

# A comment on *Quills* and the Marquis de Sade

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The review of *Quills* was superb. I myself left the movie feeling that an opportunity had been completely squandered—to present a serious artistic work based on the historical de Sade. The cartoon character of Sade we find in the movie, as well as the other cartoon characters played off him, are in the final analysis trivial and uninteresting. If Mr. Wright had some historical understanding he would have realized that “a literal, biographical account of Sade's life” would have had far more depth than the adolescent tale he has concocted.

The silly “theme” of the movie, that the repressed sexuality of the Abbé, having no outlet, turns him into a monster, whereas the unbounded eroticism of the libertine, despite extreme repression applied externally, transforms him into a Christ-like martyr, hardly rises above the level of a child's morality tale. And what can one say about the dangling subplots whose only reason for existence is their need to titillate the mass market? The young wife who runs off with the architect adds absolutely nothing to the story or our understanding of her cruel husband. There is a brief introduction of de Sade's wife bringing her husband some sexual aids (this bit is based on biographical facts) which simply goes nowhere. She confesses her disgust and fascination with her husband, and then disappears from the scene, never to be heard from again.

Imagine what could have been done with this subject. First you have the real drama of the French Revolution, and the great liberating effect of this world historical event as well as the terror with which it is conjoined. Another theme worthy of a great artistic work is the inner decay of the aristocracy of the ancient regime that is personified in a contradictory manner by de Sade himself. This motif was taken up by Diderot in his masterful *Rameau's Nephew* with its unforgettable portrait of the cynical bohemian who first announces the loss of faith of pre-revolutionary French society in its own viability.

The same theme is later reworked from a philosophical standpoint by Hegel in his *Phenomenology of Spirit*. Another subject worthy of depiction is the attitude of post-revolutionary Europe to those who did not fit into society,

the insane or the extreme asocial dissidents such as de Sade. Did the liberating impulses of the revolution extend its magnanimity to those most reviled and forgotten, those confined in the asylums? This is one of the issues that Michel Foucault addresses in his *Madness and Civilization*. Whether one is sympathetic to Foucault or not, at least we can say that he asked some of the right questions. We cannot say the same about the creators of *Quills*. It is not possible to even conceive of these topics in any meaningful sense if you start from the topsy-turvy view of the French Revolution that the makers of this movie exhibit. Their artistic failure is directly attributable to their inability to formulate a coherent historical understanding of their subject.

It was completely appropriate for you to bring up the rehabilitation of de Sade by Georges Bataille and Simone de Beauvoir. More recently, de Sade has had a resurgence of popularity among postmodernists such as the previously mentioned Foucault and Jacques Lacan. The historical assessment made of de Sade has ranged from that of his scandalized contemporaries, who considered him the devil incarnate, to that of the poet Apollinaire, who called him “the freest spirit who ever lived.” Some recent critics have interpreted de Sade's work as an example of Swiftian parody. Supposedly, he was exposing the absurdities of a certain kind of philosophy of hedonism by taking it to its extreme. This interpretation seems rather suspect in view of the fact that de Sade actually lived the life he espoused in his novels whenever he was free to do so.

The clearest formulation of de Sade's philosophy appears in his *Philosophy in the Bedroom*. This work features a philosophical interlude in the middle of the usual Sadean orgy. All of a sudden, the proceedings are interrupted, for the next 60 pages, by a philosophical dialogue discussing the genesis of social good and evil. This is certainly one of the most remarkable works in the entire history of philosophy. What we find here is a philosophical defense, argued in the language of the Enlightenment, but not of course, in the spirit of the Enlightenment, that presents a justification for incest, rape, murder and cruelty. I know of nothing remotely similar in the entire corpus of Western philosophy. This

philosophical discourse, entitled “Yet Another Effort Frenchmen, if You Would Become Republicans,” was supposed to have been separately published and circulated as a republican political tract during the 1848 revolution. It was surely one of the most peculiar political tracts ever published, containing the following defense of murder as a legitimate civil activity used to weed out the weaker members of society.

“What must be the attitude of a warlike and republican state be toward murder? Dangerous it should certainly be, either to cast discredit upon the act or to punish it.”

While it would be overly simplistic to see in de Sade the antecedents of fascism, as Pasolini has done [in *Salò*], it is a far greater crime against thought to lionize him as a progressive thinker. One of the most absurd of these interpretations is presented by Stuart Hood, who in his *Introducing de Sade*, has gone so far as to compare de Sade's ideas to those of Leon Trotsky. Hood also thinks it significant that de Sade's political tract was published in the same year as the *Communist Manifesto*. This coincidental fact is supposed to reinforce a view of de Sade as a progressive, even left-wing thinker. One recent biography, *Sade: A Biographical Essay* by Laurence L. Bongie, has put paid to these sentimental interpretations of de Sade. Summarizing Bongie's biography, the reviewer Robert Darnton says the following:

“Despite his pose as a plebeian during the Revolution, he always thought of himself as an aristocrat. Aristocrats were above the law and therefore could not break it. So Sade never considered his deeds as crimes. As a descendant of a princely ‘race’—according to the *Dictionnaire de l'Académie française* of 1762, race meant ‘lineage, all those who come from the same family’—he could do whatever he pleased to those below him” (“The Real Marquis,” *The New York Review of Books*, January 14, 1999).

Sade's importance as a philosopher was due to the fact that he took the premises of a mechanical materialist understanding of society and politics to an extreme, and thus showed very clearly the logic which leads to what Marx called a “materialism [that] had become hostile to humanity” (Marx and Engels, *The Holy Family*). In writing this passage, Marx had in mind specifically the philosophy of Thomas Hobbes. Yet Marx's characterization finds an even better fit in the outlook espoused by de Sade. The bourgeois view of society as composed of atomistic individuals potentially engaged in a war of all against all is expressed by de Sade in even more unadulterated purity than in Hobbes.

De Sade carries out a bit of one-upmanship on Hobbes by refusing to recognize the social contract by which the warlike state of nature is ameliorated into a kind of armed

peace presided over by the Sovereign. De Sade is unwilling to allow any restraints on his ability to exploit, mistreat and even destroy other human beings in the pursuit of pleasure. His conception of a libertine sees others merely as a means toward an end. This is a consequence of his defining human nature in completely individualistic terms, divorced from the “second nature” of social being. De Sade's state of nature is a veritable hell on earth. Perhaps de Sade's alleged Satanism is an appropriate metaphor of his philosophy. It should not come as a surprise to learn that some right-wing authors, notably Camille Paglia, have flirted with de Sade's celebration of cruelty.

Contrast this view of individual emancipation as a state of conflict with and subordination of one's fellow man, with the very different view of human liberation expressed by Marx:

“...the relationship of man to woman is the most natural relationship of human being to human being. Thus it shows how far the natural behavior of man has become human or how far the human essence has become his natural essence, how far his human nature has become nature for him. This relationship also shows how far the need of man has become a human need, how far his fellow men as men have become a need, *how far in his most individual existence he is at the same time a communal being*” (my emphasis) (Marx, *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts of 1844*).

Can we say that in spite of this assessment there is still something ineffable and valuable in the work of de Sade? We cannot simply ignore the opinion of André Breton and others. De Sade's defenders include some of the most creative thinkers of the last century. Perhaps de Sade's form of criminality was a necessary release from centuries of repression of the erotic. Perhaps his simplistic, homicidal, one-dimensional vision of emancipation is a necessary phase on the road to a fully articulated view of humanity. If so, then we should read him and try to understand him in relation to his historical development. But we certainly need not celebrate him.

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