

Dominatrix

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A **dominatrix** (plural *dominatrices* or *dominatrices*) or **mistress** is a woman who takes the dominant role in bondage, discipline (in the sexual-fetish sense of the word) and sadomasochism, or BDSM.

A dominatrix might be heterosexual, homosexual, or bisexual; but her orientation does not necessarily limit the genders of her submissive partners. The role of a dominatrix may not even involve physical pain toward the submissive; her domination can be verbal, involving humiliating tasks, or servitude. A dominatrix may be a paid professional ("pro-domme"), or may use the title of dominatrix in her personal sex life.

The term *domme* is a coined pseudo-French female variation of the slang *dom* (short for *dominant*). The use of "domme", "dominatrix", "dom", or "dominant" by any woman in a dominant role is chosen mostly by personal preference and the conventions of the local BDSM scene.^[1]

As fetish culture is increasingly becoming more prevalent in Western media, depictions of dominatrices in film and television have become more common.

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Etymology

Dominatrix is the feminine form of the Latin *dominator*, a ruler or lord, and was originally used in a non-sexual sense. Its use in English dates back to at least 1561. Its earliest recorded use in the prevalent modern sense, as a female dominant in S&M, dates to 1967.^[2] It was initially coined to describe a woman who provides punishment-for-pay as one of the case studies within Bruce Roger's pulp paperback *The Bizarre Lovemakers*.^[3] The term was taken up shortly after by the Myron Kosloff title *Dominatrix* (with art by Eric Stanton) in 1968, and entered more popular mainstream knowledge following the 1976 film *Dominatrix Without Mercy*.^[4]

Although the term "dominatrix" was not used, the classic example in literature of the female dominant-male submissive relationship is portrayed in the 1870 novella *Venus in Furs* by Austrian writer Leopold von Sacher-Masoch. The term masochism was later derived from the author's name by Richard von Krafft-Ebing in the latter's 1886 forensic study *Psychopathia Sexualis*.

History

The history of the dominatrix is argued to date back to rituals of the Goddess Inanna (or Ishtar as she was known in Akkadian), in ancient Mesopotamia. Ancient cuneiform texts consisting of "Hymns to Inanna" have been cited as examples of the archetype of powerful, sexual female displaying dominating behaviors and forcing Gods and men into submission to her.^[5] Archaeologist and historian Anne O. Nomis notes that Inanna's rituals included cross-dressing of cult personnel, and rituals "imbued with pain and ecstasy, bringing about initiation and journeys of altered consciousness; punishment, moaning, ecstasy, lament and song, participants exhausting themselves with weeping and grief."^[6]

In the secular era, the profession appears to have originated as a specialization within brothels, before becoming its own unique craft. As far back as the 1590s, flagellation within an erotic setting is recorded.^[7] The profession features in erotic prints of the era, such as the British Museum mezzotint "The Cully Flaug'd" (c. 1674–1702), and in accounts of forbidden books which record the flogging schools and the activities practised.^[8]

Within the 18th Century, female "Birch Disciplinarians" advertised their services in a book masked as a collection of lectures or theatrical plays, entitled "Fashionable Lectures" (c1761).^[9] This included the names of 57 women, some actresses and courtesans, who catered to birch discipline fantasies, keeping a room with rods and cat o' nine tails, and charging their clients a Guinea for a "lecture".^[9]

The 19th Century is characterised by what historian Anne O. Nomis characterises as the "Golden Age of the Governess". No fewer than twenty establishments were documented as having existed by the 1840s, supported entirely by flagellation practices and known as "Houses of Discipline" distinct from brothels.^[10] Amongst the well-known "dominatrix governesses" were Mrs Chalmers, Mrs Noyeau, the late Mrs Jones of Hertford Street and London Street, the late Mrs Theresa Berkley, Bessy Burgess of York Square and Mrs Pyree of Burton Cres.^[10] The most famous of these Governess "female flagellants" was Theresa Berkley, who operated her establishment on Charlotte Street in the central London district of Marylebone.^[11] She is recorded to have used implements such as whips, canes and birches, to chastise and punish her male clients, as well as the Berkley Horse, a specially designed flogging machine, and a pulley suspension system for lifting them off the floor.^[12] Such historical use of corporal punishment and suspension, in a setting of domination roleplay, connects very closely to the practices of modern-day professional dominatrices.

The "bizarre style" (as it came to be called) of leather catsuits, claws, tail whips, and latex rubber only came about in the 20th Century, initially within commercial fetish photography, and taken up by dominatrices.^[13] Within the mid-20th Century, dominatrices operated in a very discreet and underground manner, which has made them difficult to trace within the historical record. A few photographs still exist of the women who ran their domination businesses in London, New York, The Hague and the Herbertstraße, predominantly in sepia and black-and-white photographs, and scans from magazine articles, copied and re-copied. Amongst these were Miss Doreen of London who was acquainted with John Sutcliffe of AtomAge fame, whose clients reportedly included Britain's top politicians and businessmen.^[14] In New York, the dominatrix Anne Laurence was known within the underground circle of acquaintances during the 1950s, with Monique Von Cleef arriving in the early 1960s, and hitting national headlines when her home was raided by police detectives on December 22, 1965.^[15] Von Cleef went on to set up her "House of Pain" in The Hague in the 1970s, which became one of the world capitals for dominatrices, reportedly with visiting lawyers, ambassadors, diplomats and politicians.^[16]

Professional vs. personal

The term *dominatrix* is sometimes used to describe a professional dominant (or "pro-domme") who is paid to engage in BDSM with a submissive. An appointment or roleplay is referred to as a "session", and is often conducted in a dedicated professional play space which has been set up with specialist equipment, such as a "dungeon". In the contemporary era of technological connectivity, sessions may also be conducted remotely by phone, email or online chat.



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Women who engage in female domination typically promote and title themselves under the terms "dominatrix", "mistress", "lady", "madame", "herrin" or "goddess". A study of German dominatrices by Andrew Wilson has noted the trend for dominatrices choosing names aimed at creating and maintaining an atmosphere in which class, femininity and mystery are key elements of their self-constructed identity.^[17]

Professional dominatrices may or may not offer sexual intercourse and other intimate sexual activities as part of their service to clients. The Canadian dominatrix Terri-Jean Bedford, who was one of three women who initiated an application in the Ontario Superior Court seeking invalidation of Canada's laws regarding brothels, sought to differentiate for clarity her occupation as a dominatrix rather than a prostitute to the media, due to frequent misunderstanding and conflation by the public of the two terms.^[18]

While dominatrices come from many different backgrounds, it has been noted that a considerable number are very well-educated, with a recent survey of New York dominatrices revealing that 39% had attended graduate school / university, including well-regarded institutions such as Columbia University.^[19]

Professional dominatrices can be seen advertising their services online and in print publications which carry erotic services advertising. The precise number of women actively offering professional domination services is unknown. Most professional dominatrices practice in large metropolitan cities such as New York, Los Angeles, and London, with as many as 200 women working as dominatrices in Los Angeles.^[20]

Professional dominatrices may take pride or differentiation in their psychological insight into their clients' fetishes and desires, as well as their technical ability to perform complex BDSM practices, such as Japanese shibari and other forms of bondage, suspension, torture roleplay, and corporal punishment, and other such practices which

require a high degree of knowledge and competency to safely oversee. From a sociological point of view, Danielle Lindemann has noted the "embattled purity regime" in which many Pro-Dommes emphasise their specialist knowledge and professional skills, while distancing themselves from economic criteria for success, in a way which is comparable to avant-garde artists.^[21]

To differentiate women who identify as a dominatrix but do not offer paid services, non-professional dominants are occasionally referred to as a "lifestyle" dominatrix or Mistress. It should be noted that the term "lifestyle" to signify BDSM is occasionally a contention topic in the BDSM community and that some dominatrices may dislike the term. Some professional dominatrices are also "lifestyle" dominatrices - i.e., in addition to paid sessions with submissive clients they engage in unpaid recreational sessions or may incorporate power exchange within their own private lives and relationships.^[22] However it is worth noting that the term has fallen out of general usage with respect to women who are dominant in their private relationships, and has taken on more and more, the connotation of "professional."

Imagery

The dominatrix is a female archetype which operates on a symbolic mode of representation, associated with particular attire and props that are drawn on within popular culture to signify her role—as a strong, dominant, sexualised woman—linked to but distinct from images of sexual fetish.^[23]

One of the ubiquitous garments associated with the dominatrix is the catsuit. Historically, the black leather female catsuit entered dominant fetish culture in the 1950s with the *AtomAge* magazine and its connections to fetish fashion designer John Sutcliffe. The spill-over into mainstream culture, occurred with catsuits being worn by strong female protagonists in popular 1960s TV programs like *The Avengers*, and in the comic super-heroines such as Catwoman, in which the catsuit represented the independent woman capable of "kick-ass" moves and antics, enabling complete freedom of movement. On another level, the one-piece catsuit accentuated and exaggerated the sexualized female form, providing visual access to a woman's body, while simultaneously obstructing physical penetrative access. "You can look but you can't touch" is the mechanism of this operation, which plays upon the BDSM practice known as "tease and denial".^[24]

Other common signifying footwear of the dominatrix are thigh-high boots, in leather or shiny PVC, which have long held a fetishistic status, along with the very high stiletto heel. Fishnet stockings, seamed hosiery, suspender belts and garter stockings are also popular accents in the representation and attire of dominatrices, to emphasize the form and length of their legs, with erotic connotation.

Tight, leather corsets are another staple garment of the dominatrix signification. Gloves, whether long opera gloves or fingerless gloves, are often a further accessory to emphasize the feminine role.

Materials such as PVC, leather and rubber latex, are amongst the most common to immediately take on the signifying work of fetish attire. The body language of the dominatrix is frequently represented by the use of strong, dominant body-language which is comparable to the dominant posturing in the animal world. The props she may brandish will strongly signify her role as dominatrix, such as bearing a flogger whip or riding crop as illustrated in the artwork of Bruno Zach in the early 20th century,^{[25][26]} in conventional representation.

Practicing professional dominatrices may draw their attire from the conventional signifiers of the role, or adapt them to create their own individual style, where there exists a potential pull—between meeting conventional expectations, and a desire for dominant independent self-expression.

Some contemporary dominatrices draw upon an eclectic range of strong female archetypes, including the goddess, the female superheroine, the femme fatale, the priestess, the empress, the queen, the governess, the KGB secret agent, to their own ends.^[27]

See also

- BDSM in culture and media
- Feminization (activity)
- Fetish fashion
- Fetishes (documentary)
- List of dominatrices in popular culture
- Pegging (sexual practice)
- PVC clothing
- Sadism and masochism in fiction
- Session wrestler

- Top (BDSM)

Books

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- Evangelline Dubois: *How To Be A Domme: the Practical Guide to Becoming a Professional Dominatrix*, 2011
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External links

- The Dominatrix in Print and Other Media (<http://www.sexuality.org/1/bdsm/femdom.html>) — detailed bibliography
- Internet Movie Database (<http://www.imdb.com/keyword/dominatrix/>) — dominatrix-appearances in films

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Two professional dominatrices interviewed. Go here for the full transcript.