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# The Body Ecstatic: The Masochism of Devotion as Seen in Ritual Possession

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## The Body Ecstatic: The Masochism of Devotion as Seen in Ritual Possession

I have a religious body. I know because I touch my gods. My faith doesn't stay shuttered in my thoughts like an heirloom rattling around in an attic. Neither does it live in small, precious objects that keep dust off a mantle. Part of the experience of my individual practice of my religion, Hellenic Polytheism, includes physical contact between my body and whatever disembodied or extra-embodied form the gods take. This of course contradicts early modern and Enlightenment Era Christians' insistence that body and mind are separate, that thoughts and other cerebral activities (such as reason and faith) are immaterial, and that the sinful body, vulnerable to lust, must prostrate before the pure mind, which benefits from its proximity to an anti-corporeal God (Descartes 61). This Cartesian concept has medieval roots and persists currently in Western cultures: what does one communicate about one's body when they insist, "Mind over matter," or ignore hunger to continue working on scholarship, or express confusion when unresolved mental stress results in ground teeth, stomach ulcers, chronic heart conditions, and the like?

Religious studies, insofar as it is a Western endeavor, largely suffers from separating body from mind. When adherents to this Enlightenment Era thinking focus only on theology or psychology as distinct from ritual studies, or consider ritual as merely tangentially or symbolically related to theology rather than an enactment of theology, it's clear to me that religious studies struggles with an ignorance about bodies. Philip Mellor and Chris Shilling in their article "Reflexive Modernity and the Religious Body" attribute religious scholars' ignorance in the past and present to a "new Protestant attitude" in the early modern period wherein "the Protestant Reformers problematized the individual's relationship to the Church... by turning the Church into a disembodied idea... This Church was unknowable, invisible and

thus purely an object of faith” (Mellor and Shilling 30). They impress upon the student of religion, their primary audience, that the separation of valid, conventional religious experience from the body is not an inherent part of faith but a modern invention: “Here we can observe the psychologization of Christianity... and an attendant reduction of it to what is subjectively and psychologically sustainable, rather than it being a taken-for-granted part of one’s embodied reality” (Mellor & Shilling 30). They write from 1994; writing from 2019, I believe it is time to abandon the arbitrary division of body and mind in religious studies as well as larger Western culture. The phenomenology of religion offers a great many useful things, but a study of religious experience cannot be complete without an equally rigorous study of religious bodies—since, even the most ardent believer in the supremacy of mind over matter will agree, the body is the experiencer. To some, all the body does is experience.

I aim to formulate a theory of the religious body: what is it? how does it function in ritual and mundane contexts? how can a scholar’s understanding of the religious body enhance their work? I borrow my definition of the body in general from Meredith McGuire, who reflects on “mind/body dualism” in religious studies and offers a counter-definition of the body in contrast to a medicalized or compartmentalized characterization: “... Let us assume the human body is both a biological and a cultural product, simultaneously physical and symbolic, existing always in a specific social and environmental context in which the body is both active agent and yet shaped by each social moment and its history” (285). This perspective lends the body more meaning-making power than most afford it: rather than an inert coagulation of medically known and categorized biological material, the body, without transcending its materiality, becomes fluctuating and flexible depending on context. The body is not just an object of study, something to be known, but something that knows. A menstruating body means something different in a

doctor's office than in a community pool. A fat body means something different in 1980s United States than it did in ancient Mesopotamia. A pair of legs knows how to pump the pedals on a bike; a pair of arms knows how to hold a child.

In the phenomenological sense, a religious body in this paper refers to the body (seen as unified with the mind and/or spirit) that directly, sometimes physically interacts with divinity—the mystic's body, in other words. The religious body is similar to but not the same as a sacred body, which possesses inherent holiness (e.g., a demi-god's, a saint's), whereas a religious body is inherently profane, but becomes religious and reverts back to profanity depending on circumstances. Just as each body changes in different contexts, so changes the religious body. My project is to determine what qualities or mindsets make a devotee's body more susceptible to direct connection with divinity.

I argue that openness (ability to offer one's body to a god), receptivity (ability to accept with one's body whatever physical-spiritual experience a god wants to give), and masochism (explored in detail below) make a devotee's body religious. I demonstrate this theory by analyzing an extreme but not uncommon practice that appears in some form in many traditions: ritual possession.<sup>1</sup> My sources for this practice concern Norse Heathenism.

As part of my analysis, I focus on masochism as a common characteristic, broadly speaking, of mystics' embodied religious experiences. Many doctors, scholars, and priests have defined and theorized about masochism in a variety of ways, from Richard von Krafft-Ebing to Michel Foucault. In "Religion and the Theory of Masochism," Stuart Charme applies six

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<sup>1</sup> Ritual possession is also called horsing by adherents of Afro-Caribbean religions; contemporary polytheists of European traditions have borrowed the term. I will not speak on the ethics of this borrowing, but appropriation is a problem in every majority white religious tradition.

separate conceptualizations of masochism to contemporary (1980s, American, Protestant) Christian theology and worship. Each of these six theories attempts to trace the ever-pathologized masochism back to a deficiency, disorder, or psychological panic (for example, “a need for punishment” or “a flight from selfhood”) (221). Charme and the scholars he cites ignore two vital components of masochism: although emotional masochism exists, manipulating the production and experience of pain is primarily an embodied activity, whereas none of Charme’s theories concern the body but instead problematize the mind; and in order to truly qualify as a masochist, one must *like* the pain. One must like both what the pain does—strengthens a relationship, represents a direct connection between sadist and masochist, proves one’s strength—as well as the embodied physical experience of pain itself. The latter is necessary so that the masochist may alchemize pain, conceptualized in Western culture as inherently bad, into pleasure and back again. The masochist perspective aligns with and reflects the body’s flexibility of meanings. A slap to the face may be felt as objectionably painful from a parent or a colleague, but a masochist in a consensual relationship with a sadist may transform both the meaning and the physical experience of that slap into a type of pleasure-pain; this reveals that the insistent categorization of pure sensation into wicked pain or happy pleasure is arbitrary. The masochist’s flexibility is not pathological but context-dependent.

Because of my rejection of the pathologization of masochism, my definition aligns more closely with BDSM practitioners’ than academics’. In *Techniques of Pleasure*, ambiguously vanilla ethnographer Margot Weiss provides a history of “SM,” “S/M,” “S&M,” and “sadomasochism” as terms that carry different connotations within kink and medical communities. She sums up all these meanings as such: “This [is the] definitional complexity... *SM* both refers to and resists an originary pathology, and it is both an umbrella term for all

dynamics of consensual power exchange and a narrower term referring to pain play...” (Weiss xi). This basic definition of sadomasochism in an erotic context suffices for my purposes.

In a religious context, I identify the god/devotee relationship as inherently concerned with and reliant upon the divine’s irrevocable power over the devotee. Unlike in BDSM, there cannot be a “power exchange” because divinity always wields power over mortality and that power cannot be diminished or transferred from one to the other; additionally, unlike in other necessarily power-imbalanced relationships (parent and child, teacher and student), the devotee despite their powerlessness actively chooses to submit to their gods. This unique power dynamic, contrary to what Charne or Teresa Hornsby may argue about Christianity, is not inescapably sadomasochistic, but it does offer the possibility of sadomasochism.

Indeed, one major limit of scholarship about religion and masochism is scholars’ fixation on Christianity. In her article “Capitalism, Masochism, and Biblical Interpretation,” Teresa Hornsby argues that Christians incorporate masochism into their theology and practice in order to create (in the past, reproductive; in the present, queer; always, submissive to authority) bodies fit for capitalist production and consumption. She argues about “The Crucifixion,” the fetishization of Christ’s suffering on the cross, “The film [*The Passion of the Christ*] and its receptors seem to say that to be a good Christian, to be worthy of forgiveness and salvation, one must desire and willingly submit to the most brutal tortures. More, one must enjoy seeing others suffer horrific pain and see this pain as redemptive” (Hornsby 143). According to Hornsby, this religious masochism directly benefits imperialism and capitalism. While I agree with Hornsby’s conclusions to a point, I find her article representative of issues and erasures within religious studies about masochism: she only discusses Christianity, which she (accurately) writes as inextricable from colonialism; she borrows Freud’s theories of masochism(s), all of which

“converge in one place: this desire to be punished by the father” or in other words frame masochism as a response to a psychological deficit; and she references several other scholars about masochism, like Cynthia Marshall and Nick Mansfield, who similarly pathologize masochism and/or limit religious masochism to a reflection of the imperialist relationship.

Conversely, I choose to analyze contemporary polytheist traditions because they have no imperial-capitalist history, which frees me to discuss the god/devotee power dynamic without also discussing colonialism, capitalism, and conversion. Without a capitalist motivation, polytheist sadomasochism cannot be a tool of systemic control but of purely religious control; capital does not get in between god and devotee. Additionally, it is both a stereotype and a truth that most polytheist traditions venerate the material, including the body, in ways that Buddhist ascetics or Christians who have rooted sin in the body since the medieval period do not; as Wiccan blogger Sable Aradia says in a post about godspousery, “Pagan ethics, which embrace the physical as equally sacred to the material, change the game considerably” (Aradia).<sup>2</sup>

My last and simplest reason for choosing Hellenic Polytheist and Norse Heathen sources over Christian sources to demonstrate my theory about the religious body is a desire for variety. Every other religious studies scholar writes about Christianity, I assume, so that I don’t have to.

The majority of research about ritual possession focuses on native and indigenous religions whose practices essentially define shamanism. However, in the anthology *Shamanism: A Reader*, Robert Wallis performs what he terms an “autoarcheology” about Wiccan, Druidic, and Heathen pagans who base their contemporary rituals on ancient (often archeological)

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<sup>2</sup> Sable Aradia, like many other pagan bloggers, has adopted a pseudonym for the sake of her blog. Throughout this paper and in citations, I will respect people’s chosen pseudonyms rather than attempt to track down their legal names.

sources, which to Wallis qualifies these pagans as “neo-shamans.” He connects Norse Heathenism’s *seiðr*—“an obscure practice of ‘magic’ in the [ancient] sources that is often disreputable or related to sorcery”—to shamanism (407). In this context, Wallis and I share an understanding of shamanism, *seiðr*, pathwalking, hedge witchery, etc. as religious practices that allow a human practitioner access to the spiritual, the metaphysical, and the divine. *Seiðr* encompasses more than ritual possession, hence contemporary pagans’ adoption of the term “horsing” from Afro-Caribbean religions like Voudon, Santeria, and Candomble (Kaldera). Wallis’s article focuses on Norse Heathens’ adaptation of archeologists’ work to (re)construct their own religious rituals; Wallis notes, “The [Old Norse] literature is also used by Heathens to reconstruct what may have been Nordic ‘possession’ practices. The impetus for this practice arose... when a deity first possessed a *völva* during a *seiðr* session, an unexpected happening that required some explanation and contextualization” (408). Wallis details and laments the conflict between contemporary pagans and academics, the latter of whom accuse the former of misusing, ignoring, or willfully misinterpreting research by offering alternative perspectives of ancient texts.

Wallis, the pan-polytheistic Church of Asphodel, and Norse Heathen blogger Raven Kaldera outline roughly the same possession ritual. The Church of Asphodel’s page is instructional, repeatedly addressing an assumed pagan “you,” and thus the most detailed. In short: a god requests or demands to possess a “horse” (a devotee) in order to communicate directly with their devotees, to receive offerings, to teach devotees something through the horse, or simply because “the Gods are coming back, and They want to be able to use human bodies in order to get things done” (Kaldera). The horse spends any amount of time preparing their bodies to be taken (the Church of Asphodel frames the horse’s body as “a ritual space,” “an altar,” and



“a temporary sacrifice for that deity”) and their minds or souls to be pushed aside (“Formal Ritual Structure for Public God-Possession”). Often this preparation involves helpers dressing the horse in god-specific items. The adherents gather; the god via the horse fulfills the purpose of the ritual; the god leaves the horse; and other members of the group help the horse readjust to their own body.

Without an understanding of the religious body, any analysis of ritual possession or horsing would be incomplete. Not only is possession an unquestionably, dangerously embodied event, but a fundamentally chaotic ritual wherein, despite some pagans’ best plans, the god exerts their will indomitably. Kaldera and the Church of Asphodel agree that horsing isn’t a skill one can learn, but a vocation for which one is chosen: Kaldera warns his readers, “The Path of the Horse is the rarest of the Paths, because it isn't one that you can just set out to master via willpower. It is entirely dependent on the Gods and wights [spirits], and if they don't want to go along with the idea of you using this path, then it simply won't happen;” and the otherwise egalitarian Church of Asphodel insists, “People are either chosen by the Gods to be horses, or they aren't... It is our observation that ‘natural’ horses—the ones who are chosen by the Gods themselves, and often cannot turn the job down—are better at fully channeling the deity” (Kaldera 1, “Formal Ritual...”). Both also warn about the possibility of a god claiming a horse without consent or warning. The Church of Asphodel disallows horses who have previously hosted a god from assisting in a ritual where the same god possesses a different horse, for fear that the god will ride the wrong horse (“Formal Ritual...”). Kaldera also gestures toward spontaneous possession: “I remember being told flatly by one rather well-known Pagan author that our group shouldn't be doing it because it was self-indulgent and dangerous. (As if those of us who had been chosen to be horses could just stop!)” (Kaldera 2). As part of a horse’s

preparation, the Church of Asphodel advises “some gods might want purification rituals, others dietary restrictions, still others various taboos,” although they demur from a necessary conversation about the sacrifice and unpleasantness (at the very least, if not pain) these god-given requirements entail—however, they do admit that “there is always the chance that a deity will visit and completely ignore our limits once ensconced” (“Formal Ritual...”). Wallis acknowledges and admires Norse Heathens’ general awareness of the danger of horsing: “They [neo-shamans] accord with Taussig’s astute understanding of shamanism as... [destroying] any belief—neo-shamanic or academic—in shamanism solely as a safe or benevolent phenomenon... There is always a tension in the air, an aura of unpredictability...” (415).

Each of these elements of god-possession reveals that the god not only requires total, physical submission from the horse, but I argue also demands a masochist horse. The Church of Asphodel seems reluctant to confront the natural consequences of submitting to all-powerful gods, but Kaldera reflects the masochistic mindset of the horse by remembering those in ancient pagan traditions who feared possession: “In ancient times... people didn't expect spiritual things to be egalitarian. They also didn't expect them to be kind, or loving, or in the immediate best interests of the humans whom they might grab... They know what happens to the people who get noticed, and they'd prefer to keep living their lives with a full set of choices.” His critique of contemporary pagans who flatten and declaw their gods presents his version of a flawed worshipper. This flawed worshipper implies that the gods’ ideal worshipper, and clearly the ideal horse, must not only possess the ability to *withstand* the gods’ often capricious, selfish, and sometimes hurtful ways, but to *love* the gods and their cruelty—to love purifying rituals like fasting for days or praying for hours, to love relinquishing their bodies to deities who dance endlessly or devour offerings faster than a human body can handle, to love the pain of possession

and transform it into the pleasure, the ecstasy, of being in the presence of god. Kaldera and the Church of Asphodel are correct that horsing is an exclusive practice: it is exclusive only to religious bodies. The masochism of the religiously-embodied devotee allows them to reconcile the recognized danger of horsing with their call, and their desire, to do it.

The masochism of the religious body features vividly in pagan blogger Juniper's first-person account of acting as a horse for Frig. Her post begins with a list of minor nuisances or inconveniences that she must weather as she prepares for the ritual: carrying heavy boxes and a large chair into the "Ve" (the sacred area), being bitten by mosquitos and other bugs, urinating in the bushes outside of the Ve, and donning an uncomfortably tight robe whose hem is long enough to trip her on the uneven swamp ground. More agonizing than these small tortures, for Juniper, is the cocktail of anticipation and fear that precedes the event: "The wait can ruin you if you let it. Butterflies begin to form in your belly. The what-ifs reach insidious tendrils into your mind, spreading fear and doubt" (Juniper). Once the ritual starts, Juniper picks up her unwieldy skirt and circles the poles her group has erected that represent Frig and Odin, and her minor discomfort escalates: in her trance, she thrusts her hand into "red-hot incense coals, [her] fingers come out black and sooty, yet they feel no heat. No burns, though there should have been. Her [Frig's] storm is building and she is protecting [Juniper]" (Juniper). This incident exemplifies the sadomasochist dynamic between god and horse: Frig demands a trance that leaves Juniper vulnerable to physical harm, and although Frig protects her, Juniper knows, accepts, and presents in her writing as normal the risks of ritual possession. Juniper acknowledges and impresses upon her reader the possibility that Frig could have allowed the coals to burn her—and bearing that pain would have been part of Juniper's duty as a horse.

Juniper describes the very process of Frig entering her body, the bare minimum action required in a possession ritual, as painful:

“A greater storm, a hurricane, rages above and within the god pole itself. My insignificant little human mind does it’s best to match, a tempest in a tea-cup... My little storm slips just beyond the confines of mind and body, swirling at the threshold, neither without nor within. It brushes against the hurricane that is Frig. Electric. Wild. Not as force of nature, but a force of the multiverse. I can comprehend her as well as an ant can understand my foot. I could just let go completely, surrender. My little storm would be swept away into the maelstrom like a crow feather in a hurricane” (Juniper).

Her use of extended hurricane metaphor conveys the physical and spiritual enormity of Frig’s presence within her body—a presence that overfills, overwhelms, and overwrites. Within this awe-full possession lies an even greater danger: that Frig will push Juniper out of her own body permanently. Not only does Juniper submit to the risks of horsing, but she expects and revels in them: “This is what lies beyond ecstasy. When one has not strayed from their body. I am a clean vessel. A hollow bone” (Juniper).

As part of the ritual, right before Frig has seated herself inside Juniper, a member of the congregation ties a red linen cord between Juniper’s neck and Frig’s god pole, “An umbilical. A pathway. A noose. I hang from the god pole and wait” (Juniper). The sequence of her diction, from nurturing to neutral to deadly, encapsulates the complex pleasure-pain of opening oneself up to possession. The noose metaphor is especially salient, which Juniper emphasizes by extending it into an image, because it mirrors the myth of Odin learning the mystery of runes—and so acquiring the knowledge of written language and prophecy—by hanging himself from a tree and sacrificing his eye. He commits self-sacrifice for the sake of his devotees, just like

Juniper submits herself to the pains of ecstasy so the members of her congregation can commune with Frig. Once again, masochism results in a religious body that facilitates mysticism.

When Frig finally enters, Juniper expresses surprise that Frig's arrival wasn't as painful as past horsing rituals for other gods: "With others, there was a rush. An entitled barging in, helping themselves. Pushing me aside so that I have nearly no control, no awareness, little say in the proceedings. Frig was so gentle, so delicate that I wasn't sure she had come at all" (Juniper). Additionally, other gods had "[shoved] their horses down to some half oblivion," but Frig allowed Juniper to remain cognizant during the possession; by reflecting upon her past experiences like this, Juniper provides a glimpse at the wide breadth of discomfort and pain that gods can cause their horses as an intrinsic part of the ritual (Juniper).

Continuing the theme of complete subservience, Juniper devotes an extensive portion of the essay to a minor part of the ritual: a devotee offered Frig a plum and Frig wanted to stop the ceremony to demand more plums. Once a god starts to volley commands, the mortals who serve them cannot stop them from demanding more—more plums, more alcohol, more dancing, more sex. From the height of their imperative whimsy, gods can ravage their horse's body; as Juniper says, "It's a risk you have to be willing to take when you do this kind of work. The chance you might find yourself with battered and bruised feet, a sick stomach full of plums, a wicked hangover, an STD because the god riding you decided to screw someone" (Juniper). Similarly ruinous are the consequences for saying no to a god as a horse: "The gods are dangerous. They can destroy you in an instant. Inside of me, brushing up against my mind and spirit, Frig could have dealt me serious damage with a single lashing" (Juniper). She offers a number of real life examples of the gods' vengeance, which include a man who mistakenly felled a sacred tree and died of a brain aneurysm, leaving his spouse "driven insane with grief" (Juniper). Through her

detailed and horrifying anecdotes, Juniper delivers an urgent warning to her readers—do not invite a god into your body unless you are prepared and willing to die. To her detractors who would criticize her for scaremongering, Juniper parallels Kaldera’s criticism that to ignore the gods’ terrible power and their willingness to use it is to disrespect the gods and plunge oneself into danger:

“Many people I know want to feel as if they are on equal footing as the gods. They refuse to consider having something in universe bigger and stronger than they are. We want an all-knowing, all-loving, omnipresent super goddess who changes everything she touches and everything she touches changes... Never mind what the lore tells us. Gods who rape. Gods who kill... I try to talk to people about how the gods are so powerful, so awesome and greater-than. How terrifying they can be. I’m usually just misunderstood... Perhaps most people never experience these things, because most of us never move beyond the basics. Most of us will never invite the hurricane in our heads” (Juniper).

Of all my sources, Juniper is by far the most explicit about the masochism required to be a horse because she conveys most desperately the body-annihilating power of the gods. By typifying pagans’ all-positive, only-pleasurable experiences with their gods as “the basics,” she argues that a complex, profound relationship with the gods, to the extent where a god appears on earth inside your human flesh, inherently involves pain. According to Juniper, and according also to me, no situation exists wherein one is “on equal footing with the gods,” and certainly no mystical connection to a god who is always and only “all-knowing, all-loving, [and] omnipresent.” The rapture of possession, that which “lies beyond ecstasy,” contains pleasure so bright it burns and pain so excruciating it obliterates the mundane troubles of the mind and so reduces the body to its simplest, holiest parts. Only the religious body can endure and adore such intensity.

Juniper forbade Frig from asking for more plums. Once she accepted the next offering, Frig forgot she had asked at all. A possibly life-ending catastrophe avoided, the ritual proceeds as normal and Juniper's pain dwindles back to discomfort: her handmaiden yanks off Juniper's veil after Frig leaves and jolts Juniper firmly into her own body; and ends at the same place she had started when she says, "I have to pee" (Juniper).

With its attendant suffering and inexorable chaos, why perform a possession ritual? What is there to love about horsing that turns Juniper's pain into masochism? Why do pagans nurture religious masochism within themselves to forge from their flesh a religious body? Before the ritual, Juniper lays her head on Frig's god pole and prays: "...Not for my own ego. Not so I can impress my friends. I ask you to do this for the folk... They deserve it. Please;" in other words, do this for our community. Descend upon earth to accept from your faithfuls their mead, their bread, and their fears. Inflict upon one body awesome pain and cradle that body in your undertow. Do it for love.

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