

Castrating the Female Dominant:
An Analysis of Female Agency in Leopold von Sacher-Masoch's *Venus im Pelz*

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ABSTRACT

ELIZABETH ANNE SCHREIBER-BYERS: Castrating the Female Dominant
An Analysis of Female Agency in Leopold von Sacher-Masoch's *Venus im Pelz*
(Under the direction of Dr. Alice Kuzniar)

This work examines the agency of the female dominant in Leopold von Sacher-Masoch's *Venus im Pelz* through the lens of contemporary theories on masochism. I argue that, contrary to popular scholarship, the dominant can assume control of the masochistic scenes through a creation of her own fantasies, fetishes, and authorship of the masochistic contract. To assess the female dominant's role as agent in the original, widely read version of the work published in 1870, I compare it with the lesser known revision published eight years later. I maintain that the dominant's agency is significantly diminished in this later version and that discerning the motivations behind such revisions offers a better understanding masochism in Sacher-Masoch's work.

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INTRODUCTION

Between the years 1870 and 1878,¹ Leopold von Sacher-Masoch negotiated with J. G. Cotta Verlag in Stuttgart to publish several works including his most widely known novella, *Venus im Pelz*, originally included in what he conceived to be a six part master work, *Das Vermächtnis Kains*. In 1878, his publishers contacted him hoping for a revised version of *Das Vermächtnis Kains* with the inclusion of a new piece to replace *Venus im Pelz*, but Sacher-Masoch instead completed a new edition of *Venus im Pelz* as a stand alone novella and later that year this rewrite was published. In describing this new version and the changes he made, Sacher-Masoch wrote: “Je[t]zt ist die Heldin von Haus eine genußsüchtige und despotische grausame Frau, und die Peitsche erscheint nicht als Reizmittel sondern dient dazu den Helden, der bei dem Versuch den Tyrannen zu spielen zum Sklaven wird, zu bändigen und zu züchtigen” (“Ausgabe letzter Hand” 235).² Many would and have argued that his original work already served this purpose, but Sacher-Masoch seems to imply in his letter that the female dominant in his 1870 version was not entirely cruel, and that his protagonist Severin was neither in control nor completely cured by the end of his work. Instead, it is through his rewritten version that Sacher-Masoch expresses his belief that he has achieved these ends. This issue of control, what we may term agency, will be a pivotal feature to the study in this examination of both versions of *Venus im Pelz*.

¹ All citations are references to the 1870 version, as published by the Gerhard Dithmar Verlag (1962), unless noted as “Ausgabe letzter Hand” which refers to the 1878 version as published by Belleville Verlag (2003).

² Any typographic or grammatical peculiarities are original to the text and letters and have been preserved in their original form.

Many studies of Sacher-Masoch's work attribute agency to the male masochist alone, or at least diminish the role of the dominant female, and to my knowledge, all major studies examine only the 1870 version of the text. Little if any research has been undertaken in comparing the two versions of *Venus im Pelz* to develop an understanding of the transformation of Sacher-Masoch's conceptions of female dominance. Though the breadth of Sacher-Masoch's work extends far beyond his most widely known work *Venus im Pelz*, it is this work and its depiction of dominant women which has come to define his reception in most literary criticism, as many of his novellas and short stories address the theme of the dominant woman taking control of a submissive man. This fantasy realm appears, at first glance, to be one of sexual empowerment for women. By subjecting himself to the role of the slave, Sacher-Masoch's main character, Severin, relinquishes control to his female dominant, and yet the female voice is, according to the writings of most theorists on *Venus im Pelz*, often times suspiciously muted. The reader hears mostly that which Sacher-Masoch himself wishes to hear, through the voice of his main character Severin, and that which causes *him* the most joy and/or pain, though there are moments when his feminine ideal speaks with her own voice – breaking free from and at times even taking control of the fantasy herself. As a semi-autobiographical body of work, it is difficult to draw the distinction between Sacher-Masoch's art and his life, particularly with regard to this story and its main character Severin. The moments in the story that are outside Severin's control, where Wanda, his dominant mistress, dictates the scene are particularly interesting because they may point to fantasies that Sacher-Masoch was unable to experience in any other arena outside his fiction. Wanda's control of scenes and fantasies serves as the focus of my project, which seeks to define the agency of the female dominant in the original edition of the book in contrast with that of the

1878 version. It will also examine Sacher-Masoch's potential motivations for these changes through a close reading of his own correspondence with his publisher as well as his then-wife Wanda's memoirs. Before embarking on this analysis, however, it is necessary not only to examine past research on both masochism and Sacher-Masoch's work to situate my project amongst the literature with a particular focus on the dominant woman, the role of agency, and how it is manifested by his female dominant, Wanda.

This research departs from existing analyses of the work by focusing on the dominant woman as an active agent. Rather than seeing Wanda as a construction of Severin's fantasy, and by bringing her participation in the masochistic relationship to the fore, we are able to see the novella, and Severin's model of submission, as a co-construction of erotic ideals which is made possible by their joint contribution to the relationship, based not on sex or emotion, but rather on the exchange of power. By uncovering those places in the 1870 text where Wanda distinguishes herself from Severin's ideal through her demeanor, in laying out the ground rules for the relationships, and in the acting out of erotic scenes, it becomes clearer how Wanda exhibits her own agency and how the relationship is truly an interplay of power. Sacher-Masoch's later edits, by contrast, are not a simple streamlining of the story. Large portions of the text which explain Wanda's motivations or which set the scene for a relationship based on mutual exchange of power have been removed in this subsequent version. Wanda's cruelty seems less justified, at times even arbitrary. She is no longer interested in pursuing an interplay of power, but simply maintains Severin as her slave while she establishes her relationship with the Greek. In this later version, Wanda's agency is diminished by removing her ability to function as an equal, making her character appear more one-dimensional, and removing cues that the reader might employ to establish Wanda

as a masochist in her own right with her own masochistic drives and fetishes. Wanda's voice is weakened through the exaggeration of her cruelty juxtaposed with Severin's submission, and makes for a more repetitive story with fewer opportunities for the dominant to express her agency on the masochistic scenes.

Understanding Masochism

Central to this analysis is a clear understanding of the concepts of domination and submission within the confines of the stories, the definition of pleasure for both the main characters Wanda and Severin, and the establishment of both characters as agents. Sacher-Masoch's notion of domination and submission conceptualizes a very specific aesthetic and is not necessarily even interested in the concept of physical pain. The fantasy of domination outlined in *Venus im Pelz* certainly does include physical pain, but it also includes public humiliation, emotional submission, and serving as the cuckold of a dominant. Psychoanalyst Richard von Krafft-Ebing – who coined the terms masochism and sadism – wrote extensively in his case studies about sadists and masochists as opposing aspects of the same psychological defect, as did his contemporary Sigmund Freud. It is Freud who essentialized sadism as conventional male behavior and masochism as the standard for women (“Sadism and Masochism” 34). Defining these relationships in such terms sets them up not only as binary oppositions to one another, but also as purely sexual in nature. Jessica Benjamin develops a psychoanalytic approach for studying sadomasochism that creates a space for the female masochist and relocates the source of the masochistic desire for submission in the pre-oedipal rather than Freud's oedipal stage. She allows for interplay between dominant and

submissive through the use of Donald Woods Winnicott's theories of intersubjectivity,³ but her analysis relies on outmoded assumptions that the dominant is a sadist and the submissive a masochist. In addition, by ignoring theorists like Gilles Deleuze, focusing almost exclusively on *The Story of O*, and relying solely on outdated psychoanalytic definitions of sadomasochism – which she refers to using the problematic term “erotic violence” – her research limits the roles of the dominant and submissive to these predefined Freudian paradigms and continues to see masochism as an innate characteristic in women.

Gilles Deleuze and Albrecht Koschorke identify sadism and masochism not as two sides of the same “disorder” but as distinct phenomena, with a masochistic submissive only submitting to a fantasy of which s/he is in complete control. In discussing male masochism in *Venus im Pelz*, Koschorke argues: “While torments are indeed meted out to the willing male protagonist, his abandonment strictly follows rules he himself has devised. Playing the part of victim on a perverse stage, behind the set he is in fact the director” (560). When viewing masochism in this way, it becomes less socially subversive for a man to request domination by a woman and for the woman to dominate him. The male masochist, for Deleuze, maintains control of his fantasy and instructs his mistress as to how he should be dominated and what the boundaries and parameters of his domination should be; in this sense, the female – though nominally in control – still obeys the male (43). Koschorke, however, also points out that “both participants [are] constantly falling out of their roles: the apparent dominatrix because she sees herself forced into a game that is not her own; the apparent slave because, in open contradiction to his formally declared lack of rights, he supervises the game's parameters and rearranges them according to need” (560-561). Koschorke's focus,

³ For a more complete discussion of D.W. Winnicott's theories of intersubjectivity see his article “The Use of an Object and Relating through Identifications” in *Playing and Reality* (1971).

however, is on the male masochist as the submissive. If we proceed from the assumption that Deleuze is correct, and sadism and masochism are two very different phenomena, then are not both the dominant and submissive in the relationship participants in the masochistic fantasy, and would not this then mean that they are somehow both masochists? Of the female Deleuze states: “The woman torturer of masochism cannot be sadistic precisely because she is in the masochistic situation, she is an integral part of it, a realization of the masochistic fantasy. She belongs in the masochistic world, not in the sense that she has the same tastes as her victim, but because her ‘sadism’ is of a kind never found in the sadist” (Deleuze 41). If she is not a sadist, and not a masochist, then Deleuze relegates her to an object in the fantasy, rather than a subject with her own agency. Deleuze clearly believes that the masochist and his female dominant do not share the same desires, but by virtue of her participation in the masochistic fantasy, the female dominant is at least able to understand the predilections of her masochistic partner. She may perhaps have her own masochistic desires, or at least is interested in participating in the masochistic fantasy and is therefore able to understand the needs of the male submissive masochist. In this way we might see her not only as dominant, but perhaps a dominant masochist. This point will be discussed at length in chapter two, but reconceiving of Wanda as a female masochist and, potentially – at least in this relationship – as a dominant masochist, opens the door to modes of agency not afforded her as the object of Severin’s masculine masochistic desires.

Lynda Hart points to the problematic gendering of the submissive as male and the dominant as either male or female in Deleuze’s work again explaining how he leaves no potential for a female submissive, or at a minimum for a female masochist to assume control (Hart 72). Could we conceive of the dominant – the dominant female with respect to Sacher-

Masoch – as this sort of dominant masochist, who takes on the dominant role in the relationship, but within the confines of a male masochistic fantasy? When Freud essentializes masochism as a feminine trait, referring to the submissive aspect of masochism, he eliminates the possibility that masochism is a choice on the part of the female. Jessica Benjamin falls into this line of reasoning as well. Throughout both versions of the text, however, we see that Wanda is able to control the scenes, so the reader cannot accept this submissive role of the female masochist. Deleuze, Koschorke, and others focus on the character of Severin as a submissive in control of every scene and point to Wanda as his puppet or unwilling participant. I will show that not only is Wanda a willing participant, but it is she who moves the story along, through her ability to take control of the masochistic fantasy. However, this role changes between the two versions of the text as the motivation for her actions changes. Specific scenes which point to Wanda as a masochistic agent are either altered or removed. There are even moments in the story we might identify to show her own desire to submit as a masochist, without essentializing them as feminine trait, but rather recognizing them as a conscious lifestyle choice.

The Fluidity of Masochism

I shall make use of the terms dominant and submissive for the roles which Wanda and Severin respectively embody, while still acknowledging that even these terms are imperfect for describing the fluidity of the power exchange. The characters' negotiation of the social norms of power within the boundaries of their relationship will serve a central role in my analysis. The submissive maintains some power to create the boundaries of the fantasy, and the dominant plays her roles within the established and mutually agreed upon boundaries. The dominant is, however, also responsible for pushing those limits and initiating

renegotiations of these boundaries. The interplay of power serves as the focus of this relationship and manifests itself in densities of sexuality and power which exist not only in power exchange relationships but also in “normal” relationships. In masochistic relationships, participants are actively seeking to subvert the socially constructed norms of behavior. The social norms control, through legal and non-legal means, “commonly understood” behavioral codes (Langdrige and Butt 70). By seeking relationships that both challenge those codes and lay bare the inequalities within these relationships, masochistic relationships provide a counter-system of control in that is actively sought out and entered into voluntarily. It is the submissive who has the most potentially dangerous position in the power exchange, and as such s/he maintains control of the limits. The dominant respects these limits in order to continue the play. But this is an oversimplification of a much more dynamic relationship. Several researchers in psychology and women’s studies point to the ever changing roles and limits of both the dominant and the submissive explaining that participants often mention they enter into scenes which they would not have thought possible when they first became involved in the relationship (Dancer et al. 91). In *Venus im Pelz*, Wanda pushes Severin’s limits – thereby allowing her to assume control even though he may have laid out his/her limits ahead of time.

Additionally, it may be important to view the relationship between Severin and Wanda not only as a conflict between two masochists, but as two masochists with conflicting expectations. In contemporary terms, sadomasochistic relationships are often referred to as “power exchange” relationships, with a line drawn between scene-based power exchange, which lasts only temporarily for a fixed period and is specifically focused on erotic pleasure, and lifestyle power exchange, which involves maintaining their relationships as dominants

and submissives for weeks, months, and years, where “owner and slave weave their relationship and their power imbalance throughout the course of the day in many different ways and in a variety of settings” (Dancer et al. 95). In this sort of lifestyle power exchange, participants break out of the temporary role-play by redefining all aspects of their lives through either formal or informal contracts. Again, there is interplay and fluctuation to these interactions – while the dominant is almost always the dominant and the submissive is almost always the submissive within a particular relationship, they may fall in and out of these roles temporarily. Wanda and Severin can be seen as falling in and out of their roles as dominant and submissive throughout the story, particularly in the early edition. There are also moments in both versions, where Severin expresses his belief that Wanda has taken “his fantasy” too far. By staking an ownership claim on the fantasy and believing it to no longer suits his needs, Severin not only falls out of his masochistic submissive role, but he also reveals his desire for a more scene-based submission, while Wanda interprets his fantasy as a desire for lifestyle submission and indeed explicitly states that this is her desire.

Moreover, it is useful to recognize dominant and submissive tendencies as comparable to fluctuating gender identities, in that in both cases one can witness a continuum of desire and experience. At any time, the dominant or submissive subject might experience a greater or lesser degree of submissive or dominant impulse and may thus self-identify as dominant or submissive – just as, at any time, the subject might identify his or her personal characteristics as more or less gendered. In this sense, the construction of preference for dominant or submissive roles might be best seen through the lens of gender theory. In discussing the social construction of gender, Denise Riley describes gender as a fluctuating state. “[I]f being a woman is more accurately conceived as a state which fluctuates for the

individual, depending on what she and/or others consider to characterize it, then there are always different densities of sexed being in operation, and the historical aspects are in play here” (Riley 22). This idea presents us with an interesting way to think about dominants and submissives. Perhaps there are different densities of these sorts of “sexed beings” here as well. By treating dominant and submissive actors in these interactions as fluctuating, the control of these relationships is shared to a greater degree than we might see in traditional heteronormative relationships because the gender constructions are not as prominent. Here, it is power which is paramount. Within these relationships, we can see not only gender, but also sexuality as dynamic and fluid, so that at any time within the relationship there is a give and take with regard to not only an individual’s sexuality, but also in relation to another’s authority and gender. Taken in this way, the issues of dominant and submissive, subject and object, feminine and masculine cease to be dichotomies but points along a spectrum which are constantly shifting as each individual takes action.

Lifestyle submission and temporary scene-based submission may also demonstrate this difference between dominant and submissive expectations for these relationships. Much research and writing has been done on short-term sadomasochistic contracts – from several hours to several months – but little has been written showing how these contracts function as a lifestyle. One recent study on lifestyle submission discusses the difference between scene-based slavery and those in which the partners “choose to incorporate their SM interests as a basis for the entire relationship, in all domains” (Dancer et al. 83). Studies refer to slaves in 24/7 relationships as being “in role” at all times. Torben Lohmüller focuses on this idea of roleplay with respect to Sacher-Masoch’s works: “Die Notion des Rollenspiels ist hierbei entscheidend, da sowohl das performative Wesen der Rolle als auch die spielerische Qualität

des Handelns Bedingung für seine von mir unterstellte destabilisierende Wirkung sind” (Lohmüller 30). We must, however, question whether Wanda and Severin are truly playing a role. Returning again to notions of lifestyle submission and scene-based submission, what we may see in *Venus im Pelz* is not a role that is being played, since Wanda explicitly states that she hates role-play (105-06), but rather she conceives of this as a lifestyle choice, which suits her needs better than the scene-based submission which Severin desires. She grows bored of Severin’s desire to repeat the same scene and endeavors to break the scenes representing a desire for a relationship which will evolve and grow. This is an important aspect of understanding the difference between their relationship ideals. Wanda is attempting to assume a new identity outside societal construction, one that is jointly constructed by Wanda and Severin. In discussions of masochism, Ellis Hanson draws on Robert Tobin who observes, “The subversive aspect of the theatricality of masochism is that it suggests that the power in private, sexual, interpersonal relations is arbitrary and can be manipulated” (qtd. in Hanson 43). As a central feature of even modern sadomasochistic relationships, Wanda and Severin both manipulate the power in their relationship in various ways, although more so in the earlier work, than in the later.

One means of making this manipulation less arbitrary is through the use of a contract, meant to codify the power exchange and subvert constructs of social normative power. These contracts exist outside the legal structure and retain meaning only within the relationship itself allowing for a self-regulated relationship, rather than one regulated through external social norms. Some might argue that because these are still contracts, they are mimicking and re-codifying the existing patriarchal power structure; however, they do so on their own terms. Heteronormative patriarchy privileges male/female binaries and is the only socially accepted

and legally enforceable form of power exchange which is enforced by a marriage contract. Sacher-Masoch sets up a contract which functions to bind his two characters together, but outside of these social structures. The drafting and signing of the contract in both stories is significant because it varies so much and this variation is a central feature of the characters' attempt to clearly define the relationship. This contract also exists external to the social and legal structures of society and thereby subverts the power which those institutions have over their relationship. As the sole author of these contracts, this capacity to subvert social influence falls to Wanda.

Though power is the central feature of the masochistic relationship depicted in the novel, pleasure is also important to both characters and much like the character's masochistic expectations so too are their expectations of pleasure at odds. Wanda's desire for pleasure is grounded in a longing for the more hedonistic pleasure-seeking culture of the Greeks. Severin, on the other hand, uses the pain of the Christian martyrs as his primary focus for pleasure – going so far as to equate his own sensuality with theirs. If this is the case, then Severin's pleasure is grounded in the experience of pain, as the stories of the martyrs are gruesome tales which ultimately lead to death. While Severin desires death at various points in the story, death is not the ultimate purpose of his actions, nor truly is pain. Severin gains pleasure through the anticipation of pain and the control of the scene. Deleuze, among others, points to a desire for pleasure and pain but also theatricality in the definition of masochism (Deleuze 101). Severin is a submissive performing his role as a submissive. He desires a scene-based masochistic experience which includes setting the scene; that is part of the pleasure in his actions. Wanda, on the other hand, simply enjoys playing out the scene. She sees no point in the martyr's self-denial, nor the submissive's. She is a pagan, in the model of

ancient Greece, who requires slaves to sustain her lifestyle of seeking physical, erotic pleasure for its own sake. Her agency is tied closely to her ideals of pleasure and lifestyle.

When discussing agency, we can look to Judith Butler who defines agency as follows: “In a sense, all signification takes place within the orbit of the compulsion to repeat; ‘agency,’ then, is to be located within the possibility of a variation on that repetition” (198). Severin embodies one aspect of the compulsion to repeat within the story. He seeks out the same scenes and even uses the same language over and over again in an attempt to maintain his fantasy. Freud points to both participatory and passive compulsions to repeat (“Pleasure” 24). The passive compulsion to repeat allows the subject to maintain a negative situation out of fear for the unknown, while the participatory compulsion repetition attempts to work through past childhood traumas by reenacting them in adulthood. Severin’s compulsion is participatory in that he actively seeks out opportunities to play out his obsession with a dominating cruel woman in furs that eventually comes to constitute his whole identity. The narrative frame of the novella requires the reader to think of the work in the context of a psychoanalytic cure and Severin’s diary could serve as his Freudian talking cure through which he comes to terms with his trauma through its repetition. Though Severin claims he is “cured” through Wanda’s actions, the reader sees that he is simply repeating the actions as the dominant rather than the submissive. The reader assumes that his *Urszene* for this obsession begins with his beating at the hands of his fur-clad aunt, however based on Freud’s descriptions of the obsessive-compulsive, these compulsions typically manifest themselves in adolescence and are based on a scene that took place even earlier (“Pleasure” 24), or perhaps a scene that is only imagined and which did not actually occur (“Totem” 108). As the focus of most research on *Venus im Pelz*, Severin’s masochistic and fetishistic compulsions have

been written about at length, we will therefore focus on Wanda's descriptions of her own infancy and upbringing in order to show that she too fosters her own fetish and repetition compulsion as a competing masochist in the novella.

In order to analyze Wanda's agency and its development from the original 1870 version of *Venus im Pelz* to the 1878 edition, I will examine her agency as a masochist competing for control of the relationship. Chapter Two will focus specifically on establishing Wanda as a masochist. This is a fairly radical departure from most research on *Venus im Pelz*, but much less so if one sees their relationship in light of current research on sadomasochism, and even aspects of Deleuze's portrayal of masochism. Many researchers point to the masochist's, specifically the submissive's, ability to control others in the scenes which they create. Such theories of masochistic control become applicable to Wanda's actions if we conceive of her motivations as masochistic. This, I believe, is one way in which we can show Wanda as an active agent in the work, as Wanda is the architect of most of the dominant/submissive scenes in the story. The chapter will begin with a close reading of Wanda's stated desires and influences in the earlier version and view them first through the lens of research on female masochism and then through that of general theories of masochism. It will continue with a discussion of fetishism and its role in masochism and how it manifests itself in Sacher-Masoch's description of Wanda. It will also address Wanda's compulsion to repeat as related to her masochism and fetishism. The chapter will close with further comparisons between the earlier and later versions of the work. This later version removes most references to Wanda's desires to submit thereby removing her ability to serve as a masochist in the work, denying her the chance to function as a masochistic agent.

Chapter Three will deal with both the function and drafting of the masochistic contract that is central to the understanding of so many analyses of Sacher-Masoch's work. It will begin with an examination of the role of the masochistic contract as a counter to more socially acceptable forms of contractual obligation in relationships, specifically marriage contracts. The contract serves not only as a counter to the heteronormative marriage contract, but also provides Wanda with responsibility over codification of Severin's *Ehrenwort* as a nobleman. After understanding the function of the contract in masochistic relationships, and specifically that outlined in *Venus im Pelz*, I will undertake a detailed analysis of both the authorship of the contract as well as the differences in contractual obligations in both versions of the work. The drafting of the contract in the 1870 edition and the changes made to the 1878 version have a significant impact on how we view the dominant in this work. I will concentrate on research that has focused on Sacher-Masoch's contract to illustrate how, by generalizing about masochistic contracts and losing focus on the text itself, these researchers lose sight of the powerful position the dominant holds in the construction of Sacher-Masoch's narrative. It is important to examine the contracts in both versions against the non-fiction contracts undertaken by Sacher-Masoch to recognize the role of fantasy in these fictional contracts. As a fantasy, there is much more that can be left to not only the imagination of the reader, but also the characters of the work and I will argue that Sacher-Masoch's changes may be conceived as an attempt to manifest his fantasies through his fiction.

The Final Chapter will look at the implications which this analysis has on not only the understanding of Sacher-Masoch's work, but also on studies of masochism in literature. A look at the rationale behind these changes will also be undertaken in this chapter, as there is

significant primary source material, in the form of letters from Sacher-Masoch to his editors, as well as his wife's memoirs published in 1905. Victor Smirnoff, among others, has pointed to an agreement between Sacher-Masoch and his wife, Wanda which curtailed his writing about dominant women after receiving two negative reviews in French and German papers. In her memoirs, *Confessions of Wanda von Sacher-Masoch*, she details how the German paper wrote that his works about female characters were becoming monotonous, and that he "needed to free himself of that type of women by effacing that woman from his life, by extricating himself from her in one fashion or another, so that she would cease to appear in his books" (W. Sacher-Masoch 32). To this end, Wanda agreed to serve as Leopold's dominant mistress, to allow him to focus on his writing and bring in more money for their family. Wanda assumed control of the finances – codified through written contract – and Leopold agreed to abandon his fictional dominant woman. Smirnoff clearly believes this agreement to have worked and states that "it is quite true that none of the novels after this contained any flogging scenes, nor any true 'masochistic' machinery" (64). Based on the dated entries in Wanda's memoir, this agreement took place between 1873 and 1875, with the later version of *Venus im Pelz* being published in late 1878. The changes in the later version can be seen as reflecting Sacher-Masoch's personal desires as well as his struggle with jealousy and continued obsession with the figure of the "Greek" in his personal life. While an ultimate resolution to this question of motivation can most likely not be established, an investigation into these motivations enables researchers to conceive of new possibilities for of Sacher-Masoch's work and theories of masochism.

THE FEMALE DOMINANT AS MASOCHIST AND FETISHIST

Perhaps the most critical departure in establishing Wanda's agency in *Venus im Pelz* is seeing her not as a sadist, per Freud and Krafft-Ebing's analysis of dominant and submissive roles, nor – as Koschorke and others put forth – an unwilling participant who must be trained in her role as a dominant. Rather, in order to show Wanda both as a willing participant and perhaps even as a masochist herself, I will analyze her expressed desires and views on relationships and pleasure and contrast those with Severin's. These views and desires will be presented in the context of research on female masochism in order to show how she is able to use her masochistic desires to exert control and push Severin beyond his boundaries. Finally, in order to demonstrate Wanda's agency as a masochist in the original version of the work, I will look at the revisions which remove this aspect of her character, thereby denying her the possibility of functioning as a counter-masochist to Severin.

In her discussions with Severin on relationships at the beginning of the framed narrative, Wanda articulates a distaste for Christianity and establishes herself as a pagan with a desire to live a life more akin to that of the Greeks. “Durch das Christentum – dessen grausames Emblem – das Kreuz – etwas Entsetzliches für mich hat – wurde erst etwas Fremdes, Feindliches in die Natur und ihre unschuldigen Triebe hineingetragen. Der Kampf des Geistes mit der sinnlichen Welt ist das Evangelium der Modernen. Ich will keinen Teil daran” (34). She wants no part of the modern world, but rather wishes to focus her efforts on living a life with more freedom. She pities modern women: “die moderne Frau, für jene armen, hysterischen Weiblein, welche im somnambulen Jagen nach einem erträumten

männlichen Ideal den besten Mann nicht zu schätzen verstehen und unter Tränen und Krämpfen täglich ihre christlichen Pflichten verletzen...” (34-5).⁴ Just as Severin later discusses his ideal love, here Wanda tells Severin of her ideal life. “Mir ist die heitere Sinnlichkeit der Hellenen Freude ohne Schmerz – ein Ideal, das ich in meinem Leben zu verwirklichen strebe” (33). She distances herself from Christian suffering and asceticism and embraces the sensuality of the Greeks and proclaims herself a pagan. We can see this as Wanda’s ideal lifestyle. While she can be seen as a hedonist, based on her expressed interest in a man who will dominate her, I would suggest that it is more accurate to identify her as masochist focused on Hellenistic ideals rather than Christian ideals. However, we must also examine desires for her ideal partner.

As she continues to discuss marriage and love – which we will explore in detail later in the chapter focusing on the contract and its importance to Wanda’s agency – she clearly states her interests in loving whomever she desires, and her intent to make him happy, but not in marriage. “Einem Manne angehören, den ich nicht liebe, bloß deshalb, weil ich ihn einmal geliebt habe? Nein, ich entsage nicht, ich liebe jeden, der mir gefällt, und mache jeden glücklich, der mich liebt” (36). Wanda describes her ideal man as one who will subjugate her – someone before whom she would kneel. Understanding the integral aspects power exchange in sadomasochistic relationships, the reader can see this as Wanda’s desire to assume the submissive and perhaps masochistic role in a relationship. This does not mean, however, that she is a masochist in the same way in which we envision Severin to be. In passages not found in the later version of the story, Wanda explains that her ideal is not a man like Severin, who is weak and submissive, but a stronger, more complete man, to whom

⁴ This discussion of the hysterical women corresponds to what Foucault describes as one of the “four great unities” developed in eighteenth-century as a means of controlling sexuality. By defining women and their bodies as hysterical, they were regulated and confined to the role of mother (Foucault 103-04).

she would submit. “[I]ch kann mir ganz gut denken, daß ich einem Mann für das Leben gehöre, aber es müßte ein voller Mann sein, ein Mann, der mir imponiert, der mich durch die Gewalt seines Wesens unterwirft, verstehen Sie? und jeder Mann – ich kenne das – wird, sobald er verliebt ist – schwach, biegsam, lächerlich, wird sich in die Hand des Weibes geben...” (48). We see in this passage that Wanda’s ideal man is not weak and willing to give himself over to a woman, but rather is strong and is someone who will subdue her. Historian Gertrud Lenzer attributes these characteristics to the type of man Wanda would be willing to marry (Lenzer 287). This conclusion, however, is not represented in the text. In fact just a few lines earlier Wanda states that she is not interested in marrying again. She will not be with someone whom she does not love, though she condescends to stay with Severin for a time because she finds him interesting and is willing to give their relationship a try. When they later discuss how long Wanda thinks she could stay with a man, she makes very clear the type of man who she could stay with for a lifetime. In the later revision of *Venus im Pelz*, Wanda again expresses no desire to remarry, but in contrast to the earlier version there is no description of what her ideal man might be or desire to submit to such a man. By removing her desire to be submissive, Sacher-Masoch diminishes the potential for her to choose a submissive masochistic role and any possibility for her to serve as a counter-masochist to Severin. If we proceed from the assumption that the submissive maintains the most control over the masochistic scene, then denying Wanda the potential to choose submission and exert control over through her submission in the masochistic relationship significantly diminishes her agency in the later revisions of the work.

If we conceive of masochistic relationships as those involving an exchange of power, then Wanda’s expression of her desire to submit to a man shows not only a conscious choice

to participate in a masochistic relationship, but also the fluidity of her role in these relationships. She does not, however, see herself as the wife of such a man. She would rather belong to this person on her own terms. As a widow, Wanda exists outside the patriarchal marital and familial structures central to nineteenth-century European society. She no longer belongs to a father, nor does she belong to her now-deceased husband. She is her own agent and makes decisions for herself. She does not desire to belong to a weak man, but seeks a stronger man, and yet she does not appear interested in marrying this man or for that matter any man. Other than expressing a desire not to marry, she makes no mention of the form her submission might take, and makes no mention of a desire to submit as this man's slave, only to submit. It seems paradoxical, when shortly after this statement she agrees to live with Severin as though in marriage for one year, in order to allow him to prove himself as the man for her. Severin is permitted all of the rights "*eines Gatten, eines Anbeters, eines Freundes*" [emphasis in the original] (49). Though it is unclear how long the relationship between Severin and Wanda lasts, based on the seasonal changes described, we may be able to guess that one year is not unrealistic. Given this timeline, perhaps Severin's submission is how Wanda perceives of marriage and she is trying to break him out of his submissive role. The first time Wanda mentions the possibility of Severin's intent to marry her, it is coupled with a language and a gesture that marriage would turn Severin into a *Pantoffelheld* – an expression meaning henpecked husband (46). If her intent, initially, was to allow him the rights of a husband, lover, and friend, then it might not be unreasonable to assume that his submission was part of this. Severin himself states "in der Liebe gibt es kein Nebeneinander" (39). This comment shows us Severin's perception that heteronormative love and marriage cannot represent a union of equals, but rather one party must always be above the other. This

may also be part of Wanda's conception of marriage. In either case, Wanda does not seek the socially accepted relationship of husband and wife and the patriarchal power roles that it entails. Instead she enters into a relationship where she is able to receive all the benefits of a marriage without any of the restrictions to her agency.

Conflicting Ideals

Having examined Wanda's ideal, at this point is important to see how her desires contrast with that of Severin's. His dual ideal of a cruel woman and faithful wife is explicitly stated in both versions of the text. While the story of *Venus im Pelz* appears to focus on the cold nature of women, we can just as easily see how Severin seeks out the compassion of his other warm natured ideal as well, thereby shifting back and forth between his desire to be a slave to a cruel woman and his longing for a faithful wife. Monika Treut outlines this discrepancy explaining that in his search for the ideal woman, Sacher-Masoch creates a situation where the character "swims" between the demonic cruel woman and the trinity of daughter-wife-mother (Treut 215). This take on the angel/whore dichotomy is a fairly common literary trope and is central to the fluctuating densities of Severin's masochism. He attempts to create an ideal despotic woman and when he loses control of her he is comforted by the thought of his loving ideal:

Ich habe zwei Frauenideale. Kann ich mein edles, sonniges, eine Frau, welche mir treu und gütig mein Schicksal teilt, nicht finden, nun dann nur nichts Halbes oder Laues! Dann will ich lieber Weibe ohne Tugend, ohne Treue, ohne Erbarmen hingegeben sein. Kann ich nicht das Glück, welche treu und günstig mein Schicksal teilt, nicht finden, dann will ich lieber einem Weibe ohne Tugend, ohne Treu, ohne Erbarmen hingegeben sein. Ein solches Weib in seiner selbstsüchtigen Größe ist auch ein Ideal. (53-4)

By identifying his two ideals, Severin shows the reader that he is drawn to both the warmth of an honorable woman, and the coldness of the unfaithful woman. He believes that he has

found a combination of both ideals in Wanda, and she does indeed seem to embody both of these ideals at different points in the story. She alternates between being a cruel, dominating woman to being a soft, warm, caring woman. But how does this contribute to our understanding of Wanda as a masochist wrestling for power in the relationship with Severin? A closer look at female masochism may provide us with some answers.

As discussed in the previous chapter, masochism, particularly male masochism, has received a great deal of attention over the past century. However, female masochism has been seen alternatively as either non-existent or the natural condition of a woman, as her situation in social structures and the bourgeois family has placed her in a submissive role. More recent theories of female masochism focus on a female masochist with as much power as the male masochist and one who strives to control through submission. I would argue that perhaps the idea of submission is not central to the desires of the masochist. Whether masochism is viewed as the constant anticipation of pleasure or the pleasure gained through pain and humiliation, it is difficult to pinpoint the precise desires which form the core of masochism, and this may be because each individual case is different. Though we may identify a masochist by his/her desire to be in a power exchange relationship and at the same time use Deleuze's guidelines to separate those whom we might consider sadistic or masochistic, it is likely more accurate to acknowledge that at any time the dominant and submissive in a masochistic relationship may take on roles that are more or less dominant and more or less submissive. These actors may also take on the opposite role in other relationships as well – what might be considered a “switch” by today's BDSM terminology (Weinberg 50). The fact that Wanda is a dominant in her relationship with Severin does not preclude her from being submissive in her other encounters, and also does not preclude her

from being a masochist. With this understanding, it becomes easier to accept Wanda as a masochist. As a figure who thrives outside of patriarchal social structures, Wanda is the perfect example of a woman who is able to break out of traditional roles and act as an independent agent.

Female masochism is first, as mentioned in the introduction, posited by Freud as an essentially feminine trait that was nearly inseparable from the female psychology (“Sadism and Masochism” 34). He and Krafft-Ebing saw masochism as a male affliction, because subservience and submission were the natural state of femininity and a desire for this meant a lack of masculinity on the part of the masochist. Jessica Benjamin also points to a sort of essentialization of masochism among women, while still allowing prospects for future change (217). Deleuze, not relying entirely on Freud, leaves open the possibility for female masochism, though he expressly identifies the dominant as feminine. This fetishization of the dominant woman cannot be easily reconciled with the theories of modern writers on sadomasochism like Lynda Hart, who points out that this still inscribes traditional gendered sex-roles on both the submissive and the dominant (72). Hart rejects Deleuze’s arguments in part because they do not allow for female fantasies. The dominant woman, to her mind, is a distinctly heteronormative construction that is played temporarily but only insofar as it is a perceived subversion of the norm, and not a representation of it. Perhaps one of the more interesting analyses of female masochism comes from a female masochist herself. Anita Philips states that the “idea of masochism as an essential characteristic of women can be rejected as self-serving masculinist propaganda alongside ideas that women make ‘good listeners’ or other such ready characterizations, as prescriptive as they are descriptive” (49). She instead points to the variety of sexualities and desires as well as the potential fluidity of

with both gender roles and sexual power roles in masochism. Finally, in her book *Fantasies of Fetishism*, Amanda Fernbach explains the difficulty in distinguishing between masochism and fetishism, particularly with regard to *Venus im Pelz*, going so far as to say that the two go hand in hand (186). If this is the case, in addition to seeing Wanda as a masochist, we must also look at the potential for her to have fetishistic tendencies, just as Severin does.

Male and Female Fetish

As Fernbach explains, “In classical fetishism the fetish stands in for the mother’s missing phallus and masks her sexual difference defined in this model as lack” (4). This definition of classical fetishism (read Freudian) would seem to align with Severin’s fetishization of furs and dominant women. So much has been written of Severin’s fetish that to include a review of all literature would be impractical. I will focus instead on a basic overview of how his fetish has been defined in classical psychoanalytic terms in order to situate it in relation to our discussion of Wanda. While Fernbach attempts to reassign Severin’s fetish to a new type of “decadent fetishism,” in which the female lack of phallus is perceived as a social construction which the male masochist denies, I would argue instead that the description of classical fetishism fits with Severin much better because classical fetishism as described by both Freud and Krafft-Ebbing is derived from the works of Sacher-Masoch. It is hard to know, particularly vis-à-vis Sacher-Masoch’s work, if this definition is prescriptive or descriptive. What is clear, however, is that it does not allow for the female fetishist, because the woman is not attempting to mask the lack of the mother.⁵ In order to derive Wanda’s fetish, it therefore becomes important to look for other definitions and modes of fetishistic behavior.

⁵ For further discussion of female fetishism see Gamman (1995) and McCallum (1999).

Here Fernbach's definition of "decadent fetishism" and her focus on Wanda's desires in *Venus im Pelz* opens up a possible understanding of her fetish. Decadent fetishism is "concerned with the disavowal of cultural rather than corporeal lack," meaning that in order for Wanda to be seen as a fetishist in this light, she must either be disavowing her "lack from a position of cultural marginality; or by disavowing the cultural lack of the Other from a position of cultural centrality" (26). As a woman, Wanda already embodies a marginalized position in society. Though she is a *Fürstin*, one would assume that she received this title as a result of her previous marriage, but now that she has been widowed, she is forced into an even more marginalized position. It is interesting to note the use of *Witwe* (widow) versus *Fürstin* (countess/princess) in the two versions of the text. Many instances of Wanda's name or references to her as a widow in the original are changed in the later version of the text to *Fürstin*. By making this textual change, Sacher-Masoch changes her from the socially marginalized role of widow to that of *Fürstin*. Sacher-Masoch himself explains this change as follows: "Um den her[r]schsüchtigen Charakter der Heldin in "Venus im Pelz" beßer zu motivieren, habe ich aus derselben eine reiche Fürstin gemacht und dafür die Fürstin in der "Liebe des Plato" in eine Gräfin verwandelt" ("Ausgabe letzter Hand" 235). What is unclear is how this is supposed to better motivate Wanda's character. Perhaps because of her wealth she is used to commanding respect and maintaining servants or wearing furs. While, on the surface, the position of *Fürstin* affords her greater social position, the title itself means little. In addition, by deemphasizing the marginal position of the widow, Sacher-Masoch diminishes the ability for Wanda to function outside of social norms. From the margins, Wanda is able to disavow her lack of power within society and assume control in the masochistic fantasy. Her yearning for the lifestyle of Greek decadence rather than

Christian morality shows the creation of a fantasy where Wanda becomes a Greek goddess and fetishizes Greek culture as a means of reclaiming social power. Though this love of Greek culture is present in the later version, it is only because Wanda is given the marginal widow in the first version that it takes can assume the position of decadent fetish. In the later version it takes on less importance and only serves as a counter to Severin's Christian ideal. By claiming Greek culture as the overarching theme of her fetish, the fetish objects may be anything from the dresses of the Venus, to the hedonistic/hetaeristic lifestyle which she seeks. I am reluctant to say that the classical white Greek-style dress is her only fetish object, since "passion for cloth" has often been defined as a female fetish and the potential exists to essentialize this as female fetish behavior and nothing more, but it is one of the objects the reader can look at as embodying her fetish (Fernbach 80). Her other fetish objects may not necessarily be material, but rather idealized images. Since the story is not told from Wanda's perspective it is difficult to know what other objects might hold importance for her, since only those items which strike Severin's interest are described. Sabine Wilke points to Wanda von Sacher-Masoch's variations on the male masochistic fantasy in her own stories of women in furs, as an attempt to reclaim the scenes for the woman (Wilke 14). While these descriptions are instructive to a degree, based on Wanda's memoirs many of these stories were written prior to her marriage to Sacher-Masoch and after the writing of Sacher-Masoch's first version and they may not provide a great deal of insight into Leopold von Sacher-Masoch's masochistic fantasies and fetish objects of the dominant female.

Before Wanda reads Severin's poetry describing his desire for Venus, he sees her on the balcony: "Ich kann auf den Balkon hinaufsehen. Manchmal sehe ich auch wirklich hinauf und dann schimmert von Zeit zu Zeit ein weißes Gewand zwischen dem dichten, grünen

Netz” (22). While we cannot know whether this white garment is a Greek style dress, there are other clues in the story which point to this possibility. After reading Severin’s poetry on the back of his reproduction of the Venus image, she dresses again in white flowing robes which Severin equates to those of a goddess. “Da ist sie – Venus – aber ohne Pelz – nein, diesmal ist es die Witwe und doch – Venus – oh! welch ein Weib! Wie sie dahsteht im leichten, weißen Morgengewande und auf mich blickt, wie poetisch und anmutig zugleich erscheint ihre feine Gestalt....” (30). Though it is Severin who mistakes Wanda for Venus, had she not been wearing the clothing that called to mind the image of Venus, he might not have made such a mistake. When they finally meet she introduces herself as Wanda and then, though not directly quoted, says that she is really Severin’s Venus. We know that she speaks these words and declares herself Venus based on Severin’s response and their subsequent conversation. Severin responds: “Aber Madame, wie kamen Sie auf den Einfall?” (31-2). She says that she got the idea from the back of the picture. However, she gets only the idea of being *his* Venus from Severin’s poetry. If we read into Wanda’s background, she is not introduced to her notions about Greek culture from the poem and text on the picture. If she already sees herself as the embodiment of Severin’s ideal before ever engaging in a conversation with him, then analyses which point to Wanda’s “education” in the ways of dominance ignore her self-identification early in the work. This would also correspond to her selection of Alexis Papadopolis, the Greek, as the one to whom she believes she could belong not only because of his cruelty, but because she can live out her fetishistic fantasies with him as her partner.⁶

⁶ Most research points to the Greek as a homoerotic figure for Severin, but he could just as likely fulfill an erotic role for Wanda.

Since Freudian psychoanalysis does not make room for the female fetish, we must turn to Jessica Benjamin's reconceptions of Freud. Her analysis relies on a disavowal of the controlling mother in preference for the power of the father (Benjamin 96). There is, however, no mention of Wanda's mother in the story. In Wanda's discussions of her childhood she refers only to her father.

[M]ein Vater war ein vernünftiger Mann. Ich war von der Wiege an mit Abgüssen antiker Bildwerke umgeben, ich las mit zehn Jahren den Gil Blas, mit zwölf die Pucelle. Wie andere in ihrer Kindheit den Däumling, Blaubart, Aschenbrödel, nannte ich Venus und Apollo, Herkules und Laokoon meine Freunde. (37)

Not only is her father described as her primary care giver, but from her crib she sees statues of Greek gods, the works she reads are all focused on strong, adventurous men, and she counts men and male gods as her friends – with the exception of Venus. Since fetish development begins in infancy, it would follow that Wanda first realizes her lack of phallus in relation to what her father represents for her, which would most likely be male strength and Greek idols. However if Wanda never saw herself as experiencing a lack, but rather developed an idealized association with the father who was never renounced due to the absence of a mother, then her associations of lack may never have developed. She may never have gotten past the pre-oedipal phase and into the oedipal. Benjamin locates masochistic tendencies in the pre-oedipal phase, and focuses on the intersubjectivity of relationships whereby two subjects attempt to co-construct their relationship. She focuses on the pre-oedipal phase as an endeavor to move away from identification with the phallus. The infant at this stage is able to identify with both the primary care giver, typically the mother, and the “other” which is typically seen as the father, thus leading to an attempt on the part of the child to balance the relationship between the two. Benjamin notes that there is not enough evidence to determine the impact of a father as the primary care giver to a child's psychic

development. She speaks at length about the father-daughter bond as an “ideal love” and points to an attempt by adult women to create an “ideal love,” a form of masochism, which seeks to recreate this bond. “Such a person is likely to seek a ‘heroic’ sadist to submit to, someone who represents the liberating father...” (Benjamin 119). We may thus be able to point to Wanda’s recently deceased husband as such a man. On his death bed he tells her that she should take up with other men because she is still young. She attributes her Greek desires not only to her father, but also to him. She nevertheless explains, “Es ist wohl nicht nötig, Ihnen zu sagen, daß ich, solange er lebte, keinen Anbeter hatte, aber genug, er erzog mich zu dem, was ich bin, zu einer Griechin” (38). While maintaining her fidelity to her husband, she points to her education at his hands and how it changed her attitude toward relationships. She considers herself a Greek as a result of her husband’s suggestion that she take a lover. This association with the Greek enables her to assume a role wherein the taking of lovers is acceptable. This desire to maintain relationships outside the bounds of acceptability for her role as a widow, is, in her mind, focused on the escape from modern social constraints and an effort to self-identify as a Greek.

In addition, while Wanda does indeed seek out men who might be considered representations of her idealized father figure, her relationships are not as destructive to Wanda’s agency as Benjamin might suggest, as Wanda is able, even with the Greek, to exert control over the scene and the fantasy. Benjamin’s analysis is useful in so far as we can identify Wanda’s efforts to come to terms with her childhood, social lack, and relationship with her father, but since Benjamin essentializes female masochism, rather than seeing it as a conscious choice on the part of the woman, it is less useful for understanding Wanda’s agency in the story. Wanda consciously disavows her socially imposed weakness. In fact, if

we are able to conceive of Wanda as a masochist who maintains her own fetish of the father and all that he represents to her, then we can see how the fantasies and compulsion to repeat for both her and Severin work against each other in a struggle to gain primacy.

Severin seeks a strong woman who will wear furs for him. Wanda seeks strength that her social status does not afford her and is willing to wear furs in order to act out her own desires to live a life of Greek decadence and tyranny. After hearing her lifestyle desires, Severin suggests that, in order to live the life she desires, she must have slaves, and she agrees. From this exchange, one might assume that Severin plants the idea of slavery in her mind, but we must return to her self-identification with the text which Severin wrote on the back of the image:

Lieben, geliebt werden, welch ein Glück! und doch wie verblaßt der Glanz desselben gegen die qualvolle Seligkeit, ein Weib anzubeten, das uns zu seinem Spielzeug macht, der Sklave einer schönen Tyrannin zu sein, die uns umbarmherzig mit Füßen tritt. Auch Simson, der Held, der Riese, gab sich Delila, die ihn verraten hatte, noch einmal in die Hand, und sie verriet ihn noch einmal und die Philister banden ihn vor ihr und stachen ihm die Augen aus, die er bis zum letzten Augenblicke von Wut und Liebe trunken auf die schöne Verräterin heftete. (25-6)

Wanda believes herself to be the tyrant whom he describes; the tyrant who will make a man her plaything and turn him into her slave. She needs no coercion to become this image, and yet at the same time desires to give herself to a man who will be strong enough to subdue her. She actively creates this Greek fantasy through a series of relationships, but to do so, she must have Severin as her slave, and she must eventually seek out a dominant male. She continues in search of this fantasy while at the same time assisting Severin in the pursuit of his. Her fantasy is, however, a desire for a lifestyle of pleasure and his is a search for scenes of delayed gratification and controlled submission.

She craves pleasure for herself and her partner. She explicitly states that she does not want to be cruel. If this is what she truly wants, then why is she portrayed as enjoying the

moments of Severin's diminished control immensely as he suffers unhappily? Perhaps this is the paradox at the center of their relationship. Wanda is not interested in being cruel if it causes unhappiness, but for Severin, cruelty causes happiness. As long as both of them are still gaining pleasure from the relationship, she is willing to continue being cruel, though she often breaks the scenes to embody Severin's other ideal. There are several possible explanations for her desire to break the scenes in the relationship. The first is that she is seeking this pleasure for herself and her partner. While she is enjoying herself, because they are living a kind of lifestyle submission, she is never certain that Severin is happy. She must decrease her cruelty in order to verify his pleasure.

This sort of fluidity is common in sadomasochistic relationships as a means of verifying the submissive's pleasure and continued participation. Pat Califia describes such interactions in her account of her own sadomasochistic scenes (145-7). The second possibility is that Wanda treats Severin with warmth in order to show him his other ideal, which functions as the smothering mother figure, from whom he is trying to escape. Through this embodiment of his dual ideal, the cruel woman and the warm nurturing woman, she attempts to renegotiate the bounds of the scene by changing her approach to the submissive. This sort of renegotiation is also characteristic of lifestyle submission. Typical modern masochist relationships involve the use of limits or "safe words," however in 24/7 slave relationships the use may be limited. "'Pushing limits' is common within SM relationships. The sense of surrender and belief that the 'slavery' is real, is confirmed when slaves participate in behavior that previously seemed beyond them" (Dancer et al. 91). Wanda not only continuously tests these boundaries, but is able to wrest the control of laying the initial ground rules for the relationship from Severin as well.

The relationship is initially bounded by Severin's fantasy, but as Wanda begins to take control, Severin's density as a masochist wanes. He questions his own desires and tells Wanda that she is taking *his* fantasy too seriously. She responds with strength and furor: "Zu Ernst? Sobald ich sie ausführe, kann ich doch nicht beim Scherze stehen bleiben... du weißt, wie verhaßt mir jedes Spiel, jede Komödie ist. Du hast es so gewollt. War es meine Idee oder die Deine? Habe ich dich dazu verführt oder hast du meine Einbildung erhitzt? Nun ist es mir allerdings Ernst" (105-6). Wanda does not want to play a role in a scene-based relationship. She is interested in the lifestyle submission to which he agreed, and yet he believes that her desires are just a whim. Again, since she has promised him a marriage – which she has no intention of fulfilling – he believes that she can fulfill both of his ideals. He sees this as a performance which will be abandoned at a later date, but she does not. She calls him her slave and makes him her slave. Most research on masochism points to the privileged position of the submissive masochist, particularly with regard to entering into the relationship and claiming their identity as slaves, but Wanda turns his fantasy into reality and declares Severin her slave, thereby potentially turning many theories of dominant and submissive in *Venus im Pelz* on their heads.

As we have seen thus far, Wanda describes as her ideal a man who will subjugate her. This masochistic tendency, which is only expressed in the earlier version of the work, establishes a pattern of behavior for Wanda which enables the reader to see her desires for the power of classical Greece and the accompanying accoutrements as her fetish. Her insistence on Severin's submission is therefore established as a means of maintaining the Greek lifestyle which is part of her fantasy. In the later version of the work, while we still learn of Wanda's affinity for all things Greek, her desires are never bound to any sort of

masochism or fetishism. She is also not a masochist in the same way we envision Severin. She too has an aesthetic ideal of pleasure and in order to act it out, she needs a willing partner. Throughout the story, she strings Severin along with the temptation of his loving, warm ideal, and while she claims that she is willing to marry Severin, the reader does not get the sense that he is truly her ideal man. Toward the end of the story when Severin fears that Wanda will leave him, he threatens to kill her. It is at this point that she tells him that he is now a man that she can love because he has taken control. “So gefällst du mir...jetzt bist du ein Mann, und ich weiß in diesem Augenblicke, daß ich dich noch liebe” (219). Severin, it seems, is now able to embody Wanda’s stated ideal, and yet again Wanda is in more in control of this situation than he is. She is not the dominated woman without power. Instead she stands equal to Severin. “Wanda heftete einen großen, ruhigen, unbegreiflichen Blick auf [ihn]” (219). She breaks the scene, and tells him that he is no longer her slave, however, she is really playing on his desires for his other ideal. While the submissive masochist submits as a slave in this instance, the dominant in the masochistic scenario is the one who releases the slave and breaks his contract – at least temporarily. She uses his other ideal against him in order to reclaim the scene and lull him back into submission. It is in these moments where we can also see Wanda’s agency and voice: when she questions Severin, calls him by his name after he has assumed the identity of Gregor, and the times where he tries unsuccessfully to regain control and shape her into becoming one or the other of his ideal.

From the beginning of the story, there is talk of Wanda taking up with another man and fulfilling this fantasy for Severin. The boundary placed on this interaction in their relationship is that Severin desires that she love only him, but after becoming her slave Severin is no longer permitted to plead for her love after she takes on a lover. Instead, Wanda

breaks the repetition of action by crossing his one hard limit. After spending time with the Greek, she tells Severin that she has fallen out of love with him, and now loves Alexis. She is drawn to his strength and power and she desires that Alexis dominate Severin. With one line in his diary, Severin indicates that his mutual participation is over: “Das übertraf meine Phantasie” (229). She breaks his repetition compulsion, while hers carries on. Her desire for hedonistic Greek pleasure drives her compulsion to repeat. After arriving in Italy, she seeks out several men of her own accord. First she meets a Prince, with whom she spends a great deal of time, while assuring Severin that she has not been unfaithful to him. She then seeks out another slave in the form of the German painter. This is particularly interesting because she seeks another slave, giving credence to the suggestion that she desires additional slaves not just Severin in particular. It is also interesting that he is a painter who will create not only an eternal representation of Wanda and Severin’s relationship, but also a scene which she stages.

While painting Severin and Wanda, the painter feels that her face has lost the look he desires. In order to regain this look, she assumes a stronger position and strikes Severin with the whip. Severin describes her face: “Während sie mich peitscht, gewinnt Wandas Antlitz immer mehr jenen grausamen höhnischen Charakter, der mich so unheimlich entzückt” (184). With this the painter is overcome and requests that he be whipped as well. Wanda says that she would do so “mit Vergnügen” and allows Severin to watch as she whips him. Though Severin can only describe his own emotions in this scene, Wanda not only describes her actions as pleasurable, but she assumes the role of Venus for the painter. Her embodiment of Venus continues in scenes with the painter where Severin is not permitted to watch, but is locked out, allowed only to listen to Wanda enjoying herself with the painter.

She engages in relationships with two men of very different personalities, one strong and one weak, before she encounters the Greek, who embodies *her* ideal. Her search for the right partner displays not only her repetitious desire to seek pleasure in various forms, but also her search for her own model partner. There is no evidence that Severin was ever her ideal in either version, but certainly not in the first, where she expresses her ideal man as someone before whom she would kneel, but since each of her lovers is so different there is clearly a desire to experiment and push her own boundaries, as well as Severin's.

Breaking the Compulsion to Repeat

Identifying how Wanda is able to interrupt Severin's repetition through the introduction of variation either by embodying his ideal of a warm, caring woman or by introducing other lovers becomes a key feature of her agency in these stories. By not allowing the scene to proceed as Severin would desire it, she interrupts his repetition. Though one may argue that by taking on various lovers she is herself repeating a pattern, each lover she takes is in some manner different. They are of different stations, physical characteristics, and positions within the relationship. Each new lover is an attempt to introduce variation not only into her choice of lovers, but also into Severin's reaction to them. In the earlier version of the work, she is able to elicit varying emotions from Severin through the introduction of these lovers. With the Russian Fürsten, he is jealous, melancholy, and tries to get Wanda to end the dominant/submissive relationship and take him on as her husband. Instead of agreeing to this, Wanda declares Severin her slave – even before the contract is signed. Post contract, her next lover is Fürsten Corsini. When Fürsten Corsini dines with Wanda, she requires that Severin serve them and punishes him in front of the colonel for his clumsiness. Severin's reaction is jealousy, though he no longer shows his jealousy. "Eine Ohrfeige ist

doch eigentlich mehr als zehn Vorlesungen, man begreift so schnell, besonders wenn es eine kleine volle Frauenhand ist, die uns belehrt" (154). He is not only contractually obligated to serve Wanda, but he also does not want to repeat his previous reaction. It is Wanda who is teaching Severin, not the other way around, as some have theorized.⁷ Eventually Severin comes to seek out such a harsh reaction, but instead he is ignored rather than punished, again Wanda is attempting to train him by changing varying her response. She then invites Severin to dine with her and treats him with kindness, suspending the contract temporarily. Every time Severin thinks that he knows how she will react to something she alters her reaction in order to keep him from repeating the same actions.

The later version of the work is not as subtle and Severin learns very few lessons from his dominant mistress. Her first lover is a hussar colonel. She flaunts this relationship before Severin. "Mit was für einem Blick er ihr zuletzt beim Abschied die Hand küßt, und sie ist nicht im Mindesten beleidigt von diesem Blick, der mich zum Mörder machen könnte" ("Ausgabe letzter Hand" 53). This jealousy is more vocally expressed and repeated throughout the story. When he confronts Wanda regarding her infidelity, she tells him that she has been faithful but warns him not to continue his jealousy to the point of her boredom. "Ich gehöre dir...keinem Anderen. Indeß habe ich nichts dagegen, wenn du eifersüchtig bist, so lange mich deine Qualen belustigen, aber weh dir, wenn deine Eifersucht mich zu langweilen beginnt" ("Ausgabe letzter Hand" 53). However, Wanda is not able to affect any change in his behavior and eventually does become bored with his constant repetition of accusations and jealousy in the final version. All of these variations in relationships culminate in a final encounter with the Greek in both versions. The Russian Fürsten is

⁷ See Deleuze, Koschorke, and Reik.

completely absent in the final version, and in fact most interactions initially associated with him are established as further development of her relationship with the Greek.

The Greek, Alexis Papadopolis, is in many senses the ultimate lover in both versions of the story. Both Severin and Wanda are at first attracted to his powerful manner. Severin is instructed to find out more about him and returns with information on his background. “Man sagt, er sei in Paris gebildet und nennt ihn einen Atheisten. Er hat auf Candia gegen die Türken gekämpft und soll sich dort nicht weniger durch seinen Rassehaß und seine Grausamkeit, wie durch seine Tapferkeit ausgezeichnet haben” (193). She is delighted and acknowledges that he meets all of her needs. Until this point, all of her lovers had been substitutes for her Greek ideal, and now she has found an actual Greek. There is no need for role play with this man, because as she points out, he is everything she desires: “Oh! das ist ein Mann wie ein Löwe, stark und schön und stolz und doch weich, nicht toll wie unsere Männer im Norden” (204). The use of “toll” in this phrase is replaced by “roh” in the later version, implying that, for Wanda, men from the north like Severin, are perceived as unrefined rather than simply wild. Scenes which point to the Greek’s cruelty toward Wanda are absent from the final version of the story, likely due the removal of Wanda’s desire to submit to a man. I would also argue that his atheism is also appealing to her. It presents her with an opportunity to break from the Christian values of social interaction she has attempted to escape from through her actions throughout the story.

The “curative” end of the story, wherein Severin’s poetry is beaten out of him by the Greek, has been seen by many as Severin overcoming his homosexuality by allowing the Greek to dominate him. It is, however, Wanda who sets this scene. She gives Alexis the whip and desires that he wear her furs. In the later version she even encourages Alexis to continue

whipping Severin. She shows little mercy. Originally, she packs her bags, speaks hardly a word and leaves the scene with Alexis, never to return. The later revision sees her verbally expressing an official break with her contract with Severin. Delivering him to a man was not enough to break the contract, she must officially release him. In both versions, she breaks his compulsion to repeat his actions by introducing variation and pushing his boundaries. He explicitly states that he does not desire to serve her lovers, and yet she forces the issue. It is in the later version that she is unable to train him and push him enough to break his own repetition, and she must verbalize the renunciation of the contract.

Conclusion

This chapter addresses how seeing the character of Wanda as a masochist furthers the readers understanding of her as an agent in the story. Primarily I suggest that her masochism and fetishism allow us to see her as an agent in the masochistic scene. Most analyses of *Venus im Pelz* point to Wanda as passively going along with Severin's fantasies, and ignore the potential for her agency in the relationship. I believe that, by focusing on Severin's agency, there has been a tendency to associate Sacher-Masoch with Severin, due to the autobiographical nature of the work. Wanda and Severin are fictional characters, who fulfill a fantasy role for Sacher-Masoch and as such there is a greater range of potential with respect to their relationship than there would have been in his non-fictional relationships. This enables Sacher-Masoch to write an idealized interaction between dominant and submissive which may be seen as exaggerated and perhaps unrealistic in nature. His initial version, written after his lifestyle submission with Fanny von Pistor, presented a fantasy of his life with Fanny. As I hope to address in the next chapter, Sacher-Masoch's revisions to the

motivations of the female dominant may have been an attempt to reassert jurisdiction over a fantasy, of which he had lost control.

We must also not forget that the title of the primary work is *Venus im Pelz* not “Bekenntnisse eines Übersinnlichen,” the title of Severin’s manuscript that is framed within the story. The focus was meant to be directed to the dominant female. Perhaps this was intended as adoration, but I think it is important to understand what this title suggests, not just in the context of Severin’s obsession, but also with respect to Wanda as a character. Many have pointed to the title of Severin’s manuscript as a key for how we might understand the work, but as the title, “Bekenntnisse eines Übersinnlichen,” and the quote from Goethe’s *Faust* associated with this title, do not appear in the later version of the work, this conclusion must be called into question.⁸ By removing this text, the reader is able to see the framed narrative as a simple diary meant to preserve the memories, and eliminate a focus on the work as confessional. While the dominant woman is certainly an increased focus in the later work, her agency is not. She is established as an object. Of Wanda in the later version, Sacher-Masoch wrote:

Man war nur von der Entwicklung und Motivierung peinlich berührt, es widerte an daß die Heldin von dem Helden förmlich gezwungen wurde ihn zu misshandeln und daß in Folge deßen deren Grausamkeit, deren Peitsche als ein Anregungsmittel für die Wollust eines impotenten Mannes erschien. (“Ausgabe letzter Hand” 234)

His altered text is meant to represent a woman who is forced to abuse the hero. And indeed the depth of character which we see in Wanda’s desires to submit and her active search for such a man establishes her as an agent in the earlier version of the story. We should also note that Sacher-Masoch notes that it is the whip, not the woman and her actions, which serves as

⁸ For detailed analyses, see Hanson and Lohmüller

the stimulant for the man in his final version. In fact, though it is her whip, she may not even need to be wielding it in order to meet Severin's needs.

MASOCHISTIC CONTRACTS

Having examined the power exchange, relationship expectations, and agency of both Wanda and Severin in the previous chapters, we now turn to the importance of the masochistic contract in *Venus im Pelz*. This chapter will first examine existing research on contracts in both the novella and those used to define real-life sadomasochistic relationships. We will then look at the importance of the masochistic contract as a response to the marriage contract. It will continue by focusing specifically on the content and authorship of the contract and the suicide note, and compare how they are presented in both the earlier and later versions, as well as what implications those changes have for our understanding of Sacher-Masoch's work. Finally, some comparisons between Sacher-Masoch's fictional contracts and those he entered into with his partners may be instructive for gaining a better understanding of the role these contracts played, as well as the development of these contracts throughout his life and fiction.

Before looking at the text itself, we should examine theoretical discussions dealing with both masochistic contracts in general and the contract in *Venus im Pelz* specifically. In his 1969 discussion of the masochistic contract, Victor Smirnoff points to the contract as a means of punishing the dominant and making her role as painful as possible, as evidenced by Wanda von Sacher-Masoch's own memoirs.⁹ He points out that the submissive lays out the

⁹ Smirnoff points to a passage in Wanda von Sacher-Masoch's memoirs where she states that he made the experience "as painful as possible," but he neglects to mention the next line in this statement: "He [Severin] had whips specially made to order, including one with six lashes studded with sharp nails" (W. von Sacher-Masoch 33). My reading of this passage would point to the flagellation being as painful as possible for Leopold von Sacher-Masoch rather than Wanda.

rules (Smirnoff 65). Smirnoff assigns responsibility for the contract to the masochist or, in the terms that we have been using throughout this research, the submissive. Deleuze likewise focuses on the submissive's responsibility and drafting of the contract. He states that "a contract is established between the hero and the woman, whereby at a precise point in time and for a determinate period she is given every right over him" (Deleuze 66). Stating that the female dominant is "given every right over" the submissive turns her into a passive recipient rather than a subject who actively seeks her dominance. This is a common weakness among discussions of the masochistic contract in *Venus im Pelz*. Hartmut Böhme echoes the sentiments of most theories on masochistic contracts when he outlines the paradoxical roles of dominant and submissive:

Wanda, indem sie per Unterschrift zum Domina wird, mit dieser Unterschrift zur Dienstleisterin des Mannes wird, die sich als ihr Sklave verdingt. Als Herrin ist sie instrumentalisiert, während der zum Ding und Sklaven degradierte Severin zum Regisseur der Szene wird...[Das] Ding (die Frau) wird zum Agens, zum souveränen, ja despotischen Subjekt; doch indem sie dabei den Willen Severins erfüllt, vollstreckt sie ihre Verdinglichung. (20)

This is a fairly widespread explanation of the masochistic contract. The dominant is portrayed as merely acting out the desires of the submissive by codifying their relationship.

John Noyes points out: "Domination in Sacher-Masoch's masochistic scenes is controlled not by the desire of the dominatrix but by the contractual agreement. Dominatrix and masochist are bound in a regime of domination whose controlling force is juridical reason" (72-3). While we may be able to point to Sacher-Masoch's writing of the contract as a masochistic fantasy, Noyes ignores the fictional author of this contract. Deleuze offers the dominant woman the potential for more agency when he argues that the contract imbues the mother (read dominant) with the rights of the law, thereby endowing her with a symbolic phallus and transforming her into a more commanding figure. Since it is the dominant

woman who crafts the contract, it is her desires that control Noyes' "juridical reason." Again, however, Deleuze and others fail to recognize the importance of contractual authorship.

Barbara Mennel focuses on the signing of the contract as the end of the masochistic fantasy because it "turns the fantasy into law," and forces Severin to give up his life (52). I would argue, however, that rather than seeing the contract as the endpoint, or even the beginning of the end, it is the start of Wanda's strongest intervention on the fantasy. It enables her to begin a relationship of lifestyle submission, rather than the playacting of scene-based submission. Referring to contemporary sadomasochistic contracts, Angel Butts points out that contracts are "doubly binding...just as slaves are beholden to serve, Masters, in turn, are obligated to provide the slaves with opportunities to serve them" (68). This conception of the masochistic contract requiring concessions on the part of the master and submissive corresponds to Wanda and Severin's sharing of masochistic power. Wanda provides opportunities for Severin to prove his devotion, while Severin is required to serve. As a foundation for this, we must return to the concept of lifestyle power exchange, which allows for limitless ownership and power over the submissive, while at the same time creating an atmosphere of masochistic fluidity between the dominant and submissive. In order for such a relationship to work the dominant must master the slave in such a way that the submissive is comfortable placing his/her life in the hands of the dominant.

Belief in limitless ownership, then, is belief in the ultimate power of the Master – the wholly owned slave lives solely because the Master *allows* him or her to live...the slave who places his or her life wholly in the hands of the Master demonstrates an ideal, perhaps even sublime, level of Mastery – one that many Masters and slaves may aspire to but few could hope to achieve. (Butts 74)

The question which must be addressed is whether Wanda does indeed achieve this level of mastery wherein Severin feels comfortable placing his life wholly in Wanda's hands. Perhaps because Wanda is developing into a dominant – as well as submissive in the earlier version –

throughout the story, it is not until the end that he feels comfortable doing so, and as soon as he does, Wanda pushes this boundary beyond Severin's limits in order to end the relationship. We might also be able to argue that Severin places his trust in Wanda from the beginning as he acknowledges that he desires a marriage with her, but that there is no equality in such a relationship. When viewed in this light, he implicitly trusts Wanda from almost their first encounter as his potential wife and mate.

Masochistic Contract versus Marriage Contract

In order to codify the exchange of power in their relationship, Sacher-Masoch introduces the concept of the masochistic contract. Contracts between dominants and submissives subvert constructs of social normative power. These contracts exist outside the legal structure and retain meaning only within the subculture or relationship. They focus on concerns contrary to the patriarchal and heteronormative power structure – particularly the breakdown or subversion of gender as well as the interrogation of who maintains power, control, and authority both within the culture and within individual relationships. In this sense, Wanda and Severin's relationship becomes a sort of subculture that creates a separate space, allowing their exchange of power to occur as an extension of the masochistic relationship, just as heteronormative patriarchy is an extension of the modern marriage contract. A marriage contract is an excellent counter-point to the masochistic contract in that it privileges male/female binaries, promotes procreation, and is the only socially accepted and legally enforceable form of power exchange.

Wanda's contempt for Christian marriage is apparent early on in the work, as she tells Severin of her embodiment of her own Greek ideal. "Es ist nur der Egoismus des Mannes, der das Weib wie einen Schatz vergraben will. Alle Versuche, durch heilige Zeremonien,

Eide und Verträge Dauer in das Wandelbarste im wandelbaren menschlichen Dasein, in die Liebe hineinzutragen, sind gescheitert” (35). If she is so disapproving of the idea of Christian marriage then why does she agree to such an arrangement? Wanda suggests that she and Severin live as though they are married. In doing so, she acknowledges that a marriage is the only socially acceptable form of domination in which she, as a woman, has any rights or power. Having been married, she has already experienced the power which such a relationship has given her. Now, as a widow, she does not desire such an arrangement. Perhaps this is because she believes Severin’s statement that there is no equality in marriage. Wanda’s half-hearted desire to live a married life with Severin quickly transforms from one ostensibly of love to one based on a power hierarchy; Wanda then writes the contract which will codify this hierarchy. As mentioned, Deleuze sees this contract as indicative of the mother figure taking over the rights of the law which had previously been prescribed to the father (95). The written contract becomes a key feature of the relationship between Severin and Wanda. The presence of a contract between mistress and slave might have been subversive for its time and could very well have been scandalous, had it ever been held up as a legal document. However, given the state of nineteenth-century politics both with regard to holding an aristocratic man as a slave and women’s lack of legal power, such a document could hardly have been considered binding while a marriage contract would have been. As described in the previous two chapters, Wanda’s distain for Christian marriage and her desire to establish a relationship outside this construct leads her to seek out a means of holding Severin to his word and honor, while still maintaining the appearance of propriety.

Before engaging in a discussion of the content and authorship of the contract, we must question why a contract was necessary. In her final letter to Severin, Wanda points to

the moment where she lost her respect for him and no longer desired him as a man. This moment can be located specifically in Severin's slavery and demonstrates a significant difference between the 1870 and 1878 versions of the texts. In the earlier version, she points to the moment that Severin was her slave as her breaking point – where she realized she could no longer marry him. “Von dem Augenblicke an, wo Sie mein Sklave waren, fühlte ich, daß Sie nicht mehr mein Mann werden konnten, aber ich fand es pikant, Ihnen Ihr Ideal zu verwirklichen und Sie vielleicht – während ich mich köstlich amüsierte – zu heilen” (236). Here we see that the point at which he becomes her slave, she decides that he is not a man for her, and she amuses herself by serving as his ideal. We might be able to point to the contract as the manifestation of this moment, or, since he is being held to his word and willingly signs the contracts, they become proof that she is no longer interested in him. In the later version of the work, this situation changes: “Von dem Augenblick an, wo ich fühlte, daß sie nicht mein Mann werden konnte, war ich entschlossen, Sie zu meinem Sklaven zu machen, ich fand es pikant, Ihnen Ihr Ideal zu verwirklichen und Sie vielleicht – während ich mich köstlich amüsierte – zu heilen” (“Ausgabe letzter Hand” 134). Wanda tells Severin several times throughout the later version that he is not the man for her, but the first time in the text where she voices this conclusion, she does so because she is bored with his jealousy. She notes that Severin is no longer happy around her and she tells him that she will never be his wife: “*Du bist kein Mann für mich*” [emphasis in original] (“Ausgabe letzter Hand” 55). This same scene exists in the earlier version, but it takes place after Severin has sworn before God and his honor that he is Wanda's slave, and after Wanda has claimed power over his honor by drafting the contract (113). In the later version she decides to make Severin her slave when she can no longer see him as her husband, placing the break not after the drafting and signing

of the contract, but before. The contract therefore becomes an anti-marriage contract and a codification of Severin's inadequacy.

Content and Authorship of the Contract

While Wanda is the ultimate author of the contract in both versions of the novella, there are several moments throughout the story that the reader can point to as having potential for Severin to establish his own desire to become Wanda's slave. He mentions early on in both versions that he desires to serve a cruel woman as her slave if he cannot have his more loving feminine ideal. In the earlier version, he swears an oath and declares that as soon as she commands it, he will be her slave. "Ich schwöre dir hier, bei Gott und meiner Ehre, ich bin dein Sklave, wo und wann du willst, sobald du es befiehlest" (97). He explicitly gives her the right to decide when and where he will serve her. This conversation, which does not take place in the later version, ends with Wanda telling Severin to leave her to worry about him keeping his word, that he will be her slave, and that she will try to be his "Venus im Pelz" (97). She assumes all responsibility for enforcing Severin's promises and in order to ensure that he will do so, she drafts the contract herself.

The contract has the potential to create a further means for the masochist to control the interaction – as long as it is the masochist who willingly enters into the contract and who outlines the terms of the contract. In *Venus im Pelz*, Severin, as the submissive, does not write the contract. While he gives his *Ehrenwort* that he desires to be Wanda's slave, this is not enough for her. It is Wanda who initially conceives of the contract. She first decides where they will codify their relationship with a contract by deciding on Italy rather than Constantinople, stating that she desires to be in a locale where she is the only one with a slave.

Welchen Wert hat es für mich, dort einen Sklaven zu haben, wo jeder Sklaven hat; ich will hier in unserer gebildeten, nüchternen, philisterhaften Welt, ich *allein will einen Sklaven haben*, und zwar einen Sklaven, den nicht das Gesetz, nicht mein Recht oder rohe Gewalt, sondern ganz allein die Macht meiner Schönheit und meines Wesens willenlos in meine Hand gibt. Das finde ich pikant. Jedenfalls gehen wir in ein Land, wo man uns nicht kennt, und wo du daher ohne Anstand vor der Welt als mein Diener auftreten kannst. [emphasis in original] (100)

After travelling to Italy, where Severin serves her as a slave without a contract, she finally decides to present him with one. When he initially reads the contract she writes, he attempts in vain to exact concessions from Wanda. Severin implores her: “Aber der Vertrag enthält nur Pflichten für mich...Zuerst möchte ich in unserem Vertrag aufgenommen wissen, dass du dich nie ganz von mir trennst, und dann, dass du mich nie der Roheit eines deiner Anbeter preisgibst” (98-9). Wanda chastises him for his transgression, but then reminds him of a condition which he has forgotten: that she should always wear furs. She chooses to ignore Severin’s requests and in her final version of the contract the only stipulation for her actions is that she should wear furs as often as possible, particularly when she is being cruel (143). Between the two versions, most of the contract is not changed significantly other than using Fürstin in reference to Wanda, and changing Severin’s position in the relationship from “Bräutigam” (142) to “der begünstigte Anbeter” (“Ausgabe letzter Hand” 83). The one major change to the contract relates to Wanda’s responsibilities as dominant. The original contract requires Wanda “als seine [Severins] Herrin so oft als möglich im Pelz zu erscheinen, besonders wenn sie gegen ihren Sklaven grausam sein wird” (143). This requirement to wear furs is absent in the later version. This has significant implications for both their relationship and Wanda’s role as agent. If we return to the definition of agency as the possibility of the introduction of variation into repetition, we must identify points in the texts where this variation is most apparent. In the original version, Wanda presents the contract twice. In the

first presentation, she reminds Severin of the furs that she should wear when she is cruel, and the second time she presents the contract, this wording has been written in. The desire to wear furs – or at least to codify it as part of the contract – is Wanda’s idea and a representation of her desire.

The fact that the contract in the 1870 version is developed over time points to the interplay and fluidity of dominant and submissive which is at the core of Wanda’s conception of maintaining a consensual slave. While Wanda appears to give Severin input and allow him to set the boundaries of the relationship, ultimately she consciously disregards Severin’s boundaries in the early version – thereby establishing herself as the sole author of the contract and reinforcing her role as dominant. The scene where this interplay between dominant and submissive occurs in the earlier version does not exist in the latter. It begins with Severin questioning whether he truly understands Wanda. “Ich dachte diese Frau endlich zu kennen, zu verstehen, und ich sehe nun, daß ich wieder von vorne anfangen kann. Mit welchem Widerwillen nahm sie noch vor kurzem meine Phantasien auf und mit welchem Ernste sie jetzt die Ausführung derselben” (98). Wanda’s desire for a lifestyle submissive and to escape the prescribed scenes of Severin’s fantasy becomes too real for him when he is presented with a contract that will bind him and his verbal oath in a more permanent way. In the 1878 version, Wanda still writes the contract, but the interim time period between presentation, revision, and signing is removed. Severin is denied any input, but he is also denied the suffering he experiences in the initial version when he reads the contract and begs for revisions. One could argue that Wanda has *more* agency in the later version by not allowing Severin the suffering which he enjoys. In the 1870 version, one might see the iterative process of writing, presenting, and rewriting the contract as an attempt to train

Severin. Wanda's agency in the earlier version of the work is not only associated with the authoring of the contract, but also with the willful disregard of Severin's input. She causes him suffering, but she decides the manner, time, and place where it will be inflicted.

When it comes to signing the contract in both versions, Severin only reluctantly signs and considers backing out. His thoughts echo his sentiments earlier in the story when Wanda takes *his* fantasy too far. He does indeed sign the contract, but it is unclear that he actually signs the second document, which consists of his suicide note, of his own free will. She held his hand to sign this document and suddenly his signature was there (145). There are in fact several times in the story where Severin seems to be lost in a fantasy. In modern BDSM relationships one might associate this dream-like state with the term *subspace*. "Sometimes those who are bottoming during a scene reach a point where their own endorphins produce a powerful natural high, called subspace" (Williams 339). As the submissive (bottom) in the relationship, Severin is particularly susceptible to experiencing this phenomenon of subspace. Other theorists have associated this with moments of him becoming irrational, but if we see them as the manifestations of endorphin overload, rather than an oedipal renunciation of the female lack, then it is Wanda's pushing of the scene which is creating these moments of pleasure for Severin. As the dominant, Wanda pushes the boundaries of the relationship. While Severin is losing control of the fantasy, Wanda gains control. Since everything written in the contract has been agreed upon by Severin, it might be argued that he is in fact getting everything he wants. He requests his mistress to keep him as a cuckold. He desires to be her slave. He has established his own boundaries in the relationship, but she chooses only to accept those conditions which please her, and pushes Severin's limits beyond his fantasies – thereby moving him into this subspace. She desires a lifestyle submissive, while he is only

interested in the fantasy scenes which he has scripted. She is the first to sign the contract and maintains complete control of the contract – thereby taking control away from Severin and assuming it for herself. From the moment Wanda compelled Severin to sign the suicide note – which he may or may not have signed of his own will – she knew again, that she could not be with him. Perhaps she had the note as a test for him, to see if she desired to continue the relationship. She considered it acceptable to cross his limit because she was already prepared to end the relationship.

Sacher-Masoch's Real Life and Fictional Contracts

Most research on masochistic contracts has focused only on those which exist for a short time. Noyes, Ellis, and Nick Mansfield all point to the real-life contracts which Sacher-Masoch entered into with Fanny von Pistor, the relationship on which *Venus im Pelz* is based, and how they tie into the contract written by Wanda. There are, however, significant differences to these contracts. Though readers are often presented with similar contracts into which Sacher-Masoch entered with both Fanny von Pistor and his wife Wanda, we should note that the contract entered into with Fanny von Pistor differs significantly from the one in the novella. First, there are more conditions for the dominant in Sacher-Masoch's contract with von Pistor. The first condition is that, "Frau von Pistor cannot demand anything dishonorable of him –anything that would make him disreputable as a human being and a citizen" ("Venus in Furs" 121). No such statement exists in either the earlier or later contract in *Venus im Pelz*. In fact the contract serves to hold Severin to his *Ehrenwort*. The second condition is that "she must leave him with six hours daily for his work and never look at his letters or writings" (121). This real life contract deals with the day to day issues important to a writer, and does not maintain the same fantasy relationship that Sacher-Masoch develops in

Venus im Pelz. Sacher-Masoch was afforded concessions in the contract to allow time for his own writing and privacy. Finally, the contract with von Pistor is only six months in length while the contract in Sacher-Masoch's novella is left to the female dominant to end by her choice or by the submissive's death ("Venus in Furs" 277). Many point to phrases in the fictional contract in *Venus im Pelz* and the contract between Sacher-Masoch and von Pistor that are similar, but I believe this desire to conflate Sacher-Masoch's relationship and contract with von Pistor with the relationship and contract in his fictional novella has kept many from focusing on the implications of the contract as a work of fantasy in the novella itself, as well as the issues of authorship. According to the way their contract is written in the novella, the dominant/submissive relationship is not limited in time, nor is it a collaborative agreement. There no way for Severin to end the contract other than through suicide, leading the reader to believe that this is a lifetime commitment without opportunity for escape except through death either at his hands or Wanda's. Truly, the only similarities are that Sacher-Masoch, much like Severin, was required to change his name to Gregor and serve a fur-clad mistress. The difference between the fictional and non-fictional contracts is important to understanding the construction of a fantasy in his novella. Because he had so much to lose as the "slave" of von Pistor, he required the contract to protect him, however, the contract in the novella represents his ultimate desire to serve without condition. In addition, though we cannot know whether the contract with von Pistor was written by her or not, by placing authorship of the contract in the hands of the dominant woman, Sacher-Masoch furthers his fantasy by creating a character who will assume total control over his life.

Sacher-Masoch's other real-life contract was with his wife. The contract entered into with Wanda von Sacher-Masoch (Aurora von Römelin) more closely resembles the fictional

contract, if not in text then at least in spirit. Wanda and Leopold's contract, written prior to the *Ausgabe letzter Hand* in 1878, is not bound by any specific time period and requires Leopold's "unconditional surrender" ("Venus in Furs" 122). It also does not require Wanda to wear furs. This change of both letter and intent of the contract is not an accident. Once Sacher-Masoch was married and bound to his wife legally, meaning she was seen in society as the submissive party, there remained little need for a contract which gave him rights, since legally he had nothing to lose. Only in the masochist's fantasies and the private spaces on the fringes of society would such a document hold any weight. In addition, if we are to believe Wanda von Sacher-Masoch's memoirs, Wanda drafted this contract as a means of assuming control of the family's finances. She writes:

I put on the fur and drew up the contract while he [Leopold] stood close by, apprehensive yet satisfied. When the agreement was written he signed it, saying, "Guard it well. Now you are my mistress, and I your slave. Henceforth I shall address you only as 'Mistress.' Command and I will always obey." (W. von Sacher-Masoch 32)

This might explain why the contract is so similar to that in the book: Wanda von Sacher-Masoch may have used the book's contract as a model for her own. The lack of contractual obligation for Wanda to wear furs was entirely of her own design – as she often expressed a distain for donning furs for Leopold. Shortly after this contract is signed, Wanda forbids Leopold from writing about despotic fur-clad women and promises to whip him more regularly to keep his imagination free for other writings. In addition, just as Wanda von Sacher-Masoch may have used the fictional contract as her template, Leopold von Sacher-Masoch's exclusion of furs might have been taken from this real-life contract with his wife.

Conclusion

Several important issues have been addressed in this chapter both in the comparison between the two versions of the story and with regard to existing analyses of the masochistic contract in *Venus im Pelz*. The first is the authorship of the contract in *Venus im Pelz*. While authors like Deleuze, Noyes, and Mennel point to the contract as a key aspect of the relationship, they fail to understand the implications of Wanda as the sole author. She writes all of the clauses in the contract and in the original version of the novella, she goes so far as to offer Severin the illusion input, then denies that input in the final text of the contract. Deleuze explains the contract as imbuing the dominant woman with the power of law, but his language implies that someone must provide her with this power, not that she claims this power for herself.

The second argument in this chapter points to the major difference between the two contracts: the lack of obligation to wear furs in the second version. Though Wanda is not obligated to wear furs, and expresses no particular desire to wear them, she is described as wearing furs throughout the later version of the novella both before and after the signing of the contract. In both versions Severin must request that Wanda wear her furs during his last beating, and she obliges willingly. One must then question why Wanda was not contractually obligated to wear furs in the later version. The contract between Sacher-Masoch and his wife also does not include such language. It could be that Sacher-Masoch realized that such a requirement was not necessary since his wife wore furs for him – though often begrudgingly. Might we see the fictional Wanda of the later work as exhibiting more agency because she wears furs without contractual obligation? This seems unlikely. There is no explicit proclamation of a desire to wear furs in the second version of the novella. In addition,

because her social status as *Fürstin* is emphasized more in the second version of the text, it seems possible that she would have worn furs in keeping with her position, and would not have required a contractual obligation to do so. If we point to her social standing as a reason for her wearing of furs, then it is not an active statement of agency, but rather a passive expression of social rank and maintenance of her standing in that society which requires the wearing of furs. This would also explain Severin asking her to wear furs in the final beating. Because she was not obligated to wear furs, he must request her to do so. In the earlier version, his request and her compliance with it are a sign of agency, because she enjoys wearing furs and has codified this in her masochistic contract.

CONCLUSION, MOTIVATIONS, AND CURE

This research has made a case for readers to regard Wanda, the female dominant, in Sacher-Masoch's fictional work *Venus im Pelz*, as a masochist, as the author of the contract, and as an active agent in the masochistic relationship with her submissive Severin. I have also compared the original and subsequent versions of *Venus im Pelz* to show how Sacher-Masoch diminishes Wanda's active role in the later version of the work by eliminating the possibility for Wanda to act as a masochist with her own fetishistic tendencies, as well as altering her social status to diminish her ability to work outside social normative constructions of sexuality. The questions that remain are related to Sacher-Masoch's motivation for these changes. This chapter will begin by addressing the potential rationale behind these changes. From there it will proceed to an examination of the story's curative ending. Lastly, I will discuss the potential impact this later version and its decrease in dominant agency holds for future analyses of *Venus im Pelz*.

Based on letters published with his *Ausgabe letzter Hand*, April 1878 marks the first time Leopold von Sacher-Masoch's publisher Cotta Verlag contacted him regarding a revision of his work *Das Vermächtnis Kains*. He admits, however, that two years prior he had already begun a plan to rework *Venus im Pelz*. "Ihre Bedenken in Bezug auf die Novelle 'Venus im Pelz' theile ich so sehr daß ich bereits vor zwei Jahren den Plan einer vollständigen Umarbeitung derselben ausgeführt habe" ("Ausgabe letzter Hand" 230). Such an admission suggests that Sacher-Masoch never gave up his writings about dominant women, only that he did not publish them. Wanda von Sacher-Masoch's memoirs point to

two encounters which may provide insight into his changes and renewed motivation for *Venus im Pelz*. The first is Leopold's encouragement of an affair between Wanda and his friend Baron Ferdinand Staudenheim. Staudenheim, who had been having marital difficulties, began courting Wanda in the presence of Leopold. At one point, he kissed Wanda in front of Leopold. Wanda recalled the encounter in her memoirs: "I turned to my husband, who seemed not only happy, but excited" (Wanda von Sacher-Masoch 29). Staudenheim noted Leopold's excitement and offered to kiss her again. This proposal may have taken the encounter too far, as Leopold left the room embarrassed, "without saying a word" (29). His reaction is similar to Severin's jealous reactions in his later version of *Venus im Pelz*. It also places Severin's desire for Wanda to hold him cuckold in a new light. Based on his real life reactions to his wife's potential adultery, we can see that the subdued jealousy in the original version of the text was but a fantasy. The rewritten version is a better representation of his lived experience serving as a husband. Leopold, however, sought out this jealousy and refused to write until Wanda was unfaithful to him. Realizing that the attempt at fostering a relationship between Staudenheim and wife had failed, he instead set out to find a "Greek" who would increase his masochistic fits of jealousy and also serve to whip him (W. von Sacher-Masoch 36).

Leopold's search for an actual Greek may help explain the expanded role for this character in the final version of the text. In an attempt to reenact the fictional Wanda's encounter with the Greek, Leopold suggested that his wife visit the theater and go for walks in her furs. Around November 1875, after Wanda gave birth to her third child, Leopold encountered an ad from a "Greek" in the paper. He forced Wanda to begin a correspondence with this self-proclaimed Greek. Nicolas Tietelbaum, was not actually Greek but handsome

enough that Leopold was “unable to tear himself away from the photograph” of him (W. von Sacher-Masoch 37). After going to see Tietelbaum, Wanda returned home to Leopold who told her that “while he was waiting for [her] he had suffered the torments of the damned, convinced that [she] had already betrayed him with the Greek” (38). Again the repetitious jealousy begins to take hold. Often seen as the impetus for Severin’s cure in *Venus im Pelz*, there is no evidence in his wife’s memoirs that Leopold von Sacher-Masoch ever desired to be whipped or degraded by her lovers. Though many of their friends and acquaintances knew of his predilections for submission and flagellation, both in his writing and personal life, because of his success as a writer, husband, and father he maintained his social status, while he sought out submission within the confines of his fantasies and his relationship with his wife, which enabled him to create a fantasy play world without consequences. This further corresponds with Severin’s desire for scene-based submission in the novella. While Sacher-Masoch did engage in short and long term contracts, his jealousy and desire for social recognition prohibited him from becoming a lifestyle submissive and he instead relied on masochistic scenes and his writings on lifestyle submission.

Sadly, perhaps the most important motivation behind Sacher Masoch’s rewriting of the story was financial in nature. With a growing family, his letters to the Cotta Verlag include repeated requests for monetary advances and shortly before the publication of the 1878 version, he confessed that his work on *Venus im Pelz* had completely consumed him and he had been unable to complete *Das Vermächtniß Kains*, and – one would assume – many other pieces as well (“Ausgabe letzter Hand” 237). Sacher-Masoch’s rewritten work might be seen as not only a means of obtaining much needed money, but also a way to express his fantasies, which were not being fulfilled in his personal life. Wanda von Sacher-

Masoch notes that in the fall of 1876, Leopold received praise for those writings that were not based on dominant women, but he soon fell ill and was confined to his bed. At some point between Wanda's encounter with the Greek and his falling ill, Leopold became interested in rewriting *Venus im Pelz*. He spoke endlessly about reliving *Venus im Pelz* with her and even in his illness requested that she whip him (W. von Sacher-Masoch 43). Wanda, however, after initially participating in the floggings, refused to continue the charade of the cruel "Venus in Furs." This may have been the motivating factor for Sacher-Masoch to revisit his novella.

These previous explanations justify portions of Sacher-Masoch's revision including the role of her various lovers and the expanded presence of the Greek, but not the reduced agency of the dominant woman. While he may have made his dominant woman crueler, this does not mean that she was a more active agent in the work. Most researchers do not discuss Wanda's agency as a dominant in the 1870 version of *Venus im Pelz*. They point to classical theories of masochism that are inadequate for explaining the interaction between dominant and submissive, particularly considering Wanda's submissive and fetishistic tendencies. I have pointed to not only Wanda's active role in creating a masochistic fantasy, but also her sole authorship of the contract. Sacher-Masoch's later version eliminates her potential to submit to a man. She is only dominant and can only ever be dominant. Lisbeth Exner describes the spirit of the changes as such:

"Vor allem aber sollte die Umstellung von Szenen die ursprüngliche Pendelbewegung zwischen Liebe und Despotie ersetzen durch eine stufenweise Steigerung bis zur katalytischen Schlusszene. Diese moralische wie didaktische Zugeständnis konnte Sacher-Masoch nicht wirklich einlösen, er hätte damit auch den Reiz des Textes zerstört" (96)

This lack of fluidity, or what Exner here describes as pendulousness, whereby Wanda's depth as a character is denied, leads to a dominant with fewer desires of her own, save one –

domination. Perhaps because Wanda von Sacher-Masoch refused to play the role of dominant woman for her husband, Sacher-Masoch sought a literary means of expressing his desires where the female dominant was not as fluid and did not exhibit masochistic tendencies. Instead, he wrote of a woman who was always cruel, who forced him to serve her lovers, and who did not offer him the possibility of contribution to his submission. He created the perfect dominant, but only in his literary fantasy.

No discussion of *Venus im Pelz* is complete without addressing the Severin's proclaimed moral. "Cured" of his desire for a cruel woman, Severin assumes the role of dominant and becomes the embodiment of cruelty. However, this is not the type of cruelty which the fictional Wanda had sought. Returning to Wanda's description of the difference between her ideal of the Greek and men of the north, she describes men like Severin in the first version as "toll" or wild, while in the second version this word is changed to "roh" meaning raw, unrefined, or crude. Perhaps part of the "cure" which Wanda describes in her final letter to Severin was an attempt to make him less crude in his interactions with women. If he were capable of understanding variations in sexuality and the need for an exchange of power rather than absolute control, then he might be cured. We see however that this is not the lesson that Severin takes from his mistress. The story ends with two morals. The first is almost a flippant reference to Severin's earlier mannerisms: "Daß ich ein Esel war... [h]ätte ich sie nur gepeitscht!" (238). Not only does he acknowledge Wanda's desire to submit, but he makes reference to his earlier claim of dilettantism. This, however, is not the only moral to the novella. After Severin's companion has finished reading his diary, he asks Severin for moral of his tale. Severin answers:

Daß das Weib, wie es die Natur geschaffen und wie es der Mann gegenwärtig heranzieht, sein Feind ist und nur seine Sklavin oder seine Despotin sein kann, *nie*

aber seine Gefährtin. Dies wird sie erst dann sein können, wenn sie ihm gleich steht an Rechten, wenn sie ihm ebenbürtig ist durch Bildung und Arbeit... Wer sich peitschen lässt, verdient gepeitscht zu werden. (238)

Severin's double moral is puzzling. On the one hand he seems to be making an argument for the education and equality of women – since he sees women as they are currently raised as either slave or despot, but never partners. Wanda, however, was not raised to think like modern society, but rather despises modern “hysterical” women.

Severin might very well equate Wanda with his own image of the modern women since it is she who dominated him, but she is very clear about her connection to classical Greece throughout the story. She is not a cold image of a Venus statue, but a warm pleasure seeker who cares not for modern mores and Christian perceptions of relationships. This is Wanda's dominant masochistic fantasy. In order to seek pleasure one must be free to do so. The dominant masochist seeks freedom, and the submissive subjugation. As a dominant masochist, Wanda is only able to seek out happiness and pleasure by having slaves – not necessarily because she enjoys dominating them, but because they are a requirement to obtain the life she desires. As Severin had wished to be her slave as a submissive, the relationship met her needs, until the relationship became tiresome. Severin's moral purposefully excludes Wanda's ideals as he has reclaimed the story for himself. At this point, Wanda is absent and silenced – indeed all women in this level of the narrative are without voice. Severin has assumed total control as a more powerful dominant masochist who is able to overcome his martyrdom and rise above it. Severin is now the master of his father's domain, though he only assumes this role because his father has died. He still feels his father scrutinizing his actions, and I would argue that instead of being this dominant man, that he is still submitting to the will of his father. Though he has made a choice to assume this role and

to renounce the life of a dilettante, he is no less subjugated by his social expectations and familial responsibilities than he was by Wanda.

Nonetheless, he chooses this role. He desires neither a sadistic woman nor a masochistic one. He has become a power seeker – as opposed to Wanda’s pleasures seeking – and now lives for the power alone regardless of how it is exercised. One would hope that the purpose of the rehabilitation, to which Wanda subjected him, might have taken hold and perhaps this is where the second moral comes in. If one desires to be whipped, subjugated, then he/she deserves his/her fate. Severin no longer desires pain and whipping, and realizes the danger of submitting to another, but now enjoys only the tableau of the masochistic scene pointing to the painting of Wanda as his memory. Severin assumes the role of dominant masochist to take advantage and play with the power of others, but without a contract and without truly willing participants he has become a despot. Severin abandons his submission for dominance, but his dominance is distorted by power not pleasure. Clearly, Severin has not truly learned his lesson. He fails to understand the need for the balance which is Wanda’s legacy in the story. In the end there is no counterbalancing masochist, either dominant or submissive; Severin alone controls the entire scene. He is no better off than he was before only now he is in complete control. Wanda and all women are abandoned just as the relationship started – with a note and an image of Venus in furs.

Creating a space for Wanda in Sacher-Masoch’s most widely read work enables the reader to see her not as a simple creation of the submissive masochist, but an active partner. Though Severin states that in marriage there can be no equality, perhaps it is through the mistress/slave relationship that we can see this equality take hold. Rather than relying on theories of masochism which quite purposefully exclude the potential for female agency, we

must consider the possibility that more contemporary theories of sadomasochism provide insight into a text which has long been seen as a psychoanalytic rosetta stone for understanding masochism. By existing outside of normal social bounds, the masochistic relationship in *Venus im Pelz* is able to function counter to many of the statements made by Severin in the text. Wanda's social position as a widow and her influence over the relationship itself creates what we might be able to see as a sort of subculture with its own rules. Within this subcultural space, Wanda's voice and opinions are what define their interactions, and are expressed through her interest in both lifestyle power exchange and a sharing of power with another dominant figure. As I have shown, both these desires and the fluctuating densities of Wanda's masochism wane in the later version of the text, and instead of understanding the dominant/submissive relationship as a power exchange, the jealousy and abuse escalate to a breaking point. In the *Ausgabe letzter Hand*, there is no equality between dominant and submissive, no sharing of power. In light of this dramatic difference between these texts it is important to revisit analyses of *Venus im Pelz* to gain a more complete understanding of Sacher-Masoch's work and to question the assumptions that have focused on the control exerted by the submissive over the dominant. If Sacher-Masoch lessened Wanda's agency in his final version, then he must have considered her influence in the original too great and felt the need to further diminish her role and power over his imagination and his work.

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