

*Reading the “Kamasutra”:
the strange & the familiar*

The *Kamasutra* is the oldest extant Hindu textbook of erotic love, and one of the oldest in the world. It is not, as most people think, a book about the positions in sexual intercourse. It is a book about the art of living – finding a partner, maintaining power in a marriage, committing adultery, living as or with a courtesan, using drugs – and also about the positions in sexual intercourse. It was composed in Sanskrit, the literary language of ancient India, probably sometime in the second half of the third century of the Common Era, in North India, perhaps in Pataliputra (near the present city of Patna, in Bihar).

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Virtually nothing is known about the author, Vatsyayana Mallanaga, other than his name and what little we learn from the text. Nor do we know anything about Yashodhara, who wrote the definitive commentary in the thirteenth century. But Vatsyayana tells us something important about his text, namely, that it is a distillation of the works of a number of authors who preceded him, authors whose texts have not come down to us. Vatsyayana cites them often – sometimes in agreement, sometimes in disagreement – though his own voice always comes through, as ringmaster over the many acts he incorporates in his sexual circus.

The *Kamasutra* was therefore certainly not the first of its genre, nor was it the last. But the many textbooks of eroticism that follow it eliminate most of the *Kamasutra*’s encyclopedic social and psychological narratives and concentrate primarily on the sexual positions, of which they describe many more than are found in the *Kamasutra*.

Conspicuous by its absence, however, is what Europeans call the ‘missionary’ position, which the *Kamasutra* mentions briefly but without enthusiasm: “In the ‘cup,’ both partners stretch out both of their two legs straight. There are two variants: the ‘cup lying on the side’ or

‘the cup supine.’” (2.6.16 – 17) The commentator, too, scorns this position: “How does he penetrate her in this position? It is so easy that there is nothing to worry about!” So much for what Europeans generally regarded as the default position.

By contrast, the default position for ancient Indian men and women – overwhelmingly favored in illustrations of the *Kamasutra* – is something entirely different, as Monty Python used to say. The *Kamasutra* describes three variants:

Her head thrown down, her pelvis raised up, she is “wide open.” Without lowering her thighs, suspending them while spreading them wide apart, she receives him in the “yawning” position. Parting her thighs around his sides, at the same time she pulls her knees back around her own sides, in the “Junoesque” position, which can only be done with practice. (2.6.8, 10 – 11)

Some variants of these positions are more complex. In some, her thighs are bent back so far that, in effect, he enters her from the rear even though she is facing him: “When he raises her pelvis and thrusts into her from below, violently, it is called ‘grinding down.’” (2.8.24) Significantly, this is the position that the *Kamasutra* advises a man to use when the woman’s genitals are much smaller than his.

Size, and its importance, becomes apparent from the very start of the part of the text describing the sexual act:

The man is called a “hare,” “bull,” or “stallion,” according to the size of his sexual organ; a woman, however, is called a “doe,” “mare,” or “elephant cow.” And so there are three equal couplings, between sexual partners of similar size, and six unequal ones, between sexual partners of dissimilar size. (2.1.1)

And when the text describes the possible positions, it uses these sizes keyed to animal types as its basic referents:

At the moment of passion, in a coupling where the man is larger than the woman, a “doe” positions herself in such a way as to stretch herself open inside. A “doe” generally has three positions to choose from: the “wide open,” the “yawning,” or the “Junoesque.” (2.6.1, 7)

The man’s fear that his penis is not big enough – the recurrent leitmotif of spam on the Internet today – had apparently already raised its ugly head in ancient India. As a result, the doe became the favored woman, the ideal erotic partner.

The initial passage defining the three sizes continues: “The equal couplings are the best, the one when the man is much larger or much smaller than the woman are the worst, and the rest are intermediate. Even in the medium ones, it is better for the man to be larger than the woman.” (2.1.1, 3 – 4) Thus two different, conflicting agendas are set forth from the start: ideally, equal is best, but in fact the man has to be bigger, because women are by nature bigger. The biggest woman (the elephant cow) is much larger than the biggest man (the stallion).

The problem of satisfaction posed by the greater size of women is not easily solved, in part because it is not physical but mental. No proto-Kinsey went around in ancient India measuring women’s vulvas. It is a matter of fantasy, apparently a cross-cultural human fantasy, and it is not about physiology (for which the *Kamasutra* offers physical correctives) but about desire. And desire is affected not merely by size but also by intensity and duration:

A man has dull sexual energy if, at the time of making love, his enthusiasm is indifferent, his virility small, and he cannot

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bear to be wounded, and a man has average or fierce sexual energy in the opposite circumstances. The same goes for the woman. And so, just as with size, so with temperament, too, there are nine sorts of couplings. And similarly, with respect to endurance, men are quick, average, and long-lasting. (2.1.5 – 8, 30 – 31)

The passage then concludes that the woman should reach her climax first. Why? The commentator explains:

The best case is when the man and woman achieve their sexual pleasure at the same time, because that is an equal coupling. But if it does not happen at the same time, and the man reaches his climax first, his banner is no longer at full mast, and the woman does not reach her climax. Therefore, if the coupling is unequal rather than equal, the woman should be treated with kisses, embraces, and so forth, in such a way that she achieves her sexual pleasure first. When the woman reaches her climax first, the man, remaining inside her, puts on speed and reaches his own climax.

So the problem of fit is merely one aspect of the greater problem of satisfaction. Just as mares are bigger than hares, the logic goes, so, the commentator points out in the context of an argument about female orgasm, women have far more desire than men: “Women want a climax that takes a long time to produce, because their desire is eight times that of a man. Given these conditions, it is perfectly right to say that ‘a fair-eyed woman cannot be sated by men,’ because men’s desire is just one-eighth of women’s.” (2.1.19) Here he is quoting a well-known Sanskrit saying: “A fire is never sated by any amount of logs, nor the ocean by the rivers that flow into it; death cannot be sated by all the creatures in the world, nor a fair-eyed woman by any amount of men.” In another

text, a female-to-male bisexual says that when she was a woman, she had eight times as much pleasure (*kama*) as a man, which could also be translated as eight times as much desire.¹

But the *Kamasutra* had its ways of coping with satisfaction, a kind of end-run around the obstacle of size. Just as there are ways for a doe to expand, so, too, the *Kamasutra* assures us, “In a coupling where the man is smaller, an ‘elephant cow’ contracts herself inside . . . Sex tools may also be used.” (2.1.3, 6) (The commentator helpfully remarks, “If he is larger than she is, there is no need for sex tools.”) The “grinding down” position, in which the woman bends her thighs so close to her chest that the man enters her from below, is particularly effective for this: “He thrusts from below into the lower part of her vagina, violently, because the itch is most extensive in the lower part of the vagina.” (2.8.24) The *Kamasutra* also provides an extensive collection of recipes that are the ancient Indian equivalent of Viagra, a combination of drugs and surgical procedures to increase the size of the penis; and just as the doe may use drugs to expand, the elephant cow may use drugs to contract: “An ointment made of the white flowers of the ‘cuckoos’-eye’ caper bush makes an ‘elephant-cow’ contract tightly for one night.” (7.2.36)

At this point, it might seem that ancient India had come to terms with what Freud called penis envy (referring to women, though Woody Allen wisely remarked that it is more of a problem for

1 Wendy Doniger, *Splitting the Difference: Gender and Myth in Ancient Greece and India* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999), 287 – 292 (the tale of Chudala, in the *Yogavasishta*). Some Greek texts maintain that Teiresias, too, said that women have not just more pleasure, but *nine times* as much pleasure as men – thereby one-upping the Indian ante. *Ibid.*, 293.

men). Perhaps size does not matter after all?

Well, no. A counterweight to the problem of desire is the problem of vulnerability. It turns out that a man may be caught between the Scylla of a woman who is too big, producing a kind of sexual agoraphobia, and the Charybdis of a woman who is too small, inspiring a kind of sexual claustrophobia. Let us return to our ideal woman, the doe, and look again at the first position recommended for her, the “wide open” position. It turns out to be rather dangerous. The commentator warns:

When she is making love with the man’s penis inside her, she should slide back with her hips; or when the man is making love with her he should slide back little by little, so that they do not press together too tightly. For if he moves inside her too roughly, she can be injured, and the man’s foreskin can be torn off, which physicians call “ruptured foreskin.”

So the small woman may be too small. But it gets worse: the too-large woman may also become too small, by overcompensating, as it were, for her size. The elephant cow is encouraged to employ a sexual position that catapults her unsuspecting partner from the frying pan of insatiable enormity to the fire of strangulating tightness. It begins, disarmingly, with the harmless missionary position:

Both partners stretch out both of their two legs straight. If, as soon as he has penetrated her, he squeezes her two thighs together tightly, it becomes the “squeeze.” If she then crosses her thighs, it becomes the “circle.” In the “mare’s trap,” which can only be done with practice, she grasps him, like a mare, so tightly that he cannot move. (2.6.13 – 20)

There is also a variation with the woman on top: “When she grasps him in the ‘mare’s trap’ position and draws him more deeply into her or contracts around him and holds him there for a long time, that is the ‘tongs.’” (2.8.33) The commentator adds helpfully: “She uses the lips of the vagina as a tongs.”

This is the only sexual position that the *Kamasutra* associates with a mare, and, confusingly, it is reserved for the “elephant cow” rather than the “mare” woman. The confusion arises because the horse, hypersexualized, is the only animal that appears on both the male and the female sides of the initial triads of men and women. Though the male and female equines are not paired – the stallion is the largest male, while the mare is merely the middle-sized woman – Hindu mythology regards the mare as sexually dangerous, bursting with repressed violence: the doomsday fire is lodged in the mouth of a mare who wanders on the floor of the ocean, waiting for the moment when she will be released to burn everything to ashes.² The mare is the sexual animal par excellence; the commentator on the *Kamasutra*, glossing the phrase “two people of the same species” (in the argument that women have the same sort of climax as men), offers this example, surely not at random: “Two people of different species, such as a man and a mare, would have different kinds of sensual pleasure; and so he specifies the same species, the human species.” (2.1.24)

The conflation, in an animal image, of the woman who is too big with the woman who traps you (and is, in that sense, too small) begins in ancient India in a text from about 900 BCE:

2 Wendy Doniger O’Flaherty, *Siva: The Erotic Ascetic* (London and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1973), 289 – 292.

Long-Tongue was a demoness who had vaginas on every limb of her body. To subdue her, the god Indra equipped his grandson with penises on every limb and sent him to her. As soon as he had his way with her, he remained firmly stuck in her; Indra then ran at her and struck her down with his thunderbolt.³

Long-Tongue is a dog, and she and the grandson of Indra (the ancient Indian counterpart of Zeus/Wotan/Odin, a notorious womanizer) get stuck together as dogs sometimes do; in this case, it spells her death, and not his, but clearly it is an image of excess that corresponds to her excessively numerous vaginas, each one presumably demanding to be satisfied. So this is the catch-22: if the woman is too big, you cannot satisfy her, but if she is too small (*or too big*), you may be injured and/or trapped inside her.

This example points as well to the tendency to identify women, more than men, as animals, as is also assumed in a passage from the *Kamasutra* that makes women, in contrast with men, creatures both explicitly likened to animals and said to speak a meaningless animal language:

There are eight kinds of screaming: whimpering, groaning, babbling, crying, panting, shrieking, or sobbing. And there are various sounds that have meaning, such as “Mother!” “Stop!” “Let go!” “Enough!” As a major part of moaning she may use, according to her imagination, the cries of the dove, cuckoo, green pigeon, parrot, bee, nightingale, goose, duck, and partridge. He strikes her on her

back with his fist when she is seated on his lap. Then she pretends to be unable to bear it and beats him in return, while groaning, crying, or babbling. If she protests, he strikes her on the head until she sobs, using a hand whose fingers are slightly bent, which is called the “out-stretched hand.” At this she babbles with sounds inside her mouth, and she sobs. When the sex ends, there is panting and crying. Shrieking is a sound like a bamboo splitting, and sobbing sounds like a berry falling into water. Always, if a man tries to force his kisses and so forth on her, she moans and does the very same thing back to him. When a man in the throes of passion slaps a woman repeatedly, she uses words like “Stop!” or “Let me go!” or “Enough!” or “Mother!” and utters screams mixed with labored breathing, panting, crying, and groaning. As passion nears its end, he beats her extremely quickly, until the climax. At this, she begins to babble, fast, like a partridge or a goose. Those are the ways of groaning and slapping. (2.7.1-21)

It is worth noting that these women make the noises of birds, never of mammals, let alone the mammals that characterize the three paradigmatic sizes of women. Moreover, one of the birds whose babbling the sexual woman imitates – the parrot – appears elsewhere in the *Kamasutra* as one of the two birds who can be taught to speak like humans. (1.3.15, 1.4.8, 6.1.15) The passage about slapping and groaning inculcates what we now recognize as the rape mentality – ‘her mouth says no, but her eyes say yes’ – a dangerous line of thought that leads ultimately to places where we now no longer want to be: disregarding a woman’s protests against rape. And this treatment of women is justified by a combination of the official naming of women after oversized animals and the

3 *Jaiminiya Brahmana*, 1.161 – 163. Wendy Doniger O’Flaherty, *Tales of Sex and Violence: Folklore, Sacrifice, and Danger in the Jaiminiya Brahmana* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1985), 101.

expectation that in the throes of passion women will speak like animals, meaninglessly.

The practice of naming the sexual movements after animals – the “boar’s thrust,” the “bull’s thrust,” “frolicking like a sparrow” (2.8.27–29) – also implies that there is a very basic sense in which sex, even when done according to the book, as it were, is bestial. But despite its recurrent zoological terminology, the *Kamasutra* argues that people are not animals, and that the sexuality of animals is different from that of humans. The very passages in which people are advised, for the sake of variety, to imitate the sexual behavior of animals, or in which women are told to mimic the cries of animals, imply that such behavior is, by definition, different from ours.

Vatsyayana distinguishes human sexuality from animal sexuality in the argument that he puts forward at the very beginning to justify his text:

Scholars say: “Since even animals manage sex by themselves, and since it goes on all the time, it should not have to be handled with the help of a text.” Vatsyayana says: Because a man and a woman depend upon one another in sex, it requires a method, and this method is learnt from the *Kamasutra*. The mating of animals, by contrast, is not based upon any method, because they are not fenced in, they mate only when the females are in their fertile season and until they achieve their goal, and they act without thinking about it first. (1.2.16–20)

Humans, whose sexuality is more complex than that of animals, are more repressed – “fenced in,” as the text puts it. Therefore, they have a different sexuality from animals, and need a text for it, where animals do not. The *Kamasutra*’s claim to fame is precisely that it has found ways – positions, tools, drugs – to

deal with the mind as well as the body, to satisfy women not only of any size but of any degree of desire. Vatsyayana’s words in such passages do not seem to reflect male anxiety at all; the women are depicted not as enormous monsters but as pliant and manipulatable sources of great pleasure. *Vive la différence*: because we are not animals, we can use culture – more precisely, the technique of the *Kamasutra* – to overcome our baser instincts, which must surely include male phallic anxiety.

But culture, in the *Kamasutra*’s sense, belonged to those who had leisure and means, time and money, none of which was in short supply for the text’s primary intended audience, an urban (and urbane) elite consisting of princes, high state officials, and wealthy merchants. The production of manuscripts, especially illuminated manuscripts, was necessarily an elite matter; men of wealth and power, kings and merchants, would commission texts of the *Kamasutra* to be copied out for their private use.

The protagonist of the *Kamasutra* is such a man. Literally a “man-about-town” (*nagaraka*, from the Sanskrit *nagara*, ‘city’), he lives “in a city, a capital city, a market town, or some large gathering where there are good people, or wherever he has to stay to make a living.” (1.4.2) He has, as we say of a certain type of man today, no visible source of income. Vatsyayana tells us, at the start of the section describing “The Lifestyle of the Man-about-Town,” that the playboy finances his lifestyle by “using the money that he has obtained from gifts, conquest, trade, or wages, or from inheritance, or from both.” (1.4.1) His companions may have quite realistic money problems (1.4.31–33); his wife is entrusted with all the household management, including the finances; and his mistresses work hard to make and keep their

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money. But we never see the man-about-town at work:

This is how he spends a typical day. First is his morning toilet: He gets up in the morning, relieves himself, cleans his teeth, applies fragrant oils in small quantities, as well as incense, garlands, bees' wax and red lac, looks at his face in a mirror, takes some mouthwash, and attends to the things that need to be done. He bathes every day, has his limbs rubbed with oil every second day, a foam bath every third day, his face shaved every fourth day, and his body hair removed every fifth or tenth day. All of this is done without fail. And he continually cleans the sweat from his armpits. In the morning and afternoon he eats. (1.4.5 – 7)

Now, ready to face the day, he goes to work:

After eating, he passes the time teaching his parrots and mynah birds to speak; goes to quail-fights, cock-fights, and ram-fights; engages in various arts and games; and passes the time with his libertine, pander, and clown. And he takes a nap. In the late afternoon, he gets dressed up and goes to salons to amuse himself. And in the evening, there is music and singing. After that, on the bed in a bedroom carefully decorated and perfumed by sweet-smelling incense, he and his friends await the women who are slipping out for a rendezvous with them. He sends female messengers for them or goes to get them himself. And when the women arrive, he and his friends greet them with gentle conversation and courtesies that charm the mind and heart. If rain has soaked the clothing of women who have slipped out for a rendezvous in bad weather, he changes their clothes himself, or gets some of his friends to serve them. That is what he does by day and night. (1.4.8 – 13)

Busy teaching his birds to talk, he never drops in to check things at the shop, let alone visit his mother. Throughout the text, his one concern is the pursuit of pleasure.

That is not to say, however, that the pursuit of pleasure didn't require its own work. Vatsyayana details the sixty-four arts that need to be learned by anyone who is truly serious about pleasure:

singing; playing musical instruments; dancing; painting; cutting leaves into shapes; making lines on the floor with rice-powder and flowers; arranging flowers; coloring the teeth, clothes, and limbs; making jeweled floors; preparing beds; making music on the rims of glasses of water; playing water sports; unusual techniques; making garlands and stringing necklaces; making diadems and headbands; making costumes; making various earrings; mixing perfumes; putting on jewelry; doing conjuring tricks; practicing sorcery; sleight of hand; preparing various forms of vegetables, soups, and other things to eat; preparing wines, fruit juices, and other things to drink; needlework; weaving; playing the lute and the drum; telling jokes and riddles; completing words; reciting difficult words; reading aloud; staging plays and dialogues; completing verses; making things out of cloth, wood, and cane; wood-working; carpentry; architecture; the ability to test gold and silver; metallurgy; knowledge of the color and form of jewels; skill at nurturing trees; knowledge of ram fights, cockfights, and quail fights; teaching parrots and mynah birds to talk; skill at rubbing, massaging, and hairdressing; the ability to speak in sign language; understanding languages made to seem foreign; knowledge of local dialects; skill at making flower carts; knowledge of omens; alphabets for use in making magical diagrams; alphabets for memorizing; group

recitation; improvising poetry; dictionaries and thesauruses; knowledge of metre; literary work; the art of impersonation; the art of using clothes for disguise; special forms of gambling; the game of dice; children's games; etiquette; the science of strategy; and the cultivation of athletic skills. (1.3.15)

And while we are still reeling from this list, Vatsyayana immediately reminds us that there is, in addition, an entirely different cluster of sixty-four arts of love (1.3.16), which include eight forms of each of the main erotic activities: embracing, kissing, scratching, biting, sexual positions, moaning, the woman playing the man's part, and oral sex. (2.8.4 – 5) A rapid calculation brings the tab to 128 arts, a curriculum that one could hardly master even after the equivalent of two Ph.D.s and a long apprenticeship – and one that not many could afford.

So the lovers must be rich, yes, but not necessarily upper class. When the text says that the man may get his money from “gifts, conquest, trade, or wages, or from inheritance, or from both,” the commentator explains, “If he is a Brahmin, he gets his money from gifts; a king or warrior, from conquest; a commoner, from trade; and a servant, from wages earned by working as an artisan, a traveling bard, or something of that sort.” (1.4.1) Brahmin, warrior, commoner, and servant are the four basic classes, or *varnas*, of India. Indeed, the *Kamasutra* is almost unique in classical Sanskrit literature in its almost total disregard of caste, though of course power relations of many kinds – gender, wealth, political position, as well as caste – are implicit throughout the text. But *varna* is mentioned just twice, first in a single sentence admitting that it is of concern only when you marry a wife who will bear

you legal sons, and can be disregarded in all other erotic situations (1.5.1); and later in a passage about what we would call rough trade:

“Sex with a coarse servant” takes place with a lower-class female water-carrier or house-servant, until the climax; in this kind of sex, he does not bother with the acts of civility. Similarly, “sex with a peasant” takes place between a courtesan and a country bumpkin, until the climax, or between a man-about-town and women from the countryside, cow-herding villages, or countries beyond the borders. (2.10.22 – 25)

Vatsyayana disapproves of sexual relations with rural and tribal women because they could have adverse effects on the erotic refinement and sensibility of the cultivated man-about-town; he would have been baffled by any Lady Chatterji's sexual transports with a gamekeeper. But for all the rest of the world of pleasure, class is irrelevant. Where classical texts of Hindu social law might have said that you make love differently to women of high and low classes, Vatsyayana just says that you make love differently to women of delicate or rough temperaments. Size matters, and money matters, but status does not.

Two worlds intersect for us in the *Kamasutra*: sex and ancient India. We assume that the understanding of sex will be familiar to us, since sex is universal, and that the representations of ancient India will be strange to us, since that world existed long ago and in a galaxy far away. This is largely the case, but there are interesting reversals of expectations: some sexual matters are strange (for, as you will recall, Vatsyayana argues that sex for human beings is a matter of culture not nature), or even sometimes repugnant to us, while some cultural

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matters are strangely familiar or, if unfamiliar, still charming and comprehensible, reassuring us that the people of ancient India took their trousers off one leg at a time, just like us. Consider the description of the man's day: his morning toilet is much like ours, but we do not, alas, schedule in things like teaching mynah birds to speak. It is the constant intersection of these perceptions – "How very odd!" "Oh, I know just how she feels." "How can anyone do that?" "Ah, I remember doing that once, years ago." – that constitutes the strange appeal of the *Kamasutra*.

Take the matter of male anxiety about penis size and its prevalence on the Internet – a link between us and them. The *Kamasutra* tackles the problem aggressively:

The people of the South pierce a boy's penis just like his ears. A young man has it cut with a knife and then stands in water as long as the blood flows. To keep the opening clear, he has sexual intercourse that very night, continuously. Then, after an interval of one day, he cleans the opening with astringent decoctions. He enlarges it by putting larger and larger spears of reeds and ivory-tree wood in it, and he cleans it with a piece of sugar-cane coated with honey. After that, he enlarges it by inserting a tube of lead with a protruding knot on the end, and he lubricates it with the oil of the marking-nut. He inserts into the enlarged opening sex tools made in various shapes. They must be able to bear a lot of use, and may be soft or rough according to individual preferences.
(7.2.14 – 24)

And if that doesn't work, try this:

Rub your penis with the bristles of insects born in trees, then massage it with oil for ten nights, then rub it again and massage it again. When it swells up as the result

of this treatment, lie down on a cot with your face down and let your penis hang down from a hole in the cot. Then you may assuage the pain with cool astringents and, by stages, finish the treatment. This swelling, which lasts for a lifetime, is the one that voluptuaries call "prickled."
(7.2.25 – 27)

Granted, I have chosen extreme surgical examples, but the pharmaceutical recommendations, though less grotesque, are hardly more practical:

If you coat your penis with an ointment made with powdered white thorn-apple, black pepper, and long pepper, mixed with honey, you put your sexual partner in your power. If you pulverize a female "circle-maker" buzzard that died a natural death, and mix the powder with honey and gooseberry; or if you cut the knotty roots of the milkwort and milk-hedge plants into pieces, coat them with a powder of red arsenic and sulfur, dry and pulverize the mixture seven times, mix it with honey, and spread it on your penis, you put your sexual partner in your power.
(7.1.25, 27, 28)

The commentator's comment on this – "Do this in such a way that the woman you want does not realize, 'A man with something spread on his penis is making love to me'" – has inspired at least one reader to remark, "Any woman who would let you make love to her with all that stuff smeared on you would have to be madly in love with you already." Passages like this make us think, as a Victorian gentleman cited by Hilaire Belloc remarked after seeing Shakespeare's *Antony and Cleopatra*, "How different, how very different, from the home life of our own dear Queen."

But we may also recognize, and admire, the precision with which Vatsyayana tells us how to detect when a

woman has reached a climax (or, perhaps, if we assume, as I think we should, that the text is intended for women, too, he is telling the woman how to fake it):

The signs that a woman is reaching her climax are that her limbs become limp, her eyes close, she loses all sense of shame, and she takes him deeper and deeper inside her. She flails her hands about, sweats, bites, will not let him get up, kicks him, and continues to move over the man even after he has finished making love. (2.8.17 – 18)

He also knew about what we call the G-spot (after the German gynecologist Ernst Graefenberg): “When her eyes roll when she feels him in certain spots, he presses her in just those spots.” (1.8.16) Vatsyayana quotes a predecessor who said, “This is the secret of young women” – and, indeed, it remained a secret in Europe until well into the 1980s.

Contrary to expectation, there are moments of recognition in the realm of culture, too. There is the passage in which the boy teases the girl when they are swimming together, diving down and coming up near her, touching her, and then diving down again. (3.4.6) This was already an old trick when I was a young girl at summer camp in the Adirondacks. European readers must surely also recognize the man who tells the woman on whom he’s set his sights “about an erotic dream, pretending that it was about another woman” (3.4.9), and the woman who does the same thing. (5.4.54) I felt a guilty pang of familiarity when I read the passage suggesting that a woman interested in getting a man’s attention in a crowded room might find some pretext to take something from him, making sure to brush him with her breast as she reaches across him. (2.2.8 – 9) This is an amazingly intimate thing to know about a culture, far more intimate than know-

ing that you can stand on one leg or another when you make love.

Sometimes the unfamiliar and the familiar are cheek by jowl: the culture-specific list of women the wife must not associate with, which include a Buddhist nun and a magician who uses love-sorcery worked with roots (4.1.9), is followed in the very next passage by the woman who is cooking for her man and finds out “this is what he likes, this is what he hates, this is good for him, this is bad for him,” a consideration that must resonate with many contemporary readers.

One part of the text that surely speaks to the modern reader is the advice on ways to seduce a married woman. In the would-be adulterer’s meditations on reasons to do this, there are self-deceptive arguments that still make sense in our world:

“There is no danger involved in my having this woman, and there is a chance of wealth. And since I am useless, I have exhausted all means of making a living. Such as I am, I will get a lot of money from her in this way, with very little trouble.” Or, “This woman is madly in love with me and knows all my weaknesses. If I reject her, she will ruin me by publicly exposing my faults; or she will accuse me of some fault which I do not in fact have, but which will be easy to believe of me and hard to clear myself of, and this will be the ruin of me.” (1.5.12 – 14)

Meanwhile, another passage brilliantly imagines the resistance of a woman who is tempted to commit adultery, in ways that rival the psychologizing of John Updike and Gustave Flaubert:

She gets angry and thinks, “He is positioning me in an insulting way”; or she fears, “He will soon go away. There is no future in it; his thoughts are attached to

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the “Kama-
sutra”*

someone else"; or she is nervous, thinking, "He does not conceal his signals"; or she fears, "His advances are just a tease"; or she is diffident, thinking, "How glamorous he is"; or she becomes shy when she thinks, "He is a man-about-town, accomplished in all the arts"; or she feels, "He has always treated me just as a friend"; or she cannot bear him, thinking, "He does not know the right time and place," or she does not respect him, thinking, "He is an object of contempt"; or she despises him when she thinks, "Even though I have given him signals, he does not understand"; or she feels sympathy for him and thinks, "I would not want anything unpleasant to happen to him because of me"; or she becomes depressed when she sees her own shortcomings, or afraid when she thinks, "If I am discovered, my own people will throw me out"; or scornful, thinking, "He has gray hair"; or she worries, "My husband has employed him to test me"; or she has regard for morality. (5.1.23, 25, 26, 28, 29, 31, 32, 33, 34, 35, 37, 37–41)

The woman's thoughts on such subjects as how to get a lover and how to tell when he is cooling toward her also ring remarkably true in the twenty-first century. My favorite is the passage on the devious devices that a woman can use to make her lover leave her, rather than simply kicking him out:

She does for him what he does not want, and she does repeatedly what he has criticized. She talks about things he does not know about. She shows no amazement, but only contempt, for the things he does know about. She intentionally distorts the meaning of what he says. She laughs when he has not made a joke, and when he has made a joke, she laughs about something else. When he is talking, she looks at her entourage with sidelong glances and slaps them. And when she has interrupted his story, she tells other stories. She talks in

public about the bad habits and vices that he cannot give up. She asks for things that should not be asked for. She punctures his pride. She ignores him. She criticizes men who have the same faults. And she stalls when they are alone together. And at the end, the release happens of itself. (6.3.39–44)

A little inside joke that does not survive the cross-cultural translation is the word used for 'release,' *moksha*, which generally refers to a person's spiritual release from the world of transmigration; there may be an intended irony in its use here to designate the release of a man from a woman's thrall. The rest comes through loud and clear, however: the woman employs what some would call passive-aggressive behavior to indicate that it is time to hit the road, Jack. There is no male equivalent for this passage, presumably because a man would not have to resort to such subterfuges: he would just throw the woman out. This, too, has not changed very much.

Our reaction to the central subject, the act of love, should surely be one of recognition, of familiarity, but no. Here, rather than in the cultural setting, is where we are, unexpectedly, brought up short by the unfamiliar. The *Kamasutra* describes a number of contortions that "require practice," as the text puts it mildly, and these are the positions that generally make people laugh out loud at the mention of the *Kamasutra*. Reviews of books dealing with the *Kamasutra* in recent years have had titles like "Assume the Position" and *Position Impossible*. A recent cartoon depicts "The *Kamasutra* Relaxasizer Lounger, 165 positions."⁴

4 Mr. Boffo cartoon by Joe Martin, Inc., distributed by Universal Press Syndicate; published in the *Chicago Tribune*, September 29, 2000. A salesman is saying to a customer, "Most people just buy it to get the catalogue."

Cosmopolitan magazine published two editions of its “Cosmo *Kamasutra*,” offering “12 brand-new mattress-quaking sex styles,” each with its numerical “degree of difficulty,” including positions called “the backstairs boogie,” “the octopus,” “the mermaid,” “the spider web,” and “the rock’n’ roll.”⁵ There is a *Kamasutra* wristwatch that displays a different position every hour. A recent Roz Chast cartoon entitled “The Kama Sutra of Grilled Cheese” included the following menu:

#14: The Righteous Lion. With a firm but loving hand, guide your cheese to a slice of bread. Top with another slice of bread, and place on hot, well-lubricated griddle. Fry until bread and cheese become one.
#39: Buddha in Paradise: When the time is right, position your cheese atop a slice of bread. Run under the broiler until the cheese yields up its life force and is transformed.
#58: The Lotus: While your cheese is melting in the microwave, your bread should be toasting in the toaster. If all goes well, both will arrive at the crucial stage simultaneously, and can be united.
Next Week: The Kama Sutra of Peanut Butter and Jelly.⁶

The satirical journal *The Onion* ran a parody about a couple whose “inability to execute The Totally Auspicious Position, along with countless other ancient Indian erotic positions, took them to new heights of sexual dissatisfaction.”⁷ The authors of these jokes had in mind positions like ones that Vatsyayana attributes to his rival Suvarnanabha:

5 “The Cosmo *Kamasutra*,” *Cosmopolitan*, September 1998; “The Cosmo *Kamasutra*, #2,” *Cosmopolitan*, September 1999, 256–259.

6 *The New Yorker*, September 10, 2001, 78.

7 “Tantric Sex Class Opens Up Whole New World of Unfulfillment for Local Couple,” *The Onion*, March 30–April 5, 2000, 8.

Now for those of Suvarnanabha: When both thighs of the woman are raised, it is called the “curve.” When the man holds her legs up, it is the “yawn.” When he does that but also flexes her legs at the knees, it is the “high-squeeze.” When he does that but stretches out one of her feet, it is the “half-squeeze.” When one of her feet is placed on the man’s shoulder and the other is stretched out, and they alternate again and again, this is called “splitting the bamboo.” When one of her legs is raised above her head and the other leg is stretched out, it is called “impaling on a stake,” and can only be done with practice. When both of her legs are flexed at the knees and placed on her own abdomen, it is the “crab.” When her thighs are raised and crossed, it is the “squeeze.” When she opens her knees and crosses her calves, it is the “lotus seat.” When he turns around with his back to her, and she embraces his back, that is called “rotating,” and can only be done with practice. (2.6.23–33)

Clearly, even Vatsyayana regards these as over the top, which is why he blames them on someone else. What are we to make of these gymnastics? Did people in ancient India really make love like that? I think not. True, they did have yoga, and great practitioners of yoga can make their bodies do things that most of us would not think possible (or even, perhaps, desirable). But just because one *can* do it is no reason that one *should* do it. (Or, as Vatsyayana remarks at the end of his Viagra passage, “The statement that ‘There is a text for this’ does not justify a practice.” [7.2.55]). I think the answer lies elsewhere: “Vatsyayana says: Even passion demands variety. And it is through variety that partners inspire passion in one another. It is their infinite variety that makes courtesans and their lovers remain desirable to one another.

Even in archery and in other martial arts, the textbooks insist on variety. How much more is this true of sex!” (2.4.25)

The user’s-manual approach does not account for positions that do not invite imitation. These may simply be the artist’s free-ranging fantasies on a theme of sexual possibilities: they are not instructive but inspiring, and inspired. They represent a literally no-holds-barred exploration of the theoretical possibilities of human heterosexual coupling, much as the profusion of compound animals – heads of ducks on bodies of lions, or torsos of women on the bodies of fish, and so forth – pushed back the walls of our imagination of the variety of known and unknown animal species. It is a fantasy literature, an artistic and imaginative, rather than physical or sexual, exploration of coupling. Since there is nothing like this in the Western tradition, it strikes us as weird in the same way that the passage about enlarging the penis boggles our imagination.

But when compared to European pornography, this is, after all, mild stuff. There is no discussion of everyday topics of many European publications, such as bondage or golden showers. The text is, rather, a virtual sexual *pas de deux* as Balanchine might have choreographed it, an extended meditation on some of the ways that a naked man and a naked woman (or, rarely, several men and/or women) might move their limbs while making love. It depicts an idealized world of sex that is the antecedent of Erica Jong’s “zipless fuck” or the capitalist fantasies of Hugh Hefner’s glossy Playboy empire. And though sexual reality may in fact be universal – there are, after all, just so many places that you can put your genitals – sexual fantasy seems to be highly cultural. This, then, is what is new to us in the brave new world of these ancient images.