

Power, Conformity, and the Male Anatomy; in Pauline Réage's *Story of O*.

In its history the novel, *Story of O*, has been continuously used in the arguments and battles between what is scholarly literature and pornography, or whether or not feminism and sadomasochism can exist together (or, as most work has suggested, is sadomasochism not merely an outright display of misogyny). While there is much to be said about feminism, sadomasochism, and even literary merit when looking at *Story of O*, there has been very little—if not, no—attention given to the idea of masculinity as displayed in this classic erotica novel. As with other areas of critique, there is an ample amount of textual time spent on the men of the novel—as well as their constrained views of masculinity and absence of homosocial desire. In fact, *Story of O* displays that gender roles & their psychoanalytic forms are not defined by the body—but by the attitude of the individual person towards others—if we utilize Jessica Benjamin's theory of rational violence; an expansion of Freud's theory of castration anxiety.

In her article "The Bonds of Love: Rational Violence and Erotic Domination." Jessica Benjamin expands on Freud's theory of castration anxiety by asserting that the difference between how men and women think and act when in sadomasochistic relationships comes from the physical comparison of their and their mother's bodies. In men she explains that the physical difference in female and male anatomy forces the male child to see himself as different from his mother, and therefore place his mother as an "other" and object to which he can perform upon, but cannot be changed by and does not recognize as an equal. Whereas the woman sees herself as unified with her mother, and takes the role of the masses to be more nurturing and less autonomous. Benjamin goes on further to state this difference in thought process as essential to relationships of domination through "the way in which the male experience of differentiation is linked to a form of rationality that pervades our culture and is essential to sadomasochism" (Benjamin 145). In this Benjamin means that rational violence within a sadomasochistic relationship is violence which is acted out in order for a man to maintain his difference, and autonomy from his generally female lover. The idea being, as she states "if I completely control the other, then the other ceases to exist, and if the other completely controls me, I cease to exist" (Benjamin 151). Therefore the violence is acted out of fear of losing one's autonomy and identity—something that must be denied of the lover in order to be achieved and maintained. In Benjamin and Freud's theories this is always a mastery of men over women. While Freud's arguments do form a solid base for beginning the process of analyzing power struggles in sadomasochistic relationships, it is necessary to look beyond the physical anatomy of our subjects. We must argue the clear split between genders that Freud has treated as normal and natural occurring. If we accept that a person's view of themselves as different, and therefore separate from the rest of society—the "others"—then we must be able to accept that physical anatomy or "gender" is only a catalyst for this process of thought, and not the singular defining function. If we take this idea further, using Benjamin's theory of "othering" to gain autonomy and rational violence, and apply it to *Story of O* we will find that the considered "masculine" way of thinking is one that can be held by both men and woman—as is the more "feminine" deemed trait of conformity.

Before we begin our discussion, a brief summary of the plot line of *Story of O* is due, as the book is a little obscure to the American public, and in some cases hard to access. In the novel the protagonist, and narrator, is a young woman, O, who's fiancé, René, pushes her into an occult—like sadomasochistic life style. We follow O as she is beaten and “broken” at Roissy—a castle used as a sort of jumping off point for the lifestyle—back into the real world. She thus starts a life where she views herself as an object existing solely for the sexual pleasure of men—and in this same strain adjusts her lifestyle, clothes mainly, so as to be better accessed by her male partners. These are all concepts she has been taught and Roissy. Once she is back outside in the world she meets René’s step—brother, Sir Stephen, and allows the men to share her between them, sexually. As the story progresses, O is pressured to help and bring her coworker (whom she lusts after), Jacqueline, to Roissy and into this sexually subservient lifestyle. She is also given completely—like a present—to Sir Stephen, by René, and falls in love with him (as well as he with her). The story ends with the reader never knowing whether or not Sir Stephen leaves O, she goes back to Roissy, or he gives her permission to commit suicide—although all of these endings are hinted at in the novel’s final pages.

It is true, that within *Story of O* the men have created an abyss of thought and emotion between themselves. They lack a sense of conformity or ‘male bonding’ what Eve Sedgwick has coined the male homosocial desire. If we follow Benjamin’s theories, this abyss comes from the inability of the men to talk to each other without feeling the need to subjugate or be subjugated—as in their minds there is no sense of equality in relationships. They lack homosocial desire because they believe it to be synonymous with weakness, through the absence of communication with one another they are protecting themselves. This protective abyss is displayed in the way that the men of the novel rarely—if ever talk to each other. They do, however, converse from time to time and when they do the subject is either a) about a woman or b) through the presence of woman. This using a woman, a person already subjected and objectified by both men, as a means of conversation allows the men to speak on a parallel or equal level of power. In fact, the way in which the men hold relationships with each other falls in to that of Sedgwick’s graphic schema of erotic triangles. She states in her work *Between Men* that erotic triangles formed between two men invested in the love of the same woman, create a bond between the two rival men. As she states this bond is “as intense and potent as the bond that links either of the rivals to the beloved” (Sedgwick 21). In this way, it is through the shared love of one woman that men are able to form a sort of shared love between each other—or at least a footing for a relationship. Likewise, in these conversations the men are both dominant powers who, by objectifying the same subject are not threatening each other’s autonomy (or having their own autonomy threatened).

An example of this is Roissy; The isolated mansion used as a place to introduce and “break” women into a subservient role; what the men of the book consider their “natural state”. At Roissy the men do little to communicate with each other, but when a woman is brought into the room they are apt to address her body as a means of communication with another man—or many men. O’s first appearance at Roissy highlights this; as she is lead into a room “where four men were having coffee” (Reage 9) and yet none of these men are talking to each other. They are engaging in what would seem a typically act for small talk, but the conversation is not present. Instead the first time even one of the men dares to speak

up is to address a [unnamed] woman, about O: "Turn her around so we can see the breasts and the belly" (Reage 9). This sparks a conversation between the men; however it is one that directly revolves around O and René's treatment of her. The men appear to have no grounds of which they can communicate with each other, except through the domination of a third party—a "lesser entity" or Benjamin's concept of an "other". There is nothing substantial in this conversation—nothing the men learn of each other except how they are proving themselves to be a man. That is, how they are subjugating another person to their will. As the novel continues, the men's interaction with each other remains stagnant. Even in the very last scene we see of two men interacting, Sir Stephen and the Commander, the men need a woman to be present as an object of conversation (Reage 188-190). There is no progression—no man who learns that he can hold a relationship with his fellow man without the need for a subjugated party.

In this same strain, we see that there is the ability for a man to lose his autonomy through his interactions with another man—and this is also one of the most forefront examples of the power struggle not being related to the physiological anatomy of the characters but rather to the way in which they view the world—be it with autonomy or homosocial desire. The novel provides us with two prominent male figures, Sir Stephen and René. They are both considered O's lover and master, and for a short while it seems as if they are equals. Both command and utilize O in the way they want, and when conversing with each other make sure that O is present to be the object of discussion; as seen on pages 66-77, 81, and 89. The use of her presence as a device enabling conversation is even highlighted by the narrator of the book, O herself, as she realizes the relationship she is providing for her Fiancé René and his step-Brother Stephen to have. "O realized that through the medium of her body, shared between them, they attained something more mysterious, and perhaps more acute, more intense than amorous communion" (Reage 102). O understands that in some way it is only through her—and through her body as a physical object that René and Sir Stephen are able to find a common ground through which to converse—where neither man risks to greatly his own autonomy as a person. However it is through their ménage a trois like relationship that René does in fact lose his autonomy to that of Sir Stephen's. O comments, shortly before evaluating her body as a means of communication, that "Everything would probably have been much simpler if Sir Stephen had liked boys," (Reage 102) and that René—whom is her fiancé, and has been up until the introduction of Sir Stephen a prominent masculine figure—"would have readily granted to Sir Stephen both the slightest and the most demanding of his requests" (Reage 102). O here recognizes the complete servitude René has developed towards the older man, and she even goes on to liken his usefulness to Sir Stephen as the same as hers. If O, the subjugated, is merely a tool to be used for sexual purposes—then saying that René would allow Sir Stephen to possess his body in the same way is at once showing René at the same level of subjugation. He is as much an object to Sir Stephen, as O is, or the couch for that matter.

Of course, this subjugation could be seen as merely a result of two men becoming quite intimate and one having to lose their autonomy to the others—if not for the from the very start of their relationship we have seen these glimpses of René as willingly handing over his autonomy to Sir Stephen's use. The purest example of this is the sharing of O. If O as an object is indicative of René's ability to subjugate and find autonomy—then sharing that, or rather sharing in general is indicative of conformity. Conformity here is a sign of homosocial desire. René seeks out Sir Stephen in order to share, and to find a sort of

camaraderie that is not necessarily accepted into the masculine ideal displayed. If men are to objectify others, and become singular in their autonomy, then to want to share in the ways of brotherhood or camaraderie is to willingly lose that autonomy—find conformity, be homosocial, be weak. Despite René's physiological anatomy, and the patriarchal view of masculine as powerful, he is not a strong power holding character. From the very start, with Roissy he has sought out a sense of conformity or unity with his fellow brethren. He made it known to O when he first brings her to Roissy that “it was he who possessed and enjoyed her through those into whose hands she had been given, by the simple fact that he had given her to them … as they were so many reflections of him” (Reage 31). René's view of their arrangement has his own identity not standing obstinately and singularly as her master—but that he is rather a piece of every man who dominates O. René reveals his weakness in the fact that he does not look for his own dominance of O, but rather he delights in his conformity with the other men whom will dominant her—almost as if through this he too is dominated and subjugated in the same way.

As René is shown as a ‘feminine ideal’ embodied in a man, we too can look to the female figures in order to find so-called masculine traits. In direct reverse of René's character we are given the character of Anne-Marie who by physical anatomy is a woman (and therefore according to Freud's argument would be just as much an object as O) yet she holds considerable power with her male counterparts, and even is subjected to the same abyss of connection and need for an “other” to communicate with men. A factor that Benjamin's theory of rational violence is tantamount with power in sadomasochistic relationships. Anne-Marie is not a woman who is used as a means of conversation or sexual pleasure—in fact she herself is not treated like the other women. When we are first introduced to her, she carries out a conversation with Sir Stephen, a conversation that in the same vein of men protecting their autonomy is purely about O as an object (Reage 138-141). In this we see that she is subjected to the same erotic triangle and rivalry bond as the men of the novel. Sir Stephen treats Anne-Marie with the same level of fear and respect that is later given to the Commander on pages 188-190. This action, in itself is inexplicable if we purely follow the argument of power as only provided by physiological anatomy. However, it is not just the men's treatment of Anne-Marie that deems her a powerful character. It is also her treatment of the other women in the novel. While there are plenty of women in the novel, they are all attribute to a specific man as their Master—in fact, even René appears to have a Master in his self-objectification. For Anne-Marie there is no master, because rather than be an object to be bent to another's will, she is the will. We see this when she makes the claim “Claire belongs to me,” (Reage 158) and surprises O with the revelation that women too can take Mastery over other women. This little fact strengthens the fact that Anne-Marie is not an example of the ‘feminine ideal’, she is not an object. She is a power holder, despite the fact that she is not a male character.

While O primarily exhibits the ‘feminine ideal’ of conformity and subjugation, we are given glimpses to this not being all the she ever was. In fact, by looking at O's character before Roissy—shown to us in glimpses of memories or anecdotes—we see a woman who embodies much more a power hungry nature. O reveals to us, her “manifest masculinity” when interacting with woman at the same time that she denies this as her true nature.

"It's true that when she was twenty she had caught herself courting the prettiest of her girlfriends by doffing her beret, by standing aside to let her pass, and by offering a hand to help her out of a taxi. In the same vein, she would not tolerate not paying whenever they had tea together in some pastry shop. She would kiss her hand and, if she had a chance, her mouth, if possible in the street. But these were so many affections she paraded for the sake of scandal, displayed much more from childishness than from conviction. On the other hand, her penchant for the sweetness of sweetly made-up lips yielding beneath her own, for the porcelain or pearly sparkle of eyes half-closed in the half-light of couches at five in the afternoon, when the curtains are drawn and the lamp on the fireplace mantel lighted, for the voices that say: "again, oh please, again...", for the marine odor clinging to her fingers: this was a real, deeply rooted taste. And she also enjoyed the pursuit just as much. Probably not the pursuit itself, however amusing or fascinating it might be, but for the complete sense of freedom she experienced in the act of hunting. She, and she alone, set the rules and directed the proceedings (something she never did with men, or only in a most oblique manner). She initiated the discussions, and set the rendezvous, the kisses came from her too" (Reage 96)

Here O confesses her own hunger for power, the thrill she receives from being the singular and autonomous entity that guides a relationship to their rules. In the same breath, she tries to deny that this is her true nature—stating that it was merely “for the sake of scandal” before revealing even more that her homosocial desire is not the only ideal she carries and that she is just as perfectly capable of the masculine ideal of autonomy. We are given a better look at this dual nature when O helps her lovers/masters begin to recruit Jacqueline for Roissy. She starts to take on a masculine persona with them, much in the same way René is masking his, where she gains autonomy by entering into the rivalry leg of an erotic triangle. She achieves this by talking with the men about Jacqueline and treating her as an object (Reage 119, 133). However, despite O’s past, and her barest glimpses of masculinity with Jacqueline, O remains a weak character. We see this in how she dresses, we are told of her wardrobe before Roissy being that “she had always been a conservative dresser, the way girls do whose work resembles that of men,” but afterwards she resorts to a different set of clothes, “Sweaters worn right next to the skin, which gently molded the contours of the breasts ... pleated skirts so prone to swirling when she turned: O wore them so often it was a little as though she formed a discreet uniform.” And this change in wardrobe is even considered “very little-girl-like,” by the other woman (Reage 60). It’s a show of her failed autonomy, and the strong connection she keeps to her status as object and conformity of homosocial relationships rather than the loneliness of autonomy and power.

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