# The respectable M. de Sade, literary critic

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The fact that, almost above all, Sade wanted to be recognised as an 'homme de lettres', a man of letters, is something Sade critics often comment on but most do so only in passing. For many Sade scholars this isn't the 'real' Sade. So I'm going to be controversial and pause on this idea of Sade the respectable writer, the man of letters. This term was the one of the ultimate accolades for a writer in the 18th century, conveying literary recognition and status as well as social acceptance. And yet Sade's push for literary legitimacy (by which I mean publishing works he can put his name to on the frontispiece) occurs at precisely the time that the literary establishment is collapsing because of the upheavals of the French Revolution.[1]

Sade's first attempts at literary legitimacy were a play, *Le Comte Oxtiern ou les effets du libertinage* performed in 1791,[2] and the philosophical novel *Aline et Valcour*, published in 1795. In the novel, he demonstrates his ability to use literary models: the text explicitly plays with the epistolary and sentimental conventions established by the literary heavyweights of the century, Richardson, Prévost, and Rousseau as well as taking on Laclos. It was a way of demonstrating his mastery of the literary conventions of the day while subverting them from the inside. He goes one stage further towards literary legitimacy in 1800, publishing an essay on the novel, his *Idée sur les romans*, as the preface to his collection of short stories, *les Crimes de l'amour, the Crimes of Love*.[3] An essay on the history of the novel is a classic 18th-century 'homme de lettres' exercise allowing the would-be man of letters to show how the novel is an enlightened form, helping to move readers away from superstition. Marmontel and De La Harpe to name but two, also attempted to analyse the development of the novel as part of a final flourish of essays legitimising the genre at the end of the century and Mme de Staël deliberately echoes their endeavours with her *De la littérature* in 1800, staking a claim for the concept of a femme de

[1] For the changing relationship between patron, homme de lettres and public at the end of the 18th century see Greg Brown, *A Field of Honor: Writers, Court Culture and Public Theater in French Literary Life from Racine to the Revolution* **(**Columbia University Press/ EPIC: 2002), available at **http://www.gutenberg-e.org/brg01**

[2] See Jacques Truchet (ed), *Théâtre du XVIIIe siècle*, vol 2 (Paris : Gallimard, 1974).

[3] References to the text will be taken from *Les Crimes de l'amour*, ed. Michel Delon (Paris: Gallimard Folio 1987) and *The Crimes of Love*, translated by David Coward (Oxford World Classics, 2005).

lettres. As a literary exercise it's almost a rite of passage for entry into the literary establishment.

Sade studies have tended to take the marquis out of the context of the 18th century to see him as resolutely modern.[4] Without entirely rejecting this view, as will become clear, what I want to stress here is the need to recognise Sade's modernity firmly within the 18th-century context in which he was working. By reinserting his modernity into the literary world of the Revolutionary decade, we can better examine the literary judgements he makes of his contemporaries.

It quickly becomes clear that Sade was a very astute assessor of the 18th-century novel, all the more remarkable because he didn't really have the advantage of hindsight. Indeed, modern literary critics are only just catching up with his assessment of the principal literary figures of his day. For instance, he considered Fénelon's *Télémaque* a novel that wouldn't stand the test of time, a judgement that roused indignation at the time but which would find few opponents today[5]) and dismisses Marmontel's 'contes à l'eau-rose'(p. 38)/ 'sugary rose-tinted tales' (p. 11) in favour of his philosophic novel *Bélisaire* which is a judgement most Marmontel scholars would agree with. Women writers of the 18th century are really only now getting the attention to match the place he accorded them in the development of the novel of the ancien regime. He singles out Mme de Graffigny's *Lettres d'une péruvienne*, which has excited considerable interest particularly since the 1970s, especially among feminist critics. Similarly, he praises the *Lettres de Miladi Juliette Catesby* by mme Riccoboni, who perhaps has attracted less attention than Mme de Graffigny, partly because of a lack of cheap paperback editions which facilitate the teaching of a text but perhaps the 2006 conference on her and its resulting *actes* due out later this year will begin to rectify the imbalance.[6] I believe there's a good case for saying if the marquis has singled a text out for praise, it's worth examining in more detail.

What I want to focus on particularly here, though, is whether we can use Sade's *Idée* to better understand literary production of the Revolutionary decade. The 1790s have been considered a literary wilderness by modern critics because of their lack of great novels. Sade's assessment of the difficulty in producing fiction at a time

[4] See for instance Lawrence Schehr, 'Sade's literary space', in *Sade and the narrative of transgression*, ed. David B. Allison, Mark S. Roberts and Allen S. Weiss (CUP, 1995), pp. 228-50.
[5] See the review in the *Journal de Paris*, 6 brumaire An IX, reprinted in the Delon edn, p. 409.
[6] *Mme Riccoboni, une diversité décontractée*, ed. Jan Herman et Paul Pelckmans, Louvain-Paris, Peeters, in press.

of Revolution is an accurate one and one he shared with his contemporaries. Sénac de Meilhan, who wrote what was long considered the prototype émigré novel, *L'Emigré*, published in 1797, commented for instance in its preface that 'tout est vraisemblable, et tout est romanesque dans la révolution de la France'/ everything about the French Revolution is like something out of a novel.[7] Sade echoes this in the *Idée*: 'pour qui connaissait tous les malheurs dont les méchants peuvent accabler les hommes, le roman devenait aussi difficile à faire, que monotone à lire; il n'y avait point d'individu qui n'eût plus éprouvé d'infortunes, en quatre ou cinq ans, que n'en pouvait peindre en un siècle, le plus fameux romancier de la littérature' (p. 42) / ' To those acquainted with all the evil which the wicked can bring down on the heads of the good, novels became as difficult to write as they were tedious to read. There was hardly a soul alive who did not experience more adversity in four or five years than the most famous novelist in all literature could have invented in a hundred.' (p. 13-14)

Sade singles out the Gothic novel as archetypal product of the Revolution and again modern literary criticism is only just moving beyond Sade's assessment. The late 1790s was a time when the Gothic in France was taken seriously for the first time[8] and there is general consensus that the Gothic fed off the revolutionary anxieties of its readership.[9] Sade is again leading the way in reader response theory and the dilemma of the Gothic (that it's either 'laughable if explained too easily and incredible if we are meant to suspend our disbelief' (Hall, 211) ) remains unresolved.

But while Sade makes it clear that the Gothic is 'le fruit indispensable des secousses révolutionnaires' (42) / the necessary offspring of the revolutionary upheaval (p. 13)' and the dominant literary form of the turn of the century, he offers us a further insight into revolutionary literary production with what might be seen as an early exposition of trauma theory. Developments in trauma studies during the 1990s (particularly Felman & Laub, *Testimony : crises of witnessing in literature, psychoanalysis and history***,** 1992 and Caruth, *Unclaimed experience : trauma, narrative, and history*, 1996) have revealed the potential for using theoretical work on trauma theory in literary studies. The Revolution is a period of crisis with lasting effects on the population as a whole and involves a collective experience of sufficient

[7] My translation. See the Préface to *L'Emigré*, ed. Michel Delon (Gallimard Folio, 2004), p. 33.
[8] See Daniel Hall, *French and German Gothic Fiction in the Late Eighteenth Century* (Bern: Lang, 2005), p. 115.
[9] See Robert Miles, 'The 1790s: the effulgence of the Gothic', in *The Cambridge Companion to Gothic Fiction* (CUP, 2002).

magnitude to be considered traumatic. Erikson (1995) and Herman's (1994) work on collective trauma and the stages of recovery allows us to probe how writers react to something they are aware they have experienced but cannot necessarily articulate.[10] Trauma theory allows us to identify traces of the effect of the Revolution, and can therefore be used to explore both the proliferation of superficially non-political fiction and the failure of certain literary modes to deal with the representation of historical reality.[11] How does Sade prefigure this? By suggesting that it will only be after the Revolution, with distance, that great literature can be produced. He knows that it is not in those novels forged directly out of personal experience of Terror or emigration that great aesthetic qualities will be found, but in later novels, once the effects of the Revolution have been assimilated and borne witness to. Emigration is by implication the key to preparing a new generation of literary works. Knowledge of mankind comes for Sade from two key elements, *malheur* and *voyages*, suffering and travel, two ideas inextricably linked in the process of emigration. Having experience of other nations is not only essential for verisimilitude (paving the way for the realism of the 19th century) but for the creation of literary works (one only has to think of the benefits to French Romanticism of de Stael's exposure to German theorists and Italian landscape). Furthermore, and this is where his ideas link most explicitly with trauma theory, Sade shows the need for a writer to have come through the traumatic experience (or *tempête* (p. 44)/ 'storm' (p. 15) as he labels it) to write – there is a necessary distancing involved in the process of turning lived experience into literature: 'la main de l'infortune, en exaltant le caractère de celui qu'elle écrase, le met à la juste distance où il faut qu'il soit pour étudier les hommes.' (p. 44)/ 'the hand of misfortune, which elevates the character of those it brings low, gives its victim the right perspective from which to study others' (p. 15).

Just as literary critics are coming round to agreeing with Sade's assessment of women writers, of Marivaux's *précieux* 'mannered' style of novel writing,[12] of the importance of energy and enthusiasm in the development of early Romanticism, so

[10] Kai Erikson, 'Notes on Trauma and Community' in Caruth (ed), *Trauma and Explorations in Memory* (Baltimore and London: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1995), pp. 183-99. Judith Lewis Herman, *Trauma and Recovery. From domestic abuse to political terror* (London: Pandora, 1994).
[11] For a preliminary investigation of how trauma theory might be used to assess literary production of the Revolutionary decade see Katherine Astbury, 'Une chaumière et un cœur simple. Pastoral fiction and the art of persuasion 1790-92' in *Revolutionary Culture: Continuity and Change*, ed. by Mark Darlow, *Nottingham French Studies* 45 (1), special issue Spring 2006, pp. 5-19.
[12] See Aurora Wolfgang, *Gender and voice in the French novel, 1730-1782* (Ashgate, 2004).

his analysis of Revolutionary works of fiction can help us to understand more fully literary production during the 1790s. There remains much to be done in applying his reader response and trauma theory to literary production during the Revolutionary decade and a need to reassess the Gothic alongside the émigré novel and other texts of the period. Sade's *Idée* is a hugely significant text because of the astuteness with which he captures the essence of the age and it deserves a greater prominence in studies of the 18th-century novel. If I might adapt a phrase from the *Idée sur les romans* by way of conclusion, if more were made of Sade the critic, 'loin de lui reprocher ses moyens, nous l'offrirons alors comme un modèle'. (42) 'far from criticising the means by which he succeeded, we might hold him up as a model'.