

From Black Lace to Shades of Grey: The Interpellation of the 'Female Subject' into Erotic Discourse

SIMON HARDY

In the history of western literature the production and consumption of texts mediating erotic discourse was once a masculine prerogative. Yet a notable feature of the male tradition of pornographic writing has been the common use of a female narrative voice. In this sense a 'female subject' who creates and enjoys erotica, has long been anticipated. Over the last twenty years there have been many works of erotic fiction and memoirs published that really are written by women. This has rightly been seen as in itself a sign of women's empowerment, but it raises the question of whether female authors are producing new forms of erotica or simply assimilating the given patterns of erotic discourse established by the centuries-old tradition of male writers, often masquerading as female narrators. In theoretical terms we might ask whether female writers and readers are simply interpellated into the already established erotic discourse or whether the new forms of erotic fiction provide space for the disruption or reworking of that discourse.

In practice this question can only be approached through a comparison of the continuities and divergences of selected texts drawn from the history of pornography and recent female-authored material, and it must be acknowledged right from the outset that the selection of other examples might well lead to different conclusions. After briefly setting out some relevant aspects of the tradition of male authored pornographic literature this paper considers contemporary examples of erotic fiction by women that have achieved mass market circulation; ranging from the self-consciously pioneering Black Lace imprint to the 'erotic romances' of such authors as E.L. James and Sylvia Day. A number of scholars (Downing, 2013; Harrison and Holm, 2013; Al-Mahadin, 2013; Nilson, 2013) have already highlighted the resonance of romantic fiction in E.L. James' *Fifty Shades* trilogy, yet its debt

to written pornography has received less attention. In fact, E.L. James' work can be seen as perfecting the generic hybridisation of romance with pornography, initiated by Black Lace, but doing so in a way that dissolves the radical potential of women's erotic writing, domesticating the play of erotic power dynamics in conformity with hetero-normative orthodoxy.

Pornography as a Masculine Literary Tradition

Since there is no universally accepted definition of 'pornography' it is important to say that the term will be used here to refer to sexually explicit material that can be said to serve the primary purpose of sexual pleasure and arousal. Although the term was not widely used in this way until the late nineteenth century, the definition can be applied retrospectively to literary texts stretching back at least as far as John Cleland's germinal novel *Memoirs of a Woman of Pleasure*. No doubt when Cleland first published *Fanny Hill*, as it soon became known, in 1748 he had other motives for dissociating his name from a work he had written for cash and immediately wished 'buried and forgot' (Foxon, 1965, p.54); yet the serendipitous verisimilitude of implied female authorship must be seen alongside a series of quite deliberate stylistic devices that help to make *Fanny Hill* the first really influential 'pornographic' prose work in the English language. These devices include the basic form of the epistolary novel and the use of first person, present tense narration, which give Fanny's account both immediacy and realism. But it is above all the coupling of these contemporaneous literary innovations to the skilful assumption of a female narrative voice that makes Cleland's novel function effectively as pornography.

Yet, for all its incipient modernism *Fanny Hill* also reflected an archaic view, which prevailed into the mid-eighteenth century, of the bodies and appetites of women as coterminous with those of men, although women were seen as less capable of exercising reason and self-control. Thus Fanny is represented as becoming aroused by visual stimuli, readily masturbating, and as ejaculating in climaxes that synchronise perfectly those of her male partners. Cleland's representation differed markedly from the dominant understanding of female sexuality which subsequently developed in the nineteenth century.

In the Victorian age medical and moral authorities conceived male and female sexual bodies as incommensurably opposite, and women as possessing a fundamentally different, obscure and limited sexuality (Laqueur, 1992). In this context the adoption of Cleland's descriptive formulas in the proliferation of anonymous, though certainly still male-authored, pornographic writing that occurred in the nineteenth century took on a new significance. For example, the pornographic trope of female sexual incontinence, in such works as *The Lustful Turk* (1828) and *The Pearl* (1879-80), expressed a conscious dissidence from bourgeois moral hegemony. Indeed, the fondly held belief in the passionless woman was a particular target of these subversive narratives, in which the virtue of chaste, upper-class female characters would rapidly dissolve into a torrent of incontinent desire and orgasmic ejaculation. Here then, the still common use of female narration took on the role of indicting the ideal of pure womanhood.

A further element that seems to have become conventional to pornographic writing in the nineteenth century is that the desire to which the female voice attests is often submissive, in the sense that chastity is overcome and pleasure attained through the agency of male sexual conquest or even rape. While the origins of the pornographic trope of female sexual submission are complex and may even pre-date the Marquis de Sade, we must recognise it as a historically specific construction rather than an expression of elemental truth. It is simply not present in *Fanny Hill*. Yet today female submission remains a common theme of erotic writing, which we will encounter repeatedly in this discussion of modern erotic literature. In short, Cleland's writing represented men and women as equally lascivious. Later, when 'respectable' Victorian authorities established the notion of the passionless female, dissident pornographers opposed it by invoking the earlier tradition of female incontinence, but now with a new element; that this underlying female wantonness had to be brought forth as the submissive response to male sexual initiative.

Moreover, whilst it is impossible to trace adequately the development of the genre here, it is clear that by the turn of the twentieth century pornographic writing had acquired certain quite common features: it was written by men of the upper and middle classes, who often assumed a female voice in order to make what they said about women's sexuality – namely, that women are essentially compliant and submissive – more convincing and therefore presumably more gratifying to their male readers. It was of course also at this very

time that, in the rise of vernacular photography and especially in the moving image, pornography found its defining medium. As Linda Williams (1999) has argued, visual documentation became in the twentieth century the ultimate means of recording the 'truth' of human sexuality. Yet, while the visual medium has largely diverted the attention of the male audience it has its own inherent limitations, especially its tendency to make the image occlude narrative and psychological complexity. Even after the coming of film, therefore, the written form has remained an important vehicle for erotic expression, and one that has increasingly been colonised by women as readers and as writers.

Even so, the legacy of male erotic writing would not prove easy to efface. As Anais Nin said of her 'beginning efforts' in the 1940s:

'I realised that for centuries we had had only one model for this literary genre – the writing of men. I was really conscious of a difference between the masculine and feminine treatment of sexual experience ... I had a feeling that Pandora's box contained the mysteries of a woman's sensuality, so different from man's and for which man's language was inadequate.' (Nin, 1978, p.14)

Concocting material from stories she had heard and her own inventions, Nin presented them as the diary of a woman and thus adopted the familiar realist techniques as well as a 'style' derived from reading men's works. Moreover, while Nin felt that her own voice had not been 'completely suppressed' and that she had often been intuitively using 'a woman's language,' there is something in the equivocation of this claim that itself seems to compound the sense that an 'authentic' female sexuality was somehow inexpressible.

In Paris during the 1950s two *avant-garde* pornographic novels *Histoire d'O* (Réage, 1954) and *L'Image* (de Berg, 1956) were published that featured women as sexually submissive and were written by women. The former was published with the pseudonym Pauline Réage and the identity of the author remained a matter of controversy for the next forty years with many commentators refusing to believe it could have been created by a woman. Ironically the true author, Dominique Aury, had written it precisely in response to the chauvinistic remark that a woman would be incapable of writing an erotic novel. *L'Image* was published under the masculine pseudonym Jean de Berg in accord with the

male narrative voice, but actually written by Catherine Robbe-Grillet. What these examples seem to suggest is that while prevailing cultural attitudes continued to perceive women as essentially incapable of reproducing and manipulating the pornographic discourse of erotic power dynamics they quite evidently could do so. Conversely female writing did not automatically transform the content of eroticism in some intrinsically radical way, except perhaps in the sense that Angela Carter (1978) proposed, that by extending pornographic writing into the realms of Sadeian excess the implicit dynamics of heterosexuality are exposed to view. In any event, by this time it should have already been clear that the physiological sex of the author is irrelevant to the interpellation of the subject into the given structures of meaning, and yet the idea that female authorship spontaneously produces a fundamentally distinctive 'female' erotic language has stubbornly persisted.

Black Lace: Women Writing Sub/Dom Scenarios

When the Black Lace imprint first appeared in 1993 it could almost be regarded as putting into practice an experimental hypothesis arising from contemporary feminist debates over pornography and censorship. Critics of pornography (Dworkin, 1981; Griffin, 1981; Kappeler, 1986) had focused attention on a power dichotomy of male dominance and female submission that they perceived to be the essence of the genre in all its forms. However, other feminists (Assiter and Carol, 1993; Gibson and Gibson, 1993; Segal and McIntosh, 1992) vigorously disputed the claim that pornography was a singular entity that proselytised male supremacy or was necessarily antithetical to women's interests. From this point of view erotic representation was just another domain in which women needed to challenge male, as well as hetero-normative, prerogatives; while, in so far as much mainstream heterosexual pornography could justifiably be regarded as sexist, its content could be changed by female writers and film directors acquiring greater freedom of expression in this field. To many feminists this appeared a more positive alternative to the failed and divisive strategy of censorship that had been pursued by anti-porn campaigners.

In any event Black Lace, with its tag line of 'erotic fiction by women and for women,' seemed to realise the goal of empowering female erotic expression and exploration.

Previous analyses of Black Lace have critically evaluated the claims of its editorial discourse to novelty and female empowerment, whilst highlighting the generic relation of its content to romantic fiction (Sonnet, 1999) and written pornography (Hardy, 2001). This discourse, as articulated by the editor Kerri Sharp (1999), rested on three main tenets: female authorship, entitlement to pleasure, and liberation through erotica. Implicit in all three is a notion of a sovereign female subject: one who, as an author, expresses an essential female eroticism, and who, in consuming explicit material, both fulfils her right to pleasure and liberates her native erotic psyche from the tiresome fetters of social repression.

In practice, the style and content of Black Lace fictions varied considerably. Some of the earlier novels drew heavily on the conventions of romantic fiction. For instance, Olivia Christie's *Dance of Obsession* (1996) offers an extended narrative of some two hundred and fifty pages of which only about 10% consists of sexual description. The story, set in 1930s Paris, concerns the erotic pursuit of the heroine Georgia by a younger man. The reader is clearly invited to identify with Georgia, while the external third-person narration facilitates a preoccupation with her appearance, as she gazes into mirrors or selects clothing for each occasion. The retro setting gives licence to the use of highly conventional gender codes. Much attention is also given to the 'opulence' and 'sumptuousness' of the material surroundings. In short, in texts such as this the explicit depiction of sexual scenes appeared to be only one, and not necessarily the primary, element of the *mise en scène*.

Other Black Lace fictions, especially as the imprint developed, were much more fully dedicated to sexual action. It is important to acknowledge the variations among these texts, both in terms of the often ambiguous ways in which the reader is invited to identify with characters, and the extent to which the power dynamics within the sexual scenes depicted conform to the model of male dominance and female submission. Yet many of them do seem to follow pornographic conventions, such as ithyphallic description: giving emphasis to the size of the penis, and connoting masculine power and virility. There is also the standard lexicon of obscene terminology ('fuck,' 'cock and 'cunt'); and frequent scenes of female submission to spanking, humiliation and verbal abuse ('slut,' 'bitch' and 'whore'). A single short extract must here suffice for illustration. It is from Zoe le Verdier's short story *A Dangerous Addiction*, which despite the Sadeian allusion has a contemporary setting:

‘... the Marquis carried on where Jonny had left off. The whip screamed through the sticky air and landed across her shoulders. Her eyes and mouth jerked wide open; her expression a frozen moment of fear. “Fuck her, Johnny,” the Marquis said. “She wants this. She deserves this.” Again, the whip. Again, the jolt of every muscle in her body. Johnny fucked her faster, forcing deeper.’ (Le Verdier, 1999, p.228)-

This is but one example, yet by comparing a sufficient series of these texts a certain formula emerges; one that invokes a feminist narrative of empowerment whilst also having strong resonances with the male-authored pornography referred to previously. Black Lace fictions are stories of female sexual discovery, of women becoming active, pleasure seeking subjects. However, the goal of pleasure is usually attained only when the woman’s social self finally yields to the natural lust residing in her body, as it responds to the agency of male sexual conquest. Female liberation is attained only in the act of submission.

The impression that much, if not most, Black Lace material presents submissive scenarios to its audience is reinforced, albeit in a rather circular way, by *The Black Lace Book of Women’s Sexual Fantasies* (Sharp, 1999). This features one hundred and eighteen detailed fantasy scenarios sent in by female readers aged seventeen to sixty-six: of these, 49% cast the author herself, or some other woman with whom she clearly identified, in an explicitly submissive role and a further 25% in an implicitly or mildly submissive role, while 21% appeared to have no particular power dynamics, and just 5% put the woman in what could be seen as a dominant role. It is interesting to note that the publisher has carelessly classified this text as non-fiction, thus implying that when women write down their sexual fantasies rather than being recognised as the creative *fiction* of an authorial subject the product is treated as a *non-fictional* object, offered up for precisely the kind of pseudo-scientific scrutiny with which pornography has always regarded that thing called ‘female sexuality.’

By the turn of the millennium Black Lace had sold over three million books (Stoddart, 2000). This success, however, seemed to present something of a paradox. After the limited success of visual formats such as ‘couples films’ and ‘beefcake’ magazines the traditional feminine forms of the novel and short story had provided a medium through which women now produced and consumed sexually explicit material on a newly increased scale. Yet at

the same time the content of this material seemed far more obviously preoccupied with gendered power relations of domination and submission than is generally the case with the banal documentary stare of mainstream audio-visual pornography. Where previously women writing explicit scenarios of female submission had been confined to the Parisian *avant-garde*, it was now a commercially successful practice.

BDSM and the Genre of 'Erotic Romance'

When we survey sexually explicit writing by and for women today the theme of female erotic submission, although by no means universal, still seems common and perhaps even prevalent. Much of the current material can be classed under the emerging and as yet ill-defined generic headings of 'erotic romance,' 'adult romance' or 'provocative romance' (James, 2013). Such fictions broadly follow the Black Lace formula of combining romance with sexually explicit content. This raises questions about the extent and significance of the trope of female submission as it is employed within this emergent genre.

Maria Nilson (2013) has suggested that until recently mainstream fiction for women had been dominated by the relatively 'chaste' genre of chick lit, and that the current wave of mass-market explicit fiction was heralded by the recent vogue for women's erotic memoirs. Arguably such works as *The Sexual Life of Catherine M* (Millet, 2002), *One Hundred Strokes of the Brush Before Bed* (Melissa P., 2004) and Zoe Margolis' *Girl with a One Track Mind* (Lee, 2006) should be seen as an intermediate stage in the progress of a female erotic subjectivity. Like the *Black Lace Book of Women Sexual Fantasies* (Sharpe, 1999) they tend to disavow the creative imagination of the female author, whilst claiming to place the authentic experience of a real woman before a general audience. In contrast it is clear that erotic romance is fictional writing by women and for women, so that we can surely say that a female subject producing and consuming explicit erotic material has arrived in mainstream cultural representation. Or can we? The term 'erotic romance' seems to be applied by authors and publishers to a wide range of new work, some of which, though explicit within certain limits, also seems to hark back to older forms of romance.

At one end of the range is the prolific Cherise Sinclair, who caters to a niche BDSM market. Works such as *Make Me, Sir* (2011), contain fully explicit scenes narrated in the third person from an external perspective and depict a BDSM subculture in which men are seen in submissive roles, at least as a part of the backdrop if not at the centre of the action. These stories also offer a degree of psychological complexity in which the subjective motives of female submissives are explored as part of the narrative, rather than the identification with such desires being taken-for-granted as the intrinsic sexual preference of women *per se* (Frantz, 2012).

It is important to contrast the eroticisation of heterosexual power dynamics in many contemporary, mass market erotic romance novels, with the radical status of BDSM as a minority sexual identity, which is invoked in Sinclair's fiction. In Gayle Rubin's (1984) influential theory of the politics of sexual oppression sadomasochism is one of a number of binary opposites that are excluded from the 'charmed circle' of socially legitimated sexual practices and identities. Rubin's analysis has provided grounds for viewing the representation of BDSM as radically progressive. In regard to erotic representation, Stephanie Wardrop (1995) has argued that the ritualised roles of dominant and submissive are clearly two sides of the same imaginary play and that therefore identification with one side necessarily implies a degree of identification with the other, and that while the roles may be mapped onto specific gender identities in any given scene this is a contingent and inherently unstable arrangement. Indeed, it is clear that in interpersonal practice men often opt for the submissive role. In short, BDSM both as an interpersonal practice and as mediated representation, is more likely to de-stabilise taken-for-granted cultural assumptions about male and female sexualities by rendering them explicit and necessitating a conscious process of inter-subjective reflection and negotiation, than to further entrench their mystique. While Margot D. Weiss (2012) has cautioned that even consensual BDSM practices do not spring direct from human nature but are a product of our social environment, we must also ask what happens when such a minority sexual identity is played out, or exploited, in mainstream representation. The applicability of the idea that BDSM play radically de-stabilises traditional gender identity to any given instance of representation is empirically testable in terms of the extent to which the alignment of roles

is indeed varied within the range of sexual scenarios presented. It is to the evidence of the contemporary scene of mass-market explicit sexual representation that we now turn.

Sinclair's fiction is obscure compared to the works of E.L. James, whose *Fifty Shades* trilogy has already sold over seventy million books (Child, 2013), and Sylvia Day, who has herself been cited as the *New York Times* number one bestseller. Although, the latter's first novel of the *Crossfire* series, *Bared to You* (2012), has been cunningly packaged by Penguin in sepia tones as if a clone of *Fifty Shades*, it is in fact a rather different animal. Day's novel seems to be essentially a romance in which the sexually explicit content is subordinated to the narrative, rather than the latter merely serving as a thread connecting sexual scenarios, as one would expect in a pornographic text where the *raison d'être* is to provide sexual stimulation. Furthermore, the actual content of the scenes draw from a limited menu of activities; there is plenty of oral sex, both ways, but most of the scenarios end with Eva on her back in the missionary position. In fact the one real 'porno scene' towards the end of *Bared to You* is a foursome, involving Eva's bisexual flatmate, from which the heroine shrinks in disgust as if it were included specifically to emphasize the healthily possessive monogamy of the central couple. Moreover, unlike *Fifty Shades*, there is no explicit BDSM in any of the scenes. Rather the power dynamic resides in Gideon's overbearing nature and tendency to resolve arguments by forcing Eva into sexual acts and responses. This blurring of the line between rape and consent, coupled with the old trope of the treacherous female body that responds to the man's advances, is a cliché that recalls the hard-edged romantic fiction of the 1970s as well as much pornographic writing. In the era of second wave feminism the apparently paradoxical popularity of so called 'bodice rippers' or 'sweet savagery' that toyed with the theme of rape could be accounted for in terms of women's guilt about sex and need to have responsibility taken away (Faust, 1980). Since then, as women's sense of sexual entitlement has grown, Wardrop (1995) has argued that the appeal of the 'rape' scenario lies more in the female reader's awareness of the power of the 'masochist' within interpersonal dynamics. In female-authored romantic fiction, Wardrop (1995) claims, there is a play on the exchange of power in which the 'raping hero' is ultimately defeated by his own emotional neediness, something which the female character does not fear. Day's novel *Bared to You* seems to follow this model closely; at one point, after a passionate scene, Gideon says to Eva:

“I’m always hard for you, always hot for you. I’m always half-crazy with wanting you. If anything could change that, I would’ve done it before we got this far. Understand? ... “Now show me that you still want *me* after that.” His face was flushed and damp, his eyes dark and turbulent. “I need to know that losing control doesn’t mean I’ve lost you.”” (Day, 2012, p.186)

Later, when the tables are turning, Gideon pleads:

“Are you going to punish me with pleasure?” he asked quietly. “Because you can. You can bring me to my knees Eva.’

In short, while Day’s novel contains a dozen explicitly described sexual scenes, which often employ the pornographic hyperbole of copious female ejaculation and the big ‘steely erection’ – and we are not *just* talking about Gideon’s massive skyscraper here – the novel as a whole is really far more romantic than erotic. As such, one could argue that it represents the resurgence, albeit in ultra-modern guise, of an old sub-genre of hard-edged romance rather than anything really new. This, however, is not true of the E.L. James trilogy, which, for all that it avoids the cliché of the big cock, has the lineage of pornography much more strongly in its DNA. What makes *Fifty Shades*, to which we will now turn our attention, *remarkable* is not simply the scale of its sales but the fact that it seems to perfect, for the mass market, a hybridisation of romance and pornography.

E.L. James’ *Fifty Shades*

The formula used by E.L. James combines three elements: romantic narrative, pornographic scenes and a third theme of conspicuous consumption and extreme material wealth. These elements work together to constitute an aspirational and idealised model of a heterosexual relationship for the twenty-first century that owes nothing to the feminist politics of the twentieth. The story’s figurative female subject turns out to be a latent submissive whose sexuality is narratively actualised within a profoundly conservative and exclusionary heteronormative fantasy of the perfect marriage, defined in opposition to outsiders who are sexual deviants and social inferiors.

The British author of *Fifty Shades* sets her story in the north-western USA and it is narrated in the voice of the central character Anastasia Steele, a twenty one year-old American, whose tone is affected largely by the frequent repetition of such received colloquialisms as 'jeez' and 'holy crap.' Ana's subjective, present-tense, narration roles along with little regard to style or grammar, although critics of the rudimentary writing miss the point: whether by accident or design, the style does not exceed the likely capacities of the undergraduate narrator, albeit a student of English Literature. The stylistic limitations of the narrator are well illustrated at the very end of the first novel, when having walked out on her lover she uses this rather clunking metaphor:

'I head straight to my room, and there, hanging limply at the end of my bed, is a very sad, deflated helicopter balloon. Charlie Tango, looking and feeling exactly like me.'
(James, 2011a, p.356)

In short, Ana is a shallow and pointedly unliterary literature student. She is naïve and, as she frequently says, knows very little about anything, except cooking. What is more she is a virgin who has not yet experienced orgasm or masturbated; she has no sexual history and even finds wearing make-up intimidating. In other words she is a blank space, easily available for identification by the intended reader, whom we may assume to be female. No doubt Ana is not the reader exactly as she is but as she might wish to be: an artlessly attractive, virginal body and an innocent, sympathetic personality, *within* whom the reader can enjoy the romantic and erotic journey to imaginary fulfilment. Of course, as Salam Al-Mahadin (2013) has pointed out, we should not assume these books directly 'interpellate' readers into a pre-determined subject position. The text may be read in a variety of ways and even when the reader *does* identify with Ana it is of course part of the function of fantasy to allow us to imaginatively inhabit positions that we would not otherwise entertain. The concept of interpellation, as originally formulated by Althusser (1971), does not appear to admit notions of agency or negotiation, which is one reason why it has been generally rejected within modern cultural studies. Nevertheless it is an interesting exercise to apply it in this case, supposing that the very notion of agency is itself a delusion within a process of ideological recognition, whereby the subject perceives *herself* within the narrative discourse. After all, is it not often claimed in the more simplistic psychoanalytic and therapeutic commentaries on pornography precisely that by looking at it the individual

‘discovers’ what they really want, their *own* repressed sexuality and, so to speak, inner ‘truth’?

In essence the narrative contained in the *Fifty Shades* trilogy is an extended dialogue between Ana and her lover Christian Grey, the very tedium of which achieves a certain verisimilitude. Indeed, the real merit of E.L. James’ fiction is perhaps the way that it captures something of the true process of relationships in lived life that tend to develop as an overlapping and repeatedly circling series of conversations, which are broken off, half-forgotten, resumed in altered forms after events have intervened, and now of course extended remotely via email and other new media platforms. In our age of ‘reality’ entertainment this unliterary naturalism is surely one of the keys to the series’ mass appeal.

If Anastasia is the subject of this romantic narrative the eponymous hero is the principle object. In many ways Christian is a classic romantic figure. At twenty-seven he is still young, though a little older than Ana and, unlike her, sexually skilled and experienced. In fact Christian is prodigiously talented at all things, except cooking of course, and especially in business, where his acumen has already made him rich. But above all, as Ana remarks at least once in every chapter he is ‘beyond beautiful.’ He is, in short, an impossible combination of romantic masculine traits, both beautiful bad boy and powerful man of the world. There is an aesthetic objectification of Christian throughout Ana’s discourse, but it does not position her as a subject in any radical way, or in the same way that pornography has positioned men to respond sexually to the sight of naked women. While there are countless references to Christian in white shirt and jeans it is his face and clothed body, rather than really his naked body or sexual anatomy, which is the object of Ana’s gaze. Beyond aesthetic portrayal, Christian is also the object of Ana’s narrative in the sense of process, in that his highly desirable raw material is gradually transformed into a domesticated and marriageable form. It is the old fantasy of taming the bad boy; one who, in this version, is emotionally closed and who intends to use the heroine only as a contractual submissive. Confronted by a man who is both exciting and dangerous Ana must decide how much to risk and whether she is willing to be dominated. In sexual matters she accepts his tutelage and is entirely shaped by his script; at least until he beats her so severely that the experience takes her beyond her physical limits. Ana’s rejection of him, at

the end of the first novel, marks the turning point of the narrative and prepares the way for his transformation in the second novel.

Moreover, what drives the narrative is the gradual revelation of Christian's extensive sexual history. It is here that Ana will find clues to his proclivities and resolve the problems of their future. Mentally and physically scarred by his early experiences with a 'whore' mother who did not protect him from abuse by her punters, Christian suffers from a fear of being touched intimately. Later, as a teenager, he had been seduced and initiated as a submissive into BDSM by an older woman called Elena, with whom he still maintains a friendship and who becomes the object of Ana's visceral loathing. Since then he has assumed the dominant role with a succession of submissive brunettes, but now his love for Ana has brought about a 'Damascene conversion' so that he can be content with the more moderate power play for which he has already prepared her. From this point on, the central dynamic, or dialogue, gradually resolves itself in the direction of marriage, children and the promise of happiness ever after. In short, as others have noted (Harrison and Holm, 2013; Nilson 2013), Christian is the typical damaged alpha male of romantic fiction, who will be saved through the narrative arc of his relationship with the heroine. So, while it is clear that as a narrative *Fifty Shades* is firmly rooted in the existing 'feminine' genre of romance, what part does pornography play in its genealogy?

Generic elements of pornography clearly influence the sexual scenarios that punctuate the narrative at regular intervals. To be sure certain elements that might prove rebarbative to a female audience are excluded, such as excessive verbal obscenity or ithyphallic description. At the same time, the promiscuous couplings so characteristic of pornography are also precluded by the contextual narrative of romance. Yet, while there are only ever the same two characters in each scenario, the dynamic between them is conventional. Christian is the initial and predominant subject of the action and Ana its object, both in the sense that things are done to her and in that her pleasure and bodily responses are the focus of attention, the *thing* that the reader is invited to scrutinise.

In setting the sexual agenda Christian tells her that they will 'build up to various scenarios' (James, 2011a, p.155), thus alluding directly to the underlying sequence of scenarios that forms a sort of parallel narrative infrastructure. He also introduces a pseudo

contract, setting out the rules and obligations of their relationship and delineating its 'hard limits' and 'soft limits' (James, 2011a, pp.122-24). In effect the 'hard limits' define the boundaries that the text will not cross, and conveniently mark out for the reader those areas to be excluded as erotic themes; such as urination, defecation, piercing, blood, scarification, breath control, children and animals. On the other hand, the 'soft limits' that Ana is asked to sign up to effectively offer a menu of erotic acts that the reader may expect to see, including fellatio, cunnilingus, anal intercourse, vibrators, bondage, blindfolding, spanking, whipping and nipple clamps.

Since the contract is never signed there remains a degree of doubt as to Ana's consent to each of the latter activities. Yet, as in pornography, female consent is always already assured because the overwhelming force of masculine sexual agency has an ally in the 'traitorous' female body. The trope of the feminine mind-body dualism is given a twenty-first century gloss, when Ana researches Christian's proclivities by typing 'submissive' into Wikipedia:

'Half an hour later, I feel slight (sic) queasy and frankly shocked to my core. Do I really want this stuff in my head? Jeez – is this what he gets up to in the Red Room of Pain? I sit staring at the screen, and part of me, a very moist and integral part of me – that I've only become acquainted with very recently, is seriously turned on. Oh my, some of this stuff is HOT. But is it for me? Holy shit... could I do this?' (James, 2011a, p.132)

Gradually Ana is drawn into the submissive role and her ultimate destination is that, frequently invoked yet never interrogated, 'dark place' in her own psyche, where she finds that being tied and whipped is:

'...a sweet agony – bearable, just... pleasant – no, not immediately, but as my skin sings with each blow ... I am dragged into a dark, dark part of my psyche that surrenders to this most erotic sensation. *Yes – I get this.*' (James, 2011a, p.340)

The none-too-subtle play of light and dark, also noted by others (Harrison and Holm, 2013), hints at the central theme of the, by now marital, sex scenes of the final novel: the domestication of a mild form of BDSM eroticism within the imaginary safe haven of

heterosexual monogamy, where the emotional bond between husband and wife makes Ana's submission safe and she has entirely identified with the role she has been given by her husband and sexual master.

In short, the course of the narrative establishes Ana's submissive sexual nature; the dark, ineffable truth, lurking beneath the surface of her characterisation as a virginal yet thoroughly modern girl. While Christian's sexuality is elaborately accounted for, Ana's response to and identification with the submissive role is taken for granted; described in endless detail yet never explained, as if it were latent in her nature, or simply because she really is a blank slate to be inscribed by her lover. In contrast to the more nuanced treatment of female submission in the contemporary works of Sinclair and Day, it is above all in this fundamental essentialist silence that James' text most crucially bears the hallmark of the male tradition of pornographic writing referred to above. These borrowings from pornography are spliced into what is essentially a romantic narrative. In the process of doing this a generic hybridization is perfected; a genre in which *her* narrative reforms him for the love and marriage that she ultimately desires, while *his* erotic capital is fruitfully invested in her as the submissive sexual subject that fulfils his need.

But beyond these romantic and erotic themes there is a third notable dimension to *Fifty Shades*, revealed in the obsequious name-checking of commercial products, from Twining's English Breakfast Tea to the Eurocopter 135, 'the safest in its class' (James, 2011b, p.329). Alongside the pleasures of sex the trilogy celebrates the analogous pleasures of consumption. The latter have long been a common co-theme in erotic writing. We saw, for example, how wealth and 'opulence' were presented in the Black Lace fiction *Dance of Obsession* (Christie, 1996), and the tradition goes back at least to such Victorian works as *The Pearl* (Anon, 1968) in which sexual indulgence and the contemporaneous bourgeois passion for material consumption are conflated (Sigel, 2002). *Fifty Shades* updates this aspirational theme for the current age of the super-rich, with its cold grey aesthetic of glass and steel towers, 'impressive, sumptuous' hotel lobbies, black SUVs and giant yachts. Moreover the theme of consumption is built into the structure of the story as Christian besieges Ana with gifts, an overbearing generosity that she initially resists but gradually yields to. Thus the progressive narrative accretion of material objects marks a second and parallel loss of innocence for Ana. Alongside her transformation into an active subject of

'kinky fuckery,' she must also overcome her homely middle-class reticence about conspicuous consumption and embrace her new found status as a billionaire's wife. When the newly-weds set up house Ana struggles to come to terms with the full implications of having domestic 'help.' Still unable to affect the hubristic nonchalance of the super-rich she modestly scrubs her own butt plug, whilst inwardly cringing at the thought that the household manager, Mrs Jones, already sees to the cleaning of their sex room.

Above all, what the Greys' money buys is relative safety and security, the minimization of foreseeable risk being one of the privileges of the contemporary social elite. In the course of the trilogy Ana is gradually absorbed into the protective material culture of wealth, with its exclusive social spaces, architecture and expensive vehicles that separate the rich from the rest of society. Prominent among the supporting cast are Christian's security staff, the ex-marine Taylor, Sawyer and the others. They have their work cut out protecting the couple from various dark, threatening outsiders: Leila, a deranged stalker, and the villainous Jack Hyde, Ana's work boss who sexually harasses her, until Christian buys the company, sacks him and he resorts to sabotage and abduction. In the asymmetric contest between these puny outsiders and Christian's corporate muscle and security and surveillance apparatus, there seems to be a contemporary resonance with the excess of power with which western states obliterate potential terrorists.

Like the terrorist, the threat posed by these outsiders functions on a symbolic level. Significantly, what these figures have in common, along with the narrator's *bête noire* Elena, is that they are all unruly sexual deviants: Elena is a dominant woman who had seduced Christian when he was under-age and is therefore a paedophile in Ana's opinion, Leila had been one of Christian's masochistic contractual subs, and Jack exercises abusive power over his female PAs, and turns out to have come from the same foster family as Christian. Jack is thus a dark inversion of Christian, a modern Mr Hyde in whom sadistic sexual proclivities are not redeemed by a capacity for love; and Leila is a negative, self-destructive version of Ana, pitifully lacking in self-respect or sexual limits. As the narrative progresses it becomes clear that the function of these outsiders is to throw into relief the safely domesticated relationship between sexually submissive female and dominant male, which is forming within the exemplary moneyed haven of Christian and Ana's marriage. Thus a tamed and one-dimensional simulation of BDSM is retrieved from the 'outer limits' of Rubin's (1984)

'bad, abnormal, unnatural and damned sexuality' and used to re-eroticise the 'charmed circle' of privileged heterosexual monogamy. In short, as other's have also noted (Dymock, 2013; Tsaros, 2013) James' kinky fuckery is assimilated to a hetero-normative master narrative.

Conclusion

This chapter has argued, in the first place, that the theme of female submission is an historical feature of male pornographic writing and that a female narrative voice was often employed to make the trope appear as an expression of the unmediated truth of female sexuality. Paradoxically, however, following the feminist debates about pornography, when women came to produce and consume sexually explicit literature on a significant scale in the 1990s their fiction often adopted this same trope, as if the female subject were being interpellated into a space already created for them within pornographic discourse. Although many of the more recent contemporary sexual narratives by and for women also employ the theme of female submission they often do so in ways that might destabilise the clichés of heterosexual eroticism. However, in concocting a hybridised formula that has conquered the market and claimed a mass female audience, E.L. James' has combined two mutually regressive, yet hitherto antithetical elements: the hetero-normative conservatism of traditional romance and the derogatory essentialism often found in pornographic representations of female sexuality.

References

- Al-Mahadin, S., 2013. Is Christian a sadist? *Fifty Shades of Grey* in popular imagination. *Feminist Media Studies*, 13(3), pp.566-70.
- Althusser, L., 1971. Ideology and ideological state apparatuses. In: L. Althusser, *Lenin and philosophy and other essays*. London: Unwin, pp.127-86.
- Anonymous, 1828. *The lustful Turk*. Hertfordshire: Wordsworth, 1997.
- Anonymous, 1879-80. *The pearl*. New York: The Grove Press, 1968.
- Assister, A. and Carol, A. eds., 1993. *Bad girls & dirty pictures: the challenge to reclaim feminism*. London: Pluto Press.
- Carter, A., 1979. *The Sadeian woman and the ideology of pornography*. London: Penguin.
- Child, B., 2013. Fifty shades of angry. *The Guardian*, 5 September.
- Christie, O., 1996. *Dance of obsession*. London: Black Lace.
- Cleland, J., 1985. *Memoirs of a woman of pleasure*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Day, S., 2012. *Bared to you*. London: Penguin Books.
- De Berg, J., 1956. *The image*. London: Nexus, 1992.
- Downing, L., 2013. Safewording! Kinkphobia and gender normativity in *Fifty Shades of Grey*. *Psychology & Sexuality*, 4(1), pp.92-102.
- Dworkin, A., 1981. *Pornography: men possessing women*. London: The Women's Press.
- Dymock, A., 2013. Flogging sexual transgression: interrogating the costs of the 'Fifty Shades effect.' *Sexualities*, 16(8), pp.880-95.
- Faust, B., 1980. *Women, sex and pornography*. London: Pelican.
- Foxon, D., 1965. *Libertine literature in England 1660-1745*. New York: University Books.

- Frantz, S.S.G., 2012. 'How we love is our soul': Joey W. Hill's BDSM romance *Holding the Cards*. In: S.S.G. Frantz and E.M. Selinger, eds. *New approaches to popular romance fiction: critical essays*. Jefferson, NC: McFarland and Co. pp.47-59.
- Gibson, P.C. and Gibson, R., eds., 1994. *Dirty looks: women, pornography, power*. London: B.F.I.
- Griffin, S., 1981. *Pornography and silence: culture's revenge against nature*. London: The Women's Press.
- Hardy, S., 2001. More Black Lace: women, eroticism and subjecthood. *Sexualities*, 4(4), pp.435-53.
- Harrison, K. and Holm, M.-L., 2013. Exploring grey zones and blind spots in the binaries and boundaries of E.L. James' fifty shades trilogy. *Feminist Media Studies*, 13(3), pp.558-62.
- James, E.L., 2011a. *Fifty shades of grey*. [pdf] Waxahachie TX, USA: The Writer's Coffee Shop.
- James, E.L., 2011b. *Fifty shades darker*. [pdf] Waxahachie TX, USA: The Writer's Coffee Shop.
- James, E.L., 2012. *Fifty shades freed*. [pdf] Waxahachie TX, USA: The Writer's Coffee Shop.
- James, E.L. 2013. *E.L. James – provocative romance*. [online] Available at: <www.eljamesauthor.com> [accessed 31 December 2013].
- Kappler, S., 1986. *The pornography of representation*. Cambridge: Polity.
- Laqueur, T., 1992. *Making sex: the body and gender from the Greeks to Freud*. London: Harvard University Press.
- Lee, A., 2006. *Girl with a one track mind*. London: Random House.
- le Verdier, Z., 1999. A dangerous addiction. In: K. Sharp, ed. *The best of Black Lace*. London: Black Lace.
- Millet, C., 2002. *The sexual life of Catherine M.* London: Serpent's Tail.

- Melissa P., 2004. *One hundred strokes of the brush before bed*. London: Serpent's Tail.
- Nilson, M., 2013. From *The Flame and the Flower* to *Fifty Shades of Grey*. *Akademisk Kvarter*, 7, Fall, pp.119-31.
- Nin, A., 1978. *Delta of Venus*. London: Nexus.
- Réage, P., 1954. *Story of O*. London: Corgi Press, 1972.
- Rubin, G., 1984. Thinking sex: notes for a radical theory of the politics of sexuality. In: C.S. Vance, ed. *Pleasure and danger: exploring female sexuality*. Boston: R.K.P.
- Segal, L. and McIntosh, M. eds., 1992. *Sex exposed: sexuality and the pornography debate*. London: Virago Press.
- Sharp, K. ed., 1999. *The Black Lace book of women's sexual fantasies*. London: Black Lace.
- Sigel, L.Z., 2002. *Governing pleasures: pornography and social change in England, 1815-1914*. London: Rutgers University Press.
- Sinclair, Cherise, 2011 *Masters of the Shadow Lands 5: Make Me, Sir*. San Francisco: Loose ID LLC.
- Sonnet, E., 1999. "Erotic fiction by women for women": the pleasures of post-feminist heterosexuality. *Sexualities*, 2(2), pp.167-87.
- Stoddart, J., 2000. She's gotta have it. *The Observer Magazine*, 10 September.
- Tsaros, A., 2013. Consensual non-consent: comparing E.L. James's *Fifty Shades of Grey* and Pauline Réage's *Story of O*. *Sexualities*, 16(8), pp.864-79.
- Wardrop, S., 1995. The heroine is being beaten: Freud, sadomasochism, and reading the romance. *Style*, 29(3), pp. 459-74.
- Weiss, M., 2012. BDSM and Feminism: notes on an impasse. *Tenured Radical*. Available at: <<http://chronicle.com/blognetwork/tenuredradical/2012/05/bdsm-and-feminism-notes-on-an-impasse/>> [Accessed 29 August 2014].

Williams, L., 1999. *Hardcore: power, pleasure and the frenzy of the visible*. London:
University of California Press.