

10-1-2017

Review of *Exquisite Masochism: Marriage, Sex, and
the Novel Form* by Claire Jarvis

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Exquisite Masochism: Marriage, Sex, and the Novel Form, by Claire Jarvis; pp. xv + 201. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2016, \$49.95.

In *Exquisite Masochism: Marriage, Sex, and the Novel Form*, Claire Jarvis examines changing depictions of sex in the English novel from Emily Brontë's *Wuthering Heights* (1847) to D. H. Lawrence's *Lady Chatterley's Lover* (1928). Before modernism made sex explicit, Jarvis argues, respectable novelists relied upon what she calls "the exquisitely masochistic scene"—a decadent, descriptive scene of sexual refusal featuring dominant women and submissive men—to suggest sexual impropriety, perversion, and danger (vii). In these highly charged scenes, "plot and character drop out, description thickens, and a glance, gesture, or object takes on heightened relational significance" (viii). Through subtle analyses of such scenes in novels by Brontë, Anthony Trollope, and Thomas Hardy, Jarvis shows the ways in which writers evoke sex's dislocating and thrilling effects while avoiding explicit accounts of sexual connection. At the same time, the book argues for a critical method—what Jarvis terms "perverse formalism"—that emphasizes "close readings and interpretation over breadth and explanation" (163, 18). *Exquisite Masochism* offers a fresh

approach to the Victorian marriage plot and provocative, new readings of familiar texts. Jarvis's unwillingness to engage with historical context, though, limits her claims about the nature and role of sex in nineteenth-century fiction.

The first chapter sets out the theoretical and critical foundations of the study. Here, Jarvis offers an overview of masochism as she uses the term. In emphasizing the "frozen, suspended qualities of this sexuality," Jarvis draws upon Gilles Deleuze's work rather than Sigmund Freud's or Michel Foucault's (11). In particular, she looks to Deleuze's reading of Leopold von Sacher-Masoch's 1870 novel, *Venus in Furs*. Following Deleuze, Jarvis views sadism and masochism as entirely separate; while "the sadist abuses others from an institutional distance," Jarvis explains, "the masochist abuses himself within a carefully constructed contract" (15). Her account, however, departs from Deleuze's in an important way: where Deleuze's masochistic dyads are ordered and controlled by the submissive male partner, the dyads Jarvis describes all feature more equitable partnerships. The scenes of erotic suspension in Victorian novels, as in Sacher-Masoch's text, are "constructed by active collaboration between both partners" (56). In Jarvis's view, "hierarchy's upheaval—even if temporary—is the aim of the masochistic scene" (16).

The next three chapters develop these claims through close readings of canonical Victorian texts. In each chapter, Jarvis emphasizes masochism's potential as well as its limits; each chapter also suggests ways in which masochistic sexuality shapes and challenges the marriage plot. In *Wuthering Heights*, Jarvis argues, Brontë juxtaposes a sadistic model of legal marriage with "the frozen, positively valued masochistic dyad of Catherine and Heathcliff at the novel's center" (25). The long sequence of masochistic tableaux begins when Heathcliff sneaks into the Grange to see Catherine while Edgar is at church. These scenes, while in some ways anticipating Deleuze's account, offer a crucial qualification. In Brontë's novel, masochism's frozen aspect overtakes its limitless potential; the only way for Catherine and Heathcliff to reach consummation is to die. Brontë, however, does not imagine this process as completely destructive: "By suturing death to frozenness, Brontë imagines a possible future for the masochistic dyad even when she also relegates the two partners to the grave" (27). Trollope's *Can You Forgive Her?* (1864–65) and *The Way We Live Now* (1874–75) also demonstrate the power of masochistic feminine agency. Although *The Way We Live Now* celebrates traditional gentlemanly paragons, Jarvis shows, the novel's energy is reserved for disreputable and sexually aggressive women like Mrs. Winifred Hurtle and Marie Melmotte, who get pushed to the margins of the text. Masochistic sexuality figures even more centrally in *Can You Forgive Her?* than in Trollope's later novel. In this text, Trollope links suspense to one of his most powerful characters, Lady Glencora Palliser. Lady Glencora's ability "simultaneously [to] occupy stable marriage and never-ending suspense" suggests ways in which masochistic sexuality can be partially preserved, even while undergoing radical alteration (71). Hardy is less optimistic than Trollope about masochism's ability to resist social pressures. In Jarvis's view, the real problem of *Jude the Obscure* (1894–95) is that no security, relational or otherwise, can be found. The masochistic union that Sue and Jude form appears to avoid this problem, but their relationship remains beset with difficulties stemming from its dependence upon contract. Little Father Time's violent intrusion underscores the threats that the socially accepted, reproductive family poses to Jude and Sue's "isolated, verbally

contracted, privatized relationship” (105). As Hardy sees it, happiness dependent upon an insulating solitude is unattainable. Novelists’ treatment of sexual relations changes significantly in the early twentieth century. In Lawrence’s *The Rainbow* (1915) and its sequel, *Women in Love* (1920), which Jarvis discusses in the final chapter, the masochistic union loses its sexual charge, and the dominant woman her narrative power and interest. Unlike his predecessors, Lawrence represents sexual life fully and explicitly, and he makes sexual compatibility itself central to marriage. Masochism, typified by *Women in Love*’s Hermione Roddice, becomes irrevocably connected to death.

Jarvis is a deft critic and her readings show the value of attending closely to long, descriptive passages in novels. Her illuminating analyses make a forceful case for women’s sexual agency in the Victorian marriage plot, while demonstrating the centrality of “perverse” forms of sexuality that novelists ostensibly reject (20). The book’s theoretical framework, however, goes only so far. The language and concept of masochism seem more imposed upon than drawn out from the texts. At times, it seems as if Jarvis molds her readings, too, to fit a predetermined thesis. This is most noticeable in her discussion of *Wuthering Heights*. Jarvis claims that Catherine and Heathcliff’s masochistic union is “the ideal version of relationship within the novel” (29). Yet, her emphasis on the flexible, equalizing nature of masochistic sexuality leads her to gloss over Catherine’s vulnerability and Heathcliff’s violence. Jarvis likewise overlooks the signs of improvement in the world of the Heights and the institution of marriage at the novel’s end. In her reading, the final union between the younger Catherine and Hareton largely reproduces the inequality and cruelty that mark the legal matches in the older generation. Jarvis’s discussions, throughout the study, of contract’s place in sex and marriage would benefit from attention to historical context. She suggests that, in its emphasis on contract and negotiation, masochistic sexuality illuminates problems that beset the legal contract of marriage. Marriage, however, was an unusual type of contract; the question of whether to extend contract logic fully to marriage sparked heated debates in this period. Attending to these debates would help sharpen her analysis of the similarities and differences between the illicit unions and the legal matches in the texts.

Jarvis’s commitment to close reading resonates with recent efforts to rethink the place of form and formalism in Victorian studies. But her resistance to—and characterization of—historicist approaches is misplaced. Rather than seeking to show “how most women in nineteenth-century England encountered marriage law” or “how most people of the period understood the risks attendant in premarital sex or how they understood love or jealousy,” an historically sensitive reading of the novels would show the ways in which the specific authors under consideration engaged with, supported, revised, and/or resisted the sexual practices and beliefs of their day (164). Nor would such an approach necessarily detract from an analysis of the formal complexity of the texts. Sex and marriage, too, have histories. Far from demanding an exclusively formal approach, these subjects require contextualization. Reading perversely, while opening up provocative, new interpretations of sex scenes in nineteenth-century fiction, prevents us from fully understanding their meaning and significance.

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doi: 10.2979/victorianstudies.60.1.13