

## CHAPTER 15

# *Cleo* magazine and the sexual revolution

Megan Le Masurier

I am a scripture teacher in a girls' school and spend a lot of time trying to teach my girls the value of chastity and clean living. But with publications such as yours writing so frankly about things which, to my mind, ought to be kept private, it is no wonder that young people today think of nothing but sex, sex, sex.<sup>1</sup>

In November 1972 a new women's magazine was launched in Australia that popularised many of the ideas of the sexual revolution and women's liberation. *Cleo* was the brainchild of publisher Frank Packer at ACP Magazines and editor Ita Buttrose, influenced by the success of *Cosmopolitan* magazine in the United States and a determination to corner the younger women's market before the Australian version of *Cosmo* launched in March 1973. Buttrose's aim, as she wrote in her 1985 memoir, was to bring to everyday women—not those actively involved in the women's movement—a confronting directness about both women's and sexual liberation. 'We equipped the rebels with knowledge and thus stoked the fires of revolution.'<sup>2</sup>

Sexual liberation and women's liberation were entwined in the early years of second-wave feminism. This connection began to unravel as second-wave feminists contested the meaning of the sexual revolution for

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1 Mrs J.W., Brisbane, *Cleo*, December 1972, 146.

2 Ita Buttrose, *Early Edition* (South Melbourne: Macmillan, 1985), 151.

women throughout the 1970s in what became known as the ‘sex wars’.<sup>3</sup> For *Cleo*, however, the two remained entwined and became the cornerstone of the magazine’s editorial philosophy. The gender politics of sex were explored in its pages in the language of equal rights: women had a right to the freedoms and erotic pleasures it seemed men had always had, and they had a right to knowledge about their bodies that could make such ecstasy possible. It was the sexual politics of the fair go. Informing women about the sexual potential of their bodies and providing a regular source of sex education was framed as feminist practice, what I have termed elsewhere as ‘popular feminism’.<sup>4</sup>

What becomes apparent in *Cleo*’s repetitive discussion of sex is the encouragement of an active approach in women’s sexual behaviour with men. *Cleo* attempted to break down one of the oppressive polarities of traditional understandings of heterosexuality and gender—of masculinity as active and femininity as passive. This was quite a radical position at the time and was surprisingly evident in *Cleo*’s feature journalism and in the readers’ responses on the letters pages. For many readers, embracing the new practices of active female sexuality involved a struggle against shame and ignorance. There was a baseline lack of knowledge about women’s bodies and the sexual pleasures they were capable of. As Michael Warner explains so well: ‘The more people are isolated or privatised, the more vulnerable they are to the unequal effects of shame. Conditions that prevent variation, or prevent the knowledge of such possibilities from circulating, undermine sexual autonomy’.<sup>5</sup> While Warner is writing here about sexual practices that are not considered ‘mainstream’ or ‘normative’, shame via isolation and privatisation of sexual knowledge and experience was operative within heterosexuality too, especially in this period and especially for women. There was a lot of sex work to do, especially by and for those women who were isolated from social formations where sexual liberation or feminist discussion groups were active.

3 See, for example, Kath Albury, *Yes Means Yes: Getting Explicit about Heterosex* (Crows Nest, NSW: Allen & Unwin, 2002); and Ellen Willis, ‘Villains and Victims: “Sexual Correctness” and the Repression of Feminism’, in *Bad Girls, Good Girls: Women, Sex, and Power in the Nineties*, ed. Nan Bauer Maglin and Donna Perry (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1994), 44–53.

4 Megan Le Masurier, ‘My Other, My Self: *Cleo* Magazine and Feminism in 1970s Australia’, *Australian Feminist Studies* 22, no. 53 (2007): 191–211, doi.org/10.1080/08164640701361766.

5 Michael Warner, *The Trouble with Normal: Sex, Politics, and the Ethics of Queer Life* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2000), 12.

This chapter will establish the inadequacy of sex education in Australia at the time and the role *Cleo* played as one of the primary popular sites for teaching women about their bodies and their potential for sexual pleasure. As much as *Cleo* relied on sexperts, theirs were not the only voices to be heard in this intimate public sphere. In the reader letters and questions to advice and doctor columns we hear stories of women certainly anxious to know what ‘normal’ means in a time of dramatic social change and the wake of the sexual revolution. But we also hear stories of women’s struggles and triumphs in finding sexual pleasure and the refusals of their bodies to do what experts, be they doctors, sexologists, advisors or feminists, said they should. In *Cleo*’s chaotic sexo-babble of experts and amateurs, the varieties of sexual pleasures women experienced were all valued. ‘Normal’ female heterosexuality expanded beyond containment as the decade unfolded in *Cleo*’s pages, but a stubborn unshiftable opposition between male as active/strong/desiring and women as passive/weak/desired is not what we hear. The meaning of the ‘mainstream’ of female heterosexuality was under noisy reconstruction.

Looking back at the decade of the 1970s in an article for *Cleo*, Bettina Arndt, a sexual therapist at the time and editor of the Australian edition of *Forum* magazine, wrote: ‘In the early 1970s, sex was a topic which abounded in mythology’.

Most people knew very little about sex and what they thought they knew was often wrong. It was widely assumed, for instance, that most women had very little interest in sex—and those who did were regarded as nymphomaniacs. Female orgasm had rarely been heard of and the clitoris was quite uncharted territory.<sup>6</sup>

In a study of sex in Australia published as *The Sex Survey of Australian Women* in 1974, Professor Robert Bell interviewed 1,500 women. He concluded that there had been a sexual revolution in Australia in terms of attitudes but the behaviour was ‘lagging behind’. Writing in *Cleo* he explained: ‘The revolution has been towards greater sexuality as a right for both women and men ... [but] the conservative forces governing sexual morality continue to be strong’. The greatest failure, wrote Bell, was that Australian society ‘provides little in the way of reliable information about sex as a human experience. It is not provided in the schools and there is

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6 Bettina Arndt, ‘Did the Earth Move for You? 10 Years That Shook the Bedrooms of the World’, *Cleo*, November 1982, 176.

little available written material'.<sup>7</sup> A review of current practices and trends in sex education in Australia by the Australian Council of Social Service (ACOSS) in 1974 revealed that sex education was not taught as a separate subject in any school, and that the little sexual information on offer was subsumed into science courses or religious instruction.<sup>8</sup> Sex education was a subject of public debate in the 1970s. There was ambivalence about what should be taught, how the information should be presented, by whom and where. In schools? At home? The church? By doctors? It was noted that 'apprehension' best described the issue of educating teenagers about sex.

The usual source of information about sex, apart from ill-informed friends, came from a one-off Family Life Movement of Australia mother/daughter, father/son evening. The nine guides produced by the Family Life Movement sold an extraordinary 1.25 million copies in 1969 alone and 'probably did more than any other individual or organisation to distribute sex education information among Australians of the post-war generation'.<sup>9</sup> The content of the guides, however, was Christian-inspired and highly conservative. Readers were told that masturbation would bring guilt and shame and risk the development of homosexuality; avoidance of the practice was 'character building'. Homosexuality was a perversion for both men and women. Sex was for marriage and pre- and extra-marital sex were sinful and psychologically scarring, and contraception was not discussed. Using the guides as an aid, the primary responsibility for sex education lay with parents. Parents, however, were embarrassed and often ill-informed themselves. In *The Female Eunuch*, Germaine Greer had written about the ignorance of both mothers and daughters:

When little girls begin to ask questions their mothers provide them, if they are lucky, with crude diagrams of the sexual apparatus, in which the organs of pleasure feature much less prominently than the intricacies of tubes and ovaries.<sup>10</sup>

In a *Cleo* feature about the importance of sex education for girls, the complaint was the same. Mothers' ignorance and shame was being passed onto their daughters: 'Many mothers unwittingly bombard their

7 Robert Bell, 'Sex and the Australian woman', *Cleo*, April 1974, 92.

8 ACOSS, *Sex Education: A Review of Current Practices and Trends. Background Paper* (Sydney: ACOSS, 1974), 17.

9 Rosemary Auchmuty, 'The Truth about Sex', in *Australian Popular Culture*, ed. Peter Spearritt and David Walker (Sydney: Allen & Unwin, 1979), 182.

10 Germaine Greer, *The Female Eunuch* (London: Flamingo, 1999 [1970]), 44.

daughters with negative and damaging information about sex'.<sup>11</sup> The story, as is usual for women's magazine features, is filled with anecdotes from ordinary women who spoke of the guilt-ridden messages about sex received from their mothers. One woman said: 'I remember her saying when I was about 16: "If you ever feel tempted, just see my face before you"'. It was tantamount to having the bone pointed at you'.<sup>12</sup>

The female readers of *Cleo* had been raised on respectability but were being hailed on many fronts in the media by popular discourses of sexual and women's liberation. The clash produced much anxiety and confusion, evident in the doctor and advisor pages. By default it seems, throughout the 1970s *Cleo* became one of the most important regular sites for the provision of explicit and non-judgemental sexual information for young women (and men) in Australia. Australian women's magazines had simply not covered this territory before. And while another new magazine for women, *Pol*, certainly wrote *about* the sexual revolution and *about* women's liberation as social phenomena, it didn't provide women with the gritty 'how-to' technical and biological details. *Cleo* adopted the tradition of the service guides, the 'trade' manuals of feminine work that had defined mainstream women's magazines, and applied sex to the format. As did *Cosmopolitan* magazine in the United States under the editorship of Helen Gurley Brown from 1965 and the Australian version of *Cosmo* when it launched in March 1973.

In a special *Dear Cleo Doctor* booklet inserted in the magazine in 1976, the editors commented about the 'staggering' number of letters that arrived each month and the ignorance of young women about their bodies. 'They are too embarrassed to seek medical advice—and even after they consult a doctor they are quite ignorant of their condition and the treatment they are receiving.'<sup>13</sup> The booklet provided a list of questions to ask doctors and encouraged women to be more assertive and demanding. The 1975 *Cleo Advisor Booklet*, based on the 'hundreds of letters' that were sent to the magazine's advice column every month, was critical of the standard of information available to young women. The editors advised that women should avoid male doctors and go to Women's Health Centres or to the Family Planning Association clinics.<sup>14</sup>

11 Patricia Johnson, 'Can You Ruin Your Daughter's Sex Life?', *Cleo*, January 1977, 84.

12 *Ibid.*, 84.

13 *Dear Cleo Doctor* (insert), *Cleo*, July 1976, 60.

14 *Cleo Advisor Booklet* (insert), *Cleo* July 1975, 42.

It was not that Australian women were *completely* without resources when it came to finding information about sex. An Australian edition of *Forum* magazine, the international journal of sex research, was available in selected newsagencies. And by late 1972, just as *Cleo* launched, Australians could begin to buy the mainly American-authored books of popular sexology such as David Reuben's *Everything You Wanted To Know About Sex (But Were Afraid to Ask)* (1969), J's *The Sensuous Woman* (1969), Inge and Stan Hegeler's *The ABZ of Love* (1971) and, of course, Alex Comfort's *The Joy of Sex* (1972). These books were the start of an avalanche that was to roll through the 1970s and provided *Cleo* with much of its feature material. Every new book released seems to appear in excerpt form in *Cleo's* pages.

Feminists had begun to wrench sexology from the hands of male experts, medical and psychological. Through meetings of consciousness-raising groups, the Boston Women's Health Collective produced the first edition of *Our Bodies, Ourselves* in 1969, which circulated in various forms in Australia and was available as a book from 1973. When *Our Bodies* was released in September that year, *Cleo* ran a long excerpt with an introduction explaining its feminist origins and women's frustration with 'condescending doctors'.<sup>15</sup> The excerpts *Cleo* chose were about genital self-examination in groups; the explanation of the clitoris; the individuality of sexual response and orgasm; children by choice; shared contraceptive responsibility and the double messages about sex being dirty, virginity being saved for true love and the pressures of a commercialised sexual 'liberation': 'What really has to be confronted is the deep, persistent assumption of a sexual inequality'.<sup>16</sup> Sexual frustration or non-responsiveness was explained in social terms, the result of a 'male dominated culture [which] imbues us with a sense of second-best status ... the men we sleep with are never as interested in our orgasms as they are in their own'.<sup>17</sup>

*Cleo* readers knew the story about male selfishness already. 'Men and the Female Orgasm' was a feature in the fourth issue based on a small focus group of men and a female journalist. Shelley Summers fired the questions. 'How important is it to you that a woman has a climax?' 'Peter', a doctor in his early 30s, replied, 'If she is a one-night stand I don't give a

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15 Boston Women's Health Collective, 'Our Bodies, Ourselves', *Cleo*, September 1973, 10.

16 *Ibid.*, 11.

17 *Ibid.*, 10.

damn whether she does or not—why should I? I don't really expect her to under those circumstances anyway'. 'Michael', another doctor in his 30s, seemed confused:

I find most birds who have trouble climaxing are pretty demanding. That is about the only thing wrong with the liberated woman—she is not happy with anything but what she calls a vaginal orgasm and that takes a lot of determination from a man.

'John', a divorced solicitor in his 30s, thought some women were 'getting too aggressive' when it came to sexual liberation and becoming a 'sexual threat' to men. Peter, the doctor, was convinced that liberated women had a lot more neuroses and that they could never have the same attitude to sex as men. 'Men are going to suffer', he said prophetically.<sup>18</sup>

Men's responses to the challenges of women's sexual liberation became a running theme in *Cleo*. They were, after all, almost one-third of the readership (if not the buyers) according to the McNair Anderson survey in 1974.<sup>19</sup> Journalist Jan Smith answered 'The Burning Question: Have We Demanded Too Much from Men?' with irony. It was a long article about how men had now become unnecessary and sex was much better with the varieties of vibrators now available:

It's all just too much trouble and hardly a week goes by without articles on the bliss of living alone. Vibrators and masturbation may not be specifically mentioned in the nicer type of publication. The more militant journals may be advocating homosexuality or even celibacy. But the whole point is that having a man around actually means more frustration than not having one around.<sup>20</sup>

There is a final twist, however. Smith wonders whether women have tried too hard. After all of that 'deconditioning, Masters and Johnsoning and consciousness raising', perhaps women expected too much? 'Of course we haven't', railed S.B from Canberra on the letters page:

18 Shelley Summers, 'Men and the Female Orgasm', *Cleo*, February 1973, 114–17.

19 McNair Anderson Associates P/L 1974, *Print Readership Survey. National Magazine Readership, 1974* (Sydney: McNair Anderson Associates, 1974).

20 Jan Smith, 'The Burning Question: Have We Demanded Too Much from Men?' *Cleo*, August 1976, 19.

If men are going to sink into their water beds and refuse to take up the challenges issued by the New Women, then I say let them sink. Any man worthy of the name will not wilt at the prospect of a woman who wants him to be aware of the needs of her body and mind. Men have been asking the same thing of women for centuries and look what happened. Women became so resourceful in meeting men's demands that they eventually became strong enough to meet their own. Perhaps if men try to satisfy the New Woman they will go through the same evolution until they too liberate themselves. The way is forward, not backwards.<sup>21</sup>

In exploring their potential for sexual pleasure, the readers/writers of *Cleo* were being encouraged to become *active* sexual beings. This didn't necessarily mean having sex with more men, it meant women learning about their bodies, taking control of their own pleasure and their right to orgasm, with men or without them.

Orgasm became the symbol of women's sexual liberation in *Cleo*, as it had in some of the early writings and discussions of second-wave feminists. Anne Koedt, in her famous pamphlet 'The Myth of the Vaginal Orgasm', had insisted on the primacy of the clitoris for the 'feminist' orgasm.<sup>22</sup> Greer by contrast had insisted on women's active engagement with the whole cunt as a means to erotic pleasures and liberation as yet unknown in her theory of 'cuntpower' that embraced vaginal penetration and women's active movement during sex.<sup>23</sup> *Cleo* tried not to take sides and explored as many varieties of female sexual pleasure as it could with an underlying belief that women had not been getting a fair go when it came to sex with men. In 1974 this connection was clearly made to *Cleo's* readers. 'For centuries pleasure in sex was regarded as reserved for men only', wrote staff writer Anne Woodham. 'Now women see their own needs and want men to know.'<sup>24</sup>

If the clitoris had become the feminist truth of female sexuality in the 1970s, with the regulatory and disciplinary powers that accompany such truth claims, especially when bound up in identity politics, the magazine format created a far more democratic space for the multiple 'truths'

21 *Cleo* Letters, October 1976, 226.

22 Anne Koedt, 'The Myth of the Vaginal Orgasm', in *Radical Feminism*, ed. Anne Koedt, Ellen Levine and Anita Rapone (New York: Quadrangle Books, 1973 [1970]), 198–207.

23 Megan Le Masurier, 'Resurrecting Germaine's Theory of Cuntpower', *Australian Feminist Studies* 31 no. 87 (2016): 28–42, doi.org/10.1080/08164649.2016.1174925.

24 Anne Woodham, 'What Women Wish Their Men Would Remember', *Cleo*, December 1974, 15.

of female orgasms to gain representation. One of the unsung powers of the intimate style of sex journalism in women's magazines is that its reliance on the voice of the sexpert *as well as* the anecdotal voice of the amateur inevitably results in a picture of the pluralities of female sexuality. There is just too much to be said and too many voices. The democratic generosity of a popular journalism reliant on readers' voices, as well as experts and journalists, can open up the possibilities of female sexuality and the popular orgasm—not shut them down. It is a feminist effect, indeed a feminist desire, all enacted without too much direct mention of feminism at all.

*Cleo* didn't stop—couldn't stop—running features on the orgasm. Editorial choices were often made in response to readers' questions that kept pouring in to the *Cleo* Doctor and Advisor columns. With each repetition of the orgasm story, following the journalistic requirement of the fresh angle, different inflections on sexological research and personal anecdote were building a highly complex picture of female sexuality. Sexologists, psychologists, doctors, sex counsellors, feminists—all the experts quickly took up residence in *Cleo's* pages. But so did readers. Through these voices of everyday women—the voices of anxiety and disappointment alongside the testimonials of pleasure and demands for validation—a space was created to represent the multiplicity of sexual pleasures women were experiencing through sex with men, and without them. In an attempt to explain the female orgasm in response to 'the hundreds of letters we receive from women asking about orgasm', journalist Katrina Petersen, like Koedt, blamed Freud for diverting women away from the clitoris towards the sexually mature orgasm of the vagina. 'Thousands of women since have been given psychoanalysis directed at achieving what is in fact a biological impossibility.'<sup>25</sup> In a feature on the popularity of vibrator attachments, Anne Woodham took issue with 'rubber sheaths with lumps and bumps [which] pander to the myth of the vaginal orgasm'. There was no point to these devices if the clitoris was 'the real key to female orgasm'.<sup>26</sup>

The first *Cleo* Doctor, a male gynaecologist, had been running quite a different line in his column. Writing to the Doctor, one reader chastised him for 'perpetuating the old Freudian myth of the vaginal orgasm' and sent him a leaflet for his feminist sex education. The doctor was cross. 'The Myth of the Vaginal Orgasm by Anne Koedt leaves me cold',

25 Katrina Petersen, 'The Female Orgasm: What Is It Really Like?' *Cleo*, November 1974, 25.

26 Anne Woodham, 'The Aids of Living', *Cleo*, June 1974, 99.

he replied in his column. ‘Utter rubbish.’<sup>27</sup> There were readers who agreed with him. Responding to an article asserting “‘out with Sigmund Freud’s vaginal orgasm, in with the clitoral orgasm’”,<sup>28</sup> ‘Freud Forever’, as the reader described herself, wanted to take issue with the feminist ‘experts’ and demanded public recognition of the existence of the vaginal orgasm:

there has been mention in previous issues of ‘the myth of the vaginal orgasm’. I feel I must let the women readers of *Cleo* know that I can have both clitoral orgasm and vaginal orgasm.

In 1981, ‘The Little Man in the Boat’ was billed as ‘the story every man must read!’<sup>29</sup> Lisa Southern wrote personally about her orgasmic journey, her faking of orgasms before D-day (1969 and ‘the discovery of the clitoris’), her experience of lesbianism and clitoral orgasms, her return to men and political refusal to fake vaginal orgasm with them. ‘After making futile attempts to bring me to orgasm, men would give me little-boy hurt looks or accusing glares as they recounted their orgasm-producing exploits with other women.’ For their ignorance and false pride, Southern held other women responsible for keeping men in the clitoral dark. Her tips for ‘what women really want’ were graphic:

Women had faked vaginal orgasms so well that men were confident that there was nothing like good old-fashioned penetration to produce a climax. The clitoral orgasm was just some new-fangled feminist con ... men felt incredibly threatened by the revelation that they had probably never brought a woman to a genuine climax.<sup>30</sup>

‘The response was staggering’, wrote *Cleo* later in its review of the year. The article was ‘probably the most talked-about sex article of 1981’.<sup>31</sup> The letters in response in the May 1981 issue expressed gratitude, relief and identification: ‘It is framed and hung next to my bed’; ‘I’ve a mind to post photocopies of it to all the males in Australia’; ‘It was a weird feeling to read an article written about me by someone I’ve never met’.

27 *Cleo* Doctor, *Cleo*, March 1974, 83.

28 Sandra Hall, ‘Commonsensuality’, *Cleo*, July 1974, 91.

29 Lisa Southern, ‘The Little Man in the Boat’, *Cleo*, February 1981, 28.

30 *Ibid.*, 27.

31 Wendy Taye, ‘The Best of *Cleo*’, *Cleo*, November 1982, 141.

Just as *Cleo's* readers seemed to be finally settling in to the clitoral truth of female orgasm came the truth-exploding news of the G-spot in the June issue in 1981. 'Was Freud right after all?' asked Jack Jardine and Ruth Austen as they explained the history of sexology, Masters and Johnson, the refusals of experts to believe in women's stories of deep and different orgasms within the vagina and their tales of female ejaculation. With the rediscovery of the G-spot it turned out that the vaginal orgasm may not be a myth after all.<sup>32</sup>

In the following October issue a reader from Bondi thanked *Cleo* for 'enlightening' her that 'those wonderful experiences were not figments of my imagination':

I for one have experienced many vaginal orgasms through stimulation of the G-spot. I used to find it hard to achieve orgasm ... We stumbled upon this hidden pleasure purely by accident when we were experimenting with different positions to try to increase my sexual response by means other than oral stimulation.<sup>33</sup>

In the same issue, Chris from WA was relieved to find an explanation that her ejaculations during G-spot orgasms were not urination and happy to share the news with *Cleo's* readers. 'I have experienced this ejaculation three times in all, with numerous vaginal orgasms (also clitoral) until now I have not known what was responsible.'<sup>34</sup> Priscilla from NSW was grateful for the article. In the letters pages she also decided to share some of her own sexpertise with *Cleo's* readers:

*Cleo's* article omitted one vital piece of information; the truly devastating effect of achieving both the clitoral and G-spot orgasm at the same time. Quite often I would break down and cry afterwards in massive relief. It was as if my soul left my body and I could fly ...<sup>35</sup>

By the end of *Cleo's* first decade it became apparent that a singular truth of orgasm and female sexual pleasure kept slipping out of everyone's grasp. The detailed sexual intimacy of these letters would have been inconceivable in mainstream women's magazines before the 1970s, and

32 Jack Owen Jardine and Ruth Austen, 'Introducing the G Spot or, a Funny Thing Happened on the Way to Orgasm', *Cleo*, June 1981, 32.

33 *Cleo* Letters, *Cleo*, October 1981, 248.

34 *Ibid.* 248.

35 *Cleo* Letters, *Cleo*, November 1981, 250.

utterly impossible to print in newspapers. In this eruption of popular sexpertise any clear meaning of 'normal' female sexuality dissolved. And *Cleo's* popular sex journalism provided the public space for contending truths to circulate.

Orgasm and sexual expertise became 'lifestyle' signifiers of the new woman. She aspired to be good at sex, she knew about orgasm, her magazine proudly shouted about sex on its covers. The movement from ignorance to knowledge, from pre- or non-orgasmic to orgasmic, signified participation in the imagined liberated community of *Cleo's* new women. And writing about the orgasm, reading about it, having or struggling to have it, allowed her to participate in that community. Sex without shame had become a marker of 'the good life', even a sign of cultural capital. At the same time, this legitimization of women's right to sexual pleasure and the repetition of stories about sexual experimentation and orgasm could also lead to feelings of shame and anxiety among those readers who could not manage to reach the heights of such 'liberation'. The difficulty for some in engaging in the expanding repertoire of normal heterosexual practice are constants in the readers' letters. An exchange on the letters pages in December 1977 over oral sex illuminates the emotional complexity of engaging with the practices of sexual liberation. J.H. of NSW had found a feature discussing oral sex 'disgusting, unclean and revolting ... I nearly threw up ... I couldn't believe what I read. How any woman can put her mouth near a penis or a man put his mouth near a vagina is beyond me'.<sup>36</sup> The response from other readers the following March was one of shock. One reader responded: 'My boyfriend and I had to take another look at the issue's date to make sure it wasn't December 1947!'

Penelope George wrote a first-person account of her frustration in having an orgasm. She had to take the matter into her own hands. It took days to find the courage to go to a sex shop, but she did. Then went into her room and got to work:

The vibrator hummed for over half an hour ... Suddenly, my mind snapped, my surprised body exhibited all the textbook signs of a good orgasm and I was, truly, gut boggled. I laughed, the sensation was extraordinary. Relief settled on me like winter sunshine.<sup>37</sup>

36 *Cleo* Letters, *Cleo*, December 1977, 240.

37 Penelope George, 'Oh, for a Big O', *Cleo*, September 1979, 198.

In fact, she suggested that vibrators were so good at providing better, more reliable orgasms that women might be tempted to dispense with male partners altogether.

The journey to sexual liberation and orgasm through the use of a vibrator was a difficult pleasure for some. One reader, who had been uncertain and embarrassed about buying a vibrator, and especially from a sex shop, had been reassured and given explicit directions by another on the letters page in May 1974, bypassing the expert altogether. S.D. suggested she buy a massager from a department store and use the smooth button. 'Excellent for masturbation', said S.D.<sup>38</sup> Another reader writing to the *Cleo* advisor wanted to try a vibrator but was concerned that her husband found the idea threatening. 'He thinks it means something is wrong with our relationship if we do. I don't have a problem with orgasm but I admit I'm curious about vibrators.' Wendy McCarthy, *Cleo's* avowedly feminist 'agony aunt' from 1978 to 1984, sympathised that the man could be anxious about being replaced by a machine and very sensibly suggested: 'Why not buy a general massage vibrator and try it on your husband so he feels comfortable with it. You could then begin to use it together in your lovemaking'.<sup>39</sup>

A sisterly atmosphere was created in the pages of *Cleo* for women to share their stories of sexual fantasies, 'still one of the most taboo subjects'.<sup>40</sup> It was another way the magazine encouraged women to explore the range of their sexuality and alleviate shame. As Michael Warner argues, 'Isolation and silence are among the common conditions for the politics of sexual shame. Autonomy requires more than civil liberty; it requires the circulation and accessibility of sexual knowledge'.<sup>41</sup> Talking about sexual fantasies in public was framed by discourses of liberation, equality and progress. In an interview with Nancy Friday upon the publication of *My Secret Garden* in Australia in 1976, Camilla Beach confronted the myth that 'nice girls don't have sexual fantasies':

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38 *Cleo* Letters, *Cleo*, May 1974, 81.

39 *Cleo* Advisor, *Cleo*, May 1982, 31.

40 Polly Wilson, 'Female Fantasies', *Cleo*, January 1973, 15.

41 Warner, *The Trouble with Normal*, 171.

In the bad old days before *My Secret Garden* hit the American bestseller list, women who openly confessed to sexual fantasising were popularly pronounced either mentally sick or over-sexed. Consequently many such women unnecessarily suffered feelings of guilt.

Friday spoke of the reception to her book. 'People get scared to death ... they simply cannot understand that women have erotic lustful fantasies and desires just as men do.'<sup>42</sup>

In *Cleo's* pages, female heterosexual desire was represented as a force that could not easily be trained or constrained by sexological truth, by moral dictates or by feminist theory. It kept erupting uncontrollably. This desire would not be faithful<sup>43</sup> and would not stay interested in its chosen partner.<sup>44</sup> It got bored<sup>45</sup> or it wanted more than its lover could provide.<sup>46</sup> It persisted in attaching itself to the wrong men,<sup>47</sup> couldn't align itself with lasting love,<sup>48</sup> and wanted to sleep with strangers or friends.<sup>49</sup> It wanted sex without love<sup>50</sup> and sex without the double standard foiling its plans.<sup>51</sup> Female 'heterosexual' desire even wanted sex with women.

In an extraordinary story, 'Woman to Woman', a 'happily married woman' wrote in the first person about an experience that allowed her to discover more about her sexuality. At 35, the author makes love to her friend Amelia, also a married woman. The husband Ken is in bed with them. He fades out of the picture fairly quickly. 'Much to Ken's disappointment, neither Amelia nor I felt the need of a penis.' The reader is taken on a highly descriptive tour of both women's bodies. 'Almost a year later,' she writes, 'we find neither of us has become lesbian. I still prefer a male partner but would never discount the possibility of another experience

42 Camilla Beach, 'A Woman's Secret Garden', *Cleo*, March 1976, 116.

43 'Men—and Sex Outside Marriage', *Cleo*, January 1975, 126–29; 'Who Wants to be a One Man Woman? I Don't', *Cleo*, September 1977, 58.

44 'Is There Sex after Marriage?', *Cleo*, April 1978, 52–55; 'After Sex...What Next?', *Cleo*, November 1977, 254–55.

45 'The Big Freeze. Does Sex Send You to Sleep?' *Cleo*, October 1979, 16–19; 'Single Life in a Double Bed', *Cleo*, October 1976, 105–8; 'Could You be Happy with One Man After Sleeping with a Lot?', *Cleo*, July 1978, 17–21.

46 *Cleo* Advisor, *Cleo*, June 1973, 17.

47 'Men Are Proper Bastards', *Cleo*, November 1972, 14–17.

48 *Cleo* Advisor, *Cleo*, March 1983, 21.

49 'Sex with Strangers? Sex with Friends?' *Cleo*, May 1977, 12–14; 'The Sexual Etiquette of Brief Encounters', *Cleo*, October 1976, 73–79.

50 'Sex Without Love', *Cleo*, January 1979, 62–64.

51 'True Lust and Real Love', *Cleo*, February 1984, 52–56.

with a woman.' There was no guilt or shame and the experience had made her a better lover. The author discovered a new empathy for men. 'I know how difficult it can be ... If a woman doesn't tell him what she likes or wants, how on earth is the man to ever know?'<sup>52</sup> Lesbian readers saw the article as a step towards the acceptance of gays by straights<sup>53</sup> and were writing in for back issues years later. And straight readers who responded to the story expressed relief that their sexual experiences with women meant they were *not* lesbian.<sup>54</sup> From another reading, *Cleo* was suggesting how women could explore their sexual assertiveness and curiosity without worrying about labelling their sexuality at all.

A singular definition of 'normal' female heterosexuality had completely dissolved over this decade in *Cleo*. What remained normative was the presumption that women *should* be interested in sex as part of their newfound liberation and independence. Sex with men, however, was not represented as something to be exchanged or endured for a meal ticket or social mobility, nor was it represented as something extracted from women as unwilling victims of phallic domination. Women were encouraged to lose their shame and embarrassment about sex. They were being provided with the techniques and attitudes to *do* sex—not have it *done to* them. Doing sex didn't even necessarily mean sex with men. Women could do it alone, with machinery, in fantasy, or with other women.

*Cleo* can be read as an historical document of everyday women's struggle in the 1970s (and beyond) to become actively sexual and knowledgeable in the name of gender equality. The struggle was clearly represented as one of women's as much as sexual liberation. And for many of *Cleo's* female readers, the result was revolutionary. As Penelope George wrote, 'I was not frigid ... My life must surely change'.<sup>55</sup>

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52 'Woman to Woman', *Cleo*, November 1979, 75.

53 *Cleo* Letters, *Cleo*, May 1980, 264.

54 *Cleo* Letters, *Cleo*, February 1980, 144.

55 George, 'Oh, for a Big O'.

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