

***Beautiful Malice* by Rebecca James
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‘Our response to tragedy strangely mingles pain and pleasure,’ notes Terry Eagleton in *Sweet Violence* (2003). ‘The feelings being released are painful in themselves but the act of easing them is pleasurable.’ While reading Rebecca James’ *Beautiful Malice*, I was reminded of this passage, and of Eagleton’s suggestion that the ambivalent combination of fear, pity and relief in our reaction to tragic works is what makes them so enthralling.

This narrative is, as James’ describes one of her characters, ‘innocent and beautiful and dangerous all at once.’ Seventeen-year-old Katherine, who wants to live her ‘entire life as a shadow,’ has left her family home in Melbourne to escape unwelcome media attention, and the haunting blend of guilt and grief she feels, following the brutal murder of her younger sister, Rachel. Separated from her parents, who exist ‘only in degrees of pain,’ Katherine boards with an aunt in Sydney while completing secondary school. There, she attempts to remain as anonymous as possible, changing her name and avoiding friendships lest her peers discover her true identity—until she meets the ‘beautiful, popular, impossible to miss’ Alice, a narcissistic seductress of all who enter her path. Like a younger, female version of Maurice Conchis from John Fowles’ *The Magus*, Alice sees the world as a stage on which to play out a series of sadistic, diabolical games in which her friends and acquaintances became entranced and entrapped—with very real and shocking consequences.

Despite frequent shifts between past and present, *Beautiful Malice* focuses on the relationship between Alice and Katherine, with the introduction of minor characters, such as Robby, Alice’s hopelessly smitten love-interest, and brother and sister, Philippa and Mick, who later become Katherine’s allies, providing more hopeful representations of friendship than that offered by the Alice-Katherine dyad. Overtones of homoerotic attraction between the girls urge a heightened tension in the plot. Their first meeting is described with the lexicon of a dawning love affair: Katherine feels ‘golden warm’ with the certainty that she is finally, ‘fully understood’. Alice’s effect on her is like the champagne they share on their first meeting: ‘sweet and easy to drink [...] it rushed

through my veins, making my lips tingle, my head feel light.’ Yet, Alice and Katherine’s liaison rapidly shifts into the flipside of the supportive sisterhood often depicted in fiction that takes adolescent female friendships as its topic. Alice progressively abuses her knowledge of Katherine’s past revealed during episodes of emotional intimacy, exposing painful secrets to further wound Katherine when she is at her most vulnerable. Despite Rachel’s murderers being male, the novel refreshingly does not polarise men as perpetrators and women as victims. Robby and Mick are offered as loving, respectful, alternative male figures, while parallels are drawn between Alice’s sinister behaviour and that of Rachel’s attackers, rendering both mesmerising studies in psychopathy.

The subterranean depths of friendships, of familial and romantic relationships – and the darker side of these alliances that verge on jealousy, obsession and cruelty – are themes which James’ novel artfully interweaves. Characters’ multifaceted responses to grief and loss are explored in an acknowledgement that guilt and selfish emotions are sometimes concomitant with pathos. This refusal to sanitise the full spectrum of human response is another rousing aspect of James’ narrative. From the first page on which we meet Katherine, ‘crazy and wild with grief,’ not crying *for* her dead friend, Alice, ‘but because of her,’ we are immediately presented with an intriguing, complex character, and a myriad of questions concerning what events have led to her present state. There is no doubt that we will keep turning pages to find out.

Despite the plot containing multiple tragic deaths and dramatic betrayals, James contextualises narrative events in a way that is not only gripping, but plausible. The power of James’ writing is its everydayness. She favours a plain style, yet her dialogue is rich with colloquialisms that vividly evoke the voice of each character. Similarly, the natural progression of the murder scene, reminiscent of the 1997 Bega Schoolgirl Murders, is chilling precisely because it is so like the kind of inadvertently dangerous situation that adolescent girls can, and do, find themselves in.

Although, as Katherine comments, ‘the trouble with words is that no matter how much sense they make in theory, they can’t change what you feel inside’, it is James’ mastery of words that does place us acutely inside what her characters feel. Recollections of Rachel’s murder are told through sudden shifts from first to second person, propelling the reader into the physical ordeal in an immediate and terrifying way. Similarly, James’

movement between past and present increases suspense as the murder is recounted in lucid yet fragmented passages. This scene, like many, is engaging because it causes in us a dual response of fear and relief—the vacillation between ‘This could be me’ to ‘Thank goodness this isn’t me’—that is one of the pleasures and appeals of all tragedy.

In the lead-up to publication, *Beautiful Malice* provoked a much publicised international bidding war. For once the anticipation seems warranted. The success of James’ book arises from its sophisticated presentation of cataclysmic themes, as well as its satisfying conclusion that is uplifting yet, in accordance with the rest of the narrative, more bitter than sweet. To return to Eagleton, we are fascinated by accounts of tragedy because they allow us to ‘revel in the steadfastness of the human spirit in the face of mind-wrenching calamity.’

“No Language For My Ambivalence”¹: Masochism and Feminism in Women’s Life Writing

Recently, I re-read a past note in my journal that was yet to become a story. It tells of how: *I photographed the bruises you left on my body, as evidence of your existence, for when you were no longer present. A mud brown hand circling my calf. Fingers splayed to grip, their day-old prints still bleeding the earthed purple of bulbs. Of how: Later I opened the photo album on my computer and found the pictures there. The strange still life of my pale leg. The flash of light had lent three dimensions to my skin, your traces deep as claw tracks in wet sand. In your absence, more acutely than ever then, I wanted to adjust the contrast, balance and saturation, boost colour, increase sharpness, spotlight and darken edges – anything that might bring back the mark of you.*

Should the narrator be identified as female and the lover male, this passage might become problematic, for it is representative of themes that trouble feminist literary theorists who have argued for some level of moral responsibility in writing by and about women. Similarly, for readers, and certainly for myself as a woman, a feminist, and a writer, a passage such as this inspires a state of ambivalence. As Merri Lisa Johnson writes, “the familiar connection of sex and violence provokes in me two responses: there’s the proper feminist critique (violence is bad, connecting sex and death devalues the erotic, condones and fetishises the brutalized female body) and then there’s my real response...”²

Is it damaging to feminism when women write pleasurable accounts of masochistic desire?

1. Feminist Ambivalence

*Call it what you will, but there is no way around the fact. No words for how thin the line is between desire and domination. How much is alright for me to want?*³

In its most literal definition, *ambivalence* is understood as “the simultaneous existence of conflicting ideas, attitudes or emotions”, or, “a feeling of uncertainty about something due to a mental conflict.”⁴ Perhaps no social or political movement has been more engendering of this form of conflict in women than feminism. Writing in the late 1970’s, not long after the popularisation of feminist thought in academia and popular culture, Maria Marcus identified how Second Wave feminism’s call for women to align their personal practice with their political attitudes engendered a great deal of fear and contradictory emotions because, it “involves us so much on a purely personal level [and] because we realise its political significance and so are afraid of undertaking things that might damage it.”⁵ If that sense of ambivalence was present in 1978, then it is a view that is apparent even more so today, when the critical appraisal of creative productions, such as art and literature, often focuses on the appropriateness of images of femininity that they choose to portray.

My sometimes deeply ambivalent reactions to representations of transgressive female desire in women’s writing are in part due to the era and culture in which I have been born and educated: in the midst of the Third Wave of feminism when young women have taken for granted a strong sense of personal power, and in which, “more than any

other aspect of contemporary feminism, the so-called dominant feminist perspective on sexuality is what seems to signal regression.”⁶ I find myself located between the Second Wave’s politicisation of personal experience, and the Third Wave’s more liberal feminisms, and, further more, I find myself feeling ambivalence most keenly in the literary context, positioned as I am as a feminist, creative writer, critic and reader.

In an attempt to represent fully the conflicts between feminisms and the ambivalence that women experience in their negotiations of a feminist positive stance, I would like to think that the analysis of contemporary women's writing acknowledges women’s freedom to represent the multiple and ambiguous predicaments presented by a so-called ‘post feminist’ society—that their writings are not interpreted according to their allegiance to, or movement away from, what is a political movement rather than an artistic alliance or moral position.

This is not always the case. In my own research of responses to representations of what have commonly been considered masochistic expressions of feminine desire in both the fictional and autobiographical writing of 20th Century women, most times critics have focused on the appropriateness of the text in terms of the aims of feminism and its potentially negative effect on the movement’s achievements and progress.⁷

2. Masochism Post-Feminism

Afterwards I had serious second thoughts. Was I still the same person as before? Was I still a feminist? ... I had no language for my ambivalence. I just thought ‘What have I done?’⁸

One of the most significant sites of feminism's collision with women's literary expression remains where depictions of feminine masochism are presented as a pleasurable aspect of female desire. Although it is important to note that I do not make the assumption of a single feminist position on representations of sexuality and violence, or underestimate the complexity of debate on this issue (there are, of course, as many feminisms as there are women), what interests me are the sites of otherness and ambivalence that exist in the spaces *between* the many contemporary feminisms and the most common, 'orthodox' feminist response. That is, that writing which depicts masochistic female characters is damaging to women and the feminist project because it encourages women to respond erotically to the conditions of their own oppression.

These aspects of 'otherness' within feminism are identified by Helena Michie in *Discontented Discourses* as ambivalences present in women due to the movement's overwhelming "polyphony of feminist voices and enterprises."⁹ What Michie also highlights, are the dangers inherent in a critical theory that has often claimed to be "moving with ease from the personal to the academic to the political and refusing to see any rupture between them."¹⁰ Similarly, I see that it is the sometime failure of feminist literary studies to acknowledge these aspects of otherness within feminism that can complicate women's self-representation, causing them to self-censor out of fear that a more honest telling of their stories will be met with distaste or debate.

I have chosen to enter a dialogue with feminism for this reason – because it relates specifically to some of the most deeply troubling sites of moral questioning in my own reading and writing practice – and also because the place of feminine masochism in women's writing is an important and relevant contextualisation for the broader conflicts

and complexities involved in women's creative self-representation following the rise of feminism in literary theory. As Lauren Rosewarne writes in her unapologetically autobiographical, *Cheating on the Sisterhood*, in the same way that women have allegedly internalised patriarchal values, "feminists have similarly internalised *feminist* values [...] feminist experience is marked by the struggle between internalised feminist values and external pressures."¹¹ Feminism in its moral aspect is particularly problematic for women writing about sexual matters, for "establishing a universal definition of *moral* sexual behaviour would be impossible."¹²

Yet it is undeniable that a recurring theme in both overtly autobiographical and fictocritical or semi-fictional writing by women continues to be heterosexual desire experienced as masochistic compulsion.¹³ The proliferation of such narratives within Western women's life writing has most often been explained in terms of women feeling powerless under patriarchal culture and the subsequent failure of a masculinised language to accommodate and fully encapsulate the complexity and plurality of female experience, particularly where sexuality is concerned.¹⁴

In contrast, I put forward the notion that writing explorations of sexuality and violence, of seduction and abandonment, can be viewed as a way for women to represent their multifaceted betrayal, not only in real relationships and by patriarchy and its languages, but also as an opportunity to represent their experiences of abandonment by, and of, feminism and its theories. Within explorations of ruptured feminine subjectivity I locate a positive representation of the 'fragmented' self as a result of desire – the body and mind, a crucible where pleasure and pain may inexplicably combine. Such writing

does not exclude the unsanitised, perhaps unpleasant, contents of contradictory female pleasure which feminism sometimes fails to accommodate or refuses to admit.

3. Autobiography, Fiction and the In-between

If you record a day of your life, does the decision to do so change the shape of that day? Do you change the balance, distort the truth?¹⁵

One of the conflicts I experience, both as a creative writer and theorist, is situated on the insecure fault line between life writing and writing fiction – and also in the process of deciding which elements of my autobiographical writing I should probably, in preemptive self-protection, claim as fiction.

For writers of fiction, one of the greatest aims can be to convince the reader of the realism of our character's emotion and experience. However, that same aim doubles as a fear that potentially disturbing, challenging or subversive female characters will be interpreted as autobiographical representations, or, as female figures who, regardless of their relationship to social reality, are nevertheless antithetical to women's best interests. Worse still, what if the work *is* derived from elements of lived experience? In the process of representing experience truthfully, might our credibility as feminists be complicated or undermined?

This state of internal questioning and ambivalence may be once of the reasons that women's writing, both past and present, and including my own, seems to so often take the form of 'roman à clef': partially fictionalised autobiographical works that allow the

writer to publicly “work through a highly conflicted relationship by creating or recreating it, re-imagining intimate portions of the subject’s life.”¹⁶

In *Literary Seductions*, Frances Wilson highlights this prominent genre of women’s life writing, with reference to Anais Nin who, “chose to weave herself into her writing as a way of ensuring that she would no longer be the victim of betrayal and abandonment.”¹⁷ Nin herself stated that the decision to write fictions that echoed real events was due to the realisation that “life would become more bearable if I looked at it as an adventure and a tale.”¹⁸ The act of writing personal experiences into fiction can be seen as a way for women to obtain power and control over their own representation. For example, fictionalising personal struggles enables a renegotiation of subject positions that might not have been achieved originally. Whether the woman depicts herself in a traditionally passive heterosexual position, or as deriving pleasure in her masochistic state, becomes almost irrelevant for she, as the author, holds the position of power over the characters, events, and the eventual outcome.¹⁹

From this standpoint, narratives that arise from women’s lives can be seen as a positive act of re-possession, an opportunity to replace images and experience with recollections from a different perspective, to allow fiction and life to mingle and to experiment with ambivalent subjectivities and unstable identities. Women’s life writing is an inscription of identity that is often ‘fragmented’ by cultural discourses (those of patriarchy, and, as I would argue, feminism) but the page nevertheless provides a space where women may hold the balance of power in their reconstruction of lived experience.

Certainly the authors of such texts may not be seen as feminist, “according to the Anglo-American prescription of a writer who presents ‘positive’ images of women’s desire.”²⁰ Similarly, reading such narratives with the aim of locating positive feminist images of female desire will probably be a disappointing process. However, when reading in this way—in looking to women’s writing “to mirror feminist criticism itself”²¹—we may fail to appraise the many ways in which women’s writing can function powerfully, as work that explores troubled sites of passion, violence and ambivalence. While works that detail experiences of feminine masochism might be seen in some ways to reveal women’s attachment to extremes of suffering in violent passion, they might also be understood as successfully exploring the contradictory results and ambivalent experiences of love for women, which cannot unequivocally be seen as antithetical to a broader conception of feminist aims.

In her discussion of the problems of orthodox feminist literary analysis, Nancy K. Miller recognises the importance of the presence of such ambivalence and ambiguity in women’s writing, concluding that the moral appraisal of literary works is dangerous because such an approach “threatens to erase the ambiguities of the feminist project.”²² It is through an acknowledgment of these ambivalences, that we may in fact come to understand much more about women’s fraught relationship to men, to patriarchy and to feminism.

4. Finding Language for Ambivalence

It seems to me, that from the time at which we stared eye to eye, my memories

transformed into a register of only physicality and sensation. Language had left me. But the body has its own words, giving definition to cerebral terms without our permission, often without warning. It was quite rapid, the speed at which my attraction to you became despair. In three days perhaps the cycle was already complete. The rotation of passion and sorrow that has come to define me was set in motion. It was the mystery of your coming to me, and then your inexplicable leaving. It was the weekends of absence, the never quite knowing...

The writer, Marguerite Duras, often spoke, to the disturbance of her interviewers, about her fascination with the theme of “the woman who wanted to be killed by her lover”²³ and certainly many of her narratives set out to investigate what pathological state of obsession might lead to such a desire. In part, Duras’ creative investigation is also my own. I have always found myself writing narratives that explore femininity and the attraction to pain, both physical and emotional. Most of them, more autobiographical than I would like to admit.

Although not wanting to admit it, I had suspected that each of us were impaled at the sharp ends of a furtive triangle, but what I found was that we were each balanced at one corner of a fragile square. Afterward I imagined this invisible relation that we had each found ourselves in as a boxing ring, roped and dangerous. To take a partner and enter into its centre always held the possibility of emerging with enduring scars.

In *In the Name of Love*, Michelle Massé writes extensively on women’s apparently addictive complicity with their own emotional injury: “behaviours that first seem masochistically passive display a startling amount of initiative on the part of women.”²⁴ This element of ambiguity is one that I often present in my character’s actions, too. What

I also set out to explore in my writing, is Massé's claim that there are ways in which women "use masochism as a strategy to create and maintain identity – not solely as a sad acknowledgment of absence."²⁵

Being familiar with many of the common critical responses to representations of feminine masochism in literature by women, I am aware of what reactions I might receive to narratives such as this one. What I have observed is the tendency for women's writing to be misunderstood or narrowly experienced when interpreted according to a feminist approach. As Anais Nin details in the journals of her relationship with Henry Miller, she frequently found herself, like many women, writing objective images of herself as "her own audience, standing outside her body looking in."²⁶ I find myself positioned similarly, frequently finding that the anticipation of the response of a feminist audience arrives concomitantly with my lived experiences and the process of my rewriting them. As a result, my female characters are at once informed, vulnerable, and ambivalent in their expressions of heterosexuality. They are representative of those transgressive literary femininities that occupy an uneasy third position between the worlds of fiction and autobiography. My writing is neither completely autobiographical nor completely fictional, but a form in which my own dreams, memories and experiences make cameo appearances, displaced into the fate of my characters, where they enrich, merge with and transform the narrative. This process is present too in my writing of critical theory, for I think it is true that, as stated by Paul Valéry: "there is no theory that is not a fragment, carefully preserved, of some autobiography."²⁷ While some settings may have been altered, every emotion is one I have experienced intimately.

I began to cry in earnest when I recalled your particular gestures. The tight grip of your hand on my hair as you'd held me to the bed. The faint burn of the skin at the nape of my neck. Most people were leaving the beach but I stayed, unafraid of the sudden violent whiteness of the waves, savouring the brief heat of the sun through broken cloud. I could not discern in which direction the dark clouds were shifting, but it did not disturb me. In fact, the suspicion that each splash of sunshine may've been the last before the true onset of the storm made each swell of warmth more rewarding.

I would like to think that my own writing, as well as that by others, would be appreciated outside of the presumption that female authors should necessarily seek to present feminist-positive role models for women in their narratives. Similarly, I hope that female writers cease to feel it is a necessity to accompany the apparently passive or masochistic behaviour of women in their novels with some form of criticism, comment or moral reflection. The interrelatedness of theory and fiction in my writing is an attempt to interrupt and interrogate prevailing modes of literary interpretation, just as the depiction of often confoundingly contradictory female characters may be seen as a challenge to notions of condoned femininity and an embodiment of women's conflicted relationship to contemporary feminism. I believe that the acknowledgement and depiction of potentially problematic feminine states of being — from desiring passivity to seeking completion in romantic union — are all valid and important stories for me as a woman, and as a feminist, to tell.

Of course it had occurred to me that there may have been someone else, that there may have been many. In fact many others was a preferable thought to the threat of one other woman's body possessing your attention. But we believe only what is compatible

with our sanity – for as long as we can at least – and the thought of that, for me, was not. Not when I watched your face take on that certain appearance in profile, when you would laugh at one of your own jokes. Proud. Young. Just a little indignant. The curve of your chin, rough stubble, crinkle of skin below the lip, the lip. No, not when you drove, drove me home with one hand on my thigh, squeezing my knee hard and kissing me at slow late-night traffic lights. Not when you were inside of me and reaching down with eight fingers pulled me wide, until slippery wet we would slide, my calves on your shoulders, broad and hard, and you rocked me, rocked me side to side.

My own writing is undeniably concerned with women’s ambivalent negotiations of desire. These are some one of the topics that have always inspired my writing, but they are at times complicated by an internalised sense of feminist morality. In *Becoming a Heroine*, Rachel Brownstein writes, “I have read feminist criticism with interest and profit...but I make no attempt to articulate a theory or to follow a particular method of feminist criticism,”²⁸ an outlook that I attempt to share at times, most manifestly in the context of self representations.

Although I, too, have had to deal with a variety of reactions to my writing of femininity—from women telling me I am ‘brave’, to those asking ‘what’s wrong’ with me—I agree with the poet, Anne Carson, that texts are driven by the necessities of matter and premise with no apprehension and no apology, for, as she says: “You write what you want to write in the way that it has to be.”²⁹ I’ve finished the story whose fragments interrupt this piece: it is a man’s hands, and it is a woman who speaks.

Notes:

1 Johnson, 2002:131

2 Ibid:42

3 Johnson, 2002:37.

4 Oxford English Dictionary <<http://www.oed.com>> accessed April 11, 2010

5 Marcus, 1978:258. See also Teresa de Lauretis: “The internal divisions of the movement over the issue of separatism or mainstreaming, both in the academy and in other institutional contexts [has led to] an expanded, extremely flexible, and ultimately unsatisfactory redefinition of the notion of ‘feminist theory’ itself” (1990: 264).

6 Henry, 2004:100

7 There are many examples of this tendency. Some examples are Elisabeth Bronfen’s *Over Her Dead Body: Death, Femininity And The Aesthetic* (1992, Manchester University Press, UK) and Helena Michie’s *The Flesh Made Word: Female Figures And Women’s Bodies* (1987, Oxford University Press, New York).

8 Ibid:131.

9 Cited in Barr and Feldstein, 1989:19

10 Ibid:20

11 Rosewarne, 2009:106

12 Ibid:25

13 Texts by numerous female authors – a few examples of which might be Anne Carson’s *The Glass Essay* (1987, Faber and Faber, London) and *Beauty of the Husband* (2001, Alfred A. Knopf, New York), Merri Lisa Johnson’s *Jane Sexes it Up: True Confessions of Feminist Desire* (2002, Seal Press, UK), Alina Reyes’ *The Politics of Love* (1998, Marion Boyars, London.), and Lauren Rosewarne’s *Cheating on the Sisterhood: Infidelity and Feminism* (2009, Praeger, USA).

14 Miller, 1990:2.

16 Felski, 1989:113.

16 Felber, 2002:8. Texts of this nature include, for example, Elizabeth McNeill’s *9 1/2 Weeks* (2005, Harper Perennial, USA), Nikki Gemmill’s *The Bride Stripped Bare* (2003, HarperPerennial, Australia), Marguerite Duras’ *The Lover* (1985, Harper Collins), among countless others.

17 Wilson, 1999:29

18 Cited by Wilson, 1999:27

19 Ibid:11

20 Hill, 1990: 89-90

21 Kaplan, 1996:13

22 Miller, 1990:117

23 Eisinger, 1974:515

24 Massé, 1992:42

25 Ibid:44

26 Wilson, 1999:40

27 Miller, 1991:1

28 Brownstein, 1982:xvii

29 Cited by Brocks, 2006:13

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