Contagion, Masturbation, and Same-Sex Sexuality among Antebellum American Girls

According to doctors in the antebellum United States, a debilitating plague was spreading among American youth. Writing in a Boston medical journal in 1843, one doctor noted with alarm that this plague was of a “highly contagious and virulent character.” A woman in his district had spread the plague to every uninfected girl she met. The disease: masturbation. Of the doctor’s thirty patients who suffered from the “solitary vice,” twenty-four were in the habit of practicing it together because the “gratification is heightened by the manipulation upon each other.”

This paper asks how medical concerns about the “contagion” of masturbation among antebellum youth contained social fears about same-sex sexuality. Early historiography on romantic friendships among nineteenth-century girls argued for the unimaginability of women’s same-sex sexuality. More recent scholarship has mined pornography, legal texts, fiction and poetry for evidence that these “invisible relations” were not quite so invisible after all. Medical texts represent an additional field in which sex between women was both made visible and made invisible simultaneously. Early-nineteenth century medical texts exposed the existence of sexual relations between girls and women, while medical language renamed these erotic relations as solitary and diseased. Medical anti-masturbatory texts, which expressed concerns about the fatal effects of girls’ digital stimulation of each other, laid the groundwork for late nineteenth-century attacks on the “morbid lesbian.”

Biography
Rachel Hope Cleves is Assistant Professor of History at the University of Victoria. She received her Ph.D. from the University of California, Berkeley in 2005. Her dissertation “Mortal Eloquence: Violence, Slavery and Anti-Jacobinism in the Early American Republic” won the James H. Kettner Award for Best Dissertation in the Department of History. In 2009 her book The Reign Terror in America: Visions of Violence from Anti-Jacobinism to Antislavery was published by Cambridge University Press. It won the 2010 Gilbert Chinard Prize from the Institute for French Historical Studies. Cleves is now working on a microhistory about two ordinary women who lived in an extraordinary same-sex marriage in Vermont from 1807 to 1851. Her articles have appeared in The William and Mary Quarterly, Early American Studies, and The Journal of the Early Republic. She is also the winner of research fellowships and awards from the National Humanities Center, the American Academy of Arts and Sciences, and the Harry Frank Guggenheim Foundation.

1 “Masturbation,” The Boston Medical and Surgical Journal 27 (1843).
2 Elizabeth Susan Wahl Invisible Relations: Representations of Female Intimacy in the Age of Enlightenment (Stanford University Press, 1999).