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LOVE, SEX AND OTHER ADDICTIONS

'I looked down the front of a woman's dress when we were making sandwiches for the hungry at the church mission . . . I tried to pick up another patient in line at the VD clinic . . . I slept with my boyfriend's best friend when he was out of town . . .' Indiscretions revealed in the privacy of the Catholic confessional? No, these are public statements made at a meeting of Sex Addicts Anonymous.[1] SAA derived from the treatment of alcoholism, and is directly modelled upon Alcoholics Anonymous.[2] SAA groups adopt the 'twelve-step' recovery method favoured by Alcoholics Anonymous, according to which individuals agree first of all to accept that they are in the grip of a compulsion they are powerless to control. The first step in the 'Big Book' of Alcoholics Anonymous reads: 'We admitted we were powerless over alcohol – that our lives had become unmanageable.' SAA members are required to start with the same admission and thence progress towards overcoming their subjection to their sexual needs.

In an interesting – and significant – reversal of the trends remarked upon by Foucault, the proponents of SAA, who are mostly not medical personnel, have sought to medicalise sex addiction. The 'condition', they propose, should be listed in diagnostic handbooks as 'hyperactive sexual desire disorder'. The notion may seem far-fetched, all the more so

as it is claimed that a very substantial proportion of the population is afflicted by it. Yet much the same is true of alcohol addiction, which according to some estimates affects as many as one-quarter of all adults in the United States. It took a long while for alcoholism to be accepted officially in medical circles as an addiction, even though it has a definite physiological basis.

Sex addiction might at first sight look like just another eccentricity – or perhaps a new mode of exploiting a gullible populace, since a recognised psychiatric category can help interested parties qualify for medical funding, generate research support and present themselves as a new breed of experts. But there is more going on here than such a view would suggest, both in the area of sexual activity specifically and on a broader level. Sex is only one of a proliferation of addictions recognised over the past few years. It is possible to become addicted, among other things, to drugs, food, work, smoking, shopping, exercise, gambling – and, apart from the specifically sexual component, love and relationships also.[3] Why should addiction have come to be so widely spoken of over the relatively recent period? To answer this question, which has a bearing upon my arguments in the whole of the book, let us look at the issue of sex addiction and consider in what sense, if any, it is a real phenomenon rather than a superficial therapeutic novelty.

Sex and desire

'Women want love, men want sex.' If this crude stereotype were true, there could be no question of sex addiction. Men's appetite for sex, with as many partners as possible, would simply be a defining characteristic of their masculinity. Women's desire for love would override any proclivity

towards sex, which would be the price for acquiring the rewards of loving and being loved.

Yet this hoary old observation, at least in the present-day world, could be turned around. Women want sex? Yes, for the first time women collectively, rather than as specialists in an *ars erotica*, are able to seek out sexual pleasure as a basic component of their lives and their relationships. Men want love? Certainly they do, despite appearances to the contrary – perhaps more than the majority of women, although in ways that still remain to be looked into. For men's position in the public domain has been achieved at the expense of their exclusion from the transformation of intimacy.

So let us see where we get to if the saying is reversed. I shall begin by following the fortunes of Gerri, a young woman who contacted an SAA group in the Minneapolis area, and who became a participant in a research project into female sex addiction reported by Charlotte Kasl.[4] Before she joined SAA – and, in fits and starts afterwards – Gerri led a life as schizophrenic as any man who might have mixed probity in work activities with the calculated pursuit of sexual conquests in the non-work part of his life. During the day she was a teaching assistant in a school. In the evenings she sometimes attended other classes, but also frequented singles bars and in the months before becoming affiliated to SAA she was sexually involved simultaneously with four different men, each of whom was ignorant of the existence of the others. She reached a crisis in her life when she found that, in spite of taking greater precautions than before, she had contracted venereal disease (for the twelfth time in her life). In order to trace back others who might have been infected, she would have had to contact no fewer than fourteen men with whom she was sexually involved over a short period.

She was unable to bring herself to do so, partly because she could not face up to the indignity of making the necessary telephone calls, partly because she was worried

that the men she had been seeing regularly would discover her duplicity towards them. Gerri first found out about the notion of sex addiction when she came across an article on the subject in the local paper, mentioning a sex dependence clinic at the hospital. The thought of going to the clinic crossed her mind, but instead she called up one of her men friends and spent the night having sex with him. She contacted the clinic only several days later, after a further sexual episode. Gerri and her sister went to a bar and picked up two men. Driving back to her apartment with one of them, she was involved in a car accident. She reported:

> I was in a state of shock when we got home. Even so, I wanted to be sexual. Usually with sex I can make everything go away, but I couldn't that night. During sex I felt dead and sick to my stomach. I was relieved when the guy went home during the night. I had no interest in seeing him again, but my ego was outraged that he didn't call me the next day. I pride myself on getting men to chase after me.[5]

Gerri felt her life to be out of control and frequently contemplated suicide. She tried to steer clear of sexual encounters for several months after joining the SAA group, to which the clinic had referred her. During this time she was arrested for welfare fraud: the authorities claimed that, prior to getting her teaching job, she had obtained welfare benefits to which she was not entitled. The charge was a dubious one, and she became something of a local *cause célèbre*, receiving the support of several women's rights organisations.

In court, several other women charged with similar offences appeared on the stand before her, all of whom pleaded guilty; she, however, stated that she was not guilty and eventually the charge against her was dropped. Gerri subsequently became a prominent member of a group which contested cases in which women claiming welfare were

penalised. She spoke of coming to see 'how women are demeaned and what harsh sentences they receive for trying to survive'. Fighting for their rights, she 'could feel my own purpose in life unfolding'. Previously, she said, 'sex was a way to get power . . . the only way I knew'.[6] She began a new relationship with a man, moved in with him and struggled not to become sexually involved with anyone else.

Was Gerri acting in the same way as a long line of male seducers, trying to sample as varied a sex life as she could manage to achieve? The answer, I think, is a qualified yes. She was engaged in some sort of quest, through the use of sexuality, which can only be described as a frustrated search for self-identity; this endeavour was not the conventional quest-romance. She actively pursued men and did not just wait at home for them to call her. Her self-esteem was bound up with her sexual prowess, including her ability to gain as well as give sexual pleasure; and she kept a tally of the men she had 'conquered'.

Yet there is a desperate, tragic undertone to her story, which also sometimes comes through in male experiences of a parallel kind, but is normally less evident there. There may very well be some women today who, without too many psychic problems, adopt something close to the traditional male attitude towards sexuality as an organising dynamic of their own sexual conduct. But if there are such women, Gerri was certainly not one of them, for her behaviour involved her in great suffering. It turns out that both of her parents were alcoholics, and her father combined his alcoholism with a tendency to violent rages, which were quite often directed against his children. He sexually abused all four daughters in the family; Gerri learned to be 'nice' to him – in other words to accept his sexual advances – so as to protect herself and her sisters from likely beatings. On one occasion she reported her father to the local child care officer. When a social worker visited the family her father was able to persuade him that nothing was wrong; but her

father later took out his wrath on her and she did not dare make any further public complaints.

Gerri 'wanted sex': she was trying to integrate an openness to new sexual experiences with the other exigencies of her life. She learned early on that sex gave her a measure of control in a world over which her real influence was limited and problematic. Gerri felt her life to be quite inauthentic, and it was indeed so: she was effectively behaving like a sexually adventurous man without the material support, or generalised normative acceptance, which most such men can take for granted. She could call men, and actively seek out new sexual partners, but could not readily pursue a sexual contact beyond a certain point in the way in which a man might do. Many, perhaps most, men still find it inappropriate, and threatening, for women to behave towards them as they routinely do in reverse. The need for constant sexual approval had become part of Gerri's character – but she had to search for such endorsement in social settings which men control.

The nature of addiction

Before deciding whether or not it is reasonable to speak of Gerri's behaviour as sex addiction, let me move back to a more general plane and consider what the idea of addiction might mean. The notion of addiction was originally linked almost wholly to chemical dependency, upon alcohol or drugs of various sorts. Once the idea had been medicalised, it was defined as a physical pathology: addiction in this sense refers to a state of the organism. Such a concept, however, conceals the fact that addiction is expressed in compulsive behaviour. Even in the case of chemical dependency, addiction is measured *de facto* in terms of the

consequences of the habit for an individual's control over her or his life, plus the difficulties of giving up that habit.

All social life is substantially routinised: we have regular modes of activity which we repeat from day to day, and which give form to our individual lives as well as reproducing larger institutions to which our conduct contributes. But such routines are not all of a piece. Craig Nakken makes a useful set of distinctions between patterns of action, habits, compulsions and addictions.[7] A pattern is simply a routine which helps order daily life, but which an individual can alter when needs be. Thus someone may take the dog for a walk most mornings, but can switch to evenings if necessary. A habit is a more psychologically binding form of repetitive behaviour than a pattern; a distinct effort of the will is needed to alter or break it. Habitual activities are often described by the word 'always' – 'I always eat dinner at eight o'clock in the evening.'

A compulsion is a form of behaviour which an individual finds very difficult, or impossible, to stop through willpower alone, the enactment of which produces a release of tension. Compulsions usually take the form of stereotyped personal rituals, such as where an individual has to wash forty or fifty times a day in order to feel clean. Compulsive behaviour is associated with a feeling of loss of control over self; someone may carry out the ritual actions in a sort of trance-like state. Failure to engage in them causes an upsurge of anxiety.

Addictions are compulsive, but are not minor rituals; they colour large areas of an individual's life. An addiction includes each of the aspects of behaviour just mentioned and more besides. It can be defined as a patterned habit that is compulsively engaged in, withdrawal from which generates an unmanageable anxiety. Addictions provide a source of comfort for the individual, by assuaging anxiety, but this experience is always more or less transient.[8] All

addictions are essentially narcotising, but the chemical effect, if there is one, is not an essential element of the addictive experience.

Some of the specific characteristics of addictions are the following:

1. The 'high'. The high is what individuals seek out when they look for, in Erving Goffman's terms, where the action is[9] – an experience which is set apart from the ordinary, from the mundane characteristics of everyday life. It is a momentary feeling of elation which the person enjoys when a 'special' sensation is produced – a moment of release. The high is sometimes, although not always, a feeling of triumph as well as relaxation. Prior to a process of addiction a high is an intrinsically rewarding experience. Once an addictive pattern is established, however, the element of release predominates over the inherent characteristics of whatever sensations are involved.

2. The 'fix'. When a person is addicted to a specific experience or form of behaviour, the endeavour to achieve a high becomes translated into the need for a fix. The fix eases anxiety and introduces the individual into the narcotising phase of the addiction. The fix is psychologically necessary, but sooner or later is succeeded by depression and feelings of emptiness; and the cycle begins again.

3. The high and the fix are both forms of 'time out'. The usual strivings of the individual are temporarily in stasis and appear remote; the person, as it were, is in 'another world' and may regard his or her ordinary activities with cynical amusement or even disdain. Yet these feelings are often subject to abrupt reversal, and might turn to disgust with the addictive pattern. Such disaffection usually takes the form of despair that the addiction cannot be controlled; it is something that happens despite the individual's 'best intentions'.

4. The addictive experience is a giving up of self, a temporary abandonment of that reflexive concern with the

protection of self-identity generic to most circumstances of day-to-day life. Some forms of high – those associated with religious ecstasy, for example – specifically relate the experience to the overcoming or loss of self. In addictions, however, such sensations are normally a secular part of the behaviour pattern; the feeling of displacement of self is intrinsic to the sensation of release from anxiety.

5. The sense of loss of self is later succeeded by feelings of shame and remorse. Addictions are not ordinarily steady-state forms of behaviour, but tend to escalate in their importance. A negative feedback process can occur in which a growing dependence upon the addictive behaviour generates, not increasing feelings of well-being, but panic and self-destructiveness.

6. The addictive experience feels like a very 'special' one and it is so in the sense that at the time nothing else will do. Yet addictions are often functionally equivalent, in terms of the psychic condition of the individual. A person will struggle free of one addiction, only to succumb to another, and become locked into a new compulsive behaviour pattern. She or he might couple two forms of addictive behaviour, such as drinking and heavy smoking, or sometimes use one temporarily to stave off the cravings created by the other. Addictive behaviour may be 'layered' in the individual's psychological makeup, such that more minor addictive traits, or compulsions, cover over the core addiction. The fact that addictions tend to be functionally interchangeable lends strong support to the conclusion that they signal an underlying incapacity to cope with certain sorts of anxiety.

7. The loss of self and the self-disgust characteristic of addictions are not necessarily to be identified with indulgence. All addictions are pathologies of self-discipline, but such deviations may go in two directions – towards letting go, or towards tightening up. We can see each of these tendencies expressed in food addictions, which can take the

form of compulsive over-eating and/or anorexic fasting. Although bulimia and anorexia appear opposed, they are two sides of one coin and frequently co-exist as propensities of the same individual.

Addiction, reflexivity, self-autonomy

In Western countries, people from varying strata have long consumed alcohol as well as other drugs. But they were not called addicts. Until the nineteenth century, the regular drinking of alcohol, for example, was only seen as a 'social problem' to the degree to which it led to public disorder. The idea that one can be an addict dates from the mid-nineteenth century or so; the term did not come into general use until later, and precedes by some while the widespread application of the term alcoholic addiction. The invention of the addict, in Foucault's terms, is a control mechanism, a new network of 'power/knowledge'. Yet it also marks one step along the road towards the emergence of the reflexive project of self, which is both emancipatory and constraining. The addict, after all, is someone who is 'intemperate', a word that does not relate only to public order but to a refusal, a disinclination quietly to accept one's lot.

Addiction signals a particular mode of control over parts of one's day-to-day life – and also over the self. The specific importance of addiction can be understood in the following way. Addiction has to be understood in terms of a society in which tradition has more thoroughly been swept away than ever before and in which the reflexive project of self correspondingly assumes an especial importance. Where large areas of a person's life are no longer set by pre-existing patterns and habits, the individual is continually obliged to negotiate life-style options. Moreover – and this is crucial – such choices are not just 'external' or marginal aspects of

the individual's attitudes, but define who the individual 'is'. In other words, life-style choices are constitutive of the reflexive narrative of self.[10]

The fact that alcoholism was identified as a physical pathology for some while directed attention away from the connections between addiction, life-style choice and self-identity. The emancipatory promise it held was blocked to the degree to which it was perceived as an illness like any other. Yet the early programme of Alcoholics Anonymous already acknowledged that recovery from addiction meant undertaking profound changes in life-style and a re-examination of self-identity. As with psychotherapy and counselling, those who attend meetings find an atmosphere in which criticism or judgement are suspended. Members are encouraged to reveal their most private concerns and worries in an open way without fear of embarrassment or an abusive response. The leitmotif of these groups is a rewriting of the narrative of self.

In a post-traditional order, the narrative of self has in fact continually to be reworked, and life-style practices brought in line with it, if the individual is to combine personal autonomy with a sense of ontological security. Processes of self-actualisation, however, are very often partial and confined. Hence it is not surprising that addictions are potentially so wide-ranging in nature. Once institutional reflexivity reaches into virtually all parts of everyday social life, almost any pattern or habit can become an addiction. The idea of addiction makes little sense in a traditional culture, where it is normal to do today what one did yesterday. When there was continuity of tradition, and a particular social pattern followed what was long established, as well as sanctioned as right and proper, it could hardly be described as an addiction; nor did it make a statement about specific characteristics of self. Individuals could not pick and choose, but at the same time had no obligation to discover themselves in their actions and habits.

Addictions, then, are a negative index of the degree to which the reflexive project of self moves to centre-stage in late modernity. They are modes of behaviour which intrude, perhaps in a very consequential way, into that project, but refuse to be harnessed to it. In this sense all are harmful to the individual and it is easy to see why the problem of overcoming them now brooks so large in the therapeutic literature. An addiction is an inability to colonise the future and as such transgresses one of the prime concerns with which individuals now reflexively have to cope.

Every addiction is a defensive reaction, and an escape, a recognition of lack of autonomy that casts a shadow over the competence of the self.[11] In the case of minor compulsions, feelings of shame may be limited to mild self-disparagement, an ironic admission that 'I just seem to be hooked on this stuff'. In more pronounced forms of compulsive behaviour the integrity of the self as a whole is menaced. Wider social norms quite profoundly influence whether or not this becomes so. Addictions that are focused in socially acceptable ways are less easily recognised as such, either by the individuals concerned or by others – until, perhaps, certain crisis circumstances intervene. This is often true, as I shall indicate in a minute, of sex and it is true of work. A workaholic in a prestigeful job might go for many years without fully acknowledging the compulsive character of his (or, less commonly, her) activity. Only when other events intervene does the defensive nature of his dedication become apparent – if, for instance, he suffers a breakdown on losing his position or if his marriage collapses. Work, so to speak, has been everything to him, but it has also been a time out, a long-term narcotic experience that dulls other needs or aspirations which he cannot directly manage. He has been accustomed, as the phrase has it, regularly to lose himself in his work.

Implications for sexuality

At this point we can return to the question of sex addiction. Some might be inclined to dispute whether sex could become compulsive in the same sense as work. For the need for regular sexual activity, someone might object, is a basic drive which all adults have; almost everyone is thus addicted to sex in any case. But the existence of a need does not govern the means of its satiation. The need for food is also an elemental drive, yet food addictions have become very prominent today. Sex is compulsive, just like other behaviour patterns, when a person's sexual behaviour is governed by a constant search for a fix which, however, persistently leads to feelings of shame and inadequacy. Addiction is behaviour counterposed to choice, in respect of the reflexive project of self; this observation is just as valid in the case of sex addiction as other forms of behaviour.

Compulsive sexuality has to be understood against the backdrop of circumstances in which sexual experience has become more freely available than ever before, and where sexual identity forms a core part of the narrative of self. Women want sex? Of course they do, if this is understood as staking a claim to sexual autonomy and fulfilment. Yet consider the enormity of the changes which this circumstance presumes. Anyone who believes that the 'repressive hypothesis' contains no truth should ponder the fact that, only some seventy-five years ago, in Britain, unmarried girls who became pregnant were sent in their thousands to reformatories and mental hospitals. The Mental Deficiency Act, passed in 1913, allowed local authorities to certify, and detain indefinitely, unmarried pregnant women who were poor, homeless or just 'immoral'. Since the idea was widely held that illegitimate pregnancy was itself a sign of mental subnormality, the terms of the Act could be, and were, applied very widely indeed. Unmarried women from more

affluent backgrounds who became pregnant could sometimes get illegal abortions – as could poorer women, but at considerable risk to life – yet otherwise they were effectively pariahs. Ignorance about sex and reproduction was taken to imply subnormality, but was widespread. One woman, born in 1918 in London, interviewed in an oral history study by Joy Melville, recalls that her mother whispered to her every night as she went to sleep that she must not have sex before marriage or she would go insane. She didn't question why unmarried mothers were put in asylums; she just thought, 'Oh well, they deserved it; they'd had sex and they'd gone mad.'[12]

Is it really any wonder that it is difficult for women to cope with changes they have helped to produce? Compulsiveness in sexual behaviour, as in other areas, is blunted autonomy. Given pre-existing sexual orientations, this fact has different implications for the majority of women, as compared with most men. For both sexes today, sex carries with it the promise – or the threat – of intimacy, something which itself touches upon prime aspects of self. Gerri's precarious sense of security was deeply connected to her need repetitively to demonstrate her attractiveness to men. She was able to obtain sexual pleasure in many of her encounters but – until the subsequent changes in her life – withdrew from any longer-term attachments. One could say that she had internalised a male model of sexuality, tying sexual experience to a 'quest' built on variety; but, for a combination of social and psychological reasons, this was a destructive strategy. As Kasl remarks:

> Very few women set out to have as many sex partners as possible. Sexually addicted women get caught up in a cycle in which their primary source of power is sexual conquest, and they fulfil their need for tenderness and touch through the sexual act. Underlying sexually addictive behaviour in most women there is a desire for an ongoing relationship.[13]

The sexually compulsive behaviour of women takes various forms, reinforcing the conclusion that it is the underlying syndrome, rather than its specific manifestations, which is important. In some cases compulsive masturbation, perhaps several times a day, is the main element; some such women have few sexual partners. An obsessive preoccupation with sex on the level of fantasy, described by one woman as 'a fear-filled preoccupation with sex',[14] is the dominant feature in other instances. On the part of many, sexual activity resembles the cycle common in eating disorders. A period of frenetic sexual energy alternates with phases in which sex seems repulsive, such that the individual can hardly bear the thought of a further sexual encounter. Most such women appear to be orgasmic. The high of orgasm is a moment of triumph as well as physical and emotional release; but many sustain a high also in the build-up to a sexual encounter, in which they feel peculiarly alert and even euphoric.

Male sexual compulsiveness tends to be different. There is no male equivalent of the loose woman and the sexually adventurous man is often esteemed, particularly among other men. Kasl records that, when she mentioned to a man at a party that she was writing a book on female sex addiction, he reacted in a way that later became very familiar: 'You mean there are women addicted to sex? Hey, I want to meet one of those.'[15] Yet there is much evidence that sexually voracious men do not search out women whose behaviour is close to their own, and are in fact often actively repelled by them. Women are, as ever, divided into two categories so far as the sexual contacts of such men are concerned: those who have to be 'chased' and can therefore be conquered, and those who are in some sense beyond the moral pale and therefore 'do not matter'.[16]

Sex addiction among men is not wholly linked to an obsessive drive for variety. As in the case of women, it may take the form of compulsive masturbation, quite often linked

to sexual fantasising that pervades almost all other activities in which the person engages. Occasionally, 'sexaholism' is focused upon one person only. Charlie, described in a study by Susan Forward, reports that he has to have sex with his partner several times a day. His characterisation of his behaviour is reflexively sophisticated, and self-consciously uses the language of addiction: 'We could have had sex ten times that week, but if the eleventh time she'd say "no", I'd feel rejected and get mad at her. I know now it wasn't fair, but all I saw then was that my "fix" was pulling away from me.'[17]

Those who do seek variety, the most driven womanisers, combine a devotion to sexual pursuit with a barely hidden scorn for the very objects of their desire. As one author puts it, 'they pursue women with an urgency and single-mindedness that make ordinary courtship seem casual and desultory and with a recklessness that often jeopardises their marriages, careers and health'.[18] Women who are desired with overwhelming force fade into nothingness as soon as an affair has run its course – although many such men seek stability outside their casual affairs by maintaining a continuous relationship at the same time. In so doing, they often have to go through the most wrenching deceits and cover-ups.

The chase for sexual conquest produces just that deteriorating cycle of despair and disillusionment noted of other addictions. Here is the writer quoted above, speaking of his own experiences, which eventually led him to join a sexual addiction self-help group:

> I realised the measures I had always taken to ward off pain had become themselves immeasurably painful: womanising no longer 'worked' for me. I had lost a great deal in the pursuit of my addiction, and my sense of personal emptiness now overtook me within minutes of my last conquest. Sex no longer gave me anything more than the physical release

of ejaculation; often enough, I simply couldn't reach orgasm. Women were no longer objects of love, or even of desire. I had reached the point where I loathed my partners even as I entered them, and my loathing was all the more because I knew how badly I needed them.[19]

As he goes on to add, it is difficult to accept at face value the claims of some womanisers that their activities are not a problem for them. One man's response to his enquiries was: '*Finding* women is, but womanising, no.' Yet anxiety about, and dread of, women surfaces rapidly in the author's interviews with such men; the calmness with which they might tell of their sexual exploits contrasts with the frenetic nature of the pursuit, and resembles the denial characteristic of other addictions. The remarks with which they gloss their activities are very similar to those used by alcoholics when they justify their drinking: 'it's just this once', 'it doesn't hurt anybody', 'my wife will never find out'.[20]

It is important to make the drift of this discussion clear. Philandering should not be counterposed to an implicit model of monogamy, as if 'fidelity' could be defined in terms of sexual exclusiveness. Womanising is certainly linked to what I shall later call episodic sexuality, but the two are not the same. The connection between them is compulsiveness.

Sexuality and seduction

One might suppose that male sexual compulsiveness is simply male sexuality released from its traditional constraints. After all, haven't there always been many cultures in which rich men have accumulated as many wives or concubines as they can? Isn't Casanova the archetypal male hero – admired also by many women – and the forerunner of the James Bonds of today?

However, the taking of two or more wives, in the context of pre-modern cultures, ordinarily had little or nothing to do with sexual conquest as such. Virtually all polygamous societies have had systems of arranged marriage. Acquiring several wives demanded, and was an expression of, material wealth or social prestige; the same was true of concubinage, where it was an accepted institution. Casanova has no place in pre-modern cultures: he is a figure from a society on the threshold of modernity. He had no interest in accumulating wives, if such a thing were possible. For him, sex was a never-ending search, brought to a conclusion not by the achievement of self-fulfilment or wisdom, but only by the decrepitude of old age. Men want love? Well, certainly in one sense that is precisely the meaning of the life of Casanova. He is the first 'ladies' man', a telling phrase because, appearances to the contrary, it shows who belongs to whom.

Such men love women, although they cannot love any particular woman alone. No doubt it is a love that stems partly from fear but, interestingly, so far as one can tell, Casanova did not have that outright contempt for women that seems so near to the surface among womanisers, as well as at least some gay men, today. He was by no means an exemplary figure: in old age he was reduced to rape as a means of keeping his sexual life going. In his younger days, however, he sought to look after women he had loved and left, and quite often actively arranged suitable husbands for them. Havelock Ellis said of him that he 'loved many women but broke few hearts',[21] although this judgement is certainly over-charitable. Characteristically, in his *Memoirs* Casanova wrote charmingly of the women with whom he became sexually involved, and many of his comments long after the affairs took place were, according to his lights at any rate, generous to and flattering about them.

Casanova was a seducer. His sexual exploits were carried on at a time when unmarried women were supposed to

keep themselves virtuous and, among most groups save for the aristocracy, adultery on the part of married women could have devastating consequences if discovered. His seductions had to be managed with care, and were quite often relatively long-term endeavours, as many preparations had to be made. Nor did the process necessarily finish once the conquest had been achieved, since he often had to make sure after the event that a woman's chaperones, guardians or relatives remained unsuspicious.

Womanisers today are the products of the very transformations in personal life that they seem on the face of things to hold out most strongly against. They are seducers in an era in which seduction has virtually become obsolete, and this explains a good deal about the nature of their compulsion. 'Seduction' has lost much of its meaning in a society in which women have become much more sexually 'available' to men than ever before, although – and this is crucial – only as more equal. Womanising reflects this fundamental change at the same time as it grates against it.[22]

Present-day womanisers might appear to be fossils from a previous age, stalking their prey with derring-do, armed only with penicillin, condoms (it is to be hoped) and a preparedness to face the risk of AIDS. Yet if my earlier arguments are correct, womanisers are an intrinsic part of the present-day world of sexuality. They are seducers, yes, and to that extent are concerned above all with sexual conquest and with the exercise of power. But what price victory when victory is so easy? What is there to savour when the other is not only willing, but perhaps equally eager for sexual experience?

The assertion of power in seduction, whereby women are overcome or symbolically 'killed', might seem on the face of things to become all the more challenging when the individual confronts someone who asserts her equality. But female sexual equality, as Graham Hendrick discovered, dissolves the age-old division between the virtuous and the corrupt,

or degraded, woman. Since the 'kill' of the seducer depends upon destroying virtue, the pursuit loses its principal dynamic. That 'integrity' which the seducer sought to despoil, or bring within his power, is no longer the same as sexual innocence, and it is no longer gendered. In the context of the pure relationship, integrity retains a fundamental role, but becomes an ethical attribute which each partner presumes of the other.

In more traditional times, the seducer was in his own way a genuine adventurer, throwing down a challenge not just to each woman, but to a whole system of sexual regulation. He was a subverter of virtue and tilted at other windmills too, because seduction meant challenging a male order of sexual protection and control. The womaniser of today is not someone who cultivates sensual pleasure, but a thrill-seeker in a world of open sexual opportunities. The thrill of the pursuit provides the high – but the high tends later to become the fix. Womanisers are not so much libertines as unwitting counter-revolutionaries in an environment in which sexuality and intimacy are tied together as never before. Confluent love presumes intimacy: if such love is not achieved, the individual stands prepared to leave. Womanisers maintain that necessary 'potential space' by means other than respect for the partner. Their ability to 'walk away' is achieved through the anticipation of the next potential sexual encounter. They are often masters of the rhetoric of romantic love, but are unable to produce from it an emotionally coherent narrative of self. Consequently a man who is fluent and assured when going through his seduction routine might find himself awkward, tongue-tied and desperate to get away once the sexual act is over. He is in effect in the position of Karl Krauss's fetishist, who yearns only for a woman's shoe, but instead has to settle for the whole human being.

Some such men have sex with a hundred or more women a year: in what sense could they be said to 'want love'? In a

special and urgent sense. Their dependence upon women is obvious enough, so obvious in fact that it is a controlling influence in their lives. Seduction once could easily be assimilated to a male world of achievement and the overcoming of obstacles – the male world of modernity itself. But this orientation becomes empty once seduction loses its earlier meaning. The womaniser cannot be 'special' to each sexual partner in the way in which Casanova could – as the despoiler of virtue but also as a potential rescuer from a life of sexual seclusion. The modern sexual adventurer has rejected romantic love, or uses its language only as persuasive rhetoric. His dependence upon women, therefore, can only be validated through the mechanics of sexual conquest. More than other men, one could argue, the womaniser spots the connections between sexuality, intimacy and the reflexive construction of self-identity; but he is in thrall to women rather than able to meet them as independent beings capable of giving and accepting love. The womaniser appears as a figure who 'loves them and leaves them'. In fact, he is quite unable to 'leave them': each leaving is only a prelude to another encounter.

NOTES

1 Steven Chapple and David Talbot: *Burning Desires*, New York: Signet, 1990, p. 35.
2 There are other organisations and chapters: Sexaholics Anonymous and Sex and Love Addicts Anonymous are mainly heterosexual in orientation; groups such as Sex Compulsives Anonymous are same-sex organisations.
3 Joyce Ditzler and James Ditzler: *If You Really Loved Me. How to Survive an Addiction in the Family*, London: Macmillan, 1989 – just one example of what has become a very extensive literature.
4 Charlotte Kasl: *Women, Sex and Addiction*, London: Mandarin, 1990. Kasl's book is a wonderful resource for considering the

question of sex addiction, and I draw upon it substantially in what follows. Like much of the therapeutic literature I refer to throughout this book, however, I treat it in the manner of Garfinkel's 'documentary method': as a document about personal and social changes in process, but also as symptomatic of them.

5 Ibid., p. 86.
6 Ibid., p. 439.
7 Craig Nakken: *The Addictive Personality. Roots, Rituals and Recovery*, Centre City, Minn.: Hazelden, 1988.
8 Stanton Peele: *Love and Addiction*, New York: New American History, 1975.
9 Erving Goffman: *Interaction Ritual*, London: Allen Lane, 1972.
10 Anthony Giddens: *Modernity and Self-Identity*, Cambridge, Polity, 1991.
11 Ibid.
12 Joy Melville: 'Baby blues', *New Statesman and Society*, 3 May 1991, p. 2.
13 Kasl: *Women, Sex and Addiction*, p. 57.
14 Ibid., p. 58.
15 Ibid., p. 279.
16 Chapple and Talbot: *Burning Desires*, ch. 1.
17 Susan Forward: *Men Who Hate Women and the Women Who Love Them*, New York: Bantam, 1988, p. 68.
18 Peter Trachtenberg: *The Casanova Complex*, New York: Pocket Books, 1988, p. 17.
19 Ibid., p. 289.
20 Ibid., pp. 283–4.
21 Havelock Ellis: *Psychology of Sex*, London: Heinemann, 1946, p. 189.
22 Trachtenberg: *The Casanova Complex*, p. 241.