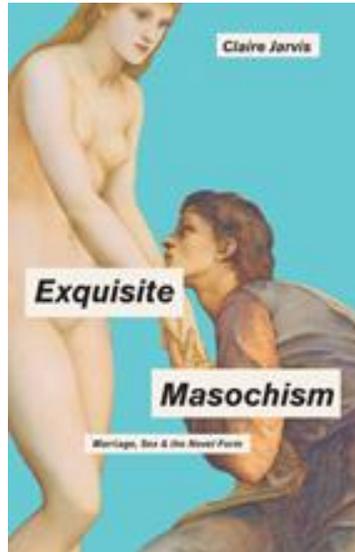


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**“Powerful Women and Submissive Men”**

[\*Exquisite Masochism: Marriage, Sex & the Novel Form\*](#). Claire Jarvis. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2016. 201 pp.

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<1>Claire Jarvis’s sharp and complex study of sex and the novel form opens with a provocative question: ‘How do respectable novelists describe sex and still maintain a decent distance from pornography?’ (vii). The answer, which most readers can readily supply and which Jarvis seeks to undermine, is through either discreet plot implications (the appearance of a child after marriage, say) or through even more discreet metaphors (usually storms, waves, or flowers blooming). Jarvis, however, brings to light another, more formal method which she describes as ‘exquisite masochism,’ or ‘a decadent, descriptive scene of sexual refusal’ (vii). ‘Withholding sex, in the Victorian novel,’ Jarvis argues, ‘is a perverse way of having it’ (viii).

<2>Jarvis’s definition of exquisite masochism is carefully constructed yet raises questions and begs for further study. Indicating her thorough understanding of theories of sadomasochism which have come before her (from Freud through Foucault to contemporary Queer Theory) Jarvis steers away from psychoanalytical or socio-historical readings of sadomasochism. Instead she directs her energies toward a formal understanding of the portrayals and uses of sadomasochistic relationships within literature, which frequently act as ‘useful correlatives to more conventional contractual relationships, such as marriages’ (13). One of the few

weaknesses of Jarvis's work is that much of the clarity and persuasiveness of her argument — and her foresight in anticipating and addressing counterarguments — comes in her conclusion. Questions which prickle the reader over the course of the book are brilliantly and fully answered, although those answers would be better placed at the front instead of at the end of the book.

<3>Jarvis solely examines female sadist characters who negotiate the extent of their power with male masochist partners. The decision to report exclusively on a female-sadist/male-masochist dyad is necessary to the parameters she sets out in her introduction. In particular, Jarvis's text breaks down the conventional romances seen in the marriage plot, which 'has a privileged status in the history of the novel,' (19) by gravitating toward texts in which women reject the fallible security of a marriage contract in favour of the power and freedom of a constantly renegotiated agreement. As with any academic text, the boundaries of one's argument must necessarily be limiting and of course Jarvis could not be expected to address all variations of sadomasochism seen in literature of the long nineteenth century. However, a companion piece to *Exquisite Masochism* would be very welcome and eagerly awaited, as Jarvis's argument would no doubt find equally fertile and complex ground in examining male-sadist/female-masochist (or, indeed, same sex sadistic and masochistic relationships) and their complication of the nineteenth-century marriage plot.

<4>There are three main conditions to classifying the (as Jarvis admits) often amorphous scene of 'exquisite masochism'. The first part of a scene's classification is, of course, the very thing which makes that classification so vague: a lack of genital sex, implied or overt. Lest the reader infer that she means to include everything from the daily rambles of the Bennet sisters, to Miss Havisham's deathbed scene, to Marlowe's steamboat journey into the Congo under the banner of 'exquisite masochism', Jarvis expounds that a lack of genital sex must be accompanied by a specifically sexual dispersal of 'physicality throughout the scene, minimizing sex's risk while accentuating its thrill' (ix); by way of example, she asks us to consider 'characters as varied in their [romantic] powers as the frightening, jilted Miss Wade in *Little Dorrit*, the attractive but mercenary, Rosamond Vincy in *Middlemarch*, and the voracious Lucy Westerna in *Dracula*' (3). In short, 'exquisite masochism' needs sexual tension, temptation, and delayed gratification or outright rejection in which desire is also 'painful and worrying' (viii). The second condition to be met in classifying these scenes is, as previously explored, the negotiated relationship between a powerful woman and submissive man — roles which 'challenge prevailing sexual norms' (3). And the third condition is that the scene (in most instances) be filled with material objects described in 'exquisite' terms to add to the sensory thrill (ix).

<5>Working sharply against the conventional marriage plot, its intrinsic and systematic subjection of women, and its frequent erasure of visible and physical eroticism, Jarvis makes a particularly savvy selection of primary texts. Namely, her texts of choice are indisputably 'canonical' realist literature known in part for their unconventional marriage plots: the haunting marriage-of-the-soul between Heathcliff and Cathy in *Wuthering Heights* (1847); the many agonisingly vacillating courtships in Anthony Trollope's Palliser series (1864-79) and *The Way We Live Now* (1875); the deterioration of Sue Bridehead and Jude Fawley's adulterous

common-law marriage in *Jude the Obscure* (1895); and the polyamorous marriage amongst the Brangwen sisters and their suitors in D.H. Lawrence's *Women in Love* (1920). Jarvis undermines the cultural status of marriage plots not only by examining texts with undeniably strange portrayals of the convention, but also by choosing to look only at characters in those novels 'on the periphery of marriage — engagement, adultery, and widowhood' (vii). The sadomasochism seen in these novels not only emphasizes the '[marriage] contract's failure to secure relationships, the need for compatibility between partners' sexual desires, and the conflict between the paired Victorian ideals of isolating, dyadic marriage and public, reproductive marriage,' (16) but also 'crucially exposes the way negotiable sexual debate is key to ongoing romantic attachment' (17).

<6>The chapter on *Wuthering Heights* illuminates 'the novel's central pairing as one of frozen intensity' (26) and gives Jarvis a very strong position from which to delve into her argument that exquisite masochism requires stasis, that inaction is in itself a form of action. And, indeed, *Wuthering Heights* provides a valuable qualification in Jarvis's book — that sadism and marriage, or 'productive' contractual relationships, are not mutually exclusive. It is rather the perpetually needed sadomasochistic *negotiation* between partners that is negated by marriage, rendering marriage an institution that provides no true protection or security over women's agency and socio-sexual desires whatsoever.

<7>In her next chapter, Jarvis recasts Trollope's conservative portrayals of marriage as unwittingly subversive. Writing that marital engagement 'in Trollope, is a necessarily insecure state,' Jarvis argues that such 'insecurity does not simply mean that marriageable women must maintain their holds on prospective suitors. It also allows them the flexibility of committing to a sexualized relationship without incurring the finalizing control of marriage' (57). And in what is truly a lovely interpretation of Trollope, Jarvis posits that Trollope's banishment of powerful, masochistic women into off-screen spaces may certainly be read as a punishment for their perversity, but may also be read as their escape into a space away from the reader's gaze, where their sexual desires may be expressed with full freedom (118).

<8>*Jude the Obscure* is read in the masochistic stasis of lingering denouement, of action falling away and resolving itself with the love interests torturously and irrevocably apart. Jarvis's third chapter is particularly rich and interesting in that it captures the point *after* 'productive' genital sex, in which Sue Bridehead attempts and fails to reclaim, in her later non-sexual period with Jude, the sexual tension that existed in their earlier non-sexual period. It is not surprising, given the multiple murders and suicide of the very products of their pseudo-marriage in their pseudo-marital home, that the domestic marital sphere is tinged with decay and a lack of negotiation. Jarvis asks, 'can anything of affection live beyond such cataclysmic, damning death?' (91).

<9>Finally come Lawrence's novels, which might initially strike the reader as Modernist anomalies in an otherwise Victorianist study; it becomes swiftly apparent that the Victorian literary need for 'exquisite masochism' casts a long shadow, tinging works that are significantly more open to and explicit in a variety of sexual experiences in a variety of social and romantic conditions. 'The Lawrentian sexual revolution hinges on naming parts and actions but not

exactly acts. (Things enter other things, body parts get named, and, through all of this, obscenity gains traction. But Lawrence never says, "This scene is a scene of anal sex.")' (152). Jarvis's last chapter creates an astute and much-needed connection between these two periods which are so often placed as cultural binaries. In complicating and enriching conversations about sexuality, marriage, power structures, and the dichotomy between pleasure and pain, Jarvis's book ultimately helps to problematize and bridge the chasm between literary periods and movements.