

Discourses of Heterosexual Female Masochism and Submission from the 1880s to the Present Day.

Submitted by Caroline Jessica Walters, to the University of Exeter as a thesis for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in Sexuality and Gender Studies, March 2012.

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Abstract

This thesis offers a critical analysis of psychopathological discourses (sexology, psychoanalysis and psychiatry) and feminist writings that contribute to the construction of representations of heterosexual female masochism and submission.

Chapter One examines pseudo-scientific ideas about ‘women’ and ‘masochism’ developed in the works of sexologist Richard von Krafft-Ebing and psychoanalyst Sigmund Freud. This chapter provides the necessary historical context with which to understand the Anglo-American iterations of discourses of heterosexual female masochism and submission from the 1970s to the present day, which form the case studies in Chapters Two to Four.

Chapter Two complexifies and nuances polarised feminist arguments of the 1970s and ’80s (the so-called ‘Sex Wars’) regarding the political status of heterosexual female masochism and submission. This chapter considers the radical and liberal feminist conceptions of fantasy, sexual orientation and sadomasochism (SM), which are examined in relation to two fictional texts: Jenny Diski’s *Nothing Natural* and Pat Califia’s *Macho Sluts*.

Chapter Three examines the relationship between self-injury and masochism using Steven Shainberg’s film *Secretary* as a case study. This chapter explores *Secretary*’s relation to the generic conventions of romantic comedy; demonstrates how the film borrows from normalising and mainstreaming discourses about SM; and finally shows that it engages implicitly and briefly, with notions of SM as a radical challenge to the prevalent cultural narrative of ‘health and harm’.

Chapter Four examines the discursive construction of heterosexual female masochism and submission in contemporary sex blogs. This chapter brings together many of the currents that run through the thesis to highlight specific ways that blogging

as a medium affects representations of these phenomena. It also examines ways that bloggers have begun to use the medium as a form of 'confessional' to co-opt the gay 'coming out' narrative for their own 'kinky' ends.

The thesis concludes by examining some reasons why the complex political position that heterosexual female masochism and submission occupied when they were first coined in Western modernity persists to the present, postmodern day.

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