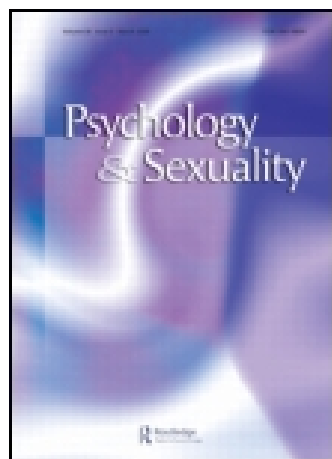


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Safewording! Kinkphobia and gender normativity in *Fifty Shades of Grey*

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This article considers the recent publishing phenomenon, E.L. James's *Fifty Shades* trilogy, from what may be termed a 'sex-critical' perspective. That is, it evaluates, without endorsing, the differing responses to the trilogy issuing from both sex-positive and radical feminist perspectives. Further, it subjects to equal scrutiny the ways in which the trilogy and discourses about it represent both BDSM practices and the rituals of 'vanilla' heterosexual romance/marriage. It concludes that both the trilogy and kinkphobic mainstream responses to it collude in rendering invisible the ethically and politically problematic aspects of heteronormative courtship narratives ending in marriage and reproduction by othering and scapegoating non-normative practices such as those included under the BDSM umbrella.

Keywords: *Fifty Shades of Grey*; E.L. James; BDSM; kinkphobia; feminism; normativity

Introduction

This article explores some of the problems raised by E.L. James's popular *Fifty Shades* trilogy from the perspective of critical sexuality studies. It focuses in particular on three issues. First, it addresses the ways in which feminist responses to the trilogy have tended to revert to the unhelpful 'sex-positive'/'sex-negative' dichotomy. Second, it explores how the generic expectations of romance and the books' very mainstream intended readership limit the representation of the female character, Anastasia Steele, and result in a protagonist who expresses no degree of autonomous desire outside of conventional romantic heteronorms. Third, it examines how the structural inequalities and political questions underpinning and determining 'vanilla' romance and its flagship institution, marriage, are obfuscated in the book by means of the focus on the titillating 'wrongness' of power exchange sex and BDSM.¹ The exceptional popularity of this trilogy and the number of media and academic commentaries it has attracted and continues to attract make it of relevance to a journal that concerns itself with the cultural and psychological meanings of sexuality – including fashions in sexual representation. This article, authored by a scholar trained primarily in literary studies and continental philosophy, with an interest in critical psychology, offers a pointed critique of the trilogy. Rather than offering a traditional literary-critical analysis of *Fifty Shades*, or a reader-response study of the trilogy, however, this article will consider the extent to which the mainstream discourses about gender and sexuality that underlie

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media commentary about the trilogy have also clearly informed the novels themselves. That is, the novels will be considered primarily as *discourse* in the Foucauldian sense and as symptoms of the culture that produced them.

Beginning life as *Twilight* fan fiction, *Fifty Shades of Grey* and its follow-up titles *Fifty Shades Darker* and *Fifty Shades Freed*, by English writer James, skyrocketed from a successful Australian e-publishing venture in 2011 to a mainstream bestseller published by Arrow in the United Kingdom and Vintage in the United States (both owned by Random House) in 2012. The trilogy depicts the romance between a young, virginal college graduate, Anastasia Steele, and self-made billionaire CEO, Christian Grey, a survivor of childhood sexual abuse and a BDSM dom. (The causal relationship asserted between Grey's childhood trauma and the form his adult desire takes is but one of the problematic, universalising clichés about non-normative sexuality which the trilogy liberally indulges.) While engaging in some light BDSM-type sex – what is termed in the book 'kinky fuckery' – Anastasia nevertheless refuses throughout the trilogy to become Christian's submissive, and he ultimately agrees to an ostensibly more conventional relationship with her (the books' shorthand for which is 'hearts and flowers'). The trilogy culminates with the pair married with one child and Anastasia pregnant with a second. Thus, in many ways, it is a very classic romance, undeniably tritely written and riddled with cliché, in which the female protagonist ostensibly 'tames' the wild, dangerous hero and in which closure is found in the marriage plot. All the while, it incorporates elements of BDSM activity, accounting for its 'novelty' value while not disrupting the premise of the conventional genre. In this latter regard, it has many resonances with Steven Shainberg's popular and widely discussed film *Secretary* of 2002, in which kink is similarly incorporated into the heteronormative resolution of matrimony.²

Fifty Shades of Grey and two shades of feminism

The trilogy has attracted extraordinarily wide attention.³ This has come predictably from BDSM activists and writers, from mainstream journalists and reviewers and, as will be the focus of this section, from feminist critics. Scores of articles and blog posts have been written and disagreements have raged on the Internet about the trilogy's doubtful feminist credentials. Predictably and regressively enough, debate has turned to the question of what its popularity reveals regarding the 'nature' of female desire in the twenty-first century. In perhaps the most hotly debated and widely critiqued of such articles, Katie Roiphe wrote that the popularity of the trilogy suggests that women in the so-called post-feminist age, 'burdened' with the freedom offered by access to a wider range of careers and a plethora of lifestyle choices than at any other time in modern history, long to surrender to an unreconstructed man; in short, agentic power has become 'boring' for them. She writes:

We may then be especially drawn to this particular romanticized, erotically charged, semi-pornographic idea of female submission at a moment in history when male dominance is shakier than it has ever been. (Roiphe, 2012)

There is much in Roiphe's article that is problematic. Tracy Clark-Flory points out in a response in *Salon* that if the popularity of the material in *Fifty Shades* says anything about the nature of desire, then it surely speaks to the complexity and diversity of *people's* desires, rather than uniquely to women's desires, since professional dominatrixes amply

report the popularity of requests from male clients to be topped and dominated (Clark-Flory, 2012). The taken-for-granted heteronormativity of Roiphe's broadside is irksome too, as is the 'gotcha' tone with which she announces that she is all too aware that her contentions will 'perplex and appall' feminists.

Refutations of this latter claim have tended to issue from the ranks of sex-positive feminism. 'Maya', at popular feminist blog *Feministing*, has written in direct response to Roiphe: 'Really, I'm not perplexed by [fantasies of submission]. And I am in no way appalled. I am fully in support of anyone doing whatever (safe, consensual) thing that [*sic*] want to do to get themselves off. Feminists for Orgasms!' (Maya, 2012). And Allena Gabosch, Director of the Center for Sex-Positive Culture in Seattle, opines that the trilogy is so popular 'because more women than would ever admit, are turned on by so called kinky sex' (cited in Thomas, 2012). Shira Tarrant, meanwhile, states: 'it is unclear which rock Roiphe is living under since a woman getting what she wants sexually is very feminist' (cited in Weiss, 2012); while, finally, Dana Goldstein states that 'asking for what you want in bed is a feminist political act' (cited in Weiss, 2012).

Perhaps predictably, blogger 'Smash' writing on the collaborative blog Radical Feminist Hub (infamous for its condemnation of both trans politics and penis-in-vagina sex) argues with regard to *Fifty Shades* that its promotion of BDSM reveals the way in which this set of sexual practices is culturally *identical* with domestic violence. She argues that the appeal of the trilogy and the appeal of BDSM practices both have to be understood in terms of women's oppression under patriarchy and their Stockholm-syndrome-esque determination to convert said oppression into a source of pleasure and illusory choice. She writes: 'Women cope with male violence and oppression by eroticizing male dominance'. And she goes on:

Freedom is slavery.

Submissiveness is empowering.

BDSM erotica is feminist.

The above are just a few of the lies that patriarchal culture has served up for women in the best selling BDSM novel *50 Shades of Grey*.

[. . .]

Radical feminists see the justification of BDSM – whether in erotica, or in practice – as a form of orgasm politics, which we reject. We do not agree with Barbara Seaman who said, 'The liberated orgasm is an orgasm you like, under any circumstances.' We do not believe that activities should be immune from criticism simply because they occur in our minds or our bedrooms. (Smash, 2012)

To my mind, *both* kinds of argument are reductive and guilty of oversimplification in the service of ideological aims. 'Smash' is right to point out that much sex-positive feminism seems to argue that an orgasm is *in and of itself* a feminist triumph, which risks maintaining an artificial disconnect between 'private' pleasure and structural societal inequality and oppression; as well as ignoring the reality that, as many women orgasm in the course of sexual abuse or rape, an orgasm in itself is not inherently 'good'. While, on the other hand, the radical position, in failing to distinguish between instances of domestic violence and those of negotiated BDSM, wilfully ignores nuance and risks a misunderstanding of *both* phenomena owing to the lack of attention paid to contextual specificities in the service of rhetorical absolutism. In making this point, I do not wish to claim, of course, that abuse

and the influence of heteropatriarchal oppression do not also seep into apparently progressive BDSM communities. For example, sex-worker activist Kitty Stryker has recently exposed instances of rape and non-consent in kink culture and has risked criticism from the communities for so doing (Chang, 2012). But to acknowledge the politically vital point that BDSM exists within, and is touched by, the same patriarchal culture as everything else is not to claim, as ‘Smash’ does, that *ethically practised* BDSM is always already the same phenomenon as domestic abuse.

In an excellent guest post on the blog ‘Tenured Radical’, BDSM anthropologist and author of the book *Techniques of Pleasure* (Weiss, 2011), Margot Weiss, has used the debates surrounding *Fifty Shades* to complexify this long-standing – and somewhat tedious – ‘sex-positive’ (or liberal feminist) versus BDSM-critical (or radical feminist) debate. She writes:

Sex-positive feminism [. . .] is about the right to pursue sexual pleasure, about an individual’s ability to ask for and get whatever it is she wants. And BDSM’s practices of negotiation, of direct conversation about sexual likes and dislikes, and of self-exploration are empowering for many – perhaps especially for women [. . .]. But as an anthropologist and a queer studies scholar who has learned more than a little from the philosopher Michel Foucault, I am wary of the claim that embracing our inner sexual desires is a sure path to liberation. And, as a queer and materialist feminist, I worry about how these debates pare down politics to sexual choices. (Weiss, 2012)

Like Weiss, I work from a Foucauldian perspective, and I endorse her suspicion of such polarised and polarising feminist positions and her warning of the inadequacy of neo-liberal choice rhetoric about sex. I would describe my own position in apprehending all sexual discourse and practices as neither ‘sex-positive’ nor ‘sex-negative’, but as *sex-critical*. While I am sympathetic to recent attempts by the blogger who uses the moniker ‘A Radical Trans-Feminist’ to reclaim the term ‘sex-negative’ (see Millbank, 2012), I prefer to eschew the either/or dichotomy of ‘positive’/‘negative’ language.⁴ What is key in the approach I am calling ‘sex-critical’ is that all forms of sexuality should be equally susceptible to critical thinking about the normative or otherwise ideologies they uphold. Assertions that given sexual practices, fantasies, orgasms, etc., are either ‘good’ or ‘bad’ are gross simplifications. They also contribute to silencing and making invisible the varieties of asexuality and those non-genital ‘bodies and pleasures’ (to use a Foucauldian term) that do not fit so neatly under the ‘sexuality’ umbrella – where the field of sexuality is a modern invention shot through with the normalising energies of its constructing disciplines. Moreover, iterations of heterosexual vanilla intercourse and reproduction deserve just as much critical scrutiny as discourses surrounding ‘extreme’ or potentially ‘harmful’ bodily practices (if not *more*, given the historical lack of critical attention brought to bear on what is perceived to be the norm). Indeed, I would argue precisely that heterosexual vanilla intercourse and reproduction can and should be strategically understood as ‘potentially harmful bodily practices’ (given the lure of assuming that what one is doing is harm free simply because it is ‘normal’).

Perhaps my biggest objection to the sex-positive agenda lies in its simplistic belief that by proliferating more and varied forms of sexual representation, expression, practices and orgasms, a ‘positive’ and progressive – indeed feminist – agenda is inevitably being served. As Weiss suggests, the idea that sexuality can be ‘freed up’ to liberate the subject buys wholly into the repressive hypothesis that Michel Foucault so devastatingly critiques in *The Will to Knowledge*, as well, I would add, as reifying as authoritative the discursive field of ‘sexuality’ itself.

'Transgressive' content in a 'Safe' form

In this section, I argue that *Fifty Shades* is intriguing because it performs a clever sleight of hand: it appears to deliver something 'transgressive' (which itself is a term that merits suspicion and interrogation⁵), namely BDSM sex, within a conservative literary generic form, the romance, thereby delivering a comfortable and traditional social narrative culminating in marriage and reproduction. Roiphe appears to understand the problem inherent in this fact when she writes:

To a certain, I guess, rather large, population, it has a semipornographic glamour, a dangerous frisson of boundary crossing, but at the same time is delivering reassuringly safe, old-fashioned romantic roles. (Roiphe, 2012)

I would argue that the dichotomy suggested here – that BDSM is 'dangerous and boundary crossing' while heterosexual romance is 'safe' and 'reassuring' is inherently false – or at least oversimplified. One of the things that is noteworthy about *Fifty Shades* is that it depicts a man whose BDSM ethics seem squeaky-clean (the list of activities he will practise is thoroughly safe, sane and consensual, and anything even slightly 'dangerous' is found on his prohibited list), whereas his behaviour within his relationship *outside* the bedroom is entirely ethically dubious. It involves extreme stalking behaviour of his partner (much like that of vampire Edward Cullen of the *Twilight* canon that inspired *Fifty Shades*), control of her food intake and enforced contraception. Thus, *Fifty Shades* irresponsibly conflates Christian Grey's dominant sexuality with his controlling, manipulative, infantilising attitude towards his partner, suggesting irresistibly the old psychological saw that the content of one's sexuality is a reflection of one's *nature*.

Unlike some forms of sex-positive discourse, then, these novels do not divorce private behaviour from the public realm, arguing implausibly that there is no link between the two. But nor do they, like some anti-BDSM feminist theories, propose that sexual practices with a male top and female bottom are always a direct or inescapable translation of socially sanctioned male oppression of women in patriarchy. I point this out not in order to argue that James is *deliberately* proposing a more complex and nuanced corrective to, or sublation of, these binary assumptions – that she is theoretically sophisticated. Rather, conversely, I am arguing that *Fifty Shades* is worth thinking about *despite* its ideological, as well as its literary, flaws because a careful sex-critical reading of it can offer insight into how the dominant heterosexual dynamic is commonly understood as benign and shored up as inevitable. It can also help us to see how non-normative iterations of sexuality are treated as a barrier or threat to the sanctioned narrative of love and 'proper' gender roles, reinforcing the psychoanalytic and sexological stereotype of the pervert as inherently intimacy-inhibited.⁶

It is important and, I would argue, not coincidental that the 'pervert' in the trilogy is Christian Grey and not Anastasia Steele, despite the wealth of wrong-headed debate about the meanings of 'female submissives' that the trilogy has provoked. (Anastasia, crucially, is *not* a submissive.) In *Fifty Shades*, there is barely any hint of autonomous preference for certain sexual acts or erotic scenarios on the woman's part. Anastasia's virginity and complete lack of sexual experience at the beginning of the first book are foregrounded, as they emphasise the extent to which she can be moulded, initiated – and 'corrupted' – by Grey. Caroline Walters has noted in a recently completed doctoral thesis on heterosexual female masochism and submission that the idea of the woman who is initiated into BDSM by a more experienced, often older, man is a long-standing and somewhat ubiquitous trope in both fictional and first-person confessional accounts. She terms this initiation

into submissive or masochistic practices ‘ambiguous coercion’ (Walters, 2012). This term neatly describes the dynamic of the *Fifty Shades* trilogy.

It is suggested that Anastasia Steele *loves* Christian Grey and merely *tolerates* the sexual shenanigans that are his erotic and emotional requirements: she adapts herself to be the reflection of his desire. At one point, James has Anastasia comment: ‘Deep down I would just like more, more affection, more playful Christian, more . . . love’ (James, 2012a, p. 355). Roiphe is correct when she writes: ‘This is important for a mainstream heroine appealing to mainstream readers: she indulges in the slightly out-there fantasy of whipping and humiliation without actually taking responsibility for any off-kilter desires’ (Roiphe, 2012). However, Roiphe veers off-key when she abstracts from this accurate observation of the effects of market forces on the construction of an ‘acceptable’ female character to argue that this reveals a broader truth *about what real women want* (exciting, sometimes brutal, sex without the responsibility of being an actively desirous subject). Like many journalists – and indeed academics not trained in literary or cultural criticism – she displays a tendency to posit a too-literal relationship between representation and life, and between fantasy and practice. The idea that readers of *Fifty Shades* would become doers of BDSM is an unexamined assumption. And, perhaps most crucially, she does not distinguish between discursive commonplaces about women on the one hand, and women’s real, diverse, *and often culturally silenced and disavowed* sexual experiences on the other.

Belief in the ‘nature’ of female desire is propped up by the weight of conservative investments in what a woman *is* – which often has much to do with what a woman is *for*. (Traditionally speaking, she is *for* marriage and reproduction. This has been her historical social function.) This is precisely the kind of structural analytic insight that radical feminist apprehensions of patriarchy can helpfully lend to a non-judgemental, sex-critical analysis of non-normative sex. In an article on the radical potential of female masochism as a challenge to mainstream ideas about women’s sexual nature, Alex Dymock has argued that:

Women who consent to harm may in fact be enacting what is ultimately a resistant category of feminine sexuality, one that is uncivilised, monstrous and impossible to accept because it is anti-reproductive, and therefore distinctly non-normative. (Dymock, 2012, p. 65)

It is clear that the character of Anastasia Steele and the meanings of any ‘harmful’ sexual acts to which she may consent in order to placate her beloved are very far from this reverse-discursive understanding of female masochism as a form of radical agency or a taxonomy-shattering force. Anastasia’s mild, sometimes faked, form of submission is in keeping with (non-erotic) understandings of the feminine as compliant; it is not an abject erotic submissiveness, wilfully exceeding the bounds of decorum, as Dymock describes. In short, it has nothing to do with ‘*jouissance*’.

The lack of sexual subjectivity accorded to young, virginal Anastasia Steele in comparison with the wolfish libidinal self-knowingness of Christian Grey is symptomatic of the more ready cultural ascription of sexual identity to male subjects. As Foucault has shown, in the modern period, people with certain sexual desires, who carry out certain sexual practices, are turned into *sexual personages* via a ‘specification of individuals’ (Foucault, 1976, p. 47) and the ‘medicalisation of the sexually peculiar’ (Foucault, 1976, p. 44). *Doing* becomes a matter of *being*. And Grey is multiply presented using identity labels. He is ‘a Dom’, ‘a dominant’; he is, moreover, ‘not normal’. Anastasia seeks reassurance from his therapist about what it means to be dating ‘a sadist’, only to be told that

that diagnosis, where it pertains to a personality type, has been removed from psychiatric taxonomy (James, 2012b, p. 297). Repeatedly – and in a way that is definitional – Christian is self-confessedly ‘fifty shades of fucked up’ (James, 2012a, p. 269).

However, the narrative of *Fifty Shades* then undermines the orientation model of sado-masochism somewhat. Grey is not ‘a sadist’ or ‘a dominant’ because that is, if you will, his *ontology*. Rather his past abuse has *made him into* this type of personage, fitted him for this identity. James borrows a cod psychoanalytic model of childhood trauma and reinforces the commonplace that the person who seeks non-normative sex is inevitably a victim who misguidedly seeks therapy through reparative adult acting-out. At one point in the first novel, Steele asks Grey whether BDSM is a ‘form of therapy’ for him, and he answers, ‘yes, I suppose it is’ (James, 2012a, p. 436).⁷ Anastasia, however, and by contrast, has no sexual label. If naming and subsequent subjectification as the personage known as ‘pervert’ are the means by which both epistemological control is asserted over non-normative subjects and, via the workings of reverse discourse, by which identity politics and subcultures are formed, Anastasia Steele is not even allowed that degree of sexual subjectivity. The ‘properly’ perverted woman is disallowed and disavowed in mainstream discourse – and, of course, in this faux transgressive trilogy.

Binding contracts

In this final section, I bring together some of the threads of argument alluded to thus far with regard to the relation proposed between gender, desire, normativity and reproductivity in the trilogy and in discourses about the trilogy. In particular, I pursue a reading-against-the-grain of the text with regard to its parallel treatments of contractual BDSM relationships and the institution of marriage.

In multiple ways, the texts reveal the monogamous heterosexual relation and its contractual manifestation – marriage – as comparable to the undertaking of a BDSM contract of the kind that Grey attempts to persuade Steele to sign. BDSM is, in fact, held up as the more sinister sibling of matrimony throughout the trilogy, and parallels between marriage and BDSM recur. In the first book, Christian presents Anastasia with a slave contract, which, not wishing to be a ‘proper’ sub, she questions. Yet, the terms in which Ana’s questioning of the legitimacy of the contract are framed are intriguing:

My head is buzzing. How can I possibly agree to all this? [. . .] *Serve and obey in all things*. All Things! I shake my head in disbelief. Actually, doesn’t the marriage ceremony use those word . . . *obey*? This throws me. (James, 2012a, p. 175)

On my initial reading of the first book, I wondered whether James was about to make a critique of the traditional institution of marriage via this pertinent analogy, but such a satisfyingly critical analysis is not forthcoming and it is left to the reader-against-the-grain to tease out the political implications of the parallel.

Anastasia and Christian then negotiate and bargain over which elements of the BDSM contract will apply to their relationship. He sums up the compromise they reach in the following words:

I want you to follow the *spirit* of the contract in the playroom and [. . .] I want you to follow the rules – all the time. Then I know you’ll be safe, and I’ll be able to have you any time I wish. (James, 2012a, p. 498)

Thus, elements of BDSM control and domination have slipped outside of the contract that would have delimited and contained them, and have found their way into the ‘vanilla’ boyfriend–girlfriend arrangement. And later, when in *Fifty Shades Darker*, Christian has proposed marriage to Anastasia and she has accepted, they once again set about negotiating and bargaining, this time over the inclusion of the word ‘obey’ in their vows, in a gesture that reinscribes the paralleling of the two contracts during Anastasia’s musings in the first book. ‘Obey’ is ultimately left out of the wording of the ceremony, but the husband continues to behave as if it had not been, which the wife points out to him numerous times. The words ‘I never promised to obey you’, spoken by Ana, occur 3 times in *Fifty Shades Freed* (James, 2012c, pp. 184, 194, 197). Moreover, James has Ana make mention of the fact that the BDSM contract would not be legally enforceable (James, 2012a, p. 187); it is a contract based on continuing, constantly negotiable desire, free will and consent. She does not, however, follow through the implications of the fact that the marriage contract, by contrast, is a state-sanctioned, legally binding one with a dubious patriarchal history that requires another legal procedure – divorce – to dissolve it. While the validity and status of the formal BDSM relationship structure are constantly subject to scrutiny, those of matrimony are not.

Christian’s non-erotic control of Anastasia, before and after their marriage, includes limiting her social activities with male friends; buying up the company for which she works so he can control hiring and firing decisions; and refusing to let her go out without armed protection when he perceives her to be the target of a stalker. These elements of the described relationship are extremely sinister compared to the scenes of consensual BDSM. When ‘Smash’, the radical feminist blogger, describes *Fifty Shades* as depicting domestic violence, she is talking about the kind of sexual practices Grey prefers. Her analysis would be more convincing if it focused instead precisely on the non-sexual, non-BDSM aspects of the relationship depicted.⁸

Perhaps the most disturbing of all these interventions is Christian’s policing of Anastasia’s bodily integrity in a non-kink-related context. In his BDSM contract, one of the stipulated rules is ‘The Submissive will ensure that she procures oral contraception and ensure that she takes it as and when prescribed’ (James, 2012a, p. 170). And, even though Anastasia declines to become his technical submissive, this expectation is *still* foregrounded in their vanilla boyfriend–girlfriend ‘contract’:

‘You need to sort out some contraception.’

[. . .]

‘Do you have a doctor?’

[. . .]

‘I can have mine come and see you at your apartment’. (James, 2012a, pp. 270–271)

Thus, expectations and behaviours that, when located in the sexual realm, are made to appear within the logic of the novel ‘kinky’, ‘not normal’, ‘sick’, ‘fifty shades of fucked up’ pass as largely acceptable when they are presented as features of heterosexual romance or marriage. As Staci Newmahr puts it in a recent blog post: ‘The fact that in American consciousness, the kink (which is really very minor) has upstaged the blatant, trite, oppressive heteronormativity of the narrative is deeply disheartening’ (Newmahr, 2012). Kinkphobic readings of the trilogy, such as that by ‘Smash’, dilute their critical power in failing to articulate that ‘harm’ may issue more directly from an acceptance of the cultural scripts regarding ‘normal heterosexual relationships’ and gender-policing than from a diversity of often misunderstood and misrepresented forms of sexual expression.

Conclusion

I have called this article ‘Safewording’ with deliberate punning intent. As well as evidently referring to the ‘safeword’, the mechanism by which the player in a BDSM scene may halt the action, I wish also to suggest that E.L. James’s texts consist of literally ‘safe words’: initially unfamiliar ideas made palatable in a discourse that safeguards mainstream beliefs and values. These beliefs and values include commonplaces about what male and female sexuality are (asymmetrical, reciprocal and heterosexual); about what produces a BDSM practitioner (childhood abuse and trauma); and about the appropriate antidote to perversion (the love of a ‘good’ woman; the conversion cure of marriage and reproduction that the woman desires and the man *needs*). It is instructive to remember here Simone de Beauvoir’s warning of more than 60 years ago regarding the deceptiveness of the ‘dream of attaining through [marriage and] a child a plenitude, warmth and value one is incapable of creating oneself’ (de Beauvoir, 1949, p. 580), and Shulamith Firestone’s assertion that the nuclear family and biological motherhood are the cornerstones of the continued oppression of women as a class (Firestone, 1970). While some literature may constitute social critique, in the case of this trilogy it is in the act of critical reading, not in the primary text itself, that any potential for unsettling conservative gender political messages lurks. It is by reading the trilogy against the grain, by seeing the text as a cultural symptom and by bringing a sex-critical perspective to bear on it that we can use the trilogy to mount a criticism of the idea that romantic love, marriage and the family, as the habitually unquestioned, privileged institutions of heterosexuality, are unambiguously benevolent.

In setting up BDSM as nothing more than a sick, scary – albeit titillating – adult symptom of childhood trauma, and in extolling romance, marriage and parenthood as the inevitable desires of women, and as the means via which a woman can save (or ‘free’ in the language of the trilogy) a sexually and socially errant man, the logic of the trilogy compels us, however unwittingly, to consider the meanings of the two contractual arrangements that are its subject matter. And one cannot but be struck by the parallels and differences between them and thereby begin to ask questions about the doubtful legitimacy of the latter in comparison with the culturally reviled former.

Notes

1. The compound acronym denotes the activities and identities involved in the following: bondage and discipline; dominance and submission; and sadism and masochism.
2. It may not be coincidence that Christian shares a surname with the Dom of *Secretary*, E. Edward Grey.
3. In a particularly bizarre twist, Bret Easton Ellis, author of iconic comment on 1980s corporate psychopathy, *American Psycho*, claimed on Twitter to be interested in writing a screenplay of *Fifty Shades* for its anticipated film adaption. (E.g. tweet on 10 June 2012: ‘Completely committed to adapting *Fifty Shades of Grey*. This is not a joke. Christian Grey and Ana: potentially great cinematic characters.’)
4. For a discussion between the current author and ‘A Radical Transfeminist’ on this point, see the comments beneath this post on my blog ‘Sex Critical’: Downing (2012).
5. For a critique of the politics – especially the feminist and queer politics – of the concept of ‘transgression’ associated with French philosopher Georges Bataille, see Downing and Gillett (2011).
6. This idea is found in classic psychoanalytic works such as Stoller (1975) and Khan (1979). For a critique of this idea, see Downing (forthcoming).
7. This is not to claim, of course, that adult BDSM desires are *never* the result of childhood abuse or that these practices can have no therapeutic function for any practitioners. Meg Barker and Darren Langdridge have written in a particularly nuanced way about these phenomena. (See especially, Barker & Langdridge, 2009.) Rather, I mean to assert that *assuming* this causality as universal is both erroneous and altericidal.

8. Similarly, a group of anti-domestic violence campaigners, Women in Need in Sunderland, UK, are pledging to burn copies of *Fifty Shades* on bonfire night, because they see its BDSM theme as propagating domestic abuse and potentially producing a new generation of violent men. See McQueeney (2012).

Notes on contributor

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