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THE MASOCHIAN WOMAN:

*A fantasy of
male desire?*

JENNIFER KOMOROWSKI

The Masochian woman is a figure who stages what is at stake for women when desire and the law come together. This requires an examination of the conflict that exists between the idea that women's masochism is the fantasy of men and the truth about who wields power in the masochistic theatre. Thus, the inquiry into women's masochism means following Jacques Lacan's conception of women's masochism in *Anxiety*, which describes it as holding a "completely different meaning, a fairly ironic meaning, and a completely different scope" from the pervert's masochism or moral masochism (Lacan, 2016, p.190). Beginning with a critical analysis of Freud and Lacan's theories on masochism, I will decipher what feminine masochism is and why we are usually only presented with cases where the man exhibits this type of masochistic desire. In order to reach a full understanding of this different and ironic meaning for women's masochism, it is important to examine the connection between the gaze and masochism to comprehend the way in which the fantasy of the Other is an essential mechanism in the design of the masochistic theatre. However, connecting these two perversions as both belonging on the passive side of the erotic register, as Lacan does in "The Function and Field of Speech and Language in Psychoanalysis", does not go far enough, and it must be understood that masochism itself is inherently reliant on the gaze as an essential part of the mas-

ochistic theatre, and allows it to function as a fantasy. Thus, for masochism to exist in women, even if it is ironic, Lacan proposes that the fantasy imagined by the Other, or the male fantasy, is what is enacted. This leads to the question of what role anxiety plays in the male fantasy. Lacan believes the masochist's aim is the anxiety of the Other. If woman is enacting a male fantasy, and one which causes anxiety in the face of the Other's desire, and man sustains his *jouissance* through his own anxiety, what is this anxiety? I believe Deleuze provides the answer to this question in his own discussion of the three women figures in Masoch's work. It is the figure of the Grecian woman, who "believes in the independence of women and in the fleeting nature of love; for her the sexes are equal" (Deleuze, 1967, p.47), that is the cause of anxiety for man. For Aphrodite, equality between men and women is the "crucial moment at which she gains dominance over man, for 'man trembles as soon as woman becomes his equal'" (47-48). In *Écrits*, Lacan reminds us of Freud's advice "not to reduce the supplement of the feminine with respect to the masculine to the complement of the passive with respect to the active" (2005, p. 615). In representing what Lacan calls the 'absolute Other' the Masochian woman is able to wield the power of law through her control of the masochistic *mise en scène*.

The Masochian Woman: A fantasy of male desire?¹

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In Lacan's "Guiding Remarks for a Convention on Female Sexuality," he posits the question, "Can we rely on what masochistic perversion owes to male invention and conclude that female masochism is a fantasy of male desire?" In my discussion of women's masochism, I trace the connections between masochism and the gaze in psychoanalysis, which has important implications for the fantasy formation and the theatricality of women's masochism. Lacan would go on to later state in *Seminar X: Anxiety* that "that women's masochism is a male fantasy" (2016, p.190), seemingly confirming this question from his earlier writings. By tracing the connections between the gaze as *objet a* and masochism in the work of both Freud and Lacan it leads to an understanding of process involved in the formation of the masochistic fantasy, and its extimate nature. Thus, by transferring this understanding of masochism to the Masochian Woman reveals the irony which Lacan saw in the concept of a masochistic woman, but also the power relations involved in the theatre of masochism. To come to a theoretical awareness of the

Masochian Woman, it is also necessary to understand who she is not, and therefore this paper will also examine several figures of women who display characteristics of masochism, but do not fully embody the identity of the woman I seek.

Masochism and the Gaze

In Freud's *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality* (1905/1924) he names sadism and masochism as "the most common and the most significant of all the perversions" (p. 23), and, following Krafft-Ebing's naming of these perversions, he emphasizes the way that Krafft-Ebing's nomenclature "[brings] into prominence the pleasure in any form of humiliation or subjection" (1924, p. 23). In his discussion of masochism, Freud gives a general description of the perversion as being comprised of "any passive attitude towards sexual life and the sexual object, the extreme instance of which appears to be that in which satisfaction is conditional upon suffering physical or mental pain at the hands of the sexual object. Masochism, in the form of a

1 Lacan poses this question in "Guiding Remarks for a Convention on Female Sexuality" in *Écrits*.

perversion, seems to be further removed from the normal sexual aim than its counterpart [sadism]" (1924, p. 24). This explanation was added by Freud in 1924, along with the footnote stating: "I have been led to distinguish a primary or *erotogenic* masochism, out of which two later forms, *feminine* and *moral* masochism, have developed. Sadism which cannot find employment in actual life is turned round upon the subject's own self and so produces a *secondary* masochism, which is superadded to the primary kind" (p. 24). The classifications of different types of masochism are also outlined by Sigmund Freud in "The Economic Problem of Masochism" (1924), and his discussion is centered around Feminine masochism because, for Freud, it is "most accessible to our observation and least problematical, and it can be surveyed in all its relations" (p. 276). According to Freud, this Feminine form is based not only in the erotogenic form, pleasure in pain, but also "places the subject in a characteristically female situation" (p. 277). This type of masochism is only ever discussed in the male subject, and since women already exist in these 'characteristically female situations,' Freud never seems to consider diagnosing the perversion in a female patient. Therefore, to understand what it means for a woman to engage in masochism we must also consider Lacan's idea of women's masochism as holding a "completely different meaning, a fairly ironic meaning, and a completely different scope" from either the male pervert's masochism or moral masochism (Lacan, 2016, p. 190). However, that does not necessarily mean that Freud's investigation into male masochism is unhelpful. It provides us the means for understanding how and why women engage in masochism.

If we take a step back to Freud's earlier work discussing Krafft-Ebing's naming of sadism and masochism in the *Three Essays on*

the Theory of Sexuality, and the emphasis on humiliation and subjection which Freud finds innate to this perversion, the language used in this passage echoes the preceding section in the *Three Essays* regarding 'Touching and Looking'. Here, Freud discusses the pleasure in looking (scopophilia) and, like sadism and masochism, he proposes that perversions of looking occur in two forms: the active and the passive. He goes on in the section 'Sadism and Masochism' to align the pain of masochism with both disgust and shame as forces that "[stand] in opposition and resistance to the libido" (Freud, 1924, p. 25). Thus, for Freud, the passive act of looking/ being looked at and masochism are aligned together on the side of the Nirvana principle, which "expresses the trend of the death instinct," although under modification by the libido (Freud, 1924, p. 275). The subject who does not seek his own good is influenced by the death drive, and this is manifest clinically, according to Freud, in various ways, such as repetition compulsion, or masochism, which relies on the gaze to function.

Bringing the discussion of the gaze back to Lacan's 1949 essay "The Mirror Stage as Formative of the Function of the I as Revealed in Psychoanalytic Experience" Lacan first explores the gaze and the role it plays in the formation of the *I*. Here, he describes the mirror stage "as an identification, in the full sense that analysis gives to the term: namely, the transformation that takes place in the subject when he assumes an image" (Lacan, 2005, p. 76). This stage of identification is understood to involve a specular image reflected for the child to see himself, and this process therefore involves an exteriority in order to resolve the analysand's "discordance with his own reality" (Lacan, 2005, p. 76). The end of the mirror stage, which occurs when the *I* is linked to "socially elaborated situations" (Lacan, 2005, p. 79), is also important, as

Lacan points out, saying, “It is this moment that decisively tips the whole of human knowledge (*savoir*) into being mediated by the other’s desire” (Lacan, 2005, p. 79). This hints at the further development of the mirror stage which focuses around the ‘other’s desire.’ Adrian Johnston provides a succinct description of the later, 1960s mirror stage:

language-using (and language-used) big(ger) Others bathe the infant in a cascade of statements and behaviors whose saturating effects endow the specular components of the mirroring moment, Lacan’s primal scene of inaugural identification, with their special, fateful status. The *petit a* (*utré*) of the child’s forming ego, partially bound up with imagistic representation, is originally and primordially a precipitate of “the desire of the Other.” (Johnston, 2013, p. 256)

Here, Johnston brings together the mirror stage together with later Lacan, and, in doing so, ties the literal, specular activity of seeing oneself in the mirror to the non-specular gaze as empty *objet a*.

These statements regarding the mirror stage focus our attention on the desire of the other/Other. The idea that “man’s desire is the desire of the Other” (Lacan, 2016, p. 22) is reiterated throughout Lacan’s work, and will be key, in analysis, to understanding the function of masochism for the woman analysand. When Lacan states that knowledge is mediated by the other’s desire, later to become the big Other, he is referring to an “intimate exteriority” (Lacan, 1999, p. 139), or extimacy, which is naturally mimetic. The process of the mirror stage is not isolated to the individual, but, as Johnston outlines it in his article, is a process which depends on the influence of big Other(s). Johnston provides the following

description for this important process:

Insofar as the ego itself, as what becomes intimate ‘me-ness,’ is born by crystallizing around a core kernel of external Other-subjects’ fantasy-formations, it could be said to be an instance of extimacy in Lacan’s precise sense of this neologism. Put differently, at the very nucleus of the recognized ‘me’ resides a misrecognized (*à la* Lacanian *méconnaissance*) ‘not-me,’ something ‘in me more than myself.’ (Johnston, 2013, p. 256)

Thus, our own fantasies and desires are never truly our own because the formation of what makes me who I am is built around a kernel of extimacy. So, when Lacan states in *Seminar X: Anxiety* “that women’s masochism is a male fantasy,” (2017, p. 190) this is what he means. He is referring to the conceptualization of a masochistic woman, which becomes the kernel for the fantasy of masochism for the subject.

Lacan directly links the concept that “man’s desire is the desire of the Other” to the gaze in “What is a Picture?” when he states: “I would say that it is a question of a sort of desire *on the part of* the Other, at the end of which is the *showing* (*le donner-à-voir*)” (1981, p. 115). The particular word *showing* that Lacan uses here indicates to us that the gaze is not merely a process of being seen, but requires a conscious showing on the part of the subject who is being seen, and literally translates from the original French *le donner-à-voir* as giving-to-see-it. Lacan goes on to pose the question, “How could this *showing* satisfy something, if there is not some appetite of the eye on the part of the person looking?” (1981, p. 115), and he feels that this reveals the truth about the eye: that it is a voracious and evil eye (1981, p. 115). What is not

mentioned here is what this showing reveals about the one who is performing the 'giving-to-see-it'. This 'giving-to-see-it' represents an unstated agreement between the one who sees and the one who shows, not unlike the masochistic contract, which reveals that this giving not only satisfies the appetite of the eye of the viewer, but also satisfies some desire on the part of the one who gives. For Freud, this 'giving-to-see-it' is another form of the perversion of looking because it supplants, or overtakes the importance, of the normal sexual aim. Freud provides three cases in which looking becomes perversion: when looking is "restricted exclusively to the genitals," when it is connected to disgust, or when it supplants the importance of the normal sexual aim (1924, p. 23). However, when this 'giving-to-see-it' is incorporated into the masochistic fantasy, and if Freud's classification of what is considered a perversion is strictly followed, then the presentation of the masochistic individual in a submissive or humiliating position as "visual impression" is simply "the most frequent pathway along which libidinal excitation is aroused" (Freud, 1924, p. 22), and as long as the act of looking is only preparatory to the normal sexual aim, this visual arousal can be considered a way to raise the libido to a "higher artistic aim" (Freud, 1924, p. 23). As I will later discuss in regards to masochism, the theatrical act of looking and showing is usually a step in the script of masochism which does not completely take the place of touching or the normal sexual aim, but instead a passive, masochistic form of looking can be considered an "artistic and theatrical display" (Bronfen, 1996, p. 60) by Freud.

In "I Hear You With My Eyes" Žižek expands further on Lacan's 'evil eye' concept and categorizes the voice and the gaze as *objet a* which align with life and death. However, simply connecting these two perversions as both belonging on the passive side of

the erotic register does not go far enough. Masochism itself is inherently reliant on the gaze as an essential part of the masochistic theatre which allows it to function as a fantasy. The intrinsic nature of the gaze in relation to masochism is revealed by going back to Freud's initial discussion of sadism and masochism, where he states that rather than overemphasizing the element of pain associated with these practices it is "the pleasure in any form of humiliation or subjection" (Freud, 1924, p. 23) that should be our focus. By tracing the etymology of 'subjection' to the Latin *subiectiōn*, which means the "action of placing something before one's mental vision" (OED), the important link between these two perversions becomes clear. Lacan further draws out this connection between 'giving-to-see-it' and masochism in *Seminar X: Anxiety* where he notes the distinction between voyeurism/exhibitionists and the act of what he refers to as "*letting something be seen*" (Lacan, 2016, p. 191) in masochism. This means more than the specular image being revealed in a process of 'giving-to-see-it' because it reveals something about the subject that is normally concealed. Most interestingly, Lacan believes that this revelation of "*letting something be seen*" is anxiety-provoking for both men and women, but for woman the masquerade of femininity is uncovered to show "*what there is*" (Lacan, 2016, p. 191) and for man this revelation of desire only allows "*what there is not*" (Lacan, 2016, p. 191) to be uncovered, and we can understand this to be his own anxiety.

Where are the Women?

Turning from Freud and Lacan to Deleuze it becomes obvious that in most discussions on masochism the women have been relegated to a lesser position or altogether forgotten. However, in Deleuze's

Coldness and Cruelty (1967) he pays particular attention to the role of women in the writing of Leopold von Sacher-Masoch; Deleuze analyses the different fantasy women that appear in Masoch's works, but this still remains problematic for my discussion because the woman is always described in relation to man's desire. These three women exist in a masochistic relationship with the men, but as female tops they are not the masochistic directors, nor are they sadists able to derive pleasure from the situation, because the male bottoms disregard woman's pleasure. However, Deleuze classifies the women as masochistic based on them existing as "a pure element of masochism" (Deleuze, 1967, p. 42), and clarifies that "it is a mistake to think that she is sadistic or even pretending to be so" (Deleuze, 1967, p. 42). Two extreme versions of woman are identified as the Grecian woman and the sadistic woman. The first type, the Grecian woman, is the hetaera or Aphrodite, and "is dedicated to love and beauty; she lives for the moment" (Deleuze, 1967, p. 47). Deleuze goes on to describe her as believing "in the independence of women and in the fleeting nature of love; for her the sexes are equal" (1967, p. 47). Aphrodite is the "female principal" (Deleuze, 1967, p. 47) and the moment of equality is the moment in which women gain dominance over man because "man trembles as soon as woman becomes his equal" (Deleuze, 1967, p. 48). This version of woman wants to cause chaos and destroy patriarchal systems of control, including marriage, morality, the Church and the State because they are "inventions of man" (Deleuze, 1967, p. 48). The opposite extreme version of woman in Masoch's writing is the sadistic woman. As a sadist "She enjoys hurting and torturing others, but it is significant that her actions are prompted by a man or otherwise performed in concert with a man, whose victim she is always liable to become" (Deleuze, 1967, p. 48). Deleuze

proposes that these two versions of woman are not the ideal type for Masoch because "At one extreme masochism has yet to come into operation, and at the other it has already lost its *raison d'être*" (1967, p. 50). The true fantasy woman instead falls somewhere in the middle of these extremes, but is almost impossible to pinpoint. This fantasy woman does not actually exist anywhere within Masoch's writings, and Deleuze can only describe her by piecing together various descriptions from Masoch's work; she is "cold—maternal—severe, icy—sentimental—cruel" (1967, p. 51). This coldness applies not only to the woman in the masochistic relationship, but also the sadistic heroes found in sadomasochistic literature. For Sade's characters this is expressed as apathy which is directed against all feelings. Masoch differs here from Sade in that the coldness connected with the fantasy woman is not a "negation of feeling, but rather the disavowal of sensuality" (Deleuze, 1967, p. 52). For Masoch, this cruel and sentimental woman is able to "compel man to thought and properly constitute the masochistic ideal" (Deleuze, 1967, p. 54). However, as I pointed out earlier, this cold-hearted woman is not the woman I seek; she does not enjoy her own subjection and humiliation, and she instead serves as the woman-as-fantasy who exists only to torture the masochistic man.

The true Masochian woman is only implied near the end of Masoch's literary case study of masochism, *Venus in Furs*; here, Wanda ends her relationship with Severin in order to have a master of her own. When she ends her relationship with Severin she says, "Not another slave, I have had enough of them: a master. Women need to have a master to worship" (Masoch, 1967, p. 258). Although few details are provided about Wanda's new relationship with the Greek, the moral of the tale is provided by Severin when he says, "I was a fool...If only I had whipped her

instead!" (Masoch, 1967, p. 271). However, this would mean that instead of Severin transforming into 'the hammer' he would have to take on the fantasy role that the masochistic woman plays in the work of Masoch. For if he became the sadistic torturer in order to whip Wanda their relationship would have been incompatible.

In Angela Carter's *The Sadeian Woman and the Ideology of Pornography* (1979) she examines the work of Sade as another literary case study, and specifically focuses on the two sisters Juliette and Justine. In Juliette she finds the true Sadeian woman, who is also very similar to the extreme sadistic woman that Deleuze finds in the work of Masoch. Juliette's ability to become a Sadeian woman is based on two things: her ability to be the "perfect whore" (Carter, 1979, p. 92) and her rejection of femininity. Juliette is motivated by financial profit and libidinal gratification, and these two things work together to ensure that she does not have to submit to any law. Through the use of her sexuality as power, "Juliette transforms herself from pawn to queen in a single move and henceforward goes wherever she pleases on the chess board. Nevertheless, there remains the question of the presence of the king, who remains the lord of the game." (Carter, 1979, p. 91). Juliette lives in a patriarchal world which is "governed by god, the king and the law" (Carter, 1979, p. 92), which Carter describes as "the trifold masculine symbols of authority" (1979, p. 92). Juliette is aware of how to survive in this world, and does so through her rational sexuality, but, like the Oedipal mother Deleuze describes, she is always at risk of becoming the victim, even as she engages in sadistic torture.

In Rebecca Comay's "Adorno avec Sade..." she discusses the proximity between Adorno and Horkheimer and Lacan's work on Sade. She points out that, for Adorno, there exists:

nothing fascinating, nothing shocking, nothing disgusting, nothing virulent... but merely the tedious administration of routine piled upon routine, bleached out, neutralize, antiseptic: sodomy, incest, mutilation, torture, coprophagy, whatever, everything reduced to business as usual, Juliette as gym coach, the bedroom as boardroom, boardroom as boredom, boredom as the congealment of the always-the-same. (Comay, 2006, p. 8)

This corresponds to the rituals of the libertines, which Carter compares to the Catholic Church, and which Juliette is educated in to become the Sadeian woman. The banality which Comay associates with Sade's smut also applies to Juliette's libertine education, which is learned by rote, much the way schoolchildren endure learning multiplication tables. For Juliette to become a perfect whore, and eventually place herself "firmly in the camp of the masters" (Carter, 1979, p. 98), requires the ability to master the education she receives from several older women figures. Carter traces this education from the convent, where she learns from the abbess Delbène "the elements of sexual expertise, the relativity of ethics, militant feminism and doctrinaire atheism" (Carter, 1979, p. 93), to the brothel, where she learns to steal, lie, and play a part in a male fantasy. In the brothel her "virginity is sold successively to fifty buyers" (Carter, 1979, p. 96) and her apprenticeship is completed when she sells her anus to an archbishop. Much like the rote recitation of numbers, Juliette's virginity must be repeatedly sold in this banal way for her to master her role as whore.

The ability of Juliette to learn these various sexual acts is an example of Freud's theory of polymorphous perversity which he outlines in *Three Essays*. His example of the polymorphously perverse subject is the 'uncultivated woman' who learns to be poly-

morphous through the repetition of different sex acts with various partners. Freud provides this description of the woman:

Under ordinary conditions she may remain normal sexually, but if she is led on by a clever seducer she will find every sort of perversion to her taste, and will retain them as part of her own sexual activities. Prostitutes exploit the same polymorphous, that is, infantile, disposition for the purposes of their profession...it becomes impossible not to recognize that this same disposition to perversions of every kind is a general and fundamental human characteristic. (1924, p. 57)

In this description of the process for developing the polymorphously perverse prostitute it is easy to locate Juliette's own education. She, however, does not stop at becoming polymorphously perverse in order to satisfy her customers, but instead seeks to become "a Nietzschean superwoman, which is to say, a woman who has transcended her gender but not the contradictions inherent in it" (Carter, 1979, p. 98). The contradiction inherent in being a Sadeian woman is just as important for the Masochian woman; woman is regarded as the 'weaker sex,' and so even as a sadistic master, Juliette is always at risk of becoming the victim of the libertine men. For the Masochian woman, the same belief that woman is weaker, and that masochism itself has something feminine inherent to it, means that a woman who enjoys being the masochistic bottom is regarded as enjoying her own patriarchal oppression. In theorizing this woman though, it becomes clear that she wields as much power as the Sadeian woman, and like Juliette, learns to play a part in her own masochistic fantasy by "[playing] with mimesis" (Irigaray, 1985, p. 76). Therefore,

as Juliette adopts the libertine theatre of cruelty, where she is willing to play any part, and her moral purity, and that of mankind, are found in her own infinitely polymorphously perverse nature, the Masochian woman adopts her own masochistic theatre, where she dictates the roles to be played for herself and those who enter her theatre.

In their discussion of sadism and masochism both Deleuze and Lacan destroy the illusion of a dichotomy between the two perversions. Deleuze states that "The concurrence of sadism and masochism is fundamentally one of analogy only; their processes and their formations are entirely different; their common organ, their 'eye,' squints and should therefore make us suspicious" (Deleuze, 1967, p. 46). As I have already discussed, Deleuze sees all the women in Masoch's works as masochistic in nature, because each woman "incarnates instead the element of 'inflicting pain' in an exclusively masochistic situation" (1967, p. 42), and therefore the men have no need, or desire, for the sadistic subject to enter into a relationship with them. This understanding is reiterated in Žižek's article "Are We Allowed To Enjoy Daphnée du Maurier?" where he emphasizes that sadism involves domination, and masochism involves liberation. The incompatibility of these two perversions is made clear through Žižek's recounting of Deleuze's interpretation of Masoch: "far from bringing any satisfaction to the sadistic witness, the masochist's self-torture frustrates the sadist, depriving him of his power over the masochist" (Žižek, 2004, n.p.).

Betwixt Sadism and Masochism

While Deleuze presents the idea that the sadist and the masochist are enacting different and separate dramas which involve them in completely different interactions of the

pleasure-pain complex (1967, p. 45), and are therefore incompatible as a pair of subjects, Lacan's discussion of the subject provides detailed differences which illustrate how and why sadism and masochism are incompatible. In *Anxiety* Lacan outlines the fact that these two perversions are "not a reversible couple" (2017, p. 177); He details the difference between them, stating:

We find ourselves, betwixt sadism and masochism, in the presence of what presents itself as an alienation. That which, at the second level, is veiled and concealed in each of these two subjects appears in the other party at the level of what is targeted. There is an occultation of anxiety in the first case, of the *object a* in the other. This is not, however, a process in reverse, a switch-around. (Lacan, 2017, p. 177)

It is the differing aims of sadism and masochism which make the subject as sadist and the subject as masochist completely incompatible. The sadist seeks *objet a* in his victim and, as Žižek makes clear, when he does not receive what he seeks from the masochist he is unsatisfied. The sadist wants to invoke shame in the victim through the gaze, but in masochism "the victim no longer experiences shame, it openly displays its *jouissance*" (Žižek, 2016, p.488). The masochist, on the other hand, is thought to seek the Other's *jouissance*, but what this mistaken belief conceals is the true aim of the masochist: the Other's anxiety. Thus, even if the same exercise is performed in sadism and masochism, the desire of these two figures is completely different.

The first point which I will bring up is the question of the value of masochism. Lacan answers this by saying, "When desire and the law find themselves together again, what the

masochist means to show—and I'll add, on his little stage, because this dimension should never be lost sight of—is that the desire of the Other lays down the law." (Lacan, 2017, p. 106). This statement echoes several of the concepts already covered in this paper—the dimension of looking and the importance of the desire of the Other—and these concepts will also prove to be crucially important for the Masochian woman. Lacan goes on to discuss masochism and he establishes that the aim of the masochist is the Other's anxiety, which has been established as a different aim from the sadist, who seeks the *object a* in the other.

In principle, the concept of women's masochism "is a male fantasy," or the fantasy of the big Other, and which Lacan goes on to explain, "In this fantasy, it is by proxy and in relation to the masochistic structure that is imagined in woman that man sustains his *jouissance* through something that is his own anxiety. That is what the object covers over. In men, the object is the condition of desire." (Lacan, 2017, p. 190). In contrast, "For women, the desire of the Other is the means by which her *jouissance* will have an object that is, as it were, suitable." (Lacan, 2017, p. 191). Thus, for masochism to exist in women, even if it is ironic, Lacan believes that the fantasy imagined by the Other, or the male fantasy, is what is enacted. This leads to the question of what role anxiety plays in the male fantasy. As I have already stated, Lacan believes the masochist's aim is the anxiety of the Other. If woman is enacting a male fantasy, which causes anxiety in the face of the Other's desire, and man sustains his *jouissance* through his own anxiety, what is this anxiety? I believe Deleuze provides the answer to this question in his own case study of the three women figures in Masoch's work. It is the figure of the Grecian woman, who "believes in the independence of women and in the fleeting nature of love; for her the

sexes are equal” (Deleuze 47), that is the cause of anxiety for man. For Aphrodite equality between men and women is the “crucial moment at which she gains dominance over man, for ‘man trembles as soon as woman becomes his equal’” (47-48).

This raises the problem of how man can reject the equality or dominance of woman by enacting a masochistic fantasy. For the male masochist, he “stages his own servitude” (Žižek, 1994, p. 92), and in doing so the man is the one “who actually pulls the strings and dictates the activity of the woman [*dominatrix*]” (Žižek, 1994, p.92). Thus, the man is always the one in control, and the constant disavowal of real violence allows him to confront the anxiety brought on by the Other by acting it out in the masochistic theatre. In Žižek’s *The Metastases of Enjoyment: On Women and Causality* (1994) he compares masochism with the concept of courtly love; he cites Deleuze’s discussion of masochism to prove the important point that sadism and masochism follow opposite modes of negation (violent domination vs disavowal and controlled violence). In addition to these opposite modes of negation, sadism and masochism also have structural differences in how they are enacted by the analysand: institution and contract. As Žižek shows, sadism uses the “institutional power” to torment “its victim and taking pleasure in the victim’s helpless resistance” (91). This, however, is exactly what the male masochist does not want, for, if he is tortured by a sadist, he will be horrified at being “reduced in the eyes of the Other to *objet a*” (Žižek, 1994, p. 93). Žižek proposes that in this case the masochist responds with “irrational violence aimed at the other” (Žižek, 1994, p. 93). This hystericization is precisely what happens to the masochist Severin in *Venus in Furs*. When the Greek whips him, rather than Wanda, he is horrified at being reduced to *objet a* and feels he is “dying of

shame and despair” (Masoch, 1991, p. 268). In reaction it is only natural that he responds with irrational violence when he becomes ‘the hammer’. Contrary to this institutional violence of sadism, masochism is “made to the measure of the victim: it is the victim...who initiates a contract with the Master (woman), authorizing her to humiliate him in any way she considers appropriate” (Žižek, 1994, p. 91). The keys to masochism are that the masochist enacts the power of the contract, so he is the one who is really in control, and that the threat of actual violence is always interrupted. Real violence is suspended and the entire masochistic theatre, as its name suggests, is an act or feigning of violence.

From Subordination to Affirmation

How does the masochistic theatre then allow woman to face her own anxiety, which, as Lacan puts it, “is only anxiety faced with the desire of the Other” (Lacan, 2017, p. 191)? If women’s masochism is theoretically a male fantasy, consisting of the man dominating the woman, by enacting it in the masochistic theatre the woman is traversing the fantasy, and confronting the anxiety of the Other at the same time. As established, masochism is enacted and the rules set out contractually by the ‘victim’. For woman, this means she is able to escape the institutional and sadistic violence, which permeates society, and instead can enact the “endless repeating of an interrupted gesture” (Žižek, 1994, pp. 92). The full meaning of women’s masochism becomes clear in Žižek’s “Are We Allowed to Enjoy Daphnée du Maurier?” when he proposes a possible subversion of the fantasy of woman by woman:

femininity is from the very beginning split between Eve and Lilith, between

‘ordinary’ hysterical feminine subject and the fantasmatic spectre of Woman: when a man is having sex with a ‘real’ woman, he is using her as a masturbatory prop to support his fantasizing about the non-existent Woman... And in *Rebecca*, her most famous novel, du Maurier adds another twist to the Lilith myth: the fantasy of Woman is (re)appropriated by a woman—what if Lilith is not so much a male fantasy as the fantasy of a woman, the model of her fantasmatic competitor? (Žižek, 2004, n.p.)

Thus, the role playing that takes place in the masochistic theatre allows woman to reappropriate the fantasy of a woman for her own masochistic desire. The multifaceted identity of woman Eve/Lilith follows the Lacanian definition of the woman who ‘does not exist,’ and she cannot be defined by one single identity because she has always already escaped signification.

This method of appropriation can be compared to Irigaray’s feminist praxis of mimicry and “[assuming] the feminine role deliberately” (Irigaray, 1974, p. 76). In sado-masochism if the masochist is, to return to Freud, the one who is placed “in a characteristically female situation” (Freud, 1924, p. 277), then by assuming the role of the feminine masochist for a woman is to reappropriate the role of the feminine, and therefore “convert a form of subordination into an affirmation, and thus to begin to thwart it” (Irigaray, 1974, p. 76). Žižek sets the groundwork for how this can be accomplished through his explanation of masochism through the libidinal economy of courtly love. The courtly Lady is described as a “cold, distanced, inhuman partner” (Žižek, 1994, p. 89), much like Masoch’s masochistic women, and she assumes the role of the master in the relationship by imposing on the knight all sorts of “senseless, outrageous,

impossible, arbitrary, capricious ordeals” (Žižek, 1994, p. 90). However, as an object of men’s desire, the courtly Lady provides a fantasy-structure through which woman “refers to herself with regard to her (potential) relationship to man” (Žižek, 1994, p. 108). The reaction of (some forms of) feminism to this structure is one of panic because it cannot accept any form of ‘patriarchal domination’ and this becomes a problem because it undermines “the fantasy-support of their own feminine identity” (Žižek, 1994, p. 108). It is only in the perverse (masochistic) contract, which is established between equal subjects, that Žižek shows us paradoxically “serves to establish a relationship of domination” (1994, p. 109) *VIA* the balanced contract. Žižek’s interpretation of masochism through courtly love reveals that in the masochistic relationship woman always holds some form of power over the man. When the woman is playing the dominatrix she assumes the traditional role of the Lady and makes ridiculous demands of the man as knight. Conversely, when she plays the subordinate role, what I have been referring to as the Masochian woman, she still plays the role of the Lady because she sets the terms of the contract and still makes demands of the man. When woman takes on this subservient role, according to Lacan, she is enacting the masquerade, a reference to Joan Riviere’s “Womanliness as Masquerade” (1929), in which she puts on the act of being feminine in a defensive mode.

To take this defensive mode of the masquerade one step further is to attempt to use the act of femininity in order to “[jam] the theoretical machinery itself, of suspending its pretension to the production of a truth and of a meaning that are excessively univocal” (Irigaray, 1974, p. 78). Following Lacan’s assertion that in masochism “the desire of the Other lays down the law” (Lacan, 2017, p. 106), the act of intentionally taking on a

masochistic position for woman to achieve pleasure is a conscious act which “can be found only at the price of *crossing back through the mirror that subtends all speculation*. For this pleasure is not simply situated in a process of reflection or mimesis, nor on one side of this process or the other” (Irigaray, 1974, p. 77). The law, or language, has traditionally been denied to women through their “social inferiority” (Irigaray, 1974, p. 85), but through the process of assuming the role of the subordinate in the masochistic situation, woman is able to define the terms of the contract and rewrite the law, and language, in her favour. For Irigaray, this type of “language work” takes on the function of casting phallogocentrism “loose from its moorings in order to return the masculine to its own language, leaving open the possibility of a different language” (1974, p. 80). Thus, the masochistic contract, which is made possible by the equality of the subjects, fulfills the fear of woman’s dominance over man; it is written in the language of the Masochian woman and has the ability to subvert the phallogocentric language that dominates the rest of the world.

One of the key theoretical points for coming to understand the Masochian woman is that of sexual difference. Following Lacan’s starting point “The Woman does not exist,” because there is no universal meaning to what it is to be a woman, for a woman to understand who she is a mimetic process occurs which she learns from those around her. In Darian Leader’s *Why do Women Write More Letters Than They Post?* (1996), he presents several hypothetical situations in which women place themselves in the role of a man in order to understand the way in which men relate to other subjects, and particularly women, in the case of heterosexual desire. Notably, Leader says that women construct love triangles because “a triangle is a necessary condition for the study of someone else’s desire” (Leader, 1996, p. 5). This type of triangulation can be

tied directly back to the masochistic theatre and the audience which is implied to be viewing the masochistic action take place. Thus, the gaze, and the mimetic response which follows, is a crucial part of sexual difference for woman. Another factor which must be taken into consideration when discussing sexual difference is feminine jouissance. Grounded in the fact that woman is not whole, woman has what Lacan calls “a supplementary jouissance compared to what the phallic function designates by way of jouissance” (Lacan, 1999, p. 73). This feminine jouissance is described by Lacan as being what “one experiences and yet knows nothing about” (1999, p. 77). One of the primary examples Lacan gives to show that this extra (*en plus*) jouissance exists, but cannot be put into language, is the statue “The Ecstasy of St. Teresa” (1999, p. 76). The challenge to describe feminine jouissance put forth by Lacan is answered by Irigaray in *Speculum of the Other Woman* (1974). Here she takes the same figure of a woman, Saint Teresa of Avila, and instead of silencing her by only considering her as a statue, she looks to her writings to find the description of this extra jouissance. Irigaray makes direct reference to Saint Teresa when she writes, “*How strange is the economy of this specula(riza)tion of woman, who in her mirror seems ever to refer back to a transcendence. Who moves away (for) who comes near, who groans to be separated from the one who holds her closest in his embrace*” (Irigaray, 1974, p. 201). The footnote, quoting from Saint Teresa’s vision of the Flaming Heart, refers to pain which “was so great that it made me moan, and yet so surpassing was the sweetness of this excessive pain that I could not wish to be rid of it” (Irigaray, 1974, p. 201). This experience of feminine jouissance, which in statue form Lacan insists that it cannot be denied Saint Teresa is ‘coming,’ is a description of an experience which is undeniably masochistic. Irigaray’s interpreta-

tion of this vision is that it is an experience of transcendence, unmistakably masochistic, and is a part of the specularization of woman. This connection back to the mimetic function of the mirror stage and the gaze is described by Irigaray as “the work of death” (1974, p. 54).

In thinking through the ironic masochism of women, it becomes clear that, in materialist terms, it is a contradictory concept, and it is in contradictions where the truth is found.² Thus, by theorizing the seemingly ironic Masochian Woman, it becomes clear that within the masochistic contract submission requires equality between men and women to come first. Therefore, it becomes apparent that thinking through each contradiction, in turn, leads us to another contradiction. Following this logic, when women enact masochism, its success depends on equality between man and woman, but the outcome is the dominance of the masochistic woman.

2 From Hegel’s thesis “*Contradictio est regula veri, non-contradictio falsi,*” or “Contradiction is the rule of the true, non-contradiction of the false” (Dolar, 2017, p. 87).

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