

The man behind the madness

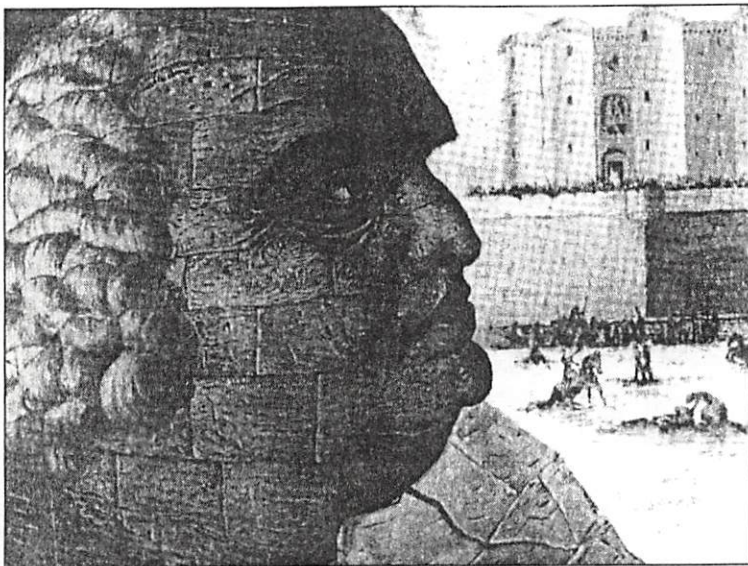
To Robespierre in the years of the French Revolution, the Marquis de Sade was a clear danger to public prudence and morality, deserving of life imprisonment for his subversive writings. To the 19th-century symbolist poet Apollinaire and to surrealists like Salvador Dali he was a martyr for individual liberty and a keen chronicler of the darkest side of human nature. To most modern-day readers, Sade is known only for the adjective his name spawned, not for his writings—which are, 200 years later, still considered obscene enough to be left out of the selections of most bookstores and public libraries.

Despite the slim audience his works now have, Donatien Alphonse Francois, Marquis de Sade (1740-1814), has held on to the dubious distinction of being the modern world's most famous writer of erotica. This genre of literature was in Sade's day enjoyed almost exclusively by the nobility, and consisted of a strange mixture of pornography, anticlericalism and extreme libertarian philosophy. Coincidentally or not, these types of books became enormously popular in France around the same time as the major works of the Enlightenment—Voltaire, Rousseau, Diderot—were released in 1748. Sade's contributions to the genre were the most bizarre and extreme ever published.

Shock value aside, his books are overlong and quickly tiresome. Much more interesting is his own life story as told most recently by novelist and New Yorker contributor Francine du Plessix Gray in "At Home with the Marquis de Sade." The book is a fascinating study of the correspondence of Sade and his relations, revealing a character marked by astounding egotism throughout his life. Ill-disciplined by his libertine father, taught by his aristocratic relatives to believe in his innate superiority, catered to by his adoring wife, and constricted only by his no-nonsense, controlling mother-in-law, Sade became a living, breathing representation of excess in every realm.

This tendency, however, was not uncommon among the aristocracy of pre-Revolutionary France. The excesses of the "courtly classes" were well known and resented by the time of Donatien's birth in 1740. Many of its members had lost their fortunes under the previous reign of Louis XIV, whose strategy it had been to bankrupt the nobility by encouraging competitive overspending and flamboyant displays of wealth at Versailles.

To this was added, in the subsequent rule of the Duc d'Orleans, a marked relaxation of sexual mores among the aristocracy, and a rejection of religious doctrines. It has been called the Age of Pleasure Seeking. Such attitudes were fed by the works of the Enlightenment in the 1750s, and by the spate of erotica mentioned above. Donatien's father, the Comte de Sade, dutifully followed in its traditions, and would be surpassed in his vices only by his son.



From the book

Imaginary portrait of the Marquis de Sade, painted by Man Ray in 1938.

Thus for the penniless aristocracy, marrying well was essential for survival—even if it meant dipping into the ranks of the bourgeoisie. The Comte de Sade was pleased to find such a match for the troublesome 22-year-old Donatien, who, in addition to racking up considerable gambling debts, had been rejected by several potential marriage partners of his own class due to his bad reputation.

The bride, Renee-Pelagie de Montreuil, came from a very wealthy Parisian magistrate family with considerable power and influence. Pelagie's mother was thrilled to have her sheltered, plain-faced daughter marry up into one of France's most distinguished families. Madame de Montreuil knew of her future son-in-law's prodigality, but was nevertheless charmed by him and convinced that the bonds of marriage would in time "put lead in his head." For such a shrewd and intuitive woman, it was a serious and uncharacteristic lapse of judgment.

It is evident from his letters that the marquis grew to love his wife dearly, if less than passionately. Nevertheless, the bonds of marriage did little to prevent Donatien from roving—with actresses, prostitutes, household servants, even Pelagie's sister. He twice landed in jail for illicit and cruel treatment of prostitutes, whose testimony each time revealed Sade's fetishes for whips, cat-o-nine-tails and religious objects.

It was the powerful Madame de Montreuil who convinced the authorities to free him, and who colluded with Donatien to hide the episodes from his wife. Remarkably, his repeated transgressions did not undermine his relationship with Pelagie, even after she became aware of them, but instead caused

her to become ever more fervently devoted to him.

It is this singular character of Donatien's and Pelagie's marriage that Miss Gray's book explores most adeptly. "The great mystery of their marriage is that this puritanical young woman so worshipped her husband that she was able to suspend all moral judgment of him: The moral scruples that would have alienated a woman of her ilk from a debauchee such as Sade seemed to bind these spouses all the more."

But the bonds between them that Madame de Montreuil had once been so eager to arrange and foster later became her most acute source of anguish, and a serious threat to the good social standing of the entire Montreuil clan. She had

given up all hopes of converting her son-in-law after discovering the affair between him and her prized younger daughter. As she wrote in 1769, the episode had served to "kill all sentiments I had for him, all my hope for his return to the straight path, which alone guided me in all that I've done to repair his misfortunes." The vitiated younger Montreuil daughter would from then on be unmarriageable.

After the support and patience of Madame de Montreuil evaporated, Pelagie became Donatien's most loyal defender. It was she who knocked on the doors of the parents of three young prostitutes in Marseilles, in a desperate attempt to bribe them out of pressing charges against her husband. He was accused of sodomy and poisoning—both of which carried the death penalty—during an encounter with them. (The poisoning accusation was put forth by one of the girls who had suffered a violent reaction after ingesting too much Spanish fly, hand-

fed by the Marquis.)

Despite her efforts, Pelagie could not keep him out of jail. Public sentiment was turning against the aristocrats and the laxity with which magistrates prosecuted their wrongdoings, and the Marseilles incident had received considerable attention. The powerful Madame de Montreuil had little trouble convincing the police to stage a raid on Sade's castle and incarcerate him.

No longer able to exercise his whims on the outside world, Sade found outlet for his energies in two ways: in the writing of plays and novels and in the increasing authoritarianism he practiced on his wife. During the course of 13 years she would prepare her husband's care packages, answer his often derisive and accusatory letters, plead with the authorities to reduce his sentence or allow him more privileges, and attempt somehow to satisfy his many angry creditors. She had long ago left their three children in the care of her parents in order to attend to Sade's needs, and her own health and finances were rapidly depleted.

Meanwhile, a typical list of Sade's demands, to be hand delivered every fortnight, would include the following: face pomade, bedroom slippers, 12 iced cakes, eight pounds of candles, cologne, cotton stockings, six waistcoats, a variety of hair ribbons, 30 large macaroons, bonnets, gloves and summer trousers tailored "in the narrow style." And heaven forbid she get it wrong: "The Savoy biscuit isn't at all what I'd asked for. I wished it to be iced all around its surface, on top and underneath."

The reader is shocked by the egocentrism of this man. But it comes as a greater shock to discover that, upon Sade's release from jail, Pelagie would have no more of him and would seek a divorce. The author does little to prepare us for this upheaval in Sade's life; Miss Gray admits that the details of Pelagie's enormous change of heart are little known. It then becomes apparent that we, like Sade, have become overly attached to their institution and to her unstinting devotion, however perverse.

The almost unbelievable adventures of the marquis de Sade do not end with Pelagie's departure. He goes on to play an important part in the storming of the Bastille during the French Revolution, and to be sent back to jail for the writing of the lurid novel "Justine." In the end, jail was the only place the Sade could live, captivity being the one remaining boundary to the extremes of his personality. It was also the only place society would have him, uneasy as it had become living amidst evidence of its own corruption.

Erica Tuttle is managing editor of *The National Interest*.

AT HOME WITH THE MARQUIS DE SADE

By Francine du Plessix Gray
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REVIEWED BY ERICA TUTTLE

NOTICE

The "On Books" column will resume Sunday, January 10.