

# THE SADEIAN WOMAN

*An Exercise in Cultural History*

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## INTRODUCTORY NOTE

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Sade was born in 1740, a great nobleman; and died in 1814, in a lunatic asylum, a poor man. His life spans the entire period of the French Revolution and he died in the same year that Napoleon abdicated and the monarchy was restored to France. He stands on the threshold of the modern period, looking both backward and forwards, at a time when the nature of human nature and of social institutions was debated as freely as it is in our own.

Sade's work concerns the nature of sexual freedom and is of particular significance to women because of his refusal to see female sexuality in relation to its reproductive function, a refusal as unusual in the late eighteenth century as it is now, even if today the function of women as primarily reproductive beings is under question. *The Sadeian Woman* is neither a critical study nor a historical analysis of Sade; it is, rather, a late-twentieth-century interpretation of some of the problems he raises about the culturally determined nature of women and of the relations between men and women that result from it – an opposition which is both cruelly divisive in our common struggle to understand the world, and also, in itself, a profound illumination of the nature of that struggle.



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**POLEMICAL PREFACE:  
PORNOGRAPHY  
IN THE SERVICE OF WOMEN**

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Sadism is not a name finally given to a practice as old as Eros; it is a massive cultural fact which appeared precisely at the end of the eighteenth century, and which constitutes one of the greatest conversions of Western imagination: unreason transformed into delirium of the heart, madness of desire, the insane dialogue of love and death in the limitless presumption of appetite.

*Madness and Civilisation,*  
Michel Foucault

I am not the slave of the Slavery that dehumanised my ancestors.

*Black Skin White Masks,*  
Frantz Fanon

Pornographers are the enemies of women only because our contemporary ideology of pornography does not encompass the possibility of change, as if we were the slaves of history and not its makers, as if sexual relations were not necessarily an expression of social relations, as if sex itself were an external fact, one as immutable as the weather,

creating human practice but never a part of it.

Pornography involves an abstraction of human intercourse in which the self is reduced to its formal elements. In its most basic form, these elements are represented by the probe and the fringed hole, the twin signs of male and female in graffiti, the biological symbols scrawled on the subway poster and the urinal wall, the simplest expression of stark and ineradicable sexual differentiation, a universal pictorial language of lust – or, rather, a language we accept as universal because, since it has always been so, we conclude that it must always remain so.

In the stylisation of graffiti, the prick is always presented erect, in an alert attitude of enquiry or curiosity or affirmation; it points upwards, it asserts. The hole is open, an inert space, like a mouth waiting to be filled. From this elementary iconography may be derived the whole metaphysic of sexual differences – man aspires; woman has no other function but to exist, waiting. The male is positive, an exclamation mark. Woman is negative. Between her legs lies nothing but zero, the sign for nothing, that only becomes something when the male principle fills it with meaning.

Anatomy is destiny, said Freud, which is true enough as far as it goes, but ambiguous. My anatomy is only part of an infinitely complex organisation, my self. The anatomical reductionalism of graffiti, the *reductio ad absurdum* of the bodily differences between men and women, extracts all the evidence of me from myself and leaves behind only a single aspect of my life as a mammal. It enlarges this aspect, simplifies it and then presents it as the most significant aspect of my entire humanity. This is true of all mythologising of sexuality; but graffiti lets it be *seen* to be true. It is the most explicit version of the idea of different sexual essences of men and women, because it is the crudest. In the face of this symbolism, my pretensions to any kind of social existence go for nothing; graffiti directs me back to my mythic generation as a woman and, as a woman, my



symbolic value is primarily that of a myth of patience and receptivity, a dumb mouth from which the teeth have been pulled.

Sometimes, especially under the influence of Jung, a more archaic mouth is allowed to exert an atavistic dominance. Then, if I am lucky enough to be taken with such poetic pseudo-seriousness, my nether mouth may be acknowledged as one capable of speech— were there not, of old, divinatory priestesses, female oracles and so forth? Was there not Cassandra, who always spoke the truth, although admittedly in such a way that nobody ever believed her? And that, in mythic terms, is the hell of it. Since that female, oracular mouth is located so near the beastly backside, my vagina might indeed be patronisingly regarded as a speaking mouth, but never one that issues the voice of reason. In this most insulting mythic redefinition of myself, that of occult priestess, I am indeed allowed to speak but only of things that male society does not take seriously. I can hint at dreams, I can even personify the imagination; but that is only because I am not rational enough to cope with reality.

If women allow themselves to be consoled for their culturally determined lack of access to the modes of intellectual debate by the invocation of hypothetical great goddesses, they are simply flattering themselves into submission (a technique often used on them by men). All the mythic versions of women, from the myth of the redeeming purity of the virgin to that of the healing, reconciling mother, are consolatory nonsenses; and consolatory nonsense seems to me a fair definition of myth, anyway. Mother goddesses are just as silly a notion as father gods. If a revival of the myths of these cults gives women emotional satisfaction, it does so at the price of obscuring the real conditions of life. This is why they were invented in the first place.

Myth deals in false universals, to dull the pain of particular circumstances. In no area is this more true than in

that of relations between the sexes. Graffiti, the most public form of sexual iconography, one which requires no training or artistic skill in its execution and yet is always assured of an audience, obtains all its effects from these false universals of myth. Its savage denial of the complexity of human relations is also a consolatory nonsense.

In its schema, as in the mythic schema of all relations between men and women, man proposes and woman is disposed of, just as she is disposed of in a rape, which is a kind of physical graffiti, the most extreme reduction of love, in which all humanity departs from the sexed beings. So that, somewhere in the fear of rape, is a more than merely physical terror of hurt and humiliation – a fear of psychic disintegration, of an essential dismemberment, a fear of a loss or disruption of the self which is not confined to the victim alone. Since all pornography derives directly from myth, it follows that its heroes and heroines, from the most gross to the most sophisticated, are mythic abstractions, heroes and heroines of dimension and capacity. Any glimpse of a real man or a real woman is absent from these representations of the archetypal male and female.

The nature of the individual is not resolved into but is ignored by these archetypes, since the function of the archetype is to diminish the unique 'I' in favour of a collective, sexed being which cannot, by reason of its very nature, exist as such because an archetype is only an image that has got too big for its boots and bears, at best, a fantasy relation to reality.

All archetypes are spurious but some are more spurious than others. There is the unarguable fact of sexual differentiation; but, separate from it and only partially derived from it, are the behavioural modes of masculine and feminine, which are culturally defined variables translated in the language of common usage to the status of universals. And these archetypes serve only to confuse the main issue, that relationships between the sexes are determined by history and by the historical fact of the economic depen-

dence of women upon men. This fact is now very largely a fact of the past and, even in the past, was only true for certain social groups and then only at certain periods. Today, most women work before, during and after marriage. Nevertheless, the economic dependence of women remains a believed fiction and is assumed to imply an emotional dependence that is taken for granted as a condition inherent in the natural order of things and so used to console working women for their low wages. They work; see little profit from it; and therefore conclude they cannot really have been working at all.

This confusion as to the experience of reality – that what I know from my experience is true is, in fact, not so – is most apparent, however, in the fantasy love-play of the archetypes, which generations of artists have contrived to make seem so attractive that, lulled by dreams, many women willingly ignore the palpable evidence of their own responses.

In these beautiful encounters, any man may encounter any woman and their personalities are far less important to their copulation than the mere fact of their genders. At the first touch or sigh he, she, is subsumed immediately into a universal. (She, of course, rarely approaches him; that is not part of the fantasy of fulfillment.) She is most immediately and dramatically a woman when she lies beneath a man, and her submission is the apex of his malehood. To show his humility before his own erection, a man must approach a woman on his knees, just as he approaches god. This is the kind of beautiful thought that has bedevilled the history of sex in Judaeo-Christian culture, causing almost as much confusion as the idea that sex is a sin. Some of the scorn heaped on homosexuals may derive from the fact that they do not customarily adopt the mythically correct, sacerdotal position. The same beautiful thought has elevated a Western European convention to the position of the only sanctified sexual position; it fortifies the missionary position with a bizarre degree of mystification. God is in-

voked as a kind of sexual referee, to assure us, as modern churchmen like to claim in the teeth of two thousand years of Christian sexual repression, that sex is really sacred.

The missionary position has another great asset, from the mythic point of view; it implies a system of relations between the partners that equates the woman to the passive receptivity of the soil, to the richness and fecundity of the earth. A whole range of images poeticises, kitschifies, departicularises intercourse, such as wind beating down corn, rain driving against bending trees, towers falling, all tributes to the freedom and strength of the roving, fecundating, irresistible male principle and the heavy, downward, equally irresistible gravity of the receptive soil. The soil that is, good heavens, myself. It is a most self-enhancing notion; I have almost seduced myself with it. Any woman may manage, in luxurious self-deceit, to feel herself for a little while one with great, creating nature, fertile, open, pulsing, anonymous and so forth. In doing so, she loses herself completely and loses her partner also.

The moment they succumb to this anonymity, they cease to be themselves, with their separate lives and desires; they cease to be the lovers who have met to assuage desire in a reciprocal pact of tenderness, and they engage at once in a spurious charade of maleness and femaleness.

The anonymity of the lovers, whom the act transforms from me and you into they, precludes the expression of ourselves.

So the act is taken away from us even as we perform it.

We become voyeurs upon our own caresses. The act does not acknowledge the participation of the individual, bringing to it a whole life of which the act is only a part. The man and woman, in their particularity, their being, are absent from these representations of themselves as male and female. These tableaux of falsification remove our sexual life from the world, from tactile experience itself. The lovers are lost to themselves in a privacy that does not transcend but deny reality. So the act can never satisfy

them, because it does not affect their lives. It occurs in the mythic dream-time of religious ritual.

But our flesh arrives to us out of history, like everything else does. We may believe we fuck stripped of social artifice; in bed, we even feel we touch the bedrock of human nature itself. But we are deceived. Flesh is not an irreducible human universal. Although the erotic relationship may seem to exist freely, on its own terms, among the distorted social relationships of a bourgeois society, it is, in fact, the most self-conscious of all human relationships, a direct confrontation of two beings whose actions in the bed are wholly determined by their acts when they are out of it. If one sexual partner is economically dependent on the other, then the question of sexual coercion, of contractual obligation, raises its ugly head in the very abode of love and inevitably colours the nature of the sexual expression of affection. The marriage bed is a particularly delusive refuge from the world because all wives of necessity fuck by contract. Prostitutes are at least decently paid on the nail and boast fewer illusions about a hireling status that has no veneer of social acceptability, but their services are suffering a decline in demand now that other women have invaded their territory in their own search for a newly acknowledged sexual pleasure. In this period, promiscuous abandon may seem the only type of free exchange.

But no bed, however unexpected, no matter how apparently gratuitous, is free from the de-universalising facts of real life. We do not go to bed in simple pairs; even if we choose not to refer to them, we still drag there with us the cultural impedimenta of our social class, our parents' lives, our bank balances, our sexual and emotional expectations, our whole biographies – all the bits and pieces of our unique existences. These considerations have limited our choice of partners before we have even got them into the bedroom. It was impossible for the Countess in Beaumarchais' *The Marriage of Figaro* to contemplate sleeping with her husband's valet, even though he was clearly the best man

available; considerations of social class censored the possibility of sexual attraction between the Countess and Figaro before it could have begun to exist, and if this convention restricted the Countess's activities, it did not affect those of her husband; he happily plotted to seduce his valet's wife. If middle-class Catherine Earnshaw, in Emily Brontë's *Wuthering Heights*, wants to sleep with Heathcliff, who has the dubious class origins of the foundling, she must not only repress this desire but pay the socially sanctioned price of brain-fever and early death for even contemplating it. Our literature is full, as are our lives, of men and women, but especially women, who deny the reality of sexual attraction and of love because of considerations of class, religion, race and of gender itself.

Class dictates our choice of partners and our choice of positions. When fear, shame and prudery condemn the poor and the ignorant to copulate in the dark, it must be obvious that sexual sophistication is a by-product of education. The primal nakedness of lovers is a phenomenon of the middle-class in cold climates; in northern winters, naked lovers must be able to afford to heat their bedrooms. The taboos regulating the sight of bare flesh are further determined by wider cultural considerations. The Japanese bathed together in the nude for centuries, yet generations of Japanese lovers fucked in kimono, even in the humidity of summer, and did not even remove the combs from their chignons while they did so. And another complication - they did not appreciate the eroticism of the nude; yet they looked at one another's exposed genitalia with a tender readiness that still perturbs the West.

Control of fertility is a by-product of sexual education and of official legislation concerning the availability of cheap or free contraception. Even so, a poor woman may find herself sterilised when all she wanted was an abortion, her fertility taken out of her own control for good by social administrators who have decided that poverty is synonymous with stupidity and a poor woman cannot know her own mind.

The very magical privacy of the bed, the pentacle, may itself only be bought with money, and lack of privacy limits sexual sophistication, which may not be pursued in a room full of children.

Add to these socio-economic considerations the Judaeo-Christian heritage of shame, disgust and morality that stand between the initial urge and the first attainment of this most elementary assertion of the self and it is a wonder anyone in this culture ever learns to fuck at all.

Flesh comes to us out of history; so does the repression and taboo that governs our experience of flesh.

The nature of actual modes of sexual intercourse is determined by historical changes in less intimate human relations, just as the actual nature of men and women is capable of infinite modulations as social structures change. Our knowledge is determined by the social boundaries upon it; for example, Sade, the eighteenth-century lecher, knew that manipulation of the clitoris was the unique key to the female orgasm, but a hundred years later, Sigmund Freud, a Viennese intellectual, did not wish to believe that this grand simplicity was all there was to the business. It was socially permissible for an eighteenth-century aristocrat to sleep with more women than it was for a member of the nineteenth-century bourgeoisie, for one thing, and to retain a genuine curiosity about female sexuality whilst doing so, for another. Yet Freud, the psychoanalyst, can conceive of a far richer notion of human nature as a whole than Sade, the illiberal philosopher, is capable of; the social boundaries of knowledge expand in some areas and contract in others due to historical forces.

Sexuality, in short, is never expressed in a vacuum. Though the archaic sequence of human life – we are born, we fuck, we reproduce, we die – might seem to be universal experience, its universality is not its greatest significance. Since human beings have invented history, we have also invented those aspects of our lives that seem most immutable, or, rather, have invented the circumstances that



determine their nature. Birth and death, the only absolute inescapables, are both absolutely determined by the social context in which they occur. There is no longer an inevitable relationship between fucking and reproducing and, indeed, neither fucking nor reproducing have been activities practiced by all men and women at all times, anyway; there has always been the option to abstain, whether it is exercised or not. Women experience sexuality and reproduction quite differently than men do; rich women are more in control of the sequence than poor women and so may actually enjoy fucking and childbirth, when poor women might find them both atrocious simply because they are poor and cannot afford comfort, privacy and paid help.

The notion of a universality of human experience is a confidence trick and the notion of a universality of female experience is a clever confidence trick.

Pornography, like marriage and the fictions of romantic love, assists the process of false universalising. Its excesses belong to that timeless, locationless area outside history, outside geography, where fascist art is born.

Nevertheless, there is no question of an aesthetics of pornography. It can never be art for art's sake. Honourably enough, it is always art with work to do.

Pornographic literature, the specific area of pornography with which we are going to deal, has several functions. On one level, and a level which should not be despised, it might serve as an instruction manual for the inexperienced. But our culture, with its metaphysics of sexuality, relegates the descriptions of the mechanics of sex to crude functionalism; in the sex textbook, intercourse also takes place in a void. So pornography's principal and most humanly significant function is that of arousing sexual excitement. It does this by ignoring the first function; it usually describes the sexual act not in explicit terms - for that might make it seem frightening - but in purely inviting terms.

The function of plot in a pornographic narrative is always the same. It exists purely to provide as many opportunities



as possible for the sexual act to take place. There is no room here for tension or the unexpected. We know what is going to happen; that is why we are reading the book. Characterisation is necessarily limited by the formal necessity for the actors to fuck as frequently and as ingeniously as possible. But they do not do so because they are continually consumed by desire; the free expression of desire is as alien to pornography as it is to marriage. In pornography, both men and women fuck because to fuck is their *raison d'être*. It is their life work.

It follows that prostitutes are favourite heroines of the pornographic writer, though the economic aspects of a prostitute's activity, which is her own main concern in the real world, will be dealt with only lightly. Her labour is her own private business. Work, in this context, is *really* dirty work; it is unmentionable. Even unspeakable. And we may not talk about it because it reintroduces the question of the world. In this privatised universe pleasure is the only work; work itself is unmentionable. To concentrate on the prostitute's trade *as* trade would introduce too much reality into a scheme that is first and foremost one of libidinous fantasy, and pornographic writers, in general, are not concerned with extending the genre in which they work to include a wider view of the world. This is because pornography is the orphan little sister of the arts; its functionalism renders it suspect, more applied art than fine art, and so its very creators rarely take it seriously.

Fine art, that exists for itself alone, is art in a final state of impotence. If nobody, including the artist, acknowledges art as a means of *knowing* the world, then art is relegated to a kind of rumpus room of the mind and the irresponsibility of the artist and the irrelevance of art to actual living becomes part and parcel of the practice of art. Nevertheless, pornographic writing retains this in common with all literature – that it turns the flesh into word. This is the real transformation the text performs upon libidinous fantasy.

The verbal structure is in itself reassuring. We know we