

LITERARY ROGUES

The Vice Lord

“In order to know virtue, we must first acquaint
ourselves with vice.”

—THE MARQUIS DE SADE

By the time the **Marquis de Sade** (1740–1814) was born in Paris, exactly three hundred years had passed since Johannes Gutenberg revolutionized the world by designing the first European printing press using movable type. Prior to Gutenberg’s invention, books had been painstakingly copied by hand—a copy of the Holy Bible, for instance, could take a monastery scribe a year or more to produce—and thus books were primarily of a religious and educational nature, intended for the clergy and the upper classes. Adoption of Gutenberg’s printing methods was swift, expanding readership to all walks of life. While nearly 200 million copies of books were printed by the end of the sixteenth century, government regulation and church censorship continued to restrict the diversity of the marketplace;

early bestseller lists were dominated by the Holy Bible and religious books by authors such as the Catholic priest Erasmus.

Fighting the free flow of information was an exhausting battle, however, and officials eventually began to ease restrictions. During the eighteenth century, the variety of reading material available exploded, and new forms such as novels and journalism emerged. The real promise of the Gutenberg revolution was finally coming to fruition. Nothing, however, could have prepared readers for what the Marquis de Sade was about to unleash upon them. As French philosopher Albert Camus wrote, "Contemporary history and tragedy really begin with him."

When he was four years old, the Marquis de Sade (born Donatien Alphonse François) found himself exiled for the first time. He had attacked a playmate in a dispute over a toy, raining down blows upon the older boy's head until they were separated. The child was a royal prince, and although aristocratic blood flowed through Sade's veins, assaulting a member of the ruling family was an inexcusable gaffe.

His father, the Comte de Sade, was a French diplomat who had already disgraced the family name with his own quarrelsome misconduct. Sensing that the apple had not fallen far from the tree, the comte sent Sade away to live with his paternal grandmother to avoid any further embarrassment to the family name. The comte's mother pampered her grandson, so the child was soon shuffled into the care of his forty-year-old uncle, the Abbé de Sade.

A cleric and scholar, the abbé appeared at first glance to be just what the young boy needed to be brought into line.

Appearances were deceiving. As it turns out, the abbé was either the coolest or the creepiest uncle in history. He lived somewhat unconventionally for a cleric, with two mistresses (a mother-daughter pair) under his roof. He frequented prostitutes, meticulously curated an extensive pornography collection, and palled around with the French philosopher Voltaire.

For the next five years, the young marquis explored the subterranean depths of his uncle's castle, where shackles hung from dungeon walls. Sade also had unlimited access to the abbé's impressive library (sample titles: *History of the Flagellants*, *The Nun in the Nightdress*, *John the Fucker Debauched*). When Sade returned to Paris at the age of ten, the young lad may very well have carried a virtual catalog of wicked acts with him in his head.

In autumn 1750, Sade began attending the Collège Louis-le-Grand, a Jesuit grammar school where the faculty were known to whip and sodomize students with impunity. Sade attended school for only a few years, but it was long enough for him to pick up more wicked knowledge for his arsenal.

Sade left school at the age of fourteen for the military. Despite seeing action during the Seven Years' War, Sade was dismissed in a massive troop reduction following the war's end in February 1763. He was now a twenty-two-year-old living on his own in Paris. With money to burn, Sade went wild with abandon in the Parisian theaters and brothels, much to his father's dismay.

The Marquis de Sade's behavior should not have come as a surprise to the comte: the boy was only following in his old man's footsteps. "Forgive my mischief," Sade wrote in a letter. "I am taking up the family spirit, and if I have

anything to reproach myself for, it is to have had the misfortune of being born into it. I should think myself almost virtuous if by the grace of God I were to take up only a portion of the family's evils."

A family friend, Madame de Raimond, cautioned the comte not to stress over the lad's behavior. "Sometimes we must sin in order to find our way back to virtue," she wrote. "The age of passion is terrible to get through. I am very pleased that he does not suffer from the passion of gambling." Little did she know that Sade was already an avid gambler. Ironically, gambling was the least destructive of his vices.

Meanwhile, Sade's father had been searching for a wife for the marquis. The appropriate candidate would come from a wealthy family who would complement the noble lineage of the Sades. After several false positives, the comte identified a suitable daughter-in-law: Renée-Pélagie de Montreuil, the progeny of a wealthy judge.

The young marquis, however, had plans of his own. After falling in and out of love with several different women, he set his sights on marrying Mademoiselle Laure-Victoire de Lauris, a beautiful twenty-two-year-old courtesan. He told his father about his plans, including the salacious detail that he was being treated for a venereal disease. The comte ordered his son to forget about Lauris and return to their family estate as soon as he had a clean bill of health. "M. de Sade's escapades might still put an end to [the marriage with Renée-Pélagie]. I won't be sure of anything until I see them at the altar," the Comte wrote.

On May 1, 1763, the Sade and Montreuil families met in

Versailles. The king even made an appearance, lending his royal signature to the marriage contract. Everyone was there. Except . . . wait. *Where was the groom?*

Sade had never left Paris. After breaking up with Lauris, he was now trying to reconcile with her. Since the missing groom was also treating his venereal disease, the comte told the Montreuil family a version of the truth: Sade was sick. Rumors flew, however, and Montreuil's family learned the truth about the groom's absence. Madame la Présidente, the powerful matriarch of the Montreuil family, took the news in stride: things would change after the wedding, she reasoned. As long as Sade showed up for the actual ceremony on May 15, she wouldn't worry.

After his reunion with Lauris failed, Sade finally accepted his fate. He had been spending money quite flagrantly, and the wedding was his best opportunity to keep living the life he was accustomed to—he literally could not afford to go against his father's wishes. Sade arrived in Avignon just in time to sign the marriage contract and stand on the altar for the religious ceremony. Everyone breathed a sigh of relief.

Madame la Présidente was sufficiently impressed with Sade's conduct in person, and wrote to the abbé, "Your nephew could not be more charming or desirable as a son-in-law, with that genial intelligence of his and that tone of good education that your care seems to have instilled in him." The abbé no doubt smirked at the implication he had instilled any sense of discipline in his nephew.

The Montreuil family agreed to provide the newlyweds with accommodations and a handsome yearly stipend, and Sade

grudgingly settled into the Montreuil Paris home following the wedding. For the man who called wedlock “the most appalling, the most loathsome of all the bonds humankind has devised for its own discomfort and degradation,” marriage was a fate worse than death. The newlywed marquis bought as much freedom as he could afford, renting separate residences in Paris, Arcueil, and Versailles for the sole purpose of continuing his extracurricular sexual activities.

That October, Sade’s carefully compartmentalized lives nearly collided when he was arrested by authorities for “mistreating” a prostitute. Sade had forced the woman to drink his semen in a chalice, asked her to denounce God, and then threatened to shoot her—with two pistols, no less. Next, he masturbated with an ivory crucifix and read blasphemous poetry to her (either his own or from an unknown book). It was a performance art piece for the ages.

Sade was imprisoned for fifteen days while investigators contemplated what to do with him. Based on interviews with other prostitutes, authorities determined that the incident was not an isolated one. They recommended severe punishment for the miscreant.

The Comte de Sade petitioned the king for a pardon, which was granted (much to the chagrin of local authorities). La Présidente learned of the ordeal, but kept her daughter in the dark as Renée-Pélagie was already three months pregnant with Sade’s child.

Fortunately for the marquis, life soon returned to normal. Although his wife’s first pregnancy ended in miscarriage, she gave birth to two sons and one daughter (“dreadful brats”)

between 1767 and 1771. Sade continued to visit prostitutes to satisfy his darker desires, but undoubtedly inflicted some measure of abuse upon his wife. At some point, Renée-Pélagie learned of her husband's indiscretions but said nothing.

Sade's father passed away in 1767, and was thereby saved from watching his son desecrate the family name any further. He died not a moment too soon, because the Marquis de Sade was once again arrested on charges of "mistreating" a prostitute following an incident on Easter Sunday in 1768. This time, Sade was exiled from Paris; had it not been for his mother-in-law's behind-the-scenes intervention on his behalf, he might very well have been executed. A prominent bookseller of the day wrote that it was "one more example that in our century even the most abominable crimes meet with impunity so long as those who commit them are fortunate enough to be noble, wealthy, or well-connected."

The marquis moved his base of operations to the Sade family castle in the French countryside. Allegations of sexual abuse, kidnapping, and poisoning of prostitutes followed him. Alongside these antics, he had an ongoing affair with his wife's sister, Anne-Prospère de Montreuil. His wife was rather blasé about her husband's behavior. She was devoutly religious and took her sworn duty to stand by her man seriously, even if her husband was a staunch atheist and serial philanderer.

In June 1772, Sade left for Marseilles for a few days to obtain a loan for an expensive, summer-long play festival he was in the midst of staging at his Lacoste estate. While they were in the city, Sade and his loyal manservant, Latour, decided to pick up some local prostitutes for entertainment. When procuring

the women for his master, Latour told them the marquis would ask them to eat anise candies “to make them fart and take the wind in his mouth.” While this certainly wasn’t a typical request, it seemed like an easy way to make money. Five prostitutes agreed to join them for their festivities.

At their rented third-floor apartment, the duo (Latour using the name “Monsieur le Marquis,” Sade calling himself “La-fleur”) whipped the women and then put on a show for them, taking turns sodomizing each other. The women were horrified. Only two of them were brave enough to eat the marquis’s candies, which, unbeknown to them, contained the aphrodisiac Spanish fly. Sade hoped the drug would get the women in the mood for more amorous activity. He couldn’t have been more wrong.

The women ingested too many of the candies and got sick; one woman began throwing up blood and had to be hospitalized. Sade, believing in error that she had died in the hospital, fled to Italy with Latour and his sister-in-law, Anne-Prospère. La Présidente refused to help him get out of his latest mess.

Madame de Sade bribed the prostitutes to drop their charges, but authorities were unwilling to let the fugitive off the hook so easily. Even though Sade and his band of merry misfits were still on the run, the prosecutor convicted them of sodomy, a crime punishable by death. The judge ordered them to make public confessions, after which Sade was to be decapitated and Latour hanged. Their bodies would then be burned. To add insult to injury, they were also fined forty livres (a pittance). Since they were not on hand to receive their sentences, effigies of the two men were burned in the town square.

In December, Sade was captured in Savoy, at the time a

sovereign region situated between Italy and France. (Anne-Prospère had long since returned to France.) At the behest of la Présidente, Sade was held captive at the imposing Fortress Miolans, a tenth-century castle known as the “Bastille of Savoy.” La Présidente feared the chaos that would erupt if her son-in-law ever returned to France, and holding him prisoner in Savoy was the only way she could see to keep the marquis out of further trouble.

His imprisonment would last less than five months. In April, while Sade and Latour were eating in the main dining room, they escaped through a window in the latrine—a wide-open window, without bars. This clearly led to a review of security measures at the prison.

Latour remained in exile, while Sade made his way back to France. To avoid being recognized, the marquis dressed in a priest’s frock. At one point, on a ferry that appeared in danger of sinking, other travelers threw themselves at Sade’s feet to make their last confessions.

Upon his return to France, Sade hid in plain sight at his Lacoste estate. The marquis kept a relatively low profile, which for him meant months-long orgies—often involving underage girls and boys, hired as maids and cooks. One girl ended up pregnant; another died following a short illness. At one point, an angry father showed up to liberate his daughter and fired a pistol point-blank at Sade’s chest. The gun misfired, and the marquis lived to sodomize another day. “I pass for the werewolf of these parts!” he wrote with delight in a letter. “Poor little chicks!”

In 1777, his mother-in-law lured him into Paris under the pretense that his mother was on her deathbed. (She had, in fact,

already passed away.) La Présidente alerted authorities that Sade was back within city limits, and they arrested him on the outstanding charges of poisoning and sodomy. La Présidente again argued with her daughter that what she was doing was in Sade's best interests: it was the only way Sade could appeal his previous conviction and clear his name, thus restoring respectability to their family.

Authorities staged a new trial. Sade's death sentence was reduced to a warning and a fine. Life could return to normal.

Alas, Sade's freedom was short-lived. A police inspector woke him in his prison cell on the day he was to be released and informed him the Parisian authorities didn't have the jurisdiction to dismiss the old charges, which had been reconfirmed by a royal order from the king—a move orchestrated by none other than la Présidente. She knew that the only way to keep her son-in-law out of trouble was to keep him locked up in perpetuity.

There was to be no escape or last-minute salvation this time. A new verdict was handed down: life in prison. The term would begin immediately.

With the years stretching out infinitely before him, Sade picked up a pen. If he could not act out his fantasies any longer, he would write them down. A prison doctor recommended that he avoid reading and writing to lessen the strain on his eyes, which were in very poor shape. He suggested Sade take up knitting instead. Based on the voluminous output of novels, short stories, and plays he wrote in prison, we can safely assume he had little time for knitting.

The marquis wrote many novels during his imprisonment, including *Justine, or Good Conduct Well Chastised*; *The 120 Days of Sodom*; and *Philosophy in the Bedroom*. While he may have written fiction before this date, he never made any mention of it. Authorship was considered an ignoble profession for a gentleman of the Marquis de Sade's standing (ironic, considering his other passions). It was only when he was stripped of his nobility and freedom that he became the man of letters we know him as today. Sade "went into prison a man; he came out a writer," French philosopher Simone de Beauvoir wrote.

Renée-Pélagie, whom he called "the fresh pork of my thoughts" (no offense intended, since pork was one of his favorite meals), continued to support her husband while raising their children alone. She took him at his word when he told her, "Imperious, angry, furious, extreme in all things, with a disturbance in the moral imagination unlike any the world has ever known—there you have me in a nutshell: and one more thing, kill me or take me as I am, because I will not change." She went so far as to sell her own silver shoe buckles to keep the marquis well dressed and in supply of the gigantic wooden dildos he used to satisfy himself in prison.

Improbably, a political sea change in France led to the release of prisoners held under royal decrees. On Good Friday in 1790, after twelve years behind bars, Sade was set free.

Following his release, he attempted to bury the aristocratic playboy image by rebranding himself as a playwright. Unfortunately, he had little success staging his own plays. He had more luck with his novels—France was in the midst of *la foutromanie* ("fuckomania"), a time when erotic works

were in great demand, and many of his books went through multiple editions.

Sade's erotic books (published anonymously) were violent, subversive, and almost unusable as "one-handed reads." As could be expected based on his past behavior, no subject was off limits in Sade's work: sexual violence, suffering, torture, rape, sodomy, incest, pedophilia, necrophilia, bestiality, and cannibalism were among the topics he explored. Sade's wish for *The 120 Days of Sodom*, for example, was to pen "the most impure tale that has ever been written since the world exists."

Although he had committed a great number of atrocities, Sade's fantasies were just that: fantasies. "I have imagined everything conceivable, but I certainly have not done all that I have imagined, and I certainly never shall," he wrote to his wife. He reserved his most outrageous acts for his novels. "Truth titillates the imagination far less than fiction," he once said.

Although his books sold well, Sade was not a critical darling. *Petites-Affiches*, in 1791, advised young people to avoid *Justine*. "Mature men, read it to see how far one can go in derangement of the human imagination," the journal wrote. "But throw it into the fire immediately thereafter. This is advice you will give yourself if you have the strength to read it in its entirety."

In 1799, Napoleon Bonaparte assumed leadership of France. He was determined to clean up the country, starting with the plague of immorality that besieged it. In 1801, government officials ordered the arrest of the author of the "pornographic" novel *Juliette*. Sade, who was at his publisher's office making corrections to the manuscript when the police arrived, was easily identified

as the author. The publisher was let go after twenty-four hours when he turned over the location of the warehouse where the books were stored. Authorities destroyed every copy of the book they could get their hands on.

The imprisoned marquis pleaded for a swift trial. "Either I am or I am not the author of the book that is imputed to me. If I am convicted, I wish to endure my punishment. But if not, I want to be free," he wrote to the Minister of Justice. Authorities, wishing to avoid a public scandal, simply jailed the Marquis de Sade permanently. No trial would be forthcoming.

After two years spent in a succession of prisons, Sade was declared ill with "sexual obsession" and transferred to Charenton, an asylum for the insane. After he was safely set up at Charenton, his wife legally separated from him. She had, at long last, finally reached her breaking point.

The asylum's unconventional director, the Abbé de Coulmier, allowed Sade to write. Sade even staged plays at Charenton, using inmates as actors. The public was invited to the performances, and for a time it became fashionable in Parisian circles to attend. Coulmier's approach to rehabilitation and therapy was controversial to say the least, and French police eventually put an end to the plays. And, if he had once thought marriage was a fate worse than death, Sade was about to face a nightmare many times worse: police ordered him to be stripped of his quills and paper and placed into solitary confinement. Although he eventually recovered them, he lived in constant fear that his equipment and work could be confiscated at any moment.

In 1814, the marquis died in prison of natural causes. His family burned all of his unpublished manuscripts. If they

wished to prevent the Marquis de Sade from further tarnishing the family name, they were unsuccessful: the word *sadisme*, meaning “to derive pleasure, especially sexual gratification, from inflicting pain, suffering, and humiliation on others,” entered the French language, and later begat the English word “sadism” and its many derivatives. As Sade once wrote to his son, “Do not be sorry to see your name live on in immortality. My works are bringing it about, and your virtues, though preferable to my works, would never do that.”