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Publication date

2014

Document Version

Final published version

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Citation for published version (APA):

Hekma, G. (Author). (2014). [Review of : W.F. Edmiston (2013) Sade: Queer Theorist]. Web publication or website, H-Net Reviews. <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=42764>

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H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences



William F. Edmiston. *Sade: Queer Theorist*. Oxford: Voltaire Foundation, 2013. x + 244 pp. \$101.00 (paper), ISBN 978-0-7294-1064-9.

Reviewed by Gert Hekma

Published on H-Histsex (November, 2014)

Commissioned by Chiara Beccalossi

Over the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, the “divine marquis” influenced literature, philosophy, and artistic and social movements such as Surrealism, Situationism, and Provo. His name became a byword for cruelty and sexual perversion in popular culture, and, as his work was forbidden until the 1960s, for a long time it remained accessible only in underground circles. Despite the celebrated and infamous position that the marquis de Sade holds in such diverse intellectual and artistic traditions and popular imagination, his work has received little serious attention in the fields of gay, lesbian, gender, or queer studies for its discussion of sadism, homosexual practices, and gender variation. And rarely is the life of the author who penned the novel *La philosophie dans le boudoir* (1795), which includes a tract that is an early declaration for homosexual rights, acknowledged as a predecessor of the gay and queer movements.

William F. Edmiston’s marvelous investigation into Sade as queer theorist stands out for introducing him into these fields. While the violence and cruelty in sexuality that are often seen as typical of Sade’s work receive relatively little attention, themes of homosexuality and incest drive Edmiston’s analysis in a reading that gives a rich overview of gender and sexual transgressions in Sade’s work and life. Literary and biographical analyses frame the third major theme in Edmiston’s work: is homosexuality a practice or proclivity in Sade and his characters?

Donatien Alphonse François marquis de Sade (1740 – 1814) lived at the end of the Enlightenment and was seen as one of its most important and highly critical adherents. After a string of sexual scandals, he ended up spending twenty-seven years of his life incarcerated in prisons and mental asylums. In these institutions he produced a body of literary work that mixed violent sexuality with philosophical considerations on themes such as state, church, gender, sexuality, incest, crime, and nature. Due to this remarkable interweaving of themes he

is regarded as both a pornographer and a philosopher. In this age, pornography was still at its inception and understood as politically subversive rather than erotic literature. The work of Sade stands out in philosophy because it came in the form of novels and not academic essays or treatises. It offers an open, undogmatic system. This form of writing allowed Sade to distance himself from the opinions voiced in his work by creating literature and also by denying that he was the author of his books—a sensible strategy in a time when such work was strictly forbidden.

Edmiston draws on a commendably diverse range of sources in three chapters devoted to the topics of gender and sexual pleasure; nature, sodomy, and the question of homosexuality as practice or proclivity; and incest in comparison with same-sex pleasure (respectively). In the first chapter, Edmiston shows how Sade extensively addresses gender variation and presents many strong women who enjoy sex and can be very masculine—having enormous clitorises and using dildos to engage in Sade’s favorite pastime, anal sex or sodomy. They are passive and active partners, both with men and women. Men transgress the gender binary as well by enjoying being penetrated and showing their feminine side. At the same time, Edmiston deplores Sade’s misogyny, as men are often the libertines and women their victims. The marquis may invert this scheme quite regularly, but his perspective remains distinctly masculine. This raises the question as to whether we should see Sade’s work as an essay or as a reflection of his society in which women were victims of Catholic priests who had more success in producing female prudes than male adherents for their bigotry. He divides women into two types: those who submit to Catholic doctrines of virtue and suffer from evil and those who quickly learn that virtue has little to offer and follow the lead of libertines and enjoy good and evil. It seems that male nature debauches men, resulting in them not having the religious qualms of women. There are good reasons to see the misogyny in Sade’s work as

a reflection of his time and less as the view of Sade on women because his works show many sexually liberated and gender-transgressive women who give 'positive' examples (if one can speak of positive in Sadean terms) in his highly ambiguous works.

The book discusses two different theories of sexuality at work in the novels. The first is a generalizing one, in which individuals are able to enjoy a spectrum of sexual pleasures. The other is particular: individuals have specific proclivities. Edmiston is especially interested in whether homosexuality is a practice that anyone can engage in or an innate characteristic. He comes to the conclusion that Sade's writing represents a period when theories were changing from the idea of homosexuality as a practice to its conception as an inborn trait. He confirms Foucault's theory regarding the transformation of sodomy as a practice, sin, and crime, to homosexuality as a pathological identity, but indicates that in the case of Sade, this transition happened a century before its realization by doctors and homosexuals themselves. In this reading, Sade sat between two time periods and was very much a forerunner as his work preceded those of homosexual rights activists such as Karl Heinrich Ulrichs and Magnus Hirschfeld, and of sexologists such as Richard von Krafft-Ebing and Havelock Ellis. I am somewhat amazed that Edmiston cannot entertain the view that both theories (the one that saw sodomy as a practice and the one that saw homosexuality as a pathological identity) may have existed at the same time. A good example is the conversation between Chevalier de Mirvel and Dolmancé at the beginning of *La philosophie dans le boudoir* (1795), in which the first is clearly heterosexual and the second homosexual. The latter seduces Mirvel into penetrating him, which Mirvel declares he has no qualms about: he is not a macho type who would hit a charming person who makes such a proposal. Mirvel penetrates Dolmancé and the pleasure is returned when the men reverse roles and heterosexual Mirvel enjoys being anally penetrated. Here we see a generalizing perspective (that homosexuality is a practice anyone can engage in) that fits together perfectly with a particularizing one (Dolmancé asserting a preference for penetration). Into this Sade inserts Mirvel's ironic statement on queer bashing.

Edmiston suggests that Sade was bisexual. I wonder why he does not say, considering the title of his book, that the marquis was the archetypal queer and in that sense a precursor to queer theory and life. Sade went beyond homo- and heterosexuality and could be defined in modern parlance as more of a masochist who preferred passive sodomy with women and men. Desire is always

more specific than the categories homo-, hetero- or bisexual imply and one does not do justice to individuals by using such broad and vague terms.

Another major topic is incest, which, according to Edmiston, was a more accepted practice than sodomy in the eighteenth century. The author sees Sade as a writer who was intent on shocking, but in my view, he went further. The marquis prioritized sodomy because it is the exact opposite of coital sex and, as we know, the church and state only allowed this kind of sex within the context of marriage and with the aim of reproduction. Incest was such an interesting topic for Sade because it undermined ideas of the family being the foundation of society. Weddings provided linkages between families and guaranteed the reproduction of new citizens. His reversal of coitus (sodomy) and marriage (incest) was a most subversive attack on these two main societal institutions. The traditions of coital sex and reproductive family were sustained not only by church and state, but also by his fellow Enlightened philosophers such as Montesquieu, Voltaire, and Rousseau. They saw the heterosexual family as the basis for their new social order and, in fact, challenged few traditional religious values in framing the sexual ethics and politics of the secular state. Homosexuality remained a base pleasure that could be better prevented through moral censure and good education than through criminalization; incest was a direct attack on the holy family that created strict divisions between genders (male and female) and generations (parents and progeny). The legacy of this union between conservative Enlightenment thought and religious edict made radical criticism just as uncommon among the early sexologists or Freudians, a situation that remained until the sexual revolution in the 1960s when Sade's work finally received wider circulation.

Another topic that Edmiston raises concerns nature. For him the main question is whether sexual desires are in nature, but a more interesting question might have been what kind of nature Sade supposes. In that respect, he is again in stark contradiction with other philosophers. At a time when many Enlightened philosophers believed in a "good" nature being made "bad" by culture, as in the masturbation debate where innocent children were thought to be corrupted by external influences, Sade took an opposite stance and underlined the "evil" and "violent" in nature. He sees all sexual pleasure in pain and suffering—of the other and the self—including lust murder as an integral part of a nature that is brutal rather than good. While Thomas Malthus is concerned with the scarcity of natural resources, the marquis continuously stresses their abundance. The rising anxiety about mas-

turbation in youngsters as indicated in Samuel Auguste Tissot's work on onanism (self-pleasuring) is of no concern to Sade because sperm is plentiful. Immanuel Kant's rejection of self-abuse and homosexuality and promotion of reproduction as the only legitimate aim of sexuality is again contrary to Sade's insights. The only individual who came close to successfully advocating such radical views was utopian socialist Charles Fourier, who lived just after Sade and endorsed gender and sexual diversity and plural loves as fundamental to society.

A nature that is seen as evil and violent has very different consequences for society than one that is seen as good and peaceful. The manner in which Edmiston discusses nature in the work and life of Sade is misguided because he pays little attention to the various possible interpretations of the concept of nature. As a queer theorist it is surprising that Edmiston does not realize how words are unstable and have multiple meanings, and how many faces "homosexual" and "nature" have in Sade and his work. If he was "it," he was more the masochist than

the "vanilla" kind that only finds pleasure in soft sex. However, as Sade was first and foremost a novelist, the two different ways in which he discusses homosexuality as a practice and an identity coexist. The radical points that Sade makes on gender, sexuality, or violence are no dogma, but open to discussion. His oeuvre is ideal for queer theory and sexologists to engage with.

Sade is a controversial author and, as LeBrun underlined in her *Soudain un bloc d'abîme, Sade* (1986, *Sade: A Sudden Abyss*), even great philosophers do not always do very well in presenting their ideas. Therefore, it is of little surprise that there are points of criticism regarding Edmiston's text. Sade goes beyond understanding and will always remain an enigmatic person. There is no definitive philosophy in his work and we will always be forced to debate various interpretations. It is very promising that we have begun to make interesting headway into his sex-radical ideas and more work on his queering of sexual and gender politics will undoubtedly follow.

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Citation: Gert Hekma. Review of Edmiston, William F., *Sade: Queer Theorist*. H-Histsex, H-Net Reviews. November, 2014.

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