

Masculinity Divided from Male Anatomy; a close look at Pauline Réage's *Story of O*.

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My paper serves to expand on two prominent literary theories, Jessica Benjamin's Theory of Rational Violence and Erotic Domination and Eve Sedgwick's theory of Erotic triangles, through the analysis of masculine and feminine ideals displayed in characters within the 1950's BDSM Erotica *Histoire D'O*, or *Story of O* as it's known in English. In order to do this I intend to give you a short synopsis of the book for those who may not be familiar with it and a brief overview of both literary theories, before I delve into the analysis of character's Masculine and Feminine attributes.

Story of O is said to be the first BDSM erotica written by a woman. It is also a novel in which very little has been written about from a literary perspective. In fact, most of the novel's literary acknowledgement is either arguments about whether or not it has any literary merit, or feminist critique of its misogynistic themes and the mistreatment of woman in the novel. While both are certainly valid and useful conversations on the subject, I feel that much more can be said about the book if we take a moment to look past its existence as an erotica novel and the taboo surrounding this genre, and look at the misogyny in the book as a symptom of time, and the book's masculinity.

As I have said, I will give a brief summary of the plot line of *Story of O*. Since the book itself is a little obscure to the American public. In the novel the protagonist, a young woman named O, is taken into an occult-like sadomasochistic lifestyle by her fiancé, René. We follow O as she is beaten and "broken" at the mansion Roissy and then thrust back into the real world. Where she starts a new life viewing herself as an object existing solely for the sexual pleasure of men. Once back in the world outside Roissy, O meets René's step-brother, Sir Stephen, and allows the two men to share her between them, sexually. As the story progresses, O is given completely—like a present—to Sir Stephen, by René, and falls in love with him (as well as he with her we are lead to believe). She later is shown to a man held in high esteem by both René and Sir Stephen, and known only as the Commander. 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.

With that, I will move on to discussing the two literary theories I will be combining and expanding. These are Jessica Benjamin's Theory of Rational Violence and Erotic Domination and Eve Sedgwick's Erotic triangles.

First Jessica Benjamin's Theory of Rational Violence and Erotic Domination, which itself is an expansion on the literary view of Freud's Castration Anxiety. Freud's theory states that it is the difference of sexual attributes or genitalia that lead a child to feel a separation from or closeness to their mother. In this case the idea that because a man is born with a penis and not a vagina as his mother has, he therefore sees himself as separate from and entirely different than his mother. This differentiation causes the man to begin to see his mother as an "other", an object to which he can perform upon, but cannot be changed by and does not recognize as an equal. An idea that in the masculine is spread to how the man views all people. Whereas the woman born with a vagina like her mother does not feel this separation and instead sees herself as unified with her mother, and with other woman, and even expanding with all people she meets. With Freud's theory as a base, Jessica Benjamin then asserts that this physical comparison of their and their mother's bodies is what leads to the difference between how men and women think and act when in sadomasochistic relationships. Thus relying on the idea, and social prevalence, of men taking sadistic and/or dominant roles while women take masochistic and/or submissive roles. Benjamin states this difference in thought process is essential to relationships of domination through QUOTE 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 ENDQUOTE (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 QUOTE if I completely control the other, then the other ceases to exist, and if the other completely controls me, I cease to exist ENDQUOTE (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.

The second theory I wish to utilize and expand on is Eve Sedgwick's idea of Erotica Triangles and in addition Male homosocial desire. In Sedgwick's theories she coins the term male homosocial desire to describe the desire of men to converse and bond with other men in terms of friendship and/or family relations. The desire Sedgwick acknowledges is stopped or blocked by Benjamin's concept of men feeling differentiated from others, and therefore the men have an inability 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. Sedgwick's erotic triangle is a solution to this dilemma. Sedgwick states in her work *Between Men* that erotic triangles are formed between two men invested in the love of the same woman, and create a bond between the two rival men. As she states this bond is QUOTE as intense and potent as the bond that links either of the rivals to the beloved ENDQUOTE (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, looking through Benjamin's theories on power in sadomasochistic relationships, 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).

Given these two explanations, I will now take a look at the actual text of *Story of O* and the interactions that confirm these two theories, but also two characters who show that it is masculinization and feminization and not genitalia that calls for the display of these two theories.

An example of this violent and dominance based erotic triangle is Roissy; the isolated mansion used as a place to introduce and "break" women into a subservient role. 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 QUOTE where four men were having coffee ENDQUOTE (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 an [unnamed] woman, about O: QUOTE Turn her around so we can see the breasts and the belly ENDQUOTE (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.

Following this we see that there is the ability for a man to lose his autonomy through his interactions with another man, if not give it up entirely. 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. The use of her presence as a device enabling conversation is even highlighted by O herself as she realizes the relationship she is providing for her Fiancé René and his step-Brother Stephen to have. QUOTE 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 ENDQUOTE (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 too greatly his own autonomy as a person. However it is through their ménage à trois like relationship that René does in fact lose or give up his autonomy to that of Sir Stephen's. O comments, shortly before evaluating her body as a means of communication, that QUOTE Everything would probably have been much simpler if Sir Stephen had liked boys, ENDQUOTE (Reage 102) and that René QUOTE would have readily granted to Sir Stephen both the slightest and the most demanding of his requests ENDQUOTE (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.

René is the first of two characters that introduce the idea that it is not anatomy that decides if a character is one who favors autonomy or homosocial desire, but the character's own amount of masculinity or femininity. Rather than seeing René's loss of autonomy as a loss, we can see it as a present. Something he has gifted Sir Stephen. From the very start of their relationship we have seen René 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 physical anatomy, and the patriarchal view of masculine as power holders in BDSM relationships, he is not a strong example of dominant partner. Rather René is more likely a character that can switch between dominant and subservient roles. 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 QUOTE 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 ENDQUOTE (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 subservience 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.

René is the 'feminine ideal' embodied in a man, but he does not stand alone in this novel. The second character I wish to look at critically is one of the woman in the novel who embodies the 'masculine ideal' and communicates through this violent and dominance based erotic triangle as the men of the novel do. The character of Anne-Marie who by physical anatomy is a woman holds considerable dominance over the other woman of the novel, and converses with the men as equals. In that she is subjected to the same fear of homosocial desire and need for an "other" to communicate with the men. Despite Freud and Benjamin's theories which would argue that given her physical anatomy she would feel a sense of a conformity with other woman and be just as much an object of subservience and subjugation as O. 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 by the men or woman of the novel. 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. In this we see that she interacts in the same erotic triangle and rivalry bond as the men of the novel. In addition Sir Stephen treats Anne-Marie with the same level of fear and respect that is later given to the Commander. This action, in itself is inexplicable if we only look at Anne-Marie's physical anatomy. It is not just that Anne-Marie's relations with the men of the novel fit into the erotic triangle and mean to protect autonomy. She also displays herself as being able to dominate and take Mastery over others. While there are plenty of women in the novel, they are all attributed 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 her most clearly as a dominating force when she makes the claim QUOTE Claire belongs to me, ENDQUOTE (Reage 158) and surprises O with the revelation that women too can take Mastery over other women. Given this Anne-Marie displays the opposite attribute of Rene. She is a female who embodies masculine power in BDSM relationships and holds no feminine or submissive traits or roles.

Given these two characters, Rene and Anne-Marie, we see that the idea of a character being masculine is not solely attached to a character being male. The same can be said for a character being feminine. Both Rene and Anne-Marie display characteristics that do not align with their physical anatomy, Freud's theory of castration anxiety, or Benjamin's theory of a dichotomized role within sadomasochistic relationships. Therefore it can be said that though these theories are displayed, there is

a chance for characters to overcome or ignore their physical anatomy in favor of displaying the nature of the opposite sex. Making masculinity and femininity and what we would see as their sadomasochistic roles of dominant and submissive more flexible attributes rather than hard line roles a character is cast into based on the physical anatomy they're given at birth.

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