

# Erotic Excess and Ritual Sacrifice: Reading Genet

## And Mishima Through Bataille

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### Abstract

‘All eroticism has a sacramental character,’ French philosopher Georges Bataille said in his work *Eroticism* (1957). For Bataille, eroticism resembles religious and ritual sacrifice because of the rapture and violence associated with orgasm.

According to Jonathan Dollimore, Bataille does not see erotic transgression as simply the erotic attraction to the forbidden, but rather, that Bataille believes the awareness of prohibition, horror, and disgust heighten the intensity of erotic pleasure. Bataille says that the association of excess with ‘evil’ is based on the belief that excess is purposeless and opposes utilitarian production. He argues that it is through the inversion of productivity, and by revelling in the excess of eroticism and sacrifice that we can experience moments of uninhibited communication with others.

In his play *The Maids* (1946) French author and activist, Jean Genet depicts the erotic sadomasochistic ritual game-playing between two maids who fantasize about killing their mistress. The maids invert utilitarian modes of production by playing their sacrificial, erotic games when they are supposed to be ‘working.’ Through their play, the maids lose their sense of isolation from one another, their characters blending to become two aspects of the same person.

In Japanese author Yukio Mishima’s short story, ‘Patriotism’ (1966), a Lieutenant and his wife commit ritual suicide to evade impending political turmoil. Like Genet’s maids, the husband and wife are essentially one character. Mishima explores excess both in the couple’s love making, and through his graphic, erotic description of the husband’s sacrificial *seppuku* (ritual suicide by stomach cutting).

While it may seem odd to compare Genet’s *The Maids* to Mishima’s ‘Patriotism,’ and read both through Bataille’s concepts of erotic excess and ritual sacrifice, I argue that there is an intimate link between Genet’s and Mishima’s works and Bataille’s notion of erotic transgression.

**Key Words:** Eroticism, transgression, excess, ritual sacrifice, Phaedra, general economy, Georges Bataille, Jean Genet, Yukio Mishima.

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*For poetry makes nothing happen: it survives*

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*in the valley of its making where executives  
would never want to tamper*

- W. H. Auden 'In Memory of W. B. Yeats'

## 1. Introduction

When Phaedra confesses her uncontrollable passion for her stepson, Hippolytus, in Racine's 1677 play *Phaedra*, the tragic heroine compares her erotic desire to an 'extreme horror.'<sup>1</sup> The Phaedra myth predates Racine's play, having been written by the Roman poet Seneca the Younger in 50CE, and before that, by the Greek dramatist Euripides in 428 BCE. The Ancient Greeks and Romans were aware of the power of erotic desire – of its potential to excite both extreme joy and horror. Even today, the power of the erotic hasn't abated, as Sarah Kane's 1996 modern adaptation *Phaedra's Love*, testifies. In the early twentieth century, French philosopher Georges Bataille (1897-1962) also used the Phaedra myth as a metaphor for his notions of erotic excess and erotic transgression. In his three-volume study of the post-war global economy, *The Accursed Share* (1946-1949), Bataille refers to what he calls the 'Phaedra Complex,' in which he explores the link between horror and desire.<sup>2</sup> In the Greek myth, Bataille understands Phaedra's love for Hippolytus as increasing in proportion to the fear that arises from the possibility of committing incest.<sup>3</sup> It is this level of sexual self-awareness that separates human eroticism from the animalistic urge to have sex.<sup>4</sup> Eroticism is also, arguably, the most central concept in Bataille's corpus. Far from understanding eroticism as a thrilling or titillating subject, Bataille takes an anthropological and philosophical approach to eroticism, and explores the place of the erotic in human nature in order to redefine the concept of human nature. It is important to note that Bataille's line of thought emerges out of a particular philosophical context and came about at a time when anthropology sought to link with life and culture. Bataille was, after all, writing in the shadow of Freud and Frazer. Having lived through World War I and II, his writing also focuses largely on capitalism and the global economy. Indeed, Bataille's creation of the 'general economy' marries his thoughts on eroticism and the economy through his concept of excess. For Bataille, the purpose of life is to expend energy. When limits of accumulation are met in an economy, he argues that any excess energy needs to be lost luxuriously and without profit or gain, for example through eroticism, otherwise it will explode into the ruinous acts of war or sacrifice.

Bataille is not alone in his promotion of excess, nor in his fascination with the Phaedra myth. Both the works of Jean Genet (1910-1986) and Yukio Mishima (1925-1970) can be read through Bataillean erotic excess and sacrifice. Genet, who is known to have called Racine's work 'beautiful,'<sup>5</sup> depicts, in his 1946 play *The Maids*, the sadomasochistic homoerotic ritual game-play between two maids who, instead of working, spend their time fantasising about killing their mistress. Mishima, whose favourite European play was Racine's *Phaedra*<sup>6</sup> tells the story of a

young lieutenant and his wife who evade political turmoil by committing ritual suicide in his 1966 short story 'Patriotism.' Reading the works of Genet and Mishima through Bataille's theories of excess, erotic transgression, and ritual sacrifice, I argue that Bataille's notions make sense of the links between the themes in Genet's and Mishima's work – a link that could otherwise be unfortunately overlooked.

## 2. Erotic Excess: Sacrifice and the General Economy in Bataille

Unlike a conservative economy that is based on production, Bataille's general economy is based on the non-returnable expenditure of excess energy, the 'accursed share.' Bataille argues that because the enormous amount of the energy available to a society or an organism cannot be entirely used up, it must be spent willingly and gloriously, or else risk erupting into disaster.<sup>7</sup> Excess energy, Bataille says, is both detrimental but necessary to an existing economy. That is, the outpouring of excess threatens the prevailing system, but 'neither growth nor reproduction would be possible if plants and animals did not normally dispose of excess.'<sup>8</sup>

Underpinning Bataille's concepts of excess and expenditure is his notion of eroticism and the link he sees between erotic transgression and ritual sacrifice. For Jonathan Dollimore, Bataille's notion of erotic transgression is not simply the erotic attraction to the forbidden, but the belief that prohibition, inhibition, horror, and disgust all heighten the intensity of erotic pleasure.<sup>9</sup> For Bataille, human experience is based on limits, and these limits are defined by our awareness of eroticism and death.<sup>10</sup> Bataille sees erotic transgression as intimately tied up with sacrifice, saying that eroticism is 'a violation bordering on death, bordering on murder.'<sup>11</sup> Thus sacrifice, for Bataille, is a violent event that requires not only that spectators look on, but, most importantly, that they desire to look on, as a sacrificial victim is killed.<sup>12</sup> The participants in a sacrifice, like the participants in an erotic act, experience the anguish, ecstasy and uninhibited communication associated with the death of the victim, or the little death of orgasm.<sup>13</sup>

According to Benjamin Noys, Bataille's notion of eroticism is focussed on unproductive, 'perverse' and non-reproductive sexuality because his interest is in the expenditure of excess energy.<sup>14</sup> In terms of his economic theory, Bataille remarks that sexual activity is either productive and procreative, or non-productive and pleasurable. In cultures where excess and expenditure were associated with evil, eroticism was denied on the grounds that it was purposeless and therefore the opposite of work. Non-productive expenditure, Bataille says, 'ultimately connects life with the senseless luxury and excess of death.'<sup>15</sup> For Bataille, death is an excess because it is the complete negation of productivity and the very essence of 'nothingness.' It is also the horror of death that promotes productivity. To avoid the terrifying thought of death societies imposed the utilitarian notion of 'work.'<sup>16</sup> To protect work from falling into disorder, the pressures of guilt and prohibition

#### 4 *Erotic Excess and Ritual Sacrifice*

became modes of regulation. Bataille argues that taboos were introduced to protect society because life is essentially violent disorder<sup>17</sup> and ‘the main function of all taboos is to combat violence.’<sup>18</sup> Thus, ‘violence is what the world of work excludes with its taboos.’<sup>19</sup> In ritual sacrifice, Bataille also believed that the violence inflicted on the victim could be understood not only as senseless, but as a violence that, because of its association with ‘the flesh,’ was erotic: ‘the external violence of the sacrifice reveals the internal violence of the creature, seen as a loss of blood and ejaculations.’<sup>20</sup> Bataille argues that taboos became an internalised part of human psychology, and became forms of regulation that were not enforced by outside powers but from within. As side note, it is interesting to consider the way Foucault would later use this notion of self censorship in his panopticon metaphor.

Bataille echoes Marx when he says that in work, people turn themselves into tools, objects, or slaves: ‘[t]he world of practice is a world where man is himself a thing.’<sup>21</sup> Bataille believed that when people reduce themselves to ‘things,’ they perpetuate individuation and a lack of meaningful communication. Bataille believed that some people could evade servility and instead be sovereign beings. According to Habermas and Lawrence, Bataillean sovereignty, ‘means not to let oneself be reduced, as in labor, to the condition of an object, but to free subjectivity from bondage.’<sup>22</sup> While the servile person assists in the production of wealth, the sovereign person consumes and does not produce.<sup>23</sup> Borch-Jacobsen says that, for Bataille, sovereignty ‘is that which does not serve anything and no purpose other than itself, that which is not a means [...] in view of an end.’<sup>24</sup> Bataille says that, ‘what is sovereign in fact is to enjoy the present time without having anything else in view but the present time.’<sup>25</sup> That is, the sovereign person revels in the excesses and ‘waste’ products of eroticism, poetry,<sup>26</sup> excrement, sacrifice, and madness, without the drive to turn this consumption into production. The sovereign person, according to Bataille, escapes death in a sense, because they do not live with the same anguish of death that enslaves others: ‘sovereignty requires the strength to violate the prohibition against killing.’<sup>27</sup> Both the sacrificial victim and the sovereign individual are liberated from the bonds of utilitarian servitude. Like the sovereign being who only consumes and does not produce,

[t]he victim [of the sacrifice] is a surplus taken from the mass of *useful* wealth. And he can only be withdrawn from it in order to be consumed profitlessly, and therefore utterly destroyed. Once chosen, he is the *accursed share*, destined for violent consumption.<sup>28</sup>

Yet, while Bataille says that the sacrificial victim is consumed profitlessly, French maintains that ‘Bataille insists on a certain economism always inherent in sacrifice.’<sup>29</sup> Interestingly, if not paradoxically, Bataille says that in sacrifice, ‘the sacred thing ends up having a utility.’<sup>30</sup>

### 3. The Sovereign-homo-sadomasochistic Eroticism of Genet's *The Maids*

Bataille's work is important to consider when reading the transgressive writings of Jean Genet. In his play *The Maids*, Genet depicts the homoerotic sadomasochistic ritual game-play between two sisters and maids, Claire and Solange. While their Madame is away, one of the maids pretends to be Madame, and the other pretends that she is Madame's maid. They then take turns at physically and psychologically abusing one another. Madame, who is never referred to by name but only by her authority is a character that appears infrequently in the play because she is often at the police station. It transpires that Claire has written falsely incriminating letters that have seen Madame's lover, Monsieur, arrested. Madame's absence is integral to the play so that the maids have the time to pretend to be her, and to prepare to kill her.

Genet explores the excesses of eroticism and violence through the games the maids play when they are supposed to be working. In one of their games, Solange, who is playing the role of the maid, gets Claire, who is pretending to be Madame, to insult her until she is on the verge of orgasm, gasping, 'I'm quivering, I'm shuddering with pleasure.'<sup>31</sup> When Claire-Madame runs out of insults, Solange brandishes a whip, and orders her sister to her knees. However, their games are always abruptly brought to an end through the ringing of an alarm clock, or the return of their Madame. Thus, the maids are always returned to the real world of work before they can achieve ecstasy, murder, or attain sovereignty. At the end of the play when Madame has gone to meet Monsieur, who has been released from prison, Solange and Claire begin to play their game one final time. The result is an outpouring of excess which ends with Claire's suicide. As we shall see, Mishima's 'Patriotism' possesses undeniably similar themes to *The Maids*.

Throughout the course of the play both maids have unsuccessfully attempted to kill the real Madame. In their final game Claire-Madame, asks Solange to pour her a cup of tea. Earlier, they had attempted to murder Madame by spiking her tea with a lethal amount of sleeping pills. However, Madame had declined the offer. Thus Claire knowingly drinks the tea, and her death is one final excessive performance – the performance of a ritual sacrifice and a means of escaping servility. Through her suicide, Claire allows Solange to feel the joy of killing Madame. Claire's suicide can be understood as a substitutionary sacrifice that also allows Claire to experience the joy of murdering Madame, even though it is through killing herself. Taking a Bataillean reading of *The Maids*, both Claire and Solange attain sovereignty through their purely consumptive actions, revelling in the consumption of non-productive excess through their erotic games and Claire's sacrifice. Using Noys' notion of erotic transgression, the maids' erotic game-play is always excessive and 'perverse' because there is never any possibility of productivity through procreation. The maids also violate the prohibition against killing because Claire's suicide is assisted.

#### 4. Death in Orgasm, Orgasm in Death: Yukio Mishima's "Patriotism"

Like *The Maids*, Mishima's short story 'Patriotism' explores the excesses of eroticism and sacrifice, and the yearning to attain sovereignty. A young couple, Shinji and his wife Reiko, commit a double ritual suicide by *seppuku* (stomach and throat cutting) to escape the husband's paralysing military task; as a lieutenant he must destroy a group of rebels that he has befriended. To avoid betraying either the emperor or his friends the couple kill themselves.

In 'Patriotism' Mishima explores Bataille's notions of erotic excess, playing on the comparison between the couple's realisation of their impending death when having sex, and of the strangely erotic nature of their suicides. Over the course of their final night together Shinji and Reiko revel in luxury: they bathe, beautify themselves, drink sake, and make love. Kimmelman examines Mishima's portrayal of excess and expenditure through the couple's non-procreative love making and bloody suicides, saying that:

we see not only the origins of the beautiful deaths of their persons, but of [...] their marriage, which gives issue not to children, but to blood that has been mingled with the fluids of procreation.<sup>32</sup>

If we return to Dollimore's definition of Bataille's erotic transgression, we can see that the characters are not specifically attracted to the forbidden, but, their awareness of death intensifies their erotic pleasure. When the couple make love, 'the agonies they could not yet feel, the distant pains of death, had refined their awareness of pleasure.'<sup>33</sup> Indeed, the reader cannot help but realise that when the wife passionately kisses her husband's stomach she is kissing the very spot on his body that will soon be 'cruelly cut by the sword.'<sup>34</sup> When she smells his sweat, she realises that she is essentially smelling 'the essence of young death.'<sup>35</sup> Likewise, when the husband looks at his wife he sees not living beauty but 'the vision of a truly radiant death face.'<sup>36</sup> From the couple's 'little death' in orgasm, the husband then experiences orgasm in death. When Shinji pushes the blade into his stomach: 'a fearful and excruciating pain came welling up as if the ground had split open to disgorge a boiling stream of molten rock.'<sup>37</sup> This description, both fatally and erotically charged, explores the expenditure of energy through the eroticism of sacrifice, and marks death, as Bataille says, as 'the most luxurious form of life.'<sup>38</sup>

#### 5. Conclusion

At the end of Sarah Kane's play *Phaedra's Love*, a frenzied crowd, who mistakenly believe Hippolytus has raped Phaedra, dismember and burn his body. During Hippolytus' sacrifice-style execution, Phaedra's husband, Theseus, stops his stepdaughter, Strophe, from running to Hippolytus' aid, and rapes and kills her.

The crowd cheer Theseus' actions while hypocritically condemning Hippolytus, cutting off his genitals and throwing them to the fire.<sup>39</sup> Although he was writing well before Kane's play emerged, Bataille considered Phaedra to be a core myth and text in the western tradition because of its exploration of taboo, excess, eroticism, and the disruption of order. In the same way that Bataille sees the outpouring of excess as threatening a prevailing economic system, Phaedra's erotic desire throws the prevailing system into disorder because it violates the Ancient Greek concept of *oikonomos*, which literally meant 'household management,' and would later become the basis for the word 'economy.'

Bataille's notions of eroticism, transgression and excess, and his reference to anthropological and mythological figures allows his writing to show the connections between works as seemingly unrelated as *Phaedra*, *The Maids* and 'Patriotism.' His fascination with the link between horror and desire and the excessive nature of eroticism can be seen in the sadomasochistic games the maid's play, and Claire's suicide, but also through the death in orgasm and orgasm in death Shinji and Reiko experience. Genet's and Mishima's characters overcome their servility by destroying themselves. Thus, like Phaedra, their sovereignty lies in their self-destruction and their embracing of the horror in their desires.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Jean Racine, *Five Plays*, trans. Kenneth Mui (NY: Hill and Wang, 1960) 186.

<sup>2</sup> Georges Bataille, *The Accursed Share: An Essay on General Economy Volumes II and III*, trans. Robert Hurley (NY: Zone Books, 1988-91) 95.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid*, 95.

<sup>4</sup> Georges Bataille, *Eroticism: Death and Sensuality*, trans. Mary Dalwood (NY: Marion Boyars, 1987), 11.

<sup>5</sup> Jean Genet, 'Interview With Bertrand Poirot-Delpech,' *The Declared Enemy: Texts and Interviews*, trans. Jeff Fort (Stanford: Stanford UP, 2004) 207.

<sup>6</sup> Carol Fisher Sorgenfrei, 'Mishima On Stage: The Black Lizard and Other Plays,' *Asian Theatre Journal*, 28 (2009): 188.

<sup>7</sup> Benjamin Noys, *Georges Bataille: A Critical Introduction* (London: Pluton, 2000) 114.

<sup>8</sup> Georges Bataille, *The Accursed Share: An Essay on General Economy Volume I*, trans. Robert Hurley (NY: Zone Books, 1988-91) 27.

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<sup>9</sup> Jonathan Dollimore, *Death, Desire and Loss in Western Culture* (NY: Routledge, 2001), 252.

<sup>10</sup> Bataille, *Eroticism*, 24.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid*, 17.

<sup>12</sup> The sacrificial victim, for Bataille, reflects the sun's nature to burn and 'give' without reason. It is interesting to hold Bataille's fascination with the sun alongside the Ancient Egyptian Pharo Ankhenaten's controversial monotheistic sun-god worship. Bataille's fascination with the excessive energy of the sun resonates with the ancient Egyptian cult of the sun god Ra (or more specifically, of Aten, the disc of the sun and originally an aspect of RA), who was made the exclusive deity during the Pharo Ankhenaten's monotheistic rule (1364-1347 BC).

<sup>13</sup> It is also worth noting here the widespread allusions of loss and death that are associated with orgasm. In Kubrick's 1964 film *Dr Strangelove: Or How I Learned to Stop Worrying and Love the Bomb*, Brigadier General Jack D. Ripper (Sterling Hayden) is a paranoid ultra-nationalist who believes that communists are taking over the world by contaminating people's bodily fluids. Ripper explains that he first discovered that he was contaminated when he was having sex, saying that afterwards he felt 'a profound sense of fatigue, a feeling of emptiness [...] loss of essence'. This 'loss' of essence, this fatigue, is reminiscent of the 'little death' of orgasm and sacrifice. 'Dr Strangelove – Precious Bodily Fluids' last modified 03 September 2011. Viewed 03 September 2011.

< <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=N1KvgtEnABY>>

<sup>14</sup> Noys, *Geroeges Bataille*, 113.

<sup>15</sup> Bataille, *The Accursed Share Volume I*, 34-35.

<sup>16</sup> Bataille, *Eroticism*, 44.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid*, 86.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid*, 41.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid*, 42. It is worth noting Girard's thoughts on violence and sacrifice, which he sees, like Bataille, as key to religion and the sacred. Where their paths diverge, is in their understandings of *how* violence and sacrifice affect a society – Girard believes that ritual sacrifice led to order, whereas for Bataille it led to disorder.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid*, 91.

<sup>21</sup> Bataille, *The Accursed Share Volumes II and III*, 213.

<sup>22</sup> Jürgen Habermas and Fredrick Lawrence, 'The French Path to Postmodernity: Bataille Between Eroticism and General Economics,' *New German Critique* 33 (1984): 90.

<sup>23</sup> Bataille, *The Accursed Share Volumes II and III*, 198.

<sup>24</sup> Mikkel Borch-Jacobsen, 'The Laughter of Being,' *MLN* 4 (1987): 745.

<sup>25</sup> Bataille, *The Accursed Share Volumes II and III*, 199.

<sup>26</sup> In 'Notions of Expenditure' Bataille claims that 'poetry' can be considered synonymous to 'expenditure' because it is the least intellectualised form of a state of loss. Georges Bataille, 'Notions of Expenditure,' *Visions of Excess: Selected Writings 1927-1939*, trans. Allan Stoekl (Minneapolis: Minnesota UP, 1985) 120. It is worth noting that Benjamin Noys sees a distinct difference between Bataille's *Visions of Excess* and *The Accursed Share*, arguing that they were written at different times (*Visions of Excess* was written during times of economic crisis, whereas *The Accursed Share* was written in the aftermath of crisis). These different times of writing, Noys says, produce significantly different views of excess and expenditure. Noys, *Georges Bataille*, 113.

<sup>27</sup> Bataille, *The Accursed Share Volumes II and III*, 221.

<sup>28</sup> Bataille, *The Accursed Share Volume I*, 59. It is also worth noting the connection between this quote and Michel Foucault's 1966 work *The Order of Things* (Foucault was, after all, heavily influenced by Bataille's writing).

<sup>29</sup> Patrick Ffrench, 'Donner A Voir: Sacrifice and Poetry in the Work of Georges Bataille,' *Forum for Modern Language Studies* 42 (2006): 131.

<sup>30</sup> Bataille, *The Accursed Share Volumes II and III*, 215. Yet, according to Michel Surya's fantastic Bataille biography, what needs to be remembered in any reading of Bataille's theory is that Bataille sought to 'develop a paradoxical philosophy. Michel Surya, *Georges Bataille: An Intellectual Biography*, trans. Krzysztof Fijalkowski and Michael Richardson (London: Verso, 2002) 16.

<sup>31</sup> Jean Genet, *The Maids and Deathwatch*, trans. Bernard Frechtman (NY: Grove, 1982) 85.

<sup>32</sup> Burt Kimmelman, 'Lecture 12: Yukio Mishima,' *World Literature II: Lecture 331*, [Podcast] 1970.

<sup>33</sup> Yukio Mishima, 'Patriotism,' *Death in Midsummer and Other Stories* (Ringwood: Penguin, 1988) 114.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid*, 116.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid*, 115-116.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid, 114.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid, 122.

<sup>38</sup> Bataille, *The Accursed Share Volumes II and III*, 84.

<sup>39</sup> Graham Saunders says that Kane's writing has often been compared to, and is said to be indebted to that of Howard Barker, whose work focuses largely on notions of sacrifice and excess. Graham Saunders, *'Love Me or Kill Me': Sarah Kane and the Theatre of Extremes* (Manchester: Manchester UP, 2002) 15-16.

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