"The stroke of death is as a lover's pinch, which hurts and is desired." This pithy proclamation, uttered by Shakespeare's Cleopatra as she lies dying from a self-inflicted poisoned asp, offers a quickening sense of amorous relations as welcoming masochistically erotic pleasure. Of course, that sense is shadowed by the melancholy analogy linking eros to death. Yet Cleopatra's example notwithstanding, recent theorists of masochism often distinguish between the pain of masochism and the risk of self-injury. Whether a problem, a perversion, an aberration, or an erotic position of pleasure and potential power that allows one to dispense with the societal pressure to assume a domineering role, forget the self, or experience a different subjectivity, masochism would seem to be ripe for more critical consideration. Claire Jarvis's study aims not so much to analyze the phenomenon of masochism, however, as to explore scenes in which it is enacted in novels by Emily Brontë, Anthony Trollope, Thomas Hardy, and D.H. Lawrence. Dispensing with Freudian and post-Freudian understandings of masochism, Jarvis prefers the theoretical insights of Gilles Deleuze as she charts a theory of masochistic and sadistic relations that highlights the way writers "represent bodies" (14).

For Jarvis, masochism signals a "pathology with a peculiarly literary history" (15). In Venus in Furs (1870), Jarvis notes, Leopold von Sacher-Masoch repeatedly uses "supersensual" to denote "the intense sensual experience" sought by the novel's protagonist (14). Jarvis herself aims to investigate what she terms "exquisite masochism," which variously stands for the "disquieting tensions" and "torturous emotional sensations" generated in fictional characters (15). In Jarvis's telling, "exquisite masochism" seems to be many things: it is "relational," and it "brings together language indicative of cruelty--particularly feminine, queenly cruelty--and language that describes equivocal states of being" (11). Although "contractual" insofar it is often scripted, it challenges marital contracts and foments dissident erotic scenarios that trouble normative heterosexual relations.

Jarvis is entering into important, oddly underexplored critical territory. On one hand, psychoanalytic studies have paid considerable attention to the issue of dominance and masochism over the last few decades. Feminist accounts such as Dorothy Dinnerstein's The Mermaid and the Minotaur (1976) and Jessica Benjamin's The Bonds of Love: Psychoanalysis, Feminism, and the Problem of Domination (1988) showed how the family is constricted by male dominance and often voluntary female subordination. Furthermore, in her critique of Hannah Arendt, Julia Kristeva argued that sadomasochism empowers totalitarian regimes. Meanwhile, the sociologist Lynn Chancer's Sadomasochism in Everyday Life (1992) argued that sadomasochistic relationships have come to permeate not only the private sphere but also the public domain, from schools and sporting events to political campaigns and corporations. Yet on the other hand, literary critics have tended to slight the vicissitudes of masochistic desire in works of fiction. Laura Hinton's The Perverse Gaze of Sympathy: Sadomasochistic Sentiments from Clarissa to Rescue 9/11 (1999) deals almost entirely with American literature, as does Marianne Nobel's The Masochistic Pleasures of Sentimental Literature (2000). Masochism in British literature has been largely overlooked, which is especially surprising in the field of Queer Theory, with its exacting commitment to a non-pathologizing consideration of non-normative sexualities.

Curiously, none of the critical studies mentioned above are cited in this book, which begins with a reading of Wuthering Heights, a novel of relentless masochistic energies. Yet before examining them, Jarvis distracts us by arguing that it is wrong to read the Brontës' fiction biographically, and when she finally gets to her subject, she tends to taxonomize rather than analyze. "The novel," she writes, "separates reproductive, legal, marital relationship from the sterile, illicit, unmarried relationship at the novel's center. The novel's marital relationships correspond to a sadistic logic, while the relationship between Catherine and Heathcliff is masochistic" (27). Yet this formulation oversimplifies both relationships. Just as Catherine's relationship to Heathcliff exemplifies both sadistic and masochistic energies, her marriage to Edgar embodies both sadistic and masochistic impulses, the first evident in her decision to invite Heathcliff into her husband's home and the second evident in Edgar's grumbling acceptance of that imposition, which reminds us that he courted her even as she frequently humiliated him (including slapping him at one point). And while her tumultuous relationship to Heathcliff could be characterized in many ways, it was "sterile" only in the strict sense that it was probably never sexually consummated and did not lead to procreation.

At one point in reading Wuthering Heights, Jarvis confuses emotional reactions with political gestures. "Sometimes our jobs are politically simple," she writes. "For instance when we read Emily Bronte's vision of love's brutality, we can't help but feel sorrow for a world in which such violence can be unremarkable because institutionalized" (156). Yet both Lockwood and
Nelly Dean, the novel's two narrators, repeatedly decry the perniciousness of the violence they witness, making it clear that such violence is both remarkable (in the sense that it is objectionable) and unstable in (terms of the institution of the family). Jarvis freights the novel with abstractions that are more intriguing than illuminating: "The masochistic model I've been describing appears, in Brontë's novel, to be structured around frozen suspense and contract. Alternately, the sadistic model is one of institutionality and perpetual motion" (32). Once again, one could just as easily make the opposite point, that the sadistic bond between Heathcliff and Catherine manifests "perpetual motion" while her masochistic relation to Edgar exemplifies "frozen suspense": one way of describing a marriage that is socially acceptable, chilly, and doomed.

The problem of viewing literary characters through the framework of categorical "models" resurfaces in Jarvis's chapter on Trollope. Jarvis makes several interesting observations: that Trollope's much-noted "conservatism" may be seen in his impulse to "drive out perverse models of sexuality in favor of more conventional power dynamics" (52); that the American seductress Mrs. Hurtle in The Way We Live Now unsuccessfully seeks to draw her lover Paul into a "sympathetic masochistic relationship" (68); and that Alice Vavasor of Can You Forgive Her? reflects a "peculiar blending" of Freud's idea of (non-sexual) moral masochism and Deleuze's notion of sexualized masochism (76). But here Jarvis categorizes Vavasor as if she were an analytic patient.

Jarvis employs a similarly coarse system of classification when she turns to Hardy. In declaring that Jude the Obscure reveals the "strong tension between the novel's bourgeois family circle and the self-contained romantic couple" (96), Jarvis mischaracterizes the penury of Jude and Arabella as well as the desperate dependence of Jude and Sue upon others. Likewise questionable is Jarvis's claim that Sue has a "somatic, pathological unwillingness to sleep with Phillotson..." (91). Sue's physical disgust with her husband manifests a sexual apathy so deep--and so socially unallowable—that, with typical Hardy-esque outlandishness, it unconsciously prompts her to jump from a window rather than having sex with him. In portraying her aversion, Hardy critiques the fact that late-Victorian marriage was largely based on economic necessity. Also, while clearly a feminist feature of the novel, Hardy's portrayal of Sue's sexual apathy is part of his fair-minded apportionment of blame, his sense that the protocols of nineteenth-century marriage diminish all parties, so the reader might pity the rejected Phillotson as well as his wife. Also, besides underestimating the complexity of their marriage, Jarvis offers disappointingly little on the masochism of Jude. One of the great masochists of Victorian fiction, Jude is right up there in the pantheon of wounded pain-seekers with Thackeray's Captain Dobbin, Meredith's Richard Feverell, and George Eliot's Philip Wakem.

Most vexing of all, however, is the section on Lawrence, where the topic of masochism disappears for many pages. Though Lawrence (like Emily Brontë) surely invites a discussion of the masochistic eros he portrays, Jarvis gets side-tracked by other issues. After spending many pages strenuously arguing that Lawrence is an undiluted "realist through and through" (123), she spends more pages defending the willful Hermione Roddice and explaining the obscene words in Lady Chatterley's Lover. When Jarvis actually does get to Lawrencian masochism, she chooses a scene from The Rainbow with no masochistic elements: as Ursula Brangwen and her lover Anton Skrebensky ride in a horse-drawn cart, the beguiled young man holds the reins with one hand while the other --in deliberately unfastening the buttons on Ursula's glove--settles over her. According to Jarvis, Ursula's "voluptuous delight" at being so courted "presents us with a masochistic moment" (120). Really? The Rainbow offers various episodes of sadomasochism--from Gudrun's playful pulling of Skrebensky's hair while he languidly rocks in a chair to Ursula's beating of a student, itself a response to the humiliation she experiences under the tyranny of a sadistic principal. But Skrebensky's intimate wooing of Ursula abord the cart scarcely counts as a moment of even mild masochistic import.

Jarvis’s discussion of The Rainbow is also marred by other mistakes. A central character, Lydia Lensky, is not a "German immigrant" (115) but, as her name suggests, a Polish one. Skrebensky is not "wealthy" (115) but is an orphan and a lieutenant in the British army, a position of prestige and honor that would bring him, however, only a modest income. (On his first meeting with Ursula he frankly tells her "I shall be poor all my life..." [The Rainbow, 273]).

The disparate arguments of this book are fitfully, self-contradictory, and confusingly made. In isolating various scenes from Lawrence, Jarvis does not always explain how they do or do not cohere into a larger structure of meaning. Promises are made but not kept. While the dust-jacket claims that the book shows how novelists "hint at sex while maintaining a safe distance from pornography," I could find no such discussion in its pages. "One of the central arguments of this book," writes Jarvis in her preface, "is that relationships are fragile and that a thoughtful life must accept that fact. This might seem like a frightening prospect in a world full of such dismal daily reminders that a lack of security can jeopardize even the most stalwart institutions" (xiv-xv). Leaving aside the easily-countered first sentence (is it not more correct to note that some relationships are fragile and others are not?), and passing over the apocalyptic tone of the second sentence, not a single page of Exquisite Masochism dilates on the fragility of human relations.

Then there is the deeper problem of definition. Throughout this study, "exquisite masochism" becomes a far-too amorphous category--a key to all erotic mythologies, as it were--that is invoked whenever a character has a pain, feels an emotional chill, is disturbed, or is simply excited by the attractiveness of another character. Perhaps because Jarvis insists that one must think outside Freudian paradigms, her own understanding of masochism is psychologically impoverished. But a psychoanalytic understanding of cruel, sometimes-desired domination in erotic life is not the only thing lacking here. Tellingly, many of the major turn-of-the-century theorists of masochism are absent or noted only in passing: the influential sexologist Havelock Ellis is un-cited, while Richard Krafft-Ebing, arguably his era's most influential theorist of masochism, briefly appears in just two footnotes.

Ironically, Jarvis often displays a sexologist's categorizing conception of her subject, as when she labels masochism a "pathology." She also tends to see characters in terms of "types," such as the "dominating female type" or the type of the "English imperial gentleman" (157). Of course, a critical study of masochism in literature need not embrace a psychoanalytic model. Masochistic relations might be viewed in political terms, such as the "master-slave dialectic" that Hegel famously used to theorize domination and slavery. But surely some kind of model is required if one is to gain a comprehension of masochism's place in fiction.

In her somewhat muddled conclusion, Jarvis tries to defend her version of formalist criticism--reading "exquisitely" --against critical approaches fraught with history and politics (155). This new mode of reading seems to mean nothing more challenging than appreciating what Jarvis considers "remarkable": dense descriptive passages in fiction, which she awkwardly calls "descriptive pile-ups" (158-59), evoking not so much aesthetic bliss as traffic jams. Oddly enough, her
example of such a pile-up comes from Emile Zola, a writer known not only for his powers of description but for his deep political allegiances. The command to "read exquisitely," however, quickly gives way to another injunction, to "read perversely," which seems to have something to do with seeing that "the novel offers special kinds of evidence--aesthetic evidence, formal evidence--that present us with more modest argumentative spoils" (162). But if these spoils are "more modest" than those obtained by other ways of reading, why advocate this way? In order to be perverse, presumably.

Thus, polemically rejecting complicated, fancy, political-motivated, history-conscious methods of reading, Jarvis favors reading for interpretive dividends only insofar as they are linked to pleasure. "The first thing we miss when we read primarily for politics," she contends, "is the formal invention that writers can and do produce when they are building a world from words" (157). "Literary history," she admonishes, "has too often been beholden to history first and literature second. But the best reason to read novels is because they are aesthetic gems to be held up for our pleasure and interpretation" (161). (Presumably she means "literary criticism" and not "literary history," which of course would be a sober account of whatever has occurred in literature and literary criticism.) These claims are not so much carefully argued as timorously asserted, as if Jarvis were asking permission to read novels unburdened by the agendas of others. But is it really fair to imply that historically- and politically-minded critics eschew pleasure? Roland Barthes, who goes un-cited in Exquisite Masochism, has explicitly celebrated The Pleasure of the Text (1973) even while decoding the cultural and political riddles buried in particular texts --and not only in literary texts but throughout popular culture. Many critics have pursued both pleasure and hermeneutics, as Stephen Greenblatt demonstrated in his 1990 essay "Resonance and Wonder." Furthermore, Jarvis's rigid binary (pleasure vs. politics and history) leaves other ends unmentioned. Besides reading for pleasure, politics, or history, one can also read for emotional release, or reframing, or Nietzschean transfiguration, or Bakhtinian question-raising, or capacity-training--or numerous other effects. Most importantly, it is difficult to discern how Jarvis's pleasure-and-interpretation agenda bears any relation to the subject of masochism, marriage, sex, or the "novel form" featured in the title of this book.

Consequently, even as it makes the oft-repeated claim that political approaches underplay the aesthetic value of literary works, the conclusion hardly indicates what that aesthetic value comes to. Instead it endorses Surface Reading, takes a swipe at Trollope and Lawrence for their supposed indifference to savagery ("they clearly don't condemn violence and cruelty"), asks why the issue of marriage law in Victorian fiction should detain serious critics, and declares that Susan Sontag's 1966 essay "Against Interpretation" inaugurated the philosophical conflict between politics and history on the one hand and aesthetics on the other (156). But the hard polarities insisted on here are false, as today's New Formalist critics are keen to point out. After all, Cleopatra, who knew more than a little about the pleasures and perils of masochistic yearning, also knew a thing or two about politics and history.

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