In this recent volume on masochistic aesthetics, Barbara Mennel has made a valuable contribution to German Studies as well as Film and Queer Studies. Mennel aims, first, to reassess the literature of Leopold von Sacher-Masoch (1836-95), who was the inspiration for Richard von Krafft-Ebing’s 1890 classification of the masochistic pathology, and, second, to expand the contemporary theoretical corpus on queer desire and how it interacts with fetishism and masquerade (4). Treating work from the late nineteenth to the late twentieth centuries, Mennel thematizes masochism and its potential for illuminating discussions of “power, pleasure, and domination, particularly how these kinds of assumptions are articulated in the study of the humanities” (1). Mennel starts with Sacher-Masoch’s Venus im Pelz (1870) and goes on to examine a number of his works, including Die Liebe des Plato (1870) and Das Vermächtniss Kains (1870), both individually and juxtaposed with other texts.

In chapter one, Mennel examines the definition of masochism with respect to the ways in which discourses of this pathology are gendered, particularly in the application of this label. Krafft-Ebing’s original conception of masochism positioned it as the inversion of sadism. Indeed, the two are said to form a symbiotic relationship (17). Mennel’s innovative examination of Krafft-Ebing’s work problematizes the discursive differences between male and female masochistic “perversions.” In early sexological and psychoanalytical discourse, masochistic behavior is only anomalous when exhibited by a male; in other words, masochism and femininity align. Furthermore, Krafft-Ebing was only intrigued by perverse behavior in males, which led to a dearth of female case studies.
Chapters two and three proceed with an examination of *Venus im Pelz*, Sacher-Masoch’s novella that is often understood to be an essential example of masochistic aesthetics, and Monika Treut and Elfi Mikesch’s film *Verführung: Die grausame Frau* (1985), a redeployment of the former text. Mennel posits that Treut/Mikesch’s film is a dramatic restructuring of Sacher-Masoch’s text that rearranges the gender and sexual dynamics of masochistic aesthetics. In an assessment of Sacher-Masoch’s work, Mennel argues that the structure of masochism found in his fictional work exists in the same form in his biographical writings, demonstrating that the fetish of the dominant woman and the submissive male camouflages a furtherance of exploitation (38). The film retells *Venus im Pelz* in a reappropriation for mid-1980s feminism and lesbian sexuality (73). Mennel argues that *Verführung* is a precursor of 1990s discussions of S/M through its feminist communication of the history of perversion while it inverts the gender-sexual roles in *Venus im Pelz* and the theories of Freud, Krafft-Ebing, and Gilles Deleuze that are employed throughout the chapter (73-4). Providing a concept that is crucial for her study, Mennel defines “masochistic aesthetics,” as an aesthetic structure that “emphasizes fantasy organized around a fetish in a reversal of power relationships. In a highly theatricalized setting, a woman is educated to be dominant, and the submission of the male is codified in a contract. The narrative structure consists of a narrative frame of the ‘real’ that contains the inner narrative of the masochistic fantasy” (37).

In the final two chapters, Mennel investigates cross-dressing: in Sacher-Masoch’s novella *Die Liebe des Plato* in chapter four and in Kutlug Ataman’s film *Lola und Bilidikid* (1999) in chapter five. In the former, Mennel finds that masquerades of cross-dressing and same-sex platonic love simultaneously propagate and deconstruct dominant formations of power “similar to masochistic aesthetics” (106). In the 1999 film, Mennel sees an opportunity to
critique the notion that masquerade (e.g., drag) is “a subversive trope for the representation of gender and sexual identity” (139). Masochistic aesthetics reacts to and overcomes gender and sexuality conflicts “through processes of fetishization, cross-identification, and masquerade” (141). Mennel makes an illustrative connection between the film’s depiction of the character Lola’s death, whereby she is shown floating in the Spree with images from Pre-Raphaelite painting and Hamlet’s Ophelia (168-9). Mennel concludes the study by criticizing the limited subversive, political potential available in masochistic aesthetics: “The dialectical relationship between camp and narrative tends to be ignored by contemporary theory that overestimates the subversive force of camp, similar to the overestimation of the subversive force of masochism” (172).

Aware of links between text and context, Mennel integrates an appraisal of relevant thematic—and interdisciplinary—cues into her thoughtful analysis. This study will doubtless spur further dialogue on the discursively subversive and complicit trajectories of gender and sexual behavior. Mennel introduces her project by explaining the relevance of depictions of masochism beyond the texts she has examined, writing that “[m]asochistic aesthetics stages power, begging the question whether this inverted and exaggerated staging of power relations reproduces existing power differentials or whether it offers ways to work through power differentials and resignify symbols of power” (9-10). In the Postscript, Mennel references the 2004 scandal surrounding photos from the Abu Ghraib prison in Iraq. The images diverge from and reinforce the behaviors of power that have been treated throughout the book. Calling for studies of “mastery, violence, and domination,” Mennel concludes that the situations in the photos continue the discursive contradiction between fantasy and reality: subjection of an Other vs. repudiated violence (173), negotiations of power that we will continue to confront.