

## **DON'T BE GENTLE WITH ME...**

**Psychotherapist Phillip Hodson wonders why rough sex is so exciting**

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If he hadn't died 65 years ago, Freud would be fascinated by our current ambivalence towards sexual violence. On the one hand, we quite rightly anathematise the crime of assault. We have the sternest penalties for wife-beating, rape and paedophile violation. On the other hand, we saturate our senses with sexual violence by proxy, whether the pornography is fictional or served up in a celebrity exposé, such as 'Ulrika and the Footballer' or features in news from the law courts (erotic strangulation is this week's topic). I have a sneaky feeling that Dr Freud might well suggest the nation should heal itself by remembering that good sex is not a dance between two pacifists. We destroy the very libido we desire if eros is chained to chintz. Indeed, if the sex is never 'rough' we'll probably cease to want to breed. My thoughts are inspired by the increasing 'leakage' of what you might call the sexual underworld into its counterpart overworld. The spills get larger.

The erotic shop Coco De Mer will be showing exhibitions of the ancient art of Japanese rope bondage in their salons from June. A new series of the television show *Footballers' Wives*, which begins on February 11 on ITV1, will show sex scenes containing violence.

Vivienne Westwood, a designer of fetish fashion, will be celebrated at the V&A, from April 1 to July 11, in an exhibition based on bondage, sex and anarchy; and *The Good Old Naughty Days*, a compilation of kinky pornographic films from the 1920s, previously banned by the censors in Britain, will be shown at the Other Cinema in Leicester Square in March.

Or take *Secretary*, a film that has successfully played to mainstream cinema audiences around the world for the past six months. It depicts the hiring of a woman for the specialised task of receiving manual correction from her employer while bent over his desk. It is well-shot, full of plot, artistic and yet whips home the moral that for a significant minority erotic spanking is not only of enduring sexual interest but possibly the necessary means of erotic arousal and a failsafe method of accessing intimacy. It's not just that the actors James Spader and Maggie Gyllenhaal represent two controlled characters in search of ritual violence. They provide, even advertise, an entirely alternative method of turning on. For the record, Mr Spader really does spank Ms Gyllenhaal hard. No sleight of handwork and faked foreplay here. For those unconvinced that this behaviour might have a serious relevance outside the closet, let me remind you that the practice has a name. Social historians call it *le vice anglais*.

Past filmic references include an amorous encounter between Trevor Howard as the Earl of Cardigan and Jill Bennett as the adulterous Mrs Duberley in director Tony Richardson's 1969 version of "The Charge of the Light Brigade". Having enticed Ms Bennett ("They say her pitcher has been too often to the well") aboard his playboy yacht moored beyond range of the Russian guns in Sebastopol Harbour, Mr Howard proceeds to wine, dine and undress his giggling companion till she's down to her tightly-laced corsets. Whereupon he flips her across his knees and paddles her posteriors till she indignantly shrieks at the top of her voice "But...but... this is not love!" The demeanour of the Earl suggests strong disagreement. And in the best

traditions of Hollywood sexism, of course, Ms Bennett's protests gradually peter out into gasps of pleasure.

A number of questions occur to me. Why on earth should such wooing work? Why in some cases does it seem to work without fail? Why, for example, do many middle class women in Nancy Friday's 1979 survey of female sexual fantasies yearn for the feel of rough serge on the blue collars of their demon ravishers? Are there any dangers in letting more of this energy rise to the social surface?

Insofar as arousal mechanisms are concerned, medical science can tell us there is only one nervous system in the human body. Although divided into sympathetic and parasympathetic operations, the crude result is that heightened emotion can be directed towards almost any end. To put it brutally, if you are angry you are closer to orgasm than if you are calm. The symptoms of both conditions are mutually resembling – red face of rage or romance; sweating brow of fury or fornication; acute breathlessness in either passion. This is also the basis of the fear that children who witness their parents making love may mistakenly assume one is attacking the other.

Add in brain-map observations from neuroscience and what our medical experts seem to be suggesting is that pleasure and pain are to some extent a question of what we call them. Not entirely. Few, for instance, would care to describe the final moments of King Edward II at Berkeley Castle skewered on a hot poker as enjoyable. But we do know that women who have trouble reaching orgasm benefit from having gone to the gym prior to lovemaking in order to raise their metabolisms. That angry couples in the middle of a furious row may suddenly turn upon each other in an erotic frenzy and strip. That war makes soldiers rapists. That scratching and biting add to the stimulation begun by more genteel caresses and strokes, sometimes instantly. That couples in the throes of a violent break-up have the best and hence most bitter sex of their entire love lives.

And all this before you open a psychology casebook. For such dossiers, I would refer you to websites like [www.alt.com](http://www.alt.com) where the international consensual spanking community is apparently on display and already numbers 871,789 in the United States, 103,354 in Great Britain and even eight hardy souls in North Korea. From a brief examination of the texts, these numerous but 'alternative' personality types appear to include both high-energy thrill-seekers and the survivors of various forms of family abuse. I didn't see a lot of cannibals about but that may have been due to research-fatigue.

In a nutshell, arousal for such folk clearly depends upon a "power exchange". Every relationship we enter has a "balance of power". Perhaps a woman can speak more authoritatively on matters of tax law and a man on contraception - or it could be the other way round. Different people also have different levels of energy and desire. On some occasions you may feel like urgently initiating sex; on others you may want to be pampered and let your lover take the strain. We all had a special relationship with the first authority figures in our lives, our parents. And the memories they gave us from childhood can colour our deepest sexual wishes and fantasies. What the denizens of [www.alt.com](http://www.alt.com) seem to enjoy is a trade whereby one person freely surrenders this sexual control to another in order to gain more stimulation from teasing and anticipatory surprise than if they had stayed in charge. They exploit what you might call the 'law of increasing returns'.

The failure to escape a predictable bedtime routine is undoubtedly behind much of the sexual boredom and subsequent adultery in modern society. We forget that

passion may need to be violent at our peril. But where do you draw the line between consensually rough playtime, and sadistic folly?

If I could outlaw one practice it would be the cult of erotic strangulation known as breath play (or “asphyxiophilia”), mentioned above. The problem (as with drugs) is that the initial pleasure is all too real. Just before you pass out, either by constriction of the carotid artery of the neck (as in the famous scene in the movie “Ai No Corrida”), or by having a hand or plastic bag held over your mouth, sexual excitement is enhanced by starving the brain of oxygen which slows the heart rate and increases pulse pressure thus maximising engorgement and prolonging orgasm.

But since I know of no way whatsoever that either suffocation or near-throttling can be done in a fashion that does not intrinsically put the recipient at risk of cardiac arrest, and moreover there is no means of determining whether such a cardiac arrest has become imminent, asphyxiophilia is a category of fetish and erotic interest that really ought to be strangled at birth.

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