

Emma L. E. Rees, *The Vagina: A Literary and Cultural History* (Bloomsbury, 2013)

If I were handing out prizes for book covers I'd give one to Alice Marwick for her clever pictorial interpretation of the content of this book: two hard covers spread wide, those artfully parted pages revealing a lotus shape with a central darkness, all on a soft pink background above the words *The Vagina* writ large, it is both innocent and suggestive, and arresting enough to make anyone stop and look twice. Emma Rees's book was for a long time going to be called *Can't*, suggesting both the negativity or 'cannot' of language and the taboo word 'cunt'. In British English, the pronunciation of the two words is very close, but the title was dropped when a friend pointed out that in many American English accents the two words sound nothing alike. Aware that the authors of *Freakonomics* had sold four million copies of their books, Rees briefly toyed with the title *Vulvanomics* but finally realised 'the power of the straightforward title in an age of search engines'. This straightforwardness stands, even if it comes in the wake of an earlier book with a similar title, Naomi Wolf's 2012 book for Virago, *Vagina: A New Biography*. Wolf contributes a generous puff on the back cover ('lively, thought-provoking, and richly researched') and most reviewers are agreeing with her, giving the victory laurels to Rees.

Rees gets off to a cracking start, with the c-word rearing its head in the introduction, as the author discusses the troubling question of 'the naming of parts', noting that the OED first definition of 'cunt' is 'the female *external* genital organs', while 'vagina' is very anatomically specific and refers to the birth canal. Her book, which pays due attention to vulva, labia and clitoris, is therefore mistitled. Do we, she asks, need to develop a new language for women's bodies, or do we rehabilitate the old one? Some three hundred pages later she arrives at no definite conclusion, beyond throwing out the challenge to come up with a 'powerful word, an accurate word ... and one that does not infantilize, by sounding "cute"'. I go along with Caitlin Moran, with a firm vote for 'quim'.

It is fascinating to learn that the word 'cunt' dates from about 1230, but was not regarded as indecent until the nineteenth century. It appears in medieval street names such as the former Gropecunte Lane in London (now disappointingly renamed Grape), and placenames such as Clawecunt, Clevecunt, and Cruskunt, which Rees assures us were not at all sexual, let alone obscene, the Old English origins of 'cunt' coinciding with terms for hollow, gully and cleft. Her book is an exploration of how the word and those who possess it came to be objectified, glorified and demonised through five fields of artistic and cultural expression: literature, film, television, visual and performance art.

Rees begins with the myth of the *vagina dentata*, the toothed genitals of bawdy medieval fables, and shows its reaches into today's novels, plays, films and television shows. I regret missing the episode in Season 10 of *South Park* which featured Oprah Winfrey's talking vagina, Minge, an episode which the author points out plays into a 'long and well-established representational tradition of the autonomous cunt'. Hillary Clinton found herself similarly autonomized on *South Park*, when the CIA suspect she might have a nuclear device 'up her snatch', and an aide volunteers to go in and defuse it.

If you devour popular culture, you'll find Rees's book an enjoyable read as she takes on everything from *The Vagina Monologues* to *Sex and the City*. Being more low- than high-brow, I really appreciated these parts of the book, particularly Rees's analysis of the fifth of the 94-episode run of *Sex and the City*, called 'The Power of Female Sex'. It's the episode where uptight Charlotte has her intimate portrait painted and is thus empowered by uniting her female self with her female body. Broadcast in July 1998 on the US channel HBO, it was the first of its programmes to broadcast

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the word 'cunt'. (Take that, Tony Soprano!) The empowerment is short-lived: Rees takes apart the episode 'The Real Me', broadcast just three years later, which also focuses on Charlotte, trying to face up to her fear of inspecting her own vagina, and is a reversal of everything the earlier episode established. Rees devotes sixteen pages to these two episodes, and why not when the show was syndicated in over 200 countries and whose final episode was watched by 10.6 million Americans.

There is content which is more academic – Rees is senior lecturer in the Department of English at the University of Chester, UK, and has a background in early modern and Renaissance culture – couched in the language of feminist studies, and some of it can be difficult to follow or even care about. I could have done with less analysis of the 'cunt art' of Judy Chicago, which is given thirty-five pages, for example, and some of the more obscure performance artists, but in general Rees seems to be targeting her book at a general rather than an academic readership. Or perhaps both.

This is not the definitive text: Rees is clear about the fact that no one book can cover the entire literary and cultural representations of female genitalia, and she sensibly keeps her focus on the West. She points out that the *Sunday Times* in 1992 broke the story of the occurrence in the UK of what was then called 'female circumcision'; in 2012 the same paper revealed that despite the *Female Genital Mutilation Act 2003* there are doctors in the UK willing to carry out the procedure for 750 pounds: 'For this, you can have your daughter's clitoris cut off, and her vulva sewn up'. Very few prosecutions have been brought, at least in part because of what the newspaper calls 'a warped sense of respect for different cultural traditions'.

Ruth Starke