

Forever
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When discussing plays in class, it's not uncommon for students to identify a given relationship as sadomasochistic, as if the meaning of that insight were objective and clear. I began to wonder what people meant by the term? Frequently, it seemed to refer to an unhealthy or unwholesome taste for cruelty and dominance, an addiction to pain and humiliation, a ritual dynamic in which characters are pathologically trapped. Claire and Solange in *The Maids*, for example. Hamm and Clov in *Endgame*. Also that we were watching a dynamic with sexual undertones, which implicitly took the place of sex, symbolically, metaphorically. When pressed, however, few could specify whether the symbols stood for sexual acts, replaced, elided them, or somehow made the acts themselves unnecessary.

In order to examine the term more closely, I arranged to teach a class on S/M at the University of Toronto. I was also prompted by an experience several years before, in which acting students in another class had staged a domination scenario. I was troubled by the assumption, which seemed to underlie the work, that you could 'become' a dominatrix, just by putting on fishnets and stilettos, that somehow the character lay in the costume, and that it was possible to 'put on' an erotic sensibility, in the same way, to get into character, actors put on period dress or regional dialects. That this perception of S/M as theatrical belied a deeper set of assumptions that also underlie the way 'power' gets represented on stage and in culture at large.

1

Sexual Performance: Case Studies in S/M

The class initially raises two sets of questions, each of which I hope to address individually, the better to establish interrelationships later. The first set of questions pertains directly to S/M practice. What *is* it? What distinguishes it from other sexual practices/perversions? What are its rules? Its myths? The second set of questions concerns the intersection of sex and performance. The difference between performance motivated by external form and the kind that happens when those forms are internalized. The exercises (acting out scenes from selected plays) aim to locate the points where power is traded or where control shifts in sexual situations, but also to analyze what motivates those shifts, e.g. What kind of permission? Or persuasion? What gives one character authority to command another sexually? Or put another way, what motivates one character to surrender that authority to another?

One of the first texts we're going to tackle is *The Changeling*, a Jacobean play attributed to Thomas Middleton. Contemporary productions I've seen--including memorable ones directed by Robert Woodruff and Dennis Kennedy--tap into the whiff of kink, although, like students' use of the term S/M, the whiff is more atmospheric than examined, a shorthand for, rather than an exploration of, deviant desire. It is not at all unusual for De Flores, servingman to Beatrice-Joanna's father, to turn up in contemporary stagings garbed in leather and piercings, a villain with not-very-well-disguised links to sexual counterculture, who initially repulses the aristocratic heroine, at the same time exerting an unwholesome force of fascination over her. Beatrice-Joanna's tragedy unfolds from wanting something she is not supposed to want. At the end of Act 3, in an

offstage ellipsis, De Flores either rewards or punishes that desire, with an act that critics interpret variously, but unanimously map along a single spectrum: at one end, a rape she resists; at the other, a rape she desires.

Because De Flores' rape (if that's what it is) takes place between scenes, the audience is left to imagine everything. In order to fill in the ellipsis, I invite the students to think about how *they* would stage the scene, challenging them to imagine what form De Flores' 'force' might take. Does he overpower Beatrice-Joanna by sheer strength, restrain her wrists to keep her from scratching him, force a gag in her mouth to muffle her screams, yank her hair to demonstrate control, force her to witness her own degradation, penetrate her in ways that cause pain? If De Flores takes measures to prevent the victim from escaping or fighting back, how might these measures dovetail with other actions intended to remind or demonstrate to the victim her own helplessness? My point is not to rewrite the play, but to underscore how, by calling the act a rape, we release a host of preconceptions relating to use of force and coercion.

This has been a sticking point in the class so far, a nervous tension or ambivalence, if not outright shyness or repugnance when it comes to fantasizing with or through the S/M gear. We talk amongst ourselves about the discomfort produced by the topic of control, but even more its symbols, as if there were something fundamentally embarrassing about the imagery of power, in its unique, shameless hyperbole. People in the class have been made uneasy from the first session by the presence of leg irons, bull whips, and leather interrogation hoods, as if—quite apart from the sexual use for which they are intended, there is something obscene about the objects themselves, or the undisguised and unapologetic relationship to power they imply. While individuals are drawn to the gear (I notice that they like to handle it, even try it on), it's another thing to find someone willing to use it with or on another person, for the purpose of acting out a mutual seduction: no

friendly offers, for example, to give someone a spanking, no playful invitations to ‘come over here and get locked up, you slut.’ Nor is the fact of being in a classroom setting enough to explain the reticence; I’ve seen the same students act out all variety of flirtation with each other. I find one possible explanation in the frank response of a graduate student who admits to being ‘really upset’ about the straitjacket. Because it carries such strong connotations for her of institutional restraint, she finds it impossible to imagine how anyone could possibly eroticize its use. For many, it probably *is* an intellectual exercise to think about using these objects as a means of teasing out interest and establishing erotic contact. Even if the sadomasochists in the room were thinking what they’d *like* to do with some of the gear, they would not admit it in a setting where the unspoken consensus equated control with coercion.

The degree to which this assumption drives an understanding of the play becomes more evident as we start working, in a practical theater context, on staging the build-up to rape, the dialogue in which De Flores comes to collect payment for his role in a murder. It is important to note that, in committing the crime, he has made himself into the instrument of Beatrice-Joanna’s will. Banking on his obvious attraction to her, Beatrice-Joanna engages De Flores to rid her of an unwanted fiancé, clearing the way for marriage with a sexier prospect. In our first run-through of the scene, the actress cast as Beatrice-Joanna chose to play the character as perfectly, even obnoxiously, unshaken in the sense of her own entitlement. She is affronted by De Flores’s ‘officious forwardness,’ sincerely offended by his bold familiarity: “I cannot see which why I can forgive [thy language] with any modesty” (III, iv, 124-5). She underscores her high-handed manner by strolling back and forth, striking her palm with the handle of a riding whip for emphasis. The actor playing De Flores, as if aroused to violence by her arrogance, resolves to take his fee by force. At “Push, you forget yourself,” he physically slams her down on a table, grips her head by

the hair and, at “A woman dipped in blood, and talk of modesty” (III, iv, 125-6) pries the whip from her hand and uses the handle to simulate anal penetration.

In S/M, scenes are built on power switches or points of exchange, where one person physically transfers self-control to someone else. This point is as simple as it is profound, and hinges on the premise that the person ceding power has enough of it to make the fact of surrendering it significant. Genet, in order to encapsulate the inversion built into such a surrender, returns often to the moment when Herod agrees, after succumbing to the seduction of Salome’s dance, to place all of his power in her hands. In a scene organized around consensual abdication, where the transfer occurs without resistance, the drama shifts—from the top’s perspective—away from “how am I going to get what I want?” to suspense—on the part of the bottom—as in, “what will s/he do to me now, with the power I’ve surrendered?”

When it dawns on Beatrice-Joanna that she can no longer call upon the protection of her father, her betrothed, or appeal to the difference in station, De Flores’ abrupt endgame leaves her with no recourse. The text indicates no struggle. With her back against the wall, Beatrice-Joanna executes a gesture of humility, kneeling to ‘sue [De Flores] for deliverance,

Beatrice: I make thee master

Of all the wealth I have in gold and jewels.

(III, iv, 156-7)

In other words, she lowers herself and, at the same time, raises her offer, hoping to win over De Flores with a double appeal to his pity and his greed. Note that she seeks to put a substitute in her place, hoping to reroute his will for mastery into mastery of her ‘gold and jewels.’

Let me go poor unto my bed with honor,

And I am rich in all things.

(III, iv, 158-9)

When De Flores refuses her terms, Beatrice-Joanna falls silent, leaving us to rely on De Flores' observation, 'Las how the turtle pants! (170), to convey a picture of Beatrice-Joanna's inner state.

2

In her essay, "Erotic Logic in *The Changeling*," Judith Haber joins the critical consensus in calling the central act a "rape scene," as if to call it by any other name would risk endorsing an anti-feminist interpretation, in which Beatrice-Joanna is "viewed as....complicit in her own ravishment," although it is clearly a temptation that Haber herself has difficulty resisting, to discern in the evidence of Beatrice-Joanna's racing heart, a combined image of panic and desire. Haber's close academic analysis connects this ambivalence to a broader cultural eroticization of virginity, a sense in which, for the literature of this period, the virgin's surrender, even in marriage, carries a taint of violation. [A cultural rape fantasy.] Haber characterizes the "culture's nightmares," its "fears and fantasies about women, sexuality, and marriage," as culminating in this notion of 'virgin death.' Deflowering transforms the new bride to the point where her parents and kinfolk question "whether she were the same woman or a *changeling*, or dead or alive, or maimed by an accident nocturnall" (from Puttenham's *Arte of English Poesie*).

Beatrice-Joanna is sufficiently distanced from her speech to make us see that, while she pays obligatory lip-service to virginity, she recognizes it as a culturally-produced value. From her first entrance, she toys with and manipulates the image of her sexual purity, presenting it as a selling point in her suit to Alsamero; dangling it cruelly before De Flores. In the knowledge of how much men prize chastity, and how much women are supposed to prize it, she plays the blushing

virgin to the hilt, even to the point where her father scoffs at her protestations, telling her she's overdoing it. About virginity, he says: "That's a toy" (I, i, 2000). While pretending to fear intercourse, she is gifted at devising surrogates that can be violated in her place, in a kind of displaced sullyng. Thus, even while protesting her desire to remain stainless, she casts off metonymic pieces of herself, tossing them provocatively in De Flores's direction. When she drops her glove in his path, for instance, she means to force him to stoop and pick it up. Next, rather than touch what he has touched, Beatrice-Joanna ceremoniously peels off the other glove and flings it, like a piece of chewed and spat out gristle, his way. He likewise seizes the opportunity to take possession of this cast-off part, to slip inside of it symbolically. De Flores reasons: "I know she hates me, because she would sooner beat me to death than let me thrust my fingers into her sockets" (I, i, 235-7).

When De Flores ultimately finds himself in a position to exact Beatrice-Joanna's virginity in exchange for services rendered, he performs a counter-switch, demanding that Beatrice-Joanna take the place of her glove, permitting him to thrust his hard-on into her *actual* socket. I place an emphasis on *actual* because I think, in this play, the act of defloration, with its connotations of sexual initiation, demands that Beatrice-Joanna be *present* in a way she's unaccustomed to. We might see this as De Flores's conquest, to succeed where other have failed, at possessing Beatrice-Joanna entirely and inescapably. In place of oaths and pledges, symbolic surrogates or empty icons: the naked beating heart.

De Flores's act stands in sharp distinction to how rapes are represented in Shakespeare, for example, despoiling a spotless virgin, i.e. rapists with one thrust of their cock, stamping out her source of social worth, using her up in one go and discarding her. As entertained by Blunt in Aphra Behn's *The Rover*, the will to rape is borne of humiliation, a means of revenging himself on woman

as a race, in one swift, symbolic act. Rapes like these are one-offs, in which the objective--i.e.. to stain something pure--can only be accomplished once. De Flores, far from using Beatrice-Joanna up and throwing her bones for scavengers to pick at (the fate Blunt proposes for Florinda), wishes to keep her forever.

If the play appeals to sadomasochistic desire--and I believe it does--the appeal is located here: in De Flores's lust to possess Beatrice-Joanna. Placing a different emphasis than Haber does, I would say that consummation, as De Flores performs it, has the consequence, not of altering, but seizing and containing Beatrice-Joanna as *his*. If he insists on her 'perfect' virginity, it is to ensure that she has had no previous master, which makes his possession of her *more* absolute. If, as Haber proposes, consummation aroused fears in the Jacobean psyche regarding the fickleness and mutability of feminine desire, then De Flores reformulates sexual union, in contradistinction, or perhaps in response to that anxiety, as a means of stabilizing the motions of a fugitive self. To Beatrice-Joanna, he says: "Thy peace is wrought for ever in this yielding" (III, iv, 169).

3

"Being permanently trapped in a chastity belt is a staple of chastity fantasy fiction, but this was the first real life permanent belt that I'd ever heard of."

--from Alphax's
recreation of Corrie
Russell's page

In sadomasochism, possession can be acted out--and fantasied--in varied ways.

Sadomasochistic fiction is full of stories in which the hapless protagonist, who merely intended to see what it felt like to try on, say a 6" stiletto or a mechanized corset, finds him or herself unexpectedly trapped, as the locking mechanism slides or clicks shut, of its own fatal accord. Sometimes the key ends up locked inside the garment; other times there is no key. Implied across the genre is the idea that such a state of absolute and irreversible entrapment, while deeply tempting and arousing to contemplate, even flirt with and imagine enduring, is something most people lack the nerve to perform for real: In the stories, it is as if the garment, while insensate and mechanical, holds the capacity to gauge a character's desire, determining the point at which he or she passes from tentative curiosity to a state of 'all in.' Taking that quality of emotional presence as a cue, the garment snaps its buckles, belts, and locks in place:, enabling a wished-for progress toward resolve.

Within the genre, its roots extending back to a medieval troubador poem, is a related tale of two lovers who, in order to seal their pledge of sexual commitment to one another, gird their loins with magic cords which human force cannot unlock. The legend of the chastity belt, like the stories above, responds to a haunting sense of selves as fugitive and restless, caught up in events and choices that cause them--against their will or better judgement--to drift away from the wished-for fixity of commitment. In a world where oaths are insolid, and the bonds to which they swear eminently breakable, the chastity belt, as product of the human imagination, stands for a more tamper-proof container for self.

Several years ago, according to a web source named Alphax, an autobiographical entry appeared on the Web, relating the stages in a process by which a woman named Corrie Russell, with the help of her lover, designed, fabricated, and turned her own body into the attachment point for a *permanent* chastity belt. Reading the text of the page, which has purportedly been saved from the censors' purge and reproduced on Alphax's site, we learn that Corrie Russell, before starting to 'play with chastity,' was already obsessed with piercings: "I just had to have some!" The voice of appetite, of self-renewing, but insatiable desire: "Initially it was my nipples, then navel, tongue, more nipple piercings (at one stage I had three piercings in each nipple, although this is now down to one in each), facial (although these have now all been removed)...." Just as we are wondering when it will end, Russell reveals that 'it' is just getting underway: "the real start was when my pussy got herself pierced!" It is as if each individual body part shares the same masochistic urge, and demands its own opportunity to be gripped, now. Russell says that it was an easy and automatic transition for her to move from piercing to chastity. The rings in her labia were already there, implying the next step, which was—'obviously'--to lock them together. "Of course there was no real chastity here, because the rings could easily be opened and the padlock, or pussy, released." Note Russell's self-declared dissatisfaction with a chastity that is less than real. To get past this point, where she feels like she's just pretending to be locked up, she purchases special padlocks that can go directly through the holes in her labia. "[S]oon I was sent to work, shopping, etc. with my pussy padlocked together-- and no key! While the removable rings would allow her to get out of her bondage without a key, in this more ruthless arrangement her flesh prevents her from removing the locks.

For the record, there is no way of knowing whether a real Corrie Russell exists, or if her website has been fictively reconstructed, to make it appear as if there is such a person. The need and desire for a Corrie Russell, however, speaks to a desire to believe that somewhere, somehow, a person exists who arrived at the end, making real the chastity fantasist's dream of absolute security and inescapable commitment. Some aspects of the character seem like a come on---a pornographic 'pussy' purr---as if the character were devised to beckon male readers hither; others, however, have a hard-edged 'dyke' quality, a woman who knows how to use tools as well as anyone, and whose body is never better used than in courageous, erotic service. Ideally, because it seems like a more real, well-rounded person: a combination of both. The character, whether fictional or actual, makes minimal mention of her partner, which has the effect of emphasizing the theme of consent, that *she*, even more than the lover, is the one who, once bolted in, seeks reassurance that the lock cannot be broken, cannot even be reached, without destroying the belt. The belt then, unlike a verbal promise, is not something you can violate without waging open attack directly on its terms. The belt, bolted through and to her flesh, is not something she can pretend to obey, while reserving for herself a secret autonomy. It accompanies her everywhere she goes: to work, to the store. It determines what she wears, how she sits, what kind of physical contact she allows herself with other people, and even the everyday mechanics of how she pees and shits. Anything she does do, under the circumstances, will involve the belt as her always-companion. If she wants to model slinky dresses for herself in a mirror, it will be on the belt's terms, with its bulky hardware protruding through the fabric; if she wants to get off, it will be on the belt's terms, requiring that she use its construction---its grill or tension points---to pull against and stimulate her genitals. The belt, without malice or coercion, but simply by the fact of its heavy steel, locked-on existence, sets new terms for 'forever.'

"I used to think I was secure with a normal chastity belt, but I knew the lock was the weak part, if I really wanted to get out a pair of mole-grips or stiltsons on the lock would easily obtain a release-- OK some superficial damage to the belt, but new pins, etc. could fix that." From serial piercings--which also, to their detriment, were removable--Russell moves toward the creation of a single object/symbol, one conceptual spindle on which to center her self. That both idea and experience get her hot is confirmed by the ferocity with which she imagines the final incarnation of the belt withstanding even her own powerful tool collection. Even in the absence of her dominant, she requires constant testing to prove her fidelity. Eventually Russell and her partner fabricate a real belt (see photo) that locks around her waist, but, as the quote suggests, even this more constrictive device fails to satisfy Russell's demand for 'absolute security.' It bothers her to think that, if she wanted to, she could break out of the belt, then, with minor repairs, make it 'seem' like nothing happened. In the final version of the belt, the lock, sealed between two steel plates, defies even Russell's genius for escape. If *she* can't get at the lock, she figures, no one can. "Now, I am absolutely secure." The security to which she refers in her website text has nothing to do with safety from attack. It is the security of knowing that something won't break, that you can trust its permanence. If binding oaths—like marriage--are so imperfect as to include escape clauses, we can still forge our own erotic covenants, with harder, purer seals.

4

Thinking about the actress, years ago, who put on fishnets, leather mini, and stilettos to act the part of a dominatrix, wheedling and cooing about how she'd gotten in touch with her inner

dominatrix, I was reminded of a scene in Wole Soyinka's *Death and the King's Horseman*, when a colonial administrator and his wife borrow some sacred egungun masks to wear to a masquerade ball. They fail to grasp the sacred meaning of the masks, much as actors, unaware of the erotic potential of a ball gag or bit, are at risk of profaning what, for some people, has transcendent meaning. What is titillating about Corrie Russell, despite the fact that her belt is 'revealed' on the web page in all of its nitty-gritty detail, is that the 'real' belt is, by definition something she only shares with her top. When she goes out in it, she makes every effort not to be detected. Any woman on the street could be Corrie Russell. The belt, however, determines who she really is; it organizes and controls every aspect of her existence, at the same time it remains hidden.

The fantasy of the belt then is to live a 24/7 eroticized existence. And I believe this is what happens to Beatrice-Joanna in *The Changeling*. From a public figure, accustomed to absenting herself, delegating objects and other people to stand in for and take her place, especially in situations requiring potential contact, she becomes a person who belongs to someone else and this—the kinky heart of the play—transpires without benefit of dowry or wedlock. She has no trouble continuing to act in her capacity as a great lady—for she was always adept at being in many places at one time, inciting desire, insinuating intimacy, while consistently holding herself apart. (In this way, we can see how the character, originally drawn from public memory, resurrects the powers of Elizabeth I, the virgin Queen.) The signs of De Flores' possession are, conversely, hidden from view. As he prepares to take possession, De Flores invokes a new form of self into which Beatrice-Joanna must settle, i.e. learn to live: this new form evokes ideas of perennial torture: as a sinner, she must learn to endure the wheel, the whip; also the mortifications of the criminal, shackled, at the mercy of her heartless executioner; through whom she settles into the

constant awareness of her flesh. If these torments invoke a picture of hell, they are equally connected to the conditions of an endlessly eroticized reality.

In a second run-through of the scene in our class, De Flores was played by a tall, muscular actress in a strap-on. She sat enthroned on a wooden, high-back chair with her legs spread, waiting for Beatrice-Joanna to kneel and fellate her. We see Beatrice-Joanna fighting her own revulsion, which is not a revulsion to De Flores, but the prospect of her own submission. We wait to see what, if anything, will make the character's resistance break from inside, overcome a personal oath to belong to no one. The scene ends with a stalemate. We discuss how the actress playing Beatrice-Joanna might be brought to a submission she could believe in. She *asks* to be tied up. *Asks* to be carried in and made to kneel.

In the final run-through, with which our work on *The Changeling* concludes, the same graduate student who had divulged her diS/May at the straitjacket, created a soundscape to represent the consummation of Beatrice-Joanna's deflowering. In the pitch blackness of the theater, we hear the characters whispering: "Hurry, hurry, before someone comes." There is the sound of a zipper being hastily zipped *or* unzipped. Liquid streams loudly into a container. Chain links, sliding over one another, emit a slinky rattle. Impossibly hard, painful S/Macks of something hard and inflexible landing on flesh? Or padding? No screams or sounds of torture, just a furtive scramble for sensation, before footsteps from the outside world approach, a knock at the door, imposing a pause, a return to social roles and pretense. It is a long way from De Flores staging his power over Beatrice-Joanna for the sake of an audience. The sound tableau is as intimate as it is savage.

When, at the end of *The Changeling*, the crime comes to light—the murder of Alonzo, as well as De Flores’s deflowering of Beatrice-Joanna—De Flores makes a speech (a personal prayer) of thanksgiving: “I thank life for nothing/ But *that* pleasure; it was so sweet to me/ That I have drunk up all, left none behind/For any man to pledge me.” Beatrice-Joanna’s submission has no worldly price. De Flores, unlike any rapist in works of the same period, is more than willing to die for it. As he cuts his vein with a penknife, he entreats her to race ahead to meet him: “I would not go to leave thee far behind” (V, iii, 175).

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