

Sade: Queer Theorist

William F. Edmiston, Oxford: Voltaire Foundation, 2013, pp. x+244pp.

Reviewed By Samuel Harrington

William F. Edmiston's *Sade: Queer Theorist* (2013) exemplifies a new turn in Sade scholarship. Amongst scholars, there seems to be little disagreement about the fact that Sade's fiction is concerned with questioning and undermining normative binary definitions regarding sex, gender and sexuality. In more 'traditional' Sade scholarship, this undermining of normative binary definitions is seen to indicate that Sade's eroticism is fundamentally dialectical, operating as a warped 'moral code'. According to this interpretation, Sade's eroticism is an exercise in transgression, inverting Christian dogmas and declaring the height of sexual pleasure to be rooted in 'evil'; the greater the *crime*, the higher the pleasure. Here, Sade is characterised by absolute isolation and dreams of infinitude, a cruel figure, occasionally even 'repulsive'.¹ Since the 1980's and 90's however, many scholars have attempted to rebrand Sade as a pivotal figure in the history of Western sexual emancipation. Rather than inverting Christian binarisms, the Marquis blurs and 'queers', prefiguring many contemporary understandings of gender and sexual identity – a pivotal forerunner of 'the 1960's sexual revolution'.² Edmiston's Sade is firmly placed within this latter category.

Edmiston proposes that Sade, in 'his personal life' and in his 'fiction', may be viewed as 'an eighteenth century queer theorist' (p. 4). Edmiston's ultimate aim is to show that Sade's texts challenge 'the dimorphisms of anatomical sex (male/female), of gender (masculine and feminine sexual roles) and of sexuality (preference of same-sex or opposite-sex partners)' (p. 229). Clearly, as Edmiston himself states, this involves an 'anachronism' (p. 6). His solution is that the primary similarity between

1 See: BATAILLE, G., (1957), *L'érotisme*, 1st ed., Paris: Editions de Minuit, DE BEAUVOIR, S., (1951–2) Faut-il brûler Sade? *Les Temps modernes*, no. 74, décembre 1951, pp. 1002-1033, et. no. 75, janvier, 1952, pp. 1197–1230, KLOSSOWSKI, P., (1947), *Sade mon prochain*, 1st ed., Paris: Editions du Seuil and LACAN, J., (1963), Kant avec Sade, *Critique*, no. 191, pp. 291–313. For more recent examples, see: GIROUX, S. S., (2010), Sade's Revenge, *Patterns of Prejudice*, vol. 44(1), pp. 1–26, SHATTUCK, R., (1996), *Forbidden Knowledge*, 1st ed., Harcourt Brace & Company, and STEINTRAGER, J. A., (2005), Liberating Sade, *The Yale Journal of Criticism*, vol. 18(2), pp. 351-379.

2 See: Gert Hekma, Jane Gallop. For instance, Hekma argues that: "Sade's defence of sodomy...should have earned him a place of honour in gay history and women's history" (p. 135), HEKMA, G., (1990), Review Essay: Rewriting the History of Sade, *Journal of the History of Sexuality*, vol.1 (1), pp.131–136. Similarly, Jane Gallop states that the 'liberated woman' is 'constructed' in Sade's 1795 novel, *Philosophy in the Bedroom*. This 'model' was 'explicit in the construction of the new, sexier lesbian who arose in the queer revolution of the late 1980s and early 1990s', (p. 101), GALLOP, J., (2005), The Liberated Woman, *Narrative*, vol.13 (2), pp. 89–104.

Sade and queer theory is the ‘use of some of the same deconstructive strategies that are used by queer theorists in our own time’ (p. 6). Whilst some understandings of sexual behaviour have undoubtedly changed in terms of contemporary norms, ‘we must also admit much has not changed’ (p. 223). For Edmiston, Sade uses these deconstructive strategies to ‘erode the boundaries’ and ‘queer the binary oppositions’ associated with ‘the categories of sex, gender and sexuality in his culture’ (p. 38). Edmiston devotes much of this work to detailing eighteenth-century understandings of gender and sexuality, and comparing them to the queer theory of the 1990’s.³ He applies this theoretical framework to close-readings of Sade’s ‘erotic novels’⁴ as well as the underappreciated text, *Aline et Valcour*.⁵

Edmiston states that the four libertines of *The 120 Days of Sodom* for instance, ‘constitute an intermediate category lying between the homosexual/heterosexual binarism’ (pp. 82–3). Similarly, the centrality of male sodomy in Sade’s sexual universe is indicative of queer discourse due to its value as the pinnacle of non-reproductive sexual activity. Crucially for Edmiston, Sade’s descriptions of sodomy and the sodomite ‘are never repudiated as effeminate and weak’, these characters ‘vaunt their pleasures as superior to any others, even claiming that nature prefers men engaging in sexual activity with other men’ (p. 139). This leads Edmiston to the discovery that it is possible to locate ‘reverse discourse’ in Sade’s fiction, a discourse previously assigned by Michel Foucault to the nineteenth century. This ‘reverse’ or ‘queer discourse’ demands that ‘homosexuality be recognised as legitimate’, whilst simultaneously employing ‘the same vocabulary used to denounce it’ (p. 126). In this way, Sade ‘challenges the reader’s belief that heterosexuality is inherently natural and normative’ (p. 112–3).

However, *Sade: Queer Theorist* continually struggles with the cruelty and sexual violence of Sade’s eroticism; the text acknowledges that unfortunately Sade does not queer all normative binarisms. Specifically, ‘the generic opposition between masculine aggression and feminine docility’ (p. 225). This point is troubling; on what grounds is it decided which aspects of Sade’s eroticism to endorse? Yet a more pressing issue is the continual use of biography and authorial intent. Edmiston devotes an entire chapter to the discussion of ‘Sade’s biographers and their attempts at categorising the author’s own sexuality’ (p. 39).⁶ Edmiston concludes this section by stating that Sade – like the figure presented in his fiction – is a man who ‘lies outside of conventional categorisations’. Edmiston claims that the ambivalent sexual identity of Sade perfectly encapsulates ‘the writer’s rejection of the boundaries between categories and indeed of the categories themselves’ (p. 221).

The search for ‘true’ authorial intent is an issue of hermeneutics generally and is particularly contentious in Sade scholarship. For example, Georges Bataille contends that Sade’s presentation of eroticism is a project designed to deny life itself, a hypothesis only possible in art; conflating art and biography delimits the ambitions

3 See: *Introduction* (pp. 1–39) Edmiston’s ‘conceptualisations of sex, gender and sexuality follow those of Eve Sedgwick and Judith Butler’ (p. 25)

4 See: ch. 1, (pp. 41–101) ‘*Les Cent vingt journées de Sodome, La Nouvelle Justine, Histoire de Juliette and La Philosophie dans le boudoir*’

5 See: ch. 3, pp. 141–193

6 See: ch. 4, pp. 195–230

of Sade's aesthetic project.⁷ In *The 120 Days of Sodom* for instance, the libertines entertain the possibility of an ultimate crime, producing the ultimate pleasure. The libertines dream of the impossible – the destruction of existence as such: "...my imagination has always outdistanced my faculties...Ah how many times, by God, have I not longed to be able to assail the sun,⁸ snatch it out of the universe, make a general darkness, or use that star to burn the world."⁹ They consider the inhabitants of Silling to be 'victims' not 'partners'. Their primary desire is to commit 'evil' acts: "My prick positively jumps when I do evil, in evil I discover precisely what is needed to stimulate in me all of pleasure's sensations, and I perform evil for that reason, for it alone, *without any ulterior motive*."¹⁰ Could we not say that in Sade's world: sodomy, the spilling of sperm and the female desiring-subject are central themes precisely because of their 'allegedly' *destructive* qualities? As stated elsewhere on exactly this point: "...it does seem a bit of a stretch to move from Sade's depictions of coprophagy, serial rape, and seemingly infinite slaughter to a reading of Sade in terms of gay rights."¹¹

Nevertheless, *Sade: Queer Theorist* remains an involving study, drawing explicitly provocative conclusions, designed to engage serious scholars of Sade. The text should be seen as part of a wider historical reaction to Sade's life and work, and the claim that he was a pivotal figure in the ongoing struggle for sexual and gender emancipation.

7 Bataille claims that there are two Sade's: the Sade of history and 'the figure' Sade of literature, see: BATAILLE, G., (1957).

8 See: The recent *Attaquer le Soleil* exhibition at the *musée d'Orsay*: LE BRUN, A., (2014), *Sade: Attaquer le Soleil*, 1st ed., Gallimard

9 SADE, D. A. F., (1990), *The One Hundred and Twenty Days of Sodom*, trans., Austryn Wainhouse and Richard Seaver, 2nd ed., Arrow Books, p. 364

10 *Ibid.*, p. 363 (my emphasis)

11 STEINTRAGER, J. A., (2005), p. 360