



Aesthetic Sexuality: A Literary History of Sadomasochism

Romana Byrne

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To understand why the concept of aesthetic sexuality is important, we must consider the influence of the first volume of Foucault's seminal *The History of Sexuality*. Arguing against Foucault's assertions that only scientia sexualis has operated in modern Western culture while ars erotica belongs to Eastern and ancient societies, Byrne suggests that modern Western culture has indeed witnessed a form of ars erotica, encompassed in what she calls 'aesthetic sexuality'.

To argue for the existence of aesthetic sexuality, Byrne examines mainly works of literature to show how, within these texts, sexual practice and pleasure are constructed as having aesthetic value, a quality that marks these experiences as forms of art. In aesthetic sexuality, value and meaning are located within sexual practice and pleasure rather than in their underlying cause; sexuality's *raison d'être* is tied to its aesthetic value, at surface level rather than beneath it. Aesthetic sexuality, Byrne shows, is a product of choice, a deliberate strategy of self-creation as well as a mode of social communication.



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