

AN ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS OF

Christie A. VanLaningham for the degree of Honors Baccalaureate of Arts in History presented on June 1st, 2007. Title: What Fools Call Crime: The Boundaries of the Pornographic Imagination in Sade's *La Philosophie dans le Boudoir*

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On the surface, the written works of the Marquis de Sade appear to be nothing more than pornographic mania articulated, the narrative trajectory of which oscillates between illicit words and acts. Yet his life and works are important to historians, if not due to their inherent quality then because they were generated during the event which marked the birth of the modern era: the French Revolution. Sade's life spanned the entire period of the French Revolution, and he died in the same year that Napoleon abdicated and the monarchy was restored in France. He stands on the threshold of the transition of the old and the new, the conversion of Western imagination.

To understand Sade as a novelist and practitioner of the genre of the 18th century novel, one must first sort through the many connotations that arise from the mere mention of his name. Sade's influence goes beyond the psychosexual interpretation that is used in modern discourse, and provides modern readers with a unique insight into French Revolutionary history, and the history of sexuality. Sade's third novel, *La Philosophie dans le boudoir*, demonstrates a calculated fictionalization of this ideology, the reflection of a unique historical moment, and a compelling argument for the indissoluble nexus between history and fiction.

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‘What Fools Call Crime’:

The Boundaries of the Pornographic Imagination in Sade’s

La Philosophie dans le Boudoir

by

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I understand that my project will become part of the permanent collection of Oregon State University, University Honors College. My signature below authorizes release of my project to any reader upon request.

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INTRODUCTION

On the surface, the written works of the Marquis de Sade appear to be nothing more than pornographic mania articulated, the narrative trajectory of which oscillates between illicit words and acts. The blood that ran through the streets of Paris during the years of the Terror following the French Revolution bleeds through the pages of *Justine*, *Le Cent Vingt Jours de Sodom*, and *La Philosophie dans le boudoir*. Sadian characters defy God, defile each other and defer to neither scepter nor censor in their wild pursuit of the annihilation of the self and the resurrection of the body. To die in pain and pleasure and then be reborn is the sacred drama of the Sadian orgasm, what the French call *la petite morte*.¹

Before Enlightenment ideas and values stirred revolutionary passion in 1789, they were being trafficked in the clandestine literature of would-be *philosophes* within the Parisian literary underground. Taking their cue from earlier libertines who used philosophical positions to defend their licentious conduct, these aspiring *hommes de lettres* flooded the Grub Street publishing world, forming what Voltaire referred to as a ragged rabble, (“Egypt of old had fewer locusts,”) bent on wielding philosophy as a weapon against the sociocultural elite.² It was from these depths that hack writers became revolutionaries and that the Jacobinical determination to wipe out the aristocracy of the mind was born.³

¹ Angela Carter, *The Sadeian Woman*, (New York: Pantheon Books, 1978), 150.

² Robert Darnton, *The Literary Underground of the Old Regime* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1982), 17.

³ Darnton, *The Literary Underground*, 21.

Pornography was thus employed in this era to communicate subversive politico-philosophical ideas to the literate citizenry. Much of the politically motivated pornography leading up to the Revolution denounced leading courtiers, Kings and their mistresses, focusing especially on Queen Marie Antoinette, whose infidelity, sexual exploits, and pleasure-seeking misconduct filled the pages of widely circulated pamphlets and scandal sheets. If the King could not keep his own family under control, how could he rule his subjects? Similar scrutiny was applied to religious and aristocratic institutions in the course of the collapse of the monarchy. In each case, pornography worked as a social leveler by stripping their subjects of reputation and power through sexual emasculation.

Sade's work occupies its own pornographic niche, existing somewhere between libertine literature—written by and destined for upper-class men—and the politically-motivated pornography designed for the man on the street. His fiction does not fit easily into the category of books eighteenth-century readers understood were meant to be read, as Rousseau put it, with one hand, nor does it serve a particular political agenda.⁴ Sade's erotic goal, unlike simple sexual activity, is a psychological quest independent of the natural goal of reproduction. An eroticism liberated from ordinary constraints potentially entails an assault on the social order's established patterns, what Georges Bataille calls, “an immediate aspect of inner experience as contrasted with animal sexuality.”⁵ This

⁴ Darnton, Robert, *The Forbidden Best-Sellers of Pre-Revolutionary France* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1996), 103.

⁵ Georges Bataille, *Death and Sensuality: A Study of Eroticism and the Taboo* (New York: Arno Press, 1977), 29.

inner experience, one that can only be fully realized within the confines of sexual imagination, prefigured what Sade called, “the art of doing whatever you please.”⁶

Sade was dismissed in his own time as a hedonist, a monster-author, and a sex-crazed lunatic, yet his life and works are important to historians, if not for their inherent quality then because they were generated during the event which marked the birth of the modern era: the French Revolution.⁷ Sade’s life spanned the entire period of the French Revolution, and he died the same year that Napoleon abdicated and the monarchy was restored in France. His fiction provides something that the historical record cannot: a glimpse of the Western imagination as it shifted from the decrepitude of the *ancien régime* to a new world of youthful liberty. By reading Sade’s fiction in historical context, it is possible to find new evidence pertaining to the limits of the pornographic imagination. During the French Revolution, this imagination was fascinated by sexual depravity, violence and upheaval. As the monarchy deteriorated, political instability was expressed in a sexual discourse by aristocrat and *sans-culotte* alike, each one emphasizing his own fantasies of power. As Sade put it, “every man wants to be a tyrant when he fornicates.”⁸

To understand Sade as a novelist and practitioner of the genre of the 18th century novel, one must neutralize the many connotations that arise from the mere mention of his name. “Sade” as a proper noun is generally excluded in favor of the common noun, “sadism,” and the adjective, “sadistic,” which serve to mark a signifying praxis,

⁶ Marquis de Sade, *Justine, Philosophy in the Bedroom, and Other Writings*, trans. by Richard Seaver, (New York: Grove Press, 1965), 252.

⁷ Marquis de Sade, *The 120 Days of Sodom and Other Writings*, trans. Austryn Wainhouse and Richard Seaver (New York: Grove Press, 1966), 94

⁸ Sade, *The 120 Days of Sodom*, 8.

psychoanalysis and not literature.⁹ In his own times, Sade's ambition and influence were of a different psychosexual order of magnitude than the one used in modern discourse; they provide modern readers with a unique insight into French Revolutionary history, the history of sexuality, and the relation between history and fiction. Sade's third novel, *La Philosophie dans le boudoir*, displays a calculated fictionalization of Sade's ideology, the reflection of a unique historical moment, and a compelling argument for the indissoluble nexus between history and fiction.

At the end of his tumultuous, often miserable life, Sade believed himself to be, "Imperious, choleric, irascible, extreme in everything, with a dissolute imagination the like of which has never been seen, atheistic to the point of fanaticism, there you have me in a nutshell, and kill me again or take me as I am, for I shall not change."¹⁰

SECTION ONE: Sade's Life and Times

The World at his Feet

Donatien Alphonse Franoise de Sade was born on June 2, 1740 in the Condé mansion at Paris, where his mother, Marie Eléonore de Maillé de Carman, served as lady-in-waiting to the Princess de Condé. His father, Jean Baptiste Joseph Franois de Sade, who bore the title Count de Sade, had been dispatched as ambassador to the court of

⁹ Lawrence Schehr, "Sade's Literary Space," *Sade and the Narrative of Transgression*, eds. David Allison, Mark Roberts, Allen Weiss (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 228.

¹⁰ Simone de Beauvoir, "Must We Burn Sade?" *The 120 Days of Sodom and Other Writings*, ed. and trans. Austryn Wainhouse and Richard Seaver (New York: Grove Press, 1966), 3.

Cologne and was not present at his son's birth.¹¹ His grandparents were also absent, requiring the employment of two servants to stand as representative godparents for the infant's baptism the following day. When the servants arrived at the church of St. Sulpice with babe in arms, the parish priest stood over the font and asked for the child's name. In their haste to see the boy baptized, his birth having so closely followed the death of an infant sister, the servants had forgotten the name the exhausted Countess de Sade had chosen. Quickly deciding on two of the father's names, and a misspelled version of the mother's family name, the man history would remember as the divine marquis, the moral pornographer, the philosopher villain experienced an early yet telling identity crisis.¹²

The young Marquis' penchant for libertinage was inherited from a famously decadent father. Count de Sade was the first member of his family to turn his back on his native Provence and try his luck in the Paris of Louis XV. He was known among courtiers as sharp-witted, handsome and intelligent, characteristics that increased the number and quality of his mistresses, which were, even by libertine standards of the day, legendary. He finally married at age thirty-one, not for love (as few aristocrats of the day did), but for access to the Prince de Condé's ravishing young German bride, with whom Marie-Eléonore was in constant company. It was an act of unapologetic duplicity, but especially meaningful in light of the Sadian epic. The dashing Count's example of

¹¹ The titles "count" and "marquis" were used alternately from generation to generation. When Sade's father died early in 1767, he therefore assumed the title "count," though history remembers him under his original title.

¹² While the world remembered him as Donatien Alphonse Françoise de Sade, those who knew him well would call him Louis Aldonse, the name his mother had chosen, and the one he revealed only in moments of rare solemnity. Sade uses the name Louis Aldonse on his marriage certificate, and much of his personal correspondence to his wife and personal and to his provençal agent, Gaspard Gaufridy.

sumptuous tastes, political savvy and profligacy underscored not only the extraordinarily permissive society into which Sade was born, but also a family for whom pleasure, especially sexual pleasure, was a tradition and a goal.¹³

Sade's early years were spent in a fashion typical of those who could claim the esteem of their noble blood and little else. Although the alliance with Marie Eléonore had provided the Count de Sade access to the royal circles of the Condés, to which his wife was distantly related, both sides of the new family had long out-lived their former wealth. This is not to say that the young marquis was raised in the poverty in which he would die seventy-four years later. On the contrary, the fair-haired charmer spent the first four years of his life side-by-side with the Prince Louis Joseph de Bourbon in what he later described as, "the heart of luxury and plenty."¹⁴ Sade would later write a passage in his novel *Aline et Valcour* (1793), that was surely autobiographical:

Born in Paris in the lap of luxury, as soon as I could think for myself I came to the conclusion that Nature and fortune had combined to help their bounties upon me. I thought this because people were stupid enough to tell me so, and that idiotic presumption made me haughty, domineering, and ill-tempered. I thought the world was at my feet, and the entire universe would serve my slightest desire. If I wanted something, all I had to do was take it.¹⁵

When the obstinate personality of the young marquis began to reveal itself in frequent physical assaults upon the elder Prince Louis, the Countess de Sade was prompted to send the boy to live in Vignon, at the ancient Sade estate with his elderly

¹³ Marquis de Sade, *Letters From Prison*, Richard Seaver, ed. and trans. (New York: Arcade Publishing, 1999), 10.

¹⁴ Gilbert Lely, *The Marquis de Sade: A Biography*, trans. Alec Brown (London: Elek Books, 1961), 25.

¹⁵ Marquis de Sade, *The Complete Marquis de Sade*, trans. Paul Gillette (Los Angeles: Holloway House Publishing, 2005), 38.

paternal grandmother and five aunts. This early abandonment by his mother, who, neglected by her unfaithful and often absent husband would eventually bury herself in a convent, laid the foundation for Sade's abhorrence of motherhood, just as his close relationship with a libertine uncle and father shaped the man he would become. This inverted Oedipus complex, which many Sade biographers and scholars have recognized, would play a crucial role in the distinctive nature of Sadian ideology.¹⁶

As the only surviving (and conveniently male) heir to the prestigious Sade legacy, which the family fantastically claimed had originated with one of the three Biblical magi and could be traced back to the very origins of France, the young marquis was doted upon by his female guardians.¹⁷ Their attention did not help curb the self-important attitude that had been fostered (if not encouraged) among the Condés. From his own libertine perspective, the Count de Sade became increasingly concerned that his young son would be suffocated by his devoutly religious female relatives, almost all of whom would take up vow and veil at some point in their lives, and begged his brother, who had just been named commendatory abbot of the Cistercian abbey Saint-Léger d'Ebreuil in Auvergne, to take over the lad's education.¹⁸ To dislodge the young marquis from the clutches of a pious grandmother and aunts only to drop him into the lap of an abbé would at first seem foolish if the aim of the Count was to broaden his son's horizons. However, the abbé de Sade was not a typical man of the cloth.

¹⁶ Maurice Lever, *Sade: A Biography*, trans. Arthur Goldhammer (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1993), 14.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 3.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 53.

Jacques François Paul Aldonse de Sade was a man of many passions. His dual existence as priest and libertine prompted his good friend Voltaire to ironically comment,

I hear you are going to be priest and vicar general. What a lot of holiness all at once in one family! So that's why you tell me you are going to renounce lovemaking... Oh however much a priest you may be, you, my dear sir, will still make love; were you bishop or Holy Father you would make love and take your pleasure, that is your real ministry.¹⁹

According to a 1762 police report, Voltaire's friendly harassment was not completely speculative. During a stay in Paris, the abbé was caught in the act at a select house of prostitution on the rue du Chantre, where he was enjoying the company of a woman named Léonore, whom he "knew carnally to the point of complete copulation."²⁰ This was the man who guided the formal education of a boy destined to write tales of clerical debauchery, the sexual exploits of whores and their customers, and panegyrics to the libertine way of life.

The years that Sade spent with his uncle, roughly between the ages of five and ten (1745 – 1750), would have a profoundly formative influence. In contrast to the life he had previously enjoyed, the château de Saumane had the graceless appearance of a fortress, whose mysterious depths and dungeons closely resembled the prisons Sade would later occupy. Instead of the company of more privileged playmates, the young marquis was surrounded by the children of village peasants, whom he undoubtedly treated with the class prejudice that would remain one of the most constant traits of his personality.²¹

¹⁹ Lely, 21.

²⁰ Lever, 58.

²¹ Ibid, 59.

When he wasn't exploring the countryside or taking his lessons, Sade spent most of his free time in the extensive and libertine-inspired library that his uncle maintained with scholarly affection. Since it included the standard fare of a gentleman's library, the abbé's collection exposed the young marquis to the work of Hobbes, Locke, Montesquieu, La Mettrie, Molière, Rousseau, Voltaire and Diderot, to name just a few. Under the guidance of his tutor, Sade began his study of humanities and soon developed an intimate knowledge of the library, including the small cache of licentious literature, which his uncle used to occasionally distract himself from his scholarly labors.²² Among them was the works of Aretino, the *Lauriers ecclésiastiques*, *Les Jésuites en belle humeur*, and *Le Bordel ou le Jean-Foutre débauché*. In addition to the other erotic literature available, Sade almost certainly explored the darker titles, including *The History of Flagellants*, whose title page reads, "in which the good and bad uses of flagellation among the Christians are pointed out."²³

The illicit volumes located on the highest shelves of the library were not the exclusive source of Sade's entrée into the mysteries of sex. His good uncle lived openly in the company of two women, a mother and her daughter, causing a great scandal in the small village overlooked by the château. Rumors of prostitutes, bar maids, and the hastily arranged marriages of serving girls were not unusual, moving Sade to later remark in justification of his own actions: "Forgive my mischief. I am taking up the family spirit, and if I have anything to reproach myself for, it is to have the misfortune of being born into it."²⁴

²² Lever, 57.

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Ibid, 58.

After monitoring his son during the years he lived in the exclusive company of the abbé, his tutor, and the various women his uncle entertained, the Count de Sade decided to remove the young marquis from Saumane in 1750, and enroll him in a large Parisian grammar school, where he might make fortuitous connections with the children of France's most esteemed nobles. He had high hopes for the boy, despite his deteriorated social position and diminishing wealth, and made considerable sacrifices to pay each year's tuition. The Louis-le-Grand had primarily a Jesuit curriculum, and emphasized the teaching of Latin, Greek, and rhetoric. The theatre, which occupied a central role in the school, surely predisposed the Sade toward a predilection for the stage. And that wasn't the only inclination he cultivated while a student at the prestigious *collège*. The Jesuits maintained a tradition of corporal punishment that 18th century educators deemed an essential adjunct.²⁵ The whip, a noble punishment visited on even the highest-class posteriors of the day, was recognized as a sexual stimulant by some of Sade's contemporaries, including Rousseau, and is the likely origination of his anal-erotic sexuality. It should be noted that allegations of sodomy against pupils by the Jesuit fathers described in pamphlets and familiar songs of the day, as research in the police archives reveals, were not entirely without foundation.²⁶

During the four years he spent at Louis-le-Grand (1750 – 1754), his summers were passed at the country estate of one Madame de Raimond, one of his father's former mistresses. It was here that Sade had his first taste of coquetry, in the company of a host

²⁵ Lever, 62.

²⁶ Ibid, 64. Maurice Lever conducted this research, where he found evidence of "special friendships" between teachers and students in Parisian *collèges*, which he compiled in *Les Bûchers de Sodome*, (Paris: Fayard, 1985), 322-333. Public opinion often accused the Jesuits of running hotbeds of pederasty and encouraging inappropriate relationships with their male students.

of charming female relations and friends of the woman he would affectionately call *maman*. These surrogate mothers and objects of teenage desire provided the same adoring attention he remembered from his early childhood. Rather than discouraging his son's amorous amusements, his father seemed to be enchanted by them, going so far as to rent a small *garconnière* where the thirteen-year-old Sade could receive his *petites conquêtes*.²⁷

Sade biographer Maurice Lever claims that theatricality, flagellation, sodomy, and passivity—all themes that make up Sadian eroticism—were derived from his experience at Louis-le-Grand; when this was combined with the dungeons of Saumane, the abbé's whores, the father's mistresses, and the mother's abandonment, they spit forth into the pre-revolutionary French world a wry misanthrope uniquely destined to challenge every convention.²⁸ Armed with a stockpile of enlightenment philosophy, a taste for obscenity, and a flare for the dramatic, the adult marquis would wage a war of words, the sting of which has not failed to prick the sensibilities of even modern readers.

A Bitter Bridegroom

Leaving his studies in Paris unfinished, the fourteen-year-old Sade was furnished with a certificate of nobility, which enabled him (at the prompting of his father) to enter cavalry training school attached to the Light Horse Regiment of the Royal Guards, garrisoned at Versailles in 1754.²⁹ During the Seven Years War, Sade served as sub-lieutenant to the King's own infantry regiment, the standard-bearer in the war against

²⁷ Lever, 72.

²⁸ Ibid, 65.

²⁹ Lely, 29.

Prussia, and finally captain in the Burgundy Horse Cavalry. His tenure as a military man was marked by a penchant for gambling, whoring, and impetuosity, about which his father received regular reports. The Count took to following him from garrison to garrison, begging his superior officers to protect the morality of their men (seeming to have either forgotten or repented of his own youthful escapades), garnering a reputation as a nervous mother hen.³⁰

The marquis did not disdain the attention, but spent agonizing days in deep regret for the pain his actions caused his father. In a letter to his uncle, the abbé de Sade, the young soldier writes, “At the suggestion of a love bout I accepted, I thought I enjoyed myself, then saw I had merely committed follies and not enjoyed myself at all in my heart of hearts... I see how right my father was when he said that three-quarters of what I did was just showing off.”³¹ Whether his remorse was sincere, as with the letters he wrote to his pious aunts promising spiritual resolve, isn’t clear. But his love for and desire to please his father is indisputable, as evidenced in a letter to his former tutor to whom he confessed, “nothing remains of pleasures that I believed so real but the bitterest pain at having irritated the most affectionate of fathers and the best of friends.”³²

The Count, who by this time had left the court life in Paris and retreated to his family home where he was undergoing a gradual religious conversion, decided that the only cure for his son’s indulgence was a wife. Finding a suitable match was made difficult by the reversal of the Sade family fortune, the Count’s libertinage, and renowned misdeeds at court, to say nothing of the son’s rapidly deteriorating reputation.

³⁰ Lever, 78.

³¹ Lely, 31.

³² Lever, 86.

Fortunately, the residual esteem of the Sade name made the King agree to grace the union with his approval, a fact that flattered the prospective bride's family, and blinded the woman known as *la présidente de Montreuil*, mother to Renée-Pélagie de Montreuil (the future marquise de Sade), to her future son-in-law's considerable flaws. To be sure, the Count de Sade did his part to deceive the Montreuils to the real nature of his son's character, which the domineering Mme Montreuil accepted, having been dazzled by the charms of father and son alike. This would be a mistake she would lament for the rest of her life, taking great pains to rectify the situation by making Sade's life as miserable as possible.

After a brief but passionate refusal to wed, having fallen in love with one Lady Laure de Lauris, twenty-three year old Sade accepted the match, and married Renée-Pélagie on May 17th, 1763. His change of heart was probably due to the fact that he had come down with a venereal disease, which caused Mademoiselle Lauris to reject him out of hand. The Montreuil family's low origin (their line could barely be traced to the late 17th century) was inversely proportional to their sizeable fortune, a fact that would not prevent Sade from belittling his new wife at every opportunity.³³ In fact, he entered the marriage with little enthusiasm, finding his new wife unattractive and quite boring. Her physical description, which was recorded on a residence certificate issued to Renée-Pélagie during the Revolution makes her to be four foot ten in height, with large nose, mouth average, jaw round, hair brown, face round and full, forehead low, and eyes gray.³⁴ She was hardly the sort of seductress to which Sade had grown accustomed

³³ Maurice Heine, *Le Marquis de Sade* (Paris: Gallimard, 1950)

³⁴ Lever, 106.

during the brothel romps of his soldiering years. Luckily for him, 18th century marriage was no obstacle to libertinage.

In October of 1763, Sade had his first run-in with the law after he hired a twenty-year old prostitute to perform acts of sacrilege and sexual depravity involving flagellation, sodomy, and defilement of a wooden crucifix. Although he did her no physical harm, he did threaten her with pistols and a sword, which was enough to get him arrested when the woman fled to the authorities following the incident. He was charged with having proposed sodomy (although never actually having performed it), blasphemy, disrespect toward the crucifix, and incitement to sacrilege, and served fifteen days before his father was able to secure a pardon from the King.³⁵ He was put under a brief house arrest in Echauffour, before being released from his confinement in September of 1764. Sade again put on a show of repentance when he was caught in bad behavior, writing in a letter to the lieutenant general of police while imprisoned at Vincennes, “Unhappy as I am here, Monsieur, I do not bemoan my fate, I deserved God’s vengeance, and I feel it. Crying for my sins, detesting my errors – these are my sole occupations.”³⁶

This repentance, typical of the marquis, was short-lived. As soon as he arrived back in Paris, he resumed his normal routines. He kept a bevy of mistresses for the next few years, most of them actresses or high-class prostitutes. His pursuit of pleasure was momentarily interrupted when his father died in 1767, leaving him in a disastrous financial situation. In January of 1768, the marquise gave birth to a son, named Louis-Marie, an event that Sade’s mother-in-law sincerely hoped would serve to calm him

³⁵ Lever, 121.

³⁶ Ibid, 122.

down. It did no such thing, and rumors of his debauchery with both men and women flooded Parisian salons.

In April of 1768, Sade was once again arrested and imprisoned for the abduction, sodomy, and beating of a middle-aged widow named Rose Keller who claimed to have agreed to perform housekeeping for the marquis at his country home in Arcueil. Sade made her acquaintance near the church of Petits-Pères, which was a common haunt of part-time prostitutes looking for interested customers. Sade made frequent use of these women, and it is likely that Keller fabricated the housekeeping job as a way of avoiding prosecution herself. Evidence introduced to the case by physicians and witnesses attest that Keller was whipped, forced to engage in sexual relations on pain of death, and held against her will by the marquis—none of which Sade denied in his deposition.³⁷ Despite the frantic efforts of his mother-in-law, the case was adjudicated by the *Parlement de Paris*, and Sade served as a convenient scapegoat to a disquieted public which had grown weary of aristocratic depravity ignored by local authorities. Although his wife's family was able to secure a royal pardon before sentencing could be handed down, the episode would serve to further debilitate his reputation and make future prosecution more likely.

A few year later Sade found himself once again the subject of a criminal investigation after he and his valet Latour had spent an evening plying the whores of a Marseilles brothel with Spanish fly and anise; the first believed to be an aphrodisiac, the second a flatulent. Sade and Latour engaged in a morning debauch involving five

³⁷ This type of behavior was in no means unheard of, and in fact, quite acceptable when the person being whipped was a prostitute – since most people believed that prostitutes would submit to anything for money. Sade was quite open about his sexual proclivity, and apart from sodomy, which was still a capital crime in Paris, had little to fear from the *Parlement's* decision. What he did not anticipate was the growing lack of toleration for aristocratic sexual crimes – a fact that finally landed him in prison for seven months.

prostitutes, all of whom whipped the gentlemen and were whipped by them in turn, with Sade dictating the action and sometimes reversing roles, insisting the women call Latour “Marquis.” Although none of the women were seriously injured, the *philtre d’amour* caused severe abdominal pain, which lasted many days—long enough for the local authorities to hear the testimony of several witnesses, claiming attempted murder by poisoning, sodomy, and physical abuse. An order of arrest was hastily drawn up, and the two accused men had barely enough time to escape to Italy before they were tried and convicted in absentia, sentenced to death and executed in effigy on the Place des Prêcheurs in Aix. Sade spent the five years between the Marseilles affair and his final arrest in 1777 traveling between France and Italy, hiding out at his La Coste château, and carrying on a torrid affair with his wife’s sister, Anne-Prospère. It was probably this affair that finally turned Sade’s mother-in-law against him.³⁸

Le Marquis de six

In February of 1777, after hearing of his mother’s poor health, Sade and his wife traveled to Paris to find she had died. It was at this moment that *la présidente* chose to act. A *lettre de cachet*, issued by the king and beyond the jurisdiction of the local judiciary, was almost certainly requested by Sade’s mother-in-law and would keep the marquis imprisoned for over thirteen years. Even after Sade was exonerated for the attempted murder of the Marseilles whores, the *lettre de cachet* was enough to keep him under lock and key. Correspondence between the marquis and his wife’s family reveal

³⁸ Lever, 189.

the rising hostility and desperation of the situation, prompting the marquis at one point to write *la présidente* a letter in his own blood.³⁹

Sade spent the first seven years of his imprisonment in the dungeon of Vincennes. His wife made sure he was well dressed and well fed, visiting him regularly to deliver sweets and fine goods, which contributed to a rapid weight gain. Although he was constantly complaining of mistreatment and terrible suffering, Sade became accustomed to prison life and learned to cope in his own way. He befriended fellow inmates, and became known as the *marquis de six*, as his cell was the sixth on the third floor of the Vincennes tower. He requested and received many phallic instruments from his wife, and recorded every orgasm they afforded him.⁴⁰ His obsession with numbers and the daily recording of figures would accelerate throughout his incarceration, until his correspondence was littered with numerals and codes that only he understood. In letters to his tyrannical mother-in-law, Sade alternates between acerbic rants and respectful epistles, but is unapologetic of his so-called crimes. In a letter written a month after his Vincennes incarceration:

If the wretchedness and ignominy to which the Marseilles judges' absurd proceedings have reduced me, by punishing the most commonplace of indiscretions as though it were a crime, have failed to mend my ways, your iron bars and iron doors and your locks will be no more successful. You ought to know my heart well enough by now to be convinced that the mere suspicion of dishonor is capable of withering it completely, and you are smart enough to understand that a misdeed, whose origin lies in hot-bloodedness, is not corrected by making that selfsame blood more bitter, by firing the brain through deprivation and inflaming the imagination through solitude.⁴¹

³⁹ Ibid, 285.

⁴⁰ 6,536 orgasms in case you were wondering.

⁴¹ Sade, *Letters from Prison*, 55.

When it became clear that his incarceration would be indefinite, Sade found solace where he could. His cell at Vincennes was “heartbreakingly grim... set in eternal twilight since their narrow windows can only let light in past a double set of iron bars.”⁴² Sade biographer Gilbert Lely asserts that the letters and written work produced there reached, “the height of eloquence and imagination,” going so far as to state that, “the only works that will bear comparison with them, in these respects, are the works of Shakespeare himself.”⁴³ In addition to requests for better food, linens, and writing materials, Sade begged for the newest novels, plays, and works of philosophy, to which he had only limited access. His “inflamed imagination,” found an outlet on paper, and it was during this time that Sade wrote some of his most famous pornographic literature.

Sade was transferred to the Bastille in 1784 when Vincennes was closed. During the five years spent there, he amassed fifteen volumes of writing to which he intended to sign his name and publish, in addition to his most precious (and anonymous) manuscript, *Le Cent Vingt Jours de Sodom*. Aware of the scandalous nature of his work, Sade took care to only write in the evening hours, when interruptions from the guards would be least likely. To further ensure his manuscripts remain private, he wrote on very thin pieces of paper, each less than five inches wide, in a miniscule hand. As soon as he had completed one sheet, he pasted it to another, until at the end of twenty days he had completed one side, which was over thirty-nine feet long. The virtue of this format was that it could be rolled into a tight scroll, which he could easily conceal between the stones of his cell.

⁴² Lely, 291.

⁴³ Ibid.

As revolutionary fervor began to reverberate through Paris and unsettle public officials in the days before the storming of the Bastille, Sade's outdoor exercise was restricted. Outraged, Sade famously shouted from the windows of the prison that the throats of the prisoners were being cut, asking for rescue and revenge against a tyrannical oppressor. This did not, contrary to the marquis' personal belief and later assertion, spark the Revolution. It did prompt prison officials to immediately transfer Sade, and on July 4th, 1789, he was removed from his cell at gunpoint with nothing but the clothes on his back. He would mourn the loss of his possessions, which were destroyed by the ensuing mob on July 14th, especially his written work.⁴⁴ He was taken to Charenton, an asylum for the mentally ill run by the Brothers of Charity, where he ceased to be, "disruptive to the maintenance of order."⁴⁵ He would remain at Charenton, which welcomed the additional family income of ennobled inmates, until the *lettre de cachet* was finally abolished by the National Assembly in March of 1790, and he was released.⁴⁶

Un Bon Citoyen

So it was that fifty-year-old Sade found himself on the streets of Paris, after thirteen years of imprisonment, virtually penniless, but a free man. Renée-Pélagie was happy to keep her husband in comfort while in prison, but had no intention of keeping

⁴⁴ All of his writings, save *Les Cent Vingt Journées de Sodome*, were destroyed. The tightly wound scroll that Sade had fortuitously hidden within the cell's stonework was found by one Arnoux de Saint-Maximin and came into the possession of the Villeneuve-Trans family, in whose care it remained for three generations. At the turn of the twentieth century, it was sold to a German collector, and in 1904 it was published for the first time. Many believe that Sade's subsequent novels, including *Justine*, *Juliette*, and *Philosophie dans le boudoir*, were Sade's efforts during his early post-prison years to reconstitute *The 120 Days of Sodom*, which he assumed he had lost forever.

⁴⁵ Sade, *Letters from Prison*, 384.

⁴⁶ Lever, 353.

him in her household once released. She refused to see him after he left Charenton, and took refuge in the convent of Sainte-Aure with her daughter for the remainder of her life.

The world had changed while he was in prison. A recession in the early 1770s interrupted a long-term growth trend, raising prices and causing shortages within a rapidly increasing population. A disastrous harvest in 1788 paved the way for a peak in tension in July of 1789, a situation summarized by Denis and Pierre Goubert as, “the conjunction of the day before yesterday’s prosperity with yesterday’s stagnation and today’s crisis.”⁴⁷ The result was a series of food riots and general unrest, which was not limited to rural areas. Panic and anti-feudal violence spread from the provinces to the city centers, a great fear that Georges Lefebvre described as initially reflective of a real situation, which soon developed an autonomous momentum that varied widely by region.⁴⁸

This unrest was fueled by what William Reddy calls a flowering of sentimentalism, a term he defines as a view of emotions as a force for good in human affairs.⁴⁹ In his seminal work on the history of emotions, Reddy examines how aristocratic codes of honor, new forms of sociability that developed in salons and Masonic lodges, a new optimism about human nature based in reason, and the dissemination of novels, plays, paintings, and operas that provided attractive new models of emotional refuge began to shape the emotional landscape in France between 1700 and

⁴⁷ François Furet and Mona Ozouf, *A Critical Dictionary of the French Revolution* (Cambridge: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1989), 75.

⁴⁸ Furet, 77.

⁴⁹ William M. Reddy, *The Navigation of Feeling: A Framework for the History of Emotions* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 146.

1789.⁵⁰ By 1789, public opinion relied heavily on a common moral sensibility that defined itself against immoral and corrupt aristocracy.

The emotional disruption with past tradition made way for a sea change in France, where the disputes leading up to the meeting of the Estates General had already emboldened revolutionary spirit. The royal family had been driven from Versailles, and a group of citizens had declared popular sovereignty and equal opportunity for all men. Pre-revolutionary libertine and pornographic literature had championed a combination of free thinking and free living, challenging religious doctrines as well as sexual mores.⁵¹ All of these elements combined to create a complex stew of revolutionary hysteria, rife with contradiction and speculation, which spilled onto the streets of Paris. It was to these streets that Sade returned in April of 1790.

During the brief period of freedom he enjoyed over the next four years, Sade made strident efforts to rejoin a world he scarcely recognized. Hostility toward the aristocracy was everywhere, forcing Sade to downplay his nobility and find a career that suited his lifestyle. He took up the name Louis Sade, and declared himself *un homme de lettres*. The decision was a significant one. It was seen as unseemly for a man of birth and title to take up the pen for profit, and to have done so may have created the schism in Sade's personality that became so evident in his later work. *Citoyen* Sade was the playwright, the political essayist, the tract writer, while the grand *marquis* was left free to write the delicious concoctions of psychosexual propaganda that would make him famous hundreds of years later. Sade was adept at intellectual maneuvering and was a gifted actor. Is it any wonder then, that he found both roles appealing? The *citoyen* Sade

⁵⁰ Ibid, 146.

⁵¹ Darnton, *The Forbidden Best-Sellers*, 90.

accepted his republican responsibilities, urging his fellow Parisians toward tolerance and order, and playing the diplomat for Free Masons, Royalists and Jacobins alike. The *marquis* viciously denounced all forms of authority; obliterating the boundaries between king and pope, love and sex, good and bad, thought and deed. But it was the *citoyen* that kept the *marquis* alive, which possibly provides an insight into Sade's genuine, if always elusive, worldview.

As Sade made the transition to civilian life, he was caught up in the political turmoil of the years immediately preceding The Terror. Owing to the wealth of English philosophy he had read in prison, *citoyen* Sade became partial to an English style constitutional monarchy, and publicly repeated many of the sentiments expressed by the English conservative Edmund Burke, who believed that the French Revolution presented challenges of terrible proportions. In a letter to Gaufridy, his loyal agent, shortly after bicameralism was rejected by the Constituent Assembly in September of 1791, Sade wrote,

I am anti-Jacobite. I hate them to death. I adore the king, but I detest the old abuses. I love any number of articles of the Constitution; others revolt me. I want the luster of the nobility restored, because taking it away solved nothing. I want the king to be the nation's leader. I do not want a National Assembly, but two chambers as in England, which would give the king a tempered authority, balanced by the concord of a nation necessarily divided into two orders; the third [the clergy] is useless, I want no part of it. That is my profession of faith. What am I at present? Aristocrat or democrat? You will tell me if you please, attorney, because I for one have no idea.⁵²

This statement, fraught with uncertainty and frustration, was one he could not have made even two years later, when Robespierre and the *sans-culottes* struck fear in the hearts of all but the most radical republicans. In 1793, Sade was compelled to denounce

⁵² Lever, 417.

his heritage, publicly disown the members of his family who had emigrated (which marked them as monarchists), and was constantly forced to point out his detention in the Bastille when his good faith was questioned. In order to survive, Sade abandoned his neutrality and allowed himself to be swept up in the revolutionary mania, knowing that even a minor slip-up would send him back to prison, or more likely, the guillotine.

A Novel, Well Peppered

While attempting to have his plays produced by Parisian theatres, Sade met and fell in love with a young actress in her late twenties, Marie Constance Renelle Quesnet, a woman who remained faithful to the aging marquis until his death. By the summer months of 1791, Sade's financial situation had deteriorated significantly, leaving him in dire straits. People were beginning to refuse to accept paper money in Paris – it was worth only twenty-one percent of its face value. In desperation, Sade wrote and published *Justine*, and for the first time saw himself bound in leather. In a letter written to his lawyer, Reinard:

At the moment, a novel of mine is being printed, but it is too immoral a work to be sent to so circumspect, religious, and modest man as yourself. I needed money, my printer said he wanted it well peppered so I gave it him fit to plague old Nick himself. It is being called *Justine or the Misfortunes of Virtue*. Burn it unread if by chance it comes your way. I am renouncing it, but you shall soon have the philosophical novel, which I certainly shall send you.⁵³

Sade published this first work just at the moment when newly democratized forms of pornography with their vulgar attacks on political leaders were gaining wider

⁵³ Lely, 324.

audiences for their obscene attacks and imagery.⁵⁴ Libertine literature, which had enjoyed a thriving readership ever since the publication of *Thérèse Philosophe* in 1748, had been predominately aimed at upper class men of leisure. It was anti-clerical, politically irreverent, and charged with intellectualized eroticism. The pornography of the post-Revolutionary era had more to do with descriptive accounts of sexual activity, often involving publicly disgraced figures, and was marketed to a much wider audience. In his capacity as the *marquis*, Sade incorporated and transcended both genres.

At the Foot of the Guillotine

Shortly after the September massacres of 1792, *citoyen* Sade became secretary of the *Section des Piques*. A year later he was elected president of the section, though his term lasted only a few hours. He resigned his post after a measure was brought to a vote to which he objected. No doubt it had something to do with capital punishment, of which Sade was an ardent opponent; though at the height of the Terror, there was an embarrassment of riches from which to choose. Sade's paradoxical aversion to institutionalized murder could be interpreted in a number of ways. Was he merely playing the imposter, opposing the death penalty as a way to protect his aristocratic brethren? Or was his objection on a sincere principle, as revealed in a letter to Gaufridy, "The guillotine before my eyes has caused me a hundred times more pain than all the bastilles imaginable ever did."⁵⁵ If the idea of sexual violence, some of which included fantasized murder, appealed to him, institutionalized murder disgusted him because it

⁵⁴ Lynn Hunt, *The Family Romance of the French Revolution* (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1992), 138.

⁵⁵ Lever, 444.

was nothing more than the odious implementation of abstract principles.⁵⁶ In a stirring, if ineloquent comment that reveals Sade's foresight, he reminded the convention, "The voices of centuries to come will only add to the homages that the generation in bloom is paying you today."⁵⁷ A week after Sade's speech, Marie-Antoinette's head fell into the basket. In the solitude of his study, Sade made this entry in his notebook:

WORDS OF ANTOINETTE AT THE CONCIERGERIE: 'The ferocious beasts who surround me every day invent some new humiliation to add to the horror of my fate. Drop by drop they distill in my heart the poison of adversity; they delight in counting my sighs, and while waiting to fatten themselves on my blood, they slake their thirst with my tears.'⁵⁸

By fictionalizing the dying Queen's last moments, Sade dramatized his own insecurities. Living among Jacobins, who demanded complete and total allegiance to the Republic, took its toll on the aging marquis. Robespierre and his cohort used fear as a means of liquidating their adversaries and establishing dominion, a tactic that was a characteristic of the revolutionary mentality.⁵⁹

A speech that Sade wrote and recited before the convention in 1793 would abruptly end his tenure in public politics. In it, he revealed his atheist beliefs (beliefs that were not unpopular), and called for the establishment of a new belief system dedicated to virtue (which can only be seen as a concession to the obvious need for organized fraternity). It was an ill-timed oration, as Robespierre and his sans-culottes were sidling up to the belief that atheism was aristocratic. His patriotic service notwithstanding,

⁵⁶ Lever, 444.

⁵⁷ Ibid, 445.

⁵⁸ Ibid, 446. Neither these words, nor any part of his personal notebooks, were intended for others to see. In that sense, we can be sure these are his private thoughts.

⁵⁹ Furet, 137.

Sade's connection to nobility, his stance on capital punishment, and his virulent objection to organized religion combined to create in him a potential enemy of the state. That he was widely known to be the author of the licentious novel, *Justine*, could not have helped his case, as nothing disgusted the Incorruptible more than libertinage.⁶⁰ He was arrested on December 8, 1793 and charged with opportunism and moderatism three months later.

Sade spent six weeks at the Madelonnettes, a former convent for reformed prostitutes that had been converted to a jail, before being transferred to Picpus at the end of March, 1794. He remained for most of that year mere inches from death, surviving only through the indefatigable efforts of Quesnet, who had friends both in the Convention and the Committee of Safety. He managed, through a few well-placed bribes, to avoid the guillotine after his execution order was signed, and after the fall of Robespierre in August of 1794, Quesnet was able to arrange for his release.

Ten months in prison under the constant threat of the guillotine had displaced whatever Republican duty he might have thought necessary for keeping up appearances. Sade turned his back on public politics, an art that was limited to the real world and its necessary boundaries, and devoted all of his time to literature, which had none. In his fiction, Sade's subversive political ideology could be unambiguously expressed. The last quarter of Sade's life was dominated by the person of the *marquis*, having left the *citoyen* and his reputation in the corpse-ridden gardens of Picpus.⁶¹ The first novel he completed

⁶⁰ Lever, 461.

⁶¹ Picpus was a detention center for counter-revolutionaries fingered by Robespierre and his henchmen. It was a former convent, and for an exorbitant sum, kept condemned aristocrats in conditions far superior to those of traditional prisons. In the months immediately prior to the end of the Terror, thousands of guillotined bodies were buried in the gardens at Picpus, and eventually, the guillotine itself was set up in the main

after his release, and one that drew heavily on the recent events of his life and his philosophical ambitions, was *La Philosophie dans le boudoir*.

SECTION TWO: *La Philosophie dans le boudoir* (1795)

Traced with a Lustful Brush

When they are compared to contemporaneous pornographic fiction, the works of Sade fall into a distinct and unique category. Sade used many of the emblematic pornographic characters of his day, such as the ingénue in need of an education, the whore with a heart of gold, and the clerical debauché. However, his infusion of politics and personal philosophy into unfettered desecration that left no social, spiritual or physical boundaries untransgressed separated him from his competitors in the genre. There was literally no line that he was unwilling to cross in order to demonstrate his pursuit of absolute liberty. In reaction to the scores of Grub Street hacks who had jumped on the pornographic literature bandwagon following the Revolution, and whose literary qualities he regarded as inferior, Sade declared,

Lust, daughters of opulence and superiority, cannot be treated except by people of a certain stamp... except by individuals finally, who, blessed by nature to begin with, are also sufficiently blessed by fortune to have tried themselves what they trace for us with their lustful brushes. This is quite beyond the reach of the rogues who are flooding us with the contemptible brochures I am speaking of.⁶²

courtyard. Among the many famous prisoners here: the duchesse d'Orleans, Radix de Sainte-Fox (Louis XVI's secret advisor), and Portalis to name a few. (Lever, ch. 23)

⁶² Lever, 383. It appears that the quote is attributed by Lever to *Histoire de Juliette*, but he does not indicate whether Sade voiced it in within the fictional dialogue, in the introduction, or some other way. I've included it here because of its particular relevance to the historical conversation, i.e., Sade's feelings toward his rivals.

Reference to political pornography most often brings to mind the pamphlets that circulated far and wide during the Revolutionary years, laced with lurid yet hilarious tales of the King's impotence, his wife's sexual exploits, and the general sexual degradation (which equaled corruption) of the royal court. While this body of obscene writing was without doubt important in desacrilizing the elite in order to make Revolution imaginable, Sade's fiction had a much more subtle and complicated design. He did not take aim at high-placed culprits or institutions alone, which the Revolution had deposed, but at

the countless individuals who go to make up human societies where Sade has placed the only organic strength these societies may possess... He offers a withering criticism of any social restraints, which reduce to whatever slight degree the activity of the incoercible human element. In his eyes, the only thing, which will lead him to accept not a social pact, but a social compromise – which can be denounced or renewed at any time – is the self-interest of the individual. For him, any society, which fails to understand this fundamental truth, is destined to perish.⁶³

Robert Darnton, whose work has laid bare the clandestine publishing industry of Revolutionary France, puts pornographic literature into three categories: books that offended the church, books that threatened the state, and books that are unambiguously obscene and an affront to public morality.⁶⁴ Darnton describes the basic ingredients of the typical 18th century work of pornographic literature to include (but which are not limited to) the use of a female narrator, obscene words, casual dialogue, views that were seen to be “modern”, and whose base purpose was the sexual arousal of the reader.⁶⁵ While these classifications are certainly helpful when discussing pornographic literature

⁶³ Heine, 181.

⁶⁴ Darnton, Robert, *The Forbidden Best-Sellers*, 88.

⁶⁵ *Ibid*, 86.

published before and after the Revolution, something happened halfway through the eighteenth century that altered the intellectual topography of Europe, and changed the tenor of literary discourse.

In 1748, a kind of pornography informed by materialist philosophy began to be published at precisely the same moment as the first great barrage of Enlightenment works.⁶⁶ *Thérèse philosophe*, probably written by the marquis d'Argens and the only pornographic novel for which Sade had any respect, was written alongside the first works of Montesquieu, Diderot, La Mettrie, and Toussaint. It is a tale of the metaphysical-sexual education of young Thérèse, whose account of the Dirrag Affair is easily recognizable as the actual 1731 courtroom drama of Catherine Cadière, who accused Jean-Baptiste Girard, a Jesuit priest, of seduction. Father Girard was acquitted by the Parlement of Aix, but the case appealed strongly to anti-clerical pamphleteers.⁶⁷ In the novel, Thérèse is exposed to a materialistic interpretation of religion, which causes her to embrace an egoistic sexual agency that allows for sexual pleasure under certain, natural constraints. L'Abbé, to whom Thérèse confides, reminds her that, "when all is said and done, men and women must only procure themselves pleasures in such a way as not to trouble the inner order of the established society."⁶⁸ Thérèse turns to masturbation, fearful of pregnancy outside of the sacrament of marriage, and eventually practices *coitus interruptus* with her lover (to whom the tome is addressed). The notion that certain boundaries must not be transgressed runs through each of Thérèse's sexual and

⁶⁶ Darnton, *Forbidden Best-Sellers*, 90.

⁶⁷ *Ibid*, 91.

⁶⁸ *Ibid*, 272.

philosophical harangues, which employ first person narration and voyeurism to elicit arousal, rather than patent eroticism.

This combination of sex and philosophy formed a kind of hedonistic-materialistic credo, which adorns the frontispiece of the novel epigrammatically, “Voluptuousness and philosophy produce the happiness of the sensible man. He embraces voluptuousness by taste, he loves philosophy by reason.”⁶⁹ *Thérèse philosophe* was published the same year as La Mettrie’s *L’Homme-machine*, and it made the same point: in copulation as in gravitation, everything could be reduced to the identical principle, matter in motion.⁷⁰

In the next three years, Buffon, Rousseau, and Voltaire would make their indelible marks on natural science, politics, and philosophy. This double explosion of philosophy and pornography was fueled by the same source: the craving for liberty. In a world where everything was questioned, nothing sacred, the enlightened minds that emerged in 1748 used different methods to impart their ideologies. That some of these men used pornography as a means of breaking down social norms, religious doctrines and sexual mores puts their work in the same frame of reference as figures in the high enlightenment. Most if not all of the French *philosophes* turned to fiction at some point in their careers, recognizing it as a useful means of communicating their ideas to the masses. Therefore it is unsurprising that the life span of politico-philosophically important pornography paralleled that of the Enlightenment canon and the Revolution it helped bring about.

⁶⁹ Darnton, *Forbidden Best-Sellers*, 100.

⁷⁰ *Ibid*, 103.

And You, Amiable Debauchees

Having once again gained his freedom in 1794, Sade set out to reestablish himself on the Parisian publishing scene. His printer Girouard, who had published *Justine*, had not been so lucky, having been sent to the guillotine the year before. This did not deter Sade, whose small-format two-volume work, enticingly titled *La Philosophie dans le boudoir* was published anonymously by the *Londres aux dépens de la Compagnie* in 1795.⁷¹

Of the titles in Sade's pornographic canon, *La Philosophie dans le boudoir* features the most thinly veiled politico-philosophical agenda.⁷² The novel included four erotic engravings in addition to the text, and an epigraph that read, "*La mère en prescrira la lecture à sa fille,*" (mothers will prescribe the book to their daughters).⁷³ In what was either the result of a printing error, or an uncharacteristic change of heart by the author, the epigraph printed in the second edition read, "*La mère en proscira la lecture à sa fille,*" (mothers will forbid this book to their daughters).⁷⁴ While many have offered thoughtful and often witty explanations for the one-letter goof, the true story is shrouded in mystery. Lynn Hunt claims that the tongue-in-cheek epigraph was in reference to another pornographic novel, *Fureurs utérines de Marie-Antoinette, femme de Louis XVI*, whose title page is adorned with the adage, "*La mere en proscira la lecture à sa fille*"

⁷¹ Sade, *Philosophy in the Bedroom*, 179

⁷² It should be noted here that the original translation by Richard Seaver for Grove press in 1965 gave this novel's title as *Philosophy in the Bedroom*, which is actually a mistranslation. The term *boudoir*, refers to a specifically female space, and was most often the word used to describe the sitting rooms of upper-class French women. Thus the word *bedroom*, which has no implicit gender in the English language, is inaccurate.

⁷³ Ibid.

⁷⁴ Ibid.

(the mother will proscribe this reading to her daughter).⁷⁵ Whatever the case, it is a poignant anecdote for what many see as a contradictory, troubling, and brilliantly ambiguous novel.

La Philosophie dans le boudoir is one of only two non-theatrical works of fiction that Sade chose to write in the dialogue form.⁷⁶ The employment of this communicative method is as important as the structure Sade used to posit his subject matter. Not only does it give the reader a more intimate relation with the fictional characters, it also strips down the action to the bare necessities. No lengthy descriptions or historical backdrops were needed, as in some of his other work. The action is immediately accessible, and spoken in the familiar parlance of the audience he meant to target: the average literate French citizen. His three other full-length pornographic works, *Les Cent Vingt Journées de Sodom* (1785), *Justine: Les Infortunes de la Vertu* (1791), and *Juliette* (1798) certainly advanced an ideological position, however cloaked it might have been in libertinage. But the sheer scope and specificity of the ideas expressed in *La Philosophie dans le boudoir*, all of which are intended to be performed in the theatre of the mind's eye where the sexed body takes center stage, is both literary parody and philosophical polemic, a Chaucerian farce with a subversive subtext.

The novel is divided into seven “*Dialogues*,” in which philosophical speculations and dissertations on morality, history and religion are commingled with the lurid sexual

⁷⁵ Lynn Hunt, *The Family Romance*, 134.

⁷⁶ The other work, *Dialogue between a Priest and a Dying Man*, was the earliest of Sade's fiction known to be dated with certainty. Sade completed it in July 1782, during the fourth year of his second imprisonment in Vincennes. It is considered one of his most incisive works, yet did not figure in to Sade's 1788 *Catalogue raisonné*, which was limited to works he wished to publicly acknowledge. It was not published until 1926, when it was discovered and translated by Sade biographer Maurice Heine.

fantasies for which the author is famous. The narrative consists of a series of orgies strung together by metaphysical ponderings in a fashion typical of the eighteenth century pornographic tradition.⁷⁷ Sade's use of this form seems intended to encourage the mimetic illusion that the limits between reader and text may be transgressed.⁷⁸ In essence, it is a story that seeks to unite the reader's intellect with his sexual imagination.

The four protagonists are Eugénie de Mistival, a chaste fifteen-year-old virgin who is to be initiated into the sexual realm of libertinage; twenty-six-year-old Madame de Saint-Ange, a wealthy widow "of extreme lubricity;" her brother, the Chevalier de Mirvel, a fellow libertine if somewhat less inclined toward the violent taste of the master of ceremonies, Dolmancé: philosopher, debauchee, and headmaster of this school of sensual pleasure. Dolmancé, whom Sade reveals as, "a sodomite out of principle... the most notorious atheist, the most immoral fellow," is present in every moment of the novel, either as subject, instigator, or mediator of the business at hand. Since he serves as both sage and seducer, it is difficult to avoid making an egotistical association between Dolmancé and the divine marquis. Never before had Sade so self-consciously injected himself into his writing. For this reason, *La Philosophie dans le boudoir* is perhaps the most eloquent refutation to those who have simplistically reduced Sade to a hedonistic misanthrope.

In the education of the neophyte Eugénie, her three teachers must not only instruct, but also disabuse her of all the false notions of virtue instilled in her by her devout mother, a despicable slave of a hypocritical society. Lengthy lectures are handed

⁷⁷ Darnton, *The Forbidden Bestsellers*, 91.

⁷⁸ Yoav Rinon, *Sadian Reflections* (Madison, New Jersey: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 2005), 59.

down to the student between bouts of frenzied and well-orchestrated sexual demonstrations, the pacing of which is economically gauged for keeping the reader engaged long enough for the next orgy to begin. As Eugénie's intellectual acuity increases, so does the sexual depravity, and by the fifth and longest dialogue, whips, dildos, bodily emissions and well-endowed gardeners fill the boudoir.

In this depraved symphony, Dolmancé is an adept conductor: here sharing pearls of libertine wisdom, there positioning his fellows to ensure the utmost sexual pleasure.⁷⁹ It is, in fact, Dolmancé himself whom his friends suspect has written the well-known "Yet Another Effort, Frenchmen, If You Would Become Republicans," a political pamphlet, which appears in its entirety in the fifth dialogue. The political welfare of the fledgling French nation is the subject of the treatise, which includes lengthy diatribes on such themes as religion, education, natural law, capital punishment, morality, the role of women, the bonds of family, crime, and government.

These subversive politico-philosophical theories succeed in practice when, in the seventh dialogue, Eugénie's pious mother appears with the intention of taking her daughter home. Warned of Madame de Mistival's arrival by a letter from Eugénie's libertine father, who gives the group a free hand to, "receive the creature in the manner she deserves," Eugénie shows she is worthy Dolmancé's pupilage.⁸⁰ Armed with a huge phallus, Eugénie strips her mother naked and penetrates her, "now in the cunt, now in the ass," while being sodomized by Dolmancé, before showering her mother with blows,

⁷⁹ The women involved in the Marseilles affair testified that Sade himself acted in a very similar matter throughout the course of that famous debauch.

⁸⁰ Sade, *Philosophy in the Bedroom*, 350.

lacerations, and whip strokes.⁸¹ When the Chevalier objects to such treatment as an outrage to nature, Dolmancé is not diverted, but explains:

Nature, who for the perfect maintenance of the laws of her general equilibrium, has sometimes need of vices and sometimes of virtues, inspires now this impulse, now that one, in accordance with what she requires: hence, we do no kind of evil in surrendering ourselves to these impulses, of whatever sort you may suppose them to be.⁸²

In the gruesome final act, a valet infected with syphilis is called into the boudoir, and is ordered to, “inject his poison into each of the two natural conduits that ornament the dear and amiable lady, with this consequence: that so long as this cruel disease’s impressions shall last, the whore will remember not to trouble her daughter when Eugénie has herself fucked.”⁸³ To provide against the escape of the tainted semen, Eugénie is given a needle and a length of heavy red thread, which she uses to sew her mother up, “so that you’ll give me no more little brothers and sisters.”⁸⁴ The theatrics are concluded when the half-dead Madame de Mistival is released, and the friends dine together before retiring for the night in the same bed. In the final sentence of the novel, Dolmancé declares, “I never dine so heartily, I never sleep so soundly as when I have, during the day, sufficiently befouled myself with what our fools call crime.”⁸⁵

Hunt has suggested that this horrific scene is the *reductio ad absurdum* of the pornographic attacks on Marie-Antoinette, whereby the “bad” mother gets a very literal

⁸¹ Sade, *Philosophy in the Bedroom*, 359.

⁸² *Ibid.*, 360.

⁸³ *Ibid.*, 362.

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, 363.

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, 367.

punishment, executed by her own child.⁸⁶ There is no doubt that Sade's rendering of the metaphorical mother attempts to extend the parodic assault to the limits of the conceivable. But Sade had a serious aim: to attack the domestic structure that he believed kept people from experiencing themselves in a natural way.

A Libertine's Nature

Like *Thérèse Philosophe*, Sade's tale is of an education in which the philosophizing and the pleasure seeking run together through the narrative until they converge in the end as materialistic hedonism. In *Thérèse Philosophe*, man is thus described as a machine that could not (and should not) be controlled:

Reason serves only to make a man aware of the strengths of the desire he has to do or not to do something or other, relative to the pleasure or displeasure he will derive from it... The arrangement of our organs, the disposition of our fibers, a certain movement of our fluids, all determine the type of passions which work upon us, directing our reason and our will in the smallest as well as the greatest actions we perform.⁸⁷

In similar fashion, Sade's Hobbsian interpretation of the inherent self-interest of human beings is at work in much of his writing, expressed through his characters' search for an individual truth based on personal needs and desires. What Sade discards from the political theories of both Hobbes, Rousseau, and earlier works such as *Thérèse Philosophe*, are the conciliatory or dynamic concepts, which decree either "natural" or

⁸⁶ Hunt, *The Family Romance*, 142.

⁸⁷ *Therese Philosophe*, excerpted in Darnton, *The Forbidden Bestsellers*, 100.

imposed social cohesion.⁸⁸ This extreme stand poses a particular problem in placing his pornographic literature on the post-Revolutionary political spectrum. Within Domancé's "Yet Another Frenchman," Sade rails, "Is it thought that our goal (to become Republicans) will be attained when at last we have been given laws? Abandon the notion: for what should we, who have no religion, do with laws?"⁸⁹ Sade keeps equally distant from conservatives and radicals, casting a cold glance on Revolution and *ancien régime* alike.⁹⁰ His refusal to admit to any form of collective coercion upon the individual in the name of the general good has led Phillip Roger to name him the most penetrating critic of revolutionary reason, but of little else.⁹¹

Yet there is a form of cohesive order at work in *La Philosophie dans le boudoir*. Hunt argues that the resolution that Sade finds is not anarchistic, but one that replaces conventional law with a new order every bit as minutely regulated as the old one, perhaps even more so.⁹² Pointing to nature as the ultimate adjudicator, Sade writes,

"Nature, equally dictating vices and virtues to us, in reason of our constitution, yet more philosophically, in reason of the need Nature has of the one and the other, what she inspires in us would become a very reliable gauge by which to adjust exactly what is good and bad."⁹³

⁸⁸ Phillip Roger, "A Political Minimalist," *Sade and the Narrative of Transgression*, eds. David B. Allison, Mark S. Roberts, and Allen S. Weiss (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 90.

⁸⁹ Sade, *Philosophy in the Bedroom*, 296

⁹⁰ Roger, 93.

⁹¹ *Ibid.*, 97.

⁹² Hunt, 137.

⁹³ Sade, *Philosophy in the Bedroom*, 307.

The Tyrannical Family

Central to the concepts of natural law and natural rights that shaped Revolutionary themes was a discourse of liberty that sought to free the individual from tyrannical families. The pamphlet read in the fifth dialogue, which attacks the family as a social structure, is Burke's greatest fear realized.⁹⁴ What difference did it make in a republic if children had no father, the pamphlet's author asks? None, since all individuals, "must have no other dam than the nation, where everyone born is the motherland's child."⁹⁵ But while Burke warned against the terrible consequence of republicanism, Sade champions it, arguing for the dissolution of familial bonds at the exact moment that the family is being lionized by the conservative reaction in the immediate aftermath of the Terror.

Revolutionary politics between 1789 and 1794 had demanded new bonds of family intimacy in which marriage became the arena for testing the limits of individual liberty in their framework of the family.⁹⁶ Families were assumed to serve as both natural and necessary intermediaries between individuals and the state; citizens were encouraged to view the nation not as a great family, which was the predominant metaphor of the *ancien régime*, but as a nation of families.⁹⁷

But after the fall of Robespierre in 1794, the counter-revolution saw the family as a bulwark against disorder. The Thermidorian reaction, a reassertion of conservatism that

⁹⁴ Edmund Burke, *Reflections on the Revolution in France*, ed. L.G. Mitchell (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993), 38.

⁹⁵ Sade, *Philosophy in the Bedroom*, 321.

⁹⁶ Suzanne Desan, *The Family on Trial in Revolutionary France* (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2004), 35.

⁹⁷ Jennifer Ngaire Heuer, *The Family and the Nation: Gender and Citizenship in Revolutionary France, 1789-1830* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2005), 98.

sought to undermine the advances of the liberal revolution, marked a new, third phase of the Revolutionary era. Because they had been inextricably bound to the excessive violence of the Terror, democracy and individual equality had lost legitimacy for many Frenchmen after 1794. As had been uncritically the case prior to 1789, the family was once again reliant on male power and on women being confined to a sexuality of simple reproduction, with modesty and fidelity as its safeguards. In the 1797 treatise titled, “De la famille considérée comme l’élément des sociétés (Of the Family Considered as the Element of Societies), Charles Toussaint Guiradet, the secretary-general in the Ministry of Foreign Relations during the Directory, claimed that families, not individuals, were the basic units of the French nation:

All other divisions (besides that of the family) can be neither elementary nor natural. Those who consider only the individual (the man) as an isolated being and conceive of society as a collection of men, perform a division in which the last term is not complete. Man, so considered, is within the domain of the physics and morals, but only man in the family forms the element of society.⁹⁸

In spite of these authoritative sentiments, gender and domestic roles had been challenged for the first time in the half-decade after 1789. Suzanne Desan’s work on gender and politics during the years immediately after the French Revolution provides evidence of a lively legal struggle to negotiate new social practices, including divorce, the reduction of paternal authority, egalitarian inheritance for sons and daughters alike, and the granting of civil rights to illegitimate children. Similarly, Lynn Hunt reminds us that the history of the family romance in French revolutionary politics shows that the individual was imagined as embedded in family relationships, but that these relationships

⁹⁸ Heuer, 77.

were always potentially unstable.⁹⁹ Sensing this instability, radical Republican pamphleteers, including Sade, represented the domestic sphere subversively: men and women mated without affection, brothers competed violently, property did not exist, and a father owed nothing to his children.¹⁰⁰

Sade's efforts to undermine family bonds, provide sexual agency to women (albeit, with conditions), and loosen religion's chokehold on the sexual imagination within *La Philosophie dans le boudoir* were intended to counter the state-sponsored propaganda that insisted upon absolute conformity to the domestic ideal. Sade asks, "Have we ever felt a single natural impulse advising us to prefer others to ourselves, and is each of us not alone, and for himself in the world?"¹⁰¹ He assumes that daughters like Eugenie, to whom the novel has been prescribed in the epitaph, will discover his philosophy and turn away from the monogamous family system.¹⁰² Madame St. Ange explains,

It is not in this age of preoccupation with the rights of man and general concern for liberties that girls ought to continue to believe themselves their families' slaves, when it is clearly established that these families' power over them is totally illusory.¹⁰³

This attack on the family is directed exclusively at mothers. Both Eugenie and Dolmancé love their fathers and loathe their mothers. "What did they do," asks Dolmancé, "but co-operate in the act which our fathers, on the contrary, solicited? Thus

⁹⁹ Hunt, *The Family Romance*, 202.

¹⁰⁰ Desan, 231.

¹⁰¹ Sade, *Philosophy in the Bedroom*, 253.

¹⁰² Hénaff, 273.

¹⁰³ Sade, *Philosophy in the Bedroom*, 218.

is was the father who desired our birth, whereas the mother merely consented thereto.”¹⁰⁴

This Aristotelian take on conception, which insists that, “the child born of the father’s blood owes filial tenderness to him alone,” seems to reveal Sade’s leanings toward a father king, and against a Republican mother.¹⁰⁵ His own experiences reinforce such an outlook. Sade’s personal family romance contrasted with the idealized version constructed after 1794, but the suffocating nature of his wife’s family, especially the influence of his dreaded mother-in-law, more than explains his derisive feelings toward motherhood. In language that resembles the attacks on Marie-Antoinette, Madame St. Ange explains that, “women’s destiny is to be like the bitch, the she-wolf: she must belong to all who want her.”¹⁰⁶ Taking the point further, Domancé encourages Eugenie to use reason:

Consider that every provocation sensed by a boy and originating from a girl is a natural offertory, and that your sex never serves Nature better than when it prostitutes itself to ours; that ‘tis in a word, to be fucked that you were born, and that she who refuses her obedience to this intention Nature has for her does not deserve to see the light longer.¹⁰⁷

What Sade refuses to acknowledge is the body’s natural inclination toward reproduction, and instead seeks to, “cheat propagation of its rights and to contradict what fools call the laws of Nature.”¹⁰⁸ In an age when reproductive sex was the only acceptable form of sexual expression, Sade calls for women—not men—to deny their reproductive function. In this way, to belong to the caste of libertines requires, for

¹⁰⁴ Ibid, 207.

¹⁰⁵ Ibid.

¹⁰⁶ Hunt, *The Family Romance*, 143.

¹⁰⁷ Sade, *Philosophy in the Bedroom*, 267.

¹⁰⁸ Ibid, 229.

women, a double transgression; to be excluded from the community of man, and to be excluded from the rites of women.¹⁰⁹

Identity in Opposition

Sade wrote in isolation about the need for absolute independence, a need that required his fictional characters to consider other people as instruments in pleasure only. His refusal to acknowledge the existence of a fellow man in any emotional or social dimension, forces Sadian characters to overcome the fear of solitude and the need for security themselves—a skill that Sade must have perfected during the many years spent in prison.¹¹⁰ What becomes clear in the passages of *La Philosophie dans le boudoir* is that Sade found his own identity in such opposition. He inverts the philosophy of Rousseau and rejects the Hobbsian solution of tyranny to the jungle ethic, using instead the “war of all against all” philosophy to justify a world where self-interest leads to the unflinching pursuit of pleasure that does not recognize socially constructed boundaries. Burke’s dour prophecies of post-Revolutionary anarchy are acknowledged in Sade’s writing, but flipped to reflect a positive outcome—indeed, the only possible outcome—of the Revolution. Dolmancé dutifully instructs Eugénie to start from one fundamental point:

In libertinage, nothing is frightful, because everything libertinage suggests is also a natural inspiration; the most extraordinary, the most bizarre acts, those which most arrantly seem to conflict with every law, every human institution (as for Heaven, I have nothing to say), well, Eugénie, even those are not frightful, and

¹⁰⁹ Chantal Thomas, “Fantasizing Juliette,” *Sade and the Narrative of Transgression*, ed. David B. Allison, Mark S. Roberts, Allen S. Weiss (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 259.

¹¹⁰ Feher, 31.

there is not one amongst them all that cannot be demonstrated within the boundaries of Nature.¹¹¹

For Sade, nature dictates a world where if it is possible to conceive of and do a thing, then it is acceptable to claim it as a natural right. *La Philosophie dans le boudoir* is unique to the 18th century pornographic canon in that it presents a notion of human nature in which the most extreme expressions of self interest are not counter-balanced by some opposing or restraining force, but add up themselves to a positive good. Madame de Saint-Ange instructs Eugenie to let loose the horrors of her mind, “what is of the filthiest, the most infamous, the most forbidden? ‘Tis that which best rouses the intellect... ‘tis that which always causes us most deliciously to discharge.”¹¹² To which the good student replies,

“If that is so, the more we wish to be agitated, the more we desire to be moved violently, the more we must give rein to our imagination; we must bend it toward the inconceivable; our enjoyment will be thereby increased, made better for the track the intellect follows.”¹¹³

Historiography

In his history of the French Revolution as related through the images of the body as they appeared in popular literature of the time, Antoine de Baecque argues that it is not only the interpretation of ideas, the commentary on values, or the counting of the economic indicators of a society, but also the study of its forms of narrative, sometimes the most out of place, the most trivial or the most surprising that allows the seeker to

¹¹¹ Sade, *Philosophy in the Bedroom*, 274.

¹¹² Sade, *Philosophy in the Bedroom*, 233.

¹¹³ *Ibid*, 235.

obtain historical knowledge.¹¹⁴ Sade's work became legally accessible in the late 1960's and historians have been arguing ever since about whether Sade's narratives were parodies of philosophy, or genuine philosophical discourses. The Historiography surrounding Sade's work, undertaken by critics, philosophers, historians and sexologists, is extremely varied: some equate its usefulness to that of fresh excrement, others touting him as an anticipator of Freud, Kraft-Ebbing, and Marx. Sade has been blamed for the Holocaust, given credit for the fall of the Bastille, and earned a place among the most controversial figures in history. With respect to gender studies, philosophy and politics, the divisions over Sade's influence are many.

Second wave feminism coincidentally coincided with the publication of Sade's work. On account of Sade's contention that women could find liberation through their sexuality, some early feminist readers of Sade embraced him as a supporter of the liberated woman.¹¹⁵ The female characters of *La Philosophie dans le boudoir* provide an extreme if convenient parallel to the sexual revolution of the 1960s. In the radical spirit of the French Revolution, the education of Eugénie is meant to construct the new French citizen, free from all the old prejudices and superstitions.¹¹⁶ Some feminists have compared the historic mission of this Sadian woman to that of the twentieth century liberated woman who, "remains in the area of privilege created by her class," and can only achieve sexual autonomy by defying her submissive mother.¹¹⁷

¹¹⁴ Antoine de Baecque, *The Body Politic: Corporeal Metaphor in Revolutionary France, 1770-1800* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1997), 5.

¹¹⁵ Many scholars attribute this correlation to the very literal use of "liberated woman" in the late 1960s and early 1970s.

¹¹⁶ Jane Gallop, "The Liberated Woman" *Narrative* 13 (2005): 90.

¹¹⁷ Carter, 133.

While correlations with the early feminists of this century are compelling, a closer read of Sade's treatment of women in *La Philosophie dans le boudoir* prove to be damaging to any argument that implies that Sade may have been a champion for women's liberation in the modern sense. The quasi-allegorical representation of Dolmancé as philosophy (male member), penetrating the boudoir (female space) is in itself a subtle refutation of any kind of sexual equality between the fictional characters. Although Eugénie discovers sexual egoism, it must be observed and sanctioned by the group – and especially Dolmancé, who is the most senior male participant and therefore superior. In addition, the interplay between the men and women can never be simultaneously mutual; there is an active and passive exchange performed in serial fashion, and although the women occasionally take up the active role by employing phallic instruments, they most often assume the passive role. How can sexual equality be realized when women are typically the receptors of male aggression?

Angela Carter takes a different approach, calling Sade a *moral* pornographer. She sees Sade as an artist who uses pornographic material as part of the acceptance of the logic of a world of absolute sexual license for both men and women, and projects a model for the way such a world might work.¹¹⁸ The aim of the moral pornographer, she writes, is the complete demystification of the flesh, in which pornography is a way of critiquing the relations between the sexes. Novels like *Philosophie dans le boudoir* abandon the fantasy world, and firmly place elicited acts in a real world; the orgies that occur in Madame de Saint-Ange's boudoir are sprinkled with long harangues that Sade consciously links to contemporary events. By doing so, Carter argues, Sade turns away

¹¹⁸ Carter, 19.

from the traditional pornographic technique of rendering men and women into probes and holes, and instead explores the explicit nature of the social relations between them, thus performing a critique of those relations.

Sade did invent his own uses for pornography, employing it as only an initial step toward excess, repetition, and rupture, in order to legitimate deviant sexual or immoral practices. But to dub him a moral pornographer, bent on placing pornography in the service of women, is to ignore the fact that Sade sought to liberate women so that all woman would be completely accessible to all men. Sade declares, “All men therefore have an equal right of enjoyment of all women; therefore, there is no man who, in keeping with natural law, may lay claim to a unique and personal right over a woman.”¹¹⁹ Thus, while no single man may tyrannize over one woman, all men may tyrannize over all women.

Carter fails to address the metaphorical foundation of Sade’s prose that links the figure of woman, and especially mother, with the Rousseauian construct of Republican patriotism.¹²⁰ In the initial stages of the Revolution, when Sade was completing *La Philosophie dans le boudoir*, woman had become a site for Republican patriotic investment. Hunt’s description of the family romance of the French Revolution places the nation within the bosom of a loving mother, who takes the place of the debauched

¹¹⁹ Sade, *Philosophy in the Bedroom*, 319.

¹²⁰ Joan B. Landes, “Republican Citizenship and Heterosocial Desire: Concepts of Masculinity in Revolutionary France,” *Masculinities in Politics and War: Gendering Modern History*, ed. Stefan Dudink, Karen Hagemann and John Tosh (New York: Manchester University Press, 2004), 104.

Queen Marie-Antoinette.¹²¹ The symbolic gestures performed by and against women in Sade's pornographic literature are thus a direct comment on these idealizations.

Pierre Klossowski takes up this argument by looking at what thinking and writing, as opposed to feeling and acting meant for Sade.¹²² Klossowski sees Sade's work as evidence of an important transition between the sound conscience of 18th century enlightened man to the atheistic philosopher of nature. The social man's sole activity is feeling and acting; his passions are directly translated into action. The philosopher is a new figure in pre-Revolutionary France, and has the sole occupation of thinking and writing, finding no place for passion in the ordered realm of reason. Sade, according to Klossowski, is a philosopher-villain, who disguises his passion as thought, thinking through and describing his most virulent passions in abstraction.¹²³

By choosing such a perversely licentious interpretation of human nature, Sade puts universal human reason at risk. In demeaning reason by comparison to sensuous nature, Sade was engaging in a direct act of transgression. He believes that the psychic regression that had occurred during the Revolutions marked a period of collective incubation, where the presence of public transgression plunged the libertine mind into euphoria.¹²⁴ Klossowski argues that this intellectual transgression, which results from

¹²¹ Hunt, 122.

¹²² Pierre Klossowski, "Sade, or the Philosopher Villain," *Sade and the Narrative of Transgression*, ed. David B. Allison, Mark S. Roberts, Allen S. Weiss (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 33.

¹²³ Sade no doubt had plenty of experience in what would have been considered deviant sexual behavior of the time, however, owing to his frequent comments that much of the most heinous sexual content could not have actually happened (either due to his incarceration or otherwise), it is safe to say that the bulk of his writing came purely from the imagination.

¹²⁴ Klossowski, *Sade, My Neighbor*, trans. Alphonso Lingis (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1991), 48.

reading Sade's pornographic literature, is akin to the general insurrection of the mind that was occurring during the period of the French Revolution.¹²⁵ According to Klossowski, Sade's writing is perhaps one of the most authentic reflections of the Revolutionary psyche available to historians.

Thus, *La Philosophie dans le boudoir* and Sade's other pornographic novels can be useful in gaining a general frame of reference for the shift in the psychological atmosphere of post-Revolutionary Paris. However, as Philippe Roger points out, Sade's target was the individual, rather than society as a whole. He frequently introduced his novels by instructing his readers to take what they found useful, and leave the rest. Roger argues that by proposing politics as a choice, which his readers could make according to reason or libido, Sade's novels had a more positive impact on political discourse than negative denunciation could have had.¹²⁶ By using such a method, Sade sabotages the basic assumption of Western political reflection, which regards the city, and not the individual, as the cornerstone of its theory. In essence, Sade fictionalized his ideology in order to draw upon the extreme images that would shock his readers into attention, and framed them ambiguously in order to oblige individuals to draw their own conclusions. In this way, Sade is a political minimalist, distrusting any system that privileges the society over the individual. After all,

to seek to impose universal laws would be a palpable absurdity: such a proceeding would be as ridiculous as that of the general who would have all his soldiers dressed in a uniform of the same size; it is a terrible injustice to require that men of unlike character all be ruled by the same law: what is good for one is not at all good for another.¹²⁷

¹²⁵ Klossowski, "The Philosopher Villain", 38.

¹²⁶ Roger, 80.

¹²⁷ Sade, *Philosophy in the Bedroom*, 310.

Roger completes his analysis of Sade by adding historical pessimism to political minimalism. Sade's position with regard to the significance of history is quite different from the popular philosophers of the time. Sade shared their disdain for history and historians, believing both to be an impediment to imagining a better tomorrow, but makes historians responsible for the atrocities they record. The flat, repetitious annals of historical writing lack any dramatic interest for Sade, and he refuses to draw any historical lessons from such pursuits. Instead, Sade sees it as the absolute right, indeed the duty, for the novelist to rewrite history, thus instilling more dramatic or moral sense into it.¹²⁸ Could it be, then, that the inclusion of "Yet Another Effort, Frenchmen, If You Would Become Republicans," within the novel is simply Sade's effort to rewrite the history of the French Revolution in his own way? Sade's radicalization of anti-clerical and politically subversive pornography obliterates the natural constraints of earlier works such as *Thérèse philosophe*, so that the underpinnings of eighteenth-century thought are pitted through parody against themselves.

SECTION THREE: History and Fiction

A Pitiless Mirror

In "Reflections on the Novel," a discursive essay in reply to the critic Villeterque, who had published a violent attack of *Les Crimes de l'Amour* in 1800, Sade reveals his comprehensive knowledge of the history of European fiction from the Greek romances

¹²⁸ Roger, 91.

through Boccaccio, Cervantes, Marivaux, Richardson and Fielding to Monk Lewis.¹²⁹

Through an examination of earlier fiction, Sade lays a foundation of principles for contemporary writers, all of which he nonetheless has more or less violated. During his incarceration, Sade had become a voracious reader and student of literature both past and present, leading most of his early biographers to suppose his career as a writer was the result.¹³⁰

By 1800, he had written several novels, collections of essays and short stories, and the odd political pamphlet. Sade's assumption that his experience as a writer, even though most of his work was necessarily written anonymously, made him a suitable expert on the subject in fact troubled his readers, who responded vigorously to his attacks on contemporary writers, accusing Sade of disingenuousness in as much as he himself was suspected of being among the ranks of pornographic authors. He defended himself against critics, all the while playing the conscientious *citoyen*, insisting that he had no desire to make vice attractive, and vowed, "Never again, never shall I portray crime other than clothed in the colors of hell: I wish people to see crime laid bare, I want them to fear it and detest it, and I know no other way to achieve this end than to paint it in all its horror."¹³¹ Sade disguised himself as a moralist to confound the moralizing masses, concealing the *marquis* beneath the *citoyen*.

¹²⁹ Sade, "Reflections on the Novel," *The 120 Days of Sodom*, 97.

¹³⁰ Namely Maurice Heine and Gilbert Lely. Maurice Lever disagrees, and believes that writing was always the ultimate goal for Sade, and that he had been doing it since childhood.

¹³¹ Sade, "Reflections on the Novel," 116. Sade is defending his novel *Aline et Valcour*, which he published in his own name. Although widely rumored to be the author of *Justine* and *Juliette* (he was never suspected of *La Philosophie dans la boudoir* in public discourse), he virulently denies any association to immoral literature.

Sade ostensibly used this essay to instruct: the novelist must not depart from what is probable; he must not interrupt his story with incidents that are either too frequent or not properly related to the subject; it should never be the author who moralizes but always one of the characters in his novel, and that he ought not even then to be made to except when he is forced to by circumstances.¹³² But more importantly, Sade asks the question, of what use are novels?

Of what use, indeed! Hypocritical and perverse men, for you alone ask this ridiculous question: they are useful in portraying you as you are, proud creatures who wish to elude the painter's brush, since you fear the results, for the novel is – if 'tis possible to express oneself thuswise – the representation of secular customs, and is therefore, for the philosopher who wishes to understand man, as essential as is the knowledge of history.¹³³

This statement, perhaps more than any other of the thousands of personal opinions expressed by Sade during the course of his life, provides insight into why Sade chose to present his ideology in the form of fictional narrative. Sade believed that fiction was more important, more useful, and more authentic than history could ever be, since, “history only depicts man when he reveals himself publicly, and then, ‘tis no longer he: ambition, pride cover his brow with a mask which portrays for us naught but these two passions, and not the man.”¹³⁴ It is no wonder then, that Sade's own public persona, that of *citoyen* Sade, varied so greatly from his private personality, the divine *marquis*.

The pitiless mirror that Sade held up not only reflects, but also inverts. Sade used philosophical reasoning to undermine philosophy itself, just as he uses acts of sacrilege to

¹³² Edmund Wilson, *The Bit Between the Teeth: A Literary Chronicle of 1950-1965*, (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1965), 206.

¹³³ Sade, “Reflections on the Novel,” *The 120 Days of Sodom*, 109.

¹³⁴ Sade, “Reflections on the Novel,” 109.

underscore his atheism, a tactic that Simone de Beauvoir claimed escaped banality only to flounder in incoherence.¹³⁵ But there was a method to this madness. Sade produced texts that were saturated in blood and sex, two elements that have deep historic metaphorical significance. By making blood and sex run gratuitously through his novels, related to nothing else outside of themselves, Sade undermined the metaphorical trick that upholds the entire rhetorical machinery of literature.¹³⁶ The demetaphorization of blood and sex materialized as the domestication of the horrific, a socialization of the intolerable, and gave concrete expression to the deepest fears of his contemporaries who struggled to survive in the chaos of the times. Such an endeavor was realized through pornography, in what Marcel Hénaff calls an encyclopedia of excess that would be utterly ludicrous to read literally.¹³⁷ Thus, standing in front of her own “delicious niche” (a wall of mirrors), Madame St. Ange instructs:

By repeating our attitudes and postures in a thousand different ways, they infinitely multiply those same pleasures for the persons seated here upon this ottoman. Thus everything is visible, no part of the body can remain hidden: everything must be seen; these images are so many groups disposed around those enchained in love, so many delicious tableaux wherewith lewdness waxes drunk and which soon drive it to its climax.¹³⁸

Political Ideology

The historical experience of an entire generation was paraphrased in Sade’s pornographic fiction as underbelly of the Revolution with its consequences stripped and exposed for all to see. Because he had no cultural experience with the sentimentalized

¹³⁵ Beauvoir, 4.

¹³⁶ Marcel Hénaff, *Sade: The Invention of the Libertine Body*, trans. By Xavier Callahan (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999), 5.

¹³⁷ *Ibid*, 60.

¹³⁸ Sade, *Philosophy in the Bedroom*, 203.

atmosphere leading up to the Revolution, Sade was uniquely suited to see it for what it really was. The political hysteria that followed the fall of the Bastille had a momentum that quickly transformed dissent and rebellion into bloodlust and terror. For Sade—whose years of confinement reappeared in his later writing as creative images of cells, fortresses and convents—the horror that surrounded imprisonment also exercised an irresistible attraction.¹³⁹ Similarly, the men and women who lived through the Terror became accustomed to the gore of the guillotine, foolishly assuming that their lusty support of such measures would make them less likely to become one of its victims. In this way, Sade's work is uniquely suited to help us understand the emotional timbre of the French Revolution.

In *La Philosophie dans le boudoir*, Sade used every weapon in his literary arsenal to explore every aspect of the collision of *citoyen* and *marquis*, blood and sex, pain and pleasure. The orgies, interlaced with political harangues, serve to link social or political power to erotic or sexual power.¹⁴⁰ Sade's sexual caricatures, much like the political caricatures rife in Paris during the years before and after 1789, used gender to signify relationships of power. In this way, the Republican Dolmancé is the instructor to the aristocratic Eugénie, who must undergo a trial by fire in order to be purged of ignorance, and bridge the gap between the private and public self. Her trajectory subverts Rousseau, who believed virtue could only be maintained if women remained in the private sphere. For Rousseau, public virtue was virile, which required the violent rejection of aristocratic

¹³⁹ Michel Foucault, *Madness and Civilization*, trans. Richard Howard (New York: Vintage Books, 1965), 208.

¹⁴⁰ Lucienne Frappier-Mazur, "The Social Body: Disorder and Ritual in Sade's *Story of Juliette*," *Eroticism and the Body Politic*, ed. Lynn Hunt (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1991), 140.

degeneracy and any intrusion of the feminine into the public sphere.¹⁴¹ Sade consciously gave women the same sexual license of men, not to liberate them as equal agents, but in order to reveal a system he found to be absurd. He thus puts a dildo into the hands of young Eugénie, so that she will penetrate her mother, thereby severing the bond between the individual and the institutions of the family and the political system built upon it.

The rejection of patriarchy was a vital tenant of French Republican doctrine, and one that Sade shared. However, the prescribed replacement of the royal patriarch with a governing brotherhood of equal men, representative of all men, is unacceptable to him. Sade's point is, "not at all to love one's brethren as oneself, since that is in defiance of all the laws of Nature, and since hers is the sole vice which must direct all the actions in life."¹⁴² Instead, Sade envisioned free individuals, to which "humanity, fraternity, and benevolence must prescribe our reciprocal obligations, and let us individually fulfill them with the simple degree of energy Nature has given us to that end."¹⁴³ Sade tolerated neither family nor friend to constrain his ideal individual, but insisted that the basic instincts provided by Nature were sufficient, providing the necessary cohesive element to his philosophy that prevented it from dissolving into anarchy. An insistence upon a nation of free agents pursuing individual desires was thus fundamental of Sade's political ideology.

¹⁴¹ Lynn Hunt, "The Many Bodies of Marie Antoinette," *Eroticism and the Body Politic*, ed. Lynn Hunt (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1991), 126.

¹⁴² Sade, *Philosophy in the Bedroom*, 309.

¹⁴³ Sade, *Philosophy in the Bedroom*, 309.

Personal Philosophy

Many have speculated on the actual nature of Sade's personal philosophy. His apparently contradictory writing raises many questions. On one hand, much of his publicly acknowledged work reflects the *citoyen*, a respectable *homme de lettres*. On the other, Sade's pornographic novels reveal the *marquis*, a passionate nihilist who can only find identity in opposition. *La Philosophie dans le boudoir* provides a cipher that can be used to vet out Sade's personal ideology, and distinguish parody from earnest prose. He probably wrote the novel in several sections and at different points in his life, but the compilation, which occurred shortly after he was released from Picpus in 1794, was a concerted effort.

Sade's personal experiences deeply colored his political views: he had spent over thirteen years of his adult life in prison as a result of the King's prerogative (*le lettre de cachet*), had spent ten of those months at the foot of the guillotine, and had been forced to toe a constantly shifting Republican line. His summation and judgment of these experiences is revealed in, "Yet Another Effort, Frenchmen, If You Would Become Republicans." One sentence of this diatribe sums up the whole of Sade's materialist ideology: "Every principle is a judgment, every judgment the outcome of experience, and experience is only acquired by the exercise of the sense."¹⁴⁴ Therefore, in order to establish any kind of principle, be they individual or universal, one must judge them on the evidence of experience—experience that can only be acquired with the thorough and unflinching exercise of every natural desire.

¹⁴⁴ Sade, *Philosophy in the Bedroom*, 304.

In his fiction, Sade portrayed the psychosexual anxieties of the New Republican order, which he assumed were far more interesting and more faithful to the truth than that which history was likely to preserve.¹⁴⁵ He was ideally suited to such a task since he had spent the years prior to the Revolution in prison, quite isolated from much of the public shift in sentiment. The political ideology of the Terror had more than a merely institutional or political origin; William Reddy argues that it was also derived from the widespread popular sentimentalism, to which Sade may not have been exposed.¹⁴⁶ Sade's letters from prison most often concern themselves with the state of his health (he suffered from ocular degeneration, obesity, and horrible hemorrhoids), requests for goods and services to increase his personal comfort, fiery tirades directed at his wife and mother-in-law, and official petitions to have the *lettre de cachet* lifted.¹⁴⁷ Not once, in the five years preceding his release in 1790, does any of his surviving correspondence reflect the city's growing unrest. Renée-Pélagie was allowed to visit almost every week when Sade was incarcerated in the Bastille, but their conversations were closely monitored, as was Sade's reading material.

Thus, there is every reason to believe that Sade was largely unaffected by the political upheaval, and would not have experienced the same emotions as other Parisians by the time of his release. It could be that this segregation, combined with his own exceptional upbringing, sexual proclivity and piecemeal philosophy, made his voice unique in his own times. We have had to wait almost two centuries for it to re-emerge.

¹⁴⁵ Sade, "Reflections on the Novel," 110.

¹⁴⁶ Reddy, 180.

¹⁴⁷ Sade, *Letters from Prison*, 365-401.

The Historical Imagination

The relationship between history and fiction is reciprocal. *La Philosophie dans le boudoir* serves as the French Revolution's unconscious, yet powerfully erotic dream. We find the same laws governing fiction and dreams; displacement, condensation, and the paradoxical existence of opposites.¹⁴⁸ Fiction provides a venue for the contradictions and repressed elements of history to reverberate, distort, and come back to us louder than before.¹⁴⁹ Sade's ideology combined what he regarded as real (or had been experienced), with a series of culturally and symbolic abstractions.

Thus, if we read *La Philosophie dans le boudoir* as a reflection of the times it may provide the historian with useful evidence about the limits of the conceivable at that time. In both the erotic and historical imagination, narratives of fact, experience and fantasy construct the human experience. Just as erotic fantasy can become a source of real sexual arousal and pleasure, historical narratives have constituted reality for individuals and nations alike.¹⁵⁰ Sade's worldview can be acknowledged in historical narration once the reader acknowledges the reciprocal relationship between history and fiction. The dissolution of the nuclear family, a libertarian political platform, and a final and irrevocable separation between church and state was Sade's deeply-felt agenda. Sade engaged in extreme parodic fiction in order to make thinkable a world that, by 1795, seemed bent on re-establishing patriarchy and traditional authority. Le Chevalier's reluctant participation in the defilement of Madame de Misticval is an example of this technique: "Well, let's comply with it, since there seems no way of persuading this

¹⁴⁸ Hénaff, 12.

¹⁴⁹ Ibid, 13.

¹⁵⁰ Vernon A. Rosario, *The Erotic Imagination: French Histories of Perversity* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 12.

scoundrel that all he is having us do is appalling.”¹⁵¹ In the direct wake of Robespierre’s bloody path, the Chevalier’s words are both ironic and hauntingly indicative of the mingled horror and complacency that greeted the Terror, and which Sade feared would be lost if Republican militancy waned. Thus, Eugénie’s mother (representing the crown) had to be physically and symbolically separated from her piety (representing the church), first with the sexual molestation by her daughter, and then by inescapable disease and ultimate death. The fact that these crimes are seen by the perpetrators (excluding Le Chevalier) as perfectly acceptable and, in fact, mandated by nature, underscores Sade’s argument that, “It is the government that makes the man.”¹⁵²

The sexed body became the only canvas upon which Sade could paint his portrait of human nature. In a world where, “there was not a man alive who had not experienced in the short span of four or five years more misfortunes than the most celebrated novelist could portray in a century,” Sade called upon the aid of hell itself to compose what he saw as, “works of interest.”¹⁵³ The choice of fiction for the subsequent fictionalization of his personal ideology, was as natural to Sade as it was to Rousseau and Voltaire during the Enlightenment, and to Camus and Sartre two hundred years later.

Sade’s fiction does not attempt to merely invoke the imaginary realm of fantasy and the ideal satisfaction of desire. Rather, he is invoking what Marcel Hénaff calls the imaginable, that is, the realm of those possibilities that can be classified within discourse.¹⁵⁴ When absolute freedom becomes imaginable in the Sadian world, it is possible for the individual, without renouncing his individuality, to “shatter the links and

¹⁵¹ Sade, *Philosophy in the Bedroom*, 361.

¹⁵² *Ibid*, 338.

¹⁵³ Sade, “Reflections on the Novel,” 109.

¹⁵⁴ Hénaff, 68.

shackles of ignorance and stupidity.”¹⁵⁵ It is the triumph of the inner world over the external and proves that the will to articulate one’s thoughts can overcome the trials of speaking them.

What Fools Call Crime

The radical and anti-institutional message of the political tract described as, “Yet Another Effort,” nestled within the sex and violence of *La Philosophie dans le boudoir*, is the apotheosis of Sade’s revolutionary philosophy. In it, Sade lays out a plan that replaces patriarchy with a masculine utopia, the laws of the state with the laws of nature, and the bonds of society with those of individual egos. For Sade, the unthinkable act was always preferable to the monotonous and lackluster charms of virtue.

Will you protest the greater usefulness of this or that, is it for us to scan Nature’s laws, ours to determine whether, vice being just as necessary to Nature as is virtue, she perhaps does not implant in us, in equal quantity, the penchant for one or the other, depending on her respective needs?¹⁵⁶

Sade’s morality, says Maurice Blanchot, “is founded on absolute solitude as a first given fact.”¹⁵⁷ Sade’s unique understanding of the sexual imagination, sharpened as it was by years of imprisonment, emphasized a system in which inherent self-interest was key. In an effort to understand human nature, Sade made his heroes uniquely self-centered, subject to no restraints of any kind. In this, Sade was convinced he had made a decisive discovery in the field of knowledge. If “what fools call crime” leads a man to

¹⁵⁵ Sade, *Philosophy in the Bedroom*, 239.

¹⁵⁶ Sade, *The 120 Days of Sodom*, 197.

¹⁵⁷ Maurice Blanchot, *Lautréamont and Sade* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2004), 120.

the greatest sensual satisfactions, the fulfillment of the most powerful desires, what could be more important than to deny that solidarity which opposes crime and prevents the enjoyment of its fruits?¹⁵⁸ In his address “to Libertines” in the introduction of *La Philosophie dans le boudoir*, Sade asks them to be at last convinced,

it is only by exploring and enlarging the sphere of his tastes and whims, it is only by sacrificing everything to the senses' pleasure that this individual, who never asked to be cast into this universe of woe, that this poor creature who goes under the name of Man, maybe be able to sow a smattering of roses atop the thorny path of life.¹⁵⁹

CONCLUSION

The man made by Sade's idyllic government has no master, and is the master of none. This allows for the collision of the *citoyen* and the *marquis*, to result in a politico-philosophical sundry of sex, blood, and liberty, that co-mingles the public and the private in one horrible unified vision. The fictionalization of Sadian Ideology in *La Philosophie dans le boudoir* reflects not only the birth pangs of a violent revolution, but also reveals the powerful nexus between history and fiction.

Sade addressed his work to “people capable of understanding me, and these people will read me without danger.”¹⁶⁰ The democratization of sex and transgression within his pornographic fiction was a kind of intellectual construct that was misunderstood in his own time. Much of the condemnation heaped on Sade comes from the belief that he acted out his fictional horrors, which we know was unlikely. If Sade was guilty of violence, it was that of language, an offense acted out upon the page—and

¹⁵⁸ Sade, *Philosophy in the Bedroom*, 367.

¹⁵⁹ *Ibid*, 185.

¹⁶⁰ Lawrence W. Lynch, *The Marquis de Sade* (Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1984), 124.

one he considered to be the perfect crime. In a key passage in *Juliette*, his first published work, Clairwil offers her definition of such a crime:

I would like, said Clairwil, to find a crime whose everlasting effect would continue to act, even when I would no longer be acting, so that there would not be one single moment in my life, even when asleep, during which I would not be the cause of some disturbance, and this disturbance could extend to the point of causing general corruption or so formal a disruption that its effect would be prolonged beyond the limit of my life.¹⁶¹

Though he wouldn't live to see it, the disturbance created by Sade's licentious literature had the desired effect. But more importantly, it recorded a greater disturbance that can be read between the lines—the birth of the modern era. Sade was no historian, and his fiction in no way presented a neutral description of the facts. Stepping onto the streets of Paris in 1790, he absorbed the fears, desperation, antipathy, and hope of a people attempting to redefine themselves, and recast it through a grisly, yet unblemished lens. Within a unique historical moment where anything was possible, Sade created a whole new world for his illuminated heroes, one in which the revolutionary dream was inverted. What Sade's fiction provides that history cannot is a view into the deepest recesses of human imagination, where future revolutions are waiting to occur.

¹⁶¹ Sade, excerpted in Lynch, 128.

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