

On Sadomasochism, Fantasy and Transgression: Rethinking Power and Gender through *Histoire d'O*

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I think that the feeling of horror . . . does not correspond, as most people believe, to what is bad for us, to what jeopardizes our interests. On the contrary, if they horrify us, objects that otherwise would have no meaning take on the highest present value in our eyes. Erotic activity can be disgusting; it can also be noble, ethereal, excluding sexual contact, but it illustrates a principle of human behavior in the clearest way. (Bataille, *Accursed* 104)

Ever since its first publication in 1954, *Histoire d'O* (also known as *Story of O*) has been a controversial work. Because it describes the sadomasochistic humiliation and abuse of its female protagonist in a very detailed way, it is regarded by some as a glorification of patriarchy and violence against women. Janis Pallister even states that its author, Pauline Réage, cannot possibly have been female, for a woman would supposedly never write about female sexuality in such an extreme way: “It is difficult . . . to accept the notion that Pauline Réage is a woman, unless a very disturbed one, one having very low self esteem and a very low regard for her sex” (10).

However, *Histoire* is more complex. Geraldine Bedell explains how Pauline Réage disclosed her real identity in the early 1990s: *Histoire* turned out to be written by Dominique Aury, an eminent French female translator and editor. She originally wrote the story for her lover, Jean Paulhan, who once told her that women were not able to write erotic

literature. Aury, determined to prove him wrong, began to write *Histoire*, at that point without the intention of publishing it. The fact that the novel was actually written by a highbrow, independent woman makes its meaning more complicated, for it makes the claim that it glorifies patriarchy and violence against women less self-evident. Moreover, if one close-reads the text with background knowledge of sadomasochism in mind, the power relations described in it become ambivalent, as the female characters turn out to be more powerful than they seem to be at first sight. Although *Histoire* is an extreme novel, it is also a complex story which can be read in a variety of ways. In this article it will be argued that it is exactly the extreme nature of *Histoire* that can make it into an interesting basis for a reflection on, and perhaps a rethinking of, the conceptualisation of gender and power and the relation between these concepts.

Not everybody describes *Histoire* as a possibly productive analytic tool. Susan Griffin and Andrea Dworkin both claim that the novel's sole purpose is to please the male reader, and that women function in it as instruments for the satisfaction of male lust (Griffin 38; Dworkin 33). This instrumental use of women turns them into objects and as a consequence they are deprived of their humanity: "To be made an object is humiliating and to be made a thing is to become a being without a will" (Griffin 47). This dehumanizing process, which is apparent in both pornography and sadomasochism according to Dworkin (149) and Griffin (85), is not restricted to the domain of fantasy but may seep through into the real world. On the other hand, pornography and sadomasochism may also be analyzed as the "manifestation of sexual violence" already existing in society (Griffin 98). In other words, Dworkin and Griffin both see a strong relationship between the fictional realms of pornography and sadomasochism and the position of women in the real world. According to some feminists, although by no means all, pornography and sadomasochism are thus hostile towards feminism and a positive image of women: "[S]adomasochism is antifeminist in a variety of ways. Simply put, it is contemptuous of women, antagonistic in its worldview to female and Lesbian liberation, and openly hostile to the intellectual and rebellious rigours of feminism" (Saxe 65). As *Histoire* is a pornographic novel that deals with sadomasochism, it is not surprising that the novel is condemned by some people. However, if one regards *Histoire* as merely sadomasochistic pornography which may have dangerous influences on its readers, a large part of its meaning and possible value is lost. Critics such as Dworkin and Griffin may have a point when they claim that pornography and sadomasochism can be revolting or dangerous.

However, they tend to overlook two aspects that are crucial for the understanding of *Histoire*. The first aspect is that *Histoire* is fiction; the second is that sadomasochism is a game.

Histoire is often described as a fable, a work of fiction that is not intended to refer directly to the real world, for example by its Dutch translator Adriaan Morriën (184). Roland Barthes also uses the term ‘fable’ in his analysis of De Sade’s oeuvre, and claims that some works of literature do not intend to be an exact representation of reality, and should therefore not be read as such (40). In this regard, Susan Sontag’s analysis of pornography as a literary genre is interesting, for she states that pornography does not deal with reality but with fantasy:

The fact that the site of narrative is an ideal *topos* disqualifies neither pornography nor science fiction from being literature. Such negations of real, concrete, three-dimensional social time, space, and personality – and such ‘fantastic’ enlargements of human energy – are rather the ingredients of another kind of literature, founded on another mode of consciousness. The materials of the pornographic books that count as literature are, precisely, one of the extreme forms of human consciousness. (46)

In other words: pornographic literature is a form of fantastic literature, and should therefore not be read as referring directly to reality. If one applies this idea to *Histoire*, one may conclude that it could be more productive to read the novel as a fictional exploration of certain fantasies instead of as a representation of an existing or desired situation. The same goes for sadomasochism: this kind of activity may be seen as a game or a form of simulation that is, according to Patrick Hopkins, recognized as such (123). Moreover, Hopkins emphasizes that sadomasochistic simulation does not necessarily require a real situation in order to exist: “The sadomasochist can *desire the simulation itself*, not as inferior copy of the real thing, not as a copy of anything at all, but as simulation qua simulation” (125). The fact that some people enjoy the simulation of violence does not necessarily mean that they enjoy real violence or sexism. In the words of the sadomasochistic society Samois: “Calling an SM person sexist is like calling someone who plays Monopoly a capitalist” (quoted in Hopkins 126). In fact, it may not even be the simulation of violence that is central to sadomasochism; rather, as Thomas Weinberg and G.W. Levi Kamel state, it deals with the idea of control, with the dynamics of dominance and submission (20). Instead of defining sadomasochism as deriving sexual pleasure from pain or violence, we could define it as a “private reality” (Kamel 203) in which power relations are being played with.

† All translations from French are my own.

Bill Thompson takes this line of thought even further when he states: “Given that all sexual fantasies involve some form of roleplay, the only real difference between SM devotees and the rest of the population is that the formers’ fantasies involve overt elements of power relationships” (178).

These enactments of power relations, however, are more complicated than they may seem at first sight. Whereas Griffin states that the sadist, or the dominant person, has absolute power, and that the masochist, or the submissive person, has no power at all (48), other theorists have very different views. Havelock Ellis, one of the first scientists to do research on this topic, states that sadism and masochism are complementary instead of opposed (33); his disciple Paul Gerbhard even claims that it is in fact the masochist who is in charge (37). What is crucial in this regard is the notion of consent: the dominant person is only allowed to act with the explicit or implicit approval of the submissive person (Kamel 201). In this way, Kamel argues, sadomasochism is not a one-way dependency relationship, but a mutual one (201). Although it may be difficult to understand, enduring pain and being submissive can be a conscious, consensual choice. Moreover, many theorists state that it can be an enactment of love (Ellis 34), a form of recreation (Weinberg and Kamel 21), or even a form of “serious leisure . . . alongside other serious leisure hobbies such as kayaking and mountain climbing” (Newmahr 314).

The notions of *Histoire* as fiction and sadomasochism as a game can be a basis for a productive analysis of the novel. According to Darren Langdrige, sadomasochism can function as a space for the exploration of gender and identity: “SM has the potential to reveal or even subvert traditional gender dynamics with

women themselves able to work with consent in a way that recognizes the influence of hetero-patriarchy and the potential impact this may have on their identities and practices” (378). Because of its extremity, sadomasochism deliberately disrupts existing norms:

s&m is scary. That’s at least half its significance. We select the most frightening, disgusting, or unacceptable activities and transmute them into pleasure. We make use of all the forbidden symbols and all the disowned emotions. s&m is a deliberate, premeditated, erotic blasphemy. (Califia 130)

A similar statement is made by Bataille concerning eroticism in general: “What is being played with in eroticism is always a dissolution of constituted forms” (*L’Érotisme* 23).¹ Instead of condemning *Histoire*’s extreme content, we may also use it in order to rethink existing ideas. In the following analysis, this will be done by focusing on two aspects of *Histoire*: the notion of consent and the position of women in the story.

The storyline of *Histoire* is not very complicated: O, the main character, is taken to a mysterious castle called Roissy by her lover René. At Roissy she is subjected to strange rituals which involve among others flogging and bondage. After a few days she is released and continues her normal life, until René gives her to his friend Sir Stephen who becomes her new master. The story ends with the suggestion that Sir Stephen either leaves her or attempts to leave her, the last option leading to her self-chosen death. In this synopsis, O appears to be a passive woman who undergoes humiliation and torture without resistance. However, consent plays a crucial role in the story. As will become clear from a close reading of the novel, O consciously chooses to be submissive; and as a result she is active and powerful in her passivity.

The novel opens in a taxi, where René orders O to take off her clothes. The destination of their journey turns out to be Roissy. When they arrive, René orders O to leave the car by saying:

Now, you are ready. I will leave you here. You will get out of the car and ring the doorbell. You will wait until the door is opened, then you will do what you will be ordered to do. If you don’t enter straight away, they will come and look for you, if you don’t obey right away, they will force you to obey. Your bag? No, you no longer need your bag. You are only the girl that I delivered. Yes, yes, I will be there. Go. (5)

At this point, O's consent is not yet asked for. She obeys René and enters the castle. In the nightmarish scenes that follow, masked men have sex with her, she is flogged and chained to walls. Strangely enough, O seems to enjoy her awkward situation: "O was wondering why such a pleasantness mingled with terror inside her, or why her terror felt so pleasant to her" (22). Later on, it is even mentioned explicitly that the sadomasochistic rituals provide her with a sense of dignity: "That she acquired dignity through being prostituted was surprising, but it was dignity that came into being" (41). After a few days O is released; she returns to her Parisian apartment and her job as a fashion photographer. Occasionally René visits her to make love with her or flog her. Their relationship changes when he suddenly asks for her consent for the very first time: "Before I leave, he said, I would like to have you flogged, and this time I ask you first. Do you accept this? She accepted it" (42). Apparently, O's consent is important for René, for the sadomasochistic side of their relationship intensifies after this dialogue. Later on, René introduces O to his friend Sir Stephen and announces that he wants to give her away to him. Sir Stephen emphasizes the importance of O's consent and its consequences: "Are you willing to join us? I would appreciate that very much and I ask for your consent because farther-reaching obligations result from it than from your submission, of which I know you will not refrain us from" (68). O realizes that this is apparently a very special occasion, and that her answer will influence the course of upcoming events: "Today, apparently they wanted her to talk, and accept in detail and with precision that which she so far had accepted in silence" (70). She also realizes that accepting to be owned by Sir Stephen will require her to be active, or "exercise an accomplishment" (71). She can no longer be passive, but becomes responsible for her own choices. After hesitating for a while, she accepts to become Sir Stephen's property, and René leaves them alone (73). O reflects on her position, emphasizing that she is no longer a passive prisoner:

But [in Roissy] she was always tied by bracelets that kept her hands together, a happy prisoner onto whom everything was enacted, of whom nothing had been asked. Here, she was half-nude voluntarily, because just a small gesture, even one as simple as standing up, would be enough to cover her nudity. Her promise kept her tied up as much as the leather bracelets and the chains. (74)

O's position is thus more ambivalent than it seems to be. She is not a passive victim, but is offered the opportunity to choose. In Susan

Sontag's words, she is a character, which is "active in her own passivity" (53). Further on in the story, René indicates that all his slaves are free to go if they want to and Sir Stephen says that O is allowed "not to be his" if she wants to (118, 154). The same goes for the other women in the story. O and the other main female characters, Jacqueline and Anne-Marie, are far from innocent and enjoy being provocative and disobedient. Jacqueline, one of O's models, is vain and sensual, contrary to O who is described as girlish and innocent looking. O often fantasizes about owning the flirty and independent Jacqueline, and once envisions her wearing leather bracelets and a collar (58). The two women begin a sexual relationship and eventually O introduces Jacqueline to René, who makes her into his new slave. Despite her new submissive status, Jacqueline enjoys being secretly disobedient and provocative; for example, she likes to flirt with other men although she receives instructions of René not to do so (166). Just like Jacqueline, O is less submissive than she pretends to be: her most disturbing side is her tendency to manipulate people. She likes to dominate Jacqueline and make love with her, but enjoys exercising power over men even more. At some point, Jacqueline recalls how she met one of her former lovers after he tried to commit suicide, a couple of years earlier:

When he came back from the clinic where they had taken him, she had gone to his house, had undressed herself, and had lain down on the couch, after she had forbidden him to touch her. Pale from desire and sadness he had looked at her for two hours, in silence, petrified by the promise he had given her. (86)

O clearly has a cruel side, for example: when Sir Stephen introduces her to a friend of his and offers him the opportunity to do with her whatever he wants, O enjoys the shocked look on the face of the stranger (154). Her pleasure increases when he gives in to his desires, violently makes love to her, and asks Sir Stephen whether he can marry her. Sir Stephen states that he has to let her go if she wants to, but that this would make him very unhappy. O leaves both men in uncertainty for a while and finally states that she belongs to Sir Stephen and will obey him, but that she is willing to subject herself temporarily to the other man (155).

O's dominant side is developed during her stay with Anne-Marie, who stimulates her to use her power to manipulate others. Anne-Marie is one of the most remarkable characters of the novel: she is the only woman who is mainly dominant. O is taken to her by Sir Stephen, who mysteriously tells her that Anne-Marie will mark her, so that

everybody will know that O is his property. Anne-Marie introduces O to her personal harem of young girls whom she flogs or sleeps with if she wants to. She forces O to wear a tight corset, makes one of the other girls flog her, and eventually pierces her labia, making her wear a ring with Sir Stephen's name on it. Although Anne-Marie makes her suffer O seems to admire her: "[O] had never doubted that a woman could be just as cruel, and less forgiving, than a man" (142). For example, when Anne-Marie makes her flog one of her girls, O laughs aloud while doing so. Apparently Anne-Marie appreciates this dominant side of O, for she sleeps with her as a reward. Contrary to the men O has encountered so far, Anne-Marie is rather tender to her: she kisses and strokes her before letting O perform oral sex on her. O remarks that Anne-Marie gives herself immediately, but not to her: "Nobody owned Anne-Marie. Anne-Marie wanted one to play with her without caring about the feelings of the person who stroked her, and she gave herself with a shameless frankness" (146). Anne-Marie is an independent woman, an attitude which O appreciates and copies when she starts playing with Jacqueline and Jacqueline's sister Nathalie.

To conclude, we may return to the Bataille citation this article started with. Bataille emphasizes the particular value of eroticism: "Erotic activity can be disgusting; it can also be noble, ethereal, excluding sexual contact, but it illustrates a principle of human behavior in the clearest way" (*Accursed* 104). Eroticism can thus tell us something about human behavior, and may even function as a space to (re)think existing ideas about it. In this regard, *Histoire* could be read not only as sadomasochistic pornography, but also as a space, a "private reality" (Kamel 203) in which ideas about gender and power can be explored. *Histoire* challenges these ideas in a particular way: it not merely touches boundaries of decency but radically transgresses them. By doing so, the novel disrupts some dichotomies that are deeply rooted in common sense. First of all, there is the difference between men and women. Although *Histoire* depicts dominant men and submissive women, it also shows how women can resist male dominance, and even dominate others. Related to this dichotomy is that of the sadistic and the masochistic. *Histoire* shows that the sadist is far from omnipotent, that the masochist can be powerful by being provocative or disobedient, and that consent is crucial in order for sadomasochistic relationships to flourish. Finally, there are the dichotomies between activity / passivity and powerfulness / powerlessness: these turn out to be more than mere binary oppositions. *Histoire* shows that especially the notion of power is

far more complex than it is often presented. The novel resists the cliché of omnipotent, violent men and powerless, passive women. Indeed, *Histoire* can be experienced as revolting, and its characters are often far from sympathetic. O's cruel behavior towards her lovers is painful and some of the torture scenes in the novel are almost unbearable to read. It is perfectly understandable that *Histoire* is experienced by some as a very disturbing, unpleasant read. However, it is exactly this unpleasantness that drags the reader from his or her comfort zone, forcing him or her to reflect on the situation described. This does not mean that the situation described in the novel is a desirable alternative for existing power relations and relations between men and women. As Barthes and Sontag suggest, the novel may rather be read as a fable-like, fantasy-based narrative world instead of as a concrete depiction of (a possible) reality. In this way, its radical disruption and transgression of existing norms may be used to explore possible alternatives for existing power and gender dynamics. For example, the novel problematizes the link between femininity and passivity, the notion of free choice, and the possibility of passive power. Readers who manage to look through the novel's disturbing surface and try to think beyond its extreme appearance may find fascinating possibilities lying underneath.

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SUMMARY

Histoire d'O by Pauline Réage is described by some critics as horrible sadomasochistic pornography which glorifies patriarchy and violence against women. However, if one reads the novel as a fictional exploration of certain ideas instead of a depiction of reality, and if one takes into account the assumption that sadomasochism is a game with strict rules, it becomes possible to use *Histoire* as a tool for rethinking power and gender dynamics. In this article, this subversive function of *Histoire* is explored by analyzing the role of consent and the position of women in the story.

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