Kinky Reading: Power, Pleasure, and Performance in Middle English Texts

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ABSTRACT

This dissertation expands upon the vibrant field of medieval queer studies by considering literary instances of medieval sexual power play via theory on contemporary BDSM (bondage and discipline, domination and submission, and sadism and masochism). It begins with a chapter outlining the history and theory of BDSM. The remaining chapters explore concepts of fantasy, performance, consent, and eroticized violence in three Middle English texts, *Sir Gowther*, *The Book of Margery Kempe*, and the *Wife of Bath's Prologue and Tale*, from the perspective of kinky reading, a methodology that draws on the traditions of feminist and queer theory and the new field of kink studies. BDSM has historically been pathologized, but this study interprets kink as a form of queerness rather than an expression of illness because of its non-reproductive, non-genital focus and embracing of fluid sexual identities and power dynamics. In each text this dissertation considers, reading with awareness of BDSM clarifies power dynamics and finds relationships between sex and power that can be both arousing and empowering for the characters involved.

Erotic discourses in these texts express the struggle of an individual character to relate to larger social power structures, a struggle complicated by race for Gowther and by gender for Margery and the Wife. Like contemporary BDSM, these texts manipulate and exaggerate existing power dynamics for erotic impact. In *Sir Gowther*, the queerness of sadism is ultimately displaced onto foreign enemies, while temporary masochism allows Gowther to secure his aristocratic position. Increased attention to eroticized violence and consent reveals how Margery's relationship with God enables her to reclaim her body and both resist and demand recognition from Church authorities. A kinky approach to the erotic content of the Wife's *Prologue* and *Tale* provides a solution to the feminist critical impasse over the Wife; this rereading argues that her texts advocate for flexible power dynamics and embrace sex as a

positive part of life. This dissertation makes connections between medieval and modern sexualities that illuminate kink as an intense form of desire and a resistance to heteronormativity.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

One day, as Margery Kempe sits in a Church in York, Jesus appears to her in a vision and tells her she will soon suffer tribulation. She is not happy to hear this news, so Jesus offers to take away her suffering:

> Than seyd owr blissed Lord agen, "What, dowtyr, art thu evyl payd for to suffyr mor tribulacyon for my lofe? Yyf thu wilte no mor suffyr, I schal take it awey fro the." And than seyd sche agen, "Nay, good Lord, late me be at thi wille and make my mythy and strong for to suffyr al that evyr thu wilt that I suffyr, and grawnt me mekenes and pacyens therwyth." And so, fro that tyme forwarde… sche received [suffering] goodly whan owr Lorde wolde send it and thankyd hym hily therof, being ryth glad and mery that day that sche suffryd any disese. (1.50.2815-22)[1]

This short visionary interaction between Margery and her savior raises issues of consent, negotiation of boundaries, and redemptive pain. Margery frequently imagines Christ as her husband and lover, so their relationship also has a sexual component.[2] This dissertation will explore these issues and other aspects of sexual power play in late medieval British texts and consider how power informs heteronormativity in the Middle Ages via the theory of contemporary BDSM (bondage and discipline, domination and submission, sadism and masochism).

While BDSM is relatively new as a sociological concept, the types of behaviour in sexual relationships that now come under this umbrella term are not at all new. They all essentially involve the conscious and performative resistance to or manipulation of existing power dynamics between practitioners. My work explores how some medieval texts' depictions of sexual

[1] This quotation of *The Book of Margery Kempe* is from Staley's edition. The citation gives book, chapter, and line numbers.
[2] For example, see book 1, chapter 36 or 86.

exchanges of power can be analysed via contemporary BDSM practices, revealing similarities and differences between medieval and contemporary queer sexual expression while resisting the pathologization of the sexual practices of medieval characters or practitioners of BDSM.

Queerness is related to sexual desire or expression and it unsettles a normative ideal or interrogates dominant sexual systems by exposing the constructedness of that ideal or system. While mid- to late-twentieth-century popular usage equates queer with homosexual, the term has much broader theoretical implications. Queer is a capacious and heterogeneous category. Many medievalists turn to Carolyn Dinshaw's understanding of the term; she writes that queerness "works by contiguity and displacement, knocking signifiers loose, ungrounding bodies, making them strange; it works in this way to provoke perceptual shifts and subsequent corporeal response in those touched" ("Chaucer's Queer Touches" 76). She stresses that the "the queer makes heterosexuality visible" ("Chaucer's Queer Touches" 92).[3] Emphasizing the wide disruptive potential of the term, medieval queer theorist Tison Pugh writes,

> *Queer* need not imply homosexuality as much as a divergent stance vis-à-vis ideological normativity in matters of gender and sexuality; it is not a synonym for *homosexual* but rather a term that captures the disorienting effect of non-normative sexual identities and their frequent clash with ideological power. (*Chaucer's (Anti-) Eroticisms* 3)

These definitions agree in two points: that the queer is somehow sexual, and that the queer is in opposition to sexual norms. The capaciousness of queerness as a category of sexual resistance makes it a useful basis for theoretical work. In fact, Judith Butler argues that flexible and shifting understandings of the term queer are crucial to its political and theoretical utility:

[3] Many queer theorists stress the cultural production of sexuality. Scholars of sexuality such as Foucault, Halperin, and Katz have written that heterosexuality is a cultural construct arising alongside of homosexuality rather than a natural category without history, and that the articulation of sexual identity is an ideological development of the nineteenth century. The next chapter considers Foucault's theory of sexuality in more detail.

> if the term queer is to be a site of collective contestation, the point of departure for a set of historical reflections and futural imaginings, it will have to remain that which is, in the present, never fully owned, but always and only redeployed, twisted, queered from a prior usage and in the direction of urgent and expanding political purposes. (*Bodies That Matter* 173)

Any project seeking to identify or examine queer subjects or objects in history or literature must remain open to new possibilities and identifications.

Queer theory has become an important lens through which to re-examine assumptions about historical periods and literature: scholars such as Dinshaw, Pugh, and Jeffrey Jerome Cohen have shown that study of the medieval canon via queer theory provides new and exciting ways to engage its texts. Queer theorists like Will Stockton have convincingly argued that before the nineteenth century the queer may appear in unexpected ways, since the system of sexual values against which queerness exists is dependent on historical context. Pugh argues that because the Church only endorsed behaviour best described as "anti-erotic," all non-procreative sexuality in medieval texts is a site of conflict with norms and therefore has queer potential (*Chaucer's (Anti-) Eroticisms* 6-10). My work engages with the idea of unexpected queerness and moves within queer theory to consider the relationships between sexual practices depicted in texts written in Middle English and sexual practices currently referred to as BDSM.

My understanding of BDSM relies on a model of queerness rather than one of psychopathology. This approach follows the work of scholars such as Gayle Rubin, who considers sadomasochism alongside gay and lesbian sexuality in her study of the hierarchization of sex acts as a regulatory vector of oppression. Understanding kink as queer is also in line with writing about BDSM by community members and theorists. The next chapter of this dissertation addresses the queerness of kink in greater detail. As the definitions of queer I quote above

demonstrate, queerness refers not only to homosexuality, but to all that "comprises sexual, amatory, and gendered practices that ostensibly depart from prevailing cultural norms" (Pugh, *Sexuality and Its Queer Discontents* 3). Even sex-opposite kink has the potential to be queer according to these understandings of the term. BDSM has the ability to queer heteronormative relations, not only because of its foregrounding of non-genital stimulation and flexibility on issues of gender and identity, but also because it has the ability to highlight power imbalances and a lack of consent that can form the basis of patriarchal, heteronormative relationships.

The approach of this dissertation is to examine queer elements of Middle English texts using two concepts of queer historiography:[4] *queer connections* and *relations of resonance*. The former is a term I take from Dinshaw, who argues that seemingly unconnected historical periods or groups can touch through queer connections; this touch is motivated by the desire to build community across time through partial connections made possible by the fractured nature of sexual identities.[5] In *Getting Medieval*, she theorizes that "queers can make new relations, new identifications, new communities with past figures who elude resemblance to us but with whom we can be connected partially by virtue of shared marginality, queer positionality" (39). In her latest book, *How Soon Is Now?* Dinshaw delves more specifically into the idea of queer time, and suggests that making queer connections across time reveals "a temporal dimension of the self and community" (21). Like many queer historiographers, she stresses the role of the scholar's subjectivity in the work of history: "some kind of desire for the past motivates all our work… love and knowledge are as inextricable as the links in chain mail" (*How Soon* xiv). Dinshaw's

[4] For more on queer historiography see the introduction to Freccero, or Fradenburg and Freccero. Queer historiography does not impose meaning from the present onto a past moment, but instead encourages searching for flexible meanings and embracing intertextuality and intentional anachronism. The advantages of queer historiography for my project are its willingness to bring present concepts to bear on past experiences and its preference for seeking out marginal desires.
[5] For more on the partial connections possible between selves see Haraway.

queer connections are overall partial, imperfect connections, made with the desire to share an identity across time.[6] An examination of the literature of fourteenth- and fifteenth-century England through the queer touch of BDSM creates new types of partial identifications with medieval communities. The connections I make between BDSM and medieval literature are queer connections: they are partial, based in queer positionality, and come from my own theoretical interests and desires for finding new communities.

The partial nature of the connections between medieval texts and BDSM in this dissertation may also be explained by the concept of relations of resonance first proposed as an approach to historical textual criticism by Wai Chee Dimock, and later masterfully employed by Alexander Eastwood as a concept particularly suited to trans*[7] literary theory. Dimock calls her practice diachronic historicism, which, much like queer historicism, "tries to engage history beyond the simultaneous" and instead considers how one time period interacts with another (1061). She sees the science of sound as a useful way to understand the reception of texts through time, and therefore proposes resonance as the best way to theorize historical relationships to literature:

> The key concept I propose for diachronic historicism is resonance…. Modeled on the traveling frequencies of sound, it suggests a way to think about what (following Ralph Ellison) I call the traveling frequencies of literary texts: frequencies received and amplified across time, moving farther and farther from their points of origin, causing

[6] Using *Getting Medieval* as a key example, Heather Love critiques a tendency in queer historiography to find only positive emotional connections to historical queer communities. Though she acknowledges Dinshaw's engagement with queer abjectivity, Love argues that Dinshaw does not account for the potential resistance of queer history to her "touch," which comes from a place of love and friendship. Love believes that queer history must involve reckoning with loss and other negative affects, as well as recognizing negative emotional attachments to queer objects of study.

[7] The "trans*" label includes an asterix to acknowledge a spectrum of gender expressions, including transmen and transwomen, but also those who identify as, for example, agender, or gender queer (that is with neither or both male and female).

> unexpected vibrations in unexpected places. A theory of resonance puts the temporal axis at the center of literary studies. Texts are emerging phenomena, activated and to some extent constituted by the passage of time, by their continual transit through new semantic networks, modifying their tonality as they proceed. (1061)

The new vibrations of a text occur as it travels through time and interacts with new readers. Dimock argues that, hearing the text in new ways according to their own historical and ideological backgrounds, "readers might want to dislocate it, relocate it, and line it up against competing voices—the natural sciences, the visual arts, law, economics—to see how it sounds and resounds" (1065). Connecting a text to a new "voice," in other words, reading the text with particular interest, creates a relation of resonance. This relation does not have to be based on perfect similarity. For Dimock, one value of resonance to literary theory is that it understands the words of the text as unfixed, and therefore "democratically claimable," which encourages imperfect identification with texts and generates new interpretations (1068).

Eastwood's work on building a trans* literary canon demonstrates the effectiveness of Dimock's theory as a tool for queer scholarship. Eastwood foregrounds the materiality of the trans* experience and gives advice both on how the trans* person might read and how the trans* person is read. Instead of looking for literal trans* content, he recommends looking for the issues and ideas that characterize trans experience as the basis for trans* readings:

> If literature from the past denies us mimetic connections with verifiable trans characters or authors who can model solutions to contemporary trans problems, then what do we turn to in lieu of identification? I want to suggest that we trace how certain problems, ideas, strategies, or aesthetics that structure contemporary experiences of Transsexuality find expression in literary history. Directing our attention away from revisionist reading strategies that excavate buried trans characters who supposedly need to have their

> interiority restored to them, I am encouraging us to abandon recovery narratives and instead reimagine how trans epistemologies might animate texts without specifically trans content. (595)

Eastwood democratically claims Ellison's *The Invisible Man* and Jones's "My Father's House" as works to be included in a trans canon on the basis of shared feelings of nostalgia, loss, and the desire to "exceed the discursive confines of identity" (592). He presents his readings of "similitude and affinity" as examples of resonant reading (595). Eastwood argues that relations of resonance are particularly important for trans* theory because they cannot be denied by violent authorial intention and because they provide moments of literary connection:

> A hermeneutics of resonant reading resists the impulse to appropriate the past for present agendas and, instead, traces latent desires that continue to structure the present. This methodology affords readers moments of textual connection that allow them to feel and hear themselves in literary history even if they cannot literally see themselves in texts…. Reading for resonance rather than for recognition allows one to develop alliances with ontologically different characters and to encounter oneself unexpectedly in the past. Resonant reading enables strange kinships between readers and texts, kinship that acts as salves for the searching trans reader. (601-602)

Eastwood identifies the returns of resonant reading for trans* people as incredibly rewarding, particularly because, as Jay Prosser argues, being trans* "articulates itself first through narration" (596).

Though Eastwood's employment of Dimock's resonant reading is firmly grounded in trans* experience and the building of a trans canon, his capable example of resonant reading and call for strange kinships between readers and texts encourages me to make use of the same techniques in my own project. As he concludes his article, Eastwood writes,

> In examining how contemporary authors are writing transsexuality into broader cultural narratives in ways that are rooted in but ultimately extend beyond trans identifies and experiences, we can uncover the specific epistemologies that trans authors and texts produce. However, I suggest that these texts do something else: in providing representations of Transsexuality that exceed narrative identification, they equip the contemporary reader with methods for reading the latent presence of trans affects, temporalities, and bodies in more canonical and historical texts. (601)

Once trans* theorists have identified the epistemologies of trans* authors and texts, Eastwood suggests, they are equipped to use those narrative elements as guides to reading for latent content in other texts, as he has done in his resonant readings of Ellison and Jones. My dissertation follows this example by outlining key elements of BDSM experience and communities, drawn from my reading of literature and theory specific to BDSM. These elements become the basis for my own resonant reading for latent kinky elements in medieval texts. I name this specific kind of resonant reading "kinky reading," a practice I will explain more fully following my introduction of key concepts in BDSM.

My analysis begins with the chapter "BDSM Touches the Middle Ages," which provides background on both medieval sexuality and BDSM. For almost thirty years now, scholars who engage with sex, desire, or gender in their work have resisted a simplistic understanding of medieval sexuality. The title of this chapter is an homage to one such theorist, Carolyn Dinshaw, whose work on medieval queerness has greatly influenced my own scholarship, as will be evident even at this point in my introduction. "BDSM Touches the Middle Ages" outlines some recent work in the field of medieval sexuality that stresses its complexity and highlights the importance of attention to categories of difference—race, gender, religion, and others—when evaluating the presentation of medieval sex and desire.

The background on BDSM in this chapter is particularly detailed, since many people are not familiar with the history and practices of these communities, or they have only misinformation from mainstream popular culture on the subject. Kinky activities all essentially involve the conscious and performative resistance to or manipulation of existing power dynamics and structures. Whereas early psycho-medical and feminist discussions of BDSM practices identify them as pathological, the basis of this work is a non-pathological understanding of BDSM. Instead, I focus on key elements of kink, including fantasy, power exchange, consent, performance, and pain. The heightened awareness of these subjects that comes from familiarity with contemporary BDSM results in what I call kinky reading, a method that provides fresh perspectives on texts from across time.

The third chapter, "A Powerful Knight: *Sir Gowther* and Distanced Consumption," reads the sadistic and masochistic content of *Sir Gowther* as evidence of the ways men with power can use willing masochism to reinforce their status while upholding social norms. In this text, otherworldly threats to Western Christian society are coded as racial Others. I read an instance of rape in the text through the lens of rape play, a kinky activity, to suggest the ties between rape and heteronormativity as well as the eroticization of rape in the romance genre. Gowther's mixed racial status results in his sadism and brutal violence against women, the family, and Church. Only his willing suffering and the redirection of his cruel impulses allow him to turn to God and honour. This romance is ultimately conservative, but the attractions of rape and violence in it indicate a complicated relationship between aristocratic masculinity and violent sexuality.

"Negotiating Power and Pleasure in *The Book of Margery Kempe*," the fourth chapter, considers how consensual masochism and performative piety enable Margery Kempe to reclaim her body and evade traditional fifteenth-century power dynamics. As the first chapter resists pathologization of BDSM, this chapter resists pathologizing Margery's devotional practices,

compares her to modern "super masochist" performance artist Bob Flanagan, and explores her text as an example of queer performativity. The chapter considers *The Book of Margery Kempe* in the context of both hagiography and autobiography, and details the considerable evidence that Margery links erotics and suffering in her text in ways that resonate with modern BDSM. Ultimately, Margery's relationship with God involves an empowering masochism.

The final chapter, "Switching with Alisoun: Chaucer's Wife of Bath and Flexible Power Dynamics," argues that understanding Chaucer's Wife of Bath as, above all, a proponent of pleasurable sex and flexible power dynamics between partners provides an alternative to more black-and-white feminist readings of the character and her texts. This chapter, in dialogue with primarily sex-positive feminist theory on erotic fiction and pornography, reads Alisoun's background, her marriages, and her Tale, and identifies her with a switch, a person who practices BDSM but alternates between dominant and submissive roles. Understanding the Wife this way opens up the most troubling aspects of the *Wife of Bath's Prologue and Tale*, including domestic and sexual abuse, to interpretation that emphasizes agency and the appeal of powerlessness. A kinky reading of the *Wife of Bath's Prologue and Tale* affirms their subversive potential.

The relationships I find between the actions of medieval characters and BDSM do not require them to look exactly the same, but rather to resonate with each other, making queer connections between medieval and modern sexualities.

Chapter 2: BDSM Touches the Middle Ages

Sexuality is heterogeneous, indeterminate, and related to other cultural phenomena, so studying sex through its representations in literature can yield significant insight. This chapter lays out theoretical background about medieval sexuality and relevant BDSM culture and practices that inform my kinky reading of sex in medieval literature in this study. First, the chapter considers the heterogeneous sexualities of the medieval period. Medieval ideals about sex were influenced by the Church, often relied on restrictive assumptions about the masculine and feminine, and reflected certain prejudices against minorities, but the lived realities of medieval people did not always conform to these ideals. Second, it outlines the history, culture, and theoretical issues most important to a general understanding of BDSM. The legacies of its medical beginnings and centrality in feminist debates about sex inform BDSM's focus on rejecting pathology and embracing consent. I consider fantasy, power exchange, and pain as foundational elements of BDSM and introduce some common practices that inform my readings of medieval texts. Finally, the chapter connects kink to sex in the Middle Ages and layout areas of notable similarity and difference between now and then in terms of consent, treatment of non-normative sexuality, pain, and fantasy.

Medieval Sexuality 101

The average layperson may think of medieval sexuality as the perfect expression of prudish heteronormativity: sex was tolerated only between a married man and woman, who had sex only for procreative purposes, in what we now call the missionary position.[8] Fortunately for scholars

[8] It is true that the missionary position was the only non-sinful option for sex in the Middle Ages, because it replicated so-called natural orders (the man dominant, the woman lying passive), and because it was thought to help procreation. Brundage posits that theologians did not trust varied

of sexuality, the idea of sex in the Middle Ages as something that did not happen outside of Church-sanctified marriage has given way to several decades of significant research on medieval sexuality.[9] This research, often influenced by feminist and queer theory, reveals the complexity of sex in the Middle Ages and eliminates the possibility of forming any sweeping conclusions about a homogenous medieval experience of sexual acts. As Ruth Mazo Karras writes, "medieval attitudes toward sexuality were conflicted and complicated; there was not one universal and hegemonic point of view imposed by a totalitarian church upon everyone" (*Sexuality in Medieval Europe* 26). Evidence of medieval sexuality can be found in medical, theological, legal, and literary texts. This dissertation will focus on the representation of sex in literature. Keeping in mind the inadequacy of generalizations to define any experience of sexuality, in this section I will introduce some background on medieval sexuality in order to create space for theoretical connections between medieval sex and BDSM later in the chapter.

Though the Church did not have complete control over medieval people's sexuality, it did have a significant impact. Much of the important early work on medieval sexuality involves considerations of how the Church's authority influenced sexual practice. To theologians and the clergy, most sex was sinful. There are no medieval Christian, non-heretical views that did not condemn sex for pleasure. There were many specific sexual sins to commit: adultery was different from fornication, fornication varied in severity depending on the age and status of those involved, and sodomy could refer to a number of acts. Only abstinence, chastity, and marital sex on specific days for procreative purposes, in the missionary position, were non-sinful sexual acts (and of course the first two were not acts at all, but the absence of action). James A. Brundage

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positions because there could be no reason for variation but to increase pleasure ("Let Me Count the Ways" 82-83).

[9] This change in approach is fortunate for scholars now, and occurred because of the groundbreaking work on medieval sexuality by scholars such as: Bullough and Brundage; Karras; Fradenburg and Freccero; Lochrie, McCracken, and Schultz; and Hopkins and Rushton.

provides a humorous flow chart for determining whether or not a medieval person could have sex without committing a sin. The chart demonstrates how restrictive and specific the Church's rules about sex could be: almost every possible scenario, including "Is it Friday?" and "Are You Naked?" leads to a large square that reads "STOP! SIN!" (*Law, Sex, and Christian Society* 162).

Early patristic writing, especially the writings of St. Augustine of Hippo (354-430 AD), contributed enormously to medieval theological positions on marriage, celibacy, and sex. Lust was the main obstacle to Augustine's conversion to Christianity, so it is not surprising that his philosophical musings are often concerned with sex.[10] Like St. Paul, Augustine sees marriage as good, but not as good as chastity.[11] Augustine writes that continence should be motivated by a love for God, and that contraception is always wrong because the primary purpose of marriage is procreation. He believes that sex as we know it is a direct result of the Fall, and that it was sexual shame that led Adam and Eve to cover themselves. He argues that even marital sex is problematic because of its potential to lead to sexual desire.[12] Because of this belief, and others like it, abstinence became the mark of the spiritually elite in medieval Christian societies. The difficulty of thinking about or having sex without sinning manifests in a variety of ways in the literature I will examine, including the titillation of audiences with forbidden sexual topics and in the explicit defiance of these sexual restrictions.

The medieval Church proposed many sexual ideals, but there was a gap between those ideals and lived reality. While no theological writings defend sex motivated by lust, or sex

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[10] In his *Confessions*, Augustine provides details of his life up to conversion, including his long-term relationship with a concubine. Augustine was plagued by lust. He famously prayed to God, "Grant me chastity and continence, but not yet" (145).

[11] 1 Cor 7.8-9: "I say therefore to the unmarried and widows, it is good for them if they abide even as I. But if they cannot contain, let them marry: for it is better to marry than to burn." All biblical quotations in this dissertation are from the King James Version.

[12] Elizabeth Clark's *St. Augustine on Marriage and Sexuality* provides a detailed look at Augustine's theories on sex.

outside of marriage, "it is difficult to escape the conclusion that [sexual] behaviours must have flourished rather vigorously among medieval people" (Brundage, "Sex and Canon Law" 41). Further insight into the reality of medieval sexual experience can be found in canon law or confessional literature about sexual sins. In *Sex and the Penitentials*, Pierre J. Payer argues that the penitential literature of the Middle Ages gives insight into a code of sexual morality, and also helped to form that code. Payer sees penitential literature as a unique resource for information about medieval sexual behaviour. He argues that penitential literature may reveal which sex acts were common in medieval society: he writes that if we consider the penitentials to be reactive texts, and take the clergy's concern with certain sins and the amount of penance assigned for different sins as a guide, then we can reach tentative conclusions about what kinds of sex medieval people indulged in most.[13] Similarly, Rouse and Rushton argue, "the very existence of the prohibitions against and penitentials for sexual activities of all types highlights their very presence in the lived practice of medieval people" (11). The evidence of confessional literature indicates that while the Church had many methods to enforce its sexual ideas, most medieval people strayed from these ideals with some regularity.

Medieval sexuality is heterogeneous, and various expressions and experiences of sex have different consequences and cultural meanings. Gayle S. Rubin's "Thinking Sex: Notes for a Radical Theory of the Politics of Sexuality" details the hierarchy of sex acts in the late twentieth century, and theorizes that certain sex acts, such as monogamous, heterosexual sex, fall within socially constructed boundaries, while other acts outside the "charmed circle" of acceptability act as part of a vector of oppression. In the Middle Ages, sex acts are also part of a hierarchy. Some of that hierarchy depends on the differentiation of the sexualization of men and women. Male sexuality is figured as active, while female sexuality is figured as passive. Unsurprisingly, the

[13] See also Payer, "Confessions and the Study of Sex in the Middle Ages."

majority of evidence about medieval sexuality pertains to the male experience: most people who could write during the Middle Ages were men, most literature was from the male perspective, and almost all people in positions of theological and philosophical influence were men.[14] Most of the written material about sex from the medieval period focuses on the man's experience of sex, but medieval people assumed the majority of sexual desire came from women.[15] Furthermore, sexual theory in the Middle Ages also considered the role of the humours in sexual relations, which privileged the natural condition of the man (hot, dry) over that of the woman (cold, wet). If a man ejaculated during intercourse with a woman, he lost some of his heat through his semen, and the woman gained it. Sex made a man weaker and a woman stronger (Cadden 57-58, 62-63). Women's sexuality fell outside of the medieval "charmed circle" far more often than did men's, and furthermore, their general reputation was much more dependent on their sexual reputation than a man's. Karras argues, "a man's honor in the Middle Ages could depend on a wide variety of things—his reputation for honesty, his physical and military prowess, his control over his household—but a woman's depended only or mainly on her sexual reputation" (*Unmarriages* 6-7).

It is only by considering sexuality in specific, intersectional ways that we can come to a more complete understanding of the medieval hierarchy of sex acts. Categories of difference other than gender also influence medieval perceptions of sexuality. Jeffrey Richards undertakes an intersectional reading of sexuality in his book *Sex, Dissidence and Damnation: Minority Groups in the Middle Ages*. He argues that perceived sexual perversion becomes a common factor to enable discrimination against persecuted minorities groups such as heretics, Jews,

[14] However, as Jacqueline Murray cautions, it is important not to universalize the sexual experience of men based on extant manuscript accounts.
[15] The Wife of Bath, for example, is "al Venerian/ in feelynge" (Chaucer, *Wife of Bath's Prologue* 609-10), which leads her to seek sexual satisfaction.

prostitutes, women, and lepers. Richards writes that young, single men had the most sexual freedom and that most censure about sex was also about women (29-30,36-37). Steven F. Kruger argues that the intersection of religious, racial, and sexual differences means that the bodies of converts to Christianity retain a "queer residue" that prevents them from assimilating into the sexual or familial structures of their new communities ("Conversion" 171-76). For medieval women and other minorities, sexual expression and experience had more serious consequences and were imbued with more cultural significance.

Kink Theory

It would be anachronistic to say that BDSM as a defined category existed in the Middle Ages; however, because I am interested in issues of performance, pain, and power exchange in medieval sexual activity, because I am interested in exploring continuities and discontinuities between sexual behaviours in the Middle Ages and the present, and because today power and pain in sexuality are most explicitly expressed by a range of sexual activities called BDSM by its practitioners, I believe that comparisons between medieval sexuality and contemporary BDSM can be productive.[16] It will be necessary to provide some background on BDSM before beginning my readings of medieval texts.

BDSM is an umbrella term for a wide range of sexual practices.[17] The acronym stands for bondage and discipline, domination and submission, and sadism and masochism. BDSM

[16] Lochrie argues that all projects of queering must risk anachronism in order to "unsettle the heterosexual paradigms of scholarship; to contest medieval representational practices across sexual, gender, and class lines; and to produce readings of medieval texts that trouble assumptions about medieval culture and textual practices" ("Mystical Acts" 180).

[17] If not explicitly cited, definitions about BDSM come from my understanding of an amalgam of insider-written books and insider perspectives presented in academic articles. By insider, I mean authors and academics who self-identify as members of a BDSM community. I will never present non-insider perspective without attribution and signaling.

constitutes a wide variety of activities, many but not all of which are sexual in some way,[18] including but not limited to physical restriction with objects like handcuffs, ropes, or other restraints, or with a partner's body; spanking, with the hand or with paddles; elaborate fantasy and role-playing, including pet play; a relationship with an explicitly named dominant and submissive partner where roles may be rigid or exchangeable, and may be played only during scenes or on an ongoing basis;[19] deliberate humiliation; and the infliction of pain through methods such as flogging, whipping, pinching, biting, punching, electrostimulation, the insertion of needles, or cutting.[20] Acts that may be classified as kinky often involve the conscious and performative resistance to or manipulation of existing power dynamics between practitioners.

Some people might be more familiar with S and M (S&M, S/M, SM) as the signifier for such sexual practices. That was indeed an earlier term for BDSM, and one that is still in use among some academics and communities. SM comes from an abbreviation of the longer diagnostic word "sadomasochism." Sadomasochism is commonly used in psychiatric discourse to describe the eroticization of inflicting or receiving pain, but has accumulated negative and pathologized connotations. The term BDSM allows for some distance from the medicalization of sex and also embraces a wider variety of practices, not just those involving pain. Theorists and practitioners have variously referred to sexual practices involving the eroticization of pain or power as sadomasochism, SM, S/M, S&M, and BDSM. I refer to the body of theory on the

[18] Many practitioners see BDSM as a sexual activity or as a prelude to sexual activity; however, for others, BDSM and sex are separate concerns. Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari talk about BDSM's potential to disrupt normative ideas about sex through non-genital sexual stimulation in *A Thousand Plateaus*.

[19] In BDSM, a scene is usually an encounter between two or more practitioners that has a designated beginning and end. In some cases, a scene may involve only one practitioner. It may or may not include sex.

[20] I will further define some BDSM terms and contemporary practices as they become relevant in later chapters.

subject as "kink theory,"[21] which encapsulates all those possibilities. The majority of research in kink theory looks at BDSM in a European and North American context; this Western/first world perspective therefore informs my own theoretical background. It is my intention in this section to provide a short genealogy of kink theory, because it is a subject not many people are informed about, and because so much of my work later in this dissertation will be much clearer with a basic understanding of this theory and the history of BDSM.[22]

BDSM Then: Psycho-Medical, Cultural, and Theoretical History

Kinksters (a community term for practitioners of BDSM) still live in the shadow of the psychopathology of sadomasochism, which began in the nineteenth century. While there are literary references to and clubs for activities like sexual spanking or flagellation from about the seventeenth century (Sisson 19-20), the first references to sadomasochism as such come in the nineteenth century.[23] Richard von Krafft-Ebing's *Psychopathia Sexualis*, published in 1886, takes the names sadism and masochism from the names of two authors who wrote books on their own unusual sexual proclivities, the Marquis de Sade and Leopold von Sacher-Masoch (87, 127-28). Krafft-Ebing sees these perversions as forms of hyper-sexuality: sadism is too much of the masculine sexual instinct and masochism is too much of the feminine instinct (87, 125). In his

[21] I believe I am coining this term. The term appeals to me as a way to talk about theory on alternative sexuality. It seems to hold the most promise to me as the name for a discipline as well, given that "Kink Theory" or "Kink Studies" is more aesthetically pleasing and less unwieldy than "BDSM Theory" or "BDSM Studies." Kink is one of many words BDSM practitioners use to describe their activities.

[22] Impressions of BDSM based on pop culture representations are flawed because, as I will address later in the chapter, information from the mainstream media about BDSM is often distorted, or at best incomplete.

[23] The following summary of early psychiatric writing on sadomasochism owes much to Ummni Khan's more in-depth summary of the medico-psychiatric literature relevant to BDSM. For more detail on the medical background of BDSM, see her book, *Vicarious Kinks: S/M in the Socio-Legal Imaginary*, esp. 26-53.

view, sadists and masochists are less than human in their sexual encounters because they allow their sexual pathology, or animal instincts, to overcome civilized restraint. He writes that masochism occurs in people whose faculties are "poisoned from the beginning" (86), and that sadistic urges "in no wise affect the normal individual" (88). Further, he concludes that "masochism and sadism appear as the fundamental forms of psycho-sexual perversion" (194). As Khan observes, Krafft-Ebing's conception of perversion as an animal instinct that overcomes civilized control makes those perversions "an abject but nonetheless inherent part of his nature" (28). The healthy, self-governing man will be able to resist these temptations, but they are a danger for a person with an otherwise weakened will.

In the early twentieth century, Sigmund Freud conceived of sadism along the same lines as Krafft-Ebing and explains it in "The Sexual Aberrations" as a masculine aggression stemming from an overactive drive to procreate (21-22). He writes that sadism in men is merely an exaggeration of normal sex drive, since "[t]he sexuality of most men shows a taint of aggression" (21). Khan writes that while Freud comes to an explanation of sadism fairly easily, his work on masochism is less certain and comes to varying conclusions (33). She reports that in both *The Interpretation of Dreams* and "Instincts and Their Vicissitudes" Freud sees masochism as an inversion of sadistic aggression**.** Seemingly unable to explain how pleasure could come from pain, Freud dismisses the idea of direct masochistic satisfaction (Khan 33-34). In later works, beginning with *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* and most fully in "The Economic Problem of Masochism," Freud revisits masochism as a primary drive and elaborates three types of masochism, including the explanation that masochism is the death drive directed on the self. Like Krafft-Ebing, he concludes that masochism is inherently feminine. Freud is also the first to connect sadomasochism with childhood trauma, a popular explanation even now for why sadomasochists have the desires they do (Khan 34-35).

Also in the early twentieth century, Havelock Ellis writes about sadomasochism as *algolagnia*, a connection between sexual excitement and pain. Ellis does not gender sadomasochism as Krafft-Ebing and Freud do, and he also argues that pure sadism or masochism probably do not exist, but that a person experiencing one almost always experiences the other as well (119-120, 171). Diverging again from Krafft-Ebing and Freud, Ellis argues that sadomasochism is a hypo-sexuality, resulting not from an excess sexual energy, but from a lack of sex drive. Because the sadist or masochist does not have a healthy sex drive, he or she cannot be aroused by normal sexual acts, and needs sadomasochism to achieve sexual satisfaction (175-76). He does, however, also see the connection between love and pain as one originating in animal or savage impulses (66-69). These psychiatrists vary in their interpretation of sadomasochism, but all three men agree that it is a psychopathology, a perverted expression of "normal" (heterosexual, marital, monogamous, restrained) sexuality.[24]

Relegated to perversion by early psychiatrists, sadomasochism continues to be pathologized by psychiatric diagnostic materials into the twenty-first century. The Diagnostic and Statistical Manuals (DSM) and the International Classification of Diseases (ICD) both diagnosed sadism and masochism as mental disorders until January of 2014, when the latest revision of the DSM, DSM-V, was published.[25] In the DSM-V, the Paraphilias section is re-named the Paraphilic Disorders section, to "define the line between an atypical sexual interest and disorder" (American Psychiatric Association 1). Furthermore:

[24] All of these psychiatric models show an investment in controlling sexuality and maintaining heteronormativity. At the same time, however, as the medico-psychiatric establishment tries to control and categorize sexuality, it creates more and more discourse about abnormal sexualities. For more on how this increase in discourse results in space for BDSM to grow and identify itself, see Khan.

[25] The ICD still pathologizes sadomasochism. The latest version, ICD-10, came into use in 1994. There is a major revision currently underway that will be released in 2018. A 2016 update to ICD-10 simply lists sadomasochism under Disorders of Sexual Preference without any mention of a possibility of non-pathologized expression (World Health Organization).

> To be diagnosed with a paraphilic disorder, DSM-5 requires that people with these interests: feel personal distress about their interest, not merely distress resulting from society's disapproval; or have a sexual desire or behavior that involves another person's psychological distress, injury, or death, or a desire for sexual behaviors involving unwilling persons or persons unable to give legal consent.
>
> […]
>
> It is a subtle but crucial difference that makes it possible for an individual to engage in consensual atypical sexual behavior without inappropriately being labeled with a mental disorder. With this revision, DSM-5 clearly distinguishes between atypical sexual interests and mental disorders involving these desires or behaviors. (APA 1)

These revisions are due in large part to the campaigning of researchers such as Drs. Charles Moser and Peggy Kleinplatz, who have written numerous articles and a co-edited collection on BDSM interests, including "DSM-IV-TR and the Paraphilias: An Argument for Removal." The changes to the way the DSM officially views sadomasochism may eventually help to lessen the stigma surrounding kinky sexualities, though the change in mainstream opinion will probably be slow.[26]

BDSM is a new sociological concept, but sadomasochistic sex acts have a long history. Kathy Sisson traces the history of organized sadomasochistic sexual behaviour back to seventeenth-century England, when whipping and spanking brothels are first documented (19-

[26] It is worth noting that the DSM in general has been controversial. Prominent organizations like the British Psychological Society, the Society for Humanistic Psychology, the American Counseling Association, and the National Institute for Mental Health do not support the DSM-5 (Rubenstein); after the revisions were announced in 2013, NIMH expressed concerns that the manual is over reliant on subjective symptoms and announced that it would be producing its own criteria for diagnosis that did not rely so much on social norms. Part of the statement on this intention reads, "Patients with mental health disorders deserve better [than the DSM]" (Insel). For more on the specific concerns of these societies, see Elkins.

20). The early organization of BDSM communities is closely linked with gay communities on the West Coast of the United States in the 1940s, 1950s and 1960s.[27] As communities became larger in the late 1970s, BDSM began to be visible to non-practitioners, and the first sociological studies on these communities were written by researchers like Charles Moser, whose dissertation, which he completed in 1979, was on the subject of SM, and Thomas Weinberg and George Falk, who published "The Social Organization of Sadism and Masochism" in 1980. It was in the late 1970s and early 1980s that the theory and praxis of BDSM begin to interact in sustained and meaningful ways.

In the 1980s, "debates among feminists in the United States over sexual politics, sexual representation, and sexual practice became known as the 'sex-wars'" (M. Stein 100).[28] In the feminist sex-wars, BDSM was a serious wedge issue, particularly between lesbian feminists. Problems began in the United States and in Britain in particular when lesbians who practiced BDSM (SM lesbians) attempted to book feminist spaces for meetings of their discussion groups, or when books on the subject of positive sadomasochism were placed in feminist bookstores.

[27] For more on the twentieth-century development of BDSM, see Sisson 21-31. Sisson explains the history of BDSM through the sexual culture theory, which posits five stages of development for sexual communities: contacts, networks, communities, social movements, and sexual cultures. She writes that BDSM is currently in the phase of developing sexual cultures (31).

[28] For a short summary of the main debates of the sex-wars, see "Sex Wars" in *The Encyclopedia of Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual and Transgendered History in America* by M. Stein. There were generally two 'sides' of the wars. On one side were feminists who felt that heteropatriarchal sex was indicative of cultural domination of women, that the representation of sex (pornography) was harmful to women, and that all sexual practice was political, sometimes called anti-sex, radical, or anti-pornography feminists. On the other side were feminists who argued for the importance of freedom of sexual expression, and against the censorship of pornography, called pro-sex feminists. For more in-depth consideration of these issues, see, on the anti-sex side, the writings of Andrea Dworkin or Catherine A. MacKinnon; and on the pro-sex side Duggan and Hunter, and the writings of Patrick Califia and Gayle S. Rubin.

Radical feminists, sometimes called anti-sex feminists,[29] believe that SM represents a sickness or disease,[30] that people who practice BDSM have internalized the structures of patriarchal dominance, and that kinky sex is not only derived from patriarchy, but it also encourages the continuing oppression of women by replicating violence.[31] Several radical feminists compare the kinksters in their cities to Nazis;[32] for example, Sheila Jeffreys, a vocal opponent of SM, subtitles an essay about the movement "The Erotic Cult of Fascism" and in it she argues that there is a natural progression between interest in sadomasochism and the rise of fascist groups. Some argue that because some kinksters use words like 'master' and 'slave' in their fantasies the movement is racist.[33] As I will discuss below, radical feminist rejection of kinky sexuality parallels their rejection of many other groups, including gay male and trans* communities. As a result of their condemnation of other sexual minorities, radical feminists have formed some questionable alliances; for example, when anti-pornography feminists campaigned to create anti-obscenity laws (the Dworkin-MacKinnon Ordinances) they joined with Republican Women's groups whose goals include defending traditional (read heterosexual, two-parent, white) families.

The pro-SM side, which at first was composed almost entirely of practitioners, argues that because BDSM involves only consensual sex and enables sexual pleasure for women, it is an

[29] Radical feminist is generally the term feminists who opposed pornography and SM preferred for themselves. Other feminists writing about radical feminists would more often use anti-sex. Anti-sex feminism, under the label sex-negative, has recently experienced an online resurgence. For example, see Horowitz's "Unpopular Opinion: I'm a Sex-Negative Feminist" or Lisa's "The Ethical Prude: Imagining an Authentic Sex-Negative Feminism" on the blog *A Radical TransFeminist*.

[30] No doubt influenced by the pathologization of sadomasochism in medico-psychiatric literature up to this point.

[31] For examples of this position, see Linden et al. *Against Sadomasochism: A Radical Feminist Analysis*.

[32] Some practitioners of BDSM do play Nazi/Jew scenes, and prominent activists like Pat Califia have defended the use of swastikas in BDSM play (*Public Sex* 170).

[33] I will discuss issues of racism in BDSM below.

empowering and feminist choice. Pro-SM feminists often rely on embodied knowledge, and argue that BDSM actually disrupts heteropatriarchal dominance because it "is more a parody of the hidden sexual nature of fascism than it is a worship of or an acquiescence to it" (Califia, *Public Sex* 170). Pat, now Patrick, Califia is a major voice in the pro-SM movement and a co-founder of Samois, the first documented organization for lesbians interested in BDSM.[34] Califia feels that kinky sex is defiant of normative sexual mores and a radical act that can effect social change. Gayle Rubin, well known as an author of pro-sex feminist theory, was also a co-founder of Samois. Her influential article "Thinking Sex: Notes for a Radical Theory of the Politics of Sexuality" argues that stigmatization of alternative sexualities like BDSM, which is very low on the sexual hierarchy, is a result of BDSM's failure to conform what is legally and socially considered "normative." She opposes sexual essentialism as a way of assigning value.

The legacy of the lesbian feminist debates on SM is still felt in the key issues in theory on BDSM: consent in kinky scenarios, the potential for productive disruption through BDSM, racism in BDSM, and whether or not sexual interest in pain and power is a sign of psychopathology. In general, the positions of anti-SM feminists and public policy and law, mainstream media representation, and many non-practitioners' ideas about BDSM reflect each other.[35] The pro-SM side is mainly represented both in academic research, which often includes insider data and perspective, and in essays about, reflections upon, and cinematic or literary

[34] Samois' first public meeting was in 1979.
[35] Khan's *Vicarious Pleasures* demonstrates the complex relationship of influence between media like pop culture and mainstream opinion and the radical feminist work of the late twentieth century, and how those might influence legal and political discourse and practice.

representations of BDSM produced by practitioners, which appear both in print and, increasingly, in online blogs and forums.[36]

It may already be clear from my analysis, but I consider myself a pro-sex, pro-SM feminist. While I acknowledge potential problems of BDSM, and will explore some of those issues in more depth in a later section of this chapter, I am more convinced by the scientific method and by the attention to the insider perspective of the pro-BDSM side than by the approach of the anti-BDSM side. While simple replications of violence are of course possible, I recognize BDSM's potential for the conscious sexual undermining of social norms. Another reason I side with pro-BDSM feminists is the connection I see between the prejudice against BDSM and the prejudice against other queer communities. Though the two experiences are not equal, we can draw, and many researchers have drawn or shown,[37] parallels between LGBT and BDSM experiences.

I read one parallel between LGBT and BDSM experience in the rhetoric that those opposed to these communities use in their writing. Here is an excerpt from the introduction to *Against Sadomasochism*, in which Robin Ruth Linden describes walking in a gay neighbourhood in San Francisco:

> Like a festival that promises to go on forever, the street rings with passion… [being a woman in the gay neighbourhood] lends a sense of safety when I'm walking after dark, freedom from the fear of being raped or murdered. But there is a feeling of threat: nameless, amorphous. The passion is cold, at times almost macabre.

[36] There is some overlap between academic and community work; academics and theorists who identify openly as practitioners include Robin Bauer, Patrick Califia, Alex Dymock, and Steve Lenius.

[37] See Bezrah, Weinburg, and Edgar; Yost and Hunter; Wright; Turley et al; Khan; Lawrence and Love-Crowell; and Landridge and Butt. It is also worth noting that the earliest psycho-medical texts consider homosexuality (then called inversion) alongside sadism and masochism, and that articles on BDSM are now frequently published in journals relating to LGBT issues, such as *Journal of Homosexuality*, *Journal of Bisexuality*, and *Gay and Lesbian Quarterly*.

> It is commonplace to see men with black leather collars and leashes around their necks to indicate they are sexual 'slaves'…. After several years I have become accustomed to seeing men wearing paraphernalia of sadomasochism… but recently, there is an occasional woman in similar dress. (1-2)

And from a letter written by Eugene Delgaudio, an American social conservative organizer, soliciting donations to an anti-gay organization:

> My office is in trouble. And I need your help. I have been working overtime fighting against the radical Homosexual Lobby. Today, I'm worried. Despite passing the Gay Bill of Special Rights through the Senate and the gutting of the Defense of Marriage Act, the radical Homosexual Lobby is drooling for more. So with midterm elections approaching, they have adopted new tactics, targeting vulnerable members of Congress. I see well-known agents of the radical Homosexual Lobby everywhere. They are huddled in dark corners scheming and plotting. (Jervis)

Finally, from an article supporting recent legislation prohibiting transgender people from using the bathroom that fits their gender identity:

> The government should never purposefully threaten the public safety of women and children by creating the legitimized access that sexual predators tend to seek… It would be impossible for a young girl to determine whether or not the man in the restroom is a "peeping tom," a rapist or a pedophile, and it is unconscionable for any legislator to purposefully place her in such a compromising position…. No government should be so irresponsible as to deliberately compromise its citizenry's safety and wellbeing in order

to appease minority demands based on personal sexual preferences. (Human Rights Campaign)[38]

In all three cases, the writer assumes an "us" versus "them" perspective; the writing is seemingly based on personal disgust or fear that the writer assumes readers will share. The language of threat these writers employ attempts to displace social and physical forms of violence onto the oppressed groups who experience them. For example, while opponents of trans* rights claim that women and children are in danger of assault if transwomen are allowed to use women's washrooms, there are no recorded cases of trans* people assaulting cis[39] people in bathrooms, nor are there any records of male predators pretending to be transwomen to gain access to women's bathrooms (Maza). In fact, trans* people are the ones who are likely to encounter harassment or assault when using the bathroom (Herman). The oppressed group is also described as an encroaching force upon the more 'normal' writer and sympathetic readers. The anti-gay and anti-trans examples speak more directly to political influence, but the passage by Linden suggests that lesbians have been contaminated by gay male practice.

I am particularly troubled by the overlap between anti-SM feminists, anti-pornography feminists, and feminists who are against the inclusion of transwomen in the feminist community.[40] Sheila Jeffreys, a leading anti-SM feminist, also opposes pornography, butch or dyke identities, drag, and acknowledging transwomen as women. Jeffreys describes seeing a couple at a BDSM festival: "a male-*to-constructed female* transsexual whipping *a woman*, both dressed in fetishistic 'feminine clothing'" (210, my italics). Jeffreys differentiates between the

[38] This quotation is from a Human Rights Campaign piece about the Family Research Council, but the original article, by FRC Senior Fellow Peter Sprigg, has since been removed from the FRC website.
[39] "cis" is the prefix applied to people whose gender identity matches their gender as assigned at birth. *Cis*, meaning "on the same side" in Latin, is the antonym of *trans*.
[40] For an excellent article on the reception of transwomen by feminists, see Emi Koyama's "Whose Feminism Is It Anyway? The Unspoken Racism of the Trans Inclusion Debate."

woman and the "constructed female," recalling the arguments of many anti-trans feminists that transwomen are not genuine women, or that they are actually male spies infiltrating feminist spaces. As the examples from their own writings show, anti-sex writers, feminist and otherwise, erase the experiences of transpeople, sex workers, and those who practice BDSM in favour of expressing their personal disapproval. Khan examines the rhetoric of anti- and pro-SM writing and notes that anti-SM feminists make more truth claims about BDSM than practitioners do, without consideration of actual SM experience (168). Ultimately, while I do not espouse a purely neoliberal perspective on choice and consent,[41] I do believe it is possible to make informed, though influenced choices, and that the move to restrict those choices often actually harms an oppressed community in the guise of defending social norms. For these reasons, I position myself as pro-BDSM.

BDSM Now: Culture, Theory, and Practice

This section on the contemporary BDSM community begins by noting that there is no one such community. Because BDSM and kink are umbrella terms, they accommodate a variety of individuals and interests; there is a great deal of heterogeneity within and between BDSM communities. When I refer to any one BDSM community, I do not mean to imply that there is a set of monolithic ideals held by members of that community. I will generally refer to BDSM communities, in the plural, to emphasize the possible multiplicity of viewpoints about, interests in, and approaches to BDSM.

[41] Neoliberalism developed in the 1970s in the United States out of economic liberalism favoring free market capitalism; culturally, neoliberalism promotes the interests of the individual over collective need. The neoliberal perspective on consent relies on a division of public and private spheres and absolves the individual of responsibility to issues of privilege (racial, economic, etc.). Weiss writes that BDSM in general relies on neoliberalism (*Techniques of Pleasure* 18-19, 69-70). For more on neoliberalism in general see Duggan.

In the 1970s and 1980s, people began to organize groups around an interest in sadomasochistic sex. At this time, the groups were generally run only in major city centers, where populations were large enough, and liberal enough, to support such groups. The Eulenspiegel Society (TES), in New York City, and The Society of Janus (SOJ), in San Francisco, founded in 1971 and 1974, respectively, are the two oldest pansexual BDSM communities in America,[42] and are both still running. Initially groups like SOJ and TES ran magazines or newsletters for members. For a number of years, meetings, discussions, and events were organized and held in person. Then came the Internet.

The Internet has been critical to the development of BDSM communities: it widens access to information about BDSM and allows those curious about it to research with relative anonymity. The Internet also creates opportunities for in person community interactions because it makes it easier for people to connect with other practitioners. For example, *Fetlife*, the most popular international BDSM social website, has 5,790,945 members and over 544,000 upcoming events as of April 20th, 2017.[43] On this site, members can organize events, share photos and videos, write blogs, and participate in forum discussions on BDSM. The Internet has made kink accessible. In forewords to new editions of their books on kink, both John and Libby Warren and Dossie Easton and Janet Hardy note that the major difference between editions from the 1990s and the newer editions is an expansion of discussion about the role of the Internet in BDSM, which the authors agree is huge.

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[42] Pansexual means "all-sexual." In an individual context it generally refers to someone who is attracted to partners of all genders and orientations. Some people prefer pansexual to bisexual since it acknowledges the gender spectrum, rather than a binary. A pansexual group may be composed of all pansexual members, or may simply refer to a group that welcomes members of any sexual orientation.

[43] These numbers have increased significantly since my first draft of this material; in March of 2014 the site had 2,771,336 members and over 230,000 upcoming events.

The Internet makes it easier for those interested in BDSM to connect with like-minded individuals. Eleanor Wilkinson suggests that the Internet may provide a space for self-representation and resistance by practitioners of BDSM. Sites like *Fetlife* or *The Pervocracy*, a "kinky, feminist, sexblog," where Cliff Pervocracy writes in-depth essays about BDSM centered topics like the notion of consent, the pleasures of BDSM, and community ethics, are examples of how kinksters can use cyberspace to explore their interests and theorize about BDSM, reaching a wider audience than other media allow.[44] The Internet has also made it possible for people to identify their interest in BDSM but not in the community at large. For example, someone who enjoys BDSM in the context of personal relationships still might not be interested in community events or socializing. In this way, the Internet widens access to BDSM beyond organized communities.

The rising importance of the Internet in forming BDSM communities influences not only interactions online and the exchange of information, but also how kinksters interact in person. A "munch" is a meeting of BDSM practitioners that generally takes place in a restaurant or coffeehouse and involves food and discussion, but no BDSM play or dress. The first munch was held in 1992 in San Francisco because people meeting online in discussion forums wanted to meet in person in a low key and low pressure way (Society of Janus 38). Today, most online BDSM groups hold a regular munch, and the events are as much a part of the scene as play parties and educational classes. A munch will often be a new practitioner's first in-person contact with other practitioners.

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[44] In some spaces online, however, it is still easy to find negative views on BDSM, as in an article on feminist website *xojane* by Riana Lipsitz entitled "It Happened to Me: I Tried Role Play But My Ex Was Too Nice," in which the author suggests her boyfriend was "just too much of a feminist" to be good at rough sex. This article develops the anti-sex feminist position that sadomasochism cannot be a feminist choice by joking that feminists and nice people literally cannot perform SM acts, even when they are aroused by the concepts and try to act them out.

Superficial knowledge of BDSM has become unavoidable in Western cultures as media representations of kink become more widespread. However, much like LGBT response to early media representations of LGBT culture, members of these communities often criticize media coverage or fictionalizations of BDSM as inaccurate. The long history of pathologization of sadomasochism and the othering of those who practice non-normative sex acts influence mainstream representation of BDSM. In "Mainstreaming Kink: The Politics of BDSM Representation in U.S. Popular Media," Margot Weiss explores non-practitioners' understandings of and responses to BDSM in popular culture. Weiss writes that media use BDSM in two ways that actually reinforce "normal" sexual boundaries: acceptance through normalization and understanding through pathology. Normalization occurs when BDSM is represented but then forced into a socially acceptable form; e.g. in *Secretary*, a movie released in 2002, a couple in a sadomasochistic relationship ends up married and living in the suburbs. This process parallels the concept of homonormativity, the practice of assimilating to or seeking inclusion in heteronormative systems by gay and lesbian people. Homonormativity assumes that the best way to be queer is to be as palatable as possible to dominant culture.[45]

Understanding through pathology presents "SM as a (pathological) identity rather than a practice … to shore up boundaries between normal and abnormal" (Weiss, "Mainstreaming" 119); e.g. in *Cruising*, a movie released in 1980, an undercover cop investigates a gay serial killer in New York City's gay S&M scene. The ending of the movie implies that the cop himself is the

[45] Lisa Duggan's *The Twilight of Equality? Neoliberalism, Cultural Politics, and the Attack on Democracy* is an excellent source on homonormativity. However, it is important to note that the term has earlier uses and a slightly different connotation in trans* activist communities (to indicate that lesbian, gay, and bisexual activists "sometimes had more in common with the straight world than [they] did with [trans activists]" (Stryker 146). For an article on how homonormativity interacts with nationalism, see Jasbir K. Puar's "Mapping US Homonormativies."

killer, motivated by his own sadism and sublimated gay urges. Weiss argues that media representations of BDSM encourage distanced consumption: "a tantalizing view of something other (sexy, exotic, kinky) that is safely viewed and evaluated from a detached, privileged, and normative position" (105). Explaining BDSM as a sickness allows non-practitioners to distance themselves from the subject and encourages the rejection of practitioners from "normal" society.

Like Weiss' article, Wilkinson's "Perverting Visual Pleasure: Representing Sadomasochism" concludes that increased representation in media has not resulted in increased tolerance for BDSM. She suggests that while some "mild" forms of BDSM (which amount to extensions of heterosexual vanilla sex, such as the use of mild restraints or play spanking) have become more acceptable because of mainstream media representation, more "extreme" forms of SM are "still considered a dangerous perversion" (192). If not threatening and dangerous, BDSM may be played for laughs as the ridiculous practice of pitiable or absurd weirdos. Wilkinson further argues that SM cannot go back to being completely invisible, and only an increase in insider perspective in media can lead to increased accuracy in representation.

Unfortunately for kinksters, Terry Hoople has convincingly argued that society does not currently accept the value of self-representation in the case of BDSM: "once SM practitioners do attempt to represent themselves… they are inserted into the cultural codes that regulate the production of meaning within that field and which produce SM as kinky sex (eroticized misogyny, a cult of violence, etc.) in the first place" (196-97). Because the pathologizing trends in media reach more people than the most current psychological or medical research, most people believe that sadomasochistic sexual desires are the result of a personal sickness, or, more troublingly, an indicator of a tendency towards violence and abuse. It is my hope that eventually self-representation and research on BDSM that emphasizes the subjugated knowledges of

kinksters will begin to penetrate mainstream consciousness and replace stereotyping and intolerance.

Before proceeding with more theoretical concerns, I would like to address some relevant aesthetics and practices of BDSM in order to give a clearer picture of what types of behaviour might be called kinky. The intensity levels in BDSM vary. Some of the practices in BDSM may seem like only slightly exaggerated scenarios, some rely on breaking taboos, and some are riskier than others. The most risky or controversial BDSM activities are called edge play, indicating that these practices push against the edges of safety or acceptability. The edge, particularly of acceptability, is a subjective concept. What seems fine to one practitioner may be too intense, for whatever reason, for another. Some kinksters would exclude scenes that other self-identified kinksters enjoy from their definition of BDSM. For example, Downing writes about how some communities exclude erotic asphyxiation from acceptable practice over concerns that it is neither safe nor sane enough ("Beyond Safety" 127-33). It bears repeating that there is no one BDSM community, and that there can be no definitive list of what BDSM is, or is not. Having said this, I will attempt to give a rough sketch of the characteristics of BDSM practices.

The essential elements of BDSM are fantasy and power exchange. Every activity that comes under the BDSM umbrella contains one, and usually both, of these qualities. Califia writes, "[t]he key word to understanding S/M is *fantasy*… The S/M subculture is a theatre in which sexual dramas can be acted out and appreciated" (*Public Sex* 168, italics in original). Those sexual dramas often revolve around power exchange—whether the reversal or exaggeration of real world dynamics, or the sharing of power through giving or receiving sensation. It may seem strange that I have left what many people associate first with sadomasochism, that is, pain, out of the essential components of BDSM activities; however, not all BDSM activities actually involve pain, or what kinksters sometimes call sensation play. Age

play and pet play, two large subcategories of BDSM, do not necessarily involve pain at all, and neither do things essential to the popular conception of BDSM, like bondage or humiliation. Power dynamics and some fantasy structure, however, are present in every scene.

The fantasy element of BDSM is often called roleplaying.[46] Roleplaying in BDSM can cover many possibilities. At the most basic level, most scenes involve roleplay of a "top" and a "bottom."[47] A top is the dominant player; he or she would most often give orders or sensation. A bottom is the one receiving sensation, likely the submissive partner.[48] The names of roles are important. Top and bottom are relatively generic terms, and may indicate that the partners focus on sensation play. As the shortened forms of dominant and submissive, "Dom" and "sub" indicate an element of power exchange between the couple. The convention of capitalizing Dom but not sub is part of the acting out of the power dynamic between the two positions. The most extreme iteration of the top and bottom is the "master" and "slave"; in these roles, the power exchange may be more overt, and involve more humiliation. Some bottoms choose to identify as slaves to indicate their willingness to undergo intense treatment at the hands of a master. Many practitioners express a preference for one role or the other, but there are also some practitioners who are "switches," who enjoy playing either the dominant or the submissive role.[49] Roleplaying can involve very specific historical material or persons, fiction, a player's life, or more fantastic inspiration.

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[46] Some references to roleplaying would not have BDSM in mind at all. Stereotypes such as the sexy French maid costume exist in the mainstream as only slightly adventurous sex, and most people probably would not associate such light fantasy with sadomasochism.

[47] I use the singular for simplicity's sake, but of course a scene could have more than two participants, and therefore multiple tops or bottoms.

[48] Generally, kinksters play these roles for the duration of a scene. Some established couples, however, practice BDSM "24/7", meaning they rarely drop their assigned roles, even throughout the course of their daily lives.

[49] I will revisit the concept of switching in my chapter on Chaucer's Wife of Bath.

Beyond the basic roles, some kinksters' fetishes involve specific roleplaying scenarios. Age play, for example, involves a person, generally a bottom, playing as if he or she were younger than his or her actual age, sometimes as a teenager or child. Some age players are diaper fetishists as well, and play as infants or toddlers. These scenarios draw on the pleasure of relinquishing responsibility, or the fun of engaging in child-like play. Age play often crosses over with daddy/daughter play, and more general incest play. For many, incest play is edge play because of the powerful and possibly traumatic taboos it draws from. Likewise, rape play is one of the more controversial forms of roleplaying, even within BDSM communities.[50] Pet play is another category of roleplaying in BDSM. In this type of scene, one practitioner plays the role of an animal of some kind (the most popular are horse, dog,[51] and cat) and the top plays the role of that animal's owner or caretaker. Pet play allows the pet to relinquish responsibility; pet players often specifically enjoy being cared for and shown physical affection, or being trained through disciplinary action to perform in certain ways. Roleplaying fantasy scenarios also involve the second foundational element of BDSM, power exchange, because all interactions involve power dynamics.

The fantasy and performance elements and the nomenclature of roleplaying encourage considering BDSM as play. One way to do so is to consider some of the first theory on play by Johann Huizinga. Huizinga defines the elements of play:

> Play is a voluntary activity or occupation executed within certain fixed limits of time and place, according to rules freely accepted but absolutely binding, having its aim in

[50] Rape play is a concept I will explore in more detail throughout this dissertation, particularly in the chapters on *Sir Gowther* and the *Wife of Bath's Prologue and Tale*.
[51] Playing as a dog, or puppy play, is a concept I discuss in my next chapter in relation to *Sir Gowther*.

> itself and accompanied by a feeling of tension, joy, and the consciousness that it is "different" from "ordinary life." (28)

Huizinga is a medievalist, and his book argues that modern society is not as playful as other eras, but I would argue that he may not have been looking in the right place. BDSM fits each of the elements of play that Huizinga identifies: the focus on consent makes certain it is voluntary activity; BDSM is executed within certain limits of time and place, such as at parties or in private fixed scenes; the negotiation of limits in BDSM is both freely accepted and absolutely binding; and, finally, the aim of BDSM builds feelings of joy, erotic tension, and escape from everyday life. Furthermore, Huizinga asserts that although play itself is temporary, it creates lasting communities:

> A play community generally tends to become permanent even after the game is over… the feeling of being 'apart together' in an exceptional situation, of sharing something important, of mutually withdrawing from the rest of the world and rejecting the usual norms, retains its magic beyond the duration of the individual game. (12)

The BDSM community arises from sexual play, but for many practitioners becomes a permanent social community. In cases where kinksters feel they cannot be completely honest with people about their sexual identities, the bonds they form with other kinksters can be especially significant.

Finally, the centrality of performance and play in kink confirm the rightful separation of BDSM from actual violence. As Huizinga stresses, play relies on a separation from "ordinary life," and the practitioner's consciousness that that separation exists. One difference between ordinary life and BDSM play is the significance of physical acts which in the former are violence but which in the latter are not. Distinguishing between violence and BDSM is crucial for practitioners. Hoople provides a clear theoretical basis for such distinction. He argues that BDSM

neither replicates nor simulates violence: it is not a straightforward replication of violence, but the physical impacts are real so it is also not a simulation. Instead, Hoople suggests, BDSM reiterates violence through queer performativity (208). According to Butler, "reiterations are never simply replicas of the same" (*Bodies That Matter* 226). The fact of performance creates a citation of an original action, but cannot perfectly reproduce that action, even if that is the goal of the performance. In the case of a queer performativity, the citation of a heteropatriarchal practice creates a "chain of historicity" and "at once marks the *limits* of agency and its most *enabling conditions*" (*Bodies That Matter* 228, italics in original). In other words, the queer performance of an act or relationship, which may be purposefully "twisted" (228), will not only recall the original, but also suggest the flaws of that original. As Hoople puts it,

> queer performances are misarticulations or, if I may be allowed a pun, "malappropriations" of heteropatriarchal norms which pervert the normalizing aims of hetero-patriarchal relations of power, thus operating, even if only in a limited, site-specific way, to undermine these relations by exposing their contingency. (209)

To illustrate how queer performativity functions in BDSM, Hoople gives the example of patriarchal relations. He argues that although BDSM appears to replicate those relations, the difference between the original and the queer performance through BDSM is that in BDSM the attributes of the roles are "structurally imposed rather than essential characteristics of the persons who occupy these roles" (209-10). As a kind of queer performativity, BDSM reiterates acts of violence: it at once cites an actual occurrence of violence and undermines the normalcy of violence by making it into performance and pleasure.

A key difference between BDSM and other sexual encounters is that the power exchange between kinksters is acknowledged; it is part of the appeal of a kinky sexual encounter. There is often some element of fantasy to power exchange, since this consensual activity can rely on the

fantasy that the decisions to exchange power are coercive, or on the unequal power dynamics between the roles the kinksters assume in play. For example, a bottom might be tied up in the fantasy of an interrogation scene. Fantasy and power exchange work together in most scenarios that fall under the BDSM rubric.

BDSM explicitly eroticizes power relations.[52] In an interview for the collection *Against Sadomasochism*, Audre Lorde explains why she does not support sadomasochistic sex: she says, "[i]n the same way rape is not about sex, s/m is not about sex but about how we use power" (70). The separation of sex and power, or the association of sex that does not separate itself from power as perversion, is a common feature of the arguments of feminists who are opposed to BDSM. On the other hand, practitioners of BDSM assert that it is precisely the acknowledgment (or creation through fantasy) of power dynamics that gives kink such an erotic charge. Susan Farr's "The Art of Discipline: Creating Erotic Dramas of Play and Power," for example, is an essay that considers the importance of power in building emotional intimacy and trust in kinky relationships. As I will address further below in reference to consent, though scenes may be based on the pretense of strict hierarchy, power in BDSM is a process of exchange, where both players share power. As Robin Bauer puts it, kink employs a model of "power-with rather than power-over" (*Queer BDSM* 176).[53] The explicit role of power in kinky sexuality has been a point

[52] There are some movements in kinky communities to focus on power rather than pain and to identify not as sadists or masochists involved in BDSM, but without fixed labels as participants in Erotic Power Exchange (EPE). Landridge and Butt argue that the attempt to reframe BDSM as EPE speaks to the desire for sexual citizenship and a more dynamic community, but also to conservatism within the broader community because of the desire to desexualize the practices.
[53] Bauer's *Queer BDSM* is an excellent resource for academic theory about BDSM by a community member. Bauer's work is particularly concerned with dyke+queer BDSM communities, communities that generally include non-heterosexual women (including transwomen), and people of any gender identity except cismale (16). Bauer feels that these communities, because of their rarity, have avoided some of the commercialization affecting heterosexual and gay BDSM groups, and he finds that they are more committed to a criticism of hierarchy and valuing of difference (23-24).

of contention among feminists, but BDSM's direct engagement with issues of power and control agrees with other theories of sexuality, and is an area of great subversive potential when bringing kink theory to bear on literature.

Theorists of sexuality have been critical of the separation of power and sex. Foucault's work on a genealogy of sexuality provides a prominent example of connecting sex and power. In *The History of Sexuality Volume One* Foucault explores both historical and discursive aspects of sexuality. His focus is on the privatization and supposed repression of sexuality that coincides with the emergence of capitalism, and the resultant medicalization of sex, particularly non-normative sex.[54] Foucault sees power as a relational structure, with many points of origin, not a simple vertical exchange. He foregrounds the importance of sex to multiple power relations: "[sex] appears rather as a dense transfer point for relations of power: between men and women, young people and old people, parents and offspring, teachers and students, priests and laity, an administration and a population" (103). He also sees the link between power and pleasure as a spiral resulting from an increase in investigation of sex:

> The medical examination, the psychiatric investigation, the pedagogical report, and family controls may have the over-all and apparent objective of saying no to all wayward or unproductive sexualities, but the fact is that they function as mechanisms with a double impetus: pleasure and power. The pleasure that comes of exercising a power that questions, monitors, watches, spies, searches out, palpates, brings to light; and on the other hand, the pleasure that kindles at having to evade this power, flee from it, fool it, or travesty it. The power that lets itself be invaded by the pleasure it is

[54] "Normative" in this case refers to white, heterosexual, monogamous, marital, procreative sexual relations. Foucault's analysis of the formation of power around sex is concentrated on white Europeans in the nineteenth century.

> pursuing; and opposite it, power asserting itself in the pleasure of showing off, scandalizing, or resisting. […] These attractions, these evasions, these circular incitements have traced around bodies and sexes, not boundaries not to be crossed, but *perpetual spirals of power and pleasure*. (45, italics in original)

I see a link between what Foucault identifies as the pleasure/power spiral and the development of BDSM in particular, which erotizes the power exchange and sometimes relies on the erotic charge of breaking taboos. Furthermore, Foucault writes about the concept of "a knowledge-pleasure" (77), which comes from a process of gaining knowledge about pleasure and taking pleasure in that knowledge itself. BDSM communities place great value on skill development and education about kink; the enjoyment practitioners get from this learning gives an example of Foucault's concept.

Queer theorists in particular reject the idea that sex can exist independent of power dynamics. Leo Bersani criticizes radical feminists like MacKinnon and Dworkin because of their "pastoralizing, redemptive intentions" to disassociate acceptable sex from power (215). With specific reference to queer BDSM, Bauer rejects what he calls "the ideal of harmonic sex" (*Queer BDSM* 3), which he sees as key tool of enforcing heteronormativity:

> The ideal sexual interaction has been increasingly constructed as occurring between egalitarian partners whose intimate bodily interactions are devoid of power dynamics and anything that may be thought of as unpleasant emotions or sensations, such as pain, humiliation, shame or discomfort. The ideal of harmonic sex is closely related to the liberal construction of the sexual subject as a subset of the construction of the private sphere as a space remote from socio-political life. Therefore, the ideal of harmonic sex serves to obscure the fact that the sexual, constructed as the most intimate and private

> sphere of interaction, is not distinct from socio-political contexts, but is infused with power dynamics just like every other area of life. (*Queer BDSM* 3)

The problem with a conception of sexuality that does not account for power relations is that it reinforces ideals that rely on assumptions of all participants in sex having the same levels of social and political privilege in all categories; this ideal, however, ignores a good deal of the lived realities of sexual experience.

BDSM encourages an understanding of power as omnipresent, neutral, and productive.[55] First, kink acknowledges the ubiquity of power relations, and then exploits that ubiquity for erotic effect. As Bauer reports, "[his] interview partners considered power to be intrinsic to the whole of the social fabric, including sexuality" (*Queer BDSM* 192).[56] Second, kink requires a neutral view of power—that is, a view that does not assume that power is repressive. Finally, while power is neutral in itself, in BDSM, power is positive and productive because it is part of what creates desire between practitioners. Instead of closing down possibilities, it opens up many possible fantasies, roles, and activities. Bauer argues that power in kinky scenarios may even be redemptive; that is, it may take power that has been "contaminated" by oppression and domination, and rehabilitate it "by deflecting it from its original purpose of disconnecting bodies in hatred and prejudice" and instead infusing it "with erotic value" thereby turning power "into a means to establish intense intimacies" (*Queer BDSM* 175). Ultimately a kinky approach to power involves acknowledging the ways that power informs all relationships. It is in its handling of power that kink has the greatest ability to be subversive of sexual norms; its straightforward

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[55] For more on power and BDSM, see Bauer, *Queer BDSM* 173-193. For more on feminist conceptions of power as relational and productive, see Davina Cooper.

[56] Bauer also concludes that dyke+queer BDSM in particular opens up possibilities for transfigurations of power, or micropolitical interventions, because of the ways that these communities value "practices and positions of little or no social value or recognition" (*Queer BDSM* 192).

acceptance of the presence of power dynamics in sexual relationships challenges the hiding of those same dynamics in other relationships.

Another practice associated with BDSM that highlights power or a lack thereof is the one indicated by the B, namely bondage, a collective term for many different activities in the community. Kinksters can practice bondage with a partner, either restricting or being restricted, or they can practice bondage alone, restricting themselves. Bondage can be done with a wide variety of material; the most common is rope. Rope tops, or riggers, use a variety of natural and synthetic ropes to create bondage that is both functional and also artistic, crafting intricate designs against the canvas of the bottom's restrained body. Some advanced riggers and rope bottoms practice suspension bondage, where the bottom is tied through a beam or hook system and lifted from the ground in a rope harness. Bondage enthusiasts can find the practice meditative, ironically freeing, and artistic. Other than rope bondage, kinksters practice bondage with items as common as plastic wrap and as complicated as expensive custom latex vacuum beds. Some bondage incorporates pain through tight binding or particularly rough ropes against the skin.

As one might expect given the prominence of fantasy in scenes, the look of BDSM can be quite important; the appeal of distinct aesthetics to many kinksters can influence space, tools, dress, and marks on the body. Mainstream representations of BDSM often stress a homogenous, stereotypical look (e.g. leather, corsets, whips, masks) for all scenes involving kink;[57] however, while some kinksters do enjoy these traditional aesthetics, others embrace different styles, and the look of the scene reflects the heterogeneity of communities and practitioners. Kinky

[57] Catherine Scott writes that these stereotypical looks intersect with dominant masculine assumptions of femininity and mainstream conceptions of attractiveness (20).

communities often host public parties,[58] where a large number of practitioners come to socialize and do scenes. The spaces in which such parties are held may be permanent or rented, and are often called dungeons.[59] Dedicated spaces may be decorated to reflect that community's idea of the look of BDSM with paint, fabric, or wall fixtures. Even in rented spaces, the presence of BDSM apparatuses can affect the look of the room; these might include spanking benches, padded areas for grappling, St. Andrews crosses, or rigging for suspension. The display of tools might also contribute to the aesthetic appeal of a space for kinksters, whether at a party or in their own homes. Tools are functional, but can also be a part of the aesthetic of a scene. Though there are kinksters who use repurposed everyday objects in their scenes, it is more common for tools to be chosen for their form as well as their function; as Weiss observes, it is possible to spend a lot of money on acquiring the right equipment for BDSM (*Techniques of Pleasure* 104-11). Some kinksters develop almost a fetish for the tools themselves.

The aesthetics of BDSM dress range from stereotypical black leather to lingerie to period or role-specific costumes to simple black jeans and t-shirts. Some types of play or fetishes even require particular items of clothing or accessories: a latex fetishist will need latex to wear; a boot-blacking scene requires leather boots to shine; a diaper fetishist will wear diapers. Perhaps the most importance accessory to BDSM culture is the collar. Collars might be worn for scene-specific purposes, as in pet play, or they might be worn to signal submissive status. Giving a submissive a collar can be the dominant partner's way of rewarding progress in training, or indicate the beginning of a formal relationship (Wiseman 260-262). Huizinga writes that the

[58] The parties are technically open to the public, but the attendees would almost certainly be practitioners themselves, making it a limited type of public. Bauer calls the spaces of BDSM "semi-contained" (*Queer BDSM* 61). The semi-contained space allows exploration and play, but is not private (which assumes any sex is private and separate from socio-political context). It may be an alternate reality (61-65).

[59] The term for me evokes an association with the medieval dungeon, a space of confinement, and perhaps torture.

difference of play from ordinary life is "most vividly expressed in 'dressing' up" (13). In his understanding of play, the mask or disguise helps a person play a role and even to better imagine actually being someone else (13). Easton and Hardy's reflections on costume in kink parallel Huizinga's ideas; they write,

> Costumes change your awareness of who you are. When you wear something out of the ordinary you get to be someone out of the ordinary… [costume influences] how other people will see you, respond to you, and treat you. So if you want to make your fantasies come real, dress yourself up in your favourite fantasy, and watch everybody else relate to your fantasy self. (131)

Costume can be an outward, visible manifestation of the character or role a kinkster wants to play; dress reflects fantasy in BDSM.

Finally, the aesthetics of BDSM affect not just surroundings and clothing, but also the body itself. Piercings and tattoos may be part of a practitioner's personal aesthetic, and both piercing and tattooing are also activities performed as part of scenes. Branding is another activity that involves both pain and marking the body. Particular piercings, tattoos, or brands may show someone's kink or indicate his or her relationship status. For example, in the popular sadomasochistic novel *Story of O*, the protagonist is both branded and pierced in ways that indicate her owner's identity. Aside from processes primarily intended to leave certain marks on the body, BDSM celebrates marks as evidence of a primary activity; for example, the bruises that result from a beating or the marks from a whipping are visual evidence of what kinds of impact play a bottom enjoys. Being heavily marked can be a source of pride for the bottom since it serves as proof of his or her ability to take pain. In *The Loving Dominant*, for example, Warren and Warren write that some bottoms wear bruises "as badges of pride" (222).

The eroticization of pain is often one of the most baffling aspects of BDSM to outsiders, but physical pain is an element of many, though not all, BDSM activities. Also called sensation play, pain play is a prominent component of many kinksters' interests. Whipping, spanking, hitting, flogging, and slapping are all forms of impact play, where pain comes from the impact of the top's body or a tool wielded by the top on the bottom's body. Pain in BDSM can also come from knife play or cutting, play piercing, or tattooing in scene. Elaine Scarry argues that pain is necessarily negative:

> The first, the most essential, aspect of pain is its sheer aversiveness… the very content of pain is itself negation. If to the person in pain it does not feel averse, and if it does in turn elicit in that person aversive feeling toward it, it is not in either philosophical discussions or psychological definitions of it called pain. (52)

However, in BDSM, pain does not cause such feelings of aversion; rather, the masochist seeks out pain. As I shall argue below, based on other aspects of Scarry's arguments about pain and its stimulation of power and transference, in BDSM pain is still pain, and therefore kink challenges the accepted definitions of pain. Though there is no definitive explanation for the appeal of giving or receiving different kinds of pain to sadists or masochists, there are many possible explanations for an individual's attraction to pain, from the physiological to the cultural, which may work alone or in tandem.

If a man enjoys intercourse with women, no one asks him why; he is assumed to be experiencing normal enjoyment from the stimulation of nerve endings in the penis. For masochists, certain types of what most people would call pain simply stimulate their nerve endings in a pleasurable way.[60] Easton and Hardy theorize that endorphins "change the way we perceive pain so that the experience really becomes pleasurable" (116). They describe the feeling

[60] For more on the physiology of pain in masochism, see Sack and Miller or Mains.

of endorphin release as pain transforms into pleasure: "many bottoms go down with a scream and come up giggling" (118). Pain may also be a cathartic experience that helps release strong emotions (116-17). For masochists, the endorphins of "a good pain scene" result in "a transcendent and blissful high that persists for at least an hour or two" (125). Easton and Hardy's explanation of the pleasures of pain draws on both physiological and psychological elements.

The experience of pain is subjective. Masochists often refer to "good pain" versus "bad pain"; they do not experience stubbing a toe as pleasurable, but may experience arousal from a flogging administered under certain negotiated circumstances. The circumstances of the pain are as important as the physical aspect of an experience; a flogging administered after negotiation and in a safe space is different from a flogging as part of an interrogation. Marla Carlson's research on pain for her book on the relationship between art and drama in medieval and modern times confirms the importance of an emotional context to the experience of pain: "[s]cience no longer ties pain to its stimulus but, instead, defines it as a subjective and emotional experience…. Just as consciousness is not isolated from the material body, pain is never merely physical; that is, it never exists in isolation from the mind" (15-16). Bob Flanagan, who called himself a "supermasochist," felt that the consensual pain of his masochism allowed him to overcome the lack of medical control he had over his body due to suffering from Cystic Fibrosis.[61] In his particular context, the pain of BDSM contrasted with the pain of his illness. A psychoanalytic perspective on masochism might conclude that pain focuses subjectivity on the fact of its sentience and therefore stresses embodiment. Fradenburg takes such a perspective in her analysis

[61] For more on Flanagan, see Juno and Vale, or Reynolds. Flanagan will inform part of my reading of *The Book of Margery Kempe*. Dawn Reynolds uses Flanagan's story as an example of how BDSM might intersect with disability and allow new possibilities for the sexuality of disabled people because BDSM is more readily able to accommodate different body types, is expressly concerned with pre-negotiation of limits and needs, and already plays with the boundaries of pain and pleasure.

of the *jouissance* of submission in relation to chivalric modes of enjoyment (*Sacrifice Your Love*). While the masochist experiences what many would classify as negative sensation, he or she can, in specific circumstances, make pain pleasurable.

The importance of context in BDSM can be felt on a cultural level as well as on a personal one. One appeal of masochism is to condition and control the body, to push one's physical limits. Bauer writes that his research on dyke+queer BDSM shows that kink can be

> about pushing one's limits and changing one's relationship to the boundaries one engages with, ultimately leading to a transformation of the self, to processes of resubjectification. I therefore understand dyke+queer BDSM not simply as playing with edges, but as going further to desire vulnerability and to renegotiate bodies as boundary projects through exploring and pushing limits. (*Queer BDSM* 163)

Similarly, Landridge observes, "pain play appears to involve a way of experiencing the limits of one's material-semiotic subjectivity through the exploration of agency and subjection" (102). The transformation of the body through pushing physical limits is comparable to the progress that an athlete makes in a sport. The athlete may even also undergo resubjectification as their self-impression changes based on their success.

However, sport and masochism have quite divergent cultural values in the modern West. Andrea Beckmann argues that pain can be culturally produced, or learned. She believes that the lived body[62] of the kinky person allows for a fluidity of pain experience. Beckmann points out that while people question the motivations of masochists, many painful experiences, such as plastic surgery or weight-lifting, are culturally sanctioned (11-62). The popular expression "no

[62] Beckmann takes the concept from Merleau-Ponty. The lived body is that which transcends the dualism of a body/mind divide. The lived body centers on being in the world and lived experience, as well as intentionality. The lived body acknowledges that place of experience in constructing reality and does not subjugate people's own understandings of their lives to biological, sociological, or psychological interpretations (4).

pain, no gain" values pain as a process of conditioning. In normative culture, then, pain can have both positive and negative connotations. Maneesha Deckha argues that BDSM can be productively understood as its own culture, and suggests the benefits of approaching BDSM as culture through a postcolonial feminist heuristic. This "critical yet respectful" method, which "affirms the situatedness and embodiedness of all knowledge making" (134), provides a valuable intervention in feminist critiques of BDSM. If feminists understand kink as culture, they may be able to approach it in a more balanced way and give fair weight to insider perspective, as contemporary feminist ethnography strives to do.[63] Cultural context is as important to the experience of pain as is the situational context.

Many masochists and theorists stress the potential mental benefits of undergoing painful experiences in a kinky context.[64] In such cases, both physical and mental pain may come into play. Mental pain in BDSM is often called humiliation, and might involve a bottom performing degrading tasks or being insulted. First, theorists like Landridge and Bauer have approached how pain functions phenomenologically in BDSM. Landridge argues that BDSM provides particularly intense opportunities for bodily fusion; he asserts that the pain of BDSM, which communicates without language, can provide comfort against the realization of the sense of otherness described by Heidegger as our moments of realization that we are fundamentally separate from other people (98-101). Sara Ahmed argues that pain turns the body in on itself, and that pleasure opens bodies to each other, but Bauer points out that BDSM complicates the pain/pleasure binary and therefore makes it possible that pain might also make bodies open to each other (*Queer BDSM* 165-166).

[63] Some feminists who already view kink as a violent manifestation of patriarchal culture will of course not be persuaded by this approach.
[64] I discuss the potential problems of perceiving these benefits below in my section on community issues.

The intense connection between practitioners is one aspect of the non-physical appeal of pain play in BDSM.

According to kinksters, another way that the experience of pain is beneficial is in the therapeutic possibilities of pain. These benefits can be both in the reworking of past trauma or in the pursuit of altered states of consciousness. Many kinksters cite the ability of BDSM play to aid them in dealing with past negative experiences, most often of sexual harassment or assault. For example, Juicy Lucy, a contributor to Samois' *Coming to Power*, writes that the experiences she has with kink help her to defuse "the terror and powerlessness of the rapes & beatings" she has experienced (34). Bauer concludes that for his interview partners,

> The specific context of BDSM functioned to reinscribe past experiences with new emotional meanings and memories, and, therefore, transformed the meaning of the earlier events in retrospect. BDSM was not simply repetitive but transformative; the repetitions served to shift the meanings of past experiences and, therefore, brought about therapeutic change. (*Queer BDSM* 170)

The acting out of past trauma in the new, safe context of BDSM can help survivors regain feelings of control. Through kinky reenactment, the fear, anger, or shame a person feels about a past sexual experience can be replaced with arousal and satisfaction.

In many religions and cultures, discomfort or pain functions as a gateway to altered states of consciousness, and practitioners of BDSM also report that pain play can bring on such alterations.[65] A common community way to refer to the altered state achieved through masochism is "subspace." Powls and Davies report that "pain within SM encounters may function as a means of blotting out higher order thought" (229), which explains subspace from a physiological

[65] The intersection of pain and religion will be quite relevant to my study of *The Book of Margery Kempe*.

perspective. Bauer argues,

> The intense stimulation of the body may clear the head and enable one to stay completely focused in the moment. Many spiritual practices, such as meditation, are also aimed at reaching this state of being. It may, therefore, not be surprising that, for many interview partners, BDSM sessions turned into spiritual experiences, and some BDSM sessions were planned with the intent to enter a spiritual space. (*Queer BDSM* 167)

Bauer's observations are backed up not only by his own interviews of kinksters, but also by the works of masochists like Easton and Hardy, who include the chapter "S/M and Spirituality" in *The New Bottoming Book*, which discusses bottoming as a ritual path to transcendence and ecstasy, and Raven Kaldera's *Dark Moon Rising: Pagan BDSM and the Ordeal Path*, which proposes a new subset of paganism combining neopaganism and BDSM. The altered consciousness some kinksters experience through masochism provides great incentive for pain play in BDSM.

Many of my points in this section have focused on the masochist, that is, on the benefits or appeal of being on the receiving end of pain; however, the sadist is also a necessary component of pain play. Warren reports that his interest in domination and sadism comes both from his desire to provide more intense pleasure to his partner and from his desire to be in control of events. Paradoxically, many sadists' explanations of the appeal of sadism is that it allows them to provide greater pleasure to a partner. For example, when Califia writes a detailed explanation of how he prefers to play with someone for the first time, he explains most of the process by detailing how or why the masochist will take pleasure from his actions (*Public Sex* 159-63). For the sadist as much as for the masochist, context is key, and there is a great difference between popular representations of the demented sadist and the first hand accounts of kinksters like Califia.

Academic theory on masochism far outweighs theory on sadism. Even community literature about BDSM is less likely to explore the motivations of the sadist in depth. This area is certainly one that should benefit from future research. It may be that it is simply harder to understand the desire to be hurt than the desire to hurt someone. It may also be the case that an assumption of the appeal of power underlies this relative lack of theorization. Bersani argues that phallocentrism relies on a denial of the value of powerlessness (217). In other words, the normative sexual ideals that derive from patriarchal heteronormativity depend on the assumption that everyone would prefer to be in control and to have power. If people generally assume that being in control is a desirable state, then it follows that explaining the desirability of being a top or sadist in a kinky scenario would seem unnecessary. Furthermore, sadism is popularly considered to be a masculine activity because of the legacy of psychopathological explanations that characterize sadism as an excess of masculinity, and it may not seem unusual for someone to want to be masculine.

Elaine Scarry's *The Body in Pain: The Making and Unmaking of the World*, may be the best-known attempt to understand pain in academic circles. Her analysis of pain as an unshareable, language-shattering experience attempts to explain the role of pain in experiences of torture and war as processes of unmaking, which are in opposition to processes of creation or making. As I note above, Scarry would not be likely to understand the feeling a masochist enjoys as pain because it is not a negative experience. However, I would argue that the similarities and differences between her theory of pain and the way BDSM understands pain show that pain in a kinky context is still pain in a way that challenges traditional understandings of the term.

First, Scarry writes about the ways pain impacts the relationship between interrogator and victim in the context of torture. She argues that torture converts pain into a "spectacle of power"

(27).[66] Because physical pain is "incontestably real" it conveys a sense of reality on the power that causes it. As an agent of that illusory power, the torturer feels some benefit from inflicting pain on his victim. The sadist too feels and enjoys power over the bottom. The crucial difference between the two is consent. The bottom in BDSM has much more control than the victim of torture. Scarry argues that torture creates a "colossal" distance between the realities of the torturer and the victim because the victim experiences annihilating negation whereas the torturer experiences an absence of negation (36). The torturer cannot understand the prisoner as a human being (44). The process of distancing between the torturer and victim is in stark contrast to the relationship between a sadist and bottom. The sadist is responsible for the bottom's well-being, and remains attentive to his or her needs throughout a scene. As I mention above, Bauer theorizes that the intensity of kink involving pain provides opportunities for deep connections between the sadist and his partner.

Landridge responds to Scarry's theories on the body in pain and uses them "as a heuristic for better understanding the appeal of sadomasochistic pain play" (95). In particular, he is interested in how the double agency, dissolution of boundaries between inside and outside, and the disintegration of self that Scarry articulates as part of the structure of torture also explain the appeal of pain play (95). His assessment of the expanding of the world of the torturer in relation to the disintegration of the prisoner's consciousness is helpful here, especially as it provides another possible reason for the appeal of topping:

> In torture and also in S/M pain play, the tendency of pain to destroy speech is enacted in obvious and exaggerated form. Through control of power—consensually agreed in S/M—the top can control the slow and steady destruction of language…. The subject of

[66] Scarry's reflections on the performative nature of torture also connect her work to BDSM, which is another type of performance of pain.

> these acts "gains" the loss of agency…. With this comes the possibility of total but temporary destruction of consciousness as pain obliterates complex thought and emotion…. The world of the tortured is thus closed down—disintegrated—such that the limits of peace and solitude can be found and/or the thrill of exposure and merging of self and world. The world of the torturer inhabits this space between their still bounded self and the other, feeling the full force of the power and control that this entails, holding the other's consciousness—their world—in their hands. This is likely to be part of the appeal of this role for the torturer, who may come to enjoy the sense of power (and responsibility) that results from living out the world of two people as one. (98)

Landridge's articulation of the similarities and differences between acts of torture and pain play demonstrate once again the crucial importance of consent and intention in making pain pleasurable.

Scarry also writes about the role of pain and altered consciousness: "[p]hysical pain is able to obliterate psychological pain because it obliterates all psychological content" (34). Her focus is on explaining how the victim of torture experiences a disintegration of self which leads to confession, but Scarry's more negative assessment of pain in this non-consensual context does resonate with kinksters' experiences of masochistic transcendence. Sessions of torture and BDSM scenes are two very different situations, and yet the impacts of pain in each situation are similar enough to be recognizable as negative and positive manifestations of the same feeling. Overall, accepting that BDSM can make pain pleasurable involves expanding a traditional understanding of pain as a purely aversive feeling.

Issues in Community and Theory

In the past twenty years, certain issues have remained at the forefront of discussion about BDSM, both in theoretical and medico-psychological writing, and in community-produced writing.[67] I will offer some background and reflection on five of those major issues in this section: consent, the therapeutic value of BDSM, racism in BDSM, BDSM as identity, and the subversive potential of BDSM.

Consent

Consent is one of the most important and contentious topics relating to BDSM.[68] In "Thinking Sex," Rubin writes, "within the law, consent is a privilege enjoyed only by those who engage in the highest-status sexual behavior" (40). Kinksters do not enjoy the legal privilege of consent. As I touched on earlier with regards to anti-SM feminist writing, one issue about consent in BDSM is whether or not such a thing can exist at all; those who are opposed to BDSM would argue that in a society so prescribed by patriarchal and capitalist values, a woman's consent to masochism, or even sometimes heterosexual sex in general, may not truly be freely given. It is not only anti-SM feminists that question the legitimacy of consent in BDSM; some authors who write about kink from a sex-critical perspective, like Margot Weiss, also question a person's ability to truly consent to the power dynamics of a Dom/sub relationship.[69]

[67] There is of course some overlap between those categories.
[68] Since medieval ideas about consent differ so significantly from modern understandings, I will be discussing consent again from that perspective later in this chapter.
[69] Neoliberalism relies on the importance of individual choice and freedom. Many theorists, however, question the ability of people living in restrictive societies to make truly free choices. In *Techniques of Pleasure*, Weiss critiques kinksters who defend their right to practice BDSM by referring to the practice as an individual choice that doesn't affect anyone else because in order to make those individual choices, kinksters have to have the benefits of certain privileges. Weiss is especially concerned with the way the neoliberal narratives of choice erase consideration of race and torture in BDSM communities.

The legal system has certainly rejected the idea that a person practicing BDSM has the ability to consent. Works by a number of scholars show that, in general, the courts in North America and in the United Kingdom dismiss a defense of consent by the partner of someone being prosecuted for inflicting bodily harm because of presumed mental instability. In his article "Conflicting Visions: SM, Feminism, and the Law: A Problem of Representation," Terry Hoople argues that because of a lack of accepted self-representation by practitioners, legal knowledge about BDSM rests on judges' presuppositions and prejudices about what kink means. A judge's knowledge of BDSM is most often based on negative stereotypes, which allows him or her to disregard the defense of consent, because kinksters are "sick" or possess false consciousness about themselves, and so are always being coerced on some level.

A kinkster's inability to consent in a legal context can have wide-reaching implications, beyond even criminal charges and prison time.[70] In one case documented by Marty Klein and Charles Moser, for example, a woman's admitting to being a masochist led to her losing her alimony and some of her custody rights to her eleven-year-old son. The woman had to enroll in domestic abuse counseling in order to keep any custody at all, and her long-time partner, with whom the boy testified he felt more comfortable than with his biological father, was no longer allowed to be present in the home at the same time as the defendant's son, because the court determined that his being a sadist might also mean that he was a pedophile, or was likely to become one. In this case, which was not originally about sadomasochism at all, this woman's masochism was taken to be domestic abuse, in spite of her assertion that it was consensual, and her partner's sadism was seen as a gateway to child molestation.

[70] Criminal charges certainly happen, and kinksters have done prison time for consensual activity. One of the most famous examples is R. v. Brown, a British case in which, though no participant ever went to the police, sixteen men involved in consensual same-sex kink were charged with various degrees of assault. Their sentences ranged from fines to four and a half years in prison (Khan 226-27). For more examples of legal cases involving BDSM, see Khan 224-303.

Precedent makes kinksters strangers to legal consent; nevertheless, consent remains a vital component of BDSM. Despite the fact that consent will not reliably influence legal proceedings, practitioners emphasize consent because it is what makes BDSM erotic and separates it from abuse or torture. Paradoxically then, though the law does not recognize the consent of a submissive partner, community literature continues to stress the importance of informed and negotiated consent to kinky scenes. Kinky consent is not grounded in the law, but it has a central position in community ethics. Bauer reports that although in most respects his interview partners' definitions of BDSM varied, the one thing every person said was that BDSM must be both erotic and consensual (*Queer BDSM* 61). It is not enough to have implicit consent or boundaries for a scene. Generally, people looking to begin a BDSM encounter will begin with explicit negotiation of what may and may not occur during the encounter.[71] Because of the wide variety and potential risk of BDSM practices, the negotiation of consent can be very detailed. After a section of instructions on how to negotiate, Jay Wiseman's *SM 101* contains an eight-page form for negotiating a first SM encounter; John and Libby Warren's *The Loving Dominant* has an entire chapter about negotiating the first encounter between partners. While rape and non-consensual activity are certainly possible in a BDSM community, as abuse can happen in any sexual or domestic relationship, on the whole kinksters are more open and exact about negotiating consent than vanilla couples,[72] leading to a culture in which consent is ideally enthusiastic and specific rather than implicit and vague.

The safeword, often lampooned in popular culture, is part of the culture of heightened consent in BDSM relationships. In some cases, part of the eroticism of a scene is the appearance

[71] Eventually, partners with experience playing with each other may relax these standards of negotiation.
[72] "Vanilla" is the term kinksters use to describe couples or sexual activities that are not kinky or would not fall under the BDSM umbrella.

of non-consent. In other cases, such as an intense whipping, a bottom may reflexively yell, "stop" without really wanting the whipping to end. A safeword is designed to stop or slow such a scene. Practitioners are especially cautious about negotiation and about stating their commitment to consent when it looks from the outside like they are ignoring those factors. The safeword is a line in the sand in the community. If a safeword is violated, the encounter is no longer a BDSM scene: it is abuse. Committed couples or groups may choose a unique safeword, generally something that would not have reason to come up during a scene, e.g. raspberry, or marshmallow. At large parties, people may simply say the generic, "safeword," to stop a scene. The words "red" for fully halting a scene and "yellow" for slowing down a particular activity are also common.

In BDSM the perceived power dynamic is often very different from the actual power dynamic. In response to the idea that BDSM is only a disguise for abuse, or that submissive partners may be subjected to actions outside of their consent after an initially pleasing encounter, like a slippery slope, kinksters and researchers have sought to correct the idea that a submissive partner has no power in a scene. Practitioners may take the positions of Dom and sub, but the negotiation of boundaries before scenes and the safeword mean that while the fantasy of BDSM is a submissive under the control of a dominant, the reality is that the submissive has control over where the scene goes and when it ends. For example, in a scene involving bondage and impact play, the bottom, tied and being beaten, would appear to be under the control of the top who is doing the beating; however, should anything happen that the bottom does not enjoy, he or she can call the safeword, and the scene would come to an end. If the powerlessness of a submissive or bottom becomes reality, then it is no longer BDSM, but abuse. As a performative sexual practice, BDSM occurs within set limits,[73] and the powerlessness of the bottom is a pleasing illusion.

[73] Recalling Huizinga's elements of play, which I discuss above.

In social hierarchies and power structures, the dynamics of inequality are not so easily reversible, which becomes more obvious in contrast with BDSM. Weinberg argues that the "temporary illusion" of powerlessness that mirrors actual social power structures is what gives kink erotic charge (67). Beckmann asserts that BDSM contrasts power dynamics in society in general by placing control with the submissive partner: the "unconsensual 'conditions of domination' implied in socio-political and cultural structures [are] opposed to the negotiated limits and fluidity of power within consensual 'SM' bodily practices" (125). In a kinky scene, the submissive can stop any activity; in other cases, while the person with less power may protest or manipulate the one who dominates them, activity or practices they do not enjoy will not necessarily cease because they want them to. Kinksters who see play as a way to work through personal trauma also describe themselves as being in control of those scenes, rather than actually victimized.

The articulated power dynamics of BDSM relationships, whether they manipulate or play into existing social structures, mean that control is not taken for granted, and power is not usually given up to a partner unthinkingly. Downing points out that the explicitness of consent in a BDSM relationship can highlight a lack of healthy consent in heteronormative relationships ("Safewording!" 100). When kink makes consent so prominent and ongoing, it can become obvious that "normal" relationships do not enact the same rigorous processes of consent. Feminist scholarship asserts the existence of "rape culture" in patriarchal societies. Rape culture normalizes sexual assault through many tactics, including minimization, victim blaming, denial, and objectification of people as sexual objects. If consent is not a visible part of sexual culture, it is more difficult to prevent non-consensual sex. Rape culture may normalize the idea of implicit consent, that a person dressing a certain way or accepting dinner or gifts implies his or her consent to sexual activity, or the idea that once a person has consented to one activity, like

kissing, he or she must also have consented to another, like intercourse. BDSM negotiations acknowledge the complexity of consent, however, and do not make such assumptions about implicit or escalating consent. The ongoing, negotiated consent practiced in kinky communities can illuminate the deficiencies of consent in other sexual cultures.

Kink's cultural and legal history with consent has been complicated, leading to an increased dialogue on consent and best practice within kink communities. Practitioners often use the term Safe, Sane, and Consensual, abbreviated to SSC, to describe BDSM activity. The term is attributed to David Stein, a self-identified gay slave bondage enthusiast, who first used it in 1983 in his work with Gay Male S/M Activists.[74] The acronym is meant to communicate the nature of good BDSM practice: it is safe, informed by education and experience, with risks identified; it is sane, or practiced in a stable frame of mind; and it is consensual. For a time, SSC would be the first qualification given to BDSM practice on web sites, on forums, in books, or in interviews. The acronym encapsulates a response to misconceptions about BDSM: it is not dangerous, it is not crazy, and it is not abuse. In an essay written in 2002, Stein reflects on coining the term. He writes that safe, sane and consensual was plucked from a much longer statement, and while it has become a slogan, he never meant for it to be one. Stein expresses two worries about his phrase: that it is used to pay lip service to good safety/consent practice, and that it becomes a way to sanitize BDSM by eliminating what may not be sane or safe. Stein intended for the term to differentiate sadomasochism from the popular conception, not to close down its possibilities.

Stein's concerns reflect debate within kink communities on the potential erasure of some BDSM activities by the SSC acronym. Lisa Downing's chapter in *Safe, Sane and Consensual*, a collection of work from varying academic perspectives on BDSM, calls attention to the problems

[74] Gay Male S/M Activists, or GMSMA, was founded in 1980 as a not-for-profit organization for gay males in the New York City area seriously interested in S/M.

of normalization that the SSC system can present. Downing argues that SSC creates stigma around edge play, valorizing some kinks at the expense of others ("Beyond Safety" 126-27). For example, many practitioners say erotic asphyxiation, or breath play, is unsafe, and therefore exclude it from kink; however, those kinksters who play with erotic asphyxiation see the risk as part of the allure of the practice (128-33). Indeed, at least some of the appeal of BDSM to many practitioners is that it is risky, and not entirely safe. Downing suggests that as sadomasochism moves slowly into the mainstream, some internal discourse plays it safe in an attempt to be more palatable, but that this disciplinary discourse endangers BDSM's potential to be truly subversive (134-36). The possibility that SSC may force kinky communities to exclude certain edgy practices leads to community questioning of the usefulness of the acronym.

Many kinksters now prefer to use the phrase Risk Aware Consensual Kink, or RACK, instead of SSC. Kinkster Gary Switch coined RACK in a 1999 post to the TES-Friends listserv because of the limits he saw in SSC: nothing in BDSM is completely safe, and sane is subjective, and may seem to be protesting too much.[75] Switch sees RACK as more confrontational, in that it references kink directly, and more accurately describes BDSM activities (Switch). Many kinksters agree with Switch, and, while SSC is still something of a kink slogan, RACK is now used more often in serious discussions of kink practice and ethics.

BDSM Therapy

Many practitioners cite the therapeutic benefits of BDSM when asked about why they practice it. These benefits may refer to a healing of some kind or of a more general narrative of self-improvement. While several psychological studies have disproven the theory that all sadists and

[75] Both phrases have consent in common, which is also a complex concept, but is, as I discuss above, essential to BDSM.

masochists are the products of molestation or mental illness (e.g. Alison *et al.*, Richters *et al.*, Weijeiser *et al.*), it is also the case that some practitioners have suffered sexual trauma in their pasts. As I discuss above, if a survivor of sexual trauma is also a kinkster, that person might experience the re-enacting of traumatic experiences under controlled circumstances as cathartic: "[m]any practitioners who play with trauma such as rape understand their play as recoding or remaking a traumatic experience into a pleasurable one" (Weiss, *Techniques of Pleasure* 148). The idea that BDSM can be therapeutic creates a direct counter-narrative to the idea that all people who practice BDSM are mentally ill or have been sexually abused. In this formation, rather than resulting from trauma, BDSM provides a remedy for trauma. In other cases, BDSM may be part of a person's quest for self-improvement or spiritual enrichment. Similarly, the idea that BDSM would help someone reach a healthier mental state is also in direct opposition to the idea that BDSM is evidence of a diseased mental state.

However, the presentation of BDSM as a healing process raises some issues. Barker, Gupta, and Iantaffi argue that while healing narratives of BDSM may challenge pathologizing narratives, they also have the potential to create a hierarchy of acceptable sex acts in BDSM, where those acts that are more therapeutic than others are ostensibly better. The therapeutic defense may also reinforce the idea that all BDSM practitioners are damaged in some way (217). The authors also point out that presenting BDSM as useful in this way may imply that if it were not therapeutic, or useful, BDSM would not be acceptable (211-12). Downing argues that as SM becomes more visible in the mainstream, presenting the therapeutic motivation for participation serves as a justification for the practice, and that "[w]hen SM is given a useful social function it ceases to function as a point of resistance and a principle of disruption" ("Beyond Safety" 128). These dangers find parallels in the phenomenon of homonormativity, wherein the search for sexual citizenship in the gay community leads to the attempt to otherwise conform to socially

dominant practices like monogamy. For those kinksters who rely on the erotic charge of taboo sex, mainstreaming of some BDSM practices would mean they were no longer transgressive and therefore no longer arousing. While BDSM may have a healing function for some practitioners, the importance of the healing narrative should not be allowed to eclipse other reasons for engaging with kink, namely for sexual pleasure for its own sake.

Racism

The topic of racism in BDSM has drawn a lot of commentary from outsiders and also causes some division within the community. The debate over whether or not BDSM is racist is long and ongoing. One of the early charges against BDSM during the sex wars was that it was inherently racist because of the use of terms like 'master' and 'slave' in scenes. Some earlier reactions, in particular work by Sheila Jeffreys, against perceived racism in kink was about the use of swastikas and Nazi/Jew dynamics in a scene. Kinksters who play with Nazi imagery and content do still exist in the scene; but there are currently only four groups listed on Fetlife that are in some way interested in Nazi play. The largest group has only forty-four members (with almost certain overlap occurring between group memberships). Nazi play is not very popular in comparison to other fetishes; Bondage, for example, has over twenty-two hundred groups, the largest of which has over forty thousand members. Nazi play does not make the site's list of Top 100 Fetishes (all numbers as of April 20th, 2017). Discussion of Nazi symbol use or play occurs much more frequently in writing about sadomasochism from before the 1990s but it is difficult to say whether the practice is actually less common now. It may be that as a particularly triggering and controversial practice Nazi play has been somewhat suppressed in kink, and it is almost

certainly the case that that same controversy leads to its representation in theory opposed to BDSM.[76]

More commentary on racism in scenes of dominance and submission has focused on race relations between Black and white people and the history of slavery. *Against Sadomasochism*, a collection of anti-SM writing published in 1982, includes the chapter "Racism and Sadomasochism: A Conversation with Two Black Lesbians," and racism is mentioned in many other chapters as a reason to find BDSM reprehensible. In "Racism and Sadomasochism" the three main points about race and SM are that sadomasochism takes attention away from issues of race in feminism, that sadomasochistic interests are "for white people to deal with" and "a luxury that [people of colour] don't have" because playing with power dynamics is not a for women of colour (Sims *et al*. 99), and that sadomasochists use of oppression rhetoric is inappropriate. Near the end of the interview, one of the women says, "I haven't seen that many Black and Third World women involved in sadomasochism at all" (104), and the other replies by questioning the truth of one Black lesbian masochist's assertion that she enjoys the power dynamic. This interview is one of the most reasonable pieces in the collection and it raises some valid topics for discussion about the dynamics of race in sadomasochistic sex; however, the women in discussion rely on their own concepts of what is normal, pleasurable, and allowable, and dismiss the voices of practitioners. Their perspective, that as women of colour they have no use for kink, is valid, but so is the perspective of kinksters. The anti-SM argument that all BDSM is racist generally ignores the experiences and situated knowledge of kinksters of colour,[77] attributing any enjoyment of BDSM to sickness or ignorance.

[76] Robin Ruth Linden also compares sadomasochism to Nazism.
[77] In "Situated Knowledges: The Science Question in Feminism and the Privilege of Partial Perspective," Donna Haraway argues that all knowledge, even the most supposedly objective science, is part of a narrative informed by culture, history, and the positionality of the researcher.

Race play is a practice that challenges the limits of acceptability, and disturbs some people on the basis that it replicates harmful real-world dynamics. As far as I have found in my research, race play is not about pretending to belong to another race, for example, a white person roleplaying as a Black person, but is rather about the manipulation of racial dynamics between practitioners, for example, between a white person and a Black person.[78] Race play might involve slavery roleplaying, or less historical racist incidents like street harassment, and often uses racial epithets to build tension. While any combination of racial dynamics might inform a scene of race play, the most theoretically contentious race play involves Black practitioners, and the accusations that BDSM in general is racist generally refer to racial dynamics involving Black people, so race play involving Black kinksters is my focus in this section.

Studies of race play in BDSM that have considered the perspective of practitioners of colour, and the statements of practitioners of colour themselves, show that many of these kinksters feel race play helps them to deal with their real-life experiences of racism in a controlled way precisely because they consent to it, taking control of and manipulating the power dynamics of race. As Mollena Williams, a Black female kinkster, states, "[t]he prime motive in a 'Race Play' scene is to underscore and investigate the challenges of racial or cultural differences" (Williams and Plaid). Ariane Cruz's analysis of how race play might help Black women derive sexual pleasure from "the shadows of slavery" (410) frequently refers to the opinions of Black

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Haraway writes that we must acknowledge the impact of our perspective and experiences on what we can know.

[78] Bauer concludes, based on sociological research and personal experience, that while white kinksters in the communities he has interacted with are willing to transgress many boundaries, they are generally not comfortable with race play (unless with a partner of colour, and sometimes not even then) because of their racial privilege as white people (*Queer BDSM* 187-191). Daisy Hernandez also reports that if white people are involved in race play it is with a partner of colour. Both Weiss and Bauer point out that in the absence of kinksters of colour, white kinksters are able to play without thinking of race, since whiteness is experienced as a default racial state (Weiss, *Techniques of Pleasure* 195; Bauer, *Queer BDSM* 187).

practitioners and foregrounds the importance of the fact that many Black kinksters experience race play as empowering. She reports, "Black women express not just an intense pleasure, but also an empowerment and a kind of therapeutic and restorative quality in race play. For renowned Black 'Leather Mother,' Viola Johnson, race play is empowering" (431). Cruz argues that the legacy of slavery in North America results in the connection of Black sexuality, especially the sexuality of Black women, with violence, but that "BDSM is a critical site from which to reimagine the formative links between Black female sexuality and violence" (410). She observes that "race play relies on the simultaneous observance and violation of conventional sociocultural interdictions" (423) and that "[i]n race play, racial boundaries collide with psychosexual and somatic boundaries in an unresolved melodrama animated by racism, eroticism, racial sexual alterity, power, pleasure, pain" (430). Cruz asserts that the therapeutic benefits of race play can come both from the fact that such play gives people of colour a choice about how they experience racial dynamics and because the manipulation of racial hierarchies for pleasure reveals those hierarchies "as performative and unnatural" (431-32). She concludes that while BDSM may not ultimately be able to completely redefine racialized power structures, it does provide both a space "to rethink the enmeshment of Black female sexuality and violence," and "sexual pleasure" that acknowledges "the multiplicity of Black women's sexual practice and the multeity of Black female sexuality" (435). Cruz does not deny that race play may be offensive to some people, but neither does she deny its potential benefits for practitioners of colour who are attracted to it.

Cruz's arguments about race play in many ways recall Hoople's consideration of BDSM as a form of queer performativity. Though race play may cite racist hierarchies, that citation results in an imperfect reiteration that may even undermine those dynamics through consensual manipulation. In his article, Hoople uses the master/slave dynamic as an example of how the queer performativity of BDSM reiterates rather than replicates:

> Because of their seeming resonance with hetero-patriarchal norms, let me take up the example of SM Master/slave relations. Masters and slaves are "figures" in the history of patriarchal oppression, and as such are necessarily cited by SM practitioners who identify themselves as masters or slaves. Moreover, certain structural similarities must obtain between historical and SM Master/slave relations in order for SM Master/slave relations to be appropriately conceived of or experienced as Master/slave relations, thus the practitioner cited earlier states that it is necessary for an SM slave to regard hirself [sic] as the property of hir [sic] Master. The difference between "regarding oneself" as being owned and "being" owned provides one instance of a misarticulation or "queering" of historical forms of Master/slave relations, but this difference itself is founded in a more fundamental difference: SM Master/slave relations are consensual, historical Master/slave relations were not; thus, in a sense, SM Master/slave relations mark a reversal of historical Master/slave relations. Which is to say, historical Master/slave relations were relations of oppression; SM Master/slave relations are relations of power, insofar as the slave is empowered to leave the relationship. (209)

In Hoople's articulation, consent is once again a key component of BDSM and its ability to manipulate power dynamics for erotic benefit.[79] Though Hoople does not explicitly engage with issues of race at this point in his analysis, the Master/slave historicity he references includes the enslavement of Black peoples. When race play cites the dynamics of slavery, instead of an exact replica of those dynamics, the result is a queer reiteration that turns those historically oppressive dynamics to its own purposes.

[79] There will of course also be some for whom the Master/slave dynamic is inherently traumatic and is without redemptive potential.

Margot Weiss theorizes extensively about the problems of race play in *Techniques of Pleasure: BDSM and the Circuits of Sexuality*. Weiss' position in the book overall might be best described as sex-critical: she is not against the practice of BDSM per se, but she does read it critically as culturally influenced and influencing. She gains her insights into race play from her ethnographic work with BDSM communities in the San Francisco Bay Area, but stresses several times that she is not a practitioner herself. Weiss argues convincingly that in BDSM in the Bay Area, practitioners are generally middle-class and white because of the necessary leisure time and money to practice BDSM in those communities.

However, while Weiss' points about racial privilege and the prominence of white people in the Bay Area scene are good interventions into kink theory, her attitude towards BDSM in general and race play in BDSM in particular in her book is somewhat problematic. Weiss opens the book with a story of one of her first forays into the scene as an ethnographer, a visit to a Byzantine Bazaar and Slave Auction event in San Francisco.[80] Weiss describes her experience in detail, and pays particular attention to one participant in the slave auction, "a young African American woman with a round face and closely cropped hair" (3). She is brought on stage by a white man who tells the crowd about her good qualities, explaining why they should bid for her. While some of the more comedic auction performances had Weiss in tears of laughter, the more serious presentation of the young Black woman makes her "uncomfortable" and she "[feels] sure that the rest of the crowd" feels the same way (4). Weiss continues, "I strained to read the woman's expression, to see if she was all right at the front of the stage, but I couldn't tell" (4).

Weiss revisits this story a few times over the course of the book. While she states in the beginning that she is surprised at the "NORMALness" (5) of the practitioners, there is obviously a line at which she imagines her own desires must be reflective of those of the kinksters, perhaps

[80] The auction raised $10,000 for the Earle Baum Center for the Blind.

because of how "normal" they seem to her.[81] What Weiss never acknowledges is that in that kinky context, the Black woman she pities was almost certainly involved in negotiating this scene. She may have done it because she enjoys it, or enjoys the humiliation of being sold at auction. Some audience members may also have been uncomfortable, but others probably knew what to expect at such an event. In the moment at which she worries about whether the young Black woman is all right, Weiss, a white woman, transfers her own discomfort onto the other woman, and demonstrates her susceptibility to the anti-sex feminist assumption that there are things no woman could enjoy or consent to. Unfortunately, though she does interview practitioners for her book, Weiss does not ever speak to this particular woman about her experience. The fact that she leaves out a perspective that may have seriously impacted such an important set piece of her book is a major flaw. Weiss uses the image of the young woman as an essential piece of evidence, but she does not engage with that woman's own situated knowledge of her experience. Weiss' own disbelief that the auction scenario could arouse or empower someone gets in the way of her objective appraisal of the scene, and also assumes that readers of the book will share her discomfort.

This example of Weiss' discomfort returns the discussion of racism and BDSM a final time to the issue of queer performativity. BDSM derives erotic power from the exploration of activities that play with people's sense of disgust, fear, or shame, and it follows that some people will find those activities disgusting, fearsome, or shameful in a straightforward way. Race play continually tests these boundaries of acceptability. Mollena Williams has been called "deeply disturbed and in need of serious counseling" by other Black kinksters because of her defense of race play in BDSM (M. Williams 71). Criticism of those who engage in race play encourages

[81] I am sure that Weiss uses "normal" with an awareness of how subjective and value-laden the word is.

them to feel shame for their activities. In her original articulation of the term, Sedgwick considers queer performativity and shame to be inextricably linked. However, she complicates a negative understanding of shame by exploring its roots as an affect. Sedgwick argues that because shame originates from the first moment of dissonance between infant and caregiver, it marks moments of identification: "in interrupting identification, shame, too, makes identity. In fact shame and identity remain in very dynamic relation to one another, at once deconstituting and foundational, because shame is both peculiarly contagious and peculiarly individuating" (5). She theorizes that queer identities in particular, since they arise from moments of dissonance with hegemonic cultures, are linked with shame (13). According to Sedgwick, the fact that for queer people shame is "a structuring fact of identity" gives it "powerfully productive and powerfully social metamorphic possibilities" through queer performance (14). In moments in which the queer performativity of BDSM invokes feelings of disgust or shame, such as in race play, similarly queer subjects will recognize the potential power of such shame to disrupt normative assumptions, while those who do not identify with that particular kinky queerness will not.

Since BDSM in general is a form of play, it depends on spatial and chronological limitations. One solution to issues with race play might be for practitioners of this kind of BDSM to restrict their activities to spaces and times designated for such play. Recognizing the sensitivity of the issues BDSM manipulates is important, but if the objection to race play is that it makes some people uncomfortable, then outlawing race play is not the answer: some people may be uncomfortable with interracial relationships, and argue that a white man dating a Black woman replicates slavery-era dynamics, but that does not mean such relationships should be stopped. BDSM is inherently privileged. It requires leisure time, and monetary investment. Is racism an issue in BDSM? Yes. To oversimplify, racism is an issue in everything. I would argue that racism is only as much of an issue in BDSM as it is in other aspects of life. If BDSM seems more racist

than other sexual activities, it is because kink makes all power dynamics explicit, and manipulates and exaggerates them for erotic benefit.

BDSM as Identity

At several points, this chapter draws parallels between LGBT communities or experience and BDSM communities. However, an obvious difference between the two groups is that lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender are identities, while the acronym BDSM describes activities. Actually, this difference is not so obvious, because there are differing perspectives on whether BDSM should be understood as a set of practices or as a possible identity. One perspective is to see BDSM as a series of activities that a person can do as part of his or her sex life. Practitioners who take this position might say, "I am into kinky sex" instead of "I am a kinkster." Some researchers take the position that BDSM is an activity to the extreme; Staci Newmahr proposes that BDSM is not a sexual community like the LGBT communities at all. She argues that BDSM is best understood as "serious leisure," an activity that happens on personal time and requires skill and dedication. She compares BDSM to sky-diving, or even playing the cello. If, as I have considered above, BDSM fits within Huizinga's definition of play, it would seem to be best described as an activity, rather than identity.

However, many practitioners identify their kinkiness as a part of their identity, sometimes as even more important to their sexual orientation than a gender-based preference. For example, Pat Califia writes that given the choice between being stranded on a desert island with a vanilla woman and a kinky man, he would choose the kinky man (*Public Sex* 158); at the time he wrote the essay, Califia identified as a lesbian, but he would rather have had a male partner with whom he could practice BDSM than a female partner who would not allow any BDSM in their sexual relationship. Susan Wright calls kinksters "SM-Identified Individuals" in her article on

discrimination towards BDSM. If BDSM can be part of a sexual identity, it can encourage alternative queer identities. It can also encourage multiple points of sexual identity; a kinkster who identifies as such may be a straight submissive, or a bisexual sadist, for example. Bauer argues that dyke+queer BDSM can be a positive sexual space for trans* people in particular because it is queer in a way that shows "an affinity with fluid boundaries in terms of gender and sexuality. Queer in this sense moves away from anatomy as the reference for sexual identity and categorization" (*Queer BDSM* 56). According to Bauer, in the intersection of a trans* and kink identity, the latter can aid in the safe exploration of the former.

While BDSM may begin with roles or activities, in the preface to their edited collection *Premodern Sexualities*, Aranye Fradenburg and Carla Freccero ask if the division between identities and acts is really so simple, and suggest that "identities can be said to be made by acts" (xx). Foucault asserts that the increasing attention to sexual deviance leads to an "incorporation of perversion" and the "specification of individuals," so that what were once acts becomes identities and types of people (*Volume One* 43). If, as Sedgwick argues, shame is essential to the formation of queer identity insomuch as it marks moments of disassociation with heterosexual norms, then the desire for kinky activity could very well lead to the formation of a kinky identity. I think the "kinkster" label can be best understood as part of a sexual identity. For some people, it is a bigger part, even primary, and for others, only a matter of occasional preference. As is the case in LGBT identities as well, kinky identity exists on a spectrum. Self-identification is key, and many practitioners consider their kinks very much a part of their sexual identity.

Much like feminist, queer, and trans* theory have explored whether gender and sexuality are the result of biological factors or social conditioning, theorists have considered whether being kinky is essential or constructed. In a 2001 study on the diversity of practice and meaning in BDSM based on 184 Finnish practitioners' self-reporting, Alison *et al* find that "sadomasochistic

behavior is best understood as a product of adult socialization processes" (10), which they note is in line with social constructionist perspectives. On the other hand, Yost and Hunter's 2012 study finds that 43.4% of respondents fit into an essentialist viewpoint of sexual identity development, while 35.3% fit constructionist views (250). A small subset fit with a socialized essentialist point of view (251). Yost and Hunter suggest that Lisa Diamond's "dynamical" model of identity formation, which allows for multiple, equally valid paths to sexual identity, is the best way to approach BDSM (246). This understanding would accept explanations involving social influence and physiological disposition to intense sensation.

Subversion of Cultural Norms

I have made reference in this chapter to the possibility of understanding BDSM as a type of queer performativity, which undermines existing dynamics even as it cites them in performance. Many defenders of BDSM claim that kink has the power to effect cultural change. I believe that BDSM has enormous potential as an illuminator of the power dynamics of capitalist cultures, and of the non-consensual power dynamics present in a heteropatriarchal society. Several researchers, including Beckmann, Hoople, and Deckha, have noted the ways that BDSM dynamics mimic corporate culture; however, the careful negotiated consent involved in BDSM draws attention to the lack of consent from both parties in the employer-employee relationship. Outsiders who censure BDSM as violence or deny kinksters the right to consent to harm are not often opposed to other, non-sexual activities that carry risk of harm, such as extreme sports or boxing. The intense interest in manipulating, subverting, or exaggerating power differences in BDSM

performances illuminates the normative social dynamics they draw from and opens those dynamics to critique.[82]

Drawing on the theory of José Esteban Muñoz, Bauer argues that BDSM can be a disidentificatory practice (54-55).[83] Muñoz proposes disidentification as a survival strategy for minority subjects: disidentification attempts to invest ideological elements of dominant culture with new meaning. Bauer writes that BDSM can be disidentificatory because it uses affective attachments to dominant and countercultural codes as a means of constructing subversive agency by using those codes for its own purposes:

> Some BDSM practices entailed at least a partial identification and eroticization of [BDSMers'] own oppressors. This was evident when interview partners enjoyed playing with sexism, homophobia and transphobia or military roles while being the victim of and/or opposing these institutions in real life…. They take up themes of cultural hegemony, infuse them with erotic value, use them for their own desires and pleasures, appropriate them without necessarily endorsing the ideology behind the institutions and 'pervert' their meanings in ways that work against the original logics and rationalizations of the inequalities behind them. (*Queer BDSM* 55)

Bauer's explanation of BDSM as potentially disidentificatory gives these practices the ability to productively engage with and critique dominant heteropatriarchal culture. While perhaps even the majority of kinksters do not participate in BDSM with this kind of sociopolitical awareness, the subversive cultural potential of BDSM remains for those who are aware of it, and, critically for my purposes, for those who would employ a kinky theoretical lens to the study of history or literature.

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[82] Though of course not every kinkster will engage in BDSM as such active critique.
[83] While here, as in most other places, Bauer is referring specifically to dyke+queer BDSM, I believe this is an instance in which his arguments can be applied to BDSM in general.

Kink Touches the Middle Ages

In this dissertation, I perform what I call "kinky reading." Kinky reading, or reading informed by an understanding of kink, entails rereading texts while paying close attention to the particulars of fantasy, consent, violent or painful erotic content, and sexual power exchange. Having studied kink theory, the kinky reader understands these elements from a new perspective: he or she appreciates that the appearance of any of these elements may be deceiving. BDSM offers literary analysis an awareness of sexual systems of power and perspective on the complexity of consent. Furthermore, the awareness of BDSM as a potentially subversive cultural practice encourages kinky readings to examine newly identified kinky aspects of a text and dominant culture. In this way, kinky reading follows the tradition of queer and trans* literary theories which focus, not solely on discovering analogues for queer identities in the texts of the past, but also on the potential similarities and dissimilarities between elements of those identities and past practices as represented in literature.

BDSM provides a unique framework for understanding medieval sexual power dynamics via queer theory.[84] As I show in the previous section of this chapter, power is the essential feature of kinky activity. BDSM makes the power dynamics that structure all relationships in society more noticeable because it exaggerates them for erotic effect, and the importance of consent in BDSM shows how sexual power in many other relationships operates outside of consensuality. Bromley and Stockton argue that considering the "mediating role of representation, language, and fantasy" when studying sex before modernity can help us identify continuities and discontinuities

[84] I believe the previous section adequately demonstrates the queerness of BDSM; not only is it an abjected form of sexual expression (or identity), BDSM shows the constructedness of normative sexual relationships by calling attention to power differentials and illuminating the performativity of sexual relations through explicit role playing. It connects with both gay and trans* communities in its questioning of heteronormativity and gender roles.

between sex then and sex now (18). Literary representations of sex can reflect a more personal sexual experience while also adding an element of fantasy. When kink theory touches literary representations of sex from the Middle Ages, we can gain insight into the constructedness of power dynamics in those relationships. To conclude this chapter I will identify some major issues that will be important to all of my readings in this dissertation: consent, sinfulness and pathologization, the role of pain, and sexual fantasy. Briefly comparing medieval sexuality and BDSM on these topics will begin to demonstrate how the two kinds of sex can touch across time.

The importance of consent is perhaps the biggest difference between medieval sexuality and BDSM. Consent plays a huge role in kink, and in the Middle Ages, consent did not have the same legal or social meanings as it does in the twenty-first century. The best way to show the differences in consent between the Middle Ages and modern society is to consider consent in the case of rape. Sexual consent in the Middle Ages almost always relates to women, though of course men can also be raped. Women in Europe in the Middle Ages did not have as many legal rights as women living in North America do today, but their situation was not as bleak as neomedievalism might lead us to believe. Of course, class was also an influence on how much control a woman had over her life, as was race. Until I move into specific textual analysis, I will necessarily make some general observations about the medieval woman's experience of consent.

The example of medieval rape demonstrates the relatively low status of women's consent in medieval Europe. Corinne J. Saunders' *Rape and Ravishment in the Literature of Medieval England* considers rape across a range of genres, including legal texts, theological writing, history, romance, and the writings of Chaucer to show that medieval conceptions of rape were not monolithic, but were a lively and ongoing dialogue. She distinguishes between *raptus*, the legal term for rape, which required abduction as well as sexual assault, and sometimes refers to abduction without any sexual violation, and "ravishment," which refers to any sexual assault.

Saunders argues that, contrary to popular conception, medieval thinkers and writers cared very much about a woman's consent,[85] and literature in particular provided a place for (ventriloquized) female perspectives on rape. Literature acknowledges that women did not always consent to men's advances while at the same time demonstrating, particularly through forced marriages, which Saunders places on a spectrum of rape, that a lack of consent could rarely defend them from a man's will.[86] Brundage examines legal evidence and traces the evolution of rape from a private crime against property or the will of a man to a public crime against unmarried women, widows, or nuns. By the twelfth century, *raptus* had to meet four requirements for legal action: violence, abduction, sexual intercourse, and a lack of consent by one party (virtually always the woman, or the woman's family). Brundage also points out, however, that while laws change and some theoretical writings debate the quality and possibilities for consent, rape cases in the ecclesiastical courts are quite rare; he concludes that many people settled such cases outside of court, with either payments of restitution, or marriage arrangements between a woman and her rapist (*Sex, Law, and Marriage* 62-75). Overall, while women had fewer options for consent in the Middle Ages than they do today, modern society is certainly not innocent of ignoring consent. BDSM shows the frailty of consent in either time period.

The concepts of sinfulness and pathologization characterize, respectively, medieval and modern understandings of deviant sexuality, and kink theory challenges the validity of both. In *The History of Sexuality Volume One*, Foucault explores both historical and discursive aspects of sexuality. His focus is on the privatization and supposed repression of sexuality that coincided with the emergence of capitalism and the bourgeoisie, and the resultant medicalization of sex,

[85] Though sometimes in non-sympathetic ways, as when the Galenic theory that both partners needed to orgasm in order to conceive a child was used to prove that a woman could not have been raped if she became pregnant as a result.

[86] Generally, a woman's lack of consent only mattered if she had a male champion to defend her; in the case of female saints, the champion is God.

particularly non-normative sex.[87] From a Foucaultian perspective, there was a great shift in the way Europeans understood sexuality because of the attitudes about sex that began to emerge in the seventeenth century and that resulted in medicalization and increased investigation of non-normative sexualities. While Foucault sees a great difference between the "markedly unitary" discourses of sex in the Middle Ages and the proliferation of discourse of sexualities afterwards (33), the shift from religious confession to medico-psychiatric confession is not so much a great change as it is a translation: a difference in language rather than substance. For example, Foucault identifies four regulative functions of sex after the seventeenth century, but sex also served the regulatory purposes of the Church in the Middle Ages. Karras, for example, writes that the Church's opinion on sex and marriage changed in response to social and political factors: for example, in the twelfth and thirteenth century, the Church answered heretics like the Cathars, who rejected marriage as inherently evil, by softening their views on the necessity of chastity and encouraging Christians to marry. It also encouraged marriage following the outbreaks of the Black Death, when the need to replenish the population was high (*Sexuality in Medieval Europe* 68-70).

Foucault's repressive hypothesis, according to which the perceived repression of sex actually leads to more discussion and examination of sex, is also evident in medieval discourses of sexuality. These discussions and examinations may occur with a discreet vocabulary, talking about sex without directly naming acts or desires (17-18). This linguistic vagueness around sex is present in the penitential literature and theological writings of the medieval period. The prime example of medieval language staying purposefully vague about sex is "sodomy," a collective term for sex acts that were not between a married man and woman for procreative purposes.

[87] Normative in this case refers to white, heterosexual, monogamous, marital, procreative sexual relations.

Sodomy might refer to male-male anal sex in one text, and to oral sex between married couples in another (Payer, *Sex and the Penitentials* 40). Sodomy, when it seems to refer to homosexual activity, is often referred to even more vaguely as unnatural, or against nature. In both medieval and modern eras, official texts (the medieval penitential manuals and the modern DSM) list and explain sexual deviances as negative, another similarity between the sinful and pathological models. While there are certainly differences between viewing deviant sex as sinful and as pathological, we can see through closer examination of the two terms that there is actually a significant amount of overlap. Kink theory disputes both of these methods of rejecting kinky sexuality as abnormal.

Medieval sexuality at times eroticizes the experience of pain. Karras writes, "It is not always possible to draw a line between the erotic and the divine, and this is true of pain as well as of pleasure; people who suffer pain to achieve salvation are not the same as those who suffer it to achieve orgasm, but there may be parallels" (*Sexuality in Medieval Europe* 29). This brief allusion to the fine line between the sadomasochist and the religious ascetic shows the importance of intent and subjectivity when discussing pain. For masochists, pain may be read as pleasure, or may cause pleasure through suffering. Medieval penitents endured and even welcomed the sensation of a hair shirt or other such painful contrivances for ideological reasons. For the ascetic, pain was intended to mortify the desire of the flesh, but the prospect of achieving salvation or divine favour through that pain might make the experience pleasurable.[88] The preoccupation of the ascetic with the flesh, and especially with whipping or self-flagellation to overcome lust, recalls the masochist's experience with impact play. Both deal with desire through

[88] My chapter on *The Book of Margery Kempe* will consider the links between asceticism and BDSM further.

pain. What matters in each case is the circumstances of that pain, and that the masochist or ascetic accepts the pain willingly.

Finally, kink and medieval sexuality intersect on the subject of fantasy and roleplaying. In the literary representations of sex I will consider in this dissertation, fantasy may be intrinsic to the narrative because of genre, or may reflect a character's desires. Roleplaying is purposeful in BDSM, but in medieval literature, living up to or subverting tropes constitutes a type of roleplay. The Wife of Bath, for example, subverts expectations about female desires, refusing to play the role the patriarchy sets for her. She also engages in fantasizing in her tale. In addition to more abstract examples, medieval sexuality did sometimes involve the same kind of specific and purposeful roleplaying essential to BDSM. The "Mounted Aristotle" tradition, which I will refer to in more detail in my chapter on the Wife of Bath, provides an example of purposeful sexual roleplaying. According to this tradition, the aging Aristotle falls in love with a young woman and, at her request, dresses himself as a horse for her to ride.[89] Aristotle not only dresses up like a horse for the young woman, he agrees to it beforehand; the scene is negotiated, just as a scene in BDSM would be. Aristotle is content to submit himself in order to achieve his erotic desires. Not only does the medieval tale show evidence of the usual power dynamic of male/female and active/passive being reversed in sex, it shows that other roles could be part of sexual experiences.

BDSM provides a new way to look at sex in the medieval period and highlights the issues of consent and power dynamics, as well as the elements of pain and fantasy, in supposedly normative sexual relationships. In the following chapters, I will perform kinky readings on *Sir Gowther*, *The Book of Margery Kempe*, and the *Wife of Bath's Prologue and Tale* in order to demonstrate that medieval sexual power dynamics are both complex and potentially subversive.

[89] For more on the medieval history and reception of the Aristotle and Phyllis story, see Desmond, esp. 13-27.

Chapter 3: A Powerful Knight: *Sir Gowther* and Distanced Consumption

In medieval romance, otherworldly threats lurk in orchards at noontide, and sex is paired with violence. This chapter draws connections between the sadism and rapes in *Sir Gowther* and contemporary BDSM practices to illuminate the sexual power dynamics of the romance. In this text, anxieties about racial purity, inheritance, and masculine sexuality manifest as sadistic fey or foreign intruders who threaten the stability of the European Christian court. The presence of racial others enables a process of "distanced consumption," wherein readers or listeners can enjoy the representation of violence without guilt because they are so different from its perpetrators. Though *Sir Gowther* plays with sadism, consent, and masochism, it does not deploy its queer elements as proponents of change; rather, the queer is present to be silenced, and the text upholds heteronormative values after playing with elements of kink.

Sir Gowther is the story of a half-devil child who renounces his murderous, fiendish behaviour, performs penance, wins redemption and a wife through his newfound spiritual worth and his martial prowess, and becomes the respected and pious emperor of Germany. The tale self-identifies as a Breton lay. The Middle English version was composed around the year 1400, and survives in two late fifteenth-century manuscripts: National Library of Scotland MS Advocates 19.3.1. (A) and British Library Royal MS 17.B.43. (B). The two manuscripts contain some dialectical differences as well as some variations in focus; critics agree that B is probably a later version, copied from A but refined for a more noble audience.[90] Although no undisputed source has been identified, the romance has several analogues, combining several potential sources, genres, and motifs, including the twelfth-century poem *Robert le Diable*, the earlier Breton lay

[90] For example, Laskaya and Salisbury reach this conclusion in their introduction to the tale. Phillipa Hardman has identified the B text as being specifically intended for genteel children's instruction (13-14). For a more specific comparison of the two versions, see Vandelinde or Marchalonis.

Tydorel, and an eleventh-century Irish tale, penitential romance and hagiographical romance, and the wish-child and Fair Unknown motifs.[91]

Sir Gowther contains extensive sadistic elements. Gowther takes pleasure in causing the pain and suffering of others, and awareness of BDSM and kink theory gives insight into the sadism in *Sir Gowther*. The racial element of this tale provides crucial context for understanding its depiction of sexuality, so this chapter begins with the Saracen and his background, followed by discussions of the normative consumption of kinky elements of a text. Next, the chapter reads the status of consent in *Sir Gowther* as it relates to both medieval ideas about marriage and rape, and how the racial Other fits into rape narratives and a process of rejecting sadism. A kinky reading of issues of consent in *Sir Gowther* leads to a queer connection between the medieval knight of romance and the modern male celebrity. Finally, the chapter considers how Gowther's masochistic process of penance helps him rehabilitate and become a part of heteronormative noble society.

Racial Others and Anxiety

Medieval nobility was inherited by a system of primogeniture and as a result medieval culture often fixates on issues of purity and continuity of bloodlines. The romance genre in particular is often concerned with issues of inheritance; motifs of heroic but dispossessed rulers, heirs lost at birth but recognizable by a token, the testing of a would-be lord, or the pursuit of a maiden who will eventually bear a hero's children are often at the core of stories revolving around the question of who will or who should lead a prosperous society and ensure its continuance. This concern with the continuation or restoration of tradition and nobility means that romance is

[91] For more on the possible sources and analogues of *Sir Gowther* see Marchalonis, Hopkins, Bradstock, Cohen's "Gowther Among the Dogs," or Mitchell-Smith.

fundamentally a conservative genre. In his consideration of romance as a mode, Frye describes romance as dependent on a restoration or return.[92] Anxiety over dynastic stability motivates the plot in *Sir Gowther*, and the threats to that stability comes from sadistic sources that are racially Other, either Saracen or fairy or demonic. Understanding the racial difference of key characters will be crucial to a kinky reading of the sadistic elements of the text.

In the twentieth century, and particularly since the 1960s, various disciplines have developed theories and critical strategies for the study of race and racism as important social issues. One significant theory of race is based on the understanding that race is not a biological category; it is socially and politically constructed. As Michael Banton writes,

> Physical differences between peoples have been observed throughout human history; all over the world people have developed words for delineating them. 'Race' is a concept rooted in a particular culture and a particular period of history which brings with it suggestions about how these differences are to be explained. (62)

This understanding of race began with the work of anthropologists like Franz Boas and sociologists like W.E.B. Du Bois, an early advocate for civil rights and a co-founder of the NAACP; their works challenged the biological basis of race and the ideas of racial hierarchies. Their thinking has continued to influence anti-racist theory in scientific and social disciplines among scholars who consider the production and impacts of race. Once race is understood as something that is not natural, but created by various circumstances and systems of power, it becomes easier to appreciate the ways that understanding specific cultural context matters in any consideration of race relations. Although race is not based in biology, race and racism have very

[92] For more on the conservatism of the romance genre, see Jameson or Frye.

real, often negative, consequences for the lived realities of people of colour, whether in the medieval or the modern era.[93]

Conceptions of race in the Middle Ages depend on a combination of regional identity, religious affiliation, culture, and biological difference. In his article on the differences and similarities between modern and medieval race, Robert Bartlett convincingly argues that medieval categories of race are also socially constructed rather than biologically determined. Further, he writes that the process of labelling race in medieval texts often depends on questions of family descent, language, customs and geographic determinism more than skin colour as a value in itself. He writes,

> Medieval terminology may have allowed a biological or genetic construal of race, but it also allowed a picture of races as changing cultural communities, often in competition, often forming and reforming, overflowing and cutting across political boundaries, providing identities and claims for their members. (54)

For example, Bartlett quotes a passage by Scottish chronicler John of Fordun that divides the people of the Scottish nation into ethnicities on the basis of shared language and customs, thereby giving both a nationally determined ethnic identity (Scottish) and a more specific culturally determined ethnic identity (Gaelic or Teutonic) to the same people (47-49). In the Middle Ages, as much as in modern times, race and ethnic identity are somewhat malleable, and often rely on systems of self-labelling and labelling by the state or theorists, labelling that might rely on any number of categories.

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[93] For a broad introduction to the sociological study of race, see *Theories of Race and Racism: A Reader*, edited by Back and Solomos, or *Racism: A Short History*, by George M. Frederickson. The fields of race theory would be impossible to introduce here, but the works of theorists like Stuart Hall, bell hooks, Frantz Fanon, Chandra Mohanty, Edward Said, Cornell West, Toni Morrison, or Gayatri Spivak provide some points of entry.

The *Middle English Dictionary* defines the noun Sarasin as "(a) A Turk; also, an Arab; also, a Moslem;—often with ref. to the Crusades; (b) a heathen, pagan; an infidel; (c) as a type of non-Christian" and the adjective as "(a) Pagan, heathen; also, Saxon; also, non-Jewish." In political and theological writings from about the seventh century onwards, "Saracen" is how Latin European writers label Islamic peoples. These Eastern enemies are lascivious, heretical, irrational, and sometimes even monstrous.[94] For example, Peter the Venerable, who commissioned the first Latin translation of the Koran in 1143, "perceived in Islam a nefarious mixture of Christian, heretical, and pagan doctrines" and this hybridity leads him to characterize the religion itself as an indiscriminately fashioned monster in *Summa totius haeresis Saracenorum* (Uebel 275-76). There is a strong connection made in much critical writing on medieval receptions of Islam between the ways Latin Europeans write about Muslims and how they write about monsters; the representation of followers of Islam as semi-human could justify wars and aggression against Muslims and help denigrate Islam. They are most often connected with the monstrous cynocephali, or dog-headed men, communicating the idea of the Saracen as a human-animal hybrid, incapable of speech or reason, and potentially cannibalistic (Arjana 13, 53-56; Uebel 268). Effectively, the Saracen is more monster than human, and like a monster, the Saracen threatens Christian bodies and boundaries. Sophia Rose Arjana points out that the consistent portrayal of Muslim men as monsters can result in real bodily harm and violence. These representations of the Saracen as monstrous and irrational became even more common after it became clear, in the twelfth century, that missionary efforts in Islamic countries were failing; as Tolan puts it, "if the Muslim 'other' could not be eliminated through war or conversion, at least he could be intellectually and socially circumscribed" (xviii). Most critics

[94] For more on the medieval concept of the Saracen, see Tolan, Arjana, or Uebel.

also note the ways in which the Saracen becomes a cultural construct against which to construct Christian identity, an idea this chapter will explore.

The proliferation of anti-Muslim writing in the medieval period, especially between the seventh and thirteenth centuries, influenced literary and common understanding of the identity of the so-called Saracen. It is well-established in criticism by now that in medieval literature the Saracen is a construct standing for at once many people and no people: the Saracen is often a composite of tropes, and functions as Other to the hero. Jeffrey Jerome Cohen, for example, writes that in literature, "[c]ultural specificities were lost as the inhabitants of Iberia and the East were unified beneath the sign *Saracen*, a racialized figure of ultimate difference who condensed everything inimical to the fragile Christian selfsame" ("On Saracen Enjoyment" 115). Particularly during the time of the Crusades, the heathen Saracen is a popular enemy of the Latin Christian,[95] but even after the campaigns in the Holy Land cease the Saracen remains a key enemy to the heroes of romance.[96] In some cases, "Saracen" may refer to any heathen invader; Diane Speed argues that in *King Horn*, the Saracens are based more on literary phenomena than any Islamic peoples, and that the poet expands the word to cover Germanic pagans as well.[97] The Saracen is a homogenous menace to romance protagonist and court, often through his intention to marry a virtuous Christian woman by force, as is the case in *Sir Gowther*. The Saracen is more often male than female, because his threat to Christian patrimony can come either through the

[95] Cohen points out that this false homogeny also happens to that Christian category during the Crusades; during this time there is a literary erasure of differences between both the enemy and the allies ("On Saracen Enjoyment" 115).
[96] Tolan argues that as the Crusades failed, literary representation of the Saracen as monstrous and dangerous became more necessary to justifying continuing the wars (xviii, 281).
[97] The same slippage between pagan and Saracen happens in theological writings; writers call Muslims "pagans" or refer to the idols of Classical peoples as some derivation of Muhammad (Tolan, chapter 5).

corruption of Christian women, through an invading army, or both.[98] Most of all, the Saracen is understood as evil because he rejects Christ and follows false gods.

The Saracen's defining characteristic may be his non-Christian religion, but his skin is also generally darker than a Christian's. In *Sir Gowther*, "tho Sarsyns blake" (478) invade Germany, and the protagonist in *King Horn* fights against "Sarazins blake" (1333).[99] True conversion is rare in medieval literature, and more often happens to virtuous women who marry Christians than to men, but in *King of Tars* the signal of the sincerity of the Sultan's conversion is a change in skin colour during baptism: "His hide, that blac & lithely was,/ Al white bicom, thurth Godes gras" (928-928).[100] The colour of the Saracen's skin is an indicator of his status as enemy to the superior (white) Christian knight.

The exotic and sinful nature of the Saracen is represented by a tendency to excess: the Sultan's lodgings and food will be luxurious; his armour will be heavily adorned; his lusts will be uncontrolled. In *Sir Isumbras*, the Sultan sails in a galley "[t]hat rychely was wrought" (222) and he offers Isumbras "red gold" (253) if he will forsake his religion. The Sultan also offers Isumbras "an hundryd pound/ Off penyys that be hool and round/ And ryche robes sevene (274-6) in exchange for his wife. In *Sir Gowther* the Saracen army is massive and the Sultan carries elaborate banners demonstrating his wealth:

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[98] Virtuous Saracen women often marry a Christian knight and convert, like Josian in *Bevis of Hampton*; bad Saracen women are often also masculine, like the Sultaness in Chaucer's *The Man of Law's Tale*, who is a "Virago" (359) and a "feyned woman" (362).

[99] Because of Old English and French influences, in some cases in Middle English a word like "blake" might mean white, so context is important. In *Havelok the Dane*, for example, there are three instances when "blac" (48), "blake" (311), or "blackne" (2165) probably means white or pale rather than black (Herzman, Drake, and Salisbury n.48, n.311).

[100] Bartlett shows that medieval medical theory explained skin colour as the result of geographic determinants, especially heat and cold. As an example, Bartlett includes Albertus Magnus' assertion from *De natura locorum* that dark skin could become lighter after many generations in a new, colder climate (46-47). Medieval thinkers believed in the mutability of race over time, and in this sense the Sultan's change may simply be a sped up version of something that would happen eventually.

Tho Sawdyn bare in sabull blacke
Three lyons rampand, withowt lacke,
That all of silver schon;
Won was corven with golys redde,
Anodur with gold in that steyd,
Tho thyrde with aser, y wene;
And his helmyt full rychely fret,
With charbuckolus stonus suryly sett
And dyamondus betwene. (577-85)

Saracens are represented as ostentatiously rich in order to further distance their values and interests from those of the Christian, who was supposed to live his life with more focus on the afterlife than on the pleasures of the world.

In many romances in which they appear, the Saracen seeks to marry a Christian woman. The lasciviousness of the Saracen in romance reflects the Christian belief that all Muslims, beginning with Muhammad, who is said to have had an unlimited supply of semen, an insatiable libido, and a desire to rape the Virgin Mary, are sexually deviant in a variety of ways (Arjana 32-37; Schibanoff 29). Many critics, including Kruger and Schibanoff, have shown that the sexual excesses of the Muslim are often coded as queer. For example, Schibanoff gives the example of purposefully deformed Latin translations of Arabic biographies of Muhammad that depict him as sexually deviant with both men and women (29, quoting Daniel 142). All of these excesses make the Saracen foreign not just to Christian values but also to ideals of masculinity that afford most positive traits to the male by default: the female is part of the Other, and the Saracen is feminized in the most negative way possible by his association with rampant sexual desire and desire for

luxury and comfort.[101] Ruth Mazo Karras shows a medieval connection between the male Saracen and passive sodomy, demonstrating the way that medieval Europeans projected that which would most compromise their own sexual ideals onto their enemies (*Sexuality in Medieval Europe* 171). The fact that the Saracen is feminized or queered for exhibiting heterosexual desire for a woman shows that the label Saracen makes normal behavior impossible: the Saracen is either too much of something, or not enough of something else; the label places a character in a permanent state of violation. He is a depository for the sexual anxieties of European aristocracy. In *Sir Gowther*, anxiety over inheritance and violent masculinity takes the form of sadistic intrusions into European society by racial Others. The mere mention of a Saracen as the enemy in a text evokes the various evils—e.g. excessive wealth, rampant sexual desire, attempted conquest and conversion, miscegenation—associated with this race for a medieval audience because the Saracen is a rhetorical flourish constructed over centuries of consistent literary tradition.

The fairy comes to Middle English literature from the Celtic tradition, but the male fey is racialized through many of the same tropes as the Saracen (he is not Christian, overly luxurious, and sexually voracious), and he is therefore an analogous threat to Christian hierarchies. Gowther's father is identified as an incubus,[102] but *Sir Gowther* also creates clear links between him and the fey that any informed reader of romance can follow: Gowther's mother meets his father "in hur orchard" (67),[103] and they conceive Gowther "undur a tree" (71).[104] Gowther's

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[101] Steven F. Kruger has written on the convergence of race, religion, and sexual deviance in both "Racial/Religious and Sexual Queerness in the Middle Ages" and "Becoming Christian; Becoming Male?"

[102] The incubus comes from a specific demonic tradition, and his actions are malevolent. There are also fey men who are more benevolent, but I feel the tropes in use in Sir Gowther support this connection between the incubus and the fey.

[103] All *Sir Gowther* quotations are from Laskaya and Salisbury's edition.

[104] Sleeping under a tree in a romance is the medieval equivalent of going down into the dark basement alone with a faulty flashlight in a horror movie. Noon-time is generally most dangerous. In tales like *Sir Gowther*, *Sir Orfeo*, or *Sir Degaré*, a woman resting under a tree leads

racial Otherness is therefore both demonic and fey. *Sir Gowther* contains both supernatural enemies (Gowther's father and Gowther) and Saracen enemies (the Sultan and his army). Medieval audiences would expect similarly depraved behavior from these non-Christian foes.

Understanding race, or ethnicity, as a real category has benefits for the Latin Christian writer seeking to establish his superiority to the Saracen, or for the person trying to bolster the security of dominant systems by defining his society against the monstrous. The continued denigration of the Other in cultural production is necessary to support the construction of race as it benefits the Christian, Western, patriarchal system, so throughout the medieval period we find examples of stories that reinforce the ideas of outsiders, of whatever kind, as disgusting and dangerous. Race often functions as a cultural category that presents insignificant differences as categorical. *Sir Gowther* participates in this project of the reinforcement of normative ideas about race in literature.

The discourses of Saracen and fairy in *Sir Gowther* also contribute to the reinforcement of the myth of heterosexuality—that is, the idea that heterosexuality is a default state, or norm, that exists as the sole acceptable option for sexual expression. The strong connection between both the Saracen and the fairy and sexual deviance means that the hero in opposition to either kind of enemy is, by virtue of that opposition, an example of proper sexual desire. In romance, the myth of heterosexuality is on display as the knight saves the maiden from a foreign threat, thus proving his love for a female object, and then marries her, thus upholding the heterosexual patriarchal order.

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to her sexual assault by an inhuman male. Lancelot's nap under an apple tree allows Morgan le Fay to capture him in Malory's *Le Morte d'Arthur.* The tree paired with sleep seems to act as a gateway between the mundane world and the supernatural, in a long history that for Middle English literature has roots in the Celtic tradition. For more on the phenomenon see Kittredge, especially 190-91.

Sadism, Race, and Distanced Consumption

The racial Otherness of Gowther and the antagonists of his text contribute to the pathologization of these characters and their desires in ways that parallel modern-day pathologization of BDSM. *Sir Gowther* contains extensive sadistic elements. Gowther takes pleasure in causing the pain and suffering of others. Obviously, Gowther's brand of sadism is not comparable to the kind of consensual, negotiated sadism of a practitioner of BDSM. Nonetheless, awareness of BDSM and kink theory does give insight into the sadism in *Sir Gowther*. BDSM offers literary analysis an awareness of implicit sexual systems of power: representations of what may seem to be extreme or dangerous sexuality exploit sexual power systems for voyeuristic titillating effect.

A text's representation of nonconsensual sexual encounters might engage an audience in many different ways, including, for a kinky audience, through sexual arousal. Sexual arousal is not the only type of arousal, however, and exposure to a combination of sex and violence might arouse other feelings as well, e.g. pity, fear, discomfort. It is also possible, as I shall discuss in this chapter with particular reference to the medieval romance genre, that some mainstream audiences have been conditioned to take pleasure (sexual, moral, or otherwise) in sexual violence, and that the later redemption of a character in a story beginning with sexual violence like rape simply redeems any pleasure in the violence as acceptable. For the non-kinky majority of the audience, some pleasure in viewing a violent sexual scene may come from abjuring desires attributed to people who are portrayed as damaged or sick in some way. In "Mainstreaming Kink," Margot Weiss posits that media use BDSM in two ways that actually reinforce normative sexual boundaries: acceptance through normalization and understanding through pathology. Normalization occurs when BDSM is forced into a "normal" form; for example, a kinky couple might get married and buy a house. Pathologization presents BDSM as a sign of mental illness "to shore up boundaries between normal and abnormal" (119). In either case, the kinkster is

identified as an outsider to dominant social groups. Ummni Khan reaches similar conclusions about cinematic representations of sadism. She argues that a sadist will often be exposed as a villain, or that villains will be exposed as sadists, so that ultimately sadism is excluded from an ostensibly normal and functional society (117-83). People observing pathologized sadism are able to transfer any desire for pain or punishment onto a "bad" character who is unlike them, while still consuming the material.

In *Sir Gowther*, sadism is intensely pathologized. The BDSM-like elements in the tale are examples of what Weiss calls "distanced consumption," "a tantalizing view of something other (sexy, exotic, kinky) that is safely viewed and evaluated from a detached, privileged, and normative position" ("Mainstreaming Kink" 105). The racialization of Gowther and the Sultan in *Sir Gowther* contributes to the process of distanced consumption of violence in these texts. In her analysis of rape narratives, Tanya Horeck finds that there is a consistent racial component to rape stories that taps into cultural fantasies of difference. Racial prejudice makes violence performed by a foreign person more believable to many audiences (29-33, 102-5). The racialization of the demon, fairy, or the Saracen establishes difference from audience members and therefore aids in their ability to separate themselves from, and yet still enjoy, the violent sexuality of *Sir Gowther*. Because the audience members are supposedly not like the Other who commits the sexual assault or violent crime, they experience the thrill of voyeurism but can safely detach themselves from feelings of responsibility or guilt.

David Gilmore offers another theory on how we enjoy the violence of an Other. Drawing on both psychoanalytic and anthropological approaches, Gilmore argues that our attraction to monster stories is based on the double enjoyment we can draw from them as both victim and victimizer; that is, he contends that we both identify with the destructive impulse of the monster, and therefore enjoy the depiction of its violence, but that we also feel guilt for our baser instincts,

and so enjoy the eventual punishment or destruction of the monster (4-5). He also argues that in addition to our identification with the monster's hero, we feel satisfaction upon the death or defeat of the monster because of the way the monster represents some repressed aspect of the self: "since Freud's time, we have come to know the monster of the imagination as not simply a political metaphor, but also a projection of some repressed part of the self… the monster of the mind is always the familiar self disguised as the alien Other" (16). This invocation of repression or rejection of some element of ourselves forms the basis of many theories about the role of the monstrous in literature.

In his book on the role of giants in medieval romance, Jeffrey Jerome Cohen explains that the concept of *extimité* is essential to the formation of identity in Middle English romance. *Extimité* is "the 'intimate alterity' of identity" (*Of Giants* 4). That is, it is something we fear that we identify as being outside ourselves, when actually our fear arises from the fact that the something is a part of us we do not want to acknowledge. *Extimité* relates in some ways to Kristeva's theory of abjection, which posits that we react with horror or disgust to that which threatens to expose a lack of boundaries between the self and the other, or between dominant culture and that which is outside of it. She writes,

> It is thus not a lack of cleanliness or health that causes abjection but what disturbs identity, system, order. What does not respect borders, positions, rules… [abjection is] immoral, sinister, scheming, and shady; a terror that dissembles, a hatred that smiles… a friend who stabs you. (4)

The horror of the abject is in the ways it exposes the fragility of law or other value systems because, as Kristeva argues, it exists outside of the symbolic order and is therefore neither object nor subject. According to Cohen's theory, the monster in romance exposes and embodies the alterity within the self, and by killing that monster, the self renders itself under control and

familiar. Cohen argues that the knight is able to fully enter his masculine identity only once he has expelled the excesses of masculinity by killing their embodiment in the giant. Cohen is concerned with giants in his book, but any monster (including the monstrous Saracen) could serve as the embodiment of *extimité*; in *Sir Gowther* the Saracen and the fairy embody the *extimité* of the self. Their sexual, luxurious, and violent excesses represent the elements of masculinity that the Christian, white knight must expel in order to function within his society. Along similar lines, the Saracen and fairy are both always queer because, as racial Others, their sexuality is a threat to the purity of the white, Christian system: their desires are either perverted (to have non-procreative or excessively pleasurable sex) or carry the threat of miscegenation. The possibility of these other desires demands a reaction of disgust or violence from the romance hero who seeks to restore order to his world.

In contemporary queer theory, the queer can be a positive force; the undermining of heteronormativity encourages self-exploration and provides alternatives to models of desire that can be more entangled with such hegemonic systems as capitalism, racism, or nationalism.[105] The queer is capable of acting as a site of positive difference and possibility. In my later chapters, I discuss two texts in which queer characters provide more obvious positive possibilities; however, in *Sir Gowther*, the queer, because it is coded as racially Other, pathologized, monstrous, and in direct contradiction to the continuation of happy, stable society, has less redemptive potential. Medieval romance is a fundamentally conservative genre, and so challenges to social order appear in romance as dangerous and unappealing. While the queer can expose negative aspects of the society of a text, there is little direct suggestion of positive alternatives to the dominant order in this narrative; the positive function of the queer in *Sir Gowther* only goes so far as to point out

[105] Some queer theorists argue that as some forms of queerness become more generally acceptable in various societies as gay rights advance, they are also being co-opted into support of dominant narratives. For more on this topic, see Warner or Puar.

what is wrong with the non-queer. This strategic use of queerness makes the romance a medieval example of media representations of the queer as threatening to "normal" society in an effort to resist social change or the acceptance of alternate ways of being. Kink theory encourages a reexamination of certain elements of texts in search of a redemptive critique and suggestion of alternatives, but in some cases, as with foreign sadism in *Sir Gowther*, only a partial intervention is possible.

Sir Gowther expresses anxiety about miscegenation. The prohibition of adultery is meant to ensure the legitimacy of heirs, and the management of marital alliances between noble families to ensure that the right bloodlines retain power. Gowther's body, half-demon and half-human, represents the threat of unsanctioned marital alliances. As the child of a devil, and therefore racially Other, he cannot adhere to the standards of the court he is born into before he acknowledges his demonic origins and allows his human half to take control of his life. The fact that his conception is adulterous also signals that he exists outside of what is socially acceptable. Furthermore, Gowther's demon blood brings him closer to the Saracen than the Christian, and his violence against the Church and his excessive sexual activities also suggest his association with the Saracen menace.

The fiend predicts that his child will be "full wylde" (77) and Gowther's monstrous body starts to cause problems as soon as he is born: when he is given to wet-nurses, "[h]e sowkyd hom so thei lost ther lyvys… Be twelfe monethys was gon/ Nine norses had he slon" (113-19). When his mother attempts to nurse him, "He snaffulld to hit soo/ He rofe tho hed fro tho brest" (129-30). Even before he is capable of the sexual violations that will characterize his later life, Gowther's body is a threat to the women he encounters. His appetites are too voracious, and he does not adhere to acceptable boundaries. Gowther does not fit into familial structures because of his monstrosity. His mixed race threatens the court not only because he will inherit a dukedom,

but also because he eliminates the best women in the country with his vampiric nursing, thereby weakening the potential for the nobility to produce new, racially pure heirs to their own estates. Gowther's threat to familial order is larger than just his own family because of his social position, suggesting the way a predatory member of the upper nobility can ruin the lives of his vassals: without order at the top, there can be no order below. Gowther's rejection of familial structure is completed by his father's death because of his actions and his mother's flight from her home to a fortress. Anna Chen also connects Gowther's inability to nurse properly with his rejection of Christianity. She argues that because of the prominence of nursing as a religious trope in the medieval period, whether from the Virgin Mary, the Church, or the lactating Christ, "in suckling his human nurses to death, Gowther further proves his spiritual alienation from the Christian community" (380). Gowther's monstrous appetites prevent him, even as an infant, from integrating into familial or religious systems.

Gowther's growth rate is abnormal, and his giant body is an early signal of his initial incompatibility with the courtly lifestyle. He grows at a ferocious rate, as much in one year as other children do in six or seven (145-46). In medieval romance, the giant represents an excess of masculinity, and the knight must defeat the giant in order to be fully inscribed into masculine identity. In *Sir Gowther*, Gowther himself is the giant who threatens civilization. He injures those he should protect. The interiority of the threat to masculine identity in *Sir Gowther* creates a more direct connection than is usual in romance between the positive and negative aspects of masculine identity.[106] Whereas in most romances the knight's destructive potential is usually externalized in a monstrous foe, in *Sir Gowther* the monstrous is actually within the protagonist's

[106] There are other occasional critiques of masculinity in romance, or awareness of the consequences of masculine enjoyment for women, as in *King Horn* when Horn's celebration of his victory before he goes to rescue Rymenhild explicitly results in her suffering longer: "Murye lif he wroghte./ Rymenhild hit dere boghte" (1401-2).

own body. As is the case in many romances, but more literally in *Sir Gowther*, a threat that seems to be external to the depicted society, the demon or monster attack, is really internal: aristocratic masculinity, improperly harnessed or directed, is dangerous.

As a young knight and Duke, Gowther takes his pleasures from dealing out pain. The text relates his various sexual and violent crimes for almost forty lines (166-204). Because of his demon father, Gowther has a particular vendetta against the Church. He will hear "[m]asse ne matens… Nor no prechyng of no frere" (172-3). He targets "men of holy kyrke" (170) for violence; he makes "frerus to leype at kraggus/ And parsons for to heng on knaggus/ And odur prestys sloo;/ To bren armettys was is dyssyre" (199-202). Perhaps his most vicious crime is his rape and murder of an entire convent of nuns:

> He see a nonry be tho way
> And thedur con he ryde;
> Tho pryorys and hur convent
> With presescion ageyn hym went
> Full hastely that tyde;
> Thei were full ferd of his body,
> For he and is men bothe leyn hom by –
> Tho sothe why schuld y hyde?
> And sythen he spard hom in hor kyrke
> And brend hom up, this con he werke. (181-91)

Notably, the nuns are attempting to appease Gowther by meeting him in procession, but at this point in his life, Gowther knows neither how to give nor to receive appropriate submission, and he responds to their overtures in the worst imaginable ways. The rape of women pledged to virginity for God's sake is a particularly sacrilegious and horrible violation. Furthermore,

Gowther is not alone when he commits his crimes; he "and is men" terrorize the nuns. His evil impulses lead other men astray because of his social position, demonstrating a sort of trickle-down economics of sin: a bad ruler will ruin the souls of his followers, not just his own. In addition to his assault upon the Church, Gowther continues to disrupt familial structures as a perverted knight errant:

> Meydyns maryage wolde he spyll
>
> And take wyffus ageyn hor wyll
>
> And sley her husbondus too. (196-98)

He specifically ruins virgins' prospects by raping them, and also destroys existing marriages by raping wives and killing their husbands. Gowther's rapes destroy Church structures and marital relationships, continuing the work of his demonic father.

Obviously, Gowther's brand of sadism is not comparable to the kind of consensual, negotiated sadism of a practitioner of BDSM. There is no mutual desire for the pain he inflicts as a young Duke, except possibly in the listeners and readers. His sadism gives an audience another opportunity for pleasure through distanced consumption in the same way modern depictions of sadists as deranged lunatics do. He is pathologized in the text as less than human as he acts out his sadistic desires. Gowther chooses the wrong recipients for his violent impulses. As he will later learn, there are appropriate ways for a Christian knight to uphold the order of a court by directing violence against outsiders. At this point in his life, however, Gowther's desires works against the interests of the Christian nobility he is meant to support.

Sir Gowther presents a hybrid of acceptance through normalization and understanding through pathologization in relation to sadism. Gowther is both normalized through a process of humiliation and submission to God, and also pathologized by his racial/demonic otherness. In the end of *Sir Gowther*, order is restored and the patriarchal Christian monarchy is more stable than it

was in the beginning. Gowther's queerness to his society is eliminated. The process of distanced consumption, encouraged by racial difference in the story's antagonists, allows audiences or readers to enjoy the tale on two levels: they may enjoy the excitement/ thrill of horror of the relation of Gowther's sadism and raping, but then the story is made safe through Gowther's reinstitution into the normal structure of monarchy as Emperor and good Christian.

Modern race play in BDSM manipulates the constructedness of race, ideally with an awareness of the lived consequences and realities of these things. It may be a road to power for kinksters of colour. Kink theorists find potential value in race play when it helps a person of color negotiate or rebel against racism, or when it reverses racial dynamics in culturally productive ways,[107] but in *Sir Gowther's* representation of race there is no such therapeutic potential or possibility for inversion of power dynamics. By representing the Saracen or the supernatural as monstrous enemies of Christian stability, this text replicates the worst accusations against BDSM race play: it is blind to racism, privilege, and without concern for lived realities.[108] Given the real world conditions, including the huge amount of anti-Muslim rhetoric and the more insular nature of England, this is hardly surprising; most medieval British people would never have had contact with real Muslims or access to accurate information about Islam to undermine the fantasy of the Saracen, and of course any more directly monstrous enemy, like the fairy, was a repository for anxiety. In *Sir Gowther*, racial representation merely facilitates the distanced consumption of sadism by the white Christian reader or listener; the racial threat of the Saracen or demon reflects the anxiety audiences may have felt about foreigners, but the romance delivers an eventual safe

[107] See, for example, Bauer ("Transgressive and Transformative"), Hernandez, Cruz, and Scott 180-200. As the second chapter of this dissertation discusses, there is some controversy over race play and its impacts both within and outside of the BDSM community. Misinterpretation of such edgy play is common.

[108] Margot Weiss questions the place of racial privilege in BDSM in *Techniques of Pleasure*. See also the work of feminists opposed to sadomasochism, such as Linden *et al*.

ending. The text's depiction of race does not have the same queer potential as does race play in BDSM.

Rape in Romance

BDSM requires negotiated consent, an enhanced level of communication about boundaries and limits, for successful scenes because of the increased potential for unwanted physical injury in play involving impact or tools, or unwanted mental anguish in play involving humiliation. But non-kinky relationships can also result in mental or physical injury, either through lack of communication or intentional abuse by a partner. BDSM explicitly acknowledges the power dynamics and potential for harm in relationships, while sometimes heteronormative relationships neglect to pay such attention to power and boundaries. The heightened standards of consent in BDSM call attention to the potential lack of consent in vanilla (non-kinky) relationships and a connection to kink in a text should also encourage us to examine the status of consent in that work. Such an examination of *Sir Gowther* shows that, like the sadism of racial Others, the representation of rape in this text merely reflects latent aspects of medieval culture.

In BDSM, rape-play transforms the very real fear that people, women in particular, might have about being forced into sex into a thrill of pleasure by means of a carefully negotiated consensual encounter. As with other sadistic and masochistic elements of BDSM, rape-play relies on existing structures of power in order to generate arousal. Kink offers literary analysis an awareness of these implicit sexual systems of power: representations of what may seem to be extreme or dangerous sexuality exploit sexual power systems for voyeuristic titillating effect. The representation of rape in romances like *Sir Gowther* reflects the vulnerability of women to men's sexual desires and can be read as a form of rape-play because of the way the rapes can titillate the audience. Read as rape-play that relies on existing sexual power dynamics for impact, the rape of

Gowther's mother reveals the ways primogeniture made women replaceable, as well as the lack of control medieval women may have experienced in their marriages.

Gowther's conception occurs, as so many things do in medieval romance, under a tree. His mother, desperate to conceive after ten years of marriage, goes into her orchard after praying to God and Mary for a child "[o]n what maner scho ne roghth" (66). Her resort to such a prayer is sinful. Predictably, after she enters the orchard, a fiend appears to her in the shape of her husband. This fiend is an incubus, in fact the same incubus who fathered the wizard Merlin. The text mentions that such fiends "sumtyme" (7) had the power to impregnate women, suggesting a past threat, and perhaps, particularly in light of the mention of Merlin, even a threat only existing in stories; however, theological writings treat incubi as very real phenomena, capable of fathering demonic children on human women. A medieval audience might very well believe in the incubus as a potential threat.[109]

Most critics refer to the sexual encounter between Gowther's mother and the fiend as a rape. I do not disagree with that classification, and certainly by modern standards the encounter is nonconsensual sex. By medieval standards, however, it is not a rape because it involves neither abduction nor violent coercion.[110] In fact, many medieval writers would take the fact that the sex results in Gowther's conception as proof that Gowther's mother consented to and enjoyed the fiend's force, at least in her body.[111] The medieval audience might also understand the fact that

[109] Saunders ("'Sumtyme the fende'") and Cartlidge both include explanations of the place of incubi in the clerical tradition. Saunders, for example, points out that Thomas Aquinas' contemplation of virginity includes consideration of supernatural interference, in *Opera Omnia* he writes, "those who are corrupted by violence either by man, or by the demon incubus, do not lose their virginity, if they resist as much as they are able" (quoted and translated in Saunders 289).

[110] For more on the medieval definition and literary treatment of rape, see Saunders, *Rape and Ravishment*.

[111] The Galenic model argued that for conception to occur, both male and female material must have been released through orgasm. Some clerical and legal writers, for example William of

she has prayed to conceive a child without specifying how it should happen as a rash wish resulting in a perverse fulfillment.

What force does a term like rape have in a culture where women's consent is diminished in general? According to medieval legal and ecclesiastical theory, the sex between the fiend and Gowther's mother would have been classified as fornication rather than rape because Gowther's mother is not a virgin, she is not taken away from her home, and she does not violently resist the sex (Saunders, *Rape and Ravishment* 33-76). Furthermore, since Gowther's mother believed the fiend to be her husband initially, it would not be possible according to a medieval model of marriage for her to refuse him. In "Masoch/Lancelotism" Cohen argues that adultery always blurs categories of identity and questions social structures because it is a sexual act that always violates social boundaries. I would argue that the rape of Gowther's mother, both as an act of unknowing adultery and as a non-consensual sexual act, calls attention to the fact that medieval systems of inheritance and medieval marriages in general rely on the coercion of women by their fathers or husbands, and on the disposability of women's bodies—other than as creators of new heirs.

While the consent of both parties to a marriage was one of two necessary components to the Church's definition of a complete marriage (the other being consummation),[112] in practice the concept of consent for women was almost certainly more theoretical than practical. Families often coerced daughters into assenting to politically or economically beneficial marriage with threats and violence, or simply relied on the cultural structures that encouraged female obedience to

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Conches (d. 1154), use this theory to judge whether or not rape had occurred (Saunders, *Rape and Ravishment* 29-30; Resnick 362-63).

[112] St. Jerome, Gratian, and Simon of Tournai, for example, all support the idea that consent leads to a spiritual marriage, consummation leads to a carnal marriage, and that a marriage needs both aspects to be complete (Resnick 354-55, 368, 369-70).

obtain consent.[113] In many cases, as Resnick notes, clergy followed the classical Roman model "that every daughter is presumed to consent to her father's will in a marriage arrangement, unless her disagreement is clearly made evident" (359). Medieval marriages were arranged by the older generation to advance economic or dynastic interests, not according to the desires of the people being married.

Once a woman was married, in most cases legal control of her assets passed from her father to her husband. Several biblical passages support the authority of a man over his wife, and no orthodox theological writing questions that hierarchy.[114] Because of the concept of the marital debt, neither husband nor wife could refuse the sexual advances of his or her spouse.[115] However, as Ruth Mazzo Karras argues, literary evidence suggests that most often it was women who submitted to the will of their partners (*Sexuality in Medieval Europe* 107-8). The *Wife of Bath's Tale*, which I will examine in another chapter, gives such evidence of the lack of regard for consent at the time. The concept of sovereignty, which the rapist knight in the tale discovers is what all women desire, closely relates to the concept of consent. The tale is a romance, and the ending in which the old hag transforms herself into a beautiful young woman is clearly fantasy. The Wife herself seeks sovereignty in her marriages, and is presented as an unusual and comic case. Alison and her tale suggest that a woman in control of her body and marital prospects is

[113] James A. Brundage's collection of essays *Law, Sex, and Christian Society in Medieval Europe* is an excellent source for reviews of both legal and doctrinal approaches to marriage throughout the medieval period. Chapters 9 and 10 are particularly relevant to a study of the marriage laws and practices that inform romances.

[114] For example, "Wives, submit yourselves unto your own husbands, as unto the Lord" (Eph 5:22); "Likewise, ye wives, be in subjection to your own husbands" (1 Peter 3:1).

[115] "Let the husband render unto the wife due benevolence: and likewise also the wife unto the husband. The wife hath not power of her own body, but the husband: and likewise also the husband hath not power of his own body, but the wife" (1 Cor 7. 3-4).

either a fantasy or a joke.[116] Although every marriage would be influenced by other factors, including individual personalities, and therefore some women would have had more control over their lives than others, on the whole it is fair to say that in practice, medieval society did not value the woman's right to consent to marriage or permit her to exercise her will inside her marriage.

The mother in *Sir Gowther* asks to be impregnated by any means necessary because her husband has already robbed her of her consent: he has informed her that he will be separating from her after ten years of marriage because she has not had a child.[117] The narrative allows that either one of the couple could be at fault – "he chylde non geyt ne sche non bare" (53) – but the Duke blames his wife:

> "Y tro thu be sum baryn,
>
> Hit is gud that we twyn;
>
> Y do bot wast my tyme on the
>
> Eireles mon owre londys bee";
>
> For gretyng he con not blyn. (56-59)

That the Duke cries as he rejects and blames his wife does not undercut his cruelty towards her, or change the fact that the decision about whether to remain married or not is entirely his. Ironically, she gains a choice as a result her rape, and instead of telling anyone about the

[116] There is also the courtly love genre, which presents the beloved as having control over the lover, but most critics agree that this genre was literary and fictional, rather than an accurate reflection of practices at the time. See for example Benton, Donaldson, or Schultz.

[117] The lack of a child resulting in the dissolution of a marriage would also have basis in the consent theory. Though consent theory posits that consent alone could create a marriage, there was the problem of objective proof of consent. Procreation, according to a Galenic model, proved that both parties had consented to the marriage; marriages without children could therefore sometimes be contested or dissolved on the basis that no true consent had occurred. Resnick discusses the consent theory and the problems of objective consent, and how aristocratic families could use it to their advantage, in his article "Marriage in Medieval Culture: Consent Theory and the Case of Joseph and Mary."

encounter, in a parodic replication of the Annunciation, Gowther's mother informs her husband that an angel has appeared to her and told her they will have a child; in this way she covers up her demonic dalliance, and the duke believes he has his heir.

The two sexual scenes in *Sir Gowther* also force us to question the difference between the man and the demon that takes his form. If we read the romance while considering the ways that rape-play in BDSM calls attention to the lack of explicit consent in normative relationships, we might conclude that there is not much of a difference between husband and demon for Gowther's mother. Consider the scenes in which she and her husband have sex after her announcement and the way the fiend rapes her in her orchard. First, the fiend-as-husband:

> …hur of luffe besoghth
> As lyke hur lorde as he might be;
> He leyd her down undur a tre,
> With hur is wyll he wroghtth. (69-72)

Then her husband:

> Be tho lappe he light his wife
> And seyd, "Dame we schall fonde."
> …
> He pleyd hym with that lade hende. (89-94)

Without context, it would be difficult to discern which of the two is meant to be the consensual encounter and which is meant to represent the rape. In the first instance, the fiend seeks her love, and lays her under a tree to have his way with her; his approach is actually less forceful than that of the Duke, who grabs her by her dress and tells her they will be having sex. It is worth noting at this point that this unbridled sexuality is part of the problem of masculine identity that *Sir Gowther* seeks to remedy. Cohen points out that the demon-attended conception in *Sir Gowther*

reminds readers or auditors of the sinfulness of all conceptions ("Gowther Among the Dogs" 228); additionally, I argue that a kinky reading of the conception in *Sir Gowther* calls attention to the potential fallibility of consent in all sexual relations, even, and maybe especially, those between husband and wife.

The nobility's dependence on a primogenitive inheritance structure, which reinforces the low status of women in comparison to men, means that the society *Sir Gowther* represents sometimes depends on non-consensual sex. Because a male heir is necessary to the continuance of political stability, the wife becomes replaceable if she cannot produce one. Alcuin Blamires argues that is important to consider the social resonances of *Sir Gowther*. He identifies the anxiety of a dynastic society about the potential problems of inheritance as the main issue of the text and writes that *Sir Gowther* "finds fresh ways of addressing some of the dominant class's deepest anxieties about heredity" ("The Twin Demons" 57).[118] In a noble marriage, the female body is judged as valuable only because of what it might produce. While depictions of courtly love as the noble pursuit of a perfect, uniquely beautiful woman are numerous in secular medieval literature, courtly love stories almost always end with marriage because of the conflict between the idealized pursuit of women based on love and the more realistic pursuit of women based on the need for children and political alliance. Gowther's contentious existence is triggered by a failure of this system and his mother's desperation not to be cast aside.

Rape and the threat of rape are common in Middle English romance, and form an essential piece of the genre's conception of sexuality.[119] In multiple Arthurian traditions King Arthur

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[118] Blamires' reading accords with this chapter's, though he does not attend to issues of race.
[119] For more on the relation of rape and romance see Saunders *Rape and Ravishment* (esp. chapter 5). Helen Cooper provides a different perspective on women's sexual agency in *The English Romance in Time*. She argues that romance heroines are "feisty and desiring" (220) and are often able to choose their own husbands (chapter 5); however, as Tolmie argues, these women "must be exceptional to catch our attention" (146), and they exist "against a backdrop of silencings,

himself is conceived when Merlin tricks Igraine into believing Uther Pendragon is her husband, Gorlois. Sometimes, rape or the threat of rape in romance is intended to create pathos in an audience: the attacker is evil in some way, and the woman is a victim to be pitied, and possibly saved by a hero. In Malory's *Le Morte d'Arthur*, for example, Bors decides to save a maiden from rape instead of helping his brother Lionel (*The Quest of the Holy Grail*, "Sir Bors"). In *King Horn*, repeated threats to Rymenhild's virginity motivate Horn to action. In *Bevis of Hampton*, Bevis protects Josian from numerous foreign rapists, and obsesses over whether or not she has been able to preserve her virginity during a ten-year marriage to a heathen king.[120] In *Sir Orfeo* the rape of Heurodis by the Fairy King drives her mad and removes her from the human world. In some romances, including *Emaré* and the *Man of Law's Tale*, the plot essentially boils down to an innocent heroine fleeing from one threat of rape to another; these romances create pathos by making the female protagonist suffer unbearable persecution, including the threat of rape. In romances like *Sir Gowther* the abuse of women's bodies may move plot forward, but the women themselves are disposable. In her study of rape in medieval literature, Saunders notes a particular connection in literature between the supernatural and rape across literary genres. She writes, "[w]hat is most striking in all these works is the association of the otherworld with sexual violence or desire for possession of the woman's body" (233). If we take into account the ways that the monstrous or foreign intruder is coded in medieval texts, this is perhaps not surprising.

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legal and social exclusions, abjections, sexual assaults, forced marriages and divisions between domestic and public space: that is their quotidian reality, and it is not altered by their many acts of resistance" (146). While some female characters in romance may exercise a measure of sexual agency, their desires are never revolutionary.

[120] Luckily for Josian, shortly after Bevis rescues her, lions attack them. According to medieval lore, noble virgins were sometimes invulnerable to attack from wild beasts, and could even tame them because of their unique virtue (Laskaya and Salisbury, note). As the text reads, "But they ne myght do hur no shame,/ For the kind of lyouns, ywis,/ A kynges doughter, that maide is,/ Kinges doughter, quene and maide both,/ The lyouns myght do hur noo wroth" (2390-94). The magical proof of her virginity shows how important purity of women's bodies was to the romance genre and to the sure continuation of patriarchal dynasties.

The difference between threats of rape and completed rape in these examples is that the victims of threats are virgins, and the victims of rape are married women. In *De Mendacio*, Augustine wrote that it was not possible to compromise purity by another's desire and so virginity was not ruined by rape (quoted in Saunders 89), but as we can observe from these literary examples, the value placed on the physical purity of women was high and the violation of a woman's virginity would severely devalue her as an object of male desire; the threat of rape was a very effective way to generate anxiety and pity in a medieval audience. Gowther himself demonstrates the way that rape would destroy a woman's marriage prospects when he commits rapes explicitly in order to "spyll" maidens' marriages" (196).

However, in other cases, probably due to the general lack of regard for consent in medieval value systems, non-consensual sex happens and moves the plot forward, but the victim's experience does not matter very much, as in the *Wife of Bath's Tale*, or rape occurs but is part of a positive fantasy, and the redemption of the perpetrator is the purpose of the narrator, or he is not a villain at all. In *Sir Degaré*, another fourteenth-century Breton lai, for example, *Degaré* is conceived when his mother gets lost in the woods and her attendants fall asleep under trees; his father comes to her and announces,

> "Iich have iloved the mani a yer,
> And now we beth us selve her,
> Thou best mi lemman ar thou go,
> Wether the liketh wel or wo."
> Tho nothing ne coude do she
> But wep and criede and wolde fle;
> And he anon gan hire at holde,
> And dide his wille, what he wolde. (105-12)

Though she cries and resists at the time, Degaré's mother quickly begins to think of his father as "here lemman" (195) and their marriage is included as part of the happy ending of the tale. Essentially, Degaré's father is not evil, though he is a fairy prince, and he eventually becomes her husband, and so his raping Degaré's mother is retroactively positive. In *Sir Gowther* itself, the narrator mentions that the same incubus who fathered Merlin fathers Gowther, giving another example of an ultimately positive outcome from a demonic rape. Amy Vines' work on rape in medieval romance shows that the reward of a rapist is not at all uncommon; in fact, she argues that rape is often a necessary step in a knight's chivalric development, and observes that in many cases, if he is well-born, "in many romances, the rapist can become the hero" (167).

The recurrence of questionably consensual sexual encounters in romance indicates an audience interest in hearing about illicit sex. Neil Cartlidge asserts that sexual transgression and naming sexual transgression are parallel crimes in the medieval period. In a sense, this makes the audience of *Sir Gowther* witnesses to the sexual transgressions of the text (136). For a medieval audience, the consumption of representations of violence and the consumption of representations of sex pose a similar ethical dilemma. Both violence and sex are integral to aristocratic identity, but both are also potentially sinful and criminal. The tension inherent in navigating acceptable violence and acceptable sex is present in many romances, suggesting a medieval fascination with the kind of ethical dilemma involved in choosing just the right amount of violence, just the right amount of sex, and the correct objects of both. When these questions are worked out in literature, audiences and readers can consider those dilemmas without personal assumption of responsibility. Similarly, rape-play in BDSM can allow practitioners to work through their personal or cultural issues with rape in a safer space of performance and fantasy; erotica about rape can also aid in the same process.

Though she uses twentieth-century North American examples to support her theories, Horeck's observations about the psychoanalytic consequences and motivations of viewing represented rape may also be applicable to the medieval audience's experience of listening to rape in romance. She argues that the difference between fantasy and reality is not absolute, but relational. She does not see a direct causal relationship between rape and rape fantasy, but does suggest that the prevalence of depictions of rape may normalize rape, or reflect a cultural tolerance of it. Horeck contends that in reading about or listening to narratives of rape an audience engages with cultural fantasies of gender, race, or class difference that often inform rape narratives:

> stories of rape are essential to the way in which the body politic is imagined, serving as a site for cultural conflict and the embodiment of public concerns … the question of who is represented by, and excluded from, the terms of the body politic, is made plain through images and stories of rape. (vii)

In the case of medieval rapes, those cultural fantasies would relate to the dynamics of marriage I discuss earlier: the disposability of female bodies in the face of the importance of dynastic succession and purity of bloodlines.

Kinky reading encourages examination of the status of women's consent in the sexual encounters of *Sir Gowther*. Reading the rape as a sexual response to the power dynamics of medieval society shows that rape is merely an extreme and more violent example of the problems that medieval women might face in any sexual negotiation, including marriage. In medieval culture, a woman's consent is often ignored, or secondary to a man's. BDSM highlights the importance of explicitly negotiated consent in the face of unspoken power dynamics. The representation of rape in these romances allows for a form of play through literary representation that reflects these power dynamics but ultimately leaves them implied and unchallenged. By

reading with increased attention to the status of women's consent, we can see that in these texts, and in many other romances, a problem which seems to be completely external, the rape of a woman by an intrusive foreign or supernatural threat, is actually parallel to an internal issue of aristocratic society, that these aristocratic marriages are based in and uphold systems that similarly devalue women's consent and autonomy.

Knights and Celebrities

The knight, a man of some means and social standing in medieval society, is in some ways analogous to the modern male celebrity. Nigel Saul writes that chivalric ideals led to some of the earliest examples of celebrity because they promoted individual achievement, and a knight with the right blend of talent and charisma could gain public support and fame (20-25). As Vines notes, rape may be part of a knight's development into his masculine chivalric identity. In *Sir Gowther*, this is certainly the case. As the chapter considers below, a period of masochistic penance and support for the church later in his life allow Gowther to atone for his sadism and rapes. He also gains the love of the once mute Princess. That a knight can remain or become a hero after violating women may be distasteful to modern readers. It may be tempting for a modern reader of this romance to conclude that the medieval culture of consent surrounding marriage and women's sexual rights represents a black period of history from which we have steadily progressed. However, a queer connection facilitated by kink theory between Gowther and modern men with wealth and celebrity will demonstrate that modernity has not yet achieved a culture in which sexual consent is clearly valued.[121]

[121] There is a great deal to write about what feminist critics identify as "rape culture" in modern society. This chapter will not be able to consider modern rape culture in the same detail as it does medieval cultures of consent above. Joyce William's entry on rape culture for the *Blackwell Encyclopedia of Sociology* provides a good overview of the term and its history.

Gowther is able to achieve power and fortune following his sexual assault of many women; however, he must first acknowledge his wrongdoing and perform penance.[122] In contrast, one celebrity's example shows that modern society does not necessarily demand similar amends. In a "hot mic" tape recorded in 2005,[123] Donald Trump, reality TV star and current President of the United States, discusses his methods of hitting on women and says, "I just start kissing them… I don't even wait. And when you're a star, they let you do it. You can do anything… Grab 'em by the pussy. You can do anything" (Farhenthold). Trump's comments forge a queer connection between the modern male celebrity and the medieval knight because he states that his sexual assault is facilitated by his status: because he is a star, he has more access to women, and his social capital translates into a lack of resistance from women. In a similar way, knights in medieval romance who commit assault are brought into contact with vulnerable women because they are knights, and their high status generally means their punishment is lenient or self-imposed so long as their assaults are against women with lower social status. Indeed, in his twelfth-century treatise on love and courtship, Andreas Capellanus advises men of rank that they might employ force against peasant women without fear (222-23). Both medieval and modern narratives suggest that when men amass celebrity or high social status, they may exercise that power over women through sexual means.

The tape of Trump's lewd remarks was released in October of 2016, just weeks before the Presidential election, and was followed by increased coverage of new and existing allegations of

[122] Somewhat similarly, though he was not anything resembling a celebrity during his lifetime, Chaucer's probable sexual assault of Cecily de Chaumpaigne did not impact his success, but he was obliged to make a large payment to rectify the situation. I discuss Chaucer's relationship to rape more in chapter 4. See also Cannon.

[123] A hot mic is a microphone that is turned on. In colloquial usage, "hot mic" indicates that the microphone was on when those whose voices are captured by it are not aware that it is functioning; hence, a hot-mic tape is a recording of remarks or conversations not intended to be recorded.

sexual assault against Trump. The release of the tape prompted even some Republicans, including his running mate Mike Pence, to denounce Trump (Fahrenthold), and news outlets speculated that this callous admission of sexual assault would be the final straw in a campaign marked by xenophobia, racism, and sexism (e.g. Drum, Ostrey). Trump's response was a non-apology that both denied his words reflected his real character, dismissed the recording as "locker-room talk"—implying that all men at least joke about sexually assaulting women, and alleged that his opponent, Hillary Clinton, was the one who had actually "bullied, attacked, shamed, and intimidated" women (quoted in Diamond). A month after the tape's release, on November 8th, 2016, Donald Trump was elected President of one of the most powerful nations in the world.[124] As this chapter explores below, the process of self-denial and self-injury that Gowther goes through in order to do penance for his sins is extreme. He nearly dies in his quest for spiritual redemption. As Trump's example chillingly proves, modern Western society does not necessarily demand such a process of rehabilitation. The relationship between the American Presidential election in 2016 and rape culture is complex, and beyond the scope of this dissertation to elucidate; however, Trump's example is a caution to modern readers who would assume moral superiority over medieval culture on matters of sexual consent.

Masochism

The most important insight that an understanding of contemporary BDSM practices and roles gives us into the experience of submission and masochism is the fact that in the performance of a scene, the bottom retains more control than the top. As I discuss in the previous chapter, the bottom sets the limits of his or her experience of humiliation or pain as much as, if not more than,

[124] Because of the Electoral College system in use in the United States, Trump won the presidency even though he lost the popular vote by 2.86 million votes. 62,979,636 Americans voted for Trump (McDonough).

the top. In scene, the bottom may appear to be in distress or at the mercy of the top, but this is an illusion, often based on the exaggeration of real world power dynamics, that covers the actual fair exchange of power that benefits both participants. The bottom receives some kind of pleasure from the pain or humiliation he or she undergoes.[125] In romance, which is also a kind of stylized performance or symbolic representation of real world experience, the character who initially seems to be in the submissive position may in fact retain control of his or her situation. This is the case with Gowther's submissive and masochistic experiences. He undertakes a submissive performance in order to achieve a larger reward, but actually retains his agency throughout the process.

Although they lacked these terms, medieval readers would appreciate that Gowther is a sadist redeemed by masochism. Because of the structures of Christian penance, medieval people were accustomed to thinking of lack as the remedy of excess. Caroline Walker Bynum employs this logic to explain how women used fasting to mitigate a lack of control and potential excess in areas of their lives not related to food; for example, a married woman might not be able to retain her chastity because of sexual obligations to her husband, but she could refuse to eat in order to show her religious devotion. The sacrament of penance essentially involves institutionalized masochism, in that it uses pain or sacrifice to expiate sin; through penance, the Church creates a link between pain and pleasing God and pain and improving oneself (especially since avoiding sin might involve bodily punishment as well, like the wearing of a hairshirt to distract from lust). Kinky relationships often use the structure of penance to inform scenes: when a bottom neglects to follow the top's rules in some way, he or she will be punished to make up for the infraction. In BDSM, a top is often called a Dom or Domme, which ultimately derives from the Latin *dominus*,

[125] For more on the role of the bottom and dynamics between practitioners, see Wiseman (esp. 169-74, 245-76) and Easton and Hardy.

meaning lord. In the medieval Church, priests were often given the same title, Anglicized as Daun (*MED*). The person inflicting pain in both BDSM scenes and medieval penance is therefore a Dom. Of course, the ultimate *Dominus* is God himself.

Kink theory provides a framework for understanding Gowther's masochism and submission to God's will as a response to the hegemonic power structures of his society. Masochism may sometimes be a direct, conscious response to a dominant system (Taylor and Ussher 303); masochism may also be a response to implicit dynamics of power in everyday life. Andrea Beckmann, for example, writes about the "unconsensual 'conditions of domination' implied in socio-political and cultural structures as opposed to the negotiated limits and fluidity of power within consensual 'SM' bodily practices" (125); she argues that those "conditions of domination" in everyday life might result in someone's interest in alternative domination in BDSM. In *Sir Gowther*, masochistic elements may be seen as a response to his place in a medieval hierarchy of power: masochism helps him negotiate his proper place in the Christian hierarchy. The submission of man to God's will and the superiority of God to man are central principles of Christianity.[126] When Gowther goes to Rome to seek penance from the Pope, he begins his transformation from sadist to masochist, and the same violence that makes him horrifying in the first part of the poem, brought on by his demon heritage, is productively re-routed to defeat a different racial menace in the series of battles against the Sultan.

Once Gowther expresses a desire to join society and repent his sins, he turns from sadism to masochism. Because he has been Christened, Gowther can perform penance and gain forgiveness. In his role as a sinner, Gowther is an everyman. His sadism can be understood as representative of the sinful condition of a Fallen man. Both his monstrosity and repentance

[126] "God resisteth the proud, but giveth grace unto the humble. Submit yourselves therefore to God" (James 4:6-7).

underscore the idea that any baptized Christian can abandon a life of sin through the help of Christ. Gowther's youthful sadism is sinful because of his choice of inappropriate objects; his penance involves a reorientation of his sadism, and a temporarily extreme acting out of his submissive position to God. Though Gowther declares his submission to God, he rejects the first penance the Pope attempts to assign him; he will not give up his sword. His negotiation of his penance shows that, like a bottom in BDSM, Gowther retains control of his experience even as he appears to submit to punishment. After he refuses to renounce his falchion, the Pope gives Gowther a new penance: until he receives a sign from God, he cannot eat but from the mouths of dogs, and he must not speak (295-98).

Gowther's penance involves acting like a dog, behavior that connects his penance to pet-play, a type of roleplaying. The submissive partner in pet-play takes on the role of a pet, most often a horse, cat, or dog, while the dominant partner takes the role of owner or trainer. The pet player might seek release from human responsibilities and the care of an owner, but also the humiliation of being treated like an animal instead of as a person. Easton and Hardy write that this kind of play can be "wonderfully uninhibited and releasing" for the submissive (141). Some kinksters report that playing as an animal frees them from embarrassment and sexual shame, or comforts them (Turley et al. 129). Dog pet-play, or puppy play, often indicates a desire for non-human structure and discipline; part of the appeal of being a dog is being trained like one, being forced to perform tricks, and being punished for failure or rewarded for good behavior (Easton and Hardy 141). Gowther is unable to speak while he is among the dogs; likewise, pet players often eschew speech when they are in scene. Instead, they express themselves with the appropriate animal sound, which may be a purer expression of emotion and relieve the submissive from the pressures of linguistic articulation, but also potentially frustrate the pet

attempting to communicate something specific.[127] The lack of verbal communication means that the puppy, or Gowther, must rely on the goodwill of superiors, whether trainer or God.

As I note above, the Saracen is sometimes depicted as an animal or monster in literature in order to stress his difference from the Latin Christian. Saracens are particularly associated with dogs because to call someone a hound was a popular expression of contempt and because of the elision of the Saracen and the *cynocephalus*, a dog-headed monster who symbolizes fears of hybridity and cannibalism (Herzman, Drake, and Salisbury n.602; Arjana 53-56). In *Sir Gowther*, for example, the Emperor declares that he will not let his daughter marry a "hethon hownde" when the Sultan demands to marry her (392). In *Sir Isumbras*, Isumbras fights "hethene houndes" (422, 474), and in *King Horn*, Horn battles "hethene honde" (600), "hunde" (837), and "hundes" (889, 1381). Many critics have noted the significance of the hound motif in *Sir Gowther*. Cohen, for example, writes that Gowther and the hound "enter into a masochistic relation" which allows Gowther to pass through "freakish hybridity to be inscribed more fully than ever into the secure space of the Human" ("Gowther Among the Dogs" 232). Cohen's theorization relies on psychoanalytic understandings of masochism as a part of the process of Oedipalization, or on Deleuze and Guattari's theory of becoming-animal, whereas I work via kink theory to connect this masochistic aspect of Gowther's penance with pet-play. This approach emphasizes the deliberate roleplaying that Gowther does as he lives among the dogs. Anna Chen also connects Gowther's bad behaviour and necessary penance to dogs. She writes that he is "[c]harged with eating like a dog because he has behaved like one" ("Consuming Childhood" 374). Cory James

[127] For more on the motivations for and experiences of puppy play, see the discussion forum posts on Puppy Play (Berith et al.) the most popular group for puppy players on *Fetlife* (the most popular online community for kinksters), esp. "How did you become a puppy?" "Being a pup (A beginners guide) [sic]," "Being a Trainer/Handler (A beginners guide) [sic]," and "Puppy Play: A sexual drive," and Turley et al. (esp. 129-31).

Rushton points out that the bestial element of Gowther's spiritual journey is like Cain's, but in reverse (75).

The process of training Gowther undergoes allows a positive association with dogs to replace the negative and racially influenced negative connotation of being like a dog. In his early life, Gowther reflects the negative traits of the rapacious *cynocephalus*: he is wild, dangerous, and vicious. Once Gowther starts his penance and dogs become a more literal part of the story, he becomes like a productive and domesticated dog, trained properly and part of the court. Before he arrives at the German emperor's court, Gowther has never participated in the domestic traditions of the hall. Once he becomes dependent on dogs for food, he needs to go into the hall space in order to access those dogs and to eat. The Emperor recognizes his attractiveness and gentleness, and even theorizes that he might be performing some penance, and so gives the dogs extra meat so that Gowther will have enough to eat (505-49).[128] The penance, which necessitates sitting under a table with the dogs, is obviously humiliating; it humbles Gowther before the court, and requires him to start at the bottom of the court system as "Hob hor fole" (555) in order to earn his way back into society's and God's good graces. In Turley et al.'s study, one respondent reported that puppy play made his thoughts less complex and allowed him to focus on obeying his master (130). Gowther's dog-like performance similarly gives him space to focus on pleasing God while integrating to the simplest level of the court. In addition to humiliating him, the restrictions of his

[128] The Emperor's recognition of Gowther's nobility while he behaves like a dog recalls Marie de France's *Bisclavret*, in which the protagonist, Bisclavret, is a werewolf stuck in his hound-like form because his unfaithful wife and her lover steal his clothes. When he meets his King in his hound form, he is still able to communicate his loyalty and nobility, and becomes part of the King's coterie as a beast. When Bisclavret bites off his wife's nose, after having been well-behaved with all others, the King's advisor figures out that he must be connected to Bisclavret and retrieves his clothes after torturing his wife, so that Bisclavret can take human form again. *Sir Gowther* and *Bisclavret* suggest that a beast-like form or behavior cannot hide true nobility of character.

roleplaying like a dog are what allow Gowther to become part of the court and accept its hierarchies as he never did as a wild youth. Being like a dog teaches Gowther to be a better man.

Gowther wants to be good, so he needs to be punished. Because Gowther is now submitting to God, his own body must be open to injury: whereas before his conversion Gowther never suffered injury, as a servant of God, Gowther must experience bodily suffering in order to earn redemption. Gowther's injuries make him worthy of forgiveness in the same way that mortification of the flesh cleanses a body of lust. Since Gowther's sins are extreme, his mortification must be extreme, and *Sir Gowther* documents his injuries to demonstrate his repentance. After the second day of fighting, Gowther does not join the celebration: "he was full wery/ Bryssud for strokus that he had laghtth" (534-35). He remains in his little room, contemplating his sins and how to earn forgiveness. In the third battle he receives the final stroke of his penance: "Ther come a Sarsyn with a speyre/ Thro tho scholdur smott Gotheyr" (634-35). This serious injury is the last thing that happens to Gowther on the battlefield, and the last event before the mute princess announces that God has forgiven him. Gowther's physical pain delivers him from his sin and proves his dedication to God. His spear wound also allows a potential association between Gowther and Christ on the cross, suggesting the holiness of Gowther that is confirmed at the end of the tale. As part of his penance, Gowther also denies his appetites for the first time by restricting his food and drink.[129] Both his willingness to suffer and his discipline of his appetites show a more proper, Christian regulation of his body.

His retention of his sword makes it clear that Gowther's status as a knight is essential to his identity; however, his previous use of the sword must be redeemed as part of his penance. The

[129] Anna Chen argues that eating and childhood are the central concerns of the text. She shows how regulation of table manners and metaphors about eating are central to children's education, which was considered to tame them from a near animal state. So, she argues that Gowther must eat like a dog because he has behaved like one, and shows how his learning to eat appropriately corresponds to his emotional, social, and spiritual development.

sword allows Gowther to be productively violent and experience physical pain in service of the emperor. Shortly after Gowther arrives at the Emperor's court in Germany, a messenger arrives from the Sultan, demanding the hand of the Emperor's daughter in marriage (379-386). Gowther now has an external enemy who provides an appropriate target for his violent impulses and allows him to use violence correctly—to help maintain a kingdom instead of destroying one. Having his sword, which was once part of his damnation, allows him to work towards his redemption.[130]

After he leaves the Pope to perform his penance, Gowther still kills people, but they are the right people to kill (Saracens), and so they construct the right kind of knightly identity.[131] The divine provision of armour to Gowther proves that his prayer to "helpe is lord in weyr" (407) is the right kind of prayer, unlike his mother's rash prayer just before his conception. In battle, Gowther is a formidable opponent against the Saracens:

> Mony a crone con he stere
> And hew apon full fast;
> He gard stedus for to stakur
> And knyghttes harys for to flakur
> When blod and brenus con brast;
> And many a heython hed of smott (425-30)

Gowther's talent for fighting is clear, and as he fights, the text begins to refer to him in much more complimentary ways than before he begins his penance. Early in the text, Gowther is described with words like "warlocke" (22), "full wylde" (77), "breme" (108), "brathe" (108), and

[130] In this way, the sword is an example of the *pharmakon*, a drug that can be either poison or medicine, depending on context. As Derrida explains, the pharmakon is ambivalent, but often an agent of change (70-71).
[131] As I note above, the rejection of a foreign or monstrous enemy is often essential to the construction of identity in romance.

"so wekyd" (148). By contrast, during and after the battles he is "kene" (480), "doghtty" (497, 618), "anturous" (523), a "gud knyght" (589, 647), "Of all Cryston knyghttus the flower/and with tho Sarsyns dredde" (713-14) and "wele belovyd" (728). Gowther begins to collect praise for his martial prowess instead of admonition for his violence against his subjects.

As he metes out more and more violence on the Saracen enemy, Gowther receives more and more of God's favour, symbolized through the lightening of his divinely-provided armor and horses, which go from black to red to white over the three days of battle (412, 467, 563). Shirley Marchalonis notes that these changing colors indicate an increasing purity in Gowther's soul, and also that they correspond to the progression of colors used in medieval knighthood ceremonies (20-23). Given the connections in the text between racial purity and goodness, we can also connect the lightening of Gowther's armor to a process of de-racialization. Gowther, by submitting to God and embracing Christian duty, becomes good and pure and therefore visibly and unambiguously "mylke whyte" (563). In this way, his successful conversion moment reflects the tradition of true Saracen conversion in romance, which could be signaled by a lightening of the convert's skin, as is the case in *The King of Tars* when the Sultan converts and "[h]is hide that blac and lothely was / Al white bicom thurth Godes gras" (922-23). The battles with the Sultan confirm the importance of violence to the life of the good Christian knight and confirm that Gowther is no longer a threat to Christian stability.

Before his trip to Rome, Gowther's violence is all motivated by his own desires. His redemption does not involve eschewing violence; instead he must redirect it towards appropriate targets. Ilan Mitchell-Smith argues that romances like *Sir Gowther* reveal a construction of ideal chivalric masculinity that shows that violence is only appropriate in particular circumstances: he writes that in chivalric romance, "some radical behavior is sanctioned as beneficial and identity building and other violent moments are condemned as monstrous and out of control" (152).

Gowther is comparable to Saracens in his early life because of his inhuman heritage and hatred of Christianity; therefore, he can, through killing hundreds of Saracens, prove his new devotion to Christ. His learning to direct violence appropriately leads to stronger homosocial and hierarchical bonds in the text, showing us that these bonds are built on violence and power. Dominance and violence are part of everyday life for medieval knights; what matters is that they follow the rules. As Matthew Weait theorizes, one threat of sadism to the order of society is that the top puts him or herself in the place of law by doling out punishment (75). In his early sadism, Gowther doles out punishment to those who follow the laws he should be protecting; by reorienting his violence onto Saracens, he acts within the law of chivalry. Gowther does not need to stop being violent to fit into society; he just needs to respect his place in the hierarchy and deploy his violence towards pro-social ends.

Gowther's sadism in his youth and his masochism during his penance are not completely analogous to BDSM play. But what the theory about consensual sadism and masochism of contemporary BDSM shows us about all types of sadomasochism is that these desires come from a power structure that is already in place. *Sir Gowther* exaggerates these existing power structures in order to demonstrate the improper and proper ways that young men can seek out identity. Gowther's youth does not involve experiencing pain, his lusts are uncontrolled, and he misapplies the violence necessary to the knight's life towards innocent victims, but when he starts acting as a proper knight, he humbles himself in body for the good of the court, reaffirming the patriarchal Christian structures he once threatened.

Conclusions

Kink theorists differ on the extent to which BDSM is capable of effecting social change or truly resisting dominant narratives. Scholars like Margot Weiss see BDSM as part of circuit of

sexuality relying on neoliberal privilege (*Techniques of Pleasure*); others, like Patrick Califia, see BDSM as "erotic blaspehemy" that can disrupt heteronormativity (*Public Sex* 158). Robin Bauer examines how privilege can limit the potential of kink to truly transgress boundaries, and shows that while kinky communities can effectively dissolve categories of gender, groups of white practitioners who are aware of their white privilege will not engage in the same dissolution of racial categories. He therefore argues that some BDSM play can be successful in undermining norms, while other play only points out the existence of those norms ("Transgressive and Transformative"). Sometimes, then, BDSM may function in much the same way as the *carnivalesque*, where chaotic or humorous textual depiction of normally inappropriate behavior (such as bawdy, profane activity) function as escape valves for inappropriate desires or ideas but ultimately reinforce social norms.[132] A kinky reading of *Sir Gowther* exposes the carnivalesque elements that expose and ridicule the sex-gender systems of aristocratic medieval society, and while orthodoxy is ultimately restored in the text, the critiques are still admitted.

Though *Sir Gowther* plays with sadism, consent, and masochism, it does not deploy its queer elements as proponents of change; rather, the queer is present to be silenced and the ending of the text restores heternormativity. Threats to European society are conceived as devils and foreigners; the racialization and queering of the enemy making it easier for audiences to enjoy and then disavow the violence of the stories through distanced consumption. Gowther is a bad young knight and duke. The crimes he commits are primarily related to violence and sex, two things that are absolutely necessary to monarchical societies and masculine identity, but which are dangerous in excess. The proper reorientation of his sadism is necessary to ensure a happy

[132] Bakhtin introduces his theory of carnival in *Rabelais and His World*.

ending. After Gowther defeats the Sultan and saves the Emperor, the Princess dies and is miraculously restored to life to announce that Gowther has been forgiven for all his sins. Her literal rebirth reflects Gowther's symbolic rebirth as a good Christian man. Gowther and the Princess, both no longer mute, are married. Gowther gives his lands in Austria into the keeping of the old earl who first told him about his demonic father and marries him to his mother, re-cementing the discourses of marriage that encourage the trading of female bodies for dynastic stability and view the married couple as a cornerstone of patriarchal and noble hierarchies. Gowther builds churches and abbeys to make restitution for his damage to Church property and to atone for his sins against the clergy, which strengthens the presence of the Church in his lands and suggests the obligation of the secular nobility to support sacred institutions.

Kinky reading alerts us to the ways in which literature explores cultural issues of sexuality. While the centrality of rape and violence in romance are not new insights, knowledge of BDSM theory offers a new perspective on both issues. First, it calls attention to the lack of consent, not just in the fiend's rape of Gowther's mother, but also in her experience of marriage. Second, it provides a framework for understanding sadism as a non-pathological desire that exists, not just in those Others that romance repudiates, but also in the orthodoxy it promotes and the audience's very enjoyment of the genre. The pleasure of this text is sadistic. A kinky reading shows that *Sir Gowther* operates on the premise that people enjoy doling out or hearing about certain types of pain, and that sadism is acceptable in medieval culture so long as it is properly directed.

At the end of *Sir Gowther*, neither violence nor sex has been eliminated, but each has been redirected towards its proper object. Violence against the heathen enemy strengthens the homosocial bonds between knights and ensures the continuity of the Christian monarchy, and sexual activity, no longer driven by uncontrolled lust, is confined to marriage. *Sir Gowther* provides opportunities for two types of enjoyment: first, the distanced consumption of violence

and rape provides safe thrills; second, the renunciation of the perpetrators of these sins through racial hierarchization can be pleasurable. While violence and dominance, properly oriented, are a part of the lives of knights, it is the violence against women in literary texts which constitutes a response to the realities of women and their place in the power structure of aristocratic nobility that illuminates the status of consent in these texts. Gowther's mother experiences nonconsensual sex that highlights the less obvious ways that she lives without true access to agency in matters of sex and marriage. Considering the masochism of Gowther as willing submission that ultimately enhances his actual authority and control demonstrates the ability noble medieval men had to play with power. Gowther does not prove himself to be a very good (that is, attentive to consent) or productive (that is disruptive of normative power structures) kinkster in the end, and his text upholds heteronormative values after playing with elements of kink.

Chapter 4: Negotiating Power and Pleasure in *The Book of Margery Kempe*

This chapter examines how *The Book of Margery Kempe*[133] depicts Margery's relationships to pain, sex, and Christ in order to highlight the power dynamics she navigates as a woman in fifteenth-century England, and how her navigations resonate with the practices of the contemporary queer communities of BDSM. BDSM theory offers a way to understand pain that does not rely on an opposition between pain and pleasure, on pathologization, or on a reductive understanding of the possibilities of agency in desire. My second chapter discusses kink theory, including a variety of potential motivations for masochistic desires: masochists may experience pain as arousing, or they may take pleasure from relinquishing control; sexuality is individual and so there are numerous reasons why someone may connect sex and pain, or enjoy feeling sensations most experience as painful. My third chapter shows how experiencing pain willingly might ultimately help aristocratic men gain more control over themselves and their courts, and demonstrate that pain is in fact a structural remedy to the kinds of excess to which aristocratic men are most prone. This chapter begins with a comparison between Margery Kempe, a fifteenth-century pious laywoman, and Bob Flanagan, a twentieth-century disabled man, that provides more insight into possible motivation for Margery's particular, masochistic brand of piety. Following an analysis of the connections between Margery's devotional practices and kink, the chapter considers Margery's performances as examples of queer performativity and futurity,[134] and, finally, explains her queer affective piety as a form of empowering masochism.

Pathology and Performance

[133] Hereafter, the *Book*.
[134] Queer futurity, as articulated by José Esteban Muñoz in *Cruising Utopia*, is an optimistic mindset that challenges Edelman's idea of the queer death drive and questions the present while imagining positive futures and possibilities for minoritarian subjects through queer aesthetics.

Bob Flanagan was a performance artist in the 1980s and 1990s living with cystic fibrosis.[135] His BDSM inspired performance pieces interrogate assumptions about control, illness, and sexuality. A self-described "supermasochist," Flanagan used BDSM to publicly push the boundaries of his bodily experience. Flanagan's work challenges the tropes about disabled bodies as sick, immobile, or asexual.[136] In interviews and his own writing, Flanagan attributes his desire to be bound to his experiences as a very young child being restrained as part of his extensive medical treatment; he remembers diverting the unwanted pain of his frequent stomachaches by masturbating (Juno and Vale 11-12). Flanagan felt that the consensual pain he put himself through as part of practicing BDSM and in his art pieces allowed him to overcome the lack of medical control he had over his body. His art explores the connections between medical pain and SM: "the SM world is more fun, and you can choose it. I was forced to be in the medical world, so I turned that into something I could have control over instead of something that was controlling me" (Juno and Vale 11). Flanagan's experience of pain was dependent on context, and for him the willing assumption of pain could be an empowering experience. His performances and writings redefine the value of pain: most people define pain as bad and the absence of pain as good; however, for Flanagan, in whose life pain was inevitable, pain could be a positive experience so long as it was pain he controlled.

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[135] Cystic Fibrosis (CF) is a fatal genetic disease affecting the digestive system and the lungs. It affects sufferers' ability to digest fats and protein properly and leads to loss of lung function, which is the cause of death for most people with the disease (Cystic Fibrosis Canada). In the 1990s, Flanagan was one of the oldest people living with CF. He died at the age of 43 in 1996.

[136] Dawn Reynolds argues that Flanagan's experience shows how BDSM might intersect with disability and allow new possibilities for the sexuality of disabled people. Reynolds writes that BDSM is more readily able to accommodate different body types, is expressly concerned with pre-negotiation of limits and needs, and already plays with the boundaries of pain and pleasure, and so may be an expression of sexuality that would connect well with disability. For more on sexuality from the perspective of disability theory, see McRuer or Shildrick.

Flanagan's performance art all involved some aspect of masochism. In *Nailed*, for example, he nailed his scrotum to a board in front of an audience after talking and joking with them about his experiences with CF and with SM (Juno and Vale 62). His performances encourage honest conversations about illness and sex, and his attitude towards his life involved pursuing pleasure while maintaining a sense of humour. Juno and Vale, the editors of a special issue of the journal *Re/Search* on Flanagan, discuss how his outlook on sex and his enthusiastic embracing of his kinks reflect on a general repressiveness in society and argue that his life and work "[underscore] the necessity for a widespread societal transformation of *shame* into *disclosure"* (9, italics in original). Flanagan did not seek to convert anyone to his way of living; rather, he hoped to encourage people to embrace their flaws and find what makes them happy.

Flanagan's most comprehensive exhibit was *Visiting Hours*, a museum-like showing of his medical and voluntary sexual pain that opened in Santa Monica in 1992 and travelled to New York City in 1994 (Reynolds 45). According to Flanagan, *Visiting Hours* is his definitive work, and "it focuses on where Cystic Fibrosis and SM converge" (quoted in Juno and Vale 66). Flanagan began to link his illness and sexuality during his childhood, and so he also incorporates childish settings and objects into the show. Visitors entered into a pediatrician's waiting room, where SM catalogues had been put inside Highlights magazine covers, progressed through rooms of graphic photos and videos of both Flanagan's SM activities and medical procedures, a room of toys modified to communicate sexual meanings, and finally encountered Flanagan in a hospital bed. He did not plan or invite it, but visitors often spoke with Flanagan about their own experiences with illness or pain at this stage, though Flanagan suddenly being pulled up into the air and suspended by his ankles sometimes interrupted conversation (Juno and Vale 96-100).

In *Visiting Hours*, Flanagan's performance gave him the opportunity to reclaim his body and represent it in ways of his own choosing, defying assumptions about the ill or disabled body

and its experiences of both sex and pain. While heteronormative assumptions position disabled people "as asexual — incapable of or uninterested in sex" (McRuer 107), the work of performers like Flanagan and of disability theorists like Robert McRuer and Margrit Shildrick demonstrates that disability, "with its potential absences, displacements and prosthetic additions to the body — generates its own specific sets of sexual possibilities that may both limit and extend the performativity of self-identity" (Shildrick 128). Flanagan's exhibitionist reclamation forces his spectators to acknowledge him as a sexual being even in the midst of extensive medical interventions on his body. In her exploration of her own transition into a disabled identity, Lisa Figge writes that she feels a need to "redirect the demand to medicalize my situation" (73), and learns to resist the feelings of shame about her body that encourage her to make others comfortable by submitting to their expectations (65). Flanagan redirects the medicalization of his body not by denying the role that medicine must play in his life, but by refusing to experience or to allow people to see his body through a solely medical context.

Like Flanagan, Margery is seeking to reclaim her body. She meets opposition not only from her contemporaries, as I discuss below, but also from modern critics of her *Book*. There is a long and unfortunate history of attempts to pathologize or medicalize Margery's Kempe's experience. Both kink theory and disability theory suggest potential reasons for this pathologization: her sexual desires do not conform to normative medieval ideals, and she is a married woman whose disruptive crying fits mark her as physically different, encouraging the medieval marking as sinful or modern medicalization of her body. Critics have called her a hysteric, not a genuine mystic; or they have decided that she was suffering from post-partum depression, not truly communicating with God. In *The Middle English Mystics*, for example, Wolfgang Riehle characterizes Margery as a copycat who "shows pathologically neurotic traits" in her imitation of mystics like Richard Rolle (11). Anne Hudson Jones refers to Margery as having "experience of

mental illness, which today might be called postpartum psychosis" (359). William Ober calls one of her visionary experiences "the psychotic episode" (30). Father David Thurston, writing shortly after the rediscovery of her manuscript, concludes, "[t]hat Margery was a victim of hysteria can hardly be open to doubt" (quoted in Allen lxv). The *Book* identifies Margery in various places as sick,[137] but to understand her as merely sick, or to approach her through modern psychiatric diagnosis constitutes a refusal recognize her significance beyond her illness. Like Flanagan, Margery may be sick in some ways; however, also like Flanagan, she is not only sick.

Diagnosing Margery enables dismissal. Likewise, Margot Weiss identifies dismissal through pathologization as one of two ways modern media avoid considering the commentary that BDSM practices can provide on socially acceptable oppressive power structures ("Mainstreaming Kink"). Dismissing Margery as pathological allows her contemporaries or literary critics to ignore how the ways she negotiates a pleasurable place for herself within restrictive Church hierarchies can illuminate the restrictions of the power dynamics in her life. Riehle, for example, also says that although the intensity of her experience might suggest a comparison with St. Francis of Assisi, "it is nevertheless very apparent at the same time how much Margery lacks the deep spirituality of Francis" without actually elaborating as to why that might be the case (139). However, even if Margery did suffer from some equivalent of post-partum depression, for example, it would not alter the significance of her *Book*. Even accurate medical or psychiatric diagnosis of Margery's suffering, were such a thing possible, should not involve a consequent dismissal of her text. Margery's conduct lies outside of theological and social norms, and pathologizing her is a convenient way to reinforce those norms. In light of the

[137] For example, in book 1, chapter 1 Margery despairs of her life "for sekenesse" (4) after she gives birth to her first child and has horrible visions of demons; she becomes so ill on pilgrimage that "sche wend to a be ded" (1.27.1527); and in book 1, chapter 56 the text relates that she suffers "gret and divers sekenes" (3238), including in her head and back, and eight years of intense recurring pain in her side.

history of critical pathologization of Margery, I want to reiterate that I am not interested in pathologizing her according to modern medical ideas. I do not compare her to Flanagan in order to argue that she was sick in a similar way. A comparison between Flanagan and Margery works, not because both are completely explained in some way by disease, but because both Flanagan and Margery use voluntary suffering to overcome limits they experience due to their respective marginalization.

Flanagan's marginalization was the result of his disability: because he had Cystic Fibrosis, he was medically limited and therefore could not participate in heteronormative formations of sexuality. His performances allowed him to undermine the idea that a body like his cannot be sexual while also rejecting the same heteronormativity that excluded him. Margery's marginalization is the result of her anti-social religious conduct and her gender: as a married woman in fifteenth-century England she was expected to bear children and lead a household. In order to change perceptions about her body and the roles it makes available to her, Margery publicly performs her piety. She does so through various methods, including conversations about spiritual matters, pilgrimage, penance, and bouts of holy crying. Some people who witness her devotions perceive her as damaged, but others become her allies in her quest for spiritual enlightenment. The performance of her pain or ecstatic devotion allows her to reclaim some control over her own body. Flanagan and Margery come to eroticized pain from very different situations, but their attempts to regain control over their bodies through performative pain demonstrate the potential of such performances, in both the medieval and modern eras, to impact and influence social perceptions of their performers.

Flanagan's direct explanations of how his public performance of pain expands his experience of control over his body give insight into how Margery's performance of wailing and crying are empowering to her: she can use these public expressions of pain to change the way

people think about her body. In both cases, the discomfort of viewing such a performance has the potential to alter perceptions; audiences can respond with disgust and reject what they see, or they may re-examine their ideas about disability or female embodiment. I will return to the idea of performance in relation to Margery's devotion later in this chapter. While Flanagan's sexual performances force people to consider the potential for sexuality in the disabled body, queering notions of sexual experience focused on penetrative, heterosexual sex between able-bodied people, Margery's public fasting and wailing force the townspeople she encounters to pay attention to her body not as maternal or sexual, but as part of her devotion, and in doing so she undermines popular medieval conceptions of the female body.

Margery's Textual/Sexual Background

Margery's *Book* is the biography of a fifteenth-century laywoman who undertakes a devotional journey from careless sinner to mystic. It includes accounts of her contemplations and visionary encounters with the Trinity, especially Christ, her conflicts with others over religion, and her experiences as a pilgrim in England, Germany, Spain, Italy, and the Holy Land. Margery Kempe, the protagonist, is a wife and mother of fourteen children from the East Anglian town of King's (once Bishop's) Lynn. Following a difficult childbirth, she is delivered from madness by a vision of Christ and begins her spiritual journey. In Jerusalem, God gives her a gift of spontaneous holy crying that brings her mostly negative attention, from laypeople and clergy members alike. She is accused of Lollardy several times because of her desire to converse on scriptural matters.[138] As she travels she clashes with ecclesiastical authorities and jealous townspeople over her piety. One

[138] Lollards followed the teachings of John Wycliff, a fourteenth-century theologian who was posthumously convicted of heresy, exhumed, and burned for his dissension from Church orthodoxy. Lollards were often uneducated, or educated only in English; they sought to translate the bible into English and make it more widely available to lay people; and they believed that the Church had become corrupted by secular influences and greed.

of her main concerns as a woman who is married and has already born children is proving her chastity and avoiding the sin of lechery.

The *Book* was probably written in the late 1430s. The only extant manuscript is a copy from approximately 1450, annotated by four different readers, and marked as property of the Mount Grace Carthusian monastery in Yorkshire. It was known only from excerpts published by Wynken de Worde and Henry Pepwell in the sixteenth century until Colonel William Butler-Bowden discovered a manuscript in his cupboard in 1934, which independent scholar Hope Emily Allen identified as a full copy of *The Book of Margery Kempe*. Since its re-discovery, the *Book* has generated fervent debate among medievalists, and criticism on the text has been plentiful, particularly since feminist critical intervention in the early 1990s.[139]

One of the largest points of contention about the *Book* has been over authorship: critics wonder if Margery Kempe really existed,[140] whether she worked alone, and if her work is fact or fiction.[141] These issues can be clarified by considering the conventions of medieval writing in

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[139] For a brief overview on the history of *The Book of Margery Kempe* see Lynn Staley's introduction to her edition. For more details on the transmission history, see Chappell; for more on the history of the critical reception, see Mitchell.

[140] Though critics like Felicity Riddy point to a lack of historical documentation supporting Kempe's existence, medieval records, particularly on non-royal, non-religious women, can be very difficult to come by. In fact, there are some sources that seem to document Kempe's existence. In 1438, for example, a Margery Kempe was admitted into the Guild of the Trinity of Lynn (Staley 1996 1, note 2). Research by Deborah Ellis uncovers credible support of Margery's existence through consideration of her named relatives, especially her father, and the ways Bishop Lynn's situation in the early fifteenth century is reflected in the themes of the *Book*. Most recently, Sebastian Sobecki has discovered a letter in a German archive he identifies as having been prepared for Margery's son John, the first scribe of the *Book*, in 1431. In his article on the find, Sobecki argues that the letter is proof of Kempe's historical existence and anchors the *Book* in reality. Although the evidence we have is scarce, it is convincing. Even without such records, it would be entirely possible for Margery Kempe to have existed. In some cases, questioning her historical validity seems to be connected to a disbelief that a woman like her could have existed in her time.

[141] There are many possible interpretations of the *Book*'s authorship, but these may be separated into essentially three positions: that the *Book* is autobiography, and Margery Kempe, a real woman, wrote it; that the *Book* is fiction, and Margery Kempe, a real woman, wrote it (with some

general, and of hagiography and autobiography in particular. The *Book* is written in the third person for the most part, and according to the text itself, this is because Kempe dictated the book to an amanuensis. Though some critics have taken the amanuensis as a sign of Kempe's illiteracy and therefore questioned the breadth of her knowledge as represented in the text, or her role in its composition, as Anthony Bale notes, the medieval culture of literacy is much different from the modern, and Kempe's use of the amanuensis would be unremarkable even if she were able to read and write herself (xiv-xv). Furthermore, he points out that the process of authorship in Kempe's time involved more than one person in most cases, including authors, scribes, amanuenses, and annotators (xvii-xx). He concludes, therefore, that, "instead of looking for a single 'author' for *The Book of Margery Kempe*, we would do better to acknowledge the collaborative, and sometimes haphazard, way in which medieval writing was produced" (xx). The book may not be Kempe's unmediated perspective, but that is not a significant reason to doubt her authorship in her cultural context.

Furthermore, the use of third-person narration and recording by an amanuensis is the most common form of textual transmission for women's hagiographical writing. These writings often detailed the miracles and holy works of pious men and women as part of a campaign for canonization. Saints' lives were immensely popular texts in England in the Middle Ages, and the *Book* borrows extensively from the hagiographical tradition. A female saint's life is most often written by her primary confessor or another religious man of standing; for example, Marie

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degree of intervention by an amanuensis); and that the *Book* is fiction, Margery Kempe is fictional, and someone else, probably a male cleric, perhaps the second scribe, wrote it. Karma Lochrie argues that Margery Kempe is the author of a mystical text. Lynn Staley contends that the text is fiction written by Margery Kempe (*Dissenting Fictions*). John C. Hirsch argues that the second scribe is equally responsible for the *Book*. In a set of articles from *Voices in Dialogue: Reading Women in the Middle Ages* Nicholas Watson and Felicity Riddy provide an overview of the debate as well as their own positions.

d'Oignes's life story, which Margery's amanuensis mentions reading (1.62.3611),[142] was written in the early thirteenth century by Jacques de Vitry, her confessor and a bishop. Following those conventions might also help to ensure her text's legibility. As Sidonie Smith, a theorist of women's autobiography, argues,

> [Margery] came to her narrative influenced by prevailing and cherished 'fictions' about woman's mystical life. The *Book's* very legibility (for herself, her amanuensis, and her projected reader) derived from its resonance with biographical and hagiographical representations of female mystics. (66)

It is likely that the *Book* was written at least in part to present Margery as a candidate for sainthood, or for exemplary status as a holy woman or mystic, so it makes sense that her text would attempt to follow the conventions of hagiography and mystical writing.[143]

Finally, feminist theory on experience and recent work on the genre of autobiography provide additional parameters for considering this text. Feminist scholars like Donna Haraway and Joan W. Scott stress the importance of recognizing the conditions of knowledge production and also the potential for knowledge openly based on experience to create new kinds of valued evidence. These feminist methods acknowledge the text's recounting of Margery's experience as worthwhile and relevant while also keeping the limitations of truth in any writing in mind. Autobiographies in general are necessarily subjective accounts of reality, a combination of fact and personal fiction. The subject of such a text is never a straightforward reproduction of a real person, and the narrative is never a faithful recounting of experiences because of the subjectivity of the author. As Smith writes,

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[142] All textual references to and quotations of *The Book of Margery Kempe* in this chapter are from Lynn Staley's 1996 edition. Citations will give book, chapter, and line numbers.
[143] Katherine Lewis, for example, makes this argument in "Margery Kempe and Saint Making in Later Medieval England."

> I understand the "self" of autobiography not to be an a priori essence, a spontaneous and therefore "true" presence, but rather a cultural and linguistic "fiction" constituted through historical ideologies of selfhood and the processes of storytelling. … autobiography becomes the both the process and the product of assigning meaning to a series of experiences, after they have taken place, by means of emphasis, juxtaposition, commentary, omission. (45)

Although the *Book* emphasizes its own truth and accuracy at many points, the narrative is shaped by the subjectivities of those involved in its composition. Lynda Barry calls her autobiographical comics "autobifictionalography" to emphasize the effect of her memory and perspective, which are subjective, on her own life story. Her assertion that her version of her autobiography is "trying to make myself look as cool as possible" (Barry) is similar to the aim of the *Book* to present Kempe's life in such a way that she becomes an example of piety for others to follow. In the case of the *Book*, which gives an account of its own composing as a multi-step, many-year-long, non-linear process involving Margery and two different scribes (Prologue 57-112), there is even more layering of perspectives. My own position is that Margery Kempe was a real woman who dictated the story of her life. However, the question of authorship, which is so central to some criticism, is a peripheral issue for me. My concern is with the desires that the text represents as those of a genuine woman, the impact Margery has on her society in the text, and the ways her relationship to power connects to kink, and those elements of the text remain regardless of the author's identity.

Margery's desires are queer, not just in the sense that they make a queer connection to BDSM, but also in the sense that they interrogate dominant structures of medieval sexuality in a positive way. As a woman in fifteenth-century England, Margery faces restrictive, sometimes contradictory ideas about her sexuality. On the one hand, sex is generally sinful, and virgins are

God's favourites. For religious women, virginity or chastity is the norm. On the other hand, as a married woman, Margery must fulfill her sexual debt to her husband and bear children. Though she has no choice but to have sex as a wife, if she enjoys sex it is still a sin.[144] Clerical misogynistic discourse states that women are more lustful than men. The tradition of affective piety encourages her to love Christ with her whole being. A medieval woman is caught between several contradictory discourses, with the result that she cannot completely conform to one set of social expectations without violating some part of another; additionally, Margery cannot worship God as she feels called to do without confirming her sinfulness according to other clerical discourses.[145] As will become clear throughout this chapter, Margery's queerness defies sexual norms for both married and religious women.

Margery patterns her devotion on several biblical women and medieval female saints, but even as she attempts to follow the example of women like St. Birgitta of Sweden, her particular expressions of devotion are excessive. She seems to regard herself as being in competition with other religious women, and feel she must go farther than they have in order to prove her holiness. It is not enough for Margery to have Eucharistic visions, for example: she must have special visions, better than those experienced by St. Birgitta. After she sees a Eucharistic vision, Christ tells her "'My dowtyr, Bryde, say me nevyr in this wyse'" (1.20.1085-1086). Similarly, her reported physical connection with Christ is more frequent and physical than that of other female mystics. Margery is proud that she goes further than the women she imitates do in devotion, but her excessiveness makes her imitation unorthodox.

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[144] In my next chapter, I will discuss how the Wife of Bath approaches the problem of sexual desire in her marriages with a much different tactic: rather than renouncing her physical sexuality as Margery does, she attempts to undermine the clerical and textual traditions that denounce her sexuality.

[145] The literature on medieval attitudes towards women's sexuality is vast. For an introduction to the topic, see Karras or Salisbury.

My discussion of sadomasochism is intentionally separate from the psychiatric and medical roots of the term. I do not understand consensual sadism or masochism as pathology. In fact, a shared and unwarranted history of pathologization is the first point of identification between Margery Kempe and BDSM: in both cases, twentieth-century critics have dismissed behaviour or desires that don't conform to social norms as abnormal or insane.[146] Neither do I wish to make any anachronistic claim that Margery Kempe represents a secret fifteenth-century BDSM practitioner. As I discuss in my introduction, connections across time between old and new communities, following Carolyn Dinshaw's model of queer connections, must be understood as partial and complicated. Efforts to build literary communities based on queer identities must focus on affinity across time and rely on "relations of resonance," that is, parallels or similarities between situations or identities rather than exact identifications.[147] The main areas of resonance between the *Book* and BDSM are in relation to fantasy, consent, and performance.

Margery's Kinky Fantasies

The incidences of eroticism and erotic masochism in the *Book* are numerous. The most obvious connections between Margery's spiritual development and sexuality are the many instances in which she conceives of her relationship to God as marriage,[148] especially when she interacts with Jesus as a husband. The tradition of affective piety in which Margery engages involves contemplation of Christ's life and Passion and focuses on emotional connections to Jesus and Mary. Many mystics, including Margery's favourites St. Birgitta of Sweden and St. Catherine of

[146] For an excellent overview of the psychiatric history of sadomasochism, see Khan 26-53.
[147] For more on relations of resonance, see the introduction to this dissertation, or Dimock.
[148] Margery has a vision of her marriage ceremony to the Godhead when she is in Rome, which the *Book* recounts in book 1, chapter 35.

Siena, use familial and marital relationships to explain their relationships to God.[149] The metaphorical mystical marriage is an orthodox concept: nuns are married to Christ; Christ is the bridegroom of the Church. St. Birgitta calls herself the bride of Christ in her *Revelations*. One biblical justification for conceiving of Christian devotion as marital comes from the Old Testament book *The Song of Songs*. As Frank Graziano writes, "*The Song* provided a canonized precedent for the use of erotic imagery to represent the love of God, hagiographers missed no opportunity to elaborate, and many female mystics understood and expressed their love of Christ as nuptial and often explicitly sexual" (187).

While marital meditations by holy men and women are not in themselves unorthodox, what makes Margery unusual among mystics is the explicit detail of the imagined physical, sexual connections she has with Jesus' body. For example, in one vision Christ tells Margery, "whan thu art in thi bed, take me to the as for thi wedded husband, as thy derworthy derlyng" and says that she should "kyssen my mowth, myn hed, and my fete" (1.36. 2103-07). Riehle calls her analogies "much too forceful" in her use of "sensual concrete terms" (38). However, consider the following passage from Birgitta's *Revelations*, part of a vision she has of the judgment of three women, including her own dead mother:

> The said dead mother seemed to come creeping out of a foul and dark clay ditch; her heart was drawn out of her body, her lips cut off, and her chin trembled; … her nostrils were all gnawn; her eyes were put out, hanging down on her cheeks between sinews; … In her head the head pan failed and had fallen away, and the brain boiled up as it if it had been lead, and flowed out like black pitch. … Her breast was open and full of worms long and short… The chines or vertebrae of her back were all dissolved…they never ceased moving. A long and

[149] As Christopher Roman points out, female mystics in particular use familial metaphors in an attempt to turn their personal experience into a spiritual experience, or because the domestic metaphors made the spiritual seem more appropriate for women.

> large serpent came forth from the nether part of her stomach to the other parts; and joining head and tail together as a round bow, went about her bowels continually… Her feet were like toads. (quoted and translated in Holloway 105-106)

Though Margery does describe the wounded body of Christ in detail, her accounts do not begin to approach this level of repulsiveness.[150] And yet, no critic accuses St. Birgitta of being too forceful; Riehle, for example, says Birgitta writes with "passionate dynamic terms" (139). Other mystics imagine themselves married to Christ; Catherine of Siena even describes her wedding band from her mystical marriage to God as Christ's foreskin (Bynum 174-175), and Riehle calls her work "marvellous" (45), so what makes Margery so unacceptably sensual? In addition to her lack of institutional backing and her gender, a lack of balance in her focus may be what makes critics question Margery's legitimacy. Margery's fixation on the body of Christ in particular stands out from the visions or revelations in the texts of other mystics. Christ's body is the only object of her detailed, physical contemplations. Other mystics may contemplate the body of Christ on the cross in some detail, but they also consider other visual objects, and connect the visions they have to larger political issues, demonstrating care for the world at large. These comparisons also demonstrate that holy women might fixate on the physical in their texts to describe the horrors of the afterlife. It is acceptable to describe rotting dead women as part of religious enterprise, because the female body is considered sinful, and because images of rotting flesh and damnation evoke emotional responses that encourage more devotion to avoid a similar

[150] This graphic vision of maternal damnation imitates a vision Gregory the Great reports having of his own mother's damnation while at mass, which lead to the St. Gregory or Pope Trental, a series of thirty masses spread through the liturgical year to deliver a soul from purgatory (Lutton 68). The repetition of themes and tropes in the writings of holy men and women demonstrates that hagiography is a genre with conventions and traditions rather than an unmediated recording of a holy life.

fate. Margery's sensuality is too much for critics of mysticism because she visualizes only that which furthers her erotic connection with Christ.

The text justifies the sensual, erotic connection between Margery and God by having the explanations of their wedded behavior come from Jesus, not Margery herself. For example, in Chapter 86, Jesus tells Margery, "thu wost wel that I far lyke an husband that schulde weddyn a wife […] for than dowtyr, may thei gon to bedde togedyr wythowtyn any schame" (1.86.5074-77). He validates her intimate feelings for him. Earlier in the text, Jesus is more explicit about how Margery might welcome him in her bed. He says,

> Therfore most I nedys be homly wyth the and lyn in in thi bed wyth the. Dowtyr, thow desyrest gretly to se me, and thu mayst boldly, whan thu art in thi bed, take me to the as for thi wedded husband, as thy derworthy derlyng […] And therfor thu mayst boldly take me in the armys of thi sowle[151] and kyssen my mowth, myn hed, and my fete as sweetly as thow wylt. (1.36.2102-08)

In passages like this one, the text suggests an erotic aspect to true devotion to Christ. Part of Margery's special relationship to Christ is her obedient rendering of her marriage debt to him, making her relationship to Christ sexual as well as spiritual.

In the two quotations in the previous paragraph, Christ refers to Margery as both his wife and his daughter. In another vision, Christ says Margery is "a very dowtyr to me and a modyr also, a syster, a wufe, and a spowse" (1.14.714). The physical impossibility of a woman being both a daughter and a mother to the same man emphasizes the spiritual nature of Christ and Margery's relationship and implies that their love transcends the usual physical boundaries of earthly relationships. However, the conflation of parental or fraternal and sexual roles, though a

[151] This phrasing calls attention to the ways that Margery's reclamation of her female embodiment extends to the embodiment of her soul; if her body is a devotional object instead of a maternal one, it makes sense that her soul can also be embodied.

foundational taboo of civilization,[152] is not physically impossible, and modern readers may not be able to ignore the incestuous undertones of such statements. The frisson of taboo violation is a major contributor to the erotic appeal of many kinds of roleplaying in BDSM, including incest play. Eliding the roles of sexual partner and daughter may increase Margery's pleasure in her relationship to Christ. Although Margery is following orthodox convention in naming herself both family member and sexual partner to Christ (nuns are both daughters of Christ and married to him), her addition of such explicit sexual scenarios brings that incestuous conflation into sharper relief.

Even outside of the marriage bed, the *Book* shows the implicit eroticism of the physical manifestation of Christ when Margery meets a group of female pilgrims on the way from Jerusalem to Rome:

> And the woman the which had the ymage [of Christ] in the chist, whan thei comyn in good citeys, sche toke owt the ymage owt of hir chist and sett it in worshepful wyfys lappys. And thei wold puttyn schirtys ther upon and kyssen it as their had ben God hymselfe. (1.30.1796-99)

As several critics note,[153] this moment, referencing the ladies' laps, kissing, and immediately proceeding to a description of the soft bed the women provide to Margery, is a moment in the text that implies a queer desire stemming from the shared desire for Christ. Christ acts as an intermediary between the women, allowing them to gather together and express physical affection that might otherwise be suspect or completely impossible.

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[152] For example, Claude Levi-Strauss argues in *The Elementary Structures of Kinship* that a prohibition of incest is part of a strategy to encourage exogamy and therefore strengthen social bonds between families.

[153] For example, both Lavezzo and Dinshaw (*Getting Medieval*) argue for this association of queer desire and devotion.

Christ speaks to Margery in contemplation and makes an explicit connection between his body on the cross and his ability to be a husband to her:

> yyf I wer in erde as bodily as I was er I deyd on the cros, I schuld not ben aschamyd of the as many other men ben, for I schuld take the be the hand amongs the pepil and make the gret cher that thei schuldyn wel knowyn that I lovyd the ryth wel. (1.36. 2094-98)

Margery associates Christ's body with both her bed and the cross, and therefore both situations are erotic to her. Focusing on his wounds or on non-sexual parts of his body during crucifixion, a normal practice of affective piety, allows Margery to continue her contemplation of the manhood of Christ. She relishes her visions of a wounded Christ many times. For example, just after her first experience of holy crying in Jerusalem, she has a vision of the crucified Christ:

> it was grawntd this creatur to beholdyn so verily hys precyows tendyr body, alto rent and toryn wyth scorgys, mor ful of wowndys than evyr was duffehows of holys, hangygng upon the cros wyth the corown of thorn upon hys hevyd, hys blysful handys, hys tendyr fete nayled to the hard tre, the reverys of blood flowyng owt plenteuowsly of every membr, the gresly and grevows wownde in hys precyows syde schedyng owt blood. (1.28.1616-21)

It is a privilege Margery is "grawntd" to see these wounds. God rewards her devotion with these gory visions that allow her to focus on the body of Christ; the detail she records reveals her interest in his physical body. She fetishizes his wounds, lovingly cataloguing his injuries, pairing descriptions of the wounds with positive descriptors of his body itself; his wounds are serious, but his body remains blissful, precious, and tender. In this vision, blood pours from "every membr." Though there is some ambiguity in the term, and it could be simply a synonym for something like "limb," the use of "membr" as a euphemism for genitals was common; the MED lists "a sex organ" as the first definition for the word, with examples as early as 1300 for that

connotation. Margery's contemplation of every member of Christ's body can therefore conceivably include his genitals.

For Margery, the wounding and eventual death of Christ's body is also erotic because it gives legitimate reason to caress his body, releasing sexual energy in the guise of caregiving. She envies the women who get to touch Christ after he is dead. As she watches in a vision, she sees Mary, her sisters, and Mary Magdalene given leave to "do what worschip and reverens thei wolde to that precyows body" (1.80.4600-1). The women weep, and kiss or hold parts of Christ's body, and as Margery watches she wishes she could "had the precyows body be hirself alone" so that she could mourn Christ as much as possible privately (1.80.4605). Margery's proprietary urge to have the body "be hirself alone" betrays the more personal nature of her desires, because the Christian orthodox theory on the bond of Christ and sinner is that it is a universal one shared by all Christians.[154] Margery's desire to possess Christ's body is rendered acceptable because the text presents her desires as part of a feminine mourning or caregiving impulse connected to his body.

Margery also imagines Christ's body as wounded outside of the context of the Passion to divert her energy away from erotic or lustful thoughts about him. In an unusual vision in Chapter 85, she falls into a kind of sleep, and imagines Christ's body lying next to hers, "the semeliest man that evyr myth be seen er thowt" (4942-43). Margery imagines sharing a bed with Christ and appreciating his physical beauty, but the sexual potential of such a scene is interrupted: "than cam on wyth a baselard knyfe to hir sight and kytt that precyows body al long in the brest" (4943-44). The fantasized penetration is violent instead of sexual, making yet another association between

[154] Some biblical passages that support the idea that Christ's redemption of mankind is universal: "Jesus… by the grace of God should taste death for every man" (Heb. 2.9); "he is the propitiation for our sins: and not for ours only, but also for *the sins of* the whole world" (1 John 2.2); "whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have everlasting life" (John 3.16).

imagined, or visualized, violence and the eroticized body of Christ in the text. As a result of this fantasy violence, Margery weeps and appreciates the Passion more completely; her contemplation of a wounded Christ instead of a directly sexual Christ brings her greater spiritual understanding, but also releases the erotic energy that could otherwise lead her astray.

In the *Book*, the frequent association of the wounded body with intimate touch creates ambiguity for any situation involving cuts, sores, or other painful holes in the body. Thus, Margery's experience with lepers connects wounds with desire even outside of the context of her relationship with Christ or his body. When Margery sees male babies, wounds, attractive men or any number of things that remind her of Christ, it triggers her wailing as a sympathetic response to his suffering (1.28.1584-90; 1.35.2010-19). In a similar way, the text creates an association between wounds and desire, because the former is associated with Christ, and Christ is Margery's ultimate erotic experience. This slippage is most obvious when Margery gets permission from her confessor to visit and kiss lepers, so long as they are female:

> And so sche kissed ther two seke women with many an holy thowt and many a devowt teer, […] than the oo woman had so many temptacyons that sche wist not how sche myth best be governyd […] And sche was labowryd wyth many fowle and horibyl thowtys, many mo than sche cowed tellyn. And, as sche seyd, sche was a mayde. (1.74.4194-4203)

Leprosy is thought to be a physical manifestation of excessive lechery in the Middle Ages.[155] Though Margery approaches the encounters with holy thoughts, one of these women is still tempted by the sexual nature of the kissing. As Jonathan Hsy points out, the text suggests same-sex desire in this episode precisely because of the lack of specificity about the woman's desires: "[a]s much as this passage intimates lechery, its evasive prose style also evokes the discursive

[155] For an overview of leprosy as a physical sign of spiritual weakness, see Grigsby 79-102.

specter of sodomy, 'that utterly confused category' that gathers together any number of non-heteronormative acts and desires" (192). Margery herself has suffered lechery and its attendant "horrybyl temptacyons" (1.4.357), so her sympathy for the leper woman is understandable. Though the text is careful to specify Margery's intentions, and though kissing the wounded and sick would have been an acceptable activity for holy women at this time (Hsy 190-191), in this episode the openness of a wounded body suggests an intimacy that becomes ambiguously sexual for at least one of the participants.

The erotic connection between wounds and intimacy in the *Book* creates connections between Margery's devotional thoughts and bodily reactions. Margery's contemplations of the second person of the trinity as her husband and the wounds of the Passion connect with the element of fantasy that is essential to BDSM. First, and most obviously, the contemplations are like fantasy because they involve imagining physical encounters that are pleasurable, as when Christ tells Margery, "'take me to the as for thi weddyd husband… take me in the armys of thi sowle and kyssen my mowth, myn hed, and my fete as sweetly as thow wylt'" (1.36.2103-08). Fantasy is often a required component of BDSM because some kinks are physically impossible; for example, in pet play, one partner plays the role of an animal of some kind.

Margery's devotional fantasies place her in bodily proximity with Christ and allow her to touch him, bringing her pleasure that would be impossible because of restrictions of time and space. At numerous points in the *Book*, the scribe writes that Margery's contemplations are, for example, "so swet, so holy, and so devowt" (1.17.905) that she cannot bear them without some physical expression like her tears or writhing and crying, and she is unable to fully explain what she experiences to others:

> Whan sche beheld this sygth in hir sowle, sche fel down in the feld among the pepil. Sche cryid, sche roryd, sche wept as thow sche schulde a brostyn therwith. Sche myth not mesuryn hirself ne rewlyn hirselfe, but cryid and roryd. (1.73.4132-35)

The ecstatic experience and ineffability of her visions suggest that, like masturbatory fantasies, the contemplations Margery experiences are highly personal and physically affecting, and that they result in an orgasm-like bubbling over of energy.

At times, Margery's visions could be recreated as sadomasochistic pornography, for example, this contemplation of the whipping of Christ before his crucifixion:

> An other tyme sche saw in hyr contemplacyon owr Lord Jhesu Crist bowndyn to a peler, and hys handys wer bowndyn abovyn hys hevyd. And than sche sey sextene men wyth sextene scorgys, and eche scorge had eight babelys of leed on the ende, and every babel was ful of scharp prekelys as it had ben the rowelys of a spor. And tho men wyth the scorgys madyn comenawnt that ich of hem schulde gevyn owr Lord forty strokys. (1.80.4526-31)

Margery's lingering over the details of the whipping and the excess of the sixteen men giving forty lashes each with sixteen whips with eight lash tips of uneven lead evoke the aesthetics of sexual whipping scenes from erotic writing. One of the most well known early sadomasochistic erotic novels, *Story of O* (Réage),[156] contains similar descriptions of whipping. The first time the

[156] The book was published in 1954 and won the prestigious *Prix des Deux Magots*. Pauline Réage is a pen name for Anne Declos, who came forward in the 1970s under a second pen name (Dominique Aury) before revealing her real identity in 1994. She wrote the novel in response to her lover's interest in the Marquis de Sade. That lover was Jean Paulhan, the French intellectual and editor, who edited the *Story of O* (Ciuraru). In the book, O is taken by her lover to a chateau and trained in the arts of submission. She returns to Paris and submits to his control in her daily life, taking a female lover to please him. He later gives her to a friend of his, Sir Stephen, who becomes her new master. She becomes even more completely devoted to him and is branded and pierced with his marks. Some versions end with her appearance at a fetish party where she is dressed only in an owl mask and treated as an object, while one version ends in Sir Stephen

protagonist, O, is whipped, her chained hands are suspended in a hook "a little above her head," and four men share the whipping between them. The text describes the whips, including "[t]he leather whip—the one she'd seen tucked in the first man's belt—was long, with six lashes knotted at the end. There was a third whip whose numerous cords were knotted several times and quite stiff, as if soaked in water" (11). The description of the whips gives a more precise idea of how much pain such a whip would cause. The anticipation of and ability to visualize the experience become part of the pleasure. In *Story of O*, the intention is to arouse readers with these thoughts of pain. The text provides readers with an opportunity to derive pleasure or excitement from the anticipation of O's pain. Readers might also identify with O, and imagine experiencing those same whips and beatings. Margery, imagining the pain of the sixteen whips and their lead balls, also experiences an intense arousal of emotions, and wails and cries in sympathy with Christ: "sche wept and cryid ryth lowed as yyf sche schulde a brostyn for sorwe and peyne" (1.80.4531-32). Though her release is characterized as being from sorrow or pain, sorrow and pain become sources of pleasure for Margery because of the masochistic nature of her desires.[157]

Margery's visualizations of the details of Christ's death, near pornographic though they may be, are also a traditional part of affective devotion. As Sarah Stanbury has argued, iconography, whether in altarpieces, statuary, or paintings, played a huge role in the piety of the average layperson of Margery's time. The artistic representation of the Crucifixion or Passion was widespread. Medieval iconography routinely depicts saints and martyrs in the moments of their deaths in gruesome detail. Saint Sebastian, for example, is traditionally depicted pierced

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losing interest and abandoning her, with the result that she commits suicide. It is unclear which version Declos intended to be published.

[157] There are more similarities between *The Book of Margery Kempe* and *Story of O* (though there are also many differences). Both are representations of practices meant to elicit identification and possibly imitation: Margery is a model for lay piety, and O is a model for aspiring submissive masochists. Both O and Margery go through a process of enlightenment, and reach fulfillment through pain, obliteration of the ego, and worship of an idealized male figure.

through with many arrows, bleeding and in pain. Pictures of Saint Denis often depict his flagellation and other torture, or his miraculous beheading (miraculous because afterwards he picks up his own head).[158] Stanbury argues that Margery, though she avoids describing them in her text, would have seen many images of saints and Christ that would have inspired her contemplations as much as the textual tradition of affective piety (191-218).

Furthermore, Margery's gazing at Christ's body had more implications of physical contact based on medieval ideas about vision as an active two-way process between viewer and object. Stanbury suggests that, because of medieval understandings of vision, the impulse to see something actually corresponds to a desire to touch:

> Yet even when visual desire takes as its goal a purely mystical sight beyond the material world, the mechanics of vision link it with sensory experience and even material objects… In looking we are connected physically to the object we see by the agency of species, or visual rays. Images, through their species, literally touch us, linking us physically with them in ways that underwrite the dramatic physicality of late medieval affective piety. (6)

The medieval understanding that seeing is a two-way process of touching makes seeing, even in visions, physical and intimate. Visualizing something also has the effect of imagined touch, heightening the emotional connection to that object.[159] In *Sight and Embodiment in the Middle Ages*, Suzannah Biernoff, appropriately for Margery's interests, conceives of vision as "a

[158] Marla Carlson considers the iconography of and dramas about both saints in conversation with modern performance artists in *Performing Bodies in Pain*. She considers Saint Denis in chapters 1 and 2 (25-76) and Saint Sebastian in chapter 4 (103-130). Carlson also notes the homoerotic tradition inspired by Saint Sebastian (105).

[159] Lisa Manter provides another perspective on the importance of sight in the *Book* when she reads Margery's visions via psychoanalysis and feminist film theory. She argues that even as Margery masochistically identifies with Christ's body, she is also watching the scene, which results in additional voyeuristic pleasure.

dynamic extension of the subject into the world and at the same time a penetration and alteration of the viewer's body by the object" (102). If Margery is seeing Christ's body, she is also touching it, even being penetrated by it; medieval theories of sight give an extra sensual dimension to her contemplation of Christ's wounds and body.

Margery's admiration of Christ's wounds results in a masochistic desire for her own pain and suffering on his behalf. At first, Margery's willing pain takes the form of familiar and officially sanctioned penance: she fasts, and wears a hair shirt at all times. Following three years of intense temptations, Christ visits Margery and tells her that she should take off her hair shirt "and I schal give the an hayr in thin hert that schal lyke my mych bettyr than alle the hayres in the world" (1.5.377-78). Christ's use of "lyke my" in this statement indicates that he is gratified by her suffering. After this time, though she continues to fast and endure the physical discomforts of poverty, Margery's assumption of pain for God's love is less direct than the self-inflicted pain of the hair shirt, and often comes mostly from her visions. This aspect of her masochism corresponds to kinky understandings of pain because it stresses the difference between the fantasy of pain as more fulfilling or important than an experience of actual pain.

The fact that most of her pain is naturally occurring or fantasy sets Margery apart from other mystics and imitators of Christ. Margery suffers for God's love, but her penitential practices are downright tame in comparison to the sometimes stomach-churning devotional rights of other medieval visionaries. As Renate Blumenfeld-Kosinski writes in her account of a near contemporary of Margery, Ermine of Reims, "medieval penitents were capable of the most shocking brutality when it came to self-inflicted suffering" (82). Ermine herself, for example, tied a knotted horse-hair rope so tightly around her body that her skin began to grow around it; to remove the rope (at the insistence of her confessor) she had to essentially flay that part of her own body (Blumenfeld-Kosinkski 160-161). Every Friday, St. Birgitta would burn a candle and

let the wax drip onto her naked flesh (Holloway 6). Modifying hair shirts with small nails to make them more painful was not uncommon; one particularly inventive monk, Arnulf of Villers, would tie a vest made from hedgehog pelts tightly to his body with ropes (Blumenfeld-Kosinkski 80). In comparison, Margery's fasting, poverty, and aches and pains seem easy. Though Church officials sometimes demonstrate discomfort with the extremity of self-harm in the penitential practices of holy men and women, the canonization of some of these figures shows that such practices were acceptable so long as they were not the norm for a majority of Christians.[160] Margery's difference from these other penitents indicates that she takes pleasure in certain types of pain, but not in others. Whereas the most extreme forms of self-abnegation cast the body and flesh as negative things to be controlled, Margery's practice imagines the body as a site of pleasure, the control of which leads to intense emotional bonding with her beloved God. Early in her spiritual journey, and at Christ's direction, she replaces most self-inflicted physical expressions of penance for internal, or imagined, punishments. Margery chooses the physical pain that leads to pleasure (through Christ's recognition), not pain that will blot out her awareness of her body. The lack of severity in her self-harming is another thing that separates her from her religious role models.

Christ tells her, "it lyken me wel the peynes that I have sufferyd for the" (1.14.686), so as part of her contemplative *imitatio Christi*, Margery imagines her own suffering and even death. Egged on by obsessive contemplation of the cuts, bruises, and wounds on Christ's body, Margery

[160] Though famous saints and mystics engaged in extreme ascetic practices, generally with the permission of a confessor or superior, the Church preached moderation in penance for the majority. Blumenfeld-Kosinski gives several examples of biographers expressing uneasy acceptance of their subject's extreme ascetic practices (80-81), including Ermine of Reims' confessor, Jean le Graveur, who tries to impose more moderate penance than Ermine would like, and who writes that Ermine "had the habit of saying, 'I can never suffer enough'… I answered, 'Penance is a very good thing, but you have to do it with discretion'" (161).

fantasizes about how she too could endure torture and die to prove her devotion to God. Early in her spiritual development, she imagines a relatively easy death for herself:

> Sche ymagyned in hirself what deth sche mygth deyn for Crystys sake. Hyr thowt sche wold a be slayn for Goddys lofe, but dred the point of deth, and therfor sche ymagyned hyrself the most soft deth […] hir hed to be smet of wyth a scharp ex for Goddys lofe. (1.14.677-81)

Gruesome enough, but quick and almost painless, this version of a martyr's death shows that Margery sets boundaries around the types of pain she willingly endures; she chooses some types of pain but not others, similar to the way modern bottoms set limits in BDSM. As she advances in her devotional life, however, Margery's boundaries expand, and she imagines dying for God in a more painful way; she asks to die if she cannot weep for others' sins anymore and tells God, "I wolde for thi lofe and for magnifying of thi name ben hewyn as small as flesch to the potte" (1.57.3358-59). Unlike the first death fantasy, which involves one quick blow from a sharp axe, in this scenario Margery would presumably be alive for some of her mutilation, suffering many cuts, and perhaps broken bones, just like Christ on the cross. The severity of the suffering she desires here points to an existential component to Margery's masochism. As I mention in my second chapter, one psychological approach to masochism understands the masochist's desire for pain as a desire to affirm embodiment and existence. On the other hand, other theorists identify the masochist's, and particularly the religious masochist's, desire to be absorbed into the Other, to cease existing (Glucklich 100-105). Margery imagining being cut up into such small pieces connects with this desire for annihilation of the independent self; she wants to become part of God. Her specific choice of metaphor—that she should become like meat for the pot—indicates her desire to be consumed. Throughout the text Margery suffers real physical pains and illnesses for God's love. At one point the text relates that she is "ryth glad and mery that day that sche

suffryd any disese" (1.50.2821-22). The pleasure Margery takes in physical pain allows her to make sense of the conditions of her life. When she is sick or injured, rather than being a helpless sufferer, Margery sees herself as a willing victim and can take pride in her endurance.

Margery takes pleasure not only in physical suffering for God's love, but also in verbal humiliation. God explains to her several times that her suffering shame on Earth is a part of his mercy, and that earthly shame will lead to more joy in Heaven: "'Dowtyr, this plesith me rith wel, for the mor schame and mor despite that thu hast for my lofe, the mor joy schalt thu have wyth me in hevyn'" (1.78.4394-95). Margery applies a language of pleasure to her experiences of humiliation; she is happy to be abused by her community or clergy members. When a monk in York preaches against her, she says, "'I have cawse to be ryth mery and glad in my sowle that I may any thing suffyr for hys lofe'" (1.52.2905-6). "Mery" is the word the text most often pairs with Margery's experience of shame. Instead of being made unhappy by humiliation, Margery feels sad when she lacks disgrace: "'I sorwyd for I had no schame'" (1.13.645). In her article on the *Book*, Timea Szell reads the very structure of the narrative as reflecting Margery's desire for both validation and humiliation. She writes that each reassurance Margery gets from authority "bears but short-lived comfort for Kempe and even appears to excite her desire both for more punishment and reassurance" (77). The continual returning to shame or uncertainty reflects Margery's commitment to punishment. The cycle of reassurance and punishment also reflects the uncertainty that Margery feels about her way of living; she needs continual validation that her life is meaningful. Though in some ways Margery's desire to experience shame for God's love reflects a normal Christian response for her time period, particularly for the affectively pious, the text separates her understanding of this kind of pain from others', marking her as a special sufferer, as when Christ tells her that other people cannot appreciate his presence in suffering as

she does (1.20.1102-6). The fact that Margery never achieves lasting recognition for her devotion to God makes her pain, and therefore her proven love, reciprocal.

Margery's devotional masochism qualifies as kink not only because of the more obvious connection between pleasure and pain, but also because her diversion of erotic energy through wounds, suffering, or shame aligns with kink's non-genital approach to sexual gratification. Both medieval and modern narratives of romance and sexual relationships privilege penetrative heterosexual sex as the only, or most important, sexual act.[161] In medieval narratives, as I discuss in my previous chapter, virginity is of paramount importance to a woman's virtue. Modern sexual systems place sex acts in a hierarchy culminating in penetrative sex,[162] and the importance of genital contact is reinforced by romantic comedies and coming of age stories alike. Masochism queers heteronormative assumptions about sex because it does not rely on genital stimulation for arousal: masochists may experience arousal and even orgasm from activities like whipping or flogging on any body part. In Jerusalem, Margery has many prompts to think about the Passion, and as she comes to Mount Cavalry, she experiences an intense contemplation of Christ's suffering: "sche fel down that sche mygth not stondyn ne knelyn but walwyd and wrestyd wyth hir body, spredyng hir armys abrode, and cryed wyth a lowde voys" (1.28.1572-74). As her contemplations reach an end or point of particular intensity, Margery has uncontrollable physical outbursts; she loses control of her body and voice. The orgasm-like explosion of feeling Margery experiences after meditating on the cruelty of the torture of the Passion reflects this possibility of non-genitally focused arousal.

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[161] These assumptions result in the desexualizing of people with disabilities who are assumed to be incapable of such penetrative acts, an idea challenged in the theory of scholars like McRuer, Reynolds, and Shildrick.

[162] Perhaps most popularly, this results in the "base" system, where, as if they were hits in a baseball game, sexual acts escalate from "first base" (kissing) up to a "home run" (penetrative heterosexual sex).

Margery's masochistic focus on Christ's wounds and her own pain and suffering make her harmony with God queer because masochism allows her to find pleasure without the genital focus that plagues her when she experiences what her culture classifies as sinful lust. When Margery displeases God by rejecting visions of negative futures in chapter 59 of the *Book*, she is tormented by twelve days of temptation. Her ecstatic dalliances with Christ are replaced by visions in which she sees holy men "shewyng her bar membrys unto hir" (3429) which are "delectabyl to hir ageyn hir wille" (3435). These visions show Margery's sinful lust fixated on the male member, though there are interesting queer implications in the fact that she sees "mennys membrys and *swech other abhominacyons*" (3426, my italics). When Margery is in harmony with God, she sees Jesus in every man, but when she is out of harmony with God she sees every man's penis.

Margery fears the temptation of thoughts of penises, and she also fears the reality of penises. First, she resents and attempts to avoid her husband John's penis before she can convince him to vow chastity with her. Though sex with him "was very peynful and horrybyl unto hir" (1.4.321) she endures his sexual attentions for years after she wishes to become chaste. Margery experiences marital rape, and she therefore begins to associate heterosexual intercourse with her husband with trauma. She bears more children as a result of these assaults, which entrenches her further in her role as a literal mother instead of the spiritual mother she will become after she is able to vow chastity.[163] Maternal theory by scholars like Adrienne Rich and Andrea O'Reilly differentiates between motherhood as a patriarchal institution, "which is male-defined and controlled and is deeply oppressive to women," and mothering, which is "female-defined and centred and potentially empowering" (O'Reilly 11). While Rich identifies the

[163] Below, the chapter considers how the text's representation of motherhood emphasizes Margery's queer futurity.

Industrial Revolution as the historical period in which the institution of motherhood creates a schism between the public and the private, keeping women confined to the home space (41-55), Margery's experience of motherhood demonstrates that medieval motherhood could also confine women to the domestic sphere: when she is bearing and rearing her children, Margery cannot perform pilgrimages and public displays of her piety as she can after she achieves chastity. John's sexual needs and her obligation to meet them and to bear any resulting children prevent Margery from taking control over her body and advancing her devotional goals.

Second, Margery's fear of rape is a consistent element of the text. Her main concern when being jailed in Leicester is that she not be put among men (1.46.2632-36). Even as an old woman, she worries over being left alone with men, especially on pilgrimage: "yet durst sche not slepyn for dred of defiling" (2.6.389). Medieval ecclesiastical theory on rape allows for sin on the part of the victim of rape, and Margery may have feared that her body would betray her to lust if a man raped her.[164] In her mind and in her reality, penises pose a threat to Margery's quest for spiritual maturity and a perfect relationship to God. Male genitals are sinister and threaten her spiritual goals, so Margery's desire needs a non-genital object on which to focus. Her masochism provides that focus.

The fact that Margery struggles with lust as she does corresponds to normative medieval ideas about the embodied nature of women. Ecclesiastical and medical writing of the time attributed excessive desire to women and caution men against falling victim to their lusts. The older woman's sexual voracity especially was the object of satire in texts such as *Le Roman de la*

[164] William of Conches, for example, writing in the twelfth century, differentiates between a woman's rational will and her natural will: even if a woman does not consent to rape, her body may eventually consent by enjoying it against her rational will. He asserts, "Although raped women dislike the act in the beginning, in the end, however, from the weakness of the flesh, they like it" (quoted in Resnick 362-363).

Rose.[165] Margery fears penises because they have the power, whether through her own lust or through unwanted contact, to force her to fit into certain female roles. Her resistance of gendered expectations for her body and avoidance of sin undermine the idea that women are more flesh than spirit; the gratification Margery experiences in her holy fantasies is queer because it allows her to achieve pleasure without penises or sin.

Margery's Consent

The appearance, or fantasy, of a BDSM scene may be that a top is abusing a bottom; however, the reality of the encounter is that both partners have input into the scene and the bottom has greater control over what may occur. This manipulation of power dynamics is for mutual erotic benefit.[166] In the *Book*, God is the Dom and Margery is the sub. Though God retains more control than the modern Dom by virtue of Margery's orthodoxy, there is a surprising amount of reciprocity, negotiation, and consent in Margery's relationship to the Trinity. God enjoys Margery's tears and suffering too: he tells her that the shame she suffers for him "'plesith [him] rith wel'" (1.78.4394). Margery trades her tears and prayers for grace for other people, negotiating terms in purgatory and salvation with God, and God uses Margery to convert more souls. Both Margery and God get pleasure from their relationship. During contemplation, Christ asks Margery whom she would like to save by her suffering. She answers that she would like to save her confessor, who has helped her be saved, and Jesus tells her the confessor shall be with her in heaven, but so shall her father, husband, and children (1.8.458-73). In other meditations, Margery asks God to forgive others for sinning, and he agrees that her crying and tears will save

[165] The next chapter of this dissertation will consider how Chaucer's *Wife of Bath's Prologue and Tale* interacts with this tradition.
[166] For more on how BDSM standards illuminate deficiencies in consent in other kinds of relationships see chapter 2 of this dissertation.

them.[167] These conversations demonstrate the negotiations that occur between Margery and God, which, because they occur in dialogue and reoccur over the course of the text, suggest an ongoing and negotiated consent that is absent in Margery's other relationships.

Because of communities' awareness of the risk of kinky activities, education and expertise in technique are highly valued components of BDSM. Staci Newmahr, who writes on the prominence of learning and mastering skills as part of the experience of BDSM in a community based on four years of ethnographic research in the Pacific Northwest, concludes,

> participation in SM involves significant effort and a fairly steep learning curve. Learning to play is an integral part of "becoming" a member of this community, and this social process shapes and reshapes motivations and contributes to identity formation. Even apart from participants' general desires to avoid sustenance and infliction of unintended injury themselves, the community as a whole shares responsibility for recruitment, education and supervision of SM play. (319)

In kink communities, learning is part of the process of both becoming a community member and refining one's kink identity.[168] Margery's propensity for conversation (not preaching!) on holy matters, her consultations with her confessors, her pilgrimages, and her mentoring of others show her own interest in both education and community building. Though she rejects the need for universal acceptance, it does seem important to her to have some small community of supporters

[167] Margery's saving souls through her tears is a traditional feature of the saint's intercession; part of the reason it would be included in the text is to set Margery up as the equal to some of her saintly models, like Birgitta of Sweden and Catherine of Siena, who also cried to save the souls of sinners.

[168] For more on the importance of education and skill acquisition, and how that might act as a barrier to access in kink communities, see Weiss *Techniques of Pleasure.*

to validate her identity as a pious woman.[169] Kinksters benefit from belonging to communities in which their desires are not viewed as pathological; similarly, Margery benefits from the recognition of her spiritual authority by her own small community.

In the Dom/sub relationship in particular, the concept of training is also often very important. In addition to mastery of skills, the Dominant partner will train the submissive partner to adhere to his or her standards. These standards might involve simply obeying direct orders in a scene, or may involve following complex sets of rules on conduct and dress at all times. Learning to suit the top's needs is an ongoing process. If the sub fails to follow orders or breaks a rule, he or she will probably be punished for the infraction. If the submissive partner is a masochist, the type of pain involved in the punishment will probably be one that he or she does not enjoy. Sometimes, punishment will be applied simply to test that the sub will submit to the Dom. In *Story of O*, when O arrives for the first time at the mysterious estate where she is initiated into a sadomasochistic sex group, she is instructed on matters of dress and behaviour, and then on the consequences for breaking the rules: "'You are here to serve your masters… you will be punished, in the form of further whipping, at night for any infraction of the rules during the day" (15-16). At many times during the novel, O is reminded that she must obey her master, and is punished for failing to do so. The Dom/sub relationship relies on the process of training, including through negative consequences. The punishments are often represented as being for the submissive's own good because they will teach the sub to be more obedient and pleasing to his or her partner, and to that end, some Doms require their subs to thank them for punishments.[170] The

[169] For example, she relates stories about two men who regard her as a spiritual mother (2.2; 1.45), and she includes an incident in which she convinces a small group of Londoners of her legitimacy (2.9).

[170] Sometimes breaking the rules would be part of a scene, to allow for "punishments" that the bottom enjoys. For more information on the dynamics of punishment in a kink context, see

explicitness of authority and punishments in a scene can be a relief in contrast to more subtle, but compulsory, structures of reward and punishment in everyday life, and the submissive partner can experience that relief as pleasure. Both Andrea Beckmann and Maneesha Deckha point out that employment relationships rely on compulsory hierarchy but are considered normal parts of society, whereas the pleasurable hierarchies of BDSM are considered perverted. The idea that sex occurs between equals, which Robin Bauer describes as the false ideal of "harmonic sex" ignores the various social hierarchies that influence sexual relationships and leads to the labelling of sex that acknowledges those hierarchies, or even revels in them, as perverted (3-4). In BDSM, punishment is part of play, whereas outside of BDSM, punishment may be represented as beneficial to the development of the one being punished, but it is decidedly not playful.[171]

Like a dominant training a submissive, God leads Margery through her spiritual development.[172] His care and attention to her progress would be likely to secure him the reputation of a "good" Dom in modern kinky contexts. He tells her, "'I schal make the buxom to my wil'" (1.77.4309), and teaches her his expectations and talks with her about her progress in her meditations; he tells her how she should pray, how she should do penance, and how she should eat in a lengthy vision soon after she begins her true devotional practices (1.5). God specifies what clothes Margery should wear, and these clothes indicate her special relationship to him like a collar or other kink symbol of ownership: "I schal ordeyn for the […] yyf thow wilt be

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Wiseman 273-276, or Easton and Hardy 112-114. For more on the submissive training process as a whole see Wiseman 251-276.

[171] Punishment is always represented as having the goal of improving the recipient in some way; without the goal of rehabilitation or improvement, punishment is violence or vengeance.

[172] Margery's tutelage under God would also allow to her access more *auctoritas*, or authority, as an author, because of their special relationship. As Lochrie points out, mystical texts, and perhaps the *Book* in particular, have less access to authority than traditional theological texts (*Margery Kempe* 97-98).

clad in white clothys" (1.30.1758-60).[173] God wants Margery to be obedient to him, and he is willing to guide her through a process of learning how she can best please him.

When Margery fails to meet God's standards, he punishes her. For example, when God tells her who will go to hell and she fails to believe that God would damn anyone, he chastises her for doubting his word:

> for thu beleyvst not that it is the spirit of God that spekyth in thi sowle and schewyth the hys prevy cownselys of summe that schul ben savyd and summe that schal ben dampnyd, therfor God chastisyd the on this wise and maner. (1.59.3443-45)

Her punishment for her lack of faith is twelve days of visions of men's members. After the visions end, Margery tells God "now wyl I lyn stille and be buxom to thi wille" (1.59.3463). Unlike the humiliation she suffers, Margery does not enjoy this kind of torment, and after she endures it she always believes God when he speaks to her, demonstrating the effectiveness of the punishment. At some times, God punishes Margery simply to test the limits of her devotion, as when he sends her eight years of sickness, including mysterious abdominal pains "so hard and so scharp that sche must voydyn that was in hir stomak" (1.56.3247-48). Her endurance of such trials allows her to prove her love for God. God tells Margery that any punishment he sends her is part of his mercy, since it leads her closer to devotional perfection and means she will not suffer in purgatory after her death. He tells her,

> I have behygth the that thu schuldyst noon other purgatory han than slawndyr and speche of the world, for I have chastised the myself as I wolde by many gret dredys and

[173] As I have discussed in previous chapters, costume is often an important part of kink practice, and for Margery dress is also an important part of her mystic role. Her many struggles to be awarded and then to stay in all-white clothing reflect the ways certain clothing corresponds to certain positions or roles in scenes.

turmentriis that thu hast had wyth evyl spyritys bothin slepyng and waking many yerys. And therfor I schal preservyn the at thin ende thorw my mercy. (1.22.1168-71)

In other words, the punishments are for her own good. Margery agrees that God's punishments help her, and often expresses her gratitude for the pains that bring her closer to God. In her final prayer in the *Book* she says, "I thank the… for seeknes and alle scornys, for alle spitys and alle wrongys, and for all divers tribulacyons that han fallyn er schal fallyn to me as long as I leve. Heily I thank the that thu woldist letyn me suffryn" (2.10.749-52).

The system of punishment and training the *Book* depicts resonates with the systems in use in contemporary BDSM communities, particularly in the way that in both time periods, this alternative to more socially acceptable systems of dominance and punishment provides pleasure to the submissive. Knowledge of the ways BDSM manipulates power dynamics in the Dom/sub relationship encourages a closer look at the ways Margery experiences power in her relationship with God. In both cases, a community with rules and standards supports the individual relationship with a dominant partner. The community relationship validates the bottom or Margery's individual experience as non-pathological or non-sinful. Without such a community, the individual is more vulnerable to dominant cultural ideals, and is less likely to experience fulfillment.

As in a healthy kinky relationship between a Dom and sub, all the pain, humiliation, and poverty that Margery suffers for God is consensual. Some theorists question the possibility of true consent within restrictive systems like patriarchy because of the constant influence of the system on a person. A toxic system may, through consistent influence, lead a person to believe he or she is choosing something that actually benefits that toxic system; in other words, power is capable of creating desire to perpetuate itself (Aers 36). In fifteenth-century England, Margery would certainly have faced consistent pressure to adhere to Christian standards of living from the

powerful Church; however, the actions she takes, because of their level of intensity, do not adhere to those standards. God adds another layer of complication to the idea of consent: if God is omnipotent, is it possible for Margery to withhold her consent? By some modern standards, in situations of power imbalance, such as between students and teachers or employees and employers, where the person with more power might wield undue influence over the subordinate, sexual consent is held to be impossible.[174] As I note in my second chapter, anti-sex feminists apply this same kind of criticism to BDSM when they argue that no one can consent to being in a Dom/sub relationship or that masochism is a result of internalizing patriarchy and therefore no woman can consent to erotic pain.[175]

In spite of the extreme power imbalance between God and Margery, her consent to her devotional path and relationship with God is still valid, first because of the direct textual evidence of her consent, and second because of the medieval understanding of free will and how Kempe uses it, particularly as it is represented by the sins of other people in the *Book*. Ignoring Margery's own words and the text's construction of consent dismisses Margery's agency, which the text reasserts throughout. At several points in the *Book*, Margery states her desire to serve God or reaffirms her commitment to suffering on his behalf. In chapter 50, for example, as Margery sets off for a showdown with the Archbishop in York, Christ tells her tribulation is coming. Her less than enthusiastic response leads him to ask her if she would like him to take away the suffering she endures for his love. Margery replies, "'Nay, good Lord, late me be at thi wille and make my mythy and strong for to suffyr al that evyr thu wilt that I suffyr'" (2817-18).

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[174] For an overview of issues of consent in situations involving authority relations between adults in a modern legal context that also considers feminist objections to current laws, see Schneebaum. For a focus on authority relationships between one adolescent and one adult, see Drobac.

[175] Khan provides a good overview of the place of BDSM in the feminist sex wars in the second chapter of her book.

Autobiographical narrative presents the author's perception of an experience and makes it the truth of a text. This exchange emphasizes that although she suffers for Christ, Margery believes she can choose to turn away from her path of masochistic devotion, yet she does not.

Furthermore, medieval Christians believed that God gives free will.[176] God provides opportunities to turn away from sin, and he does not force people to follow him. Free will in the *Book* appears not only in Margery's affirmations of her choice to follow God's path, but also in the fact that other people in the text choose not to do so. Margery has many problems with other people in her *Book*. For example, she clashes with almost every person with whom she travels on pilgrimage. In chapter 26, soon after she begins her journey to Jerusalem, her refusal to eat meat and her crying annoy her companions so much that they ruin her clothing, force her to sit at the end of the table, and mock and scorn her. When the pilgrims Margery travels with concern themselves with their clothes, eat decadent food, and mock her for her piety, they highlight the fact that her behaviour is not the only option. She chooses to obey God's commands, and other people in the text do not.

The explicit, consensual power dynamics of kinky relationships encourage closer reading of the power dynamics at work in Margery's life, and it is most obvious that her relationship with God is consensual when it is compared to the many other non-consensual relationships of power she experiences. The willingness of Margery's submission to God highlights the lack of control she has over her submission to the earthly authority of her husband and the Church. Sometimes these earthly authorities are helpful to her in cases where her own authority would not be recognized: for example, when Margery fears rape on the road or when she is put in jail, she strategically uses her position as "a mannys wife" to avoid sexual assault (1.47.2659). Her

[176] St. Augustine (*Free Choice of the Will*), Bernard of Clairvaux (*Concerning Grace and Free Will*), and St. Thomas Aquinas (*Summa Theologica* 82) all write about the importance of free will to Christian theology.

invocation of her married status in these situations suggests that men in positions of power only respect her right to refuse contact with other men if it is on the authority of her husband.[177]

While medieval marital rules about sex supposedly give husbands and wives equal claim to each other's bodies, and medieval stereotypes depicted women as more desiring and lustful than men, Margery's experience is of a husband whose desires for sex impinge upon her spiritual goals: she must obtain John's consent in order to live chastely. Though sex with her husband becomes "peynful and horrybyl unto hir" once she turns to Christ (1.4.321), she must continue to submit to her husband's sexual desires for years. As the Lord says to Margery in chapter 86, he has given her a husband who allows her to be chaste, and many other wives would love to be in her position (5043-50). Furthermore, it is only through Christ's authority, which she can draw on because of her submission to God, that she is able to persuade John to live chaste at all. The deal that Margery makes with John to get his vow of chastity involves paying his debts and eating with him on Fridays, instead of fasting as she has for years. When she asks Christ for guidance, he tells her, "'And he schal han that he desyreth. For, my derworthy dowtyr, this was the cawse that I bad the fastyn for thu schuldyst the sonar opteyn and getyn thi desyr'" (1.11.561-63). This negotiation of their marriage resonates with negotiations in BDSM because it is both consensual and mutually satisfying. Christ's intervention into Margery's marriage frees her from the condition of most wives under patriarchy—submission to a husband's needs—which, depending on the married couple involved, could lead to experiences of non-consensual sex. On her own, Margery cannot overcome the systems of patriarchal dominance she lives in, but through her willing obedience to God she escapes the kinds of obedience to which she does not wish to consent.

[177] In *Authority and the Female Body in the Writings of Julian of Norwich and Margery Kempe*, Liz Herbert McAvoy points out that Margery manipulates a variety of discourses on medieval femininity and the female body as it suits her to do so.

Margery draws on that same holy authority when she confronts disapproving clergy at home and on her travels. When she is examined as a heretic or Lollard, Margery responds with the correct answers through the Holy Ghost, and this allows her to evade imprisonment. The clergy who wish to imprison or burn her wield the oppressive power of the Church, which is particularly violent at this time owing to the persecution of Lollards. Margery faces death threats many times because clergymen or other people suspect her of being a Lollard: in Canterbury, monks yell, "Thow schalt be brent, fals lollare. Her is a cartful of thornys redy for the and a tonne to bren the wyth" (1.13.649-50); in Lambeth the Archbishop's men wish for "a fagot to bren [her] wyth" (1.16.825); in Leicester the mayor wishes to burn her (1.47.2690); and in York another Archbishop's men wish to burn her, as do the Duke of Bedford's men (1.52; 1.53). All of these accusers are male representatives of ecclesiastical, civic, or aristocratic authority. The violence that Margery is threatened with on multiple occasions demonstrates the importance of intention. God's intent in bringing Margery pain or suffering is to save her soul; his motivation is benevolent. The men of the towns or the clergy who wish to hurt Margery, on the other hand, seek only to destroy her because she is outside of their understanding or control.[178]

Margery's masochism and willing submission to God contrast with the nonconsensual and one-directional flow of power and violence between clergy and laity and the potentially corrupt nature of the clergy who misinterpret Margery's holiness. The clergy she meets are often hypocrites. Margery finds it difficult to acquire the ecclesiastical approval she needs to move about the country, fast as she wants to, or wear her white clothes. Since her visions and several

[178] Though one official justification of burning heretics was that the burning alive would give them a last chance to repent before their heresy condemned them to eternal hellfire, no man who threatens Margery ever expresses this sentiment of redemption; on the other hand, God always pairs her penitential suffering with promises of joy in heaven. Another reason heretics were burned was because people believed that fire would not burn someone protected by God (through the concept of trial by ordeal). For more on the historical justifications for burning heretics, see Barbezat, or Head 234.

weather-related miracles prove that her practices are holy, the Church is in error when it hampers her progress, and therefore out of touch with the true will of God.[179] Her frequent imprisonment or examination by clergy shows how oppressive the authority of the Church can be for a woman in fifteenth-century England, particularly in comparison with the more loving dominance of God. She is able to overcome those toxic power dynamics because of her masochistic submission to God. Margery is subject to oppressive power structures (marriage, ecclesiastical authority) that do not respect her volition. Her masochistic relationship with God, which is entirely voluntary, presents itself as a positive alternative, even though it looks pathological to her contemporaries and early twentieth-century critics of the *Book*.

The text also shows that there is a difference between the physical and mental pain to which Margery consents and pain to which she does not consent by beginning Margery's story with nonconsensual pain. In the very first chapter, Margery experiences a madness following childbirth:

> And in this tyme sche sey, as hir thowt, develys opyn her mowthys al inflaumyd wyth brennyng lowys of fyr as thei schuld a swalwyd hyr in, sumtyme ramping at hyr, sumtyme thretyng her, sumtym pullyng hyr and halying hir… Sche wold a fordon hirself many a tym at her steryngs and a ben damnyd wyth hem in helle. And into wytnesse therof sche bot hir owen hand so violently that it was seen al hir lyfe aftyr. And also sche roof hir skyn on hir body agen hir hert wyth hir nayles spetowsly. (150-63)

When Margery experiences unwanted torment and visions, she attempts to reclaim control over her pain through reactionary self-harm that gives physical expression to her psychological trauma. Margery's experience here is radically different from her grateful acceptance of pain and

[179] The inability of some members of the Church to recognize a mystic's holiness is another common trope of hagiography.

shame from God, and her delivery from this torment is what motivates her to begin a holy life. In the *Book*, there is a difference between the pain God gives to Margery with her consent, or that Christ submits to on the cross, which symbolize devotion and bring love and salvation, and non-consensual pain that comes from bad men or the devil, which symbolizes sin, despair, or hypocrisy.

Margery's Performative Devotion

It is Margery's performance of the roles of weeping, holy woman and special beloved of God that allow her to navigate away from nonconsensual pain in favour of the consensual. Performance affords Margery freedoms she would not otherwise have.[180] The *Book* recounts Margery's spiritual journey as performative. The most provocative of Margery's performances of her devotion are her unrestrainable explosions of holy crying, which she experiences for many years following her visit to Jerusalem. The text recounts her first experience as follows:

> sche fel down that sche mygth not stondyn ne knelyn but walwyd and wrestyd wyth hir body, spredyng hir armys abrode, and cryed wyth a lowed voys as thow hir hert schulde a brostyn asundyr… And sche had so gret compassion and so gret peyn to se owyr Lordys peyn that sche myt not kepe hirself fro krying and roryng thow sche schuld a be ded therfor. (1.28.1572-79)

Mass, moving sermons, male children, and wounds are among the many triggers capable of prompting Margery into a fit of roaring, boisterous crying. Though she is capable of having her crying fits in private, the majority of Margery's crying happens before spectators, making the

[180] As Diana Taylor notes in her landmark study of performance and Latin American communities in the United States, there are many ways to understand the term performance. The word might refer to fulfilling potential in a job, consciously acting out "unreal" acts or characters in an artistic context, or the unconscious adherence to gender roles and cultural values most people enact on a daily basis (2-4).

crying a public performance of her emotional devotion to God and especially Christ's Passion. With these actions, she performs devotion to God with her body but without bearing children.

Holloway makes an explicit connection between the medieval mystic's visionary contact with God and the saints and dramatic performance. She writes,

> such practices consisted of re-visioning the sacred drama with oneself as witness and participant, transcending both time and space. Rather than as hallucinations, it could be wise to perceive these visions, these texts and these paintings, as spiritual exercises, sacred conversations, and participatory reenactments of the past's scared drama. (128)

Margery's conversations with holy figures and her imagining of Christ's passion participate in a dramatic tradition. Her holy crying involves the physical acting out of her intense emotions; when she cries in mass she disruptively performs her devotion to Christ. The recording of her conversations and outbursts in the text archives them and creates new audiences in readers.

Margery's performance of devotion impacts her observers, and no matter how they react, she benefits spiritually. Her two kinds of performance reach her audiences or readers in two ways: her relation of her contemplations in conversation with holy men grants her some authority as it proves she is in God's favour and brings her personal comfort and gratification; and her performative crying either moves people who see her into adopting a more holy lifestyle, or they feel she is faking her thrashing and her tears, and the scorn they heap on her helps her achieve more glory with God. In *Death by Drama*, Jody Enders reads the medieval urban legends of actors who become too immersed in theatrical reality as a commentary on ecclesiastical and social fears of the power of drama to create madness or even death. However, if Margery's performance is informed by or becomes generative of real emotion, her engagement with the power of theatrics to alter reality (hers and her observers') is positive because she draws on piety

and love for God instead of despair or insanity. Ultimately, her performance may benefit her observers, but it always benefits her.

Like Margery's devotion, BDSM is performative. As Patrick Califia, noted kinkster, theorist, and author, writes, "[t]he S/M subculture is a theatre in which sexual dramas can be acted out and appreciated" (168). The theory of performance as it applies to BDSM can also shed light on Margery's devotional performances. In my first chapter, I discuss how BDSM can be read as acts of queer performativity. As Hoople argues,

> queer performances are misarticulations or, if I may be allowed a pun, "malappropriations" of hetero-patriarchal norms which pervert the normalizing aims of hetero-patriarchal relations of power, thus operating, even if only in a limited, site-specific way, to undermine these relations by exposing their contingency. (209)

Hoople employs Judith Butler's theory of queer performativity in order to argue that BDSM is capable of undermining the oppressive dynamics it cites in performance.

The queer performativity of kink provides a new perspective on Margery's performance of masochism and submission as part of her affective piety in the *Book*. When Margery performs her devotion, the citation of the pain and torment of Christ and her unwilling submission to men underscore the repressive nature of marriage and Church hierarchy to a woman in her position. Her willing surrender of her will to God demonstrates the lack of ability she has to consent in the patriarchal structures that govern her, but at the same time it enables her to gain control over her life she could not otherwise have. As Marla Carlson argues in *Performing Bodies in Pain: Medieval and Postmodern Martyrs, Mystics, and Artists*, the female mystic's performance of pain grants her access to speech in systems that would otherwise repress her; Carlson writes, "for the mystic, pain has been a source of empowerment and guarantee of authenticity" (101). Carlson is mostly concerned with the suffering of virgin martyrs and mystics, but her arguments apply to

Margery's performances of pain as well. If Margery's wailing in Church guarantees anything, it is that she gets the attention, however begrudgingly, of her community.

Margery's performance of her devotion, and the occasional consultation with a sympathetic clerical authority, allow her text to walk along the very edge of orthodoxy; though she is expressing herself and using her body in unusual ways for a married woman of her time, she is always able to find validation for her practices from earthly or divine authorities. She pushes her conduct beyond what most people are comfortable with, but always remains theologically justifiable. The *Book*'s representation of this brinksmanship resonates with the practices and representation of BDSM. On the level of practice, kinksters may derive pleasure from pushing boundaries in three different ways: from pushing social boundaries through their scenes, for example if a kinkster enjoys acting out taboo scenarios; from testing their personal physical limits and pain tolerance; and from participating in what practitioners call edge-play, which are types of activities that are controversial within BDSM communities, like breath play. As Weiss ("Mainstreaming Kink") and Khan have shown, mainstream representations of BDSM test the limits of social acceptability by introducing elements of BDSM but then dismissing them as forbidden or perverse; community produced representations of BDSM, on the other hand, often present BDSM practices as ways to challenge socially acceptable limits.[181] Margery's representation of her experiences in the *Book* connects more with the practitioner's view of BDSM; that is, the text presents her practices as empowering and challenging to secular and clerical authorities. She demonstrates the potential productivity of living on the edge of acceptability.

[181] Patrick Califia, for example, writes, "S/M is a deliberate, pre-meditated, erotic blasphemy. It is a form of sexual extremism and sexual dissent" (158). Juicy Lucy, a member of the Samois collective of lesbian feminists, sees BDSM as an active response to the power inequalities present in sexual relationships.

Margery's queer performance of her devotion also embraces a concept modern queer theorist José Muñoz calls "queer futurity." Whereas general futurity depends on heterosexual reproduction and the continuation of normative ideals, queer futurity is "attentive to the past for the purposes of critiquing the present" and hopes to build an alternative, utopian future (18). This is not to say that all queer people will participate in queer futurity or that all revolutionaries are queer; rather, Muñoz identifies elements of the queer experience, such as social and familial rejection, that can lead to a commitment to disrupting the status quo. While Muñoz's analysis of queer utopias and futurity is concerned with mid to late twentieth-century film and performance in New York City, Margery's devotional practices resonate surprisingly well with his ideas of how hopeful queerness reacts to a stultifying present in order to imagine a better future.

First, the Book emphasizes the importance of Margery's spiritual development over the importance of futurity through reproduction. Though the Bible and medieval Church officials encourage women to serve God by having children, Margery is spiritually unsatisfied by her fourteen biological children. In fact, since she often wishes she were a virgin, these children only remind her of her maternal, and therefore unvirginal, status. Instead, Margery values her spiritual children, a network of chosen family who support her devotional goals. When a clerk in York asks her to explain the meaning of God's command *crescite et multiplicamini*, Margery replies, "thes words ben not undirstondyn only of begetyng of children bodily, but also be purchasing of vertu, whech is frute gostly" (1.51.2842-44). She insists that bearing children is not the only way to follow God's command; the reclamation of her body for physical devotion to God without bearing children is a major aspect of her *Book*. To that end, she includes stories of men she mothers in a spiritual sense; she raises them in devotion, and these men call her mother because of her piety and influence, including the shipmaster on her trip to Norway (2.3) and Thomas Marshall (1.45-46). Though Margery has fourteen biological children, beyond reporting that fact,

she does not write about her children, except in the case of her eldest son, whom she includes only as an example of her spiritual mothering. This son, John, is a worldly man, but through her prayers and tears, he changes his ways and becomes devout (2.1-2). The *Book* clearly values Margery's spiritual mothering, which might contribute to a queer futurity, more than her biological motherhood, which can only contribute to reproductive futurity.

Muñoz contends that queerness "is a longing that propels us onwards… Queerness is that thing that lets us feel that this world is not enough, that indeed something is missing… Queerness is essentially a rejection of a here and now and insistence on potentiality or concrete possibility for another world" (1). The queer rejection of the here and now need not refer to a conscious and political critique of existing institutions; it may result from an attempt to claim an identity that is not acceptable to standards of heteronormativity. In that case, the rejection of the present and longing for a different kind of future can be a side effect of the queer subject's frustrated desire for recognition. Margery's longing for the afterlife and for the physical body of Christ resonates with the queer feeling of something missing. Moreover, her visions of the Passion demonstrate her emotional connection to the biblical past. Though the Church preaches the importance of the afterlife, Margery's frequent disagreements with clerical figures and fellow pilgrims show that her longing for heaven rejects the here and now to a degree that marks her as out of step with her community. As Muñoz argues queer futurity must do, Margery looks to the past and critiques the present: she meditates on the biblical past as part of her campaign to increase piety in the present. Margery's focus on heaven as her future utopia is so intense that it makes her an outsider in her present.[182]

[182] "Set your affections on things above, not on things on earth" (Col. 3:2). The focus on heaven instead of on earthly existence is another orthodox theological concept that Margery takes too far. While she is in line with clerical tradition in her heavenly focus, the reaction of her neighbours, clergy members, and other pilgrims indicate that she is out of line with what the text represents as

Finally, Margery's weeping, crying, conversations, and *Book* are examples of utopian performativity because they seek to create community and belonging for her in otherwise hostile spaces. As Muñoz writes,

> performance is the kernel of a potentiality that is transmitted to audiences and witnesses … the real force of performance is its ability to generate a modality of knowing and recognition among audiences and groups that facilitates modes of belonging, especially minoritarian belonging. If we consider performance under such a lens, we can see the temporality of what I describe as utopian performativity, which is to say a manifestation of a "doing" that is in the horizon, a mode of possibility. (99)

Margery's weeping, for example, proposes an alternate way of showing devotion and her text encourages imitation of her tears, both through its description of the benefits of those tears—Christ tells her that holy crying saves souls from Purgatory (1.22)—and by the inclusion of stories of people who join her spiritual family through imitation and find fulfillment like Thomas Marshall (1.45). The readers of her book who believe and follow her could also join this spiritual family, extending her vision of piety into the future.

In *The Powers of the Holy*, as a part of his examination of the humanity of Christ and Lollardy, David Aers responds to the idea that affective piety empowers medieval women through the feminization of Christ. He argues that the medieval Church sidelines the Jesus of joy, who also encourages action against repressive or unjust governments, and focuses on the wounds of the Passion in order to elicit affective responses that encourage submission to suffering and authority. Affective piety is a non-intellectual movement that gives individuals without access to

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average, or normal, Christian devotion. Her revelation of her contemporaries' hypocrisy by her own focus on heaven may be why some people react as negatively to her as they do. As I mention above, the mystic's example demonstrating the corruption of others is a standard trope of hagiography; however, Margery's failure to gain recognition as a saint also separates her from those examples.

theological texts access to God through emotion. In response to the idea that affective piety empowers women because they can take control of their bodies through their *imitatio Christi*, Aers writes,

> pleasures and desires, including pleasures that are viewed as transgressive… may be produced by current relations of power as a move in the perpetuation of those relations of power. As Foucault remarked in an interview with the editors of *Quel Corps* in 1975, "power is strong… because, as we are beginning to realize, it produces effects at the level of desire." (36)

He argues that any illusion of power that comes to women through affective piety actually involves their reabsorption into the Church's existing power structure. Aers' insightful critique of the reification of the humanity of Christ is valuable, but his assumption that affective piety can only replicate the kind of submission valued by the Church finds parallels with the anti-sex assumption that BDSM only replicates patriarchal violence. Like critics of BDSM, he denies the value of the agency and subjective experience of the mystic and assumes that any pleasure they find in submission must be because they enjoy submitting to the Church. While the Church expects obedience and submission, and affective piety promotes those qualities, the submission and meekness Margery practices allow her to challenge these structures; her masochism encourages worship of God and earthly suffering, but not blind obedience to those clergy who would restrict her expression of her love for God. She undermines the Church's power through her consensual manipulation of power with God, and her performance of public suffering affords her a level of control over her body.

Conclusions

In every society, people experience corrupt or coercive power, whether it is through the hypocrisy of the fifteenth-century Church or the exploitative structures of modern-day capitalism. For some people, the solution or response to these structures is to perform pleasurable and deviant manipulation of existing power dynamics to find some measure of control over their own experience. There are definite resonances between Margery Kempe's affectively pious relationship with God and modern BDSM, enough to form a queer connection across time. In BDSM and in Margery's *Book*, we see that masochism can constitute a way of relating to power and of negotiating within existing hierarchies for an increased sense of control and pleasure. Though she lives in a world of oppressive patriarchal authority and threats of real violence, Margery Kempe enters into a loving, consensual, submissive relationship with God that helps her make peace with her desires, resist corrupt clerical control, and find her own power.

Chapter 5: Switching with Alisoun: Chaucer's Wife of Bath and Flexible Power Dynamics

In kinky relationships, there is generally a top and a bottom, one partner who takes the dominant role and one partner who submits. However, in erotic power exchange, particularly between people in an ongoing relationship, the person who dominates and the person who submits may not always be the same; that is, from one scene to another, one partner may play both the dominant and submissive positions. When a kinkster enjoys both kinds of roles, rather than identifying as a top or bottom, that person will identify as a switch to indicate his or her interest in switching between dominance and submission. The switch takes a more fluid approach to power exchange; rather than performing scenes based on a fixed hierarchical flow of power, the switch occupies either role, creating a flexible power dynamic.[183]

This chapter proposes that reading the Wife of Bath as a switch instead of as a pure dominant or submissive provides a fresh perspective on the most contested aspects of her *Prologue* and *Tale*. Kinky reading entails paying close attention to details of power exchange in a text with the understanding that the initial appearance of that power exchange may be deceiving. It seems fitting that this dissertation should conclude with a kinky reading of the *Wife of Bath's Prologue and Tale*, both of which have been lightening rods for critical controversy. Notably, there has long been disagreement over the nature of Chaucer's contribution to antifeminist discourse in these texts. Does Alisoun undermine negative stereotypes of women, or reinforce them? Critical response falls along a spectrum from seeing her as giving "a serious vision of the woman on top" (Pugh, "Queering Genres" 134) to calling her "a feminine monstrosity who is the product of the masculine imagination against which she ineffectively and only superficially rebels" (Hansen, *Fictions of Gender* 35). Her borrowing from misogynistic texts, her defense of

[183] For more on the switch, see Bauer 51-52, 176; Scott 156-179; MsTender; *The Switchy Witch*; or Wiseman 375.

her voracious sexuality, her preoccupation with money, her love of a husband who beats her, and her tale about a rapist knight have generated hundreds of differing critical opinions.[184] Reading the Wife as a switch depends on accepting power as a malleable force and differentiating between play and reality in order to provide a solution to the critical impasse over this character. A kinky reading of the Wife's *Prologue* and *Tale* also allows me to make a connection between these texts and modern feminist discourse that reveals feminist resistance to embracing female desire and interprets the Wife as a sincere intervention against misogynistic discourse.

A kinky reading of the Wife and her texts is compelling because her desires and sexuality revolve explicitly around power, pain, authority, and role reversal. She pursues power, as she calls it *maistrie* or *sovereignty*,[185] in her relationships, and so does the loathly lady in her *Tale*. Alisoun and her five husbands trade both physical and emotional pain; her fifth husband Jankyn in particular draws out her masochistic side. She eroticizes violence in her bloody dream. The Wife plays many roles, and claims to be only playing as she speaks to the other pilgrims (192). Her instructional monologue on sexual and marital practices calls attention to the constructedness of normative practices and of the antifeminist ideas about women that she questions. A kinky perspective on the Wife provides both an alternative to psychopathological readings of her character's sadism and masochism and a solution to the problem of reconciling antifeminist and feminist readings of her *Prologue* and *Tale*.[186]

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[184] Pugh and Hansen represent two ends of a critical spectrum. More moderate responses—which often include a focus on issues other than gender and sexuality, for example on historicism, psychoanalysis, or source texts—include those by Fradenburg "Fulfild of fairye", Minnis, Pearman, Tinkle, and Van Dyke.

[185] The word sovereign derives from the Latin *superanus*, the root of which is *super* (above) (*OED*). A sovereign is above others and is therefore, etymologically, a top.

[186] These psychopathological readings would assume Alisoun's behaviour results from mental illness. The chapter considers one such reading in more detail below.

The Wife is positioned in relation to two discourses on female sexuality: the clerical and the antifeminist. Both depict women as the sensual opposite of reasoning men and dictate that husbands should be the heads of their households—teaching, controlling, and even disciplining their wives. St. Thomas Aquinas, for example, writes, "woman is naturally subject to man, because in man the discretion of reason predominates" (I.92). The basis for these ideas is biblical. As God ejects Adam and Eve from the Garden of Eden, he tells Eve (and by extension all women after her) that her husband "shall rule over you" (Gen. 3:16). The New Testament makes several references to the rightful dominance of a man over his wife. Ephesians 5:22-24, for example, reads,

> Wives, submit yourselves unto your own husbands, as unto the Lord. For the husband is the head of the wife, even as Christ is the head of the church: and he is the saviour of the body. Therefore as the church is subject unto Christ, so let the wives be to their own husbands in every thing.

The First Book of Timothy asserts male authority and that woman is less intellectually capable than man: "But I suffer not a woman to teach, nor to usurp authority over the man, but to be in silence. For Adam was first formed, then Eve. And Adam was not deceived, but the woman being deceived was in the transgression" (2:12-14). Medieval theologians use these and other bible verses,[187] as well as patristic writing, to encourage men to keep women subservient, and a literary tradition of misogynistic prose and poetry results from hegemonic ideas about female inferiority.[188]

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[187] For example: "Likewise, ye wives, be in subjection to your own husbands" (1 Peter 3:1); "But I would have you know, that the head of every man is Christ; and the head of the woman is the man" (1 Cor. 11:3); "Wives, submit yourselves unto your own husbands, as it is fit in the Lord" (Col. 3:18).

[188] For more on medieval antifeminist literature, see Blamires, Pratt, and Marx or Bloch.

According to clerical authority, a woman should be chaste and virginal before marriage, but it is more difficult for women to deny their fleshly desires. Women tempt men with their bodies, and the fear that men feel about that temptation can manifest in disdain for women (Sylvester 69). A married woman could ideally remain chaste after bearing some children, but if she becomes a widow, she threatens sexual boundaries because she has sexual experience but no marital outlet for her desires. As Desmond writes, "as sexually experienced women outside the regime of marriage and consequently beyond masculine control, widows explicitly troubled the normative categories of desire in medieval culture" (125). The widow often holds more economic power than other women. Her legal status is more independent than that of a married or single woman; she might own property or run businesses in her own name (Carruthers, "Painting of Lions" 210-11). In an attempt to contain the widow's threat, antifeminist literature often represents the widow as a lecherous, garrulous, revolting figure; as Lee Patterson argues, "[t]he randy widow is virtually always a figure of mockery, but mocked less in fun than in outrage and even horror" (292). He then specifies, "widows who remarried a much younger man were by far the most common target of community disapproval" (293). By mocking the sexually demanding older woman, antifeminist discourse undermines her and warns women against becoming like her.[189]

The Wife descends directly from such antifeminist stereotypes of widows, and yet she resists the same straightforwardly negative appraisals.[190] This chapter argues that she responds so directly and unapologetically to the misogynistic tradition that spawns her that she undermines

[189] For more on the tradition of the old woman and the Wife in particular, see Matthews or Patterson 290-96.

[190] While for some time the Wife was generally considered obscene and morally corrupt (for example, Dryden writes a version of the *Tale* but omits the *Prologue* in *Fables Ancient and Modern*), she eventually comes to inspire more divergent readings. For more on the history of the reception of the *Prologue* and *Tale* see H. Cooper, "The Shape-shiftings."

the undermining of women's sexuality. Alisoun conforms to expectations of garrulity and sexual deception, but she confounds such one-dimensional characterizations through the depth of her character and the power in her speech. She resists demands that widows practice sexual acceptability (adhering to patriarchal standards of sexuality) in order to gain respect. Gowther reinscribes himself into aristocratic masculinity through sadism and masochism, and Margery Kempe resists authority but still demands a place for herself in the Church in spite of her queer devotional practices. Unlike these two, the Wife does not attempt to work within existing power systems; instead she attempts to dismantle these sexist power dynamics and establish a new order in which sex can be a positive, mutually satisfying, non-sinful aspect of life.

Erotic Fiction and the Wife of Bath

It is useful to consider the Wife and her texts as pieces of kinky erotic fiction. This approach clarifies three points often at issue in criticism of these texts: the realism of the Wife, the ethical implications of her *Prologue* and *Tale*, and the place of pleasure in the text. First of all, keeping in mind that the Wife and her texts are fiction prevents the mistake of attributing independent subjectivity to the Wife. Historically, part of the appeal of Alisoun's character has been her realism: her apparent emotional depth and the strong female point of view she offers. Teresa Tinkle, for example, writes that reception of the Wife "reveals the powerful impact of Chaucer's realism" ("Textual/Sexual Lives" 79). Geoffrey Gust notes that readers consistently receive her as realistic or even real (122). This realism has tempted some critics to try to identify Alisoun as an historical person: John Manly argues that Chaucer based the Wife on a real woman working in St. Michael's parish of Bath (225-34), and Martin Puhvel attempts to identify Alisoun as Alice Kyteler, an Irish woman tried for witchcraft in 1324. However, as other critics have noted, it is important to remember that though the Wife is realistic, she is not real: her speeches, whatever

their impact and message, cannot convey authentic female desire because she is actually the product of Chaucer's male imagination. For example, Elaine Treharne writes that while Chaucer's "linguistic acuity" makes his characters convincing, there is no real female voice in the text (114-15). Elaine Tuttle Hansen bluntly states that the Wife is "nothing more or less than a projection of collective male fear, conventionally masculine desire, and a male-dominated linguistic order" ("'Of his love'" 275).

It would seem by now to be a given in literary criticism that no character, or even literary recording of a real person's experience, can convey a perfect truth about the desires of real people. Why is it then so important for some critics to remind readers that the Wife is not real? There seems to be much more concern for mistaking Alisoun for a real person than there is for other characters, and I would argue that this caution about how "real" her perspective is most often occurs in readings of the *Prologue* and *Tale* that find the texts' ideology to be effective yet unpalatable. In Hansen's case, for example, her reminders that the Wife's voice is really Chaucer's are part of her argument that the *Prologue* and *Tale* cannot be feminist because they establish pain as part of female desire and suggest that women love violent men. Her denial that Chaucer, as a man, could create a character that might accurately represent an aspect of female subjectivity seems to me to be partially motivated by distaste for what she sees as the implications of the texts.

I, however, am willing to argue that Chaucer is capable of imagining a woman's perspective, even if he cannot become a woman as he writes his female characters,[191] and more importantly, that when he imagines this differently gendered perspective, the result has some

[191] Any more than he becomes a miller or pardoner as he writes other parts of the *Canterbury Tales*.

sympathy and nuance.[192] Even if Chaucer intends to appeal to male fantasy, the resulting character subverts gender norms and undermines heteronormative conceptions of power dynamics. Regardless of Chaucer's intentions with regards to antifeminist traditions, the text supports a number of readings. While it is perhaps important not to reify the Wife of Bath, remembering that these texts are fiction does not mean they cannot reflect a version of reality. A text may represent and even generate certain desires; representing and generating desire are goals of erotic fiction in particular.

Secondly, treating the Wife and her texts as erotic fiction provides a new framework for considering the ethical implications of the texts. The *Prologue* includes some intense instances of violence and erotic humiliation, and the *Tale* begins with a rape. I discuss these aspects of the text in detail as part of my readings below; first, I establish how understanding the texts as erotic fiction informs my reading more generally. Erotica, particularly kinky erotica, often employs exaggerated fantasy scenarios. In a kinky context, literary representation of violence is part of erotic fantasy. Sometimes, the pretend violence is explicitly like BDSM: it takes place with negotiation and between partners; at other times, however, the violence will be written without scene conventions and will seem more like the actual scenario a kink may manipulate or draw from. In my first chapter, and again as has been necessary throughout this dissertation, I address the idea that BDSM is not violence. Rather, it reiterates violence in ways that may be harnessed for personal pleasure or even political subversion of an original power. A rape scene is not a rape, and in fact, survivors of sexual assault may enact rape scenes in order to purposefully work

[192] For an overview of cultural appropriation in literature, see Rogers. For background on the potential of artistic cultural appropriation without cultural essentialism see Matthes. Matthes, unlike many defenders of voice appropriation (authors writing characters of different genders, races, cultures, etc.), argues that cultural appropriation can be legitimately harmful.

through that real-life trauma in an environment of control and safety.[193] Similarly, and perhaps to an even more obvious degree, such a scene in erotic literature is not really happening. A story about incest is not reality, nor does it constitute an endorsement of incest in the real world. In a kinky story, such a scene is intended to be arousing, and the arousal in such cases can result because of how forbidden, and even disturbing the act would be if it were to actually happen. Rape fantasies, for example, occur in both kinky and non-kinky contexts, and, as Critelli and Bivona conclude in their recent study of women and rape fantasy, an erotic rape fantasy does not at all correspond to a desire for actual rape; in fact, it may be that the fear of being raped in reality is what gives the fantasy of being raped its heightened erotic impact (68).[194] The inability to reconcile the presence of violence with the potentially empowering elements of these texts is what leads to some feminists' negative critiques of the Wife, but the kinky reading of erotic fiction leaves room for both to co-exist.

Of course, that the erotic representation of violent acts is acceptable is not a position a feminist can take for granted. In feminist theory, consideration of works with erotic purposes is dominated by the long and hotly contested feminist debates over pornography.[195] Very basically, the debates over porn occur between anti-pornography feminists, who believe that pornography should be eliminated because it sexualizes discrimination and promotes violence against women, and anti-censorship feminists, who argue that pornography can be positive and should not be censored. The feminist debates over pornography fit along fairly predictable lines into the

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193 This perspective is present in many community writings about BDSM. For example, in her essay for *Coming to Power*, Juicy Lucy writes that the experiences she has with kink help her to defuse "the terror and powerlessness of the rapes & beatings" she has experienced (34).

194 I return to the idea of rape fantasy in particular below as I consider the meaning of the rape in the Wife's *Tale*.

195 For an overview of these debates that seeks to be fair to both sides by including essays by feminists with a variety of attitudes towards pornography, see Cornell's *Feminism and Pornography*.

broader feminist sex wars,[196] with most anti-pornography feminists also being anti-sex feminists, and most anti-censorship feminists also being pro-sex feminists. Drucilla Cornell attempts a moderate approach; she argues that critique of pornography should eschew absolutes, and instead approach pornography as a medium that might allow exploration of feminine sexuality, but which is also a modern industry with issues, including of consent and exploitation, of which we can and should be critical (551-68). In other words, feminists should neither reject pornography out of hand, nor uncritically accept it as positive. This approach reflects my reading of the Wife and her texts as erotic fiction: the eroticized violence in the texts does not preclude them from contributing to a positive depiction of female sexuality, but the nonconsensual aspects of the text will complicate a straightforwardly positive reading.

Linda Williams' conclusions in her book *Hard Core*, one of the first attempts to study pornography academically as a genre, have helped to inform my perspective on the Wife's erotic fictions. In particular, Williams' ideas about the ways porn engages social context and offers some potential for female pleasure seem relevant to a discussion of the Wife's texts. First, Williams argues that, paradoxically, porn distracts from the real world, but that to do so it must engage with real issues convincingly enough to be distracting (154-55). Because of this engagement, although porn offers "solutions… sought facilely in the greater energy, abundance, intensity, or transparency of sexual performance, the form itself nevertheless brings questions of power relations between the sexes into view" (155-56). Both the Wife's *Prologue* and *Tale* are distracting entertainment on the road for the pilgrims, but they also present issues of power imbalances between men and women, and do so with some candour. The Wife's method of dealing with the problems she points out between women and men or women and authority can

[196] As discussed in the second chapter of this dissertation.

be seen to parallel pornography's strategy, since her solution to the problems of controlling one's husbands, being happy, reforming a rapist, or having a successful marriage all involve sexuality.

Second, Williams contends that pornography offers some opportunity for women's pleasure. She writes that in most contexts, women lose power if they admit to pleasure, and that rhetorically pleasure is traditionally opposed to power or control (153). Pornography, however, does not maintain this dichotomy. In *Insatiable*, for example, a film from the 1970s, the female protagonist always wants more sex, but is not portrayed as desperate or wrong for feeling this way, and neither does her search for sexual fulfillment undermine her control over other aspects of her life (178-79). Moreover, pornography, according to Williams, is the one genre in which women are not punished for wanting or experiencing sexual pleasure (208-09).[197] As this chapter will demonstrate, the erotic elements of the Wife's texts reflect this same possibility of a woman who wants both sexual pleasure and control over other parts of her life; the *Prologue* and *Tale* also ultimately reward female sexuality instead of punishing it.

Finally, reading the texts as erotic fiction ensures that the importance of pleasure remains a consideration in the interpretation of the Wife and her texts. While specific interpretation of their meaning is open, these texts undoubtedly advance arguments about gender and sexuality; however, as erotic fiction, these texts are also concerned with sexual enjoyment and fulfillment, as well as the pursuit of sexual pleasure. The Wife, her husbands, the knight, and the old wyf are concerned with feeling sexual pleasure, in many cases perhaps primarily so. That the relationships are heterosexual may partially explain why some feminist critics have been unable to take the Wife's assertions at face value. In her survey of feminist work, Janet Halley observes a lack of appreciation for heterosexual desire, and particularly a lack of accounting for

[197] It may not be universally true that pornography does not punish female desire, but Williams' point is that by the standards of the genre, such punishment would be an exception.

heterosexual women's desire, which she sees as the result of several strands of feminism's views on sex between a man and a woman as replication of patriarchal subordination. She writes,

> I have encountered thick theories and thick descriptions of lesbian love (butch/femme/, femme/femme, butch/butch), gay male erotic genders of all kinds, and transsexual crossings back and through all of that: but I have not found *anyone* determined to produce a theory or politics of women's *heterosexual desire for masculinity in men*. It's just missing. (65)

It is beyond the scope of this dissertation to supply a unified theory to explain women's desire for men, but reading the *Prologue* and *Tale* as erotic fiction includes taking the Wife's pleasure, which she achieves through interactions with men, seriously.

Various features of the *Prologue*'s rhetoric mark it as erotic fiction. As erotic fiction, the Wife's account of her sexual satisfaction in the *Prologue* needs to elicit at least sexual curiosity and preferably arousal from her audience. The Wife's texts have a purpose, which I argue is to advocate for sexual pleasure and flexible power dynamics in marriage. Audience engagement needs to be positive for this message to be well received. First of all, the Wife supplements the narrator's description from the *General Prologue* by describing herself physically, which none of the other pilgrims do; she says she is "gat-toothed" (603),[198] has suggestive birthmarks (604,620) has been "faire, and riche, and yong" with the "beste quoniam myghte be" (608). She also describes herself as sexually voracious and a skilled lover throughout her *Prologue*. The other pilgrims devote their description of bodies to the characters in their stories; by describing herself the way other pilgrims do their characters, Alisoun presents herself as a character in her own

[198] All quotations of the *Wife of Bath's Prologue and Tale* are from the *Riverside Chaucer*, 3rd edition. Many critics include "III" before the line numbers in quotations to indicate that the Wife's texts are grouped in the third fragment of the *Canterbury Tales*. I note that here and omit the numerals from citations.

erotic tales. She is realistic about the effects of age, but also contends that her sexual usefulness is not over: "[t]he flour is goon… The bren, as I best kan, now moste I selle;/ But yet to be right myrie wol I fonde" (477-79). She is an older woman, and may therefore no longer be conventionally attractive (in fact, as an older widow she fights against the stereotype that her body is offensively grotesque), but the Wife presents her body as still worthy of erotic attention when she declares her intention to marry again; the sixth "yonge" and "fressh abedde" (1259) husband she hopes for would undoubtedly be having sex with her.

The Wife's appreciation of her own body is also apparent in her treatment of herself as a sexual commodity, which a kinky reading can reframe in a positive way. She presents her body as something she can trade or sell for control; this view often results in her use of economic metaphors to describe sex, including the traditional metaphor of the marriage debt, the principle by which each spouse was obliged to have sex with the other.[199] Alcuin Blamires argues that the traditional interpretation of what should have been a principle of equality actually reinforced female passivity, as it assumed that women's desires would have to be intuited by their husbands (*Chaucer, Ethics, and Gender* 81-83); however, that is clearly not the case for the Wife. She relishes her control over her husband's body: "'I have the power during al my lyf/ Upon his propre body, and noght he'" (157-58). She also makes it clear that she intends for her husband to "make his paiement" often (131); and that he will have her body "bothe eve and morwe" (152). She wants a husband who will be "bothe [her] dettour and [her] thral" (155). The Wife explicitly presents her body as something that can be bought and sold: she makes her first husbands pay her before she will have sex with them (409-12), and she tells those same husbands that she could be

[199] 1 Cor. 7:3-4: "The husband should give to his wife her conjugal rights, and likewise the wife to her husband. For the wife does not have authority over her own body, but the husband does. Likewise the husband does not have authority over his own body, but the wife does."

a successful prostitute, but will remain faithful to them (447-50). Obviously, and repeatedly, Alisoun presents her body as a commodity.[200]

From the anti-sex feminist perspective, when a woman is objectified, it is always a negative experience. Even if she objectifies herself, it is only because she has internalized patriarchal rhetoric. Julie Elaine Goodspeed-Chadwick interprets what she calls the Wife's "succumbing to dangerous (to women) notions of the woman as commodity" (161) along these lines. She argues that although Alisoun condemns domestic violence and rape, she sometimes "fosters violent acts against women" (161) because of her absorption of masculine rhetoric that says women are property. Goodspeed-Chadwick further argues that the Wife's interest in sex and discussion of genitals actually demonstrates that her past sexual abuse has led her to consider herself an "unrapeable woman" (159), not that she actually enjoys sex (158-60). The idea of the "unrapeable woman," a concept that results from toxic masculine ideology and discredits women's experience of rape, is Catherine MacKinnon's. Perhaps unsurprisingly, given her interpretation of the Wife's enjoyment of heterosexual sex as the result of her internalized misogyny, Goodspeed-Chadwick cites MacKinnon's work several times in her essay, connecting her ideas on the Wife of Bath to anti-pornography and anti-sex feminist thought.

However, as this dissertation has often demonstrated, the anti-sex feminist position is not the only possibility for interpreting women's sexuality, and kink theory provides a persuasive alternative to the idea that women's sexuality is necessarily pathological because of the influence of patriarchy. In BDSM, objectification can be an arousing process, and may be sought after or done intentionally to one's self. Robin Bauer, for example, writes that for some kinksters, wanted objectification can be a way to "produce intense sensations and affect" because it, paradoxically, generates difference and de-emphasizes intimacy but also facilitates emotional bonds over time

[200] For more on the role of economics in the Wife's sexuality, see Finke, Cole, or Delany.

through shared passion (124). Bauer writes that objectification in a kinky context can therefore be "best understood as a form of intimacy focusing on boundary transgression and access to a body through power dynamics (rather than pathologizing [methods of objectification] as fear of intimacy or lack of ability to bond) (125). From this perspective, the Wife's insistence on the commodification of her body does not preclude an attachment to her sexual partners, as it might at first seem to do.

Catherine Scott's writing on objectification is also useful to a consideration of how the Wife objectifies herself for her audience as part of her erotic fiction. She writes about the value of self-objectification and argues that policing women's sexual expression is more of a problem than enjoying self-objectification (113-16). Scott reports on a study by Katherine Martinez to support her exploration of self-objectification:

> [Martinez' study finds] that contrary to the accepted belief, especially among feminists, that objectification leads to reduced self-esteem and increased anxiety, BDSM practitioners who self-objectify actually report better mental health and greater happiness… for some women, not only is consensual objectification not the terrible anti-feminist activity which it has previously been seen to be, but it's actually a positive reinforcement of body confidence and sexual autonomy. This implies that the simplistic feminist argument that all objectification of the female body contributes to a hostile sexual culture does not stand up. (113-14)

As is the case with many kinky practices, the difference between harmful objectification and positive objectification is consent. Scott differentiates between unwanted activity and desirable activity: "[w]ithout consent, mutual respect and mutual pleasure, a person acting as a table, chair or indeed any object of voyeurism, would not just be one of sexism, but one of assault and coercion. But then, *so would all sex*" (114, emphasis in original). From a kink positive

perspective, then, the Wife's objectification of her own body is not objectionable, and her economic relationship to sex does not preclude the possibility of pleasure or genuine attachment. The commodification of her own body contributes to the overall eroticism of her texts.

As a key element of its eroticism, the text establishes that Jankyn is an attractive man, and in doing so, reverses standard erotic dynamics in which the female body is the desired object. Pugh writes, "[t]he lascivious pleasures of [Alisoun's] gaze reconstruct and queer the masculine bias of scopophilic pleasures, as Jankyn loses the privileges of the male subject and metamorphoses into a feminized object" ("Queering Genres" 127). As Jankyn carries her fourth husband's coffin, the Wife cannot help but focus on his "legges and… feet so clene and faire" (598). His well-shaped body attracts her so much that she gives him her whole heart in that moment (599). The Wife's portrait of herself as an attractive woman also lends to the eroticism of the romance. Though she is about forty years old to his twenty when they marry, she "hadde alwey a coltes tooth" (602). The sexually rapacious and grotesque widow is part of the stereotypical tradition from which the Wife descends; however, Chaucer's innovation here is to both to add the objectification of the male body from the first person female perspective and to omit an unflattering portrait of the older woman. In the misogynistic tradition, the desiring old woman is ugly. La Vieille, a character in *Le Roman de la Rose* and one of the Wife's direct predecessors, is called "senile old whore" (219), and she describes her own face as having lost its charm; she was once lovely but now her appearance makes her "complain and moan" (222). The Wife acknowledges that she is past her youth, nevertheless, she persists: she says, "[b]ut yet to be right myrie wol I fonde" (469-79). Her attitude about her appearance is a contrast to La Vieille's bitterness.

Jankyn is not only attractive, but he is also a skilled lover, and the Wife's description of his skill is one of the most explicitly sexual parts of her Prologue:

But in oure bed he was so fressh and gay

And therwithal so wel koude he me glose,

Whan that he wolde han my *bele chose*;

That thogh he had me bete on every bon,

He koude wynne agayn my love anon.

I trowe I loved hym best, for that he

Was of his love daungerous to me. (508-14)

A young man, Jankyn is fresh and gay in bed, suggesting skill, ingenuity, and playfulness. As many critics have noted, Jankyn's glossing of the Wife suggests skilled attention to her body. Carolyn Dinshaw, who reads the glossing as a metaphor for textual interpretation, argues that Jankyn alone of her husbands pleases the Wife by his glossing because he satisfies both of their desires (*Sexual Poetics* 125). Sue Niebrzydowski argues that the sexual glossing that Jankyn participates in is foreplay, and could be either erotic speech or touch (24-25). The Wife's one complaint about having sex with Jankyn is that he controls his own availability (514).[201] The part of the *Prologue* describing her fifth marriage contains enough description for Alisoun's audience to know that she derives pleasure from sexual encounters with Jankyn.

Jankyn is in fact so skilled a lover that Alisoun cannot help but forgive him for beating her. Or, as Hansen suggests (though to much different purpose) it may be that the close association in this passage of sexual skill and violence is no accident, and the Wife enjoys both:

> The Wife speaks first here of the felt, lasting pain in her body that her husband, God bless him, inflicted. While "but" in line 508 and "though" in line 511 logically imply that he

[201] The word "daungerous" has several meanings in this period (*MED*); here I place emphasis on the second, which is relating to a person who is "aloof, reserved, reluctant" but the first meaning ("domineering, overbearing") and fourth meaning ("fraught with danger; hazardous, risky") bring tension to the Wife's meaning, perhaps particularly in light of my kinky reading.

> could get away with beating her up because "in oure bed" he was such a great lover, the last few lines may also indicate something very different: male violence is not just offset by good sex, but male violence and female pain are mutually constitutive elements of female desire… The message seems to be clear here: whatever sexual pleasure the Wife may enjoy, sober or not, has a considerable element of what we might identify as masochism. ("'Of his love'" 278)

I do not agree that the text means to imply that Alisoun enjoys domestic violence; however, I do think that the close proximity of sex and violence, in the context of erotic fiction, may indicate the potential for future erotic violence (which would not be actual violence, but rather a reiteration).[202] The sex and violence in this passage may be less a contradiction than an association. The Wife's assertion that she can still feel Jankyn's work on her ribs has some similarity to the pride a bottom might take in the bruises or other physical evidence left from a scene; evidence that remains on the body proves how much pain that body is capable of taking.

Hansen suggests that the Wife does not enjoy normal sex at all as part of her larger argument that these texts promote domestic violence and that Chaucer's male fantasy of women's desire is perverse and inaccurate (277-78). However, in modern and kinky contexts, some women do enjoy the kind of non-normative pleasure that so disturbs Hansen, and they do so without being deluded slaves of the patriarchy. The interpretation of any association of pain and sexual pleasure as being necessarily demeaning to women recalls the anti-pornography and anti-sex positions of the feminist sex wars. Overall the Wife's focus on sex as a desirable activity, attractive physical descriptions, and explicit references to sexual skill make her speech erotic

[202] For more on erotic violence as a reiteration of violence, see the second chapter of this dissertation.

fiction, and considering these texts as such provides new approaches to some key areas of critical contention.

The Dominant Wife

Before delving into the issues of sex, authority, and power in the relationships of the *Prologue* and *Tale*, this section addresses the physical and sartorial evidence for associating Alisoun with eroticism. It is clear before she ever speaks that Alisoun is a sexual woman. In the *General Prologue* we learn, "Boold was hir face and fair and reed of hewe" (458), and "Gat-tothed was she" (468). Alisoun's face is not just fair, but bold, and, as a note in the *Riverside Chaucer* explains, her red face and the gap between her teeth both imply carnality (818-19). In her own *Prologue*, Alisoun states again that she is gap-toothed, emphasizing that feature as one of her most attractive (603). The Wife's very physical appearance announces her ebullient sexuality. Furthermore, the fine fabrics of her clothing, especially the excessive headdress and coverchiefs she wears to Church, would indicate a tendency toward unchaste behavior to medieval readers (Hodges 163-68).[203] The Wife tells her listeners, "I am al venerian/ In feelynge, and myn herte is marcien" (609-10). That combination of sexual and martial influences is apparent, as many critics have noted, in her hat, which is "[a]s brood as any bokeler or a targe" (471), associating the Wife with battle and fighting. Furthermore, the buckler is used in literature around this time to symbolize the *mons veneris*, as John F. Plummer explains, which creates what he calls a "hat-buckler-pudenda" image suggesting her sexual aggressiveness (90). A targe is, specifically, a shield with an opening meant to be penetrated by a jousting lance, which, as Hodges points out, has obvious sexual implications (177-78). The text presents different parts of Alisoun's body and

[203] The fine fabrics and elaborate headdress would indicate a lack of chastity because, according to clerical authority, women who dress excessively draw men's attention and encourage lustful thoughts (Hodges 166-168).

costume as evidence of her lustiness; her body is sexualized and associates her words with sex and pleasure (1185).

Beyond connecting her to sexuality in general, several details of the Wife's appearance and clothing connect her more specifically to erotic dominance through the tradition of the mounted Aristotle. In this popular tale, the wise philosopher is besotted with a woman who convinces him to allow her to ride him as if he were a horse, complete with riding gear, in order to prove his love for her. Aristotle is seen by other men and humiliated by this equestrian dominance.[204] Desmond argues that the story is definitely erotic:

> [the] 'mounted Aristotle'—whether text or image—goes beyond metaphor to represent the erotic possibilities of humiliation and even flagellation…. As a visual detail—or an attribute—the whip directs the viewer's attention to the physical sensations Aristotle will experience as a consequence of the rider's erotic mastery…. In addition to the visual rhetoric of whip as an instrument of erotic violence, the sight of Aristotle crawling on his hands and knees—often with bridle in his mouth—offers a tableau of masochistic humiliation. (22)

Desmond also argues that the story was so well-known in the Middle Ages that "a cultural notion of the scandal of female dominance could be cited visually or textually in equestrian images or metaphors" (27).[205] Though it is not explicitly stated in the text that she has one, many illustrations of the Wife, including the one from the Ellesmere manuscript,[206] picture her holding a small whip or riding crop raised aloft in one hand. In the text, when Alisoun speaks of having

[204] George Sarton notes that the story is available to English readers of French as early as the first half of the thirteenth century through Henri d'Andeli's *Li Lais d'Aristote* (10).
[205] Desmond writes that Chaucer would have known the tradition through Jean le Fevre's *Livre de Leesce*, which informs the Wife of Bath's character and which Desmond interprets as a refutation of misogyny (122).
[206] The Ellesmere Chaucer was produced between 1400-1405 and contains a portrait of Chaucer as well as twenty-two miniatures of the Canterbury pilgrims.

control over her husbands she says that she has "the bridel in myn hond" (813) and that she herself has "been the whippe" (175). According to the description in the *General Prologue*, she also wears a pair of sharp spurs (473). Because of the tradition of the mounted Aristotle, the Wife's equestrian gear and metaphors, coupled with her controlling nature, create an association with erotic female dominance.

A woman wearing boots with spurs and wielding a small whip might be the Wife of Bath, or she might be a modern woman participating in a BDSM scene. The aesthetics of BDSM often focus around leather and implements of discipline like whips or riding crops.[207] This is not because of some continuity between medieval and modern kinky communities, but because when this kind of clothing is removed from a functional context, it can become erotic because it implies control and dominance of a partner rather than an animal. In textual and visual representations of the Wife, equestrian details paint her as an erotically dominant woman, perhaps one who humiliates men, whether the understanding of those symbols come through an awareness of the mounted Aristotle or the aesthetics of BDSM.

With visual evidence pointing both the medieval and the informed modern audience to associate Alisoun with a dominant woman, it might seem that this chapter should consider Alisoun as a Domme (the title of a female dominant kinkster). The image of Alisoun as a controlling equestrian does mark her aesthetically as someone who plays with erotic power, but it is my contention that, in order to truly understand Alisoun in a kinky context, we must consider her, not as a Domme, but as a switch. Though she is famous for her boisterous defense of her

[207] As Scott points out, women practicing BDSM can wear literally any type of clothing and use a variety of implements for impact play, but modern media representations remain fairly fixated on images of women in tight leather or PVC, high heels, and tools of dominance like leather whips or floggers. This is possibly because this kind of gear visually designates those practicing BDSM as different from "normal" people in everyday clothes and because of the eroticism of tight clothing and heels on conventionally attractive women (20).

own right to authority and her shrewish and controlling behaviour with most of her husbands, she also demonstrates submissive and masochistic inclinations in these texts. Though many critics have attempted to classify the Wife as one thing or another, the switch label allows her to be both dominant and submissive without committing finally to either position.

First, this chapter addresses the evidence that seems most clearly to point to Alisoun's dominant status: her relationship to patriarchal authority, and her first three marriages. The Wife's enthusiastic engagement with anti-feminist texts is apparent from her very first statement that she will speak without regard for authority because she values her own experience more (1-3). The Wife is unhappy with the clerical discourse against women. As she says, "For trusteth wel, it is an impossible/ That any clerk wol speke good of wyves" (688-89). When she asks, "Who painted the leon, tel me who" (698), she addresses the inaccuracy of men's representation of women and their desires. Clerical discourse as it stands does not have much praise for women's goodness, unless they are saints (690). Saints are not only usually virgins, which the Wife emphatically claims is not for her, they are always dead. A living woman with physical desires has no role model. The Wife dominates patriarchal discourse by questioning its accuracy and applicability to the lives of women.

In her *Prologue*, her selective quotation and novel interpretation of clerical texts re-appropriates the language typically used against women into her service. Though she begins by refuting the importance of authority, the Wife quotes from and argues with several authoritative texts, including the work of St. Jerome and the Bible, especially St. Paul's Letters to the Corinthians. Critics have considered the Wife's citation of clerical discourse to be incomplete and self-serving; D.W. Robertson, for example, writes that as "an exemplar of the disobedient flesh" Alisoun is "'deaf' to any wisdom that may be implied in a text" (11). Robertson believes that medieval readers would have laughed at the Wife's incompetent use of classical sources (19).

However, Tinkle's work on the marginal annotations of copies of the Wife's *Prologue* from the fifteenth century shows that the idea of the Wife as an incompetent reader "is based entirely on modern standards of citation and hermeneutic expectations" ("Marginal Authority" 80). She examines scribal annotations to prove that, according to medieval exegetical standards, the Wife is "an authoritative exegete" (85). Many feminist critics agree that the Wife shows mastery of the patriarchal discourse she engages in. Priscilla Martin, for example, writes that the Wife "jokingly subverts the conventions of male authorship" (340). Barrie Ruth Straus argues that the Wife's manipulation of phallocentric discourse is so complete that it reveals the deficiencies of that discourse and of masculine desires, and shows the connections between knowledge and sexuality that patriarchal discourse denies (538). Carruthers contends that the Wife is powerful, particularly when questioning clerical authority, and she is not challenged on that power in her text ("Afterword" 40-44). Perhaps part of Chaucer's point in the way the Wife uses scripture is to show that her method of reading is no different from that of some clerks, though her ends are not the same. The Wife makes use of clerical knowledge and writing as it suits her and capably supports her arguments, asserting dominance over the supremacy of written, male authority.

The Wife further demonstrates her discursive power when she explains one of the ways she controlled her first three husbands: by lying to them about the misogynistic comments they make to her while drunk (246-383). She tells them that they have said she is unfaithful "lyk a cat" (348) or that woman's love is like "helle… bareyne lond… [and] wilde fyr" (371-72), in order to shame her husbands into treating her well. A combination of flattery, lies, and scolding keeps her old husbands in line and makes sure that they make their "ransoun" to her before she will have sex with them (411); her false accusations result in payment. As I mention above, in her *Prologue*, the Wife often uses economic metaphors for sex, which both ties into and sometimes perverts the

traditional metaphor of the marriage debt and also emphasizes her status as a middle-class woman.

In her first three marriages, Alisoun takes the dominant role through control and verbal humiliation of her husbands. She exercises control over her old husbands by giving them commands, telling them what they "sholdest seye" (318) to her, and how they should act: "Com neer, my spouse, lat me ba they cheke!/ Ye sholde been al pacient and meke" (433-34). Verbal humiliation in a kinky relationship can take a number of forms, including name-calling, insults about ability or achievements, or simply giving commands (Wiseman 241-43). In her *Prologue*, the Wife gives an account of her own verbal methods of control with her first three husbands, and her methods mirror the BDSM methods of humiliation: she calls them names like "olde lecchour" (242), "olde dotard" (331), and "olde fool" (357). She "hadde hem hoolly in [her] hond" (211) and constantly insults them to keep them off their guard, picking on their clothing and their generosity, and accusing them of unfaithfulness.

The Wife's most important demand from a sexual perspective is that she "sette hem so a-werke" (215) in bed because it pleases her to exercise her marital rights as she chooses.
She wields direct sexual control over her three old husbands, and she takes pleasure in the dominance: "I laughe when I thynke/ How pitously a-nyght I made hem swynke!" (201-02). By making the husband's experience of sex into work, Chaucer may also be making a joke here by reversing gender roles: generally, one working in bed at night would be a prostitute, who would be a woman. These men are paying for sex as a john would, but instead of being rewarded with attention, they are also the ones doing the sexual labour. Alisoun's dominance of her husbands in this way therefore feminizes them both by placing them in the submissive role and by associating them with sex workers. Though she laughs at the thought of her husbands' attempts to satisfy her in bed, her enjoyment of their efforts is not based in direct sexual fulfillment; she also says, "yet

in bacon hadde I never delit" (418), conveying a lack of sexual fulfillment in these marriages. Her lack of sexual satisfaction does not mean she is not participating in something like BDSM because not all sadomasochistic pleasure comes from sexual intercourse. Like bottoms in a BDSM scene, her husbands surrender their sexual volition to Alisoun, who controls their sexual activity, demanding satisfaction or delaying gratification as it suits her to do so. The Wife gains wealth, land, and sexual dominance from these marriages, and never doubts her first three husbands' love for her. They seem happy with submitting to her, perhaps revealing their own emotional masochism: she says, "they loved me so wel" (207) and asserts,

> I governed hem so wel, after my lawe,
> That ech of hem ful blisful was and fawe
> To brynge me gaye thynges fro the fayre. (219-21)

These men may be submissive, but as Alisoun tells it, they are happy to be so. In her first three marriages, the Wife definitely takes a dominant position, and some of her behavior aligns well with BDSM practices of dominating a partner.

The Wife presents her stories of dominating her first three husbands as advice and as using women's knowledge and skills, and it is in her use of this women's wisdom that Alisoun seems the most like the anti-feminist stereotypes from which she partially derives, dominating her older husbands and demanding more sex from them than they are capable of providing, as well as taking control of their money. Her haranguing and tricking of her first husbands and her rapacious sexual demands adhere to anti-matrimonial texts' assertions about what a bad wife is capable of being. The Wife's more traditionally shrewish persecution of her husbands anticipates the modern-day stereotype of the pathologized sadist, only in the case of the Wife, her pathology is not mental illness, but her gender. Medieval audiences of her text might very well interpret her unapologetic embracing of these stereotypes as a female deficiency, just as modern audiences

often interpret kink in books, TV, or film as signs of psychological deficiency.[208] However, the pathologized sadist in modern media is likely to express his or her urges with assault or murder, whereas Alisoun's behaviour, though controlling and sometimes humiliating, apparently results in the happiness of both herself and her dominated husbands.

A few critics use a pathological understanding of masochism in their readings of the Wife; however, only one scholar approaches the Wife as a sadist. Roland Finger reads the Wife's behavior with her husbands as a sadistic inversion of the usual treatment of wives in medieval marriages; he writes that the Wife's "sadism can be seen as a hyperreaction to the subordinate role into which the Medieval patriarchy normally relegated women" (72). According to Finger, the Wife's sadism continues through all five of her marriages, even with Jankyn, and she loves him best because her sadism enjoys the challenge of a non-recognizing subject. However, Finger approaches sadism as a psychopathology. His views are informed by psychoanalytic work by Jessica Benjamin, D.W. Winnicott, and Lynn Chancer. Though I reject a pathological understanding of sadism, one aspect of Finger's analysis that I agree with is his assertion that the Wife's actions in her marriage are a response to the patriarchal subordination of women.[209] However, if the Wife's sadistic treatment of her first three husbands comes from a desire to negotiate the power system she lives in, it does not last. Eventually she finds herself in a different kind of marriage, one that does not allow her the same kind of dominance she enjoys in the first three.

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[208] See the discussion of pathologization in chapter 2. Medieval examples of stereotypical female deficiency include La Vieille from le *Roman de la Rose*, or the Wife of Noah in cycle plays like those performed in the York or Chester.

[209] This argument can also be made without attributing psychology to the Wife because the *Prologue* and *Tale* are sometimes translations of misogynistic Latin works, and her speech sometimes directly repudiates clerical authority. In this way, these texts are literally a response to that patriarchal tradition.

The Wife gains sadistic pleasure from her first three marriages, but not direct sexual satisfaction, so in her fourth marriage, now a woman of means, she tries a new dynamic and does not marry an older rich man. This marriage plays out quite differently from the first three: instead of trying hard to meet her sexual demands and listening to her commands, her fourth husband takes a "paramour" (454). The wife reports that she "hadde in herte greet despit/That he of any oother had delit" (481-82). She wishes to monopolize her husband's pleasure, but in addition to this jealousy, the fact that she does not have the same amount of control over this man as she did over her other husbands is a main source of her unhappiness. However she interacts with him before he takes a lover (she does not describe that behaviour), he does not react the way she wants him to. He does not wait on her pleasure, or obey her orders regarding sex in the way the old husbands did. She is not in her preferred position of dominance until she takes back her power by making "hym of the same wode a croce" (484); she makes "hym frye/ For anger and for verray jalousye" (487-88). As with her first husbands, Alisoun tricks her fourth husband into believing something that is not true in order to have better control over him and inflicts emotional pain on him to punish him for his infidelity. This trickery, like her pleasure in forcing her first three husbands to perform sexually, shows an element of emotional sadism in the Wife. She cannot take pleasure in her fourth husband physically, and so she finds it through emotional torture. However, in this case, there is no mutual pleasure, and Alisoun's dominance begins to resemble truly pathological sadism motivated by vengeance more than consensual BDSM. The reciprocity of infidelity (real and pretended) gives the relationship balance, but only produces pain on both sides. The Wife is unsatisfied by this non-consensual power dynamic even though she achieves dominance; she calls this marriage "bad" (196) and buries her fourth husband plainly when he dies (500).

Switching with Jankyn

In her first four marriages, the Wife maintains dominance, whether to the mutual benefit of her husbands or not. The radical shift she makes in partner choice and marrying for love in her fifth marriage (525-26) shows her lack of satisfaction with a purely dominant role, particularly when her husband is resistant to her dominance. The Wife's fifth marriage is the favourite of both Alisoun herself and of critics. It contains the most individualized detail, and is to the only husband she bothers to name: Jankyn. Jankyn is a clerk, trained at Oxford, and he is about twenty years old when the Wife marries him at forty (600-01). The marriage is the opposite of her first three, as the Wife is now the one with land and money who marries a much younger person to satisfy herself. Perhaps as a result of the failure of dominance in her fourth marriage, she begins her marriage to Jankyn by giving him "al the lond and fee" she has, in an attempt to submit to him (630).[210] Alisoun's attempts to change her approach to marriage results in a fifth marriage that features similarities to BDSM scenarios, as well as some that are decidedly not kinky.

Before Jankyn and Alisoun are married (in fact, during her fourth marriage), she lays the groundwork for eroticizing violence and submission in their relationship with a "soutiltee" (576) of courtship. As they walk together in the fields, Alisoun flirts with Jankyn:

> I bar hym on honde he hadde enchanted me—
>
> My dame taughte me that soutiltee—
>
> And eek I seyde I mette of hym al nyght,
>
> He wolde han slayn me as I lay upright
>
> And al my bed was ful of verray blood;

[210] The Wife makes a point of saying that she actively gave him her property, so it is acceptable to attribute some intention to the action outside the legal context. As Mary Carruthers argues, there is basis in common law for Alisoun's retention of her property after marriage as a bourgeois woman; she gives Jankyn her property by choice, not by legal default ("Painting of Lions" 210-11).

"But yet I hope that ye shal do me good,

For blood bitokenth gold, as me was taught."

And al was fals; I dremed of it right naught. (575-82)

The Wife does not really have this dream: it is a fiction within fiction to pique Jankyn's interest.[211] That the dream is explicitly a lie makes it easy to connect it with erotic fiction. The dream did not actually happen as a dream, but it can still be representative of the Wife's sexual desires. The dream has obvious sexual overtones: the Wife admits her dream story is an attempt to seduce Jankyn, which indicates that she intends for it to be erotic; also, the Wife is dreaming of Jankyn, which means that while she is in her bed, a private and potentially sexual space, she has him in her mind. Pugh argues that Alisoun's admission that the dream is a false story reveals that she has control of her fantasies, and uses the stories she tells to convey messages; she furthers her agenda through careful and selective presentation of her desires ("Squire Jankyn's Legs" 90-91). Many critics have pointed out that the slaying of the dream also has erotic potential. Timothy D. Brien, for example, writes, "[t]his imagined dream's suggestions of the sexual act are undeniable: the slaying takes place as Alisoun lies in her bed and she seems to have been penetrated by some weapon […] it simulates sex" (181). The presence of blood after penetration also associates the dream with losing virginity and, by extension, the marriage bed. In light of the sexual implications of the dream, Alisoun's explanation that the blood of the story represents gold suggests that a sexual relationship with or marriage to her would be profitable for Jankyn. John Pitcher writes that this dream is the Wife's fantasy about what it would be like to have Jankyn when she had been a young bride; it presents Jankyn as a young patriarch who would take her

[211] The dream is one of the contested passages of the text, since it does not appear in the earlier Hengwrt manuscript, but is present in the Ellesmere. Most editions of the *Canterbury Tales* from the later twentieth century and beyond, including the authoritative *Riverside Chaucer*, use the Ellesmere as their primary source text, and include the dream in the *Prologue*. Leicester argues that whether or not the dream is Chaucer's writing, it focuses several themes of the text (240-41).

virginity and sexually satisfy her, and make her rich (47-48). Critical consensus is that the dream has multiple meanings, at least one of them sexual.

To these interpretations, I add a kinky perspective: this dream both eroticizes violence and directly indicates Alisoun's sexually submissive nature. As Allman and Hanks point out in their article on the erotics of the *Canterbury Tales*, "in both narrative description and imagery, Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales* from first to last reflect a forbidding and sometimes self-consciously forbidden erotics… as they present lovemaking in terms of cutting, stabbing, bleeding, and dying" (39). From a conventional perspective, the violence of sex would be forbidding, but, as my first chapter outlines, it is in some cases the very forbidden nature of a sexual activity that makes it exciting for practitioners of BDSM. The Wife eroticizes being penetrated and dominated by Jankyn in bed. This kind of sexual activity would be forbidden to her because of the sinfulness of sexual pleasure, particularly with a man to whom she is not married. The Wife does not wish to submit to a man's will outside of the bedroom, it is clear, but the dream she invents indicates that within the bedroom, she is aroused by the concept of being dominated, and put in danger. Her bed is full of blood, which indicates a serious wound, perhaps danger to her life. In sexualizing her own blood, the Wife also connects her dream to the erotics of blood play, a kind of play that sexualizes blood and may involve cutting or menstrual blood (Warren 252-53). This sexual fantasy presented as a "fals" dream reveals Alisoun's attraction to being dominated in bed. In her seduction, she relates a false fantasy in order to help her achieve her real desire of being with Jankyn. Her hope is that her imagined dream will become Jankyn's fantasy and lead him to develop more sexual desire for her. The sharing of violent erotic fantasy and her hope for mutually desirable dominance resonate with the practices of couples in BDSM relationships, though the Wife is less straightforward in stating her desires than the ideal of negotiated consent would recommend.

Alisoun follows up her dream of sexual submission with the aforementioned submission of her land and money to Jankyn; however, he does not reward this submission. As the Wife tormented and subdued her older husbands using ventriloquized misogynist discourse, Jankyn forces her to listen to his tales of treacherous and wicked women from his Book in an attempt to control her. His lectures make her regret "ful soore" (632) her decision to give him control. The Wife wants Jankyn to have some authority, but she does not wish to be controlled outside of the intimate relationship between them. What she wants is a relationship in which she willingly submits but really maintains her independence in most senses; this dynamic resonates with a negotiated arrangement between kinksters. Jankyn, however, forces his dominance on her in every aspect of their lives in a decidedly nonconsensual manner. His browbeating becomes literal beating, and the Wife tells her audience that she still feels his anger on her ribs, "[a]nd evere shal" (507). Their clash over their apparently differing expectations of marriage culminates in a violent struggle.

Above, I discuss the importance of understanding the Wife's texts as fictions, literary representations of erotic violence. The fight between Alisoun and Jankyn tests our acceptance of these representations. Their violent confrontation over Jankyn's "book of wikked wyves" (685) is the climax of the *Prologue* and poses a challenge to readings that take the Wife seriously as an opponent to the antifeminist tradition. If a woman still loves her husband after he deafens her in one ear, how can she still be a legitimate figure of female power? Hansen, for example, strongly objects to what she sees as the Wife's assertion that women's sexuality welcomes pain and male violence:

> The Wife's marital experiences are grounded in domestic and sexual violence against women, and yet repeatedly her narrative serves two purposes: (1) it normalizes this violence by suggesting that men who are really attractive to women are just violent by

> nature, and anyhow women actually enjoy it; and (2) it erases this violence by suggesting that Jankyn actually loved her and stopped hurting her after that last big fight. Women are erotically aroused by the injuries done to them, according to the Wife, but the good news is that an abusive husband can be reformed if the blow he strikes is finally hard enough to deafen his spouse for life. What does it mean that the only female character who is allowed to speak of her own putative experience has this particular story to tell? ("'Of his love'" 280)

It is in a reading of these texts as erotic fiction that I find an answer to questions such as Hansen's. In order to complete my reading of the fight in particular as an example of a moment of eroticized violence, it will be necessary to provide some context for the degree of violence present in this episode.

Marilynn Desmond's *Ovid's Art and the Wife of Bath: The Ethics of Erotic Violence* argues that the eroticization of violence in culture is a process beginning in the works of Ovid and continuing in many senses even today. Like many kink theorists, she sees modern repudiation of BDSM as motivated by fear that these practices will reveal uncomfortable truths about so-called normal relationships: "[p]erhaps S/M is so intensely policed because it exposes the status of domestic violence as nonnegotiated, nonconsensual violence and humiliation" (4). Desmond traces a genealogy of erotic violence from Ovid's *Ars Amatoria* to Chaucer's Wife of Bath in order to demonstrate that Roman discourses of love involving hierarchy and imperialism haunt medieval domesticated discourses of marriage, in both the normalization of violence within marriage and courtship and the presentation of heterosexuality as a skill that must be learned. She writes,

> The performance of the Wife of Bath achieves authenticity to the degree that it is consistent with marriage as an institution that elicits and disciplines sexual desire. If this

> medieval literary figure seems familiar to the modern reader, that familiarity suggests the extent to which modern heterosexualities are haunted by medieval discourses on sexuality. (118-19)

Desmond's analysis makes it clear that the violence she studies functions to groom women to submit to masculine authority. Desmond writes that descriptions of the Wife "employ an equestrian portrait in order to visualize her discourse of dominance; these images interpret the Wife of Bath as a woman on top" (119). She sees Alisoun as a woman who claims "the right to profit from [her] own sexuality; such assertions expose the economic dimensions of erotic desire that ideologies such as courtly love or the institution of marriage work to obscure" (128). Desmond argues that ultimately the Wife exemplifies the medieval cultural ideology of marriage and, in spite of early shows of dominance, she eventually submits to patriarchal power dynamics in her relationship with Jankyn. Desmond sees the return to traditional dynamics as motivated by the excessive violence of their confrontation over Jankyn's book; she argues that he knows he has crossed a boundary into unacceptable violence against his wife, and that is what motivates his change in behaviour (139-40).

I agree with Desmond's assertion that the Wife submits to Jankyn (though I would add not consistently and with some conditions) and with her idea that "to be erotically efficacious, force and violence must be deployed sparingly and knowingly" (45); however, I differ with Desmond in my interpretation of the role of erotic violence in the Wife's *Prologue*. Whereas Desmond sees the *Prologue*'s ending as a return to cultural norms, and therefore a turn away from violence that might reveal the nonconsensual violence of those cultural norms, I argue that the power exchange at the end of the *Prologue* remains subversive. Literary representation of violence, particular in a kinky context, may have thematic or erotic motivations: Jankyn's beating of Alisoun, and their final fight in particular, demonstrate the toxicity of misogynistic discourse and eroticize violence

in consensual circumstances. Critical difficulty with the brawl between Alisoun and Jankyn stems almost entirely from the ways in which this fight and its aftermath reflect on Alisoun and her earlier arguments against misogynistic discourse. My kinky reading of the fight will seek to resolve this apparent inconsistency in a way that privileges Alisoun's stated desires without undermining her criticism of patriarchal authority.

The Wife soon finds that, as a husband, Jankyn asserts himself and his misogynistic views very strongly. He will not tolerate her stubbornness, garrulousness, or socializing with neighbours (637-40). His constant lecturing and retelling of stories of vicious, treacherous, weak women brings her such "wo" and "pyne" in her heart that she can no longer listen to him read from his book full of tales denouncing women (786):

> And whan I saw that he wolde nevere fine
> To reden on this cursed book al nyght,
> Al sodeynly thre leves have I plight
> Out of his book, right as he radde, and eke
> I with my fest so took hym on the cheke
> That in our fyr he fil bakward adoun. (787-93)

Alisoun's attack is against the book Jankyn has been using to berate her and all women, and also against Jankyn himself. The material that Alisoun reacts to is Jankyn's response to her attempt to retain her dominance in the social sphere. Unable to bear submission to patriarchal discourses any longer, she begins a bid for physical dominance. Jankyn's response is also physical:

> And he up stirte as dooth a wood leoun,
> And with his fist he smote me on the heed
> That in the floor I lay as I were deed. (794-96)

He has hit her before, but this blow is so forceful that it deafens her and knocks her unconscious. This moment of extreme violence is the climax of the fight and of the Wife's *Prologue*. After a moment of uncertainty, during which time Jankyn seems to realize he has gone too far, the Wife regains consciousness:

> And whan he saugh how stille that I lay,
> He was agast and wolde han fled his way,
> Til at last out of my swogh I breyde.
> "O, hastow slayn me, false theef?" I seyde,
> "And for my land thus hastow mordred me?
> Er I be deed, yet wol I kisse thee." (797-803)

As in her false dream, the Wife links dangerous violence with sexual activity as she demands a kiss at the ostensible moment of her death. In the fight with Jankyn, she experiences a dynamic quite like the one in her fantasy when she eroticizes domination and violent penetration; she makes what could very well be a moment of pain and separation from her husband into a moment of intimacy.[212] These lines are significant in a consideration of the Wife as a sadomasochist, because they provide a clear link between actual, physical pain and sexual desire for the one causing her the pain.

Bauer's work on dyke+queer BDSM is helpful in explaining this moment from a kinky perspective. He writes that moments of intensity, even of unpleasant sensation, or boundary violations, "are supposed to be experienced as negative kinds of intimacy, to incite shame, fear and withdrawal. But they also produce unintended excesses of erotic desires" which practitioners of BDSM can use to create stronger bonds of intimacy (114). As if they were kinksters, Alisoun

[212] The moment is both intimate and part of a ruse; when the Wife asks Jankyn to come closer to kiss her, he comes close enough for her to hit him.

and Jankyn actually strengthen their bond to each other in this very intense moment of violence. Bauer writes that this kind of bond, explored through excessive or exaggerated performance of power dynamics, can lead to "a heightened level of intimacy through the way one is exposed and made vulnerable, the trust involved and the general intensity of playing with sensations, power, social taboos and boundaries" (122). As Jankyn finally makes himself vulnerable to the Wife, their relationship experiences a major shift and they escape from the negative but normative power dynamics they had previously followed.

After she declares her imminent death, Jankyn expresses remorse and cedes control of the situation to Alisoun by asking for her forgiveness:

> And neer he cam, and kneled faire adoun,
> And seyde, "Deere suster Alisoun,
> As help me God, I shal thee nevere smyte!
> That I have doon, it is thyself to wyte.
> Foryeve it me, and that I thee biseke!" (804-07)

At this point, Jankyn is not totally submissive, because he blames his force on the fact that Alisoun hit him first. He does, however, promise never to strike her again, giving up what was previously a major method of enforcing his dominance. When the Wife responds by insulting and hitting him (808-810), it is the last example of negative reciprocity in the text: he hit her, so she hits him back.

The Wife then describes the aftermath of the fight:

> But atte laste, with muchel care and wo
> We fille accorded by us selven two.
> He yaf me al the bridel in myn hond,
> To han the governance of hous and lond

And of his tonge, and of his hond also;

And made hym brenne his book anon right tho. (811-16)

After "muchel care and wo" the Wife and Jankyn reach an agreement that is mutually satisfying. From a kinky perspective, this reaching of an accord is like a negotiation of consent for what the future state of their relationship will be. This process brings the Wife's fifth marriage closest to the standards of consent in BDSM. The fact that she represents this marriage as her happiest suggests that only truly consensual relationships can be satisfying.[213] Following their negotiation Jankyn and Alisoun "hadden never debaat" (822); they are kind to each other and happy. Furthermore, their happiness after negotiation rejects, as does kink, the idea that consent and planning cannot lead to erotically fulfilling encounters.[214] Jankyn and the Wife abandon their socially proscribed roles (dominant husband and chaste obedient wife) and negotiate their own arrangement; ultimately their marriage reflects both BDSM's attention to consent and challenge of normative relationship power dynamics.

There are two important details to attend to after this reconciliatory negotiation: Jankyn's surrender of social control and the suggestion of his continued sexual dominance. Jankyn returns the control of her land and wealth to Alisoun, and also gives her control over his speech and actions. This establishes the Wife as the partner with control over the resources of their marriage, and gives her back some authority in the social sphere. By giving up control of his speech,

[213] Not all critics take the Wife's claim of a happy ending seriously, however. They argue that she is glossing over difficulties that may have come afterward (both here and in her *Tale*, which I discuss below). See for example Hansen, *Fictions of Gender*; Saunders, *Rape and Ravishment* 308-309; Wiesl 103. My work and the works of other kink theorists explore desire and the possibility of fulfillment through sexual means, and emphasize the importance of taking seriously people's claims about their own experiences and subjectivities. In the absence of clear textual evidence to the contrary, a character's assertions about her life or experience should also be taken seriously.

[214] Bauer discusses the role of consent in BDSM relationships in *Queer BDSM Intimacies*, especially in chapter 4.

Jankyn has promised to stop lecturing or trying to teach the Wife about the wickedness of women and he has burned the book from which he took those lessons. He tells her that she is free to "Do as thee lust" for the rest of her life (820). Some critics read Alisoun's kindness to Jankyn after their fight as submission, but what she actually says is "I was to hym as kynde/ As any wyf… And also trewe" (823-25).[215] In previous relationships, her lack of kindness has been the result of her dissatisfaction. In the new context of her mutually satisfying relationship with Jankyn, where he is completely agreeable to her, she has no need of tricks to control him. Being kind to a submissive partner is something many dominant partners do to reward good behaviour, and kindness and faithfulness do not necessarily come from submission. In fact, since Alisoun has the governance of Jankyn's words, actions, and estate, and that she is kind to him in his obedience, suggests the kind of control a Domme would exercise over her sub, not that she does whatever her husband asks. Concluding that Alisoun's marital bliss could only result from her submission to Jankyn, when she explicitly mentions only his submission, her own kindness, and their mutual happiness seems to me to result from the same heteronormative assumptions about gender roles in marriage that fuel the antifeminist tradition the Wife rebels against. The Wife, rather than reinforcing these gendered power dynamics, presents the alternative of a wife in charge.

However, as I interpret the evidence of her false dream and her behaviour just after Jankyn hits her in the final fight, Alisoun also has masochistic sexual desires, and so there is much suggestive possibility in the fact that he specifically gives her control "of his tonge, and of his hond also" (815). In a kinky relationship, there is the appearance that the dominant partner has control; however, as I establish in my first chapter, the bottom actually sets limits and makes requests about sensation during negotiation. The Wife has control over what Jankyn's tongue and

[215] The word *kynde* is somewhat ambiguous at this time: according to the MED its primary meaning is "in accordance with the ordinary course of nature." The sense of love or niceness is only the fourth listed secondary meaning.

hands do, but that does not mean she always plays the dominant role. That she has the governance of his hand does not mean that he is never violent, just that she controls when he is. There is no textual evidence about the specifics of Jankyn and Alisoun's sex life after their big fight, but one can conclude that their complete lack of disagreement extends to the bedroom, especially because Alisoun is such a tireless defender of the place of sexual pleasure in marriage. It only makes sense that Jankyn would continue to be very sexually capable, and that his "glossing," whatever it entails, continues in the newly negotiated marriage. The repeated links the Wife makes between pain and sexuality do imply that she might enjoy erotic pain, but it is the marriage itself (negotiated and renouncing normative male dominance) that is kinky, however she and Jankyn pass the time in bed. Jankyn's early mistake was trying to control the Wife in all aspects of her life; after their fight, I argue that he only takes control at her request. The Wife is socially dominant, and has enjoyed dominance in past relationships, but with Jankyn she also enjoys selective submission, making her a switch.

To return, briefly, to Hansen: her assessment of the fifth marriage is that it portrays male violence as something women desire, and that the *Prologue* normalizes violence against women. In my opinion, the *Prologue*, and even the final confrontation, do just the opposite. The text shows a clear difference between consensual erotic "violence" as part of fantasy or negotiated play, which arouses the Wife and perhaps her audience, and the violence of Jankyn that makes her miserable. The interpretation of these different kinds of action hinges on consent, as does a modern understanding of BDSM. Abuse is possible in all relationships, and often happens with the blessing of hegemonic social discourse (in the *Prologue*'s case as represented by Jankyn's book and other clerical authority that the Wife challenges); however, if partners can escape these restrictive ideas about male and female behaviour, perhaps through the traumatic experience of a

very serious fight, they might find a way to "f[a]lle acorded" into a very different kind of relationship based on mutual satisfaction and consent.

Classifying Alisoun as a switch makes the extent of her resistance of normative power structures clear. The Wife challenges clerical authority and perception of female sexuality in her claims of dominance, but her equal embracing of sexual submission and masochism show that power and desire are flexible. Roles do not need to be absolute, and desire may change based on partner, stage of life, or other factors. Bauer writes that switching shows that desire is based in responsiveness (52). This understanding emphasizes the importance of particularized but still changing dynamics between partners and therefore encourages non-normative relationship configurations. Scott argues that the fluidity of the switch's relationship to power explains why few are represented in popular culture: if roles and power dynamics can be fluid and change, then the heteronormative model of consistently dominant male and passive female partners becomes more obviously unnatural and might be challenged (165-67).

The Wife's willing switching from dominant to submissive roles also reflects on the potential appeal of powerlessness in erotic situations, something Leo Bersani argues is threatening to a heteronormative model that assumes everyone seeks dominance, a view that privileges the male perspective:

> In short, the social structures from which it is often said that the eroticizing of mastery and subordination derive are perhaps themselves derivations (and sublimations) of the indissociable nature of sexual pleasure and the exercise or loss of power… [A] gravely dysfunctional aspect of what is, after all, the healthy pleasure we take in the operation of a coordinated and strong physical organism is the temptation to deny the perhaps equally strong appeal of powerlessness, of the loss of control. Phallocentrism is exactly that: not primarily the denial of power to women (although it has obviously also led to that,

> everywhere and at all times), but above all the denial of the value of powerlessness in both men and women. I don't mean the value of gentleness, or nonaggressiveness, or even of passivity, but rather of a more radical disintegration and humiliation of the self. (216-17)

Bersani theorizes the erotic potential of powerlessness while also indicating why such eroticization presents problems to a heteronormative model: because if being powerless or humiliated can be sexual, then, first, there is not such a strong divide between sex and power as people might like to pretend,[216] and, second, if not everyone sought control and mastery then the value of those things would be diminished. Throughout Western history, strong social taboos have forbidden men from taking the passive role in sex. In a heterosexual scenario, the man is seen as the active partner, so to take the passive role is to be feminized. Even in cultures in which sodomy was licit in some forms, only the active role was really culturally acceptable for adult men (Karras, *Sexuality in Medieval Europe* 120-49). These taboos indicate a strong fear of passivity or loss of control, and a conception of power as one-directional and unchanging. If different configurations of power become acceptable and valued, then the normative retains less control over relationship structures. In the Wife's case, strictly erotic submission paired with dominance and control of her husband otherwise proves to be erotically and emotionally satisfying.[217] The Wife uses this past satisfaction to argue for more of the same in the future, for herself and anyone who would take her advice, which places her at odds with what clerical authority deems appropriate for the configuration of power on marital relationships.

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[216] Separating sex from power is part of the idealization of sex. For more on the denial of power as a part of sexual relationships see Bauer, *Queer BDSM* 2-6.

[217] As Rushton and Hopkins write, "Bersani's insistence on the attraction and necessity of powerlessness, of submission, is echoed in many medieval texts" (10). The Wife loves Jankyn most of all her husbands, retrospectively, and his energetic glossing in bed brings her sexual satisfaction (508-09).

A kinky reading of the Wife's *Prologue* also provides a new framework for understanding Jankyn's character and his role in his marriage. Most critics reading the *Prologue* focus on the Wife and her experiences. What critics have not generally considered until recently is how Jankyn becomes involved in and is affected by their fight and marriage dynamics in general. As is often also the case in modern criticism of BDSM, critics reading the Wife show concern for her as a victim, without considering her own stated desires. But Jankyn is also dismissed in many readings; critics assume that he is simply a representative of clerical, masculine authority. It seems that he is straightforwardly masculine in such a way that his beating of his wife does not require explanation or analysis. This negative view of masculinity is as much a product of patriarchy as the misogynistic stereotypes about the Wife. Critics of BDSM often assume that the sadist or top is pathologically motivated and always the active party. As Ummni Khan argues, these ideas are rooted in the original psychomedical conceptions of sadomasochism, which stereotype sadism as active (and therefore masculine) and masochism as passive (and therefore feminine) (26-53). These foundational concepts are clear in the DSM III's assertions about sadism: "the authors suggest that only sadism can be potentially inflicted on a non-consenting partner, and not masochism…. The psychiatric authorities find it inconceivable that the sexual desire to be dominated is an active impulse that can be inflicted on another" (Khan 43).[218] But these assumptions about Jankyn and about sadism and masculinity obscure the real distribution of power. A kinky reading, which incorporates a more nuanced understanding of power exchange, will illuminate aspects of Jankyn's character.

[218] In a later chapter, Khan shows the legal implications of these assumptions in *R. v. Black*, a case in which a mother lost custody of her children over BDSM activities she claimed were at her partner's insistence. The judge did not believe her because she played the dominant role in the play (280-86).

Jankyn is in some ways a victim of the same clerical discourse he attempts to use to control the Wife. Jankyn and Alisoun's relationship begins when she is still married to her fourth husband, for whom Jankyn acts as a pallbearer, and the Wife marries him for love. We do not read any of Jankyn's thoughts or feelings as we do the Wife's, which is perhaps why most scholars do not attempt to interpret him. What the text says about Jankyn is that he is a fantastic lover who beats his wife. But why does her beat her? Elizabeth Beibel writes that according to cultural expectations of masculinity, Jankyn must be violent. He has entered a marriage in which he has no advantage of age or finances, so he must use physical force to take his proper place as head of his household (69-70). Alisoun's age is likely to mean that Jankyn will never become a father, so he has also given up that form of authority. Ben Parsons sees Jankyn's use of violence against the Wife as a misapplication of pedagogical method; his extensive education has not given him domestic experience, so he tries (and fails) to manage his wife with a schoolteacher's method (163). Jankyn beats the Wife because, as a clerk, he has been trained to believe the oppressive clerical discourse she opposes. He is an inheritor of the antifeminist tradition. He enters his marriage to Alisoun with traditional (if extreme) ideas about marriage, but he has not married a traditional woman. His nightly readings from the book of wicked wives is an attempt to control Alisoun and thereby fulfill what he sees as his masculine responsibility; however, from the moment at which he deafens Alisoun and is "agast" at his actions (798), he rejects the clerical discourse that has led to this violent argument and embraces an alternative method. Antifeminist texts create a dynamic between Jankyn and Alisoun that satisfies neither party. When the violence between them becomes physical, the shock of going too far allows them the space to depart from the dynamic that had been unsatisfying to carve out a mutually desirable way of approaching their relationship. This renegotiation would not have been possible without Jankyn's

cooperation.[219] Jankyn's willing submission to the Wife challenges patriarchal assumptions about what can satisfy men in relationships. Jankyn no longer controls their money or estate, yet he and Alisoun are both happy and true to each other. Jankyn does not need financial, familial, or sexual dominance to be satisfied, providing an alternate role for men like him to play.

The Wife of Bath's Tale

Turning now to the *Wife of Bath's Tale*, this section shows how a kinky reading of the *Tale* reinforces the importance of flexible power dynamics in healthy relationships and reframes the potentially vexing ending of the story. The Wife's *Tale* is an erotic fiction within the erotic fiction of her *Prologue*. In a kinky reading of her *Prologue*, as I have argued, the Wife is established as a switch and the text advances a mutually satisfying model for marriage based not on rigid, gender-determined roles, but on the flexible exchange of power as it suits both parties. Sexuality is figured as an important part of marital happiness, and that sexuality might include an appreciation of eroticized pain or dominance. A kinky reading of the *Tale* will show affinity between the Wife and both of her main characters, which again supports a flexible understanding of sexual power dynamics, and it will also affirm the value of consent in sexual relationships.

The Wife's *Tale* is an Arthurian romance that draws on the tradition of the "loathly lady" story.[220] The earliest examples of this type of story come from about the sixth century and

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[219] Likewise, Margery needs the cooperation of her husband John to renegotiate their relationship in *The Book of Margery Kempe*.

[220] The sexual farce that is now the *Shipman's Tale* was originally intended to be the Wife's (Patterson 290, n.14). The final choice of the romance genre for the Wife's *Tale* has received extensive critical commentary. Dinshaw argues that the romance is a womanly form, and is therefore appropriate to the Wife's attempt to "renovate the patriarchal hermeneutic" (*Sexual Poetics* 126). Fradenburg says that the Wife's use of romance is a sophisticated response to shifting class borders in the late fourteenth century ("Passing Fancy"). Pugh contends that the *Tale* demonstrates tensions between the romance and fabliau genres, and that the Wife's reformulation makes a strong statement about women on top and allows her to create a space for

involve issues of Irish sovereignty.[221] The folk motif of the loathly lady hinges on the assumed lack of sexual possibility in the 'deformed' or elderly female body, as an old woman demands sex (or marriage and by extension sex) from young men in exchange for a secret, power, or some necessary object. When the man of worth submits to the request for a kiss or a night together from the loathly lady, she reveals a new and beautiful form for him to enjoy, thwarting the expectation of the knight and the readers of the tale that her old body is beyond sexual interest. A loathly lady tale is, in this light, the perfect story for the Wife to tell as an older woman who wishes for those same expectations about older bodies to be subverted for her own benefit.

The Wife's *Tale* diverges from the traditional loathly lady story in several key ways, most of which this chapter reads as the result of her *Tale* being erotic fiction. First, and most critically challenging, is Chaucer's addition of a rape to the story. The Wife's version begins with the protagonist knight's rape of "a mayde" (886). This rape results in his being sentenced to death, but on the queen's intervention he is instead given a quest to find "[w]hat thyng is it that wommen moost desiren" (905). As the issue of the rape will require the most attention, I will return to that topic following a consideration of the other differences, namely, a lack of grotesque hideousness in the old wyf, the attention to class, and the absence of a coercive spell.

Middle English loathly lady stories generally contain lengthy physical descriptions of the loathly lady. It is true that the loathly lady in the Wife's *Tale* is physically unappealing; however, it is also the case that her body is significantly less disgusting than the bodies of loathly ladies who come before or after. Whereas the Wife's lady is "a fou[l] wight" (999) and an "olde wyf" (1000) who comes from "so lough a kynde" (1101), Chaucer gives much less space to her

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women's sexual agency ("Queering Genres" 116-19, 134-35). Disbrow argues that Chaucer disdains Arthurian romances and that the Wife's use of the genre therefore reflects her ineptitude and moral fallibility.

221 For more on the history of the loathly lady tradition and its influences on Middle English Literature, see Maynadier or Passmore and Carter.

physical description than is traditional. In other versions of the loathly lady stories, which appear in Norse, Welsh, Irish, and French, the ladies are beast-like, or their human features are deformed or misplaced. Gower, writing at about the same time as Chaucer, creates his own loathly lady in the *Tale of Florent.* One description alone of this lady's "lothlieste" body is sixteen lines long: her eyes are "smale and depe set"; her lips are "schrunken"; her cheeks "rivelen as an emty skyn/ Hangende doun unto the chin"; "[s]che hath no lith withoute a lak"; her features together "myhte a mannes lust destourbe" (1676-91). She is completely repulsive. Similarly, the texts that make use of loathly ladies in the fifteenth century emphasize the withered wrongness of the ladies' bodies. In *The Wedding of Sir Gawaine and Dame Ragnell*, for example, the first description of Ragnell's twisted looks is almost twenty lines long: she has a snot-filled nose, yellowed teeth in an enormous mouth, huge bleary eyes, heavy hanging breasts; she is built like a barrel (227-45). Later, another nine lines add that she has crooked teeth like boar's tusks, withered lips, and no visible neck (547-56). The Wife does not detail the appearance of the old wyf both because, as I will explore below, she identifies with the character, and because such revolting details about misshapen bodies that repel lust do not contribute to her erotic aims.[222]

Another atypical feature of Chaucer's version of the loathly lady story is a focus on class. In Chaucer's version, the rapist-knight's objection that the lady comes from "so lough a kynde" implies that she is not a member of the nobility (1110). In other versions of the loathly lady narrative, the lady's transformation to a young and beautiful woman includes the revelation that she is either the magical embodiment of a noble concept, as in the Irish stories in which she is literally Sovereignty, or a woman of noble birth, as is the case in *The Weddyng of Sir Gawaine*

[222] I have chosen to refer to the main female character of the Wife's *Tale* as "the old wyf" throughout. Other critics use the word "hag" with some frequency, but since that term never appears in the text itself, and because I think it has more negative connotations than the Wife's choice of language, I avoid using it.

and Dame Ragnell. In this version, however, the wyf's transformation does not include a specific revelation of mythical or highborn status. Chaucer engages directly with social hierarchy in the Wife's *Tale*, and his version of the loathly lady story includes critique of social hierarchy: in her pillow lecture for example, the wyf argues that Christ, not nobility of birth, is the source of *gentilesse* (1117-18), and the majority of her speech concerns class or poverty.[223] BDSM often exploits social hierarchies for erotic effect in roleplaying scenarios, but the *Tale* does not pair its commentary on class with erotic discourse.

The story the Wife tells does not contain the traditional transformation by trigger or spell because her exploration of sexual power dynamics emphasizes the importance of consent. In the *Prologue*, the Wife contrasts the abuse she suffers with the mutual happiness she and Jankyn experience once they begin to respect each other's desires, and her *Tale* continues to suggest that women's agency plays an important role in sexual fulfillment of both men and women. In many of the other loathly lady tales, the lady has been cursed, usually by a stepmother, into the hideous form of the loathly lady, and is freed by the knight's fulfillment of the terms of that curse; these women are without agency in their transformations. The old wyf, by contrast, suffers no such curse, and her metamorphosis into a lovely young bride is her own choice—which means that her original loathly shape was also a choice she made for herself. When the rapist-knight acts "maugree hir heed" and rapes the young maiden, the consequence is that he is sentenced to death and then, instead, to a daunting quest that might save his life. When the rapist-knight grants his wife the same "governance" over him that Jankyn gives to Alisoun (1231), the result is a beautiful wife who satisfies all his desires. The *Tale* thus suggests that consensual sexual activity, specifically that which takes a woman's desires into account, is more satisfying than the non-

[223] Many scholars have commented on the importance of class to the Wife's *Tale*. For example, see Fradenburg "'Fulfild of fairye'" or "Passing Fancy," Finke, Pugh "Squire Jankyn's Legs," or Spearing.

consensual sex with which the story begins. Furthermore, the *Tale* presents non-consensual relationships as socially unacceptable.

To return then, to Chaucer's addition of rape to the *Tale*, I see the rape as a part of the erotic strategy of the text but not in itself erotic. In a chapter on *Sir Gowther*, this dissertation reads the trope of rape as a form of rape-play that draws attention to the lack of consent endemic to medieval women's experience of sexuality, as well as an effective method of titillating an audience, whether through fear, pity, outrage, or sexual arousal. That chapter considers how rape can be a part of a process of distanced consumption, whereby audience members can first enjoy and then abjure the violence of the Other. In considering the Wife's *Tale*, I focus on the ways rape might be part of erotic fantasy and whether that is the case in this narrative, which will again connect my analysis with theory on erotics and pornography.

The idea that rape might be an effective part of an erotic fiction is, perhaps, a discomfiting idea. Feminist critiques of pornography often include outrage over the inclusion of coercive sex, which they allege represents an aggressive, masculine fantasy and promotes the rape of real women.[224] It would be easy to dismiss the rape in the *Tale* as an example of masculine fantasy, especially given that the victim disappears and the rapist gains a beautiful, obedient wife as a direct result of his having committed rape.[225] Given Chaucer's own history with rape, it might be

[224] For example, see Russell.

[225] The rapist-knight's victim never speaks, and after the rape she disappears from the text. As I note below, the *Tale* may be more concerned with larger social change than individual justice, but the absence of the maiden from the text following her rape is disconcerting to many readers. Some critics, including Leicester and Hansen, see her fate as representative of the place of women in these texts, i.e. silenced and abandoned by justice. Her silence may also correspond to medieval women's legal standing in cases of rape; it was a woman's male family members who would bring cases of rape to the courts. Robertson claims that the maid is actually another form of the old wyf, so she has not really disappeared (17).

particularly tempting to assign the masculine fantasy label to the way rape occurs in this text.[226] If rape is masculine fantasy, then the rape in the Wife's *Tale* might appeal to the sexual appetites of male audience members as part of her erotic strategy to entice them.

However, rape narratives do not only resonate erotically for male listeners. There is significant evidence that women, and even a majority of women according to some studies, also enjoy rape fantasy.[227] In BDSM, rape-play makes use of rape fantasy to inform scenarios where kinksters act out different kinds of coerced sex. Considering that as high as sixty-two percent of women have had rape fantasies (Bivona and Critelli 43), I conclude that rape-play represents a kink that reflects the desires many women have.[228] As is the case with many kinds of kinky fantasy, the fantasy or play of rape does not represent a desire to be sexually assaulted.[229]

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[226] In 1380, Chaucer is named in a document releasing him from responsibility for the rape of Cecily Chaumpaigne. Though some critics have cited the indecipherability of the word *raptus* at this time in history and therefore argued that we cannot know what exactly the legal document refers to, current critical consensus is that this potential uncertainty must not be used defensively to preserve a sanitized vision of Chaucer because of respect for his works. For more of this topic see Cannon "Raptus in the Chaumpaigne Release" and "Chaucer and Rape."

[227] Studies cited by Critelli and Bivona report that between thirty-one and fifty-seven percent of women have fantasized about rape (61). In a later study by Bivona and Critelli sixty-two percent of respondents reported having had rape fantasies (43).

[228] There is no simple explanation for why women have rape fantasies. Anti-sex feminists interpret these fantasies as a pathological response to male-dominated culture. Brownmiller, for example, writes that rape fantasy is "a pitiful effort on the part of young girls, as well as older women, to find their sexuality within the context of male sexuality" (325). Non-pathologizing studies, like those by Critelli and Bivona, find that there are a variety of reasons women enjoy rape fantasy. Strassberg and Lockerd find that women who report fantasies involving force had more sexual experience and were more positive about sex overall (412). In BDSM, rape-play responds to fear women might have about being raped, but allows them to reassert control over such fears through fantasy or play. Rape fantasy is not an indication that a woman's sexuality is damaged, or even non-normative.

[229] As Strassberg and Lockerd write, "many females actively engage in an erotic and pleasurable fantasy of… nonconsensual forced sex, when the actual experience of such an encounter would be traumatic and repugnant" (67).

Rape fantasy may be arousing in a literary context. For example, rape is prominent in modern romance novels.[230] One survey of historical romances finds that fifty-four percent included a rape narrative (Thurston 78). Critelli and Bivona consider the presence of rape in romance novels as natural because rape fantasy is common among women and there are strong connections between erotic fantasy and romance novels:

> Sexual fantasies are self-generated erotic stories often intentionally initiated to provide enjoyment and sexual arousal. Romance novels are structured erotic fantasies that individuals intentionally expose themselves to, typically for emotional satisfaction and sexual arousal. (66)

Hazen argues that a rape in a romance novel takes the place of a violent confrontation with an enemy in fiction intended for men. The heroine may have to conquer the heart of this adversary following his erotic domination of her (Critelli and Bivona 67).

Saunders' study *Rape and Ravishment in the Literature of Medieval England* proves that rape is present across a range of genres, and that medieval conceptions of rape are not monolithic, but part of a lively and ongoing dialogue. Saunders explores the various thematic uses of rape in medieval literature, but she does not consider why the inclusion of rape might have effectively engaged reader interest. One critic who does attempt to explain the frequency of rape in presumably pleasant stories from an audience impact perspective is Evelyn Birge Vitz. She asserts, as I have in my previous chapter, that the representation of rape could be titillating to some women and men in the medieval period. Vitz argues that modern morality and ideas of

[230] For studies of the romance novel genre and female sexuality, see Hazen, Thurston, and Salmon and Symons. Thurston notes the endurance of the trope several times in her book, but she does not think women like the rape narrative (192-93).

consent may be influencing readings of rape in medieval literature too much. She also notes that female patrons paid for these stories, so some must have enjoyed them (10-11).[231]

Rape narratives may have a sexually arousing function, but in the Wife's *Tale*, though the rape is part of an erotic discourse, it is not in itself erotic.[232] The *Tale*'s rape has two main functions: it helps establish a sexual context for the *Tale*, and it acts as a negative exemplum for behavior, much like the fight between Jankyn and Alisoun. According to Bivona and Critelli, rape fantasies are "often abstracted, eroticized portrayals that emphasize some aspects of actual rape and omit or distort other features" (34). This description seems to fit the way the Wife tells the rape. As the knight, "a lusty bachelor" (883) is riding along a river, he sees a maiden:

> And happed that, alone as he was born,
>
> He saugh a mayde walkynge hym biforn,
>
> Of which mayde anon, maugree heir heed,
>
> By verray force, he rafte hir maydenhed. (885-88)

The Wife glosses over some aspects, such as exactly what force might have been necessary to "[reve] her maidenhead" and emphasizes the knight's physicality, leaving much to the audience members' imagination. However, to take the four lines devoted to describing the rape into "eroticized" territory would require extensive imagining. The Wife spends as many lines describing the outrage that follows the rape as she does on the rape itself, leaving me to conclude

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[231] Vitz's approach is at times abrasive and her article has garnered some feminist response. Robertson and Rose, for example, critique her for both a lack of historical support for her arguments and for not mentioning both Christine de Pizan's and Marie de France's condemnation of literary rape (6). It is important to note that Vitz sometimes supports her argument with only speculation; for example, her observation about female patrons supposes that enjoyment of rape narratives would be the only motivation behind commissioning stories, when in fact such commissions could have been in spite of the rape rather than because of it.

[232] While this particular rape is not erotic, this chapter considers the possibility of erotic rape narratives and rape fantasies in order to counter the assumption that the presence of a rape in this text means that it is automatically not erotic or not compatible with female desire.

that the rape is not intended to trigger sexual arousal in audiences, male or female, but to engage other kinds of emotional interest through anger or disgust.

The sexual context of the *Prologue* and of the ending of the *Tale* mean that the rape is clearly an example of how a man should not behave towards women. In the *Prologue*, Jankyn's and Alisoun's behavior early in their marriage is potentially erotic, but the lack of consent and mutuality in that behavior means it must be corrected. They are happy once they work together to respect each other's desires. The *Tale* produces a similar dynamic in which the rape at the beginning of the story is a negative act that ignores a woman's desire; once the rapist-knight learns from his old wife (as Jankyn does) to think about what women want, both partners are happy. While the rape seems not to have much individual consequence for the rapist-knight, it is not endorsed by the text as behaviour that should be emulated.

Most critics consider the rape in the Wife's *Tale* as an event that gets in the way of a completely sympathetic reading. Saunders, for example, writes that the *Tale*'s treatment of rape is "deeply disturbing," and that the ending transformation "must remain disturbing" because it rewards a rapist ("Women Displaced" 117, 129).[233] Amy Vines has shown that in medieval romance, however, the reward of a rapist is not at all uncommon; in fact, she argues that rape is often a necessary step in a knight's chivalric development, and says that while "[n]ot every romance hero is a rapist… in many romances, the rapist can become the hero" (167). This is the case in *Sir Gowther* as well as in the *Wife's Tale*.[234]

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[233] According to Suzanne Sara Thomas though, he is not really rewarded. She argues that since the main concern of the *Tale* is *sovereyntee*, which she thinks means the ability to define and control one's own desires, and since the transformation comes from the old wyf's decision, the knight remains cursed by a continued lack of control over himself and his desires (93-94).

[234] Though as Saunders points out, while Gowther is clearly remorseful for his sins and atones for them at the end of his romance, we see no such direct indication of the Wife of Bath's rapist-knight's feelings of guilt (*Rape and Ravishment* 306).

Rather than enacting individual justice on the rapist-knight for his crime, the *Tale* concerns itself, as many romances do, with larger social concerns. Saunders finds that Chaucer's use of rape in his texts never loses "the sense of the real gravity of rape for women or of the ways force colours the relations between the sexes" (*Rape and Ravishment* 310). In the *Wife's Tale* in particular, Saunders finds that the use of a feminine perspective presents rape in ways that differ from its traditional use in romance: it is legally realistic,[235] domestically situated, and attentive to consent (*Rape and Ravishment* 300-10). While the rapist-knight is rehabilitated rather than put to death, his individual crime provides the opportunity for the *Tale* to advocate for a renegotiated relationship between the sexes on a larger scale.[236]

The inclusion of a rape in her erotic fiction makes sense considering the ways in which the Wife's erotics throughout her texts focus on the role of power and mutuality, which we might also understand as consent. Her own search for the right amount of control in her marriages, as well as the *Tale*'s assertion that what women really want is *sovereyntee*, reflect an awareness of the importance of power dynamics in sexual relationships, as does the addition of a rape to her story. Furthermore, the emotional hook of the rape narrative may increase the audience's engagement in her erotic fiction, making them more receptive to the ideas about flexible sexual power exchange in the texts.

The Wife's propensity for switching roles and exchanging power with her partners manifests in her *Tale* in her multiple identifications with her characters. There are strong and obvious factors that lead to an identification of the Wife with the old wyf of her story: both are old women, both have an obvious sexual appetite and are married to younger men, both have perceptions of themselves which do not adhere to the traditional view of older women, and both

[235] For more on the interaction of the *Tale* and legal reality see Edwards.
[236] For more on the *Tale* and restorative justice, see Cawsey.

make use of the same traditional authority that they in some ways resist to provide textual support for their arguments. Leicester believes the wyf is Alisoun's "surrogate" (161). Pugh writes that the *Prologue* and *Tale* contain parallel couples: the Wife/wyf and Jankyn/rapist-knight ("Squire Jankyn's Legs" 93). The old wyf's transformation is easily understood as wish fulfillment for the Wife, who, in spite of her practical determination "to be right myrie" as she ages, would no doubt welcome back the "jolitee," "beautee," and "pith" of her "yowthe" (470-79). For example, Beer writes, "[t]he 'Tale' ends happily because the power of narration lies with Alisoun and it is an expression of 'wish-fulfillment'" (8). Both the Wife and old wyf explicitly support women's *sovereyntee* in relationships, and the connection between the two female characters is undeniable.

However, that connection may be less straightforward and complete than it first appears: the Wife also shares traits with the rapist-knight of her tale. McTaggert reads the Wife's texts as examples of mimetic desire, and, as a result, sees the *Prologue* and *Tale* as "gendered inversions (rather than straightforward reiterations) of each other" (43). According to McTaggert, both texts ultimately present an alternative to acquisitive mimesis as both the Wife and the knight give up their desires for mastery to embrace relationships based on mutuality; the Wife is more like the knight than the wyf in McTaggert's opinion because they both need to reform their self-interested aggressive behavior. Both the Wife and the knight learn not to rely on coercion in their sexual relationships. In some ways, the Wife's experiences in marriage parallel the rapist-knight's quest to find what women really want: she tries different ways to be happy with her husbands before finding thatwhat she really wants is the mutually agreed upon and flexible sovereignty of a switch. It is possible, then, to identify the Wife with both the wyf and the rapist-knight.

The Wife has more than one point of identification in her *Tale* because it is an erotic fiction, and in erotic fantasy, subjects maintain more than one position. Writing about pornography's potential for non-gender-based identification, Linda Williams applies Modleski's

theory of the bisexuality of spectatorship: when watching media, Modleski argues, viewers oscillate between the male and female or active and passive positions, identifying with both roles regardless of their own gender (205-06). Williams applies this theory to pornography to explain how viewers of porn imagine themselves in a variety of roles, undermining assumptions that identification will always be stable or based on gender. Referring to La Planche and Pontalis's work on fantasy, Judith Butler also argues that consumers of erotica connect with multiple subject positions, even with elements of the story such as setting ("The Force of Fantasy" 491-92). Her argument is against the censorship of pornography on the grounds that positing a simple cause and effect relationship between fantasy or representation and reality is wrong. According to these theories of fantasy and erotics, both the Wife and audience members switch positions in the *Tale*, and therefore imagine experiencing both the dominant and submissive positions.

Following the rape of the maiden, the events of the *Tale* begin to concern female desire and power. The sentence for rape is death, but thanks to the mercy of the queen, the rapist-knight will earn a reprieve if he can discover what women desire most (892-905). This sentence represents a reversal of the dynamics of a rape: instead of imposing his will on a woman without regard for her desires, his life depends on understanding what women want. Because he finds many answers by consulting women, but no two the same (919-34), he accepts the help of the old wyf. Her answer, that "[w]ommen desiren to have sovereyntee," comes with a price that the rapist-knight only learns after he has used her response: he must take her as his wife. Jill Mann calls this forced marriage "a fantasy retaliation of rape-in-reverse" (89). There has certainly been a reversal of power in the *Tale*.

The bedroom conversation between the old wyf and the rapist-knight contains expressions of opinions and desires on both sides, and ends with an agreement between the partners about how their relationship will be conducted; it is the *Tale*'s instance of negotiated consent. The old

wyf approaches the marriage bed "smylynge everemo" (1086), but "[g]reet was the wo the knyght hadde in his thought… [h]e walweth and he turneth to and fro" (1083-85). His reluctance to be her lover because she is "so loothly, and so oold also,/ And therto comen of so lough a kynde" (1100-01) leads to her pillow lecture, in which she cites traditional authority to prove that true *gentilesse* comes from God alone, and not appearance, age, or social status (1104-1212).

Following this lecture, the rapist-knight seems finally to have absorbed the fact that she has some wisdom and to appreciate that women desire sovereignty, because he gives her the decision about whether she should be "foul and old" but a "trew, humble wyf" or "yong and fair" without guarantee of her behavior (1220-24). He says,

> My lady and my love, and wyf so deere,
> I put me in your wise governance;
> Chesith yourself which may be moost pleasance
> And moost honour to yow and me also.
> I do no fors the whether of the two,
> For as you liketh, it suffiseth me. (1230-35)

This submission to his wife shows a reversal in the knight's approach to women: instead of doing what he likes to a woman "maugree hir heed" (887), he takes her feelings into account and defers to her control. Importantly, the rapist-knight makes his decision before he has seen that his wife has physically transformed. The endearments with which he refers to her come before he knows she is now young and fair, and therefore prove that he has been convinced by the old wyf's words; he has accepted her as a partner and called her "my love" while still believing she is the same "loothly" lady he saw before. Mann may refer to the forced marriage as a "rape-in-reverse," but actually, the old wyf is only playing with the knight's fear when they first go to bed; she knows all along that he has objections to the marriage and that she will offer him a choice.

Robertson writes, "[t]he queen's justice has succeeded only in returning her knight to the condition he suffered before he raped the maiden" (19), but this is only true if one sees no difference between rape, or the domination of women, which is his condition before, and consensual marital sex and submission to his wife's desire. Both characters, by the end of the story, are privileging a responsive model of power exchange, where each partner expresses desires and consents to what will occur.

Many critics, including Hansen, Leicester, and Patterson, read the final transformation of the old wyf into a beautiful young woman as masculine wish fulfillment and a suppression of female power, but the shapeshifting does not necessarily indicate a return to female passivity and submission.[237] Reading the transformation this way assumes that faithful wives must be unhappy, or that being dominant is more important than being happy; however, this is the very issue the Wife navigates in her *Prologue*, and the repetition of the value of consensual submission and sexual fulfilment in her *Tale* reinforces the idea that power exchange need not be based on rigid gender roles or cruelty. The old wyf cares about bodily experience and sexual satisfaction, but she also gives a wise and convincing sermon to her new husband. Ellen Caldwell argues against a feminist interpretation of loathly lady narratives like the Wife's *Tale* and sees an opposition between brains and beauty in the wyf's transformation. But I do not agree that sexual fulfilment and good pillow talk need to be at odds, and apparently neither does the Wife, since each of her texts includes a female character who is both sexually appealing and intelligent enough to speak back to the authorities that would devalue her. Instead, Alisoun is suggesting that, given the chance, an old wife may reveal marital benefits and pleasure to her husband. She certainly did,

[237] Patterson, for example, writes, "the point is not simply that the hag's transformation into a wife 'bothe fair and good' (1241) expresses the Wife of Bath's secret hankering to trade her hard-won wisdom for more orthodox pleasures, but that the feminine wishes that are here fulfilled are themselves a function of *masculine* desire" (314, emphasis in original).

and she had no ability to renew her youth. The knight in the *Tale* does not originally want to be married to an old woman, and he does not want to have sex with her, but after committing to his new wife, he finds their union to be very pleasurable. This pleasure results not only from the fact that the wyf has transformed her body, but also from the negotiation the couple engages in, and the consensuality of the exchange of power between them.

The old wyf has power of her own; she is not under a spell like most of the other loathly ladies in the English tradition. As Susan Carter points out, however odd her choice is, the old wyf is driven by her own desire for a young husband ("Hymenation" 84). In another article, Carter argues that her obedience to her husband after the transformation might be better understood as a playful intimate moment:

> Is it too essentialist to assume that what is said in intimate play may not be a definitive statement on power relations, but an indulgence, equivalent to Mars allowing his lover to wear his armor during dalliance? The unequal power balance between the hag who can change shape and the knight who remains nameless is well-established by this stage. ("Coupling" 335)

The wyf could exercise her power at any point, but she does not have to because her husband has given her control. As in a BDSM scene, the bottom retains real control but enjoys the submissive role. If the rapist-knight were to do anything to violate the "parfit joye" they experience after marriage (1258), the wise, shapeshifting old wyf would be up to defending herself. The contrast between the power she has and the power she uses gives another example of the erotic value of powerlessness which I note above with reference to Bersani. As Rushton and Hopkins write,

> The Wife of Bath's relationship with her husbands, especially the last two, is one of "inevitable play of thrusts and relinquishment," and Bersani's theory of powerlessness and masochism might explain the problematic ending of her tale; it is an exchange of

power configured differently from modern relationship negotiations because it does not hide from certain sexual truths. (10)

The Wife and the old wyf do not separate power and control from sex; neither do they accept a traditional balance of power in relationships between men and women. Both women want men because they desire them sexually, but they do not want to have to fight with those men constantly for some measure of control over their own lives, and once each husband realizes the benefits of mutuality, the couples are happy. While Hansen argues that the ending of the *Tale* suggests that powerful women just want to return to silence (*Fictions of Gender* 33), I argue that the negotiated exchange of power between the old wyf and the rapist-knight, which precedes her transformation, only proves that powerful women want both sexual fulfillment and understanding from their husbands.

The Wife's final curse may be a bit jarring after the romantic ending of her *Tale*, but it does not contradict the ideas in her *Prologue* and *Tale* about sexual power. Following her assertion that the wyf and knight live in "parfit joye" until the end of their lives (1258), the Wife immediately launches into her final wish/curse:

…and Jhesu Crist us sende
Housbondes meeke, yonge, and fresh abedde,
And grace t'overbyde hem that we wedde;
And eek I praye Jhesu shorte hir lyves
That noght wol be governed by hir wyves;
And olde and angry nygardes of dispence,
God sende hem soone verray pestilence! (1258-64)

The Wife wants sexual satisfaction, and she wants it on her terms. Those husbands who would resist their wives' control (which both the *Prologue* and *Tale* suggest is actually a consensual

power exchange that makes both partners happier) and angry, stingy husbands are those husbands adhering to the traditional misogyny Alisoun opposes. Hansen argues that the curse puts the Wife back into the role of a vengeful woman in a war of the sexes ("'Of his love'" 286). That reading does not actually need to disagree with a reading of the Wife's *Tale* as being ultimately subversive: the Wife announces her intention to continue to oppose antifeminism and to seek out good sex, but she does not deny that the search might be difficult. She and the wyf from her *Tale* may have achieved happiness, but that does not mean victory is final for all women, or even for her in a new relationship. According to Minnis, the Wife's *Tale* shows

> [that f]antasy has the power to transcend the historical realities wherein we live and desire, to refuse the normative power-relations which constrain our existence; indeed, the fantastic pleasure of imagining the world otherwise discloses ways in which the social order may be transformed.[238] (311-12)

Pugh writes that the curse is a final switch in genre:

> [the *Tale*] is a romance with all of the trappings of the genre, but she switches from the play of fantasy to the utter seriousness of her curse both against husbands who would control the lives of their wives and against male pilgrims who are complicit in the privileges of patriarchy. ("Queering Genres" 134)

If the Wife's *Tale* (and perhaps too her *Prologue*) is the fantasy in which she rejects normative power relationships and imagines a different social order, the curse is her acknowledgement that such fantasy is not yet reality.

[238] Minnis' understanding of fantasy here comes close to my own argument about the potential of kinky fantasy or practice to transform normative relationships; however our overall focuses, i.e. mine on kink and sexuality vs. Minnis' on medieval concepts of authority and fallibility, are quite different.

The Wife's erotic fiction within erotic fiction reinforces the messages about the potential pleasures of a fair, negotiated, and flexible exchange of power from her *Prologue*. The rapist-knight begins by imposing his will on a woman, assuming she is available for his sexual pleasure without considering her desires, but by the end of the *Tale*, with the old wyf's guidance, he learns that negotiating a relationship and abandoning strict gender roles can be more satisfying than domination. The rapist-knight and wyf, like Jankyn and Alisoun, are happiest once they have worked out a mutually satisfying distribution of power in their marriages.

Conclusions: The Wife and Lesbian Sadomasochists

A kinky reading of the Wife's *Prologue* and *Tale* helps us to understand the seeming contradictions of the Wife and her texts. Most critics who write about her mark the complexity or realism of the Wife's character. Matthews, for example, writes that she is "more richly complex and engaging" than any other classical or medieval older female character (438). Van Dyke argues that the Wife is so realistic that she puts off the illusion of subjective agency as she engages in multiple discourses (186). It is her complexity that makes the Wife such a compelling character; however, a major critical problem in analysing the Wife has been how to resolve contradictions between her rhetoric about marriage and female sovereignty and the resolutions of both her fifth marriage and her story. The Wife advocates for multiple marriages, appropriates clerical discourse, and states the value of female *maistrye*. She pursues her sexual desires. On the other hand, she loves a husband who beats her and seems happiest when she is kind and true to him and they live without conflict (822-25); likewise, in her *Tale*, the challenging old wyf transforms into a young, beautiful, and obedient wife for the rapist-knight, which for some critics

undermines any authority in her earlier speech.[239] Viewing Alisoun as a switch provides a way to understand her without dismissing the importance of her commitment to female pleasure or ignoring the violence and power dynamics of her relationship with Jankyn and the transformation of the old wyf from her *Tale*. In a kinky context, a character's political beliefs about gender, sexuality, or *gentilesse* and her expression of desire in the context of a performative, sexual relationship can be separated.

Analysis of pop culture by kink theorists Ummni Khan, Catherine Scott, Margot Weiss, and Eleanor Wilkinson has shown that mainstream media representation of kink tends to be one-dimensional and to rely heavily on stereotypes of pathology. Scott's analysis of the female dominant in popular culture, for example, shows that a Domme is almost always depicted as emotionally damaged and aggressive (12). Khan comes to similar conclusions about the Domme in her study of film, and also shows that any redemption in the narrative for such a character comes through her revealing secret emotional weakness or a desire for more traditional family structure, and by submitting to a man, usually the protagonist of the movie (118-52). The work of these theorists finds that characters who are kinky are rarely anything else, and their kinks ultimately reinforce or are directly related to their position in society or their political beliefs. Very rarely are female characters allowed to have sexual desires without some specific reason.

Though popular culture has some difficulty depicting the wide variety of ways in which a kinkster's role in the scene might interact with other aspects of her life, in BDSM, the role a person takes as part of fantasy or sexual play might parallel or contradict her role in other contexts. For that matter, the role a person plays in sexual contexts may change from day to day or partner to partner. Instability of role is common enough that in addition to being a top or a

[239] This chapter has most extensively engaged with Hansen's arguments to this effect. Other critics who reach similar conclusions include Caldwell and Goodspeed-Chadwick.

bottom, a kinkster may be a switch, a person who switches between dominance and submission, as I have argued the Wife does. BDSM does not demand consistency, so a kinky reading allows seeming contradictions in character to be appreciated as co-existing facets, which to me encourages fuller appreciation of complex characters like the Wife of Bath.

In demanding that women be taken seriously and that sexual pleasure be recognized as positive, the Wife resists demands of sexual acceptability. Respectability politics, first articulated by Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham with respect to Black women's experience in American Baptist Churches, refers to attempts by members of minority groups to gain acceptance in the mainstream through acting in accordance with mainstream values. Though respectability politics generally apply to modern Black Americans, there are parallels of this behaviour or strategy for many different stigmatized groups throughout history. In her defense of women, Christine de Pizan, Chaucer's near contemporary, writes that women should avoid censure through virtuous behaviour and good works (*City of Ladies*). In the Wife's case, respectability politics would involve keeping quiet, not remarrying, and certainly not pursuing sexual pleasure. The Wife of Bath, rather than adhering to the usual routes of respectability for a widow, defiantly claims a right to pleasure, even with a sixth husband, when she asserts that she is not meant to live perfectly (111-12), and that she will continue to seek out physical satisfaction from men: "In wyfhod I wol use myn instrument" (149). The Wife is unashamed of bawdiness and her embodiedness; she refers to genitals several times and proudly claims she has "the best *quoniam* myghte be" (608). As I have argued above, the Wife's claiming of pleasure also incorporates an eroticization and reclamation of some painful experience. BDSM theory provides a framework for seeing such reclamations as part of a resistance to dominate narratives of power, rather than simply an internalization of the same.

As I note in my second chapter, however, some feminist critics of BDSM do not agree about the nature of connections between sexuality and other aspects of a person's life. Some feminists have argued that the appreciation of eroticized power exchange is incompatible with a desire for women's liberation because it recreates and encourages more violence.[240] This argument led to the major battle of the twentieth-century feminist sex wars over sadomasochism.[241] In a similar vein, scholars like Hansen and Goodspeed-Chadwick have argued that the Wife's love for a husband who beats her cancels out her impassioned defense of women's sexual desire and recreates patriarchal oppression of women. Anti-sex feminist positions impose limits on other women's sexual choices without considering those women's explanations of their own desires.[242] Considering the general narrative and rhetorical strategies from the sex wars and the conflict in the Wife's *Prologue* between clerical authority and Alisoun's experience illuminates an unexpected connection between the Wife of Bath and twentieth-century lesbian feminists.

The debates over sadomasochism ultimately center on how sex relates to social constructs and power, and over whether the body can be trusted as a source of truth—that is, if physical desires are as relevant and worth acting upon as rational ideas, or if the body's desires are too influenced

[240] See for example Linden *et al*. or Jeffreys.

[241] Above, this chapter discusses how these sex wars relate to issues of erotic fiction and pornography. The theoretical height of the sex wars occurred between the late 1970s and early 90s, but the feminist debates about sex positivity and negativity continue, and sometimes still focus on BDSM. For example, in a 2014 article on the website *xojane*, a website focusing on women's issues, Riana Lipsitz suggests her boyfriend is "just too much of a feminist" to be good at rough sex, reproducing the anti-sex position that sadomasochism cannot be a feminist choice. Feminists are still having these debates about what the right and wrong ways for a feminist to have sex are, about whether or not sex can challenge power, and about who gets to decide about these issues, and how.

[242] As I state in my first chapter, I align myself with pro-sex feminists. I find their position more convincing because it is supported by both scientific and insider perspectives. The rhetoric of the anti-sex feminists seems to me to reflect some of the same prejudice that some people have against queer people in general; they express disgust over kinksters' practices and seek to expel them from the community of feminists.

by toxic heteropatriarchy to be healthy. Issues of sex and power, and who has the authority to interpret these topics, will be familiar to any medievalist who has worked on the Wife. Both the Wife of Bath and feminist lesbian sadomasochists actively resist discourses with more normative social power in an effort to pursue their personal sexual fulfillment. Both face opponents seeking to control their behaviour, opponents who see their desires as damaging to a healthy society. To conclude this study, I will compare the works of pro-s/m lesbian feminists, using the writing of Patrick Califia,[243] one of the most prolific and provocative writers from that movement as examples, with the Wife's *Prologue* and *Tale* in order to explain why the critique of patriarchy in Chaucer's texts can be understood as sincere.[244]

First, Chaucer constructs the Wife as a playful character who uses humour to persuade audiences in ways that are similar to writings by lesbian sadomasochists. The Wife's "entente nys but for to pleye" and she makes many witty comments in her *Prologue*. For example, she laughs at the sexual efforts of her three old husbands: "I laughe whan I thynke/ How pitously a-nyght I made hem swynke" (201-02). In spite of all their efforts, the Wife also says that she has no "delit" in "bacon" (418), comparing her old husbands to unsatisfying, cured meat. These jokes both make the Wife's audience laugh and recall the fabliau trope of the old husband who cannot sexually satisfy his young wife. Califia also often uses humour to engage his readers and sarcasm to mock his detractors. In the introduction to *Public Sex*, for example, Califia writes that he has been "fuming and fussing about sexual repression… and incurring the wrath of Big Brother, Big Sister, and a lot of other people who have too much power and no sense of humor" (11). Califia conceives of himself as someone who has a sense of humor, and that humor is obvious in many

[243] Patrick Califia is a transman who identified as a lesbian during the height of the sex wars.
[244] In comparing writing by Califia with the Wife's texts, I do not mean to imply that the Wife has equivalent agency to Califia. Rather, I hope to show that the rhetorical strategies Califia uses (whether he is writing from his own perspective or writing a fictional character) are similar to rhetorical patterns Chaucer uses to give the Wife her voice.

places in his books, for example, his flippant comment on monogamy, "If this is passion, give me bleeding ulcers" (*Public Sex* 200). Like the Wife, Califia also uses an informal tone in his writing, addressing his readers in the second person, and incorporating slang terms, cursing, and exclamations. The use of humour in these pro-sex writings (both the pro-s/m feminists and the Wife are pro-sex) presents what may be controversial ideas in ways that amuse. The presentation of alternative desires in this non-threatening way challenges conceptions and may lead audiences to interrogate their assumptions about sex.

The playfulness in their writing or speech reminds us that sexuality can be playful, but neither the Wife nor Califia ever denies the importance of sexual expression on that basis. A light, informal tone does not invalidate the potential seriousness of the content of a text. The Wife may laugh and joke about sex, but Chaucer also presents her sexual needs as a key component of her self as she fights against the silencing of women in clerical discourse. Alongside jokes about fisting and erotic fiction about sexual conquest, Califia contemplates the oppressive legal ramifications of sexuality for a variety of minority groups and reveals his personal struggles with transitioning. His characters experience sexual fulfillment as self-affirming; for example, the protagonist of "Jessie" reflects on her personality during a sexual encounter and feels liberated by pursuing her desires (*Macho Sluts* 73-112). Even in the face of censure, from anti-sex feminists or from clerics, Chaucer's Wife and Califia's writings promote the importance of sexual desire and freedom of sexual expression. The irreverence and informality of their texts are a result of this battle against authority: if the hegemonic institutions or critics against whom they speak use formal, humorless language and avoid joking familiarity, then that kind of language is best suited to a critique of those same people and institutions. Readers who would be inclined to speak of sex only with solemn or shameful language are also challenged. Califia and his characters and the Wife are outsiders to the dominant institutions of their day, and so while they may use some of

the information of those sources (Califia sometimes incorporates statistics or the occasional academic theoretical concept and the Wife quotes patristic sources and classical texts) they present them in a new style that helps announce their subversive intentions.

Both Califia's writing and the Wife's texts also defend the value of their deviancy and reclaim the language used against them. BDSM is often associated with a reversal or questioning of the good/bad dichotomy because many BDSM activities create pleasure from what vanilla people would consider undesirable, such as pain and humiliation. As Califia sees it, the practice of BDSM involves questioning and challenging established sexual discourse: he writes, "being a sex radical means being defiant as well as deviant. It means being aware that there is something unsatisfying and dishonest about the way sex is talked about (or hidden) in daily life" (*Public Sex* 11). Califia addresses the difficulty of using language that "has been appropriated by feminist propagandists" (*Public Sex* 166) but insists on attempting to reclaim and redefine s/m terms; for example, he writes, "I'm a sadist. The polite term is 'top,' but I don't like to use it… If someone wants to know about my sexuality, she can deal with me on my own terms" (*Public Sex* 158). For Califia, speaking straightforwardly and unapologetically about sex in the language of one's own choosing is a way to address the dishonesty about sex in mainstream discourse.

As I note above, the Wife is similarly straightforward about her distrust of clerical discourse against women. In keeping with her desire to make room for women in discourse, her *Tale* privileges the consultation of women to learn about what women want. The rapist-knight must travel and speak with women about their desires, and take their answers seriously. She also upsets clear notions of good and bad in her description of her five marriages. Alisoun says of her husbands that "thre of hem were goode, and two were bade" (196). However, she loves Jankyn, one of the bad two, best of all her husbands, and does not even bother describing her three good husbands individually, indicating a lack of emotional engagement with those men. The Wife

prefers what is "bad" for her (Jankyn) to what is supposed to be "good" for her (the three old husbands). Both Califia and the Wife challenge the discourses that seek to oppress them through linguistic reclamation and direct questioning of the ability of that discourse to accurately speak about their lives.

The Wife and lesbian sadomasochist writing also engage with and challenge the traditional opposition of the mind and body. Unlike their detractors, both claim the importance and trustworthiness of corporeal knowledge. In clerical discourse, the body, and especially the female body, is a source of temptation and carnal impulse, not a source of knowledge. But Alisoun values knowledge of the body and her physical experiences. For her, bodily experience is placed in direct opposition to the written, clerical authority that disparages her when she begins her Prologue by stating, "Experience, though noon auctoritee/ Were in this world, is right ynogh for me/ To speke of wo that is in mariage" (1-3); however, her capable manipulation of that same clerical authority in her subsequent speech shows that someone who embraces bodily experience need not completely reject more intellectual knowledge. Critics like Robertson, who argue that Alisoun's carnality makes her incapable of understanding textual knowledge, assume that the mind and body are opposites. Califia writes about the importance of the body's truth but does not completely oppose the body and the mind because he believes that corporeal action can be thoughtful. Califia begins "Genderbending: Playing with Roles and Reversals" by describing a sexual encounter with a lover in pornographic detail as a lead in to theorizing about the practice of genderbending and to critique feminist exclusion of transwomen (*Public Sex* 175-182). His frank writing about sexual experiences and arousal displays a commitment to the body and its pleasures, but his consideration of the politics and power structures of modern-day sex, oppression, and feminist thought demonstrates an equal commitment to the work of the mind. In

Califia's writing and the Wife's speech, the mind and body can work together towards gaining pleasure and towards gaining power in the real world.

The Wife's erotic fiction contains elements that may be difficult for some readers to accept, but these stories support the concerns of the Wife's more theoretical engagement with alternative sexual satisfaction. Her prurient descriptions of her marriages, eroticized violence, and a rapist-knight rewarded all serve the larger purpose of opening discussion about issues of gender, sexuality, and power exchange. Some feminists cannot take the Wife's texts' critique of patriarchy seriously because they cannot separate the Wife's sexual life from her arguments about authority, which tells us that sex remains a point of contention for feminists. They cannot conceive of a woman who could be both sexual and knowledgeable and they require sexual acceptability from any person or character who challenges the patriarchy. Even some feminists who consider themselves to be pro-sex may find that the Wife of Bath and/or BDSM present limits to their tolerance. According to Gayle Rubin, sadomasochism is outside of the charmed inner ring of the circle of acceptable sexuality (281-83).[245] Because kinky sexuality comprises so many different desires and practices, almost anyone could find something that triggers revulsion in them, and for some feminists, even the lightest roleplay or power exchange may be too much. Would it be easier to read the Wife of Bath as a source of authority if she did not love a man whose love was "daungerous" to her (514)? Perhaps, but that does not need to be the case. As BDSM shows, sexual desire has room for concepts that would be disturbing in reality, but which can be freeing as part of fantasy. Kinky understanding of the Wife leaves room for the complexity of her relationship to power and to eroticized violence.

[245] Rubin is a co-founder of Samois and perhaps the most vocal academic proponent of acceptance for lesbian sadomasochism.

If the Wife's "entente nys but for to pleye," she plays not only with words but also with power. The Wife may laugh and joke about sex, and flirtatiously refer to her "*bele chose*" (510), or say she has "the beste *quoniam* myghte be" (608), but she also works hard to present her sexual needs as a key component of her self and fights against the silencing of women in clerical discourse. Her energetic defense of women's sexuality and argument for consensual and flexible power dynamics within marriage are supported by the erotic content of her texts, which challenges conceptions of acceptable desires. As the Wife switches between dominant and submissive and eroticizes violence, she advocates for a more flexible understanding of gender and of power relations. She demonstrates in both her *Prologue* and *Tale* that only a flexible approach to these topics will result in happiness for both men and women.

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