

My Kinky Shadow:

The poetics of the sadomasochistic Other

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By

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According to the Oxford English Dictionary, the term BDSM appeared in the early 1990's as an abbreviation for bondage and discipline, domination and submission, and sadism-masochism. It has become a catch-all phrase to describe a wide range of behaviors, activities, and relationships that involve some combination of sexuality, eroticism, and roleplaying often including a consensual unequal power dynamic, more accurately referred to as an authority exchange (C. Shahbaz, personal communication, June 15, 2017). The other popular slang term for a wide range of unconventional sexual interests is kink, or kinky in its original adjectival form. Cultural references to these practices abound with iconic images of handcuffs, ropes, riding crops, and leather accoutrements (Barker, Ayantafi, & Gupta, 2007). Such activities and relationships appear across all sexual and affectional orientations, all gender identities, and a broad range of social, racial, and ethnic groups (Shahbaz & Chirinos, 2017).

Roughly a century before the term BDSM entered the vernacular, Richard von Krafft-Ebing (2011) published *Psychopathia Sexualis* in 1886. Widely regarded as a landmark text, the author's inclusion of sadomasochism and other sexual practices that currently fall under the BDSM rubric established them as sexual pathologies, a view perpetuated by Freud (2000), who dubbed sadomasochism "the most common and the most significant of all the perversions" (p. 23). This view went largely unchallenged by mental health practitioners and theorists until recently (Barker et al, 2007).

Despite the historical tendency of the mental health field to marginalize BDSM and kink as perverted and deviant, there appears to be a growing interest and enthusiasm for this form of psycho-sexual exploration among the collective. The runaway success of E. L. James' *Fifty Shades of Grey* trilogy is one striking example, having sold 125 million

copies worldwide, and the movie based on the first book having grossed more than 500 million dollars (Stedman, 2015). At the same time, members of the BDSM community have sharply criticized the franchise as misrepresenting the modern fully consensual version of these relationships (Marcus, 2015). The question remains how many people practice BDSM or take an interest in some aspect of it. In 1993, The Janus Report on Sexual Behavior estimated that up to 14% of men and 11% of women in the United States engaged in some form of BDSM behavior. More recently, Joyal and Carpentier's (2016) rigorous study with 1,040 subjects selected from the general population in Canada found that 45.6% of their sample expressed interest in at least one paraphilic behavior as defined by the DSM-5, and 33.9% had engaged in such behaviors at least once. The authors persuasively question why sexual behaviors that are statistically neither atypical nor unusual should still be labeled anomalous and paraphilic.

During the same period that research finds an increase in public acceptance and curiosity toward BDSM and kink, the American Psychiatric Association has also softened its diagnostic stance. The DSM-5 (2013) now makes a clear distinction between paraphilias and the paraphilic disorders. The manual states, "A paraphilia by itself does not necessarily justify or require clinical intervention" (p. 686). It goes on to say, "The majority of individuals who are active in community networks that practice sadistic and masochistic behaviors do not express any dissatisfaction with their sexual interests, and their behavior would not meet DSM-5 criteria for sexual sadism disorder" (p. 697). Despite this important move toward a more open and affirming attitude by the mental health field, reports of stigma, therapeutic bias, and inadequate care remain a common complaint by practitioners of BDSM when they seek therapeutic services (Barker et al,

2007; Kolmes, Stock, & Moser, 2006; Lawrence, & Love-Crowell, 2008; Shahbaz and Chirinos, 2017).

This disparity between changing social attitudes toward BDSM and an undereducated therapeutic community does not improve when one considers the field of analytical psychology. An online search of journal and research articles on the EBSCO database yields 1,771 matches for the topic of BDSM, yet there are no matches when the words Jung, Jungian, or analytical psychology are added to the query. Apart from important contributions a generation ago from Lyn Cowan (1982) and Thomas Moore (1990) on masochism and sadism respectively, Pamela Power's (2014) insightful essay is one of the few recent examples of Jungians contributing to the psychological discussion of BDSM, even though the extravagant sexual imagination of this area of human experience seems like a natural topic of enquiry for Jungian thought.

More than the attitudinal shift in the collective or the evidence calling for greater awareness and sensitivity among therapists, what arouses curiosity from a Jungian perspective is the pronounced tendency to pathologize, marginalize, and ignore the kinks that come into the consulting room with patients. If a patient were to share a dream involving imprisonment in a dungeon, or tying a beautiful youth to a tree, a Jungian analyst would likely greet these images with enthusiasm, noticing the dynamic archetypal themes on display. Are the mythopoetic elements of these images any less vital when they appear as part of a couple's consensual sex play?

Consider this passage from Guy Baldwin's (2004) book *SlaveCraft*, which describes the intimate bond that develops in an extreme authority exchange:

The more He [the Master] demands from me, the deeper down into the Sea of Surrender i drift. If He should push the limits of my current capabilities, my descent stops at that point, and i remain suspended at that depth. But if He continues to push me, i take that as a sign that He wants me to go deeper and i use my internal slave tools to dissolve my resistance and continue my descent. If He continues, before long, i shall find myself slowly settling to the very bottom of the Sea of Surrender, a place i have come to call the Great Deep.

. . . my internal experience at such times is one of a limitless, resonant joy enveloping me, sometimes quietly, other times vibrantly. All words, all thoughts, are swept away, and i am so very peaceful inside. And, in the distance, i can sometimes hear the deep, low-pitched, undulating sounds of what a slave buddy of mine calls, The Roaring Void. (pp. 63-64)

This account resembles what Jungian thinkers refer to as a numinous experience and an encounter with the archetype of the Self. The description is consistent with reports from other practitioners of BDSM, some who have described transcendent transformative experiences through their sessions (Beckman, 2008; Sagarin, Cutler, Cutler, Lawler-Sagarin, & Matuszewich, 2009). Jungian psychology could support such experiences as part of a person's individuation process. What is it then that prevents Jungians from understanding the practice of BDSM and kink within the framework of Jung's model?

The specter of the Other and Jung's formulation of the syzygy offer a possible answer for this question. In multiple aspects BDSM involves an encounter with the archetypal Other. Shahbaz and Chirinos (2017) discuss the dark counter-cultural aspects of BDSM as congruent with Jung's conceptualization of the Shadow. On the interpersonal level, many of the negotiated relationships in BDSM exaggerate the sense of otherness between the partners through the extreme imbalance of authority and

control. As an individual reaches deep within the personal psyche to embody that which is archetypally dominant or submissive, one encounters the Other, the complementary polarity, embodied in the partner. It is in fact a conscious consensual engagement with otherness that characterizes BDSM activities, making the phenomenology of differentness explicit, overt, and valued. For example, people entering into a long term or continuous BDSM relationship such as Dom/me and sub, often articulate the details of the relationship in a contract, which both parties sign (Shahbaz & Chirinos, 2017). Part of what distinguishes the modern movement is the importance of open communication and dialogue, safety precautions, and the essential respect accorded to each practitioner. This is apparent in the use of terms such as “safe, sane, and consensual” (Stein, 2000), or “risk aware consensual kink,” (Switch, 2017) which commonly appear in introductory literature about BDSM. The Other is consciously acknowledged and valued.

The phenomenology of otherness that characterizes BDSM also appears in the consulting room when clinicians experience discomfort in the presence of a kinky patient. The natural tendency is to resolve such feelings of discomfort by distancing oneself from that which is other and casting a pathologizing eye on the patient’s activities. Shahbaz and Chirinos (2017) develop the concept of “othering” originally formulated by Said (1979) in his work with Palestinians, to delineate the social and clinical marginalization of BDSM and kink communities. Krafft-Ebing’s (2011) legacy can serve as a professional validation of the clinician’s dis-ease, which could also be termed *kinkophobia* (Baldwin, 1993). The power of a diagnostic label can become an apotropaic gesture, serving as a barrier against our deeper fascination with our own proclivities for cruelty, ugliness, humiliation, and violence. This clinical situation offers a nuanced

illustration of Jung's (1957/1983) famous declaration: "The gods have become diseases" (p. 37, [CW 13, para. 54]). That which the clinician views as pathological in a patient's presentation may also be where the gods of the archetypal unconscious have been forced into hiding. Suddenly two possibilities appear simultaneously: to view kink as sick and twisted and at the same time to see its transcendent possibilities for healing and transformation. Let us imagine kink as a living symbol.

This potential for the psyche to hold together pairs in dialectic tension lies at the heart of Jung's formulation of the syzygy, that divine marriage, which he originally referenced in regard to anima and animus (Jung, 1978/1951 [CW 9ii]). Hillman (1985) asserts that the notion of pairing in tandems is more compatible with the polymorphous nature of the psyche than is the classical concept of opposition. In fact, a pair of opposites is only one possible configuration of a tandem. This suggests that the Other as it constellates in BDSM is always operating in relationship with another figure designated as its dialectical counterpart, rather than its opposite. In BDSM, there is no Dom/me without a sub; the Other cannot be rejected or expelled without breaking the syzygy and collapsing the archetypal potential of the scene. Even if a scene involves more than two people, roles are clearly defined, protocols are established, and the authority exchange becomes a collaborative construction of a conscious Other (Shahbaz, 2012). For some, this is the essence of BDSM's psychological value: the consensual exchange of authority and control occurring within an established container facilitates the emergence of a syzygy between Dominant and submissive. In such a configuration, opposition is no longer experienced as a threat or a problem; an unconscious value split between good and

bad does not occur. Rather, the conscious Other is indispensable to the pursuit of pleasure and growth.

In psychotherapy, a similar situation constellates between the figures of patient and analyst, as they exist not in opposition so much as in tandem as a syzygy of archetypal potential. In fact, the similarities between BDSM and psychotherapy are more significant than one might easily admit. Guggenbühl-Craig (1971) famously delineated the potent and sometimes sinister forces at work in the helping professions. The practice of obtaining the informed consent of the patient prior to initiating treatment is in part to safeguard against the sadomasochistic potential of the relationship to go awry, just as the consensual contract in BDSM is a safeguard against the potential for physical abuse and trauma.

The restrictions of a time-limited therapeutic hour, the imposition and humiliation of a fee for the service, the imperatives of self disclosure and stripping away defenses, as well as the necessity of enduring probing questions and painful truths about one's own nature all bear the archetypal imprint of a sadomasochistic syzygy between patient and analyst that thrives as an unconscious dynamic. Hence, without recognizing the influence of an archetype of sadomasochism per se, the profession has recognized the value of analysis as part of analytic training, and the imperative of astute supervision and consultation to acknowledge the dynamic presence of these darker impulses. BDSM and kink acknowledge and affirm the enduring presence of such deep impulses in the human psyche both to inflict and to endure humiliation and suffering in relationship with others. Kink communities have developed ethical practices to contain, explore, and integrate the

darker aspects of our nature, aspects which both Moore (1990) and Cowan (1982) have recognized as necessities of the soul itself.

With BDSM as it's developed over the past quarter century, the psyche appears to have discovered a poetics of sadomasochism, thereby creating a psychological container with the potential for self discovery, personal growth, and transformation via the sexual imagination. Like all forms of *poesis*, these relationships foster the creation and layering of symbolic meaning. In such an imaginal space, the soul finds value in suffering. Suffering becomes important and necessary, and it is greeted with intentionality and consent. This brings to mind Hillman's (1975) notion of pathologizing as one of the primary innate expressive modes of the soul, in contrast to the historical characterization of sadomasochism as a disease. By pathologizing BDSM and kink, the field of psychology turns the numinous pathos of suffering into a pathologized Other, a projection of one's own shadow, that is ostensibly in need of a cure. And this fantasy of cure involves a rejection or sublimation of that which is unwanted and labeled as diseased. Professional perspectives are evolving as social attitudes toward BDSM and kink change, such that a new paradigm could emerge in which the kinky sadomasochistic Other is no longer an opposite concealed in the analyst's shadow, but rather a dark twin in a dialectical syzygy paired with the conscious personality. It is this presentation of new possibilities that merits further attention. *Poesis* invites play in the broader hermeneutic sense of the word (Palmer, 1969), and it is the opportunity to play with the potential of the sadistic and masochistic aspects of our own nature that honors a fuller and more deeply engaged relationship with the Other in ourselves and in the world.

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