The Representation of Masochism and Queer Desire in Film and Literature
The Representation of Masochism and Queer Desire in Film and Literature

Barbara Mennel
## Contents

| Acknowledgments                              | vii          |
| Introduction                                 | 1            |
| 1 The Literary Perversion: The Invention of Masochism at the Fin-de-siècle | 11           |
| 2 The Gendered Fantasy of Masochistic Aesthetics: Leopold von Sacher-Masoch's *Venus in Furs* | 37           |
| 3 Lesbian Desire Rewrites *Venus in Furs*: Monika Treut and Elfi Mikesch's *Seduction: The Cruel Woman* | 73           |
| 4 Cross-Dressing for Platonic Love: Leopold von Sacher-Masoch's *The Love of Plato* | 105          |
| 5 Male Femininity as Sacrificial Corpse: Kutluğ Ataman's *Lola and Billy the Kid* | 139          |
| Postscript                                   | 173          |
| Notes                                        | 175          |
| Works Cited                                  | 185          |
| Index                                        | 199          |
Acknowledgments

This book originated in a writing group organized by and around Sander Gilman that included John K. Noyes and Suzanne R. Stewart, and provided me with a forum to try out very early versions of my study. Monika Treut was also an important supporter of this project in its early stages. Leslie Adelson, David Bathrick, Biddy Martin, and Tim Murray at Cornell University gave substantive critical feedback to the project in its early manifestation as my dissertation.

I thank the Provost at the University of Maryland Baltimore County, for awarding me the Provost’s Research Fellowship for Fall 2002, and my former colleagues in the Department of Modern Languages and Linguistics at the University of Maryland Baltimore County, especially Tom Field, Edward Larkey, Brigitte May, and Angela Moorjani, as well as chair Judith Schneider for granting me an additional leave for Spring 2003 that enabled me to participate in the Beatrice M. Bain Research Group on Gender and Sexuality at the University of California, Berkeley, where much of the writing was done. There, group members Rima Praspaliauskiene, Edith Sauer-Polonik, Lois S. Musman, Susan Kray, and Katherine Mesur engaged with the project from their multidisciplinary backgrounds. The Beatrice M. Bain Lecture Series, under the auspices of Laura Perez, offered an additional forum to present early versions of the manuscript. At Berkeley, I also cherished the meetings with Sanda Munic, a great interlocutor of ideas, a careful reader, and an attentive provider of references. Thanks to the German Department at Berkeley, particularly Deniz Göktürk for taking me into the fold. During my year at Berkeley, I also benefited from the intellectual friendship of Estelle Tarica and Brad Prager, who both provided significant feedback at crucial points.

Claudia Breger offered a sophisticated and generous response to an early version of the chapter on Lola and Billy the Kid given as a talk, while Christopher Clark kindly shared with me materials pertinent to that film. Ingeborg Majer O’Sickey enabled me to publish an early version of chapter three and since then has accompanied the project with a generous but critical eye and unwavering intellectual and emotional support. Katrin Sieg has
provided ongoing productive intellectual exchange and crucial interventions, as well as passionate engagement with the book's underlying ideas. I am deeply indebted to Amy Ongiri for the continued understanding and reflecting on the political and theoretical importance of this project, as well as ongoing debates about the different manifestations of masochistic aesthetics in contemporary cinema.

My father, Hans-Dieter Mennel, invited me to present portions of my work at the Deutsche Gesellschaft für Nervenheilkunde, where an entirely different audience of historians of medicine engaged with questions raised. Leslie Adelson’s summer seminar “German Studies and the Global,” under the auspices of the German Academic Exchange Association, was the setting for presenting my work in the late stages to a group of particularly astute, yet kind, readers and listeners. I consider myself lucky to have been able to learn from Leslie Adelson’s attentiveness, theoretical sophistication, generosity, and kindness over the years.

An early version of chapter three was first published under the title “Wanda’s Whip: Recasting Masochism’s Fantasy—Monika Treut’s Seduction: The Cruel Woman.” It is here reprinted by permission from Triangulated Visions: Women in Recent German Cinema edited by Ingeborg Majer O’Sickey and Ingeborg von Zadow, the State University of New York Press copyright 1998, State University of New York. All rights reserved. A preliminary version of chapter five was first published in Studies in 20th and 21st Century Literature 28, 1 (Winter 2004): 286–315 as “Masochism, Marginality, and the Metropolis: Kutluğ Ataman’s Lola and Billy the Kid.” The expanded argument appears here with permission of Studies in 20th and 21st Century Literature. Parts of an article that appeared in Modern Austrian Literature 34, 1/2 (2001): 1–14 as “Leopold von Sacher-Masoch’s Ein weiblicher Sultan: Historischer Roman in drei Teilen (1873): Public Sadism/Private Masochism” are integrated into chapter one. They have been reprinted with the kind permission of Modern Austrian Literature. Sections on chapter five are reworked arguments of an essay entitled “Masochistic Fantasy and Racialized Fetish in Rainer Werner Fassbinder’s Ali: Fear Eats Soul,” which was published in One Hundred Years of Masochism: Literary Texts, Social and Cultural Contexts, edited by Michael C. Finke and Carl Niekerk (Atlanta: Rodopi, 2000): 191–205, reprinted here with the kind permission of Rodopi.

At the University of Florida I have appreciated the hardworking participants in my graduate seminar “Gender and Sexuality at the Fin-de-Siècle.” Nora Alter has been a staunch supporter of my work within the Department of Germanic and Slavic Studies, and my two chairs at the time, Dragan Kujundzic and John Leavey, enabled the final stages of writing with a pre-tenure semester leave, during which I was privileged to exchange work and
ideas with Susan Hegeman. I am also thankful for Mary Ann Eaverly’s references to discussions of statues in classic Greece that came my way in the book’s final stages. Walks with Leah Rosenberg accompanied by discussions about final submission made the very last stage more bearable, and Mary Fahnestock-Thomas corrected and explained commas and other idiosyncrasies of the English language. Finally, I am deeply grateful to my family and friends for their support over the years of writing.
By the end of the twentieth century, pierced and tattooed bodies had become a familiar sight, as familiar as leather-clad domina-look-alikes on high-fashion runways. From avant-garde performance art in the 1970s and subcultural sexual practices in the 1980s, signifiers of masochism and sadism moved into mainstream culture by the 1990s, featuring in music videos and as favorite plot devices in neo-noir films and television police shows. The prevalence of contemporary references to what were formerly subcultural sadomasochistic practices mirrors the European turn-of-the-century circulation of the image of the Ur-Dominatrix, Wanda von Dunajew a.k.a. “Venus in furs.” Created by Leopold von Sacher-Masoch (1836–95) in his 1870 novel Venus in Furs, her figure is emblematic of masochistic aesthetics. This nineteenth-century literary creation is the dominant, focal character in the masochistic fantasy, carrying with her the accoutrements of masochistic aesthetics familiar even to those who do not know Sacher-Masoch’s original text: clad in fur and carrying a whip, she combines cruelty with a cold exteriority to which the male masochist submits.

This figure of the cruel woman is integral to the masochistic staging, which reverses the power relation between the sexes. Her figure embodies the contradictions and paradoxes that characterize masochism: Does her domination hide and mock women’s oppression, or does it paradoxically exaggerate and thus emphasize women’s power? This question points to the larger intellectual and cultural challenge of masochism that has been masked by the contemporary appropriation and commodification of signifiers of masochism and sadism. Masochism as an aesthetic and psychic structure challenges us to rethink some of our most basic assumptions regarding power, pleasure, and domination, particularly how these kinds of assumptions are articulated in the study of the humanities. It questions our conception of aesthetic and psychic pleasure because masochism locates pleasure in the suspense that derives from the deferral of the fulfillment of pleasure. Similarly, masochism complicates our political understanding of domination because it locates pleasure in submission. The discussion of masochistic aesthetics is therefore
intricately tied to contemporary political and theoretical debates about pleasure and power.

Contemporary popular imagination divides the paradox of masochism into two paradigmatic scenarios. In the first, a reactionary rhetoric mobilizes masochism to project a desire for victimization onto victims and thereby avoids political accountability for processes of victimization. The rhetoric about masochistic desire for victimization can be conveniently extended from individuals to groups of people, such as “battered women” and “eternal Jews,” since it emerges from an essentialist understanding of identity. The paradox of masochism in this scenario is mobilized to blame victims for their victimization and simultaneously deny the status of victimhood.

The second paradigmatic scenario is embodied by the figure of a successful businessman who visits a dominatrix and pays for his staged humiliation. This scenario suggests performed subordination to compensate for public success and domination. The paradox of masochism lies in the conflicting desires for power and powerlessness dissolved in a populist understanding of psychic economy, in which a surplus in domination necessitates a surplus in subordination. In this scenario then, masochistic desire manifests itself in a performance of domination purchased by and ultimately controlled by a male subject.

Essentialism is central to the former scenario and performativity to the latter. In the former, masochism is used to explain external or self-inflicted violence against the subject, while in the latter, masochism engenders a fantasy juxtaposed to social reality. These two scenarios seem to pose yet another paradox in that the former connects masochism to a lack of power while the latter associates it with an excess of power. The gendering of the two scenarios, I suggest, dissolves this last paradox, associating the figure of the masochistic victim with femininity, either in women or those who are coded as feminized men, such as Jews or gays, and the controlled fantasy of a masochistic staging with masculinity in men or masculinized women.

These two paradigmatic scenarios reflect a gendered understanding of masochism that associates femininity with an essentialist masochistic desire and masculinity with a performance of masochistic submission; these two aspects of masochism have been structurally tied to each other since the inception of the term masochism in the late-nineteenth century. In the first chapter I trace this paradigmatic, gendered, binary configuration of masochism from Richard von Krafft-Ebing’s invention of the term in the 1890 volume of his study Psychopathia Sexualis to Sigmund Freud’s account of masochism in the early twentieth century. I provide a detailed analysis of Krafft-Ebing’s definition of masochism, which is based on Sacher-Masoch’s literature, and argue that the appropriation of Sacher-Masoch’s literary aesthetics for a sexologist
definition of perversion reflects larger shifts in the understanding of culture and the self in late nineteenth-century Europe. To see Sacher-Masoch solely as a victim of Krafft-Ebing’s discourse, however, would be a reduction, while to see him as central to the redefinition of subjectivity would be an overstatement. While subjectivity in the nineteenth century was increasingly defined in terms of sexual desire, Sacher-Masoch’s novels sexualized politics, history, and power but characterized individual relationships by a masochistic sexlessness. Krafft-Ebing rewrote the sexualization of power in Sacher-Masoch’s literature as individual desires of “perverts.”

This study returns then to the aesthetic structure of Sacher-Masoch’s writing prior to Krafft-Ebing’s definition of masochism. In individual chapters I lay out how Sacher-Masoch’s literature employs masochistic aesthetics to negotiate subjectivity at the intersection of history and fantasy, which Krafft-Ebing reduces to notions of normalcy and perversion in the field of sexuality. The secondary literature on masochism has focused primarily on male masochism, ignoring the biological inscription of women’s masochism and highlighting male masochism as a response to a crisis of masculinity. This study expands this limited perspective by discussing Krafft-Ebing’s very small number of “masochistic women” to articulate a more complex account of the gendering of masochism. By viewing Sacher-Masoch’s literature as a cultural response to negotiations regarding the primacy of the white, male, heterosexual, liberal Western subject, my discussion of his writing goes beyond the individualization of psychoanalysis and the Foucauldian concept of the subject shaped by institutional discourses.

In the chapters that follow, the literary analysis of Sacher-Masoch’s works offers a reading of masochistic aesthetics that moves beyond the pathologizing account by an earlier generation of dismissive literary scholars on the one hand, and the recent theorization of masochistic aesthetics that disavows any gap between literature and theory on the other. Both approaches, while occupying different poles in the rhetoric concerning masochistic aesthetics, suffer from an overdetermination of psychoanalysis. In the former model, Sacher-Masoch is cast as victim of his own perversion to the detriment of the aesthetic value of his literary production; in the latter model, his aesthetic production is cast as the symptom of culture read through the lens of a psychoanalytic paradigm not anchored in a specific political and historical context. My work thus insists on the specificity of place and time, even though the chapters connect across the division of centuries by focusing on the theoretical concepts of fetishism and masquerade that are integral to masochistic aesthetics, shape its narratives, and organize articulations of queer desire. Fetishism and masquerade have become privileged terms endowed with the promise of subversion in theoretical debates about power, pleasure, and perversion in the humanities.
The centrality of the fetish links Sacher-Masoch’s *Venus in Furs* to Monika Treut’s *Seduction: The Cruel Woman* (1985), while masquerade connects Sacher-Masoch’s *The Love of Plato* (1870) to Kutluğ Ataman’s *Lola and Billy the Kid* (1999). My comparative approach to the literary and psychiatric discourse on masochism at the turn of the century in chapter one sets the stage for my discussion about the appropriation of masochism for the representation of queer desire.

My analysis of Sacher-Masoch’s texts thus has a two-fold agenda: first, to offer a more precise account of his literature, an account which neither imposes a psychoanalytic view nor ignores its socio-political and cultural contexts; second, to add to contemporary theoretical debates about masochism, cinematic spectatorship, and queer desire an account of both the aesthetic and the psychoanalytic dimensions of fetishism and masquerade. This book therefore explores questions of continuity and breaks between two historical moments in dialogue with each other, namely Sacher-Masoch’s writing and specific examples of West German and contemporary German film that appropriate masochistic aesthetics to represent perverse desire. In that process the films under investigation rework Sacher-Masoch’s paradigmatic model of masochistic aesthetics, but at times also reproduce its pitfalls.

The connections between the two historical moments come to the fore if we relate the internal psychic reality of self, sexuality, and fantasy on the one hand, to the external political and socio-political reality of power, pain, and liberalism on the other. Harry Oosterhuis relies on Michel Foucault’s insight into the connection between late nineteenth-century psychiatric discourse regarding sexuality and the post-1960s culture of self-expression: “[B]oth are based on the confessional model, which proclaims sexuality as the key to personality. In this sense, Krafft-Ebing’s case histories and the self-observations of his clients are a foreshadowing of the post-1960s sexual liberation” (282). The post-1960s sexual liberation and 1970s liberalism brought about a surge of interest in the representation of perversion in the 1980s and 1990s, when this interest expressed itself in a theoretical concern with masochism. Recent writers on masochism, including Gilles Deleuze, Leo Bersani, Kaja Silverman, David Halperin, Steven Shaviro, and Gaylyn Studlar, emphasize its subversive potential to a degree that displaces hegemonic aspects of Sacher-Masoch’s literature and texts that rely on masochistic aesthetics. This study shows, however, that masochistic aesthetics was always subversive and hegemonic, a claim that puts masochistic aesthetics in a more complicated relationship to queer desire than some of the writers of queer theory want us to believe when they collapse masochistic aesthetics and queer desire in a fantasy of submissive and subversive ecstasy.
The cultural preoccupation with masochism during the late twentieth century has been accompanied by increasing theorizing as well. Gilles Deleuze’s groundbreaking essay “Coldness and Cruelty,” first published in 1967, initiated and subsequently overshadowed any theorization of masochistic aesthetics. It severed the assumed symbiosis of sadism and masochism in sadomasochism and returned to the writings of Sacher-Masoch and the Marquis de Sade respectively. Deleuze recuperated Sacher-Masoch’s literature and masochistic aesthetics vis-à-vis Sade and thus returned Sacher-Masoch from obscurity. In addition, he offered an alternative approach to the tradition of literary studies in Germanistik, which cast Sacher-Masoch as the victim of his own perversion who, doomed to repeat endlessly the semi-pornographic writing of masochistic scenarios, produced “bad literature.” The significance of Deleuze’s essay for any discourse on masochism and masochistic aesthetics, including this book, lies in his insightful and detailed description of the characteristics of masochistic aesthetics as aesthetics on the basis of Sacher-Masoch’s writings. I suggest, however, that the current discourse on masochism has substituted the symbiotic pair of theory, signified by Deleuze, and literature, signified by Sacher-Masoch, for the former symbiotic pair of masochism and sadism. Intended to restore the importance of Sacher-Masoch’s literature, Deleuze’s essay in effect turned Sacher-Masoch’s writings into raw material for theory in such diverse fields as Ukrainian Studies, Austrian Studies, Queer Studies, and Feminist Studies, in addition to their earlier status in Cinema Studies and German Studies, which pay scant attention to Sacher-Masoch’s actual literary aesthetics.

At the annual meeting of the Modern Language Association in December 2000, the topic of masochism, so fraught with the weight of sexual perversion and nineteenth-century pathology, evoked more than the obligatory raised eyebrow. The headline of the report on the annual meeting in the New York Times exclaimed: “Masochism means never having to say ‘Stop! Stop! Enough!’” (See Boxer) The article itself recounted that at the convention “three hours were devoted to masochism. And that isn’t counting the lectures and seminars on the cruelty of theory and the uses of perversity” (Boxer n.p.). Despite the ironic and patronizing tone, the annual review in the New York Times serves as an accurate barometer for academic trends. Several interrelated factors created this sudden surge of interest in Sacher-Masoch’s literature in different fields: first, the collapse of communism led to a violent resurgence of the tension regarding the relationship of nationhood and ethnicity, a tension that also framed Sacher-Masoch’s historical novels; second, the emphasis of theoretical debates in the humanities that addressed sexuality primarily as fantasy had given way to an analysis of how fantasy is embedded in history; and finally, the assumed success of modern liberation movements,