

# **“The Hideous Monster and the Beaver”: Sadomasochistic Language in Kathy Acker’s *Blood and Guts in High School***

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## **“The White Worm”: Acker’s Theory of Language**

Kathy Acker fundamentally defies a traditional introduction: called “[a] punk turned post-modernist,”<sup>1</sup> “a novelist as performance artist,”<sup>2</sup> and “the Xena of American lit: strong and scary, maybe a little crazy, encased in leather,”<sup>3</sup> Acker is both avant-garde and experimental, properly avoiding either category completely. As part of an underground subculture of self-published writers, Acker refuses to compromise her craft despite criticism from peers and reviewers. Appropriating violence and sexuality, revising the modern economy of love, and exploiting famous historical and literary figures, Acker explores various means of expression even within the fairly traditional form of the “novel.” Her work employs visual representations, defiant typographical mechanisms and the physical act of plagiarism, all of which have been quite controversially received. Both Acker and her work

fail to conform to any already established notions of author and text, and they simply cannot be examined with these heavily connotative terms in mind. Her sadomasochistic relationship to her texts, where she submits herself to the authority of canonized works even as she vigorously revises and recontextualizes them, illustrates her acknowledgement of (but resistance to) the stifling matrix of patriarchal language.

*Blood and Guts in High School* (1984) is especially difficult to categorize and essentially impossible to summarize. At the onset of the text protagonist Janey Smith is a ten-year-old girl involved in an incestuous, though seemingly adult relationship with her father. After “breaking up,” Janey is sent to school in New York City, left to look after herself, and falls into a virtually endless series of sexual encounters and abortions. Her lifestyle is drastically altered when she is kidnapped and sold to a Persian slave trader to be trained as a whore. Locked up in a solitary room, Janey turns to her literary roommates: a copy of *The Scarlet Letter* and a book of Persian poems. Through these books, Janey begins to explore the deeply contested themes of words, language and representations of sadomasochism, among others.

Like Janey’s scattered and diverse literary education, *Blood and Guts* is a “text” that is littered with drawings, scribbblings, typical prose, dramatic dialogues, poetry, and even a pictorial pamphlet. Ever conscious of her reading public, Acker attempts to shock and appall even the most apathetic of anticipated readers. Indeed, reading *Blood and Guts* presents its own unique challenges, as it requires a careful navigation of the labyrinth encompassing all of these separate artistic mediums; the novel, if we can call it that, rejects a linear and cohesive assimilation of its many disparate parts. Her use of pastiche allows Acker to destabilize the nature of language and, accordingly, the nature of sexuality. Further, Acker’s integration of pornographic text and images into her work suggests a simultaneous adoption and rejection of patriarchal authority, and her method of composition becomes a conversation negotiating the power relationships inherent in writing—a process of creation that assumes a

sadomasochistic relationship to language. An examination of Acker's crotch-shots, scenes of sadomasochism, literary plagiarism and Sadeian subversion of romantic tropes reveals Acker as a literary libertine enacting violence on the very language that perpetually oppresses her.

Despite this radical rejection of a patriarchal claim to language, Acker has been dismissed by feminist critics for her violent depictions of sex and her revisions of theoretically privileged and politically successful feminists.<sup>4</sup> Most crucially, she has been castigated for the lack of any utopian feminist vision in her work.<sup>5</sup> As she composed *Blood and Guts*, Acker's theoretical opposition to the second-wave feminists, who envisioned a utopia free from the men that oppress them, took shape and heavily informed *Blood and Guts*. The climate was also one of vehement attacks on the supposedly misogynistic pornography industry by Catharine MacKinnon and a (re)envisioning of women's textual and political space by theorists such as Helene Cixous. Both MacKinnon and Cixous, although radically different in their approaches, advocated a break with patriarchal society by affirming the sexual and social difference of a universal feminine subject; Acker, herself radically opposed to such a counterproductive schism, challenges the viability of a project based upon the prescriptivism of a normative sense of sexuality and gender. Instead, Acker chooses to align herself equally with a violent and pornographic tradition of sexual deviance by theorizing an intellectual and artistic relationship to the Marquis de Sade, among others—a radical and defiant stance against the sexual normativity implied by theories that valorize a universal feminine subject. Sadomasochistic language, by emphasizing the power relationships inherent in a feminist reappropriation of male-dominated discourse, embodies Acker's unique position vis-à-vis second-wave feminism as she writes *Blood and Guts*.

As Acker rejects theoretical manifestations of this prescriptive patriarchy as well as an overarching feminism, so she denies the inherently male privilege in language by brutally dismantling any notion of a coherent textual body. Simultaneously, she recognizes

her subjugation to that language in a way that complicates, or even contradicts a utopian vision of Cixous's *écriture féminine*. To address these complex and (at times) oppositional issues, Acker creates in Janey a mechanism with which to navigate power relationships within *Blood and Guts*. Janey reflects a sadomasochistic relationship to her text because she offers little resistance to the men who consistently oppress her, even though she is fully conscious of and critical of their authority. Janey's seemingly defeatist position in the face of these misogynistic forces complicates a reading of her as a feminist, or even salvageable character. Furthermore, Acker's incorporation of pornography as a form of visual (non-linguistic) expression has caused some feminist critics to make an "oddly selective 'journey'"<sup>6</sup> through the text, focusing instead on the numerous drawings of penises while ignoring Acker's prominent vaginal depictions. *Blood and Guts* illustrates Acker's resistance to a feminist conception of a society fully gender-equitable; indeed, it is Acker's rejection of any viable, politically correct discourse that makes her such an appalling figure to second-wave feminism. Her reluctant acceptance of a society unwilling to revise its ideological stance on women causes some to view her as defeated by it, yet Acker is far from being a reticent participant in that mainstream society.

Understandably, or perhaps necessarily, Acker's political stance produces a text that functions primarily as a challenge to the traditionally patriarchal literary project: it contests a complete and unified textual body. Such a body reinforces the stable binary that has historically defined sexuality and preserved the primacy of male-dominated discourses. For Acker, the textual body in its canonized form is a male appropriation of language that effaces femininity, especially women's sexuality. She contextualizes these appropriations by using plagiarism and pastiche in order to dismantle and rearrange a male gaze while simultaneously redefining what it means to create/write. But Acker's "dissolute poetics"<sup>7</sup> is not simply a response to the masculine domination of language; it is equally a direct challenge to second-wave feminism, which proposes a unity of feminine experience and entertains the

possibility of escaping or subverting language as a means to reclaim writing. For example, one might call to mind Cixous's radical statement in "The Laugh of the Medusa" that:

It is by writing, from and toward women, and by taking up the challenge of speech that has been governed by the phallus, that women will confirm women in a place other than that which is reserved in and by the symbolic, that is, in a place other than silence.<sup>8</sup>

In contrast to this vision, the sadomasochistic, pornographic world of *Blood and Guts* cannot allow Janey to escape her identity or master the mechanism with which to express it. The result is a text that combines several different forms of inaccessible self-expression, a constant destabilization of signification that displaces meaning even as it appears to fix it.

Acker's (ab)use of language in *Blood and Guts* results in an unsettling political aesthetic that rages against the confinement of a patriarchal language. Although feminist critics have largely misrepresented Acker's appropriation of this male-dominated language,<sup>9</sup> her work is, at its core, self-aware and relentlessly conscious of that very medium it seeks to challenge, as Acker confronts the hegemonic tradition of patriarchal authority through an affirmation of a sexualized and pornographic experimental voice. Her portrayal of feminine experience simultaneously represents and undercuts the constraints of a textual code that refuses to acknowledge the existence of female sexuality, both literally and figuratively. Acker unites the implications of an absent expression of female sexuality with the constraints inherent in the only language available to express that sexuality by breaking down the barrier between the body and language; for Acker, "language . . . is the body,"<sup>10</sup> so that the textual becomes inevitably sexualized and equally subjugated to a language dominated by men.

Acker's vexed relationship to language is a recognition of the dichotomized structure within which expression must operate.

While she is aware of the potentially liberating function of words in a paradigm of writing-as-creation, Acker is reluctant to accept this positive association fully. She writes, “obviously to use language is to enter the world”<sup>11</sup>—but even this admission is problematic: if language is the means to enter the world, it is the act of creation (a birth process) and accordingly, it is the *only* means through which to enter the world. Language is, thus, a natural freeing only in a context of societal confinement. Its dualistic nature allows for the illusion of liberty in a language that is always already ideologically coded; Acker writes:

Thus, when I use words, any words, I am always taking part in the constructing of the political, economic, and moral community in which my discourse is taking place. All aspects of language—denotation, sound, style, syntax, grammar, etc.—are politically, economically and morally coded. In this sense, there’s no escaping content.<sup>12</sup>

The acknowledgement that language is inherently embedded with overarching societal sentiments actually suggests that language is, in fact, inseparable from those sentiments. Therefore, because any engagement with language, for Acker, propagates the very societal structure that it means to subvert, the act of writing is always tied into an inescapable ideology. However, her participation in the act of writing suggests a belief in the power of language to approach these boundaries even if it cannot breach them. For Acker, simply to call these boundaries into question is an act, perhaps the only act, of defiance available to women writers.

### **“My Cunt is Empty”: Acker’s Revision of Textual Authority**

Acker’s refusal to construct a distinct authorial voice encourages a consideration of the novel’s many illustrations as viable “texts” in their own right. *Blood and Guts* can arguably be

read intertextually, not only as opening up a discourse with its many plagiarized texts, but as in discussion with its own illustrations, dream maps and Janey's journals. Those critics who have attempted an analysis of Acker's illustrations have generalized them to a presumed "whole," an imposition of structure that Acker would reject outright. However, if we consider each piece as an individual "text," *in conversation with* and *defined by* its relationship to other "texts" (and therefore, incapable of solely representing an overarching thread), we find the beginnings of a theoretical conversation in *Blood and Guts* about the limitations and constraints of representation within language. One might then question Acker's use of artistic renditions, which would presumably provide some sort of escape from the boundaries of language, if she then simply re-imposes an equally stifling linguistic framework on top of those images. Two such intertextual drawings, "GIRLS WILL DO ANYTHING FOR LOVE" [fig. 1] and "ODE TO A GRECIAN URN," [fig. 2] exemplify Acker's constant contextualization of her images through a reimposition of interpretable titles. The question remains: if the project is not, then, liberation from language, what might it be?

Potentially it is a form of feminist critique, a literalizing of the Cixousean "feminine voice" that assumes freedom from patriarchal constraints by simply reshaping the language within which it continues to function. This critique is not only of the binding and imposing nature of language itself, which Acker would consider ultimately patriarchal, but also of a utopian feminist vision which asserts that we can get beyond that function of language. Cixous's concept of *écriture féminine*, which attempts to subvert patriarchal structures by reaffirming a "feminine voice" within texts, is unable to escape the very language it means to subvert: it may problematize a masculine claim to the text, but it does not actually manage to sever the umbilical cord, as it still constructs itself both as separate from and part of those structures it attempts to supercede. For Acker, because language is an origin of power, it must also be the origin of oppression, and an author harboring an illusion of subverting that ideological structure has ultimately

situated herself deeper within it. In this way, “GIRLS WILL DO ANYTHING FOR LOVE” and “ODE TO A GRECIAN URN,” Acker’s sexually suggestive drawings on pages 62 and 63, attempt to appropriate a non-linguistic form as a means of subverting sexual oppression, and yet must necessarily be redefined in light of the linguistic structure they mean to escape. In this respect, Acker’s ideologically complicated vaginal drawings must be understood in their relationship to Cixous’s notion of *écriture féminine*.

Although Acker and Cixous share a common goal of manipulating and subverting a patriarchal language, Cixous’s belief that one can ultimately escape its limitations is significantly more utopian than Acker’s stance. In “The Newly-Born Woman,” Cixous writes, “. . . I am speaking here of femininity as keeping alive the other that is confided to her, that visits her, that she can love as other. The loving to be other, another, without its necessarily going the route of abasing what is same, herself.”<sup>13</sup> Cixous’s belief that the female appropriation of the Other renders writing less dominated by a male gaze contradicts Acker’s self-consciousness of her own subjugation to that same language: “I am unspeakable so I ran into the language of others.”<sup>14</sup> In other words, while Cixous describes a pleurably symbiotic relationship in which both Other and Self benefit, Acker emphasizes the parasitic nature of such a relationship. Inherent in this hierarchal conception of female identity is a power struggle, one in which Acker’s role remains typically undefined. She writes:

A man’s power resides in his prick. That’s what they say, whoever they is, say. How the fuck should I know? I ain’t a man. Though I’m a good fake lieutenant, it’s not good enough to have a fake dick. I don’t have one. Does this mean I’ve got no strength? If it’s true that a man’s prick is his strength, what and where is my power?<sup>15</sup>

As a “good fake lieutenant,” Acker entertains the illusion of sexualized empowerment, while simultaneously recognizing her

inability to embody the arbitrary mechanism of that power: a “fake dick.” Similarly, Cixous laments the “primacy of the phallus,” arguing that “phallographic ideology has produced more than one victim . . . I could be obsessed by the scepter’s great shadow, and they told me: adore it, that thing you don’t wield.”<sup>16</sup> If, for Acker, the power exists in the penis and the body is language,<sup>17</sup> what does that say about the act of creation, which is historically and biologically female?

According to Cixous, the act of creation is one of birth:

Writing is the passageway, the entrance, the exit, the dwelling place of the other in me – the other that I am and am not, that I don’t know how to be, but that I feel passing, that makes me live – that tears me apart, disturbs me, changes me, who? – a feminine one, a masculine one, some? – several, some unknown, which is indeed what gives me the desire to know and from which all life soars.<sup>18</sup>

Though Cixous relies on a parallel between writing and a universalized concept of maternity, Acker directly rejects this utopian notion; for Acker, then, the act of creation is not one of birth, but one of destructive appropriation – a violent ingestion as opposed to a liberating expulsion. This distinction is crucial for Acker, for whom plagiarism, as an act of dismantling authority, is a means of producing text. For Cixous, the act of creation is harmonious, one “from which all life soars,” whereas for Acker it is disjointed, the result of the opposing forces of personal creativity and a revision of established literary history. The product of such discursive pastiche is a dynamic power struggle between assuming a position of authority and accepting one of submission: in short, an act of sadomasochism.

The dynamic relationship implied by the term “sadomasochism” recurs throughout *Blood and Guts*; two of Acker’s images, or visible “texts” – those on pages 62 and 63 – are, in fact, explorations of the pervasiveness of sadomasochism within everyday life. The first, “GIRLS WILL DO ANYTHING

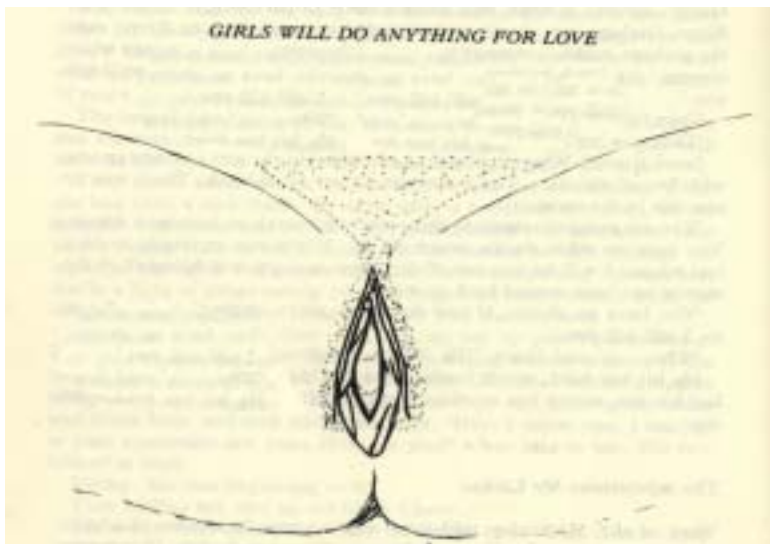


fig. 1

FOR LOVE,” is a sketch of a woman with her legs spread open; the second, “ODE TO A GRECIAN URN,” is of a headless, naked woman loosely bound at the hands and feet. While critics such as Gabrielle Dane have attempted readings of “ODE,” they do so by detaching it from its possible relationship to “GIRLS,” and instead choose to examine it in light of the penis illustrations on earlier pages.<sup>19</sup> While such readings may be beneficial, it seems equally crucial to consider “ODE” as being in conversation with “GIRLS,” if for no other reason than Acker herself clearly juxtaposes them by situating the sketches side-by-side in her text.

“GIRLS” is a pornographic and focused depiction of the vagina – although the woman’s thighs and shaved pubic hair are visible, they are drawn with a lighter stroke and fade into the background of the more pronounced labia. The viewer’s perspective is perfectly level with the position of the body, suggesting that the body is resting on something (a bed, floor, or table). Although conceptually similar to Gustave Courbet’s “L’Origine du Monde” (“The Origin of the World”), Acker’s

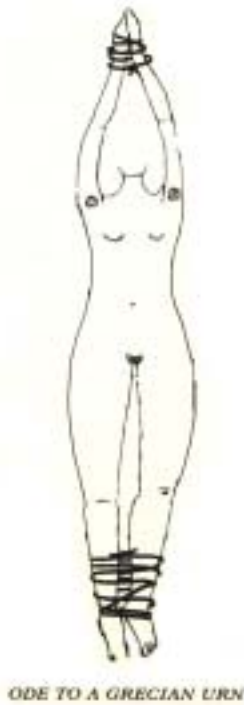


fig. 2

sketch does not provide the same perspective or information that Courbet's does: Courbet's subject is seen reclined on a bed, with stomach and one breast showing, and the perspective is from above, indicating a voyeuristic power relationship and a dynamism between subject and object. Courbet's naked woman, though filtered through a gaze, remains a subject; Acker's vagina is, essentially, all object. The perspective suggests an examination that strips the drawing of any sexual or pleasurable sentiment; the intricacies of the folds of the labia demonstrate an almost scientific attention to detail, especially when compared to the abstraction of the rest of the body. Because the image is clinical, it suggests a real site of birth, unlike Courbet's sexualized, romantic depiction of the same "origin."

The image is sterile, barren; despite being pornographic in nature, it is devoid of any pleasurable or sexual response. "GIRLS WILL DO ANYTHING FOR LOVE," a caption that suggests an ultimate self-sacrifice in search of a fairy-tale destiny, forces the reader to reevaluate the sketch: what is being "done" here in search of love? Because the legs are spread open in a receiving position, an instinctive interpretation is that women will submit themselves sexually in order to obtain love. However, this reading should be immediately suspect given the desexualized depiction of the vagina and viewer's perspective, which invites an examination rather than a voyeuristic interaction. So what is being sacrificed here?

We might provide an answer by considering "GIRLS" in relation to "ODE," drawn on the facing page. In "ODE," a headless woman is bound loosely at the hands and feet, with her right leg slightly lifted compared to her left, signaling that she is able to shift her body somewhat despite the restraints. The hands, which are folded together in a position of prayer, and her feet, dangling downward, imply that she is not standing, but either lying down or being propped up by an invisible mechanism, such as a pole or stake. Her hips, exaggerated in relation to the rest of her body, give her an urn-like shape. The neck and the bottom of her chin are drawn, providing the "lip" of the urn that would receive its contents. Like "GIRLS," the image is of an incomplete, potentially split subject: the missing head indicates a lack of identity, as the woman without it can have no vision or voice. Further, that the image is even a woman at all must be determined through interpretation: we rely on physical signifiers, such as the hips and the genitals, to identify it as "woman." A tension emerges between the reading of "ODE" as either a vase drawn with sexually suggestive features or a woman drawn without a face; both interpretations speak to the arbitrary nature of sexual signifiers and the feminine body as object.

Acker's revision of John Keats's poem turns his method of composition back on itself: while Keats verbally constructs a textual image from a visual object, Acker reconstructs what is

invisible in the poem – the urn itself. The urn, an inspiration for Keats, is the invisible subject of his poem, which instead focuses on a female lover. The poem becomes an act of translation, mediating and navigating between the object of urn and the subject of women. For Keats, the object (urn) becomes a subject (lover), a “still unravish’d bride of quietness,”<sup>20</sup> and thus the relative autonomy of subject and object remains preserved; Acker superimposes the subject upon the object, so that the urn and lover become interchangeable, denying any distinction between the two. Further, the representation of woman-as-urn makes the mechanism behind written expression (or, more simply, the inspiration) visible – the act of creation is an act of objectification. As in “GIRLS,” Acker is calling our attention to the ways in which the subject is objectified through perspective, either through a visual construction (where the vagina is isolated and centralized) or through the metaphoric representation (where the woman is qualified as an urn).

The phrase “GIRLS WILL DO ANYTHING FOR LOVE” suggests self-sacrifice; similarly, in both Keats’s poem and Acker’s reinterpretation the concept of sacrifice is central. Presumably referencing an image from the urn, Keats describes a scene where a female cow is reluctantly led towards an altar, bound in ceremonial dress: “Who are these coming to the sacrifice?/To what green altar, O mysterious priest,/Leads’t thou that heifer lowing at the skies,/And all her silken flanks with garlands dressed?”<sup>21</sup> Acker revises this scene by replacing the cow with a woman and the garlands with thick ropes, her body stripped and bared as though preparing for a sacrifice. In a strange reversal, here it is Acker who disguises the mechanism: while Keats makes it explicit that a “mysterious priest” will conduct the offering, Acker gives us nothing but the sacrificial object. The “mysterious priest,” as context, is invisible (yet, not irrelevant) in Acker: it is the bound body that is the site of spectacle, not the act of its being sacrificed.

A parallel reading might argue the ties that actually bind the body act as a means of sacrifice. Although the woman is given

slight flexibility of movement, the actual physical limitations can serve as a finalizing element of control. In this respect, “ODE” acts as a metaphor for Acker’s views on the inherent limitations of language; by appropriating a pornographic, patriarchal vision, Acker is reinforcing her dualistic perspective of language. If the body is, literally, the text for Acker, then the text must struggle in its restraints even as it attempts to transcend them. If “ODE” does depict a sacrifice, it is a giving up of both freedom and the illusion of freedom in favor of a textual object that acknowledges its subjugation to an oppressive language.

Further, if we consider “ODE” in the context of the facing image, it becomes increasingly clear that it is also participating in a conversation opened up by “GIRLS” about the nature of language and sexuality. Visually, the vaginal focus of “GIRLS” is magnified in “ODE” – the shape of the vagina and the shape of the headless body are conceptually identical. Accordingly, the absent head but present chin suggests a genital reference – the blank space, curved by the chin, marks the spot where the clitoris should be. Anatomically the determinate site of female pleasure, “ODE” laments the effacement of female sexuality by indicating the presence of the anatomically determinate site of female pleasure through its erasure. By highlighting the violent removal of a woman’s sexual identity, Acker is commenting on the male-dominated politics of sexuality. “GIRLS,” which qualifies its visual representation by contextualizing it as a form of sacrifice, is preparing us to view “ODE” as a depiction of that same subjugation.

While “GIRLS” isolates the vagina as a representative object of female identity, “ODE” presents a whole body rendered incomplete by its missing head. Both the vagina and the “opening” of the headless urn can act as receptacles or as ejectors, taking in content or expelling it, though Acker does not provide us with the necessary context to determine which action. “GIRLS” can be read as either pre-intercourse or pre-birth, “ODE” can be read as either the urn/woman full of content or the urn/woman full of lack, yet we are unable to discern which of these metaphors

applies. The images both contain a split subject-as-object where the instability and indeterminacy of representation reminds us that language itself, and its subsequent meaning, is unstable.

However, this conclusion is necessarily problematized by the imposition of language, in the form of captions, *upon* the images Acker creates. The image of the vagina *must* be read in the context of “GIRLS WILL DO ANYTHING FOR LOVE,” a declarative statement that suggests a stable binary – girls will do things for what they wish to receive (love, although sex is equally implied here). Similarly, “ODE TO A GRECIAN URN” immediately invokes Keats’s conclusion that “Beauty is truth, truth beauty—that is all/Ye know on earth, and all ye need to know.”<sup>22</sup> Keats’s equation (truth = beauty) likewise suggests a stability of signified/signifier and a direct relation of meaning, a context in which the image of a bound woman must somehow connote an imposition of structure upon sexuality or gender. Acker’s complex relationship to language extends into the space beyond language; the inescapable sense of sacrifice and the problematic non-existence of female sexuality, explored in these two drawings, are addressed not only by Acker as author, but also by Janey as protagonist.

### **“Freakiness like a bloody Kotex”: Sadomasochism as a Writing Strategy**

In “The Sexual Aberrations,” Freud defines sadism as “characterized by an active or violent attitude to the sexual object and...in which satisfaction is entirely conditional on the humiliation and maltreatment of the object.”<sup>23</sup> Masochism, then, is “nothing more than an extension of sadism turned round upon the subject’s own self, which thus, to begin with, takes the place of the sexual object.”<sup>24</sup> Freud’s definitions lack the dynamism of a mutual relationship; sadism and masochism remain somewhat autonomous and do not reflect the potential for interaction. In contrast, Lynn S. Chancer’s more contemporary definition of sadomasochism reflects this telling codependence as “a type of

interaction [that] results when simultaneous needs for autonomy and connections to others, for dependence as well as independence, are denied.”<sup>25</sup> Because Chancer’s definition allows for the squalid symbiosis that is Acker’s sadomasochistic vision (as represented both in her text and in the act of writing itself), it is a more suitable reflection of these relationships.

In *Blood and Guts*, sadomasochism becomes a commonplace sexual act; for example, Janey discusses her inclination to be beaten by her eighty-year boyfriend in an excerpt from her journal, writing, “I told him to get a belt. I think I shocked him. He took a heavy leather belt and whipped me across the back as he fucked me in the ass. It hurt almost too much and I liked it . . . it helps me feel I can do whatever I like.”<sup>26</sup> Because sadomasochism is equated with pleasurable sex acts for Janey, it is an immediate source of empowerment, contrary to Freud’s theory. Janey describes a pleasure in the pain that “helps [her] feel [she] can do whatever [she] likes” – a direct source of empowerment in a world where such mastery is rare. Kevin Floyd has argued persuasively that, “for Janey, brutal, violent, heterosexual sex *signifies* love: it is therefore the very thing she seeks.”<sup>27</sup> Since Janey embraces pain, she strips her males of their authoritative beater role: her assimilation of love and sexual violence effectively emasculates the males in her life by depriving them of a “beater” identity wholly dependent on the resistance of pain by the “beaten.” Janey becomes the mechanism behind a deconstructed sexual binary: she dismantles the authoritative relationship between male and female in an effort to redefine female sexuality as both multiplicitous and conflicted. But Janey’s sexual empowerment is qualified by the fact that her body is, literally, confined to a room by a Persian slave trader—her sexual liberation is subsequently repressed by a physical entrapment.

The crummy room that imprisons Janey (and also Acker) confines action but not thought. Therefore, for Acker, this imprisonment embodies the traditionally stifling conventions of literature, sexuality, gender, and art—in short, the textual embodiments of language. Despite this repressive restraint,

Janey presents us with an affirmative mission statement - “Now I’m going to do everything”—and we discover the constraints that Janey and Acker are subject to are surprisingly empowering.<sup>28</sup> This sadomasochistic anecdote represents Acker’s justification of her use of other texts as well as her patriarchal representations of sexuality—if existing within the prison is the only way to escape the prison, so to speak, this allots both Acker and Janey power in their ability to *use* their imprisonment. Because Acker considers language and the body as interchangeable, we read the confinement of Janey’s body as literally imprisoning the text itself—a statement reinforced by Janey’s plea that “something’s gonna break probably my body,” where the text is helplessly subject to the language that confines it.<sup>29</sup>

Although it is never explicitly stated, the connections between Janey and Acker as writer/author are evident. Janey says “I think most writers are crazy ‘cause they sit in their rooms all the time and scribble down stuff no one wants to read.”<sup>30</sup> Deviant sexuality, literary plagiarism, the commodification of gender—issues viewed by Acker as implicit in the construction of our everyday lives—are forced into indiscernible compliance by a society that refuses to recognize them. These issues are simultaneously brought to the forefront by Janey, a character who embodies and negotiates all of these taboo subjects. A recognition of the interplay between these three forms of oppression disturbs the illusion of homeostatic equilibrium in a heterosexual, male-dominated society—for example, just as Acker’s depiction of female sexuality in “ODE” and “GIRLS” reifies a violent reaction to an awareness of these prescribed invisibilities, Janey’s outright demand for a sadomasochistic relationship also exists as a challenge to normalized sexuality. Janey verbalizes the non-linguistic representation of self-sacrifice and actualizes the bondage of language by allowing it to beat her. The men in her life become both oppressors and sources of liberation, just as the captions on “ODE” and “GIRLS” qualify and then bind their otherwise freeing artistic medium.

Similarly, the act of self-sacrifice in “ODE” and “GIRLS” is also a discussion about the act of creation—when read in conjunction with the abortion scenes of *Blood and Guts*, “GIRLS” might be considered simultaneously pre-birth and pre-abortion. Janey encourages such a parallel when she declares: “if we closed our eyes and spread our legs, we’d be taken care of.”<sup>31</sup> This statement, which might refer to several acts (abortion, intercourse, or birth), is qualified from within an abortion scene, a context that is absent from the drawing of “GIRLS.” For Janey, birth is simply an impossibility and abortion is the only option, further contextualizing “GIRLS” as a pre-abortion scene. In accordance with this reading, the novel presents abortion as an act that is central to the feminine experience; in fact, the scenes of abortion are the only depictions of a shared female community in *Blood and Guts*. During this scene, Janey addresses the other women, saying, “we girls knew everything there was to know without having to say a word and we knew we had put ourselves here and we were all in this together.”<sup>32</sup> Janey is referring to the other young women in line for an abortion, but a previous statement—“it’s all up to you girls”—suggests a less specific audience.<sup>33</sup> Janey’s statement, thus, refers to a more universal female complicity in submission and subordination to men.

Acker writes this submission through the acts of sex and abortion, but also in terms of birth. In an essay about the writing of Marquis de Sade, she argues, “a woman who wants to be free, above all, must avoid pregnancy. The discussion about female identity in society narrows down to the problem of abortion.”<sup>34</sup> If we consider birth, for Acker, as a metaphor for creativity, then equating the birth of the text with an act of aborting that text suggests that all creation takes place as an act of destruction; further, it is only in this context of displacement that women become empowered. By making this empowerment contingent on the unspoken destructive aspect of the crux of heterosexuality—birth—Acker reveals the element of sadomasochism typically ignored by the whole of society. Implying that Janey’s abortion experience is both intensely personal and universally feminine,

Acker highlights the potential pervasiveness of sadomasochism in acts we otherwise blindly accept as “the norm.”

Although Acker uses Janey to uncover the frequency of sadomasochism in the fictionalized everyday life of *Blood and Guts*, Acker also challenges the extent to which her readers are subject to sadomasochism themselves. She unites the experience of the sadist with that of the masochist, emphasizing the way that “we are aware that we know both and, perhaps, are both victim and victimizer.”<sup>35</sup> Acker, then, invites the reader to approach her work with this complex relationship of contemporary sadomasochism in mind, as the reader is encouraged to both master and submit to the text as she negotiates her way through it. Thus, sadomasochism is a reading strategy for Acker, a constant renegotiation of the subject position assigned to a reader by the text’s author.

A strategy for reading necessarily implies a strategy for writing, as Acker states “The more that I write my own novels, the more it seems to me that to write is to read.”<sup>36</sup> Accordingly, sadomasochism also becomes part of the writing process for Acker, a method of “creation” used in the sections on Janey’s abortion and the reading of “ODE and “GIRLS.” Acker’s use of pastiche as a form of expression within the text is, in itself, a representation of sadomasochistic relations; she describes the process of pastiche as a necessary precondition of writing: “I do not write out of nothing, or from nothing, for I must write with the help of other texts, be these texts written ones, oral ones, those of memory, those of dream, etc.”<sup>37</sup> Acker appropriates texts in order to revise and redefine them, suggesting a concurrent need for those texts as well as the desire to make them her own, to create something original from within their established limits.<sup>38</sup> This negotiation, a dismantling of textual authority through a submission to the framework of another author, permits Acker to revise and rewrite the texts that have historically participated in constructing the very society she revolts against—an act combining the mutual needs of both the authoritative sadist and

the subjugated masochist in a textually-based negotiation of power.

The best example of such a dismantling in *Blood and Guts* is Acker's appropriation of Nathaniel Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter*. By borrowing large portions of his text threaded throughout her own, Acker privileges Hawthorne's language, emptying her textual body in order to create a place for him within herself. The reverse of this subjugation is that Acker simultaneously strips Hawthorne of his body and language, rewriting *The Scarlet Letter* from within the context of *Blood and Guts* in her own words. At once, Acker is the beater and the beaten—a relationship necessary for Acker with any text she rewrites.<sup>39</sup> Her choice to use *The Scarlet Letter*, a text that is itself a commentary on the oppressive nature of language and its interchangeability with the body, suggests a consciousness of appropriation capable of being “read”—an intertext commenting on the events of *Blood and Guts*.

In *The Scarlet Letter*, Hester Prynne, Hawthorne's protagonist, is defined by the “A” permanently embroidered on her garment; that “A” becomes a constant reminder of “the weight of a thousand unrelenting eyes.”<sup>40</sup> Hester internalizes “the weight” of those “unrelenting eyes,” as evidenced by her choice to live her entire life with that mark, regardless of the community's willingness to see it removed after she has supposedly served her sentence. Language defines Hester spiritually and physically – an interpretation that leads Janey to identify herself with Hester as she writes “A Book Report.” In this dense section of *Blood and Guts*, Janey projects her own life onto Hester's, while simultaneously using Hester's life to illuminate her experiences. Characterizing Hester as “a freak [who] couldn't be anything else and . . . wouldn't be quiet and hide her freakiness,”<sup>41</sup> Janey seems to be speaking to her own self-conscious feelings about her deviant sexuality while generalizing more broadly to a sense of Acker's sadomasochistic writing style—the need to revise Hester, the feminine protagonist of a canonized text as celebrating the “freakishness” that infuses Acker's own sense of the female

subject within language. Further, while Janey vigorously chronicles the account of Hester's life, she also sets up a distinction between the passively sexualized female heroine and the libertine rebel who rages against such stereotypical confinement—aligning herself (“I wanted to be a good girl for my father”) with Hester (“Hester Prynne, Hawthorne tells us, had wanted to be a good girl”).<sup>42</sup> Janey becomes a literal reflection of Hester's situation when she replaces Hester, as the subjugated heroine of *The Scarlet Letter* – demonstrating that, while identity may be textually revised through an alternative “reading,” this rewriting is not entirely a liberating act. In fact, Janey's alignment with Hester serves to highlight how patriarchal language reinscribes and replicates these canonized forms of gender identity – Hawthorne does not provide an escape or a release from the confines of Janey's room, he only serves to ground her more firmly in it.

Hester's counterpart, Reverend Dimmesdale (or “Dimwit,” as Janey refers to him), also figures heavily in Janey's revision of *The Scarlet Letter*. In Hawthorne's text, unlike Hester, who internalizes the language that is (literally) enforced upon her, Dimmesdale becomes the textual embodiment of that language, possibly even burning the “A” onto his chest in the final scene on the pulpit. Janey reads this literally and turns to Dimmesdale as a teacher, a man who might teach her how to master the language that she is constantly victimized by. She demands, “teach me how to talk to you . . . TEACH ME A NEW LANGUAGE . . . A LANGUAGE THAT MEANS SOMETHING TO ME.”<sup>43</sup> Even as Janey is conscious of the ways that language has afflicted and oppressed Hester Prynne, she continues to search for a means to control that language—in short, Janey aches to be both subject to it (as Hester) and master of it (as Dimmesdale). This tendency is again reflective of Acker's sadomasochistic relationship to her own language. Although Acker recognizes that language exists as the main vehicle of sexual oppression, she recognizes that the power to liberate does exist, but only in the Other (embodied by Dimmesdale). The conclusion of *The Scarlet Letter* lesson is that the power of language cannot be transferred, and Janey is forced

to identify with Hester, the subject of language, while negotiating an ever-oppressive relationship to Dimmesdale, the vehicle of language.

The act of plagiarism, an act that literally steals the authority from well-established texts, ultimately serves as a commentary on the power of language. Acker's plagiarism does not formally acknowledge the authors from whom she steals, and although this could be read as a stripping of textual authority, it is as much a submission to them as it is an act of violence against them. In this way, Acker's sadomasochistic relationship to texts from which she borrows is a dynamic one, as described by Chancer, who states that "sadism and masochism are insatiable strategies, ultimately unable to resolve the dilemma they are supposed to redress."<sup>44</sup> Simultaneously, Acker is both authorized by and disempowered by the language she appropriates as her own.

### **"GlooGlooGlooFuckShitPiss," or Acker Beyond Sade**

Through plagiarism, Acker both acknowledges and denies the patriarchal canon, while concurrently affirming her own literary lineage. Responding to an essay by Linda S. Kauffman in which she argues that Acker's integration of pornography, raw sexuality, and plagiarized pastiche offers a "false liberation"<sup>45</sup> from the confines of the text, Richard Hardack is instead offering an alternative view of Acker's intertextuality. He sees Acker as "dismantling herself as an author(ity),"<sup>46</sup> which he believes can lead to only two possible interpretations: either Acker's position as female subject in a patriarchal world offers her no other option, or that all identity is the result of such overlapping between tentative voices. In both cases, Hardack argues, the intertexts (the plagiarism of both pornography<sup>47</sup> and classical literature) provide a safe haven for response. They also, importantly, offer a substitute to the stifling nature of romance—a genre Acker rebels against as she creates alternative fictional worlds where participating in romance is "an act of masochism."<sup>48</sup> Hardack crucially parallels this tendency in Acker's fiction to the Marquis

de Sade's constant inversion, subversion, and exploitation of the fairy-tale genre, establishing Acker's fiction in a tradition of pornographic response to rigidified and problematic sexual norms.

It is true that both Acker and Sade see romance as a form of subjugation and oppression. The idea of human beings as entitled to, or being able to earn love, is suspect for Sade, who instead valorizes honor or respect through power and conquest.<sup>49</sup> Sade, disgusted by the concept of love because it is a fantasy of the weak (and thus a form of exploitation not applicable to the powerful Sadeian hero), sees "honor" and "respect" as more honest forms of security, as they presuppose the connection to power that Sade, as a libertine, sees as running through all of our social systems. The only way to gain power is to avoid the fallacy of love—meant to placate and emasculate—and instead turn to exploitation, destruction and vice as more viable demonstrations of power. Similarly, Acker sees the appropriation of sadomasochism, as a blatantly exposed power struggle, as a potentially more liberating force than that of romance or love, which simply hides the subjection that takes place in normal heterosexual relationships.

Acker's connection to Sade is even more pronounced when she analyzes two of his works, *Philosophy in the Bedroom* and "Florville and Courval, or the Works of Fate" in "The Words to Say It." In this brief essay, she reads both stories as representative of Sade's rage against the patriarchal confines of eighteenth-century French society and his imprisonment, arguing that his hatred of "centralised power (the Immortal King)" forces him to "see through the female gaze."<sup>50</sup> Although Acker is careful to remind us that Sade's gaze remains ultimately patriarchal—"an act that must dominate, therefore define, all it sees"<sup>51</sup>—she argues that his project is "to teach us who we are; he wanted for us to learn to want to not exist."<sup>52</sup> Her argument, amplified by the pornographic textual product of Sade's feminization, is that a male-dominated gaze forces female identity into retreat, and that Sade, effectively emasculated by his imprisonment, was able to tap into and exploit, but not subvert, these mirages.

For Acker, the Sadeian model contradicts the relationship to language that a more unified textual body would assert. First, Sade does not assume an authoritatively gendered language, according to Acker; although he writes as a male, his text is a “labyrinth of mirrors,” an unstable fantasy where questions of sexuality are inextricably tied to questions of power.<sup>53</sup> The “labyrinth,” a model that Acker uses to describe her own writing, suggests a purposely complex maze as opposed to a linear text.<sup>54</sup> This “maze” becomes, for the reader, an engaging play with the power of language to oppress and confine, where such qualities are exposed even as they are accepted. Also, Sade’s relationship to romance reveals an important aspect of Acker’s composition: “the beginning of the fairy tale” becomes precisely the dismantling of that vision.<sup>55</sup> Janey’s life, which is literally a compression of traditional fairy tale morphologies—entrapment, travel, oppressive father, liberating (but also oppressive) boyfriend—is disturbingly ordinary. Acker, paradoxically, defamiliarizes the fairy tale by normalizing an extreme version of it. The typical tropes that engender the heroines of fairy tales are present—but present in an extreme that suggests a violent aversion to the confines of that genre. In this way, Sade’s vision of romance as a form of both masculine and feminine exploitation becomes, for Acker, demonstrably linguistic—an exercise in how we use language to construct the identities, both sexual and otherwise, that ultimately consume us.

If we do not make a selective journey through *Blood and Guts*, but rather consider each self-contained narrative in its relation to other narratives, we are left with a dialogic rather than a cohesive text. The only discernible continuous dialogue in the text is a conversation about the relationship of sexuality to language, as language may offer an illusion of freedom but ultimately renders us victims of its oppression. Sadomasochism provides a context for this necessary struggle to express female sexuality in a language that cannot (and, perhaps, will not) adequately represent it. For Acker, the appropriation of pornographic images and dialogue signals a reluctant but forceful acceptance of the objectification of

sexuality; in the fictional world of *Blood and Guts*, the only viable challenge to the patriarchal constraints of language is a revision, but not an erasure, of the textual history that has previously defined sexuality and propagated the very language that controls it.

Acker, ever conscious of the ways in which patriarchy can rigidify sexual norms, is constantly dismantling and undercutting her textual authority (most notably through her blatant use of plagiarism), while Sade maintains a coherent and cohesive narrative, forever in charge of his own text. The implication of this difference is more than simply a gender distinction—it speaks to Acker and Sade’s divergent viewpoints on language. While both authors seek to subvert the fairy-tale genre, Acker attempts to normalize it in an extreme that is both disturbing and bizarre, while Sade thrusts it into a world of excessive sexual and pornographic fantasy. The effect is the same—we are made aware of the ways in which fairy-tale tropes reflect our most basic and powerful gender roles—but the different strategies speak to the ways in which Acker appropriates, but does not fully accept, Sade as a determining factor of her own philosophy of sexuality.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Peter Guttridge, “Obituary: Kathy Acker,” available online at *Club Mekon.com*, 10 October 2004 <<http://www.mekons.de/inde.htm>>, 1.

<sup>2</sup> Guttridge, 1.

<sup>3</sup> Richard Kadrey, “Black Tarantula: The Intense Life and Uncompromising Death of Renegade Writer Kathy Acker,” *Salon*, (3 December 1997) 1.

<sup>4</sup> Kevin Floyd, “Deconstructing Masochism in Kathy Acker’s *Blood and Guts in High School* and Joyce Carol Oate’s *You Must Remember This*,” *Critical Studies on the Feminist Subject* (Trento, Italy: Universita degli Studi di Trento, 1997) 57. Also, Marilyn Manners, “The Dissolute

Feminisms of Kathy Acker," *Future Crossings: Literature between Philosophy and Cultural Studies* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2000), 108.

<sup>5</sup> For further reading, see Andrea Dworkin, "Against the Male Flood: Censorship, Pornography, and Equality," *Oxford Readings in Feminism: Feminism and Pornography*, ed. Drucilla Cornell (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000) 19-38; Mary Joe Frug, "The Politics of Postmodern Feminism: Lessons from the Anti-Pornography Campaign," *Oxford Readings in Feminism*, 254-263. Dworkin, a champion for anti-pornography law (closely affiliated with Catharine MacKinnon), wrote civil rights ordinances making pornography actionable as a form of sexual discrimination. Responding to this campaign, Frug writes a persuasive article arguing against the effectiveness of sexual censorship as a feminist tactic.

<sup>6</sup> Manners, "The Dissolute Feminisms," 104.

<sup>7</sup> Manners, 104.

<sup>8</sup> Helene Cixous, "The Laugh of the Medusa," *Signs* 1 (1976): 875-893; quotation from 881.

<sup>9</sup> See Colleen Kennedy, "Simulating Sex and Imagining Mothers," *American Literary History* 4, no. 1 (1992): 157-181; and Lynne Layton, "Trauma, Gender Identity and Sexuality: Discourses of Fragmentation," *Psychoanalyses/Feminisms*, ed. Peter L. Rudnytsky and Andrew M. Gordon (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 2000): 211-227; and Marilyn Manners, "The Dissolute Feminisms of Kathy Acker."

<sup>10</sup> Kathy Acker, "A Few Notes on Two of My Books," *Bodies of Work* (London: Serpent's Tail, 1997), 12.

<sup>11</sup> Acker, *Bodies of Work*, viii.

<sup>12</sup> Acker, "On Art and Artists," *Bodies of Work*, 4.

<sup>13</sup> Helene Cixous, "The Newly-Born Woman," *The Helene Cixous Reader*, ed. Susan Sellers (London: Routledge, 1994), 42.

<sup>14</sup> Acker, "Seeing Gender," *Bodies of Work*, 161.

<sup>15</sup> Kathy Acker, *Empire of the Senseless* (New York: Grove, 1988), 127.

<sup>16</sup> Cixous, "The Newly-Born Woman," 41.

<sup>17</sup> Acker writes: "My body might deeply be connected to, if not be, language" in "Seeing Gender," *Bodies of Work*, 166.

<sup>18</sup> Cixous, "The Newly-Born Woman," 42.

<sup>19</sup> Gabrielle Dane, "Hysteria as Feminist Protest: Dora, Cixous, Acker," *Women's Studies* 23 (1994): 239-63.

- <sup>20</sup> John Keats, "Ode to A Grecian Urn," line 1.
- <sup>21</sup> Keats, lines 31-34.
- <sup>22</sup> Keats, lines 49-50.
- <sup>23</sup> Sigmund Freud, "The Sexual Aberrations," *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality*, trans. James Strachey (New York: Basic Books, 1975), 25.
- <sup>24</sup> Freud, 24.
- <sup>25</sup> Lynn S. Chancer, *Sadomasochism in Everyday Life: The Dynamics of Power and Powerlessness* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1992), 138.
- <sup>26</sup> Kathy Acker, *Blood and Guts in High School* (New York: Grove Press, 1978), 59.
- <sup>27</sup> Floyd, "Deconstructing Masochism," 61.
- <sup>28</sup> Acker, *Blood and Guts*, 59.
- <sup>29</sup> Acker, *Blood and Guts*, 59.
- <sup>30</sup> Acker, *Blood and Guts*, 36.
- <sup>31</sup> Acker, *Blood and Guts*, 33.
- <sup>32</sup> Acker, *Blood and Guts*, 32.
- <sup>33</sup> Acker, *Blood and Guts*, 32.
- <sup>34</sup> Acker, "Reading the Lack of the Body: The Writing of Marquis de Sade," *Bodies of Work*, 70.
- <sup>35</sup> Acker, "Writing, Identity, and Copyright in the Net Age," *Bodies of Work*, 99.
- <sup>36</sup> Acker, "The Words to Say It," *Bodies of Work*, 66.
- <sup>37</sup> Acker, "Writing, Identity, and Copyright in the Net Age," *Bodies of Work*, 100.
- <sup>38</sup> Acker has said: "I never liked the idea of originality, and so my whole life I've always written by taking other texts, inhabiting them in some way so that I can do something with them." Acker, "The Path," *Bodies of Work*, 27.
- <sup>39</sup> See Kathy Acker, *Great Expectations* (New York: Grove Press, 1982); Kathy Acker, *Don Quixote: Which Was a Dream* (New York: Grove Press, 1986).
- <sup>40</sup> Nathaniel Hawthorne, *The Scarlet Letter* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1988), 39.
- <sup>41</sup> Acker, *Blood and Guts*, 65.
- <sup>42</sup> Acker, *Blood and Guts*, 67.
- <sup>43</sup> Acker, *Blood and Guts*, 96.

<sup>44</sup> Chancer, Sadomasochism 139.

<sup>45</sup> Qtd. in Richard Hardack, "A Letter to Linda: Female Quixotism and the School of Sadeian Woman," *Episolar Histories: Letters, Fiction, Culture* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 2000), 217.

<sup>46</sup> Hardack, 217.

<sup>47</sup> In *Great Expectations* Acker plagiarizes *The Story of O*.

<sup>48</sup> Hardack, "A Letter to Linda," 219.

<sup>49</sup> Timo Airaksinen, *The Philosophy of the Marquis de Sade* (London: Routledge, 1995), 110.

<sup>50</sup> Acker, "The Words to Say It," *Bodies of Work*, 79.

<sup>51</sup> Acker, "The Words to Say It," *Bodies of Work*, 79.

<sup>52</sup> Acker, "The Words to Say It," *Bodies of Work*, 79.

<sup>53</sup> Acker, "The Words to Say It," *Bodies of Work*, 79.

<sup>54</sup> "To write in order to lead the reader into a labyrinth from which the reader cannot emerge without destroying the world." Acker, "The Words to Say It," *Bodies of Work*, 66.

<sup>55</sup> Acker, *Blood and Guts*, 51.