



VINTAGE

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# AT HOME WITH THE MARQUIS DE SADE

FRANCINE DU PLESSIX GRAY

## ***Contents***

*Cover*

*About the Book*

*About the Author*

*Dedication*

*Title Page*

*Foreword*

### ***PART ONE***

I: Youth

II: The Father

III: Wild Oats

IV: Settling Down

V: The First Outrage

VI: A Peaceful Interlude

VII: La Coste

VIII: Easter Sunday

IX: A Winter in Provence

X: The Orgy

XI: The Prisoner

XII: On the Lam

XIII: The Last Fling of Liberty

XIV: The Trap

### ***PART TWO***

XV: The Child of the Government

XVI: Freedom, Almost

XVII: An Utterly Chaste Romance

XVIII: 'Monsieur le 6', 1778-84  
XIX: The Jealous Husband  
XX: The Tower of Liberty: 1784-89  
XXI: Reading and Writing: The Budding Novelist  
XXII: The Children, the Future  
XXIII: A Royal Scandal and Its Aftermaths  
XXIV: The Revolution According to Madame de Sade  
XXV: Liberation  
XXVI: The Active Citizen  
XXVII: A Letter to the King  
XXVIII: President for a Day  
XXIX: 'Sade, Who Is Not Without Talents'  
XXX: Society  
XXXI: Last Curtain Calls

*Epilogue*

*Picture Section*

*Notes*

*Index*

*Photo Credits*

*Acknowledgements*

*Bibliography*

*Copyright*

## About the Book

Donatien Alphonse Francois, Marquis de Sade (1740-1814), one of the most perplexing personalities of Western culture, has been called 'the freest spirit who ever lived' and 'a frenetic and abominable assemblage of all crimes and obscenities'. Yet scant attention has been given to the two women who were the catalysts of his fate: his loyal, tolerant wife, Renee-Pelagie, and his vindictive mother-in-law, Madame de Montreuil. This groundbreaking account vividly brings to life these two dynamic women and the complex bonds they evolved with the rakish Marquis, as they dedicated themselves to protecting, curbing and, ultimately, confining him.

Francine du Plessix Gray draws on thousands of pages of correspondence between the magnetic, aristocratic Marquis de Sade and his plain, bourgeois wife, to explore in historical and psychological detail what it was like to live with this maverick adventurer and man of letters in the decades before the French Revolution. She brilliantly recreates the extravagant hedonism and corruption of late-18th-century France, the ensuing Terror, and the oppression of the Napoleonic regime under which de Sade spent his last years.

## About the Author

Francine du Plessix Gray is a distinguished novelist, essayist and biographer, as well as a journalist and university lecturer.

She was born in the French Embassy in Warsaw, and, after her father's death with the Free French Forces in the Second World War, emigrated to the United States with her Russian-born mother. She has been decorated by the French government as Chevalier de l'Ordre des Arts et Lettres. In 1983 she received the National Magazine Award for Best Reporting for her articles in *Vanity Fair*, currently she contributes frequently to the *New Yorker*. She has been the recipient of a Guggenheim Fellowship and is a member of the American Academy of Arts and Letters. She lives in Connecticut with her husband, the painter Cleve Gray.

She has written eight previous books of fiction and non-fiction. Her first book, *Divine Disobedience: Profiles in Catholic Radicalism* (1970) won the National Catholic Book Award. Other titles include *Soviet Women* (1990) and a biography of the nineteenth-century French writer, Louise Colet, entitled *Rage and Fire* (1994).

To Alex and Melinda  
with gratitude and love always

# At Home with the Marquis De Sade

Francine du Plessix Gray



PIMLICO

## Foreword

*Since therefore the knowledge and survey of vice is in this world so necessary to the constituting of human virtue, and the scanning of error to the confirmation of truth, how can we more safely, and with less danger, scout into the regions of sin and falsity than by reading all manner of tractates and hearing all manner of reason? And this is the benefit which may be had of books promiscuously read.*

—Milton, *Areopagitica*

DONATIEN ALPHONSE FRANÇOIS, Marquis de Sade (1740–1814), is one of the few men in history whose names have spawned adjectives (others who come readily to mind are Plato, Machiavelli, and Masoch). He may well be the only writer who will never lose his capacity to shock us. And over the past century, he has evoked more mixed epithets than any other writer in memory: ‘the freest spirit who ever lived’,<sup>1</sup> ‘a Professor Emeritus of Crime’,<sup>2</sup> ‘the most lucid hero of Western thought’,<sup>3</sup> ‘a frenetic and abominable assemblage of all crimes and obscenities’,<sup>4</sup> ‘the one completely consistent and thorough-going revolutionary of history’.<sup>5</sup>

Yet when I steeped myself in the scandalous marquis’s correspondence, I became entranced by the more modest, familial motifs of his saga. I soon realized that few writers’ destinies have been so powerfully shaped by women, that few lives provide a more eloquent allegory on women’s ability to tame men’s nomadic sexual energies, to enforce civilization and its attendant discontents.

This millennial conflict is exemplified by the complex relationship Sade evolved with the two central female figures in his life: with his devoted wife, Renée-Pélagie de Sade, and with his vindictive, brilliant mother-in-law, Mme

de Montreuil, each of whom, in her own way, dealt with the taboos that imprisoned Sade the man and liberated Sade the writer.

For it was Sade's proper mother-in-law who was responsible for his decades of imprisonment and was thus a muse (if she'd only known!) of his feral texts. It was Sade's prudish wife who fostered his talent during his years of detainment and preserved his scabrous correspondence, perhaps the most remarkable part of his oeuvre. What was it like, I began to wonder as I read on, to be at home with the Marquis de Sade? What was it like to be the Marquise de Sade, a pious, very decorous woman married, throughout the decades that preceded the French Revolution, to one of the most depraved mavericks of recent times? What was it like to be Sade's mother-in-law, a highly ambitious bourgeoisie struggling to protect the fabric of a family that her renegade son-in-law constantly threatened to destroy? And beyond his real-life orgies and delirious fictional debauches, what kind of husband was Sade to write the following letter, from his jail cell at Vincennes, to his prim and pining wife?

Rest assured, soul of my soul, that the first little errand I will make upon being sprung, my very first action as a free man, after kissing your eyes, your nipples, and your buttocks, will be to purchase . . . the totality of the works of Montaigne, Voltaire, J.-J. Rousseau . . . [And] why the refusal of the peach wine? . . . Could one or two bottles of peach wine, my Poozie, subvert the Salic Law, or threaten the Justinian Code? Hark ye, Minerva's favourite, only a drunkard should suffer such a refusal: but I who am solely inebriated by your charms and am never sated by them, O you Olympian ambrosia, shouldn't be denied a little peach wine! Charm of my eyes, I thank you for the fine Rousseau print you sent me. Flame of my life, when will your alabaster fingers come to exchange the irons of [my jailer] for the roses of your breast? Adieu, I kiss it and go to sleep. This 24th [of November 1783] at 1 a.m.<sup>6</sup>

It is, in part, the irony and rage and tenderness of the Marquis and Marquise de Sade's correspondence that encouraged me to write this book. The writer's task is to

probe the mystery of personality, the mystery of human incompleteness, particularly the mystery of love and of evil. And one cannot hope to explore the most hidden recesses of the mortal cave without giving equal time to yogis and to commissars, to heroes and to cowards, to kings and to knaves, to demons and to saints. In this family portrait, I have tried to shed light on the enigmas of guilt and grace evoked by Sade's fate and bring to life the extraordinary women who shaped it.

# *Part One*

# I

## *Youth*

*I assumed that everything must yield to me, that the entire universe had to flatter my whims, and that I had the right to satisfy them at will.*

—*Aline et Valcour*1

THE CHILD STOOD in the palace courtyard, shouting. Donatien Alphonse François, Marquis de Sade, a blond four-year-old, was giving the first public display of his dreadful temper.

‘That is mine!’ he yelled at his playmate, eight-year-old Prince de Condé, a prince of the royal blood. Donatien may have been clamouring for his toy horse, his miniature sword, his skipping rope. It could have been one of many objects, but it was the one currently in his friend’s hand, and Donatien, fearing that the little prince would choose to keep it, demanded that it be returned to him that very instant.

Upon being denied his toy, the four-year-old threw himself fiercely upon his dearest playmate, the beloved companion in whose home he had been brought up since birth, and started pummeling the young Prince de Condé’s chest with his fists, smacking the face ten inches above his own, continuing to bellow out his rage, howling urgently for his possession. Young Condé, who as head of the junior branch of the Bourbon family was already aware of his exalted station, cried out for his friend to stop. Soon the warring pair was surrounded by dozens of palace personnel—gentlemen of the bedchamber and tutors and governesses, equerries, grooms, and valets, all shouting for the little marquis to desist. It took the strength of several adults to separate the battling children. Young Sade’s voracity, his need to have

every appetite instantly indulged—which most humans begin to curb at the age of seven or eight—was a trait this particular boy would seldom in his lifetime be willing to control.

The struggle took place in 1744 at the Condés' palace, Paris's largest private residence, whose hundreds of acres of park and scores of superbly furnished rooms overlooked the entire expanse of what is now the Luxembourg Gardens. Born in 1740, the little Marquis de Sade had been brought up in this palace alongside young Prince de Condé, his mother being a relative of the prince's father and a governess and lady-in-waiting to the prince.

Whether the young noble was bruised or bloodied by Donatien's blows, or whether just his feelings were hurt, is not known. There is only one fact we are sure of: shortly after this confrontation, the four-year-old Marquis de Sade suffered the first of his many banishments. In the following weeks, he was shunted out of Paris to his paternal grandmother's home in Avignon, the region of Provence where his ancestors had exercised their feudal rights with legendary arrogance.

The young marquis's nascent hubris cannot have been diminished by the greeting he received upon his arrival in Avignon. He was met by a delegation of the most distinguished citizens of Saumane, one of the several neighbouring villages owned by his father. They came, in the delegation's own words, 'to compliment M. Marquis de Sade, son of M. le Comte, lord of this place, on his happy arrival in Avignon, and to wish him long and happy years as his presumptive heir'.<sup>2</sup> A score of adults bowing, scraping their hats upon the floor, to pay homage to the three-foot-high Donatien: he must have relished it.

In his first and most autobiographical novel, *Aline et Valcour*, written decades later at the Bastille, Sade would describe this childhood quarrel, which he viewed as his first

dishonour, and his subsequent dismissal from the Condés' court:

Connected, through my mother, to all the greatest powers in the kingdom and, through my father, to the most distinguished families of the province of Languedoc; born in Paris in the bosom of luxury and plenty, I believed, from the very first moment I could reason, that nature and fortune had collaborated to lavish me with their gifts; I believed it because people were foolish enough to tell me so, and this ridiculous prejudice made me haughty, despotic, and choleric. . . . I shall relate just one feature of my childhood to convince you of the dangerous principles that were so ineptly allowed to flourish in me.

Since I was born and raised in the palace of the illustrious prince to whom my mother was honoured to be connected, and who was my contemporary, I was encouraged to be constantly in his company . . . but during one of our youthful games, my vanity . . . was ruffled during a quarrel over an object; and since [the prince] seemed to think he was entitled to it through sheer rank, I avenged myself for his resistance with repeated blows which were beyond my control, with the result that only violent force could separate me from my adversary.<sup>3</sup>

There is hubris in this passage, and much preening about origins. Young Donatien came from the kind of Provençal nobility that bristles with self-serving legends. The names Gaspar and Balthasar having recurred frequently in the family—they were widespread throughout the region—the Sades even promoted the myth that they were directly descended from one of the three Magi. What is far more certain than that particular delusion is that the family had been rooted in the Avignon region since at least the tenth century and bought a title of nobility after growing rich in the textile trade, having specialized in the processing of hemp. From then on, their progeny abounded with high-ranking civil servants and clerics—many bishops, eight Knights of Malta, scores of magistrates and high dignitaries of Avignon's papal court, and also numerous priests and nuns, who would later fuel Donatien de Sade's erotic imagination.

The marquis's ancestry begins to be precisely chronicled with one Louis de Sade, a textile magnate who in 1177

helped to finance the building of the Pont Bénézet, Avignon's oldest bridge and the subject of that popular French children's ditty 'Sur le Pont d'Avignon'.<sup>4</sup> It was Louis's great-great-grandson Hughes who initiated the most romantic legend attached to the Sade clan: he married a woman called Laure de Noves, who became fabled throughout history as Petrarch's muse. The poet began his lifelong obsession with Laure de Sade upon glimpsing her at Sunday mass in Avignon when she was a young married woman of twenty-three. She remained the dark lady of his sonnets until she died of the plague, twenty years to the day after their meeting. Opinions have varied on whether Laure ever returned Petrarch's love. Arguments for her chastity emphasize the several children she had already borne her husband, the bard's many complaints concerning his muse's coolness, his repeated praise for her moral virtue, and the theme of 'unattainability' and 'distance' central to Petrarch's oeuvre and to the general traditions of fourteenth-century courtly love. The case for her surrender stresses that it would have been difficult for any woman to resist, for twenty years, the love of Christendom's most famous poet, especially in a society of such notoriously loose mores: medieval Avignon was a city of easy virtue, in whose convents some of the region's lewdest orgies were held.

Whether or not Laure gave in to the poet—contemporary scholars tend to deny that she ever did<sup>5</sup>—she wove a phenomenal spell on the Sade family's imagination. For many centuries, nearly every generation of Sades has included her in their daughters' baptismal names. Her most illustrious descendant, the marquis, her great-grandson twelve generations removed, was haunted by her legend throughout his life. And her fascination continues undiminished to this day—a noted twentieth-century offspring is Philippe de Montebello, director of New York's Metropolitan Museum and a direct descendant of the

marquis, who like every member of his generation of Sades has called his own daughter Laure.

The family entered the late seventeenth century through Gaspard-François de Sade, Donatien's paternal grandfather. He was the first in his family to urge his offspring to set their ambitions on Paris. This was a significant step, for until then the Sades, like the great majority of Provençal nobles, had looked on the capital with a mixture of envy and mistrust, and had never attempted their fortunes outside the confines of their province. Gaspard-François was also the first Sade to call himself Marquis. The title had recently come into wide usage, and Provençal nobles tended to enjoy its flamboyance. (The alternation of titles in the Sade family has caused great confusion. The first marquis's oldest son, Jean-Baptiste de Sade, Donatien's father, reverted to the less flashy status of count. Upon Donatien's birth, shortly after the first marquis died, his parents decided he should bear his grandfather's title—French government authorities, however, would frequently use 'Count' as a designation for young Sade.)

The Comte de Sade, Donatien's diplomat father, was one of the more illustrious rakes of Louis XV's reign. He had an unusually complex and close relationship with his only child, but he saw little of Donatien during the boy's first ten years, being constantly engaged in diplomatic missions in foreign lands. Donatien's indolent mother, who spent much of her life sponging off relatives and religious orders, was equally absent from Donatien's orbit. She accompanied her husband on his foreign assignments, not out of marital devotion—the Comte and Comtesse de Sade were notoriously hostile to each other—but in order to get him out of his many scrapes. So when four-year-old Donatien was exiled to Provence after his struggle with the Prince de Condé, it was his paternal grandmother he first lived with. This convivial matriarch, who doted on her only grandson,

lived in the palatial Hôtel de Sade, which still stands in the centre of Avignon and now serves as its prefecture.

Grand-mère de Sade was visited often by her five daughters. Her youngest child, Donatien's aunt Henriette-Victoire, a notoriously promiscuous beauty, was particularly fond of her turbulent little nephew and loved to indulge him. She had married a great lord of Provence, the Marquis de Villeneuve-Martignan, who built her a splendid palace, not far from her mother's house, which now houses the Musée Calvet. The dowager marquise's other four daughters were nuns. Convents being relatively worldly in prerevolutionary days, these ladies, during their frequent forays into the secular world, doted on Donatien as lavishly as the rest of his female kin. Aunt Gabrielle Laure, his father's eldest sister, a forceful personality with a taste for wild game and truffles, was abbess of the convent of Saint-Laurent in Avignon. Aunt Gabrielle Éléonore was abbess of a nunnery in nearby Cavillon, a town renowned for its succulent melons. Aunts Anne-Marie Lucrèce and Marguerite-Félicité also belonged to monastic communities in the Avignon region. In addition, one of Donatien's paternal uncles, Richard-Jean-Louis de Sade, was a knight of the Order of Malta and served as grand prior of the city of Toulouse; the boy's other uncle, Jacques-François-Paul-Aldonse de Sade, was a worldly cleric whose influence on Donatien would be fully as great as the child's father's.

The religious vocations that prevailed in that generation of Sades had a crucial impact on young Donatien's character. With the exception of the Marquise de Villeneuve, who had several daughters, none of his aunts or uncles had children. Thus the hot-tempered boy was the only male descendant of a family that took its distinguished lineage all too seriously. His status was further enhanced by his connections to Paris society. His father was the first Sade to take part in the court life of Versailles; his mother, being related to the great Condés, could claim descent from the

most hallowed monarch in the nation's history, thirteenth-century king Saint Louis. Moreover, Donatien, a round-faced, blue-eyed boy with curly blond hair and a memorably sweet voice, was said to be so handsome that women stopped in the streets to stare at him. The doting grandmother and the coddling aunts lavished all manner of affection on the child. Plying him with toys, sweets, and caresses, they indulged his most capricious whims, with the result that the apprentice tyrant, as he was the first to admit, became more unruly than ever. 'My father being busy with diplomatic negotiations, my mother having followed him,' he later wrote, 'I was sent to the home of a grandmother . . . whose overly blind tenderness fostered all the faults I have acknowledged.'<sup>6</sup>

The Comte de Sade must have learned that his son was being spoiled by his female relatives and decided that Donatien's character needed to be honed by male authority. So the little marquis went into his second exile, this time with his paternal uncle the Abbé Jacques-François de Sade, a cleric and scholar. The abbé's official functions, at his tiny abbey in the Auvergne, took up only a few months of the year. He spent the rest of his time at the family castle of Saumane, some thirty-five kilometres from Avignon and equidistant, by some six kilometres, from the towns of Fontaine-de-Vaucluse and L'Isle-sur-la-Sorgue. Saumane, which one of the Avignon popes had offered the Sades centuries back as a reward for their services, belonged officially to Donatien's father, who had given his younger brother a lifelong lease on it. The little marquis, now six or so,<sup>7</sup> was in for a grim surprise.

One can still see the château of Saumane as it was when Donatien first entered it. A sinister former fortress whose foundations date back to the twelfth century, it retains the ominous air of a military stronghold. It is built upon the steep rocky crag that overlooks its tiny village, and is perpetually shrouded by dense groves of evergreens and

oaks. Its high crenellated ramparts of dark-grey stone, the grey of an unkempt tomb, are still dotted with openings for artillery pieces and Judas windows, and they overlook a foreboding twenty-foot-deep moat hollowed out of the rock. And one cannot look at this oppressive residence without recalling the fortress of Silling, the lugubrious fictional citadel in which the morbid orgies of Sade's *The 120 Days of Sodom* are held: 'A very narrow, very steep spiral staircase with three hundred steps . . . descended through the entrails of the earth towards a kind of vaulted dungeon sealed by three iron gates and containing all that the cruellest art and most refined barbarism could invent in the way of atrocity.'<sup>8</sup>

Luckily for Donatien, the master of this sombre estate had a temperament and manner radically at odds with his surroundings. Jacques-François de Sade was an amiable forty-year-old priest and scholar with an ardent love life, who was much admired for his gallantry and literary skills. Like his brother the Comte de Sade, he was well known in Parisian society and was a friend of Voltaire's and of the philosopher's companion, the eminent Mme du Châtelet. 'I love you with all my heart,' Voltaire had written to the abbé a few years before Donatien arrived in Saumane. 'I shall be devoted to you throughout my brief life.'<sup>9</sup> Voltaire and Châtelet often worried that the abbé's Enlightenment ideals would eventually be dimmed by his clerical vocation: '[The Abbé de Sade] is one of the men I like best,' Châtelet wrote to a friend she shared with Donatien's uncle. 'Unless four or five years of priestifying have terribly spoiled him, I'm sure that his wit and character have pleased you.'<sup>10</sup>

Voltaire, also hoping that the abbé would retain his hedonistic bent, dedicated the following verses to him: 'However much of a priest you are, / O Sir, you'll continue to love; / that is your true ministry, / Be you a bishop or the Holy Father. / You will love, you will seduce / and you'll equally succeed / in the Church and in Cythera.'<sup>11</sup>

Voltaire's predictions were on the mark. Part of the abbé's charm, to his generation of libertines, was that he remained an active debauchee while acquiring considerable standing as a linguist and scholar. He held true to the Sades' fascination with their ancestor Laure de Sade by writing a three-volume biography of Petrarch. The work would take him twenty years—it was published in 1763, the year of Donatien's marriage—and came to be looked on as an unexcelled cultural chronicle of fourteenth-century Italy. He also was author of a book on the French poets and troubadours of the Middle Ages and translated numerous Latin texts.

For relaxation, 'the priest of Epicurus', as the abbé was often referred to, enjoyed liaisons with women of very diverse social milieus (he was also known as 'the sybarite of Saumane'). His greatest love was Mme de La Popelinière, a noblewoman who was the official mistress of the powerful Maréchal de Richelieu. But the abbé also frequented Paris's most ribald bordellos, an inclination that led to at least one arrest. For fear that his police record be reopened, he tended to keep away from the capital and confine his lust to Provence. During the years he welcomed the young Marquis de Sade to Saumane, the abbé was keeping simultaneous company with two women, a mother and her daughter, who resided in his house; with a maid called Marie, for whom he had arranged a marriage with a local youth; and with a notorious prostitute in the nearby town of Bonnieux, whom he rewarded handsomely.

But such seemingly lurid details are mitigated if set into the context of the abbé's milieu. The ethics of Provence's clergy, and of its nobility, were even looser than in the rest of France. The French Crown had granted the papacy a vast tract of land in the Avignon area in the thirteenth century, when the Pope sought refuge from the political turmoil of Rome; and until the Revolution, Avignon would remain under the notoriously lax jurisdiction of the papal police. The

region had long been renowned for the debauchery of its brothels and taverns. It was also an asylum for countless criminals ('a sewer where all the muck of the universe collects',<sup>12</sup> Petrarch called Avignon in the thirteenth century). Moreover, during the popes' seventy years in Provence, their penury had induced them to evolve a uniquely corrupt system of indulgences. Here, for instance, are some legal stipulations issued by the Avignon papacy, which intended to raise cash by absolving sinners of some of the worst crimes in Christendom:

A nun who has given herself to several men, simultaneously or successively, within or outside her monastery, and wishes to achieve the rank of abbess, will pay 131 livres, 15 sous.

For all sins of fornication committed by a layman, absolution will be given for 27 livres. Add an extra 4 livres for incest.

Adulterous women can receive absolution, be shielded from any prosecution, and receive dispensation to continue illicit relations, for 87 livres, 5 sous.<sup>13</sup>

The aura of dissipation that permeated the Marquis de Sade's childhood later supplied him with his favourite moral fodder: he would frequently excuse his own depravity by flaunting the profligacy of various kin and male surrogates. 'Priest though he is, he still keeps a pair of trollops in his house,' Donatien wrote to his aunt Gabrielle Éléonore of Cavaillon at the age of twenty-five, as he described her brother's household. 'Is his château a seraglio? No, better, it's a bordello,' he added in response to one of her scoldings. 'Forgive my mischief . . . I'm taking up the family spirit, and if I have anything to reproach myself for, it's to have the misfortune of being born into it. God keep me from all the foolishness and vice with which it is rife.'<sup>14</sup>

SETTLED WITH this curious surrogate family, a 'bordello' whose members seem to have shown Donatien great kindness, the child grew very fond of his uncle. The Abbé de Sade was clearly intrigued by this choleric, imperious but emotionally

fragile boy who was also capable of great gentleness, and he took his ward along on most of his excursions. They often visited a Sade estate, La Coste, which the marquis's later antics would make notorious. They shared many excursions to the village of Fontaine-de-Vaucluse, a bare six kilometres' distance from Saumane, where the Sorgue River begins its tumultuous course. It was in Fontaine-de-Vaucluse, on the banks of the Sorgue, that Petrarch lived for seventeen years while nursing his hopeless passion for the beautiful Laure de Sade. The site of the little riverside house he lived in, and in which he composed scores of sonnets to his muse, remains little changed to this day. As Petrarch's biographer, the Abbé often entranced his nephew with accounts of the poet's love for their ancestor. Through such excursions to places that had been linked to his family for centuries, Donatien learned to love this region of Provence—the verdant rolling hills that stretch between the peaks of the Lubéron and Ventoux mountain chains, the groves of olive, fig, cherry, pear, and quince trees that thrive in their valleys, the steep hilltop villages clinging to their slopes.

Every few months, the abbé's household took off a day to travel, by coach, the twenty miles to Avignon, referred to as 'the city'. Mail from 'the city' reached Saumane only once a week; news of Paris was far less frequent and seemed to come from another planet.

Like most youngsters his age, Donatien enjoyed helping with simple rural tasks: milking the cows and goats, collecting eggs, helping to herd sheep, learning to fish for the fine trout—a favourite fare of his uncle—found in the rushing waters of the Sorgue. It was also at the abbé's estate that Donatien acquired his attachment to dogs; he would continue to love them as an adult, often asking permission, decades later, to keep dogs in his jail cells to allay his solitude. He frequently socialized with local children, sons of peasants or of the few bourgeois—doctors,

lawyers—who lived in nearby villages and from whom he acquired his fluent knowledge of the Provençal dialect.

The days, the years, passed uneventfully. The abbé occasionally left his seraglio at Saumane to oversee a dilapidated Cistercian abbey in the Auvergne, whose administration was his principal source of income. Its community consisted of four monks in various phases of senility. Donatien, who accompanied his uncle on most such journeys, may later have transmuted this particular memory of ramshackle priories and sinister friars into his fiction. Back at Saumane, the abbé's concubines—the mother-and-daughter pair, the maid Marie—caressed Donatien like a pet and exclaimed, as all women did, on his beauty. When his uncle was at home, there were occasions when Donatien might have heard sounds of much heaving and laughter emerging from the 'seraglio' in which Uncle Jacques-François cavorted with his paramours. And yet the Abbé de Sade retained a rigorous sense of protocol: on the occasions when a bishop or fellow cleric came for lunch—Monseigneur l'Évêque de Montélimar, Monsieur le Curé from the nearby town of Apt or Mazan—the ladies retreated back to their rooms, back went the white clerical collar on the Abbé's black garb.

Beyond his lofty social status, there was a particular way in which the young Marquis de Sade must have felt his difference from the children he played with. It can be safely assumed that most of his peers in the tranquil village of Saumane had a mother. And it may have been harder for Donatien than for many other young aristocrats to explain why he seldom saw his own *maman*—why, indeed, he had seen her so seldom that he could barely describe her. He could not have known much about the Comtesse de Sade beyond the fact that she spent a lot of time dressing up to look well at the court of the great Condé family, and accompanied his father on his important diplomatic trips. Questions about his father were far easier to answer, for

though Papa was a very busy diplomat, he sometimes found the time in between his official trips to come to Provence to see the boy, and teach him swordsmanship, and tell him about his trips to Germany and Russia. Donatien's inner thoughts about his female parent, however, were possibly more bitter than any he communicated to his playmates. A hatred of motherhood as virulent as that which prevails throughout Sade's writing—a loathing of procreation, of all manifestations of the maternal principle—is not likely to arise full-blown in adulthood. He may have already felt resentment, by the age often, towards the glacial, self-absorbed mother who seemed too lazy to come and see him in Provence, too lazy, perhaps, even to love anyone.

Fortunately, beyond his uncle's attachment to him, young Donatien was solaced by yet another source of affection, even of purity. Understandably concerned by the limited education his only son was getting in the barnyards and boudoirs of Provence, the Comte de Sade had asked his brother to find a preceptor for his child. Sometime between Donatien's ninth and tenth years, the abbé hired a gentle twenty-six-year-old bachelor who was also called 'Abbé', because he was studying for the priesthood and, though he had not yet been ordained, wore his hair tonsured like a cleric's. It was 'Abbé' Amblet, a native of Annecy, who with great patience taught Donatien the fundamentals of reading and arithmetic, of geography and French history. This 'steadfast and highly intelligent man, a most fitting overseer of my education',<sup>15</sup> as Sade later described him, was the only member of the child's male entourage who was not the least bit interested in keeping company with women. And Sade would remain deeply devoted to this mentor for the rest of his life, taking great pains, even in his own moments of greatest penury, to provide him with financial support.

ONCE HE HAD learned to read, Donatien had plenty of free time, during Abbé Amblet's periods of personal study, to

browse through his uncle's library, as extensive and progressive as that of any liberal nobleman in France. Along with the classics of previous centuries—Cervantes, Boileau, Racine, Molière—every major text of Enlightenment thought was included in the abbé's collection: Locke's *Essay Concerning Human Understanding*; Thomas Hobbes's and Montesquieu's works; all of Rousseau, Voltaire, and Diderot; and the many contemporary works of anthropology and comparative religion that had been banned by the Church and were the *dernier cri* of the French intelligentsia. The abbé's library, like any accomplished eighteenth-century gentleman's, was also rich in erotic literature. It included Aretino's famous *Book of Postures* and scores of salacious contemporary volumes such as *Venus in the Cloister, or the Nun in Her Nightdress* and *The Bordello, or John the Fucker Debauched*. Such books sometimes bore equally lewd publishers' addresses: 'At Incunt, c/o Widow Big Mound's' ('À Anconne, chez la veuve Grosse-Motte').<sup>16</sup>

Even as a child, Sade was a voracious reader, and he tells us that by the age of ten he knew the holdings of Saumane's library so intimately that he could locate almost any volume with his eyes closed. The abbé would have been the last man to put areas of his collection off limits to his nephew. There is no way Donatien could have missed the kind of books intended, as the French euphemism went, 'to be read with one hand'. Nor could he have overlooked their illustrations, many of which displayed persons in religious garb performing curious acts upon each other—monks mightily whipping bare-bottomed nuns who kneel at their prayer stools, wearing the same kind of religious attire and floating white headgear as Aunt Gabrielle Laure of Avignon, Aunt Gabrielle Éléonore of Cavailon. Such books, such images, were an important part of the education Donatien received during the last years he spent with his uncle 'the sybarite of Saumane'.

## II

### *The Father*

*'How many crimes are incited by my prick,' Noirceuil cried out. 'What atrocities I commit in order to make it lose its sperm with a little passion! There's no object on earth which I'm not ready to sacrifice to it! It's a god for me, Juliette, let it also be yours: Adore this despotic phallus, offer incense to this superb deity. I would like it to receive homage from the entire planet. . . .'*

—Juliette

IT WAS A family rife with licentious behaviour.

On a fine autumn evening in the 1730s, a few years before his son, Donatien, was born, Comte Jean-Baptiste de Sade was strolling in the Tuileries Gardens, looking for a good time. Having spotted a young man whose charms he admired, he struck up a conversation and then invited the fellow to join him behind a clump of bushes. Unfortunately for the count, his prey turned out to be a *mouche*, or 'fly', one of the thousands of undercover agents employed by Louis XV's police to monitor the mores of his subjects. Within a few minutes, the Comte de Sade was surrounded and put under arrest. The police report reads as follows:

When the young man passed him by, he [Comte de Sade] . . . made various lewd propositions. . . . He would invite him to dine and go to bed with him. . . . And he would have taken him immediately behind the trees, but the young man was unwilling to go along and proposed instead that they go to his room, which was not far away. . . . Sieur de Sade agreed to this. As the two got up and started on their way . . . the officer of the watch, who had observed them and who learned from the young man's signal that a reprobate was actively soliciting him, attempted to arrest the man but in view of his quality did not, and instead released him after taking his name and address.<sup>1</sup>

Like many of his playboy peers, the Comte de Sade was bisexual, and needed street boys to fully satisfy his impulses. His erotic exploits with men, a fairly minor part of his sexual proclivities, were the only ones that were caste-blind. For most of his pleasure was sought with women of quality—women, in fact, with the most distinguished titles and the most powerful connections in the kingdom.

Upon arriving in Paris from Provence in 1721, the Comte de Sade made friends, through family acquaintances, with the very unpopular but powerful Prince de Condé, father of the young noble who would be roughed up by little Donatien. He obtained a captaincy in Condé's regiment. And he soon began a liaison with the prince's sister, Mlle de Charolais, the most beautiful of the Bourbon princesses and one of the more dissolute women of the French court. She ordered her portraitists to depict her in the garb of a Franciscan nun, not out of any religious devotion but as a way of sexually arousing the lovers to whom she offered these images. 'The singularity of the adventure entices me as much as it does you,' Mlle de Charolais once wrote to Donatien's father when he suggested some particularly exotic orgy, 'and the curiosity of knowing if this debauch will suit me leads me to accept your proposition.'<sup>2</sup>

The Comte de Sade's erotic activities, like his brother's in Provence, should be seen in the context of a particularly libertine phase of French culture. Donatien's father arrived in Paris in the last years of the Regency, the eight-year interlude that began in 1715 with the death of Louis XIV and ended when his only legitimate offspring, his thirteen-year-old great-grandson Louis, was crowned King Louis XV. The Regency was the most dissolute period in French history and might well vie with the late Roman Empire as the most debauched era of Western civilization. Indeed, Mlle de Charolais's capers seem fairly innocuous compared with the excesses of her peers.

The permissiveness of Regency society was in part a rebellion against the rigid etiquette of Louis XIV's court and the austere protocol imposed by his last consort, or morganatic wife, Mme de Maintenon. But it also took its moral tone from the proclivities of the regent himself, the Duc d'Orléans, Louis XIV's nephew, who ruled France between Louis XV's fifth and thirteenth years. A brilliant, industrious statesman, the regent was also an indefatigable playboy and voyeur, who took up with a new batch of paramours at least every fortnight and enjoyed witnessing, if not participating in, some of the most outlandish bacchanals of the time.

In a frenzy of pleasure-seeking, members of the regent's circle held nightly 'suppers' at which, after hours of serious drinking, the highest nobility in the land reenacted the illustrations of various classics of erotic literature. Or else they watched as the Prince de Soubise got his lover, Mme de Gacé, thoroughly inebriated and ordered a group of valets to take their pleasure with her. 'Our state of general debauch is dreadful,' the regent's mother commented about the morals of her son's entourage. 'Youths of both sexes . . . have the conduct of pigs and sows. . . . Women . . . particularly those of our highest families . . . are worse than those in houses of ill repute. . . . I'm amazed that France is not totally drowned, like Sodom and Gomorrah.'<sup>3</sup> The prudish Mme de Maintenon readily concurred. 'I prefer not to paint you a picture of our current mores; I would sin against the love one should have for one's country,'<sup>4</sup> she wrote about the era that followed her consort's reign.

The period of French history into which the Comte de Sade was born has been eloquently represented by the refined hedonism of Watteau's and Boucher's paintings and has primarily been known as the Age of Pleasure-Seeking. But one could also look on it as the Age of Cruelty. A perfect example of the vicious eighteenth-century French aristocrat

was the Comte de Charolais, brother of the Prince de Condé and of the Comte de Sade's mistress. Charolais was particularly detested for the ferocity of his pleasures. 'His heart was cruel and his actions were bloody. . . . Orgies of all kinds were to his taste,' a contemporary described him.<sup>5</sup> Drunk more often than not, Charolais killed peasants for sheer sport the way other men went hunting, and fired at workmen repairing roofs in the village adjoining his castle. Attempting to avoid prosecution, he once begged Louis XV's forgiveness for such murders. The monarch replied: 'The pardon you seek is granted . . . but I shall be even more pleased to pardon the man who kills you.'

'Sublime reply!'<sup>6</sup> the Marquis de Sade later commented on this royal mercy. During his childhood, Donatien had been closely acquainted with Charolais, who was the legal guardian of his childhood playmate the Prince de Condé, and he would later draw heavily on him to portray the depraved protagonists of his novels.

In one brutal prank, Charolais got the Marquise de Saint-Sulpice drunk, then placed two ropes of explosives under her skirt and ignited them. His victim was taken home wrapped in a tablecloth, with dreadful burns on her stomach and thighs. This caper was celebrated with a ditty that swiftly made the rounds of Paris: '*Le grand portail de Saint-Sulpice / Où l'on a tant fait le service / Est brulé jusqu'aux fondements.*' ('The great portal of Saint-Sulpice [one of Paris's most celebrated churches], / Which was the site of so many services, / Has been burned down to its foundations.')

Such was the milieu that young Comte de Sade chose as the power base for his attempted rise in Paris society. Such were the examples set for his son.

LIKE HIS BROTHER the abbé, the Comte de Sade had literary aspirations, which he expressed in heroic verses, novellas, comedies, and tragedies. But unlike his brother, who left a

lasting work of scholarship in his biography of Petrarch, the count never published his writings. Donatien's father exemplified the type of man described by the French phrase *petit maître*—the gay blade endowed with a superficial scribbler's talent who gets ahead in the world through his abundance of facile charm. Of his large literary output, only the count's letters, filled with racy documentations of mid-eighteenth-century Parisian mores, remain of interest to posterity.

Observing society from the homes of the capital's most exalted aristocrats—the Condés, the Rochefoucaulds, his distant cousin the Duchesse de La Roche-Guyon—the count served as confidant to the city's liveliest dowagers: 'She tells me that her love is so violent that it is her very first passion,'<sup>8</sup> he commented about a sixty-year-old duchess who had taken a twenty-two-year-old lover. 'Mme de Clermont could not resist the pleasure of simultaneously cuckolding two men,'<sup>9</sup> he wrote about another Parisian grande dame. His correspondence with his own paramours is filled with ironic reversals of accepted pieties. 'How can one not be unfaithful, my queen?' he wrote to one of his most beloved mistresses, Mme de Raimond, whom young Donatien would eventually look upon as an adopted mother. 'Only idiots are constant. . . . One must submit to whatever temptation presents itself. . . . I've sometimes known faithful lovers. . . . Their sadness, moroseness, would make you tremble. If my son were to be faithful, I would be outraged.'<sup>10</sup>

The Comte de Sade's eventual social decline was based not only on his lack of scruples but on an astonishing lack of judgement. He seems to have made a grave miscalculation, for instance, by choosing the Condé-Charolais family as his central power base, for they were as despised by their fellow nobles, and by the general public, as any aristocrats in France. The count's fall from grace would also be caused