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To cite this article: Alex Dymock (2012) But femsub is broken too! On the normalisation of BDSM and the problem of pleasure, *Psychology & Sexuality*, 3:1, 54-68, DOI: [10.1080/19419899.2011.627696](https://doi.org/10.1080/19419899.2011.627696)

To link to this article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/19419899.2011.627696>



Published online: 04 Nov 2011.



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But femsub is broken too! On the normalisation of BDSM and the problem of pleasure

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(Received 3 December 2010; final version received 27 July 2011)

This article constitutes a theoretical critique of the limits by which BDSM is policed by law and psychiatry from a feminist jurisprudential perspective. In particular, it discusses types of female masochism that disavow narratives of ‘safe, sane and consensual’ and BDSM’s transformative potential and instead makes an argument for a feminist ethics of female masochism. Through an engagement with psychoanalysis and Jacques Lacan’s notion of *jouissance*, the essay makes a claim that criminal law in this context functions as a kind of ‘pleasure principle’ and that the notion of ‘harmful’ consensual sexual experiences relies upon a normative tendency to relate feminine masochism with compliance, not only to the will of another, but with the social order of ‘reproductive futurity’.

Keywords: feminine sexuality; criminal law; psychiatry; feminist theory; Jacques Lacan; queer theory; sexual ethics

Kink’s broken. I hate it. I don’t really want to play. Something inside me does, but that something is trapped inside the meat of me that hates all this fucking pornified, PVC clad, patriarchy eroticising bullshit that stifles everything and anything good that kink could ever be. It is the enemy of any kind of creative artistic freedom and that’s a sad, sad thing, because it could be the opposite of that.

(Bitchy Jones’s Diary, posted 1 February 2010, post entitled ‘Some Kind of Climax’)

Not only does civilisation stop us getting enough sex; it prevents us from getting the kind of sex some of us most deeply want.

(Leo Bersani, ‘Is the Rectum A Grave?’, 1988)

To make a theory feminist, it is not enough that it be authored by a biological female. Nor that it describe female sexuality as different (if equal to) male sexuality, or as if sexuality in women ineluctably exists in some realm beyond, beneath, above, behind – in any event unmoved and untouched by – an unequal social order.

(Catherine Mackinnon, ‘Sexuality, Pornography, and Method: “Pleasure under patriarchy”’, 1989)

Introduction

When female dominant blogger Bitchy Jones removed herself from the blogosphere early in 2010 her message was clear: kink in the United Kingdom as it is currently represented offers little in the way of stimulation or inspiration – be that intellectual, creative or

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erotic – to the contemporary feminist. This fear is an oft-repeated theme throughout her journal. If kink is not protected from the normalising effects of the commercialisation of sex, it loses a validity and authenticity that it might have otherwise. Bitchy's message seems to be that desirable narratives of BDSM¹ have been silenced by normalisation to such an extent that contemporary representations of kink no longer bear any resemblance to the kind of sex she, as a feminist, would want to have. The normalisation of sex through commercialisation can be traced back to the 'sexual revolution' of the 1960s when 'sex' became a significant industry of its own, as part of a simple expansion of the ideology of sexual libertarianism (Wilkinson, 2009). Through the expansion of the marketplace to accommodate any number of sexual innovations (Beckmann, 2001), a greater number of paradigms of sexual deviance are on display than ever before; but they continue to be represented within regimented boundaries, policed by psychiatry and the law.

I am broadly in agreement with Bitchy about the marginalising effect this normalised image of BDSM has had on feminine desires that cannot be comfortably assimilated into heteronormative constructions of sexuality. Furthermore, I suggest that non-pathologising narratives newly assigned to BDSM often simultaneously aid the process of normalisation she takes issue with. This article argues that these newer, non-pathologising narratives still operate as a kind of disciplinary mechanism, further marginalising paradigms of female masochism that are cast outside the legal and clinical binary of health and harm. Taking a Foucauldian approach to the disciplinary effects of mental health narratives, Downing and Gillett have argued, in a previous issue of this journal, for the necessity of a 'more radical and queer gesture of epistemological de(con)struction' (Downing & Gillett, 2011, p. 11). In the final section of my essay, I attempt to reconcile their approach with a feminist reading of Lacan's theories of *jouissance*. As Plummer (1995) notes, all sexual narratives begin with the publicising of private meaning. In the liminal safety of the online 'blogosphere', *Bitchy Jones's Diary* is perhaps the most visible narrative de(con)struction of the normalisation of BDSM available. Her voice is thus the starting point for my analysis.

Locating women's BDSM discourses beyond the 'safe, sane and consensual'

Although there is a small body of theoretical work exploring the critical implications of 'extreme' BDSM practices situated 'beyond safety' (Downing, 2004, 2007; Downing & Gillett, 2011; Moore, 2009), there is very little empirical work available that pays close attention to participants with a specific interest in 'edgeplay'² outside of clinic settings.³ Much of the earliest research conducted with BDSM participants has been acquired through quantitative methodologies (e.g. Gosselin & Wilson, 1980; Lee, 1979; Weinberg, Williams, & Moser, 1984), privileging the prescriptive categories assigned by the mental health 'expert' over the subjective, private meanings of participants' experiences. Critical psychology has attempted in recent years to rebalance the relationship between participant and researcher by situating individual, subjective accounts of BDSM by practitioners as central to a better understanding of sexual deviance, and a number of empirical studies have been made on this basis (e.g. Beckmann, 2001; Newmahr, 2008; Ritchie & Barker, 2005). However, there is very little empirical work that pays significant attention to female masochism and its relationship with feminism (a rare exception being Ritchie & Barker, 2005), and none that explicitly addresses female masochism 'beyond safety'. Taylor and Ussher (2001, p. 296) are careful to include behaviours in their study that would in principle satisfy the legal criteria for actual or grievous bodily harm, but do not pay specific attention to the challenges these practices may pose to a non-pathologising appraisal of BDSM. Even if there were a wealth of qualitative material available it is difficult to imagine, as

Langdridge and Butt (2005, p. 67) account for, how voluntary subjects might attempt to reconcile what they perceive to be the interviewer's perception of, or even prejudices against, BDSM with their own, and how that may affect the terms by which they weave their own narrative for the 'coaxing' researcher. There is also the possibility that some narratives – namely those that conform to the specifics of the researchers' agenda – may be privileged over others that do not (Barker & Langdridge, 2009, p. 8). By addressing exclusively the theoretical (rather than empirical) implications of 'edgeplay' in this article, I hope to highlight critical concerns the relationship between sexuality, the psy-disciplines and law raise that future empirical studies of BDSM might take into account.

Civilised subjects versus monstrous desires: a short genealogy of deviance, psychiatry and law

As diagnostic studies of sadism and masochism have predominantly remained confined to clinical and forensic settings (e.g. Glick & Meyers, 1988; Gratzler & Bradford, 1995), a degree of 'cognitive impairment', 'disturbance' or criminality was generally already presumed. However, in recent clinical literature there is now rarely an assumption on the part of the researcher that a sexual predilection towards sadistic or masochistic behaviours *automatically* renders the subject psychically disturbed or dangerous. Contemporary psychiatric reviews of empirical literature continue to trend towards problematising the link between sadism, masochism and pathology (Baumeister & Butler, 1997; Hucker, 2008) with the assumption that if it is possible to demonstrate that a desire to practise BDSM involves only experiences that are pleasurable, 'sex-positive' or, as Bitchy puts it, 'creative', it is proven that non-normative desires are a perversion of behaviour, but that the subject remains 'civilised' and sane. Although eventually resulting in a recent summary of the literature (Krueger, 2010) persuasive enough to (in part) remove sadism and masochism from the soon-to-be-published American Psychiatric Association *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM-5)* (due May 2013) as straightforwardly pathological, the extent to which such behaviours may 'damage' the subject or 'cause them significant distress or impairment in important areas of functioning' will instead be the limit at which sexually deviant behaviour is policed, resulting in a diagnosis of a paraphilic disorder rather than a paraphilia. It is yet to be seen whether this will have any impact on legal definitions of sexual offences.

Sexual deviance that lies close to recognisable, heteronormative sexual paradigms, while previously troubling the boundaries between definitions of sanity and psychopathology, the civilised and the barbarous, comes to represent a perversion of behaviour rather than a perverted subject. However, this division between behaviour and subjectivity is predicated upon a desire to define criminality on the basis of the moral rather than the psychic. Once expelled from the psychic, the subject becomes a 'moral monster' confined within 'the satisfyingly unimaginable and theologically sponsored universe of evil [. . .] humanly inconceivable' (Bersani & Phillips, 2008, p. 58). The subject themselves, if the behaviour is sufficiently perverse, is thereby considered either a criminal or victim of 'harm'/accomplice to violence under the law,⁴ or mentally ill. In the United Kingdom, sexuality is acceptable only on the basis that sexual desire is *recognisably* pleasurable and appears 'civilised' enough to the reasonable observer (S. 20 & 47, *Offences Against the Person Act*, 1861) that it will not cause, condone or promote suffering. The idea of protection in law from suffering in a sexual context, even if suffering is precisely what is desired, seems to be either policed by the moral limit of 'evil' (see Gurnham, 2011; Khan, 2009), or a crude division between behaviour and subjectivity, with psychiatry providing guidance as to the legal limit of what the subject can consent to and, by extension, 'reasonably' desire.

Masochism inside/outside this limit remains the point at which psychiatry distinguishes sanity from psychopathology, but in fact clinical responses to masochism that influence this legal limit have their origins in early sexological writings and psychoanalysis. Masochism for Freud was principally understood as sexual pleasure derived through pain (Freud, 1924/1961, termed 'primary masochism'). The origin of this particular definition is inherited from Havelock Ellis, who designated masochism as 'pain only' and 'not cruelty', suggesting that 'the masochist desires to experience pain, but he generally desires that it should be inflicted in love' (Ellis, 1903/1926, p. 160). Sexual sadism and masochism based upon mutual pleasure experienced through receiving/giving pain from/to a loved one became the civilising principle of sadism and masochism, and remains the framework upon which any 'harm' caused through consensual BDSM is permitted, justified and de-pathologised.

However, as has been pointed out in several accounts of BDSM (Moore, 2009; Weinberg & Kamel, 1983) Krafft-Ebing, writer of the earliest scientific record of a behaviour termed 'masochism', did not explicitly refer to pain or pleasure in the same way as Freud. Instead, masochism was:

A peculiar perversion of the psychical sexual life . . . of being treated [by this person] as by a master, humiliated and abused. This idea is coloured by lustful feeling; the masochist often lives in fantasies, in which [he] creates situations of this kind and often attempts to realise them. (Krafft-Ebing, 1886/1965, p. 86)

In this definition, there is certainly a suggestion that cruelty and suffering may play a part in the masochist's sexual desires. As a result of the multiplicity of definitions of sadism, masochism, dominance and submission on offer, scholarship on sexual deviance has begun to refer to these practices under the heading of 'BDSM', which is also the umbrella term UK subcultures now tend to use to self-identify above any other (informedconsent.co.uk, 1997). This is because, as has been extensively argued (Barker, Iantaffi, & Gupta, 2007; Moore, 2009), sadism and masochism (or the terms S&M, SM or S/M) do not account for the vast range of fetishes and practices common to those who participate in BDSM subcultures that may elicit the experiences Krafft-Ebing described as 'masochism', that Bitchy Jones may have described inflicting under 'femdom', or that may be desired as part of 'femsub'.⁵ This also allows for an account of BDSM that privileges participants' definitions over those prescribed by the clinic, and avoids the 'clinical' approach taken by Deleuze, which I describe below.

Deleuze's response to the basic perversions of sadism and masochism as merely 'outstanding examples of the efficiency of literature' (Deleuze, 1967/1991, p. 15) lays the groundwork for moving sadistic and masochistic behaviours away from the clinical domain. However, Alison Moore recently problematised the Deleuzian framework for differentiating sadism and masochism from the clinical neologisms first put forward by Krafft-Ebing, positing that: 'in attributing the clinical qualities of Krafft-Ebing's inventions to Sade and Masoch themselves, we see Deleuze perform precisely the kind of hasty dialectic he himself warns against performed along another axis' (Moore, 2009, p. 28). She reminds us that the clinical disorders grouping sexual desires under the 'sadism' and 'masochism' headings drawn from the literary work of Sade and Masoch do not cover all the incidents of sexual deviance in those texts, such as scatological play, anal penetration and incest. Deleuze's reinscription of sadism and masochism is thus rather reductive, as its interpretation is dependent upon the very psychiatric definitions of perversion he sought to overthrow. However, Deleuze's approach to sadism and masochism has also aided the

normalisation of BDSM, as it seeks to locate sadism and masochism within two popular, recognisable cultural narratives through a reading heavily influenced by systemising psychiatric category.

Normalisation and feminism's double bind

Margot Weiss offers an interesting reading of the 'mainstreaming' of BDSM as a mechanism of *acceptance* and *understanding*, although problematically distinguishes between sadomasochism and BDSM by applying them as terms to distinguish between normative and non-normative desires, respectively. *Acceptance*, she says, is 'expressing tolerance of BDSM; admitting SM into mainstream social groupings; and/or categorising BDSM as proper, normal or approved'. *Understanding* is 'grasping the reasonableness of BDSM; having a thorough acquaintance of, and familiarity with, SM; and/or showing a sympathetic or tolerant attitude toward BDSM and its practitioners'. In this mechanism, BDSM is only *acceptable* where it is adopted as being part of a normative sexual repertoire; to become *acceptable*, BDSM must be normalised. *Acceptance* may provide a mainstream audience with a tantalising glimpse of the danger and excitement of SM practices as an expansion of heteronormativity, but ultimately allows it to maintain a safe, detached distance from BDSM. To *understand* BDSM, Weiss argues, is to pathologise it. BDSM can be made sense of only when it is a symptom of a 'deviant kind of person with a sick, damaged core' (Weiss, 2006, p. 105). However, I question Weiss's deployment of the word *understanding* in the context of BDSM, as it seems to me to try to make any sexual experience that may fall under that banner falsely coherent or systematised in a way that can surely only aid *acceptance*. To *understand* BDSM beyond its pathologisation, as Weiss would have us do, must still fall into precisely the kind of systematising, diagnostic approach she warns against taking, and fail to take into account the multiplicity of meanings of BDSM's subjective quality for its participants may have.

Feminism's relationship with BDSM has been a troubled one precisely because of the problematic double bind Weiss's argument poses. In attempting to *understand* BDSM, feminist theory has tended towards two polarising views in line with the feminist 'sex wars' of the 1980s; the radical feminist view versus the sex-positive perspective. The 'sex-positive' view has been to assert BDSM's status as inherently transgressive because of its non-normative status, attempting instead to position it as a form of resistance to dominant institutions (Califia, 2000; Creet, 1991; Rubin, 1992) governing sexual norms, and 'staking its claim in the liberatory power of *sex per se*' (Glick, 2000, p. 21). Alternatively, it has been argued that through playing with inequalities of power in the bedroom, societal inequalities are rendered more rather than less visible (Langdridge & Butt, 2004), that BDSM narratives represent a *simulation* of inequality rather than a replication of it (Hopkins, 1994).

The radical feminist counterargument, first laid out in the volume *Against Sadomasochism* (1982), sets BDSM against the feminist ideal of an egalitarian sexual ethics, as 'sadomasochism reproduces and therefore condones many of the power imbalances and destructive features of our lives' (Linden, Pagano, Russell, & Star, 1982, p. 138), in particular the replication of what is seen as a paternalistic, violent heterosexuality. Ritchie and Barker's empirical work discussing the intersection of feminism and BDSM with participants cites choice, negotiating limits and consent, and a strong differentiation between fantasy and reality as the beginning of finding this reconciliation (Ritchie & Barker, 2005). However, as Pateman (1980, p. 162) compellingly argues, 'sex-positive' perspectives do not take into account 'the failure in liberal-democratic theory and practice to distinguish free commitment and agreement by equals from domination, subordination

and inequality', instead becoming submerged within it. Therefore, as Downing suggests, in order to take this reconciliation between BDSM and feminism any further we must look outside the liberal-democratic framework to make sense of practices that involve the subject's will to self-destruct (see Downing, 2004).

Although it may seem counterintuitive, it is radical feminist perspectives on the ethics of sex that further enable the argument I wish to make rather than 'sex-positive' narratives. 'Sex-positive' feminist theorists frequently adopt liberal-democratic strategies to combat the idea of BDSM as a 'destructive' force, in particular aligning masochism with narratives of health and healing (Phillips, 1998). It is radical feminist theory that pays attention to deconstructing the most 'naturalised' premises of what constitutes a healthy, pleasurable, consensual feminine sexuality. The title of this piece, an echo of *Bitchy Jones's Diary*, declaring that femsub is 'broken' too, refers to the problem of reconciling femsub and feminism when femsub is so often represented as a form of sexual compliance, compliance not only with the wishes and desires of another, but with the assimilation of feminine masochism into the system of *heteronormativity itself*. As Robin West asserts, woman's compliance with a male partner's sexual desires is systematically rewarded by society, while her own desire is silenced (West, 1995). Perhaps most crucially, West raises the question of what validity and meaning sexual consent can have within a patriarchal, paternalistic system of sexual governance, where prohibition makes a parallel between the moral and the psychic. 'Sex-positive' arguments attempting to de-pathologise women's experiences of BDSM do not answer the pressing questions of consent that radical feminists pose.

When femsub is desired 'beyond safety', beyond what a woman can be *reasonably* said to consent to sexually in law, it is seen to condone and promote cruelty and suffering and valorise sexual violence. It cannot be systematically rewarded, because the system itself attempts to protect us from it. A legal definition of sexual consent is further problematised by feminism's critique of the patriarchal and paternalistic construction of psychiatry and law as they exist as dominant institutions today (Mackinnon, 1989), governing the kind of sexual pleasure and consent that women should seek out to *avoid* their own suffering. Femsub therefore surely requires the subject to exert a *greater* degree of self-assertion, because it demands the subject not only place themselves in a position of risk and of criminality, but beyond what may *reasonably* be understood as sexual pleasure. Cruelty and suffering in a sexual context is not only *not* rewarded, but specifically delineated as anti-social or 'anti-relational' (Halberstam, 2008, p. 140).

If a feminist critique of sexual pleasure is perceived as anti-social, anti-relational and anti-reproductive, feminist sexuality cannot be reduced, as Jane Gallop (1988, p. 107) writes, to 'an egalitarian relation of tenderness and care where each partner is considered as a "whole person" rather than as an object of sexual fantasy'. This vision of sexuality seems all the more encoded in detrimental gender roles that simply take on tenets of the 'difference' model, in which men and women are understood as not only physiologically, but ontologically, different categories of person with different needs and desires (Gilligan, 1982). In fact, this model bears a striking resemblance to psychoanalytic interpretations of masochism as feminine sexual passivity, which relied upon an essentialist division between 'male' and 'female'. The third category in Freud's tripartite of masochisms was simply 'an expression of the feminine being nature' (Freud, 1924/1961, p. 161). Theodore Reik's work on masochism and gender developed Freud's thesis, describing female masochists as women called upon to accept the passive role and to suffer pain and wrong patiently. Distinct from the 'prevailing masochistic perversion' in men, which he thought rare in women, feminine masochism is expected; indeed, a woman who did not display such traits might be perceived as 'unwomanly' (Reik, 1941/1976, p. 214). Feminist theorists

problematising feminine masochism and fantasies of submission seem to be responding to the Reikian model, and thus fail to fully escape claims of essentialism often ascribed to their work. Rather than a perversion, masochism is read either as ‘patience’ or compliance with male aggression and violence (Jeffreys, 1996), or as a myth that has aided the social construction of womanhood, blaming women for their own misery by implying they actively enjoy their suffering (Caplan, 1984).

Problematising narratives of healing and personal transformation

Perhaps the most effective non-essentialist argument for a depathologisation of feminine masochism has been the ‘transformation’ narrative. This model has been taken up by feminists writing in defence of masochism (Phillips, 1998), legitimising sexual practices as processes of personal emancipation with benefits that go far beyond sexual pleasure. In popular culture, the feature film *Secretary* neatly dramatises this narrative. Lee replaces a tendency towards self-injury with sexual submission to her boss, and in doing so rediscovers pleasure, romantic intimacy and the possibility of a happier future. Barker et al. (2007) cite the possibility of the process of healing through their reading of BDSM as politically useful because it counters the pathologising discourses around BDSM and privileges the subjective experience of the individual above the assessment of ‘experts’, but they are also careful to point out that privileging such narratives may inadvertently marginalise others. An argument for BDSM’s therapeutic potential suggests that previously self-destructive behaviours or traumatic events can be set to rest through BDSM’s redemptive, healing power (Barker, 2005; Barker et al., 2007; Beckmann, 2009). In a later essay, Easton (2007, p. 228) suggests that it is ‘truly radical to use S/M roles and stimulations to travel to the roots of our emotional realities and the core of our sense of identity, deep under the dark earth to suck up some mysterious nourishment [. . .] and find out what blooms’. This again implies that BDSM is in some way ontological; a ‘radical’ sexual identity can be accessed only if the right personal tools for transformation can be located. However, such a narrative does not take into account the problem radical feminists raise of subordination to the patriarchal governance of women’s sexuality. As Barker, Gupta, and Iantaffi warn, when BDSM fails to elicit a coherently redemptive or transformative experience – or perhaps, to put it more precisely, when neither that experience, nor coherence, is what is desired – the subject risks becoming precisely the pathologised subject Weiss suggests observers of BDSM come to *understand*: ‘a deviant, sick person with a damaged core’.

Additionally, therapeutic, self-actualising narratives are the target of another criticism feminists have made in recent years about the co-option of ‘feminist’ narratives of choice in the construction of mediated sexualities (e.g. Gill, 2003, p. 2007; McRobbie, 2004). This co-option represents part of a wider tendency in media and popular culture, an assumption that through the simple act of ‘choosing’ a woman becomes more ‘herself’, capable of defining and planning her own future. When applied to sexuality, the self-actualisation narrative takes the form of self-governance; a mode of ‘[the] shaping of being’ (Rose, 2000, p. 121). The possibility of women constructing their own sexual narratives is acceptable, but only so long as it remains within strictly policed, socially approved limits. As McRobbie (2004, p. 260) posits, when ‘success’ is not the result of attempts to transform the self, the individual only has themselves to blame. The possibility of self-transformation through sexuality is thus merely a reproduction of the ideology of personal emancipation within contemporary capitalist society; a politics of, as Glick writes, ‘[sexual] relations seemingly separated from their locations in political and economic systems’ (Glick, 2000, p. 22).

Furthermore, the critique of the ‘post-feminist’ tendency towards self-governance posits that the emphasis on women’s capacity to choose is not a product of the so-called sexual revolution, but merely a shift in how power operates. Gill (2007, p. 151) suggests that this shift goes from ‘an external, male judging gaze to a self-policing, narcissistic gaze’. She argues that this is in fact a deeper form of exploitation: one in which the male gaze is ‘internalised’ and used as a form of ‘disciplinary regime’. In this regime, power is imposed not from above or the outside, but constructs our very subjectivity. ‘Girls and women are invited to become a particular kind of self, and are endowed with agency on the condition that it is used to construct oneself as a subject closely resembling the heterosexual male fantasy found in pornography’ (Gill, 2007, p. 152). Whilst problematising the disciplinary regimes the male gaze imposes is an important tool for critiquing the mainstreaming of BDSM, perhaps the one most often deployed by Bitchy Jones, I would further argue that such a construction of subjectivity does not always apply to femsub. Gill’s argument, if followed to its limits, would not differentiate masochistic perversion from the Freudian notion of masochism as an expression of passive femininity. If read this way, femsub would indeed be reduced to a self-policing product of coercive, heterosexual male fantasy. However, as some BDSM acts undertaken by women remain the subject of systematic *disapproval* and cannot be understood without the burden of pathologisation or victimisation, it is hard to imagine how such coercion takes place. Feminists who submit may feel as alienated by oppressive heterosexual norms as feminists who do not. Submission to a man in a BDSM context may have very little to do with the pre-feminist heteromonogamous relationship structures or ‘self-policing’ in accordance with the heterosexual male gaze, but might be a way of rethinking the politics of heterosexuality.

The limits of pleasure

I want to spend the remainder of this essay examining the theoretical implications of BDSM practices ‘beyond safety’ that may demonstrate ways in which the desire–pleasure–*acceptance* mechanism when applied to masochism is one that marginalises and pathologises. In this section, I will explore how masochism’s troubled relationship with feminism may be reconciled through the mechanism of what the French psychoanalyst and theorist Jacques Lacan termed *jouissance*. Historicist approaches to psychoanalysis, in particular Foucault’s, often fail to distinguish between psychiatry, psychology and psychoanalysis (see Derrida, 1994), situating psychoanalysis’s relevance to sexuality primarily in the circumstances through which it emerged: the clinic. Nevertheless, this does not mean psychoanalysis cannot be read discursively, applied as one tool amongst many rather than as a definitive means of ‘truth’ production (Foucault, 1976/1990). It has also been argued that Lacan’s approach to psychoanalysis was not ahistoric. His lectures lean heavily on myth and parable, their disciplinary tropes and structures, to explain analysis. As Dean (2000) convincingly asserts, identifying psychoanalysis as having the power to grant us a rigorous understanding of anything is perhaps not the point. According to Lacan (1988, p. 73), in his 1954 seminar: ‘to interpret and to imagine one understands are not at all the same things’. As the experiences and meanings of practices cast under the heading of BDSM are so multiple and subjective, it is interpretation, not understanding, that is the researcher’s strong suit. As Downing and Gillett (2011, p. 10) note, there is little interaction between Lacanian psychoanalysis and critical psychology, or attention paid to Lacanian influences on discourse analysis (Parker, 2005), and perhaps this is all the more surprising when Lacan’s insights on masochism may be especially critically useful.

The problem of the desire–pleasure–*acceptance* mechanism is that sexual desire and pleasure are not one and the same, nor is pleasure always desire’s aim or counterpoint. In the case of the masochist it may instead be, as Freud (1924/1961, p. 165) proposes, ‘the suffering itself that matters’. In fact, the limitations of what may constitute *acceptable* sex might be precisely what are sought out in BDSM – in order to disavow them. If pleasure is aligned with *eros* – the libido, the life instinct, the drive working for creativity, harmony, reproductivity and self-preservation – then the normalisation of BDSM is dependent upon these sexual values being adhered to. However, it is the determination to articulate only *eros* in defences of BDSM, or at least provide a justification that masochistic suffering has redemptive or transcendent ends (Beckmann, 2009; Easton & Hardy, 2004; Phillips, 1998), that has led to a wider acceptance of some BDSM practices. The self-actualising or therapeutic narratives of BDSM I recounted earlier attempt to persuade us that through its practice the subject is drawn *away* from ‘unhealthy’ behaviours, enacting sex in a way that merges with the life drive. By simulating painful or difficult experiences in a safe, sane, consensual context, these ‘unhealthy’ behaviours may be disrupted, possibly prevented. However, as Downing and Gillett attest, a BDSM practice that goes ‘beyond safety’ such as erotic asphyxiation resists any attempt to reconcile desire with a life-driven sexuality (Downing, 2007), as it can be ‘seen to literalise the Lacanian death-drive to the extent of willfully risking – or requiring – the practitioner’s death’ (Downing & Gillett, 2011, p. 11). Lacan’s death drive was an idea developed from what Freud (1920/1955) termed the ‘death instinct’ in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, but never fully drew out: a drive towards destruction, undoing, repetition, aggression and compulsion. Freud set up the death drive in opposition to the sexual drive, *eros*, but Lacan stated in a 1964 seminar that ‘every drive is virtually a death drive’ as every drive is an attempt to go beyond the pleasure principle to the realm of excess *jouissance* where enjoyment is experienced as suffering (Lacan, 1977, p. 848).

The term ‘*jouissance*’ acquired numerous meanings, sometimes paradoxical, throughout Lacan’s career. In his lectures on the ethics of psychoanalysis, *jouissance* is the struggle to transgress the limits of pleasure or the ‘pleasure principle’, because pleasure is the obstacle to *jouissance* that takes the subject to the extreme point where the erotic borders death and where subjectivity risks extinction. While pleasure is an obstacle to *jouissance*, sexual satisfaction achieved through the life drive is always limited. Lacan (1992, p. 176) believed that the central thesis of Freud’s (1930/1961) *Civilisation and its Discontents* was that ‘everything that is transferred from *jouissance* to prohibition gives rise to the increasing strengthening of prohibition’ and thus the desire to transgress it. *Jouissance* here is linked to law, whose prohibitive powers function as a form of pleasure principle. This idea of prohibition-as-pleasure-principle is literalised through the governing of masochism, prohibiting a subject from consenting to sexual practices that contain distinct risks of harm and suffering.

Lacan later attempted to make sense of feminine *jouissance*. Although his contention was not that feminine *jouissance* occurred because of any feminine ‘essence’, her sexual organ (*sexe*) was of interest because of the body’s *jouissance*. In this sense, her ‘not wholeness’ means she exceeds phallic *jouissance*. In *Seminar XX* (1972–1973), he develops this thesis a little further in relation to feminine *jouissance*: ‘Phallic *jouissance* is the obstacle owing to which man does not come, I would say, to enjoy woman’s body, precisely because what he enjoys is the *jouissance* of the organ’ (Lacan, 1998, p. 7). Phallic *jouissance* commands the subject to desire ‘beyond’ one’s partner, and is thus a failed movement of the subject to merge with the Other. This Other is thus the Other of the unconscious, the place of the law and where ‘symbolic castration is set into play’ (Lacan, 1998, p. 20). As woman

is the Other, her lack of phallus renders an experience of phallic *jouissance* impossible. The masculine structure of *jouissance* attempts to overcome this by simply turning the Other into an other (*objet a*), an imprecise projection of the ego. Because this endeavour is always a failed one, pleasure feels limited. Desire will never find its perfect object. As feminine *jouissance* is located in the Other, it cannot be assimilated into the ego through identification. It is instead the excess of *jouissance*, unsupported by object and fantasy, that a masculine, phallic structure cannot reach. However, this particular articulation of *jouissance* was, according to Lacan, ‘impossible’ to express, which led him to suggest its ‘mystical’ qualities, referring to Bernini’s statue of St. Theresa, in which she is about to be pierced by the gold spear of an angel. As St. Theresa’s own narrative reveals, this moment of mystical ecstasy is suggestive of orgasmic satisfaction.

A differentiation between masculine and feminine structures of *jouissance* is dependent upon the idea that there are different forms of sexual satisfaction for men and women. As Lacan wrote, masochism and *jouissance* are not one and the same thing. Through masochism, pleasure is sought through the act of suffering, in suffering itself, so that pleasure and pain become indistinguishable. *Jouissance* instead suggests that pleasure cannot be obtained without paying the price of suffering. In his illustration of this point, Lacan gives the Kantian example of the subject who may seek out sexual satisfaction with the woman he most desires on the grounds that he will be executed the following morning. He argues that what is being weighed up is not the selfish calculation of pleasure versus pain, but the ethical dilemma of the acceptance of death as being a presence in one’s experience of enjoyment (Lacan, 1992, p. 108). It is through this formulation of *jouissance* that a practice such as erotic asphyxiation may thus be located, but its appeal to feminine *jouissance* must be abandoned.

Querying queer *jouissance*

Queer theory has attempted to make sense of the sexual connotation of Lacan’s notion of *jouissance* in relation to an anti-normative approach to sexuality, in which the failure of homosexuality to assimilate itself fully into the dominant culture is accepted, and the wilful impetus to transgress the pleasure principle is interpreted as an inherently queer gesture. Through this mechanism, queer becomes dangerous, anti-social and self-destructive. Tim Dean (2000, p. 164) has argued that the sexual connotation of *jouissance* is intrinsically linked to danger: ‘the capacity inherent in sexual *jouissance* to undo the coherent self means that there is something *psychically* dangerous about sex as such’. Bersani’s (1988) use of *jouissance* is in the corroboration of sexuality and masochism as ultimately the same thing, since the accepted failure to assimilate oneself within the framework of heteronormativity constitutes a kind of ‘self-shattering’. Masochism in this context is not an expression of passivity, but an active desire for the dissolution of the subject.⁶ If masochism and sexuality are in fact akin to the same thing then Freud’s feminine masochism would simply correspond to the key desire Bersani cites as being present in all sexual paradigms: self-annihilation and shattering, being possessed, dominated and even humiliated. The problem with Bersani’s narrative, as Modleski (1991, p. 148) points out, ‘lies in the way the category of gender – the sum of all the practices through which bodies sexed as female are, to requote Bersani, “ideologically exploited” so as to restrict their “potential to control and to manipulate the world beyond the self”’. In other words, eroticising powerlessness is a privilege of the already empowered. However, Modleski’s critique falls into the same trap as Caplan’s; attributing essentialist conditions of gender handed down by dominant institutions to sexual preference. To demonstrate how this account of queer *jouissance* functions

in relation to female experiences of masochism ‘beyond the pleasure principle’, a tentative example is necessary, in which the validity of consent and its relationship with suffering is called into question.

Let us say that a woman is bound and confined in a small space and would most definitely prefer not to be there, but has agreed at some point prior in the relationship that she will have no say in such moments. Her desire to uphold this promise is greater and perhaps more erotic than her discomfort and suffering. *Jouissance* entails that she is forced to acknowledge the materiality of her existence through her discomfort, that the upholding of her promise is/feels nigh on impossible because it is threatened by the reality of her predicament and all its ties to the prohibitive qualities of the pleasure principle. It is an ontological struggle to desire ‘beyond’ pleasure, but only because of the hold of the prohibitive promise of a ‘beyond’. In a further definition, Lacan stated that *jouissance* is the principle that commands the subject to ‘enjoy as little as possible’ (Evans, 1996, p. 148) and, rather than being experienced as pleasure, may be experienced as suffering, which demands that the subject’s enjoyment is found only within the controlled limits of cultural norms and the symbolic order. In the confined woman’s attempts to cut her ties to the symbolic order, her *jouissance* and its failure are experienced as a kind of ecstatic suffering, a ‘symbolic death’. Like Kant’s desiring subject facing execution, in order to fulfil her desire she must accept the presence of death.

Jouissance is not an experience that can be aligned easily with sex-positivism because of its relationship with suffering, and experiences of women who femsub are thus *understood* as inherently ‘unhealthy’ and ‘psychically dangerous’. *Jouissance* and the death drive imply destruction and the dissolution of the subject. Perhaps more potently for feminism, the death drive in queer theory is set up as an opposition to the law of reproductive futurity. Edelman (2004, p. 13) posits that if sex exists in a culture with ‘no baby [. . .] then the blame must fall on the fatal lure of the sterile, narcissistic enjoyments understood as inherently destructive of meaning and therefore as responsible for the undoing of social organisation, collective reality, and, inevitably, life itself’. If a woman’s sexual desire to suffer does not have any relation to reproductivity, is it not possible that the masochistic erotic impulse in women to shatter the self may be articulated through a feminine *jouissance*? Furthermore, does this *jouissance* imply an ‘undoing’ or disavowal of reproductive futurism? If consent is given little weight in distinguishing ‘health’ from ‘harm’ by prohibitive law, the desire to transgress law in search of a ‘beyond pleasure’ is surely representative of the limitations current notions of consent that follow a liberal-democratic ideology impose on the subject. To return to the motif of the woman confined, her experiential experience of the erotic would then not be predicated on her powerlessness, but on her resistance to the prohibitive qualities of law (as the symbolic order), under which her experience of the erotic may be eclipsed from what constitutes ‘sex’ altogether. *Jouissance* in this context is transgressive because it disavows the imperative that sexuality is in some way connected to one’s own futurity, and through futurity, to reproduction.

Conclusions

If masochism ‘beyond safety’ that eroticises the notion of harm, perhaps even the possibility of death, functions as a resistance to ‘reproductive futurity’, it is perhaps unsurprising that in exercising such a desire a woman must display a *greater* degree of self-assertion, not only in disavowing her own safety, but in an active disavowal of the prohibitions imposed on her sexuality because of its anti-reproductivity, which justifies this prohibition. Pleasure, or the pleasure principle which functions as law, is thus the limitation upon which her sexuality must be compulsively arranged and through which her desire must be silenced. Her

femininity accounts for the problem of her inability, as Lacan (1992, p. 199) suggests Sade did, to bear witness ‘against himself by publicly confessing the extremes to which he may go’ because law commands that her ‘uncivilised’ sexuality is *already* silenced through her compulsory victimhood.

Because *jouissance* is predicated upon failure and dependent upon prohibition, such a narrative of masochism can have no ‘transformative’ potential to reinstate the subject’s will to futurity. As Downing and Gillett (2011, p. 11) attest, critical psychology sets up a binarism between health and pathology that must be undone for ‘so long as that model is in operation, so totalising is its meaning that one has no choice but to divide practices into “acceptable” and “unacceptable”’. I suggest this undoing must also take into account the relationship between the psy-disciplines and law in eliding ideas of psychic and moral monstrosity, between civilised and uncivilised sexual behaviour. Until this binarism is undone, the prohibition on a woman’s ability to consent to harm cannot be removed. Through the pursuit of *jouissance*, women who consent to harm may in fact be enacting what is ultimately a resistant category of feminine sexuality, one that is uncivilised, monstrous and impossible to *accept* because it is anti-reproductive, and therefore distinctly non-normative. Through consenting to harm, woman’s capacity to reproduce is no longer the primary function of her sexuality; her disinterest in *her own* futurity is thereby not only pathologised, but viewed as *morally* monstrous because it does not obey the social order of progression, reproduction and transformation. Law’s current prohibitions on what constitute sex, consent and pleasure limit what a woman may desire along benevolently paternalistic, but ultimately misogynistic, lines. It therefore prevents female masochists who play beyond the law of the pleasure principle from existing as sexual subjects because their desires threaten the *moral* imperative of reproductive futurity. I am thus inclined to agree with Deleuze (1973/2001, p. 97) when he remarked: ‘pleasure is a completely rotten [. . .] idea’.

Acknowledgement

My thanks go to Lisa Downing for her determination that this article should be part of this special issue, her patience and her guidance; to my supervisors at Reading, Carl Stychin and Alcardo Zanghellini, for their notes and suggestions; and to my friend, Adrian May, for his.

Notes

1. The compound acronym denotes the activities and identities involved in the following: Bondage and Discipline; Dominance and Submission; Sadism and Masochism.
2. BDSM practices that are considered ‘extreme’ or ‘dangerous’ are thus said to provoke the greatest risks of psychic and physical harm. As Downing (2007) suggests, the very notion of ‘edgeplay’ suggests that such practices function as being close to a ‘limit’, which also valorises their prohibition.
3. See Cooper (1996) for three clinical case studies of autoerotic asphyxiation.
4. See *R v. Wilson* [1996] 3 WLR 125 for a demonstration of the legal precedent for how female masochism beyond ‘trifling harm’ is prosecuted under the *Offences Against the Person Act* (1861) as victimhood and was successfully appealed only by valorising masochism as a function of heteronormativity. There is thus a legal differentiation between women’s experience of masochism and the ‘accomplice’ role in which the homosexual men in *R v. Brown* [1994] 1 AC 212 were situated. Matthew Weait’s essay in the volume *Safe, Sane and Consensual* explores this differentiation through a queer critique.
5. It must be remarked at this stage that the term ‘femsub’ has been chosen for the purposes of this piece to mirror the terminology used in *Bitchy Jones’s Diary*: ‘femdom’. Its definition, although (in mirroring Bitchy Jones) used more generically to describe paradigms of feminine sexual submission and masochism, must therefore be taken in this article only to describe *theoretically* the desires and experiences I suggest. Additionally, in attempting to destabilise normalising and

pathologising narratives of BDSM it would seem appropriate to use a term that has not been handed down through psychopathology.

6. Some work in psychology from a non-Lacanian perspective has begun to deal with dissolution/disintegration as the aim of BDSM (see especially Langdridge, 2005).

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