

A WOMAN'S RIGHT TO BE SPANKED: TESTING THE LIMITS OF TOLERANCE OF S/M IN THE SOCIO-LEGAL IMAGINARY

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Abstract

What conditions must be in place for s/m sexuality to be tolerated in law and culture? In this article, I consider the film *Secretary* as a lens to explore the imaginative limits of our socio-legal culture regarding sadomasochism. In Part One, I compare *Secretary* to the film *9 ½ weeks*. I deconstruct the narrative and aesthetic components of the two films that uphold their contrasting normative visions, arguing that *Secretary* did indeed chart new ground for the sadomasochist sexual subject. Yet, a close discursive analysis reveals that the narrative relied upon other hegemonies to make the s/m couple acceptable and intelligible: their whiteness, their attractiveness, their male-top/female-bottom gender dynamic, the mildness of their kinks, and their interpolation into the law of marriage. In Part Two, I consider *Secretary* in relation to a trilogy of British cases on s/m, *R. v. Brown*, *R. v. Wilson*, and *R. v. Emmett*, and one American divorce case on s/m, *Twyman v. Twyman*. Reading these cases in relation to *Secretary* reveals the extent to which tolerance of s/m in the socio-legal imaginary is contingent upon marital privacy and spousal fidelity.

By doing a comparative analysis of *Secretary*'s normative vision to other socio-legal narratives, I hope to reveal the complexity involved in assessing the (counter-)hegemonic impact of the film.

This paper draws upon my dissertation, "Sadomasochism Once Removed: S/m in the Socio-Legal Imaginary," in which I analyze the interaction between cultural and legal constructions and regulations of s/m.