

Is the Female Orgasm an Adaptation?

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Abstract. The question of the evolutionary utility of female orgasm is profound for many reasons, but most importantly, it will influence our ideas regarding human sexuality and equality between the sexes. The prevailing theory in evolutionary biology is that the female orgasm is not an adaptation; despite arguments to the contrary, non-adaptive accounts of the female orgasm suggests that it is fundamentally less-purposeful—and more supererogatory—than the male orgasm. By answering this question, we can gain insight into the essential nature and potential of male and female sexuality. After having read several books and articles on the subject, I have evaluated the arguments for and against adaptationist accounts of the female orgasm. What I have found is that there is a substantial amount of confusion built into the debate, due largely to a lack of harmony in its terminology. I show that, given the validity of the non-adaptive account, the female orgasm does not appear to be an adaptation (if we employ a rigorous definition of the word); however, by undermining some of the key features of the non-adaptive account, and by providing some alternative insights from the psychological community, I show that there are many good reasons to suspend our judgment on this question, if not conclude that the female orgasm is an adaptive trait.

To some, the question on deck seems to be a substantial one; to others, this inquiry may seem to be trivial, even ludicrous. But the results of this investigation has the potential to influence the way we think about all aspects of sexuality, including—perhaps most importantly—sexual oppression and feminist theory. Because whether or not we find that the female orgasm is an adaptation, evolutionary biologists have already established one thing: the male orgasm *is*, undoubtedly, an adaptation. In other words, the male orgasm has contributed mightily to the preservation and the development of our species; without the male orgasm, theorists believe that human fitness would—at the very least—suffer. But the debate regarding the evolutionary utility of the female orgasm has been raging for over 40 years, and at this point, a conclusion still has not been institutionalized.

How might establishing whether the female orgasm is an adaptation affect our ideas regarding feminist issues? Let us take female genital mutilation (FGM), or the

performance of *clitoridectomies*, as an example. There are those that argue that people from the United States should withhold judgment when evaluating other cultures (primarily those in East Africa) that perform FGM on its female citizens; people holding such views are often promoting *cultural relativism*. One effective rebuttal to this assertion—that people from cultures not practicing FGM should not assume that the procedure is inherently immoral—is to propose that FGM is intrinsically and violently oppressive, and that one can be a cultural relativist and still refuse to tolerate violent oppression, no matter where or in which culture it occurs. But consider what happens when we introduce the notion that the female orgasm is mechanically less important than male orgasm (at least in evolutionary terms)—is it then necessarily oppressive if orgasm is biologically withheld from women? What if it were possible to regulate the practice of clitoridectomies, so that they always (a) were performed after the patient is anesthetized, (b) under sterile conditions, and (c) excluded Type III FGM (otherwise known as *infibulation*)? Suppose that the agonizing pain, the infections and the tremendous amount of bleeding (which often result in death) could all be avoided; the only major issue left for us to debate, then, would be whether women should be entitled to have orgasms (since, for the vast majority of women, the orgasm is experienced only after clitoral stimulation¹; and while many women who have undergone clitoridectomies have reported an ability to experience orgasm after the procedure, they are most likely members of a small-numbered minority²). Is the right to experience orgasm a positive or a negative liberty? Perhaps, if the female orgasm is not an adaptation—in other words, if it has made

¹ Many sexology studies support this claim—to the extent that is presented as fact by Dr. Lloyd in her book about the evolution of the female orgasm—including those conducted by Alfred Kinsey, Paul Gebhard, and Shere Hite (Lloyd 25).

² “One study of women who had had their clitorises removed found that most of the women could have orgasm with intercourse (Lightfoot-Klein, 1989). Lightfoot-Klein gives some examples of those orgasms that I find unconvincing. If it is true that some of these women experience orgasm, it would be due to the deep stimulation of tissues surrounding the vagina and the uterus” (Lloyd 262).

no (noteworthy) contribution to our species' ability to produce viable offspring—then it's arguable that *for women* the freedom to experience orgasms should not be prioritized—or even included—in the conception of their human rights.

This example of FGM provides one possibility of how our understanding of the evolutionary—and biological—importance of the female orgasm can affect our sense of morality and social politics. However, our overarching purpose is not to consider the effects of our conclusion, but rather to see whether we can reach a conclusion at all. So, is the female orgasm an adaptation? Or is it merely the “embryological consequence” of the strong selection for male orgasm that takes place early in fetal development (which is the essence of the reigning non-adaptation theory)? There are provocative arguments on both sides of this dispute, and I intend to show that certain elements of these arguments mustn't be discarded. Ultimately, I will argue that although the female orgasm may *not* an adaptation, it most likely is an *adaptive trait*.

Before we delve into the theories that examine the evolutionary ‘purpose’ of the human female orgasm, we must understand a few key terms. Let us begin by defining *adaptation*.

Elisabeth Lloyd, author of *The Case of the Female Orgasm: Bias in the Science of Evolution*, claims that the conflict within the scientific community regarding the meaning of the word *adaptation* has resulted in two prevalent, different interpretations that are essential to this particular debate. The first variety is referred to as the *engineering adaptation*, which is a characteristic that serves a singular purpose for the organism that possesses it; additionally, there must be evidence illustrating that the trait has evolved from a previous condition to its current state or manifestation, *and* the evolution of that

trait must be shown to increase the biological fitness of its owner (Lloyd 157). Lloyd adds: “Under [this] definition...evidence that a current trait is an adaptation requires a historical account involving the trait’s past participation in an evolution-by-selection process”. On the other hand, Lloyd presents us with the *current-fitness account*, which is quite similar to the engineering adaptation except for one crucial point: the requirement of historical evidence is absent. “One only needs to show that the trait *presently* contributes to an organism’s reproductive inclusive fitness” (158). Finally, Lloyd claims that both the historical account (i.e. the engineering adaptation) and the current-fitness account require that an adaptation contribute to the species’ fitness in the present.

These two definitions are very different from the one provided by Sterelny and Griffiths in *Sex and Death*. The authors claim that an adaptation certainly does *not* need to contribute to current fitness in order to rightfully be considered an adaptation. Sterelny and Griffiths instead distinguish between an *adaptive trait* and an adaptation: an adaptation is “a trait that exists because natural selection has favored it” (Sterelny and Griffiths 217) that may or may not continue to contribute to the current fitness of the species that possesses it, whereas an adaptive trait is merely one that enhances the fitness of a species. They go on to say that “adaptiveness is neither necessary nor sufficient for a trait to be an adaptation”, and cite the human appendix—and vestigial structures in general—in an attempt to illustrate their point. Then the authors illuminate the ways in which adaptive traits can be individuated from adaptations:

The appendix is a *vestigial* trait: a relic of previous selection. Conversely, the ability to read is adaptive without being an adaptation. Literacy is highly adaptive in most modern human societies, as the disadvantages suffered by dyslexic people testify. But the ability to read is probably a side effect of other, more ancient cognitive abilities.

Some traits exist as a consequence of natural selection for one or more of their effects. These are *adaptations*. Some, but not all, of these traits contribute to the fitness of organisms that have them. These traits are *adaptive*. Other traits are merely side effects of evolution, and these include some now that happen to be adaptive (218).

Given the various definitions of the word *adaptation*, it isn't clear whether one can ever justly exclude the female orgasm from its domain; but regardless of which form of *adaptation* you prefer—I prefer the clarity of Sterelny and Griffiths' definition—it seems to be even more clear that it will be less difficult to show that the female orgasm is, in the very least, *adaptive*. Now we will investigate the meaning of *reproductive success* and see how our understanding of this term also affects our understanding of fitness and adaptation.

Reproductive success is another very important term that is suffering from heterogeneous definition, which in turn further confounds the confusion surrounding the debate's essential terminology. First, not being able to agree upon the meaning of *reproductive success* necessarily creates an obstacle to establishing a concerted definition of *adaptation*. This is because an adaptation is a trait that has increased the fitness of a species (although there are different definitions of *adaptation*, it is nonetheless clear that in order to fit anyone's conception of the term, the trait must have contributed to increased fitness at *some* point in the species' history). But if we don't share an understanding of *reproductive success*, then surely we will have different ideas about the significance of *fitness* (which, in the broadest biological sense, is the ability to produce offspring). I find it strange that reproductive success was left undefined in Lloyd's book, which is considered to be the most definitive inquiry into the question of the female

orgasm to date. How can we answer the question—is the female orgasm an adaptation?—if we don't know for certain what reproductive success is?

Although she mentions the existence of *some* of the term's various connotations, Lloyd generally equates reproductive success with fertility, insemination, and occasionally, gestation. Nowhere in her exposition of the adaptationist theories of female orgasm does she give much consideration to *viability* (within the realm of biological fitness, viability refers to the capacity to produce offspring that is fertile). Many—though to Lloyd's credit, not most—biologists choose to define reproductive success in a more rigorous way by elaborating upon parents' ability to give birth to—and raise—*healthy offspring that will, in turn, be able to produce healthy offspring of its own*. These two ways of defining reproductive success provide us with respective 'short run' and 'long run' analyses. If reproductive success is confined to an organism's ability to survive until an age that allows it to procreate and give birth—and possibly even to raise its offspring until the brood can then plausibly survive on its own—then it becomes difficult to see how traits that have subtle health-promoting properties might contribute to the *fitness* of the species in question. If, on the other hand, reproductive success also includes the organism's ability to give birth to healthy offspring *that is itself capable of reproductive success*, then elements such as the psychological adjustment of the parent organism—which certainly stands to contribute or deter from the offspring's ability to do things like act appropriately when in danger, select an appropriate mate, and be a desirable mate itself—may play a role in determining the reproductive success of its young (which would mean that psychological adjustment would play a role in determining fitness). In other words: is fitness an 'all-or-nothing' dynamic, or does it vary in degrees?

The conflict among these various definitions of *adaptation* and *reproductive success* is of the utmost importance to our inquiry regarding the female orgasm for a couple of reasons. First, what if we can show that the female orgasm *does* currently contribute to the fitness of the human species? If we use the current-fitness, then we will have proved that yes, the female orgasm is an adaptation; but if we use the definitions provided by Sterelny and Griffiths, we will only have shown that the female orgasm is an adaptive trait. Secondly, if reproductive success—and therefore biological fitness—is limited to the ability to produce offspring, then it will be easy to show that the female orgasm is much less important than male orgasm to the fitness of our species; furthermore, if the mere act of reproduction (possibly followed by a sequence of *prima facie* nurturing events) is what is most prized by the biological world, then it seems that heterosexual, intravaginal rape—which certainly increases the incidence of reproduction among humans—is an important contribution to the fitness of our species. However, if reproductive success is viewed as a ‘long run’ mechanism, then the psychological health of the mother—which has been shown to influence the psychological health of her offspring, in that it shapes her offspring’s beliefs and abilities regarding their own survival and procreation—enters the equation; and once psychological health becomes an element of reproductive success, the psychological effects of rape *and* orgasm can no longer be thought of as separate from reproductive success, biological fitness, or adaptiveness.

Now that we have a solid working definition of the key terms involved in the debate of the evolutionary origins of the female orgasm, let us now examine the most well-supported theory to date. In 2005, Dr. Lloyd released her 257-page explication of

the 21 authoritative arguments that have been made during the preceding 40 years (the debate officially began in 1966), illustrating that no one argument is wholly effective in answering this question, but showing that some arguments are better—and more provocative—than others. Nineteen of the arguments outlined in Lloyd’s book support the theory that the female orgasm *is* an adaptation. Some of these arguments are quite ridiculous in that they contradict scientific and sexological findings or rest substantially on ungrounded assumptions (one actually asserts that female orgasm was selected for because it helps to induce spontaneous abortion), while others are well-reasoned but lack the prerequisite level of constraints in their research (arguments resting on *operant conditioning* and *intermittent reinforcement*, for example, remain appealing and are mostly unrefuted by Lloyd).

The account that Lloyd advocates, however, is one that proposes that the female orgasm developed as a “byproduct”—as the “embryological consequence”—of the development of and strong selection for male orgasm. Presented originally by Donald Symons (in 1979’s *The Evolution of Human Sexuality*), the byproduct or “Fantastic Bonus” account (the latter term was coined by Lloyd) asserts that: (1) the scientific evidence shows that the clitoris is, undeniably, the primary site of sexual arousal and orgasm for women³; (2) the clitoris and the penis are essentially two different manifestations of the same nerve-rich sex organ⁴; (3) heterosexual intercourse in both humans and primates—unaccompanied by direct stimulation to the clitoris—rarely results in orgasm for females (Lloyd 37, 118), whereas the vast majority of women—and

³ Although there is some evidence supporting the existence of the G-Spot—a sexually sensitive area inside the vagina (near the “twelve o’clock position”) that can be stimulated through intercourse and result in female orgasm—there has been far more research performed that establishes the “overriding importance” of clitoral stimulation in the achievement of orgasm in women (Lloyd 22).

⁴ “The penis and the clitoris have the same embryological origins and are thus called ‘homologous’ organs. Similarly, the nervous and erectile tissues involved in orgasm in both sexes arose from a common embryological source” (Lloyd 108).

several other known primate species—retain the ability to orgasm nonetheless; (4) given the evidence illustrating the “autonomy of female sexual response from intercourse” (Lloyd 38), it appears that the female orgasm was not designed to be experienced during heterosexual coitus, and (5) since heterosexual intercourse is the most important—if not sole—sexual act that must be evaluated in considering the evolutionary utility of female orgasm, then it appears that (6) the female orgasm is unrelated to the propagation—and fitness—of the human species.

One of the most important elements of the byproduct account discussed by Lloyd deals with the issue of variability with respect to the occurrence of female orgasm during coitus: “In cases in which wide variability occurs without the suggestion of selection on phenotypic plasticity, selection itself is considered unlikely to have taken place, because selection tends to narrow variability, either because the most fit phenotype is at one end of the range or because it is at the middle of the range. In either case, variability is reduced by selection over time” (135). Only about a quarter of Western women “always” experience orgasm during heterosexual intercourse, *and* much of the data that reports this figure is undermined by the fact that during many of the studies, it wasn’t specified by researchers whether participants should answer “always” *only* if they were referring to sex *without additional—direct—clitoral stimulation* (36). Although a little more than half of women from the United States and Europe orgasm during coitus (again, it isn’t always clear in the studies whether or not this demographic did or did not utilize direct clitoral stimulation in addition to ‘traditional’ intercourse), they only orgasm “frequently” or “more than half the time”. Finally, it seems strange that a whole five to ten percent of women in the U.S. and Europe have never experienced orgasm at all (not even through

masturbation). There is a great amount of variability in the findings, and that variability certainly *does* point again to the possibility that the female orgasm was not selected for.

Before I discuss why the female orgasm may be an adaptive trait (or a current-fitness adaptation), I would like to point out a few issues within the byproduct account that might undermine its validity. First, it is not stated explicitly by Lloyd in *The Case* whether that five to ten percent of women who have never experienced orgasm are *incapable* of achieving orgasm, or whether they simply have never experienced a latent ability that they may, in fact, possess. This distinction is important in considering the notion of variability in the byproduct argument, because we must answer the question “which variable is fluctuating? Is it the *capacity* to orgasm, or is it the *expression* of the capacity to orgasm?” Consider this: what if the sexes have an equal capacity for orgasmic achievement? Could it be that the five to ten percent of “non-orgasmic” women are not anorgasmic, but merely “pre-orgasmic”? Dr. Lonnie Barbach, author of *For Yourself: The Fulfillment of Female Sexuality*, argues that “pre-orgasmic” is a more accurate term than “non-orgasmic” because she “fully expects” that a woman who learns proper masturbation techniques will achieve orgasm (xi).

It is also discussed in Lloyd’s work that there is evidence that suggests that American and European women have higher rates of orgasm than women in other cultures (most notably, those in so-called “Third World”, or “developing”, nations). She states: “The cross-cultural evidence is a problem for any theory of female orgasm as an adaptation because it also reflects such variability... This evidence is a problem because it appears that female orgasm is, if anything, less common in women generally than in European and American women” (132). But this evidence needn’t merely be a problem

for the adaptationist accounts. We must entertain the possibility that when women do not experience orgasm, it is not because their bodies cannot produce the experience, but rather because of a lack of education, understanding, and respect for—and oppressive attitudes and teachings towards—the nature of women’s genitalia and sexuality. In other words, we mustn’t *assume* that the variability of female orgasm is due to biology; it could be primarily attributable to environment (social and cultural). In *Sex and Death*, the authors claim that “not only is it unsafe to assume *adaptive stability* over significant environmental change, it is even unsafe to assume *phenotypic stability*” (315). This points to the notion that we mustn’t assume that the minority of women who do not experience orgasm—*regardless* of whether they are pre-orgasmic or anorgasmic—are reflecting the sexual traits that were selected for in our species’ evolutionary history; according to Sterelny and Griffiths, if the differences in the ability to orgasm among women can be ascribed to changes in environment, then the variability argument—that the diversity in the occurrence of female orgasm is too broad in order to be a result of natural selection—which is one of the cornerstones of the byproduct theory, is severely undermined.

So, the assertion that the broad dispersion of the occurrence of female orgasm across the spectrum of women *in and of itself* does not necessarily negate the possibility that female orgasm is an adaptation (regardless of the varying definitions of the word). But, since we will not contend with the element of the byproduct account that likens the clitoris to the penis—there is too much evidence in support of this aspect of the byproduct account⁵—it seems that we cannot rule out this theory. However, if we consider the definition of reproductive success that includes as a prerequisite the ability

⁵ During the initial stages of gestation, fetuses are neither officially “male” nor “female”: the release of hormone necessary for male development doesn’t occur until the eighth week; at that time, either what has developed into a clitoris *remains*, or it begins to develop additional the characteristics that we associate with the penis (Lloyd 108).

to give birth to *viable* offspring, then perhaps we can still show that the female orgasm—while possibly remaining the “embryological consequence” of the selection for male orgasm—currently makes an important contribution to the fitness of the human species.

There are many studies that suggest that the experience of orgasm—for both men *and* women—provides psychological and/or physiological health benefits. I will examine the work of one psychologist, Dr. Barbach, who asserts that women who experience orgasm—particularly women who orgasm *with their mates*—have higher self-esteem and are happier in their marriages than women who do not; from there, I will show how these kinds of findings may influence our opinions regarding the utility of female orgasm. Barbach’s assertions are supported by her own counseling experiences as well as research from several outside sources, including Masters and Johnson (Barbach 218). I present her ideas here as examples of the ubiquitous acceptance in the psychological community of the health benefits of female orgasm.

There are several important contributions that psychologist and sex therapist Lonnie Barbach can offer to our inquiry: first, she claims that the experience of orgasm for women is an important venue for stress reduction (Barbach claims that stress reduction enhances overall health in general, and mentions improvements in gynecological health as a relevant example); second, that sexual assertiveness is strongly correlated with orgasmic achievement; third, that women who orgasm with their mates are happier in their intimate relationships than women who do not; and finally, that women who do not orgasm (with their mates) are more inclined towards depression.

Here is what Barbach believes about the consequences of (women) leading a non-orgasmic life:

Orgasm is the natural and normal release of sexual tension. Sexual tension builds up in women just as it does in men. It builds up not only as the result of sexual encounters, but as the result of normal daily activities; the things we see, hear, touch, and think... And in most of us, this buildup of tension requires a release which is just as natural a process as the buildup itself. In some of us, tension may dissipate without orgasm, while in other women, a continual, repeated lack of sexual release can cause irritability, frustration, fatigue, or headaches. Stress resulting from sexual or other problems can create body imbalances that may result in vaginal infections and other physical symptoms and gynecological problems (3).

We can—and should—entertain Barbach’s point about the relevance of ‘sexual release’ to women’s ability to experience optimum health because she has supported her claim with compelling evidence (these particular assertions rely on the research detailed in Masters and Johnson’s *Human Sexual Inadequacy*). Certainly if women who achieve orgasm are more energetic and have fewer gynecological problems than women who do not, then of course the female orgasm is an adaptive trait! How could it *not* be contributing to the fitness of our species? However, the second point made above—that stress, which may or may not be sexual in nature, can have a detrimental effect on women’s energy levels and gynecological health (which is obviously important in considering women’s ability to reproduce for—hopefully—obvious reasons) requires that we take a ‘leap of faith’ in our reasoning. Is it accurate to suggest that a “continual, repeated lack of sexual release”—i.e., a complete lack of orgasm—necessarily results in so-called ‘sexual stress’? For if women do not experience Barbach’s ‘sexual stress retention’, then there is no reason to believe that the inability to experience orgasm (orgasm being Barbach’s primary prescription for sexual stress relief) will lead to the stress that in turn wreaks (a mild) havoc on women’s bodies. It may seem obvious to some that a non-orgasmic adult existence might necessarily be a stressful and frustrating thing to endure; however, Barbach admits herself that “In some [women], tension may

dissipate without orgasm...” Is it possible that women are more capable of sublimating ‘sexual tension’ than men, and hence have less of a physiological need for orgasms? Perhaps, without answering this particular question, it will be extremely difficult to understand how the female orgasm stands to contribute to fitness; but, alas, more (highly-constrained) research will have to be done before we get our (definitive) answer.

Here is another important excerpt taken from Barbach’s book: “Sexual assertiveness is essential to orgasm. A study by D. F. Hurlbert showed that sexually assertive women reported higher frequencies of orgasm in addition to greater marital and sexual satisfaction” (xv). There are two connections that must be made here. First, if sexual assertiveness is a prerequisite for orgasmic achievement, then it seems even more plausible that the minority of women (in the U.S. and Europe) who are non-orgasmic really might be failing to orgasm not because of physical dysfunction, but because of social constraints that prohibit female sexual assertiveness (such as those imposed by certain cultural and religious traditions). Secondly, if frequently orgasmic women are happier in their marriages, how might that affect their reproductive success and the viability of their offspring? Perhaps happier women make for happier wives, and happier wives make for happier marriages. Most of us have heard that bit of pop psychology that claims we will model our future intimate relationships after the primary example which nature has provided for us: our parents’. If our parents have a happy, healthy marriage, is it more likely that *we* will be better equipped to establish happy, healthy relationships of our own? Also, if our mothers are happy, will they not model more ‘happy’, rather than ‘depressed’, behavior for us? And if so, what effects might that have on our ability to settle down and procreate? There is at least an intuitional appeal to the notion that

‘happy’ parents are more likely to have ‘happy’ children, and that ‘unhappy’ parents are more likely to have ‘unhappy’ children; and furthermore, that ‘happy’ people are more attractive as potential mates than ‘unhappy’, or ‘depressed’, people.

Finally, Barbach says that “consistently orgasmic women tend to describe themselves as contented, good-natured, insightful, self-confident, independent, realistic, strong, capable, and understanding while non-orgasmic women tend to describe themselves as bitter, despondent, dissatisfied, fussy, immature, inhibited, prejudiced, and sulky” (xv)⁶. So, if women who frequently orgasm tend to experience overall superior psychological health to non-orgasmic women—as the arguments of Dr. Barbach aim to suggest—then we should consider the possibility that women who experience orgasm may be particularly capable of producing and rearing children that are psychologically more healthy, and consequently, more ‘fit’ than the children of women who do not (frequently) orgasm.

I have tried to illuminate the debate regarding the evolutionary utility of the female orgasm by explaining what the debate is, why it is important, and how it is inherently tainted by the employment of imprecise terminology. My goal has not been to prove that the female orgasm is or is not an adaptation, but rather to complicate the question. How can we decide that the female orgasm is not an adaptation until we are clear on the meaning of *adaptation* (or the meaning of *fitness*, for that matter)? I propose that, despite the fact that the byproduct account is very compelling, the female orgasm *does* currently enhance the fitness of our species: women who orgasm *do* tend to be happier than women who do not, and consequently, are in a better position to be nurturing, energetic, and patient mothers; and it seems only reasonable to gather that

⁶ Here Barbach paraphrases the research of psychologist Dr. Arvalea Nelson (released in 1974).

stronger mothers are more capable of rearing ‘fitter’ children (who consequently will have higher reproductive potential). It may seem to some readers that I have ‘gone out on a limb’ with my reasoning, but I believe that it is more than likely that future psychological and sexological research will support these hypotheses. And, along with Professor Lloyd, I hope that sex researchers everywhere will tighten the constraints—and the logic—of their experiments, so that their findings will be more credible and acceptable to the academic community.

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ABSTRACT

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The question of the evolutionary utility of female orgasm is profound for many reasons but, most important, it will influence our ideas regarding human sexuality and equality between the sexes. The prevailing theory in evolutionary biology is that the female orgasm is not an adaptation; despite arguments to the contrary, non-adaptive accounts of the female orgasm suggests that it is fundamentally less-purposeful—and more supererogatory—than the male orgasm. By answering this question, we can gain insight into the essential nature and potential of male and female sexuality. After having read several books and articles on the subject, I have evaluated the arguments for and against adaptive and adaptationist accounts of the female orgasm. What I have found is that there is a substantial amount of confusion built into the debate, due largely to a lack of harmony in its terminology. I show that, given the validity of the non-adaptive account, the female orgasm does not appear to be an adaptation (if we employ a rigorous

definition of the word); however, by undermining some of the key features of the non-adaptive account, and by providing some alternative insights from the psychological community, I show that there are many good reasons to suspend our judgment on this question, if not conclude that the female orgasm is an adaptive trait.