A Space of Resistance: Madame Duclos and her Counter-Narrative in The 120 Days of Sodom (1785)

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Abstract

This article aims to challenge the common critique of Sade’s misogyny by focusing on the polyphonic discourses in his works. Echoing Stéphanie Genand’s critique that Sade’s oeuvre does not inscribe itself in an act of claiming rights, but in the portrayal of complex identities (2013: 14), this article examines how the multiplicity of voices in Sade’s writings allows for a more nuanced reading and a better understanding of the author (2013: 15). Although it would be wrong to define Sade as a feminist, it is safe to say that his complex female characters embody feminist tendencies. Sade’s “third woman” does not only appear in his nouvelles philosophiques such as Aline et Valcour (1795) but also in the highly pornographic The 120 Days of Sodom, specifically featured in the characterization of one of his forgotten “heroines,” Madame Duclos.

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Sade’s female characters have been generally described as either victims of patriarchy or as rebellious models for women’s emancipation. According to Angela Carter, Justine and her sister Juliette are “without hope and neither pays any heed to a future in which might lie the possibility of a synthesis of their modes of being, neither submissive nor aggressive, capable of thought and feeling” (1978: 79). In her article “The Liberated Woman” (2005), Jane Gallop echoes Carter’s analysis by stating that in her earlier works on Sade, she mistook his construct of the sexually liberated woman as a tool for equal rights during the sexual revolution in the late sixties (2005: 92). Yet more than twenty years later, Gallop distances herself from her earlier interpretations in which she had seen “Sadian antihumanism,” meaning the violation of certain sexual identities, as a “feminist disturbance of the distinction masculine/feminine and the correlative privilege of the male, ideal sphere” (1981: 4). More recent works on Sade, however, take up where Gallop abandoned her feminist readings of Sade. Michèle Valenthini, for example, challenges the binary of femininity and masculinity of Sade’s characters, by arguing for a “third woman,” the synthesis of Juliette and Justine that, according to Carter, was missing in Sade’s novels. Valenthini defines the “third woman” as a “femme future’, adaptée aux nouvelles réalités de l’époque post-révolutionnaire” (2013: 24).

This article aligns with Valenthini’s approach and aims to challenge the common critique of Sade’s misogyny by focusing on the polyphonic discourses in his works. Echoing Stéphanie Genand’s critique that Sade’s oeuvre does not inscribe itself in an act of claiming rights, but in the portrayal of complex identities (2013: 14), this article examines how the multiplicity of voices in Sade’s writings allows for a more nuanced reading and a better understanding of the author (2013: 15). Although it would be wrong to define Sade as a feminist, it is safe to say that his complex female characters embody feminist tendencies.

Contrary to Valenthini’s analysis (24), Sade’s “third woman” does not only appear in his *nouvelles philosophiques* such as *Aline et Valcour* (1795) but also in the highly pornographic *The 120 Days of Sodom*, specifically featured in the characterization of one of his forgotten “heroines,” Madame Duclos. Of the Sadian prostitutes analyzed by scholars thus far, Madame Duclos has been missing. This omission is surprising since she frequently challenges the misogynistic diegesis of the novel by providing counter-narratives that focus on mutual pleasures, female friendships, and lesbian relations. Although she depends on the favor of the four male libertines (the Duc de Blangis, the Bishop of X***, the Président de Curval, Durcet) who hired her together with three other prostitutes to entertain them and to guide the various orgies in the Château of Silling, in several of her stories Madame Duclos underlines the beauty and strength of women, as well as the bond that they can create with each other. Consequently, she uses her advantageous position as the favorite prostitute of one of the libertines to protect one of their victims, Julie, from certain death. In an eighteenth-century version of “Scheherazade” (Carter, 81), not only do the stories of Mme Duclos guarantee her survival of the final massacre described in *The 120 Days of Sodom*, they allow her to save Julie with whom she created a secret alliance against the misogynistic rules established by the libertines.

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1 "Exhibée comme le principe unique de l’univers sadien, sa loi aveugle qui ne démasque pas son pouvoir d’illusion. Condamnant Sade au monstrueux et à la marge, elle empêche sa réception de sortir de l’arène où les pudiques s’opposent aux libertaires, les victimes aux bourreaux, les femmes aux hommes." (Coudreuse, Genand, 2013 :15).
I. Madame Duclos and the power of narration

The role of storyteller empowers Duclos and her three comrades, Madame Champville, Madame Martaine, and Madame Desgranges. As Carter states, “these four women survive the ensuing holocaust” because “they know how to utilize the power of the word, of narrative, to save their lives” (81). While the libertines generally consider women to be “feeble, enfettered creatures destined solely for our [male] pleasures,” (250) whose only duty is to anticipate and obey the libertines’ desires, the four whores that function as storytellers and “priestesses” in the narration are exempt of such harsh treatment for several reasons. First, they help the libertines in their sacrifice of the kidnapped girls and boys and in the disposal of the wives (253). Second, and most importantly, from the beginning of the novel, the power of speech on the senses is underlined by the narrator, according to whom “the sensations communicated by the organs of hearing are the most flattering and those whose impressions are the liveliest” (218). This effect is even heightened if the speaker is capable of “isolating and categorizing and detailing” all of “debauchery’s extravagances” by relating her experiences (219). The capacity of analyzing and narrating sexual passions aligns with Michel Foucault’s definition of the institutionalization of sexual discourse and its immense verbosity starting in the eighteenth century (33). Conversations about sex take place inside power structures, as it is the case during confession. Certainly the stories of the four whores are similar to confessions, since they relate in detail their crimes and acts of debauchery. However, in Sade’s representation of perversion and violence, the confessional mode is not linked to repentance, but to enhancing sexual pleasure.

This link between sexual pleasure and storytelling is evident in the attraction of the Duc to Duclos. Due to her sexual performances and her narrative ability, she is capable of dominating the fiercest of the four libertines. The narrator compares the Duc to a “dreadful colossus,” a “Hercules,” a “centaur,” and a “raging tiger” with a “masculine visage, great dark eyes […] the strength of a horse, the member of a veritable mule” (201). His “huge construction” was responsible for the death of all his wives, “and he had been more than once seen to strangle a woman to death at the instant of his perfidious discharge” (201). Yet this “colossus” is docile in Duclos’s company. On January 16, for example, the Duc is shown sitting next to Duclos, touching “no food save what he has out of her mouth, dotes upon her” (612). The same chapter stresses Duclos’s power over him by comparing Durcet’s infatuation with Madame Martaine to Duc Blangis’s passion for Duclos. This comparison emphasizes the intensity of his attraction to Duclos (603). The narrator states that Duclos “had entirely mastered the art of procuring him delight, and […] according to his own words, his discharges were lubricious with no one else” (432). In the same manner, Duclos has the capacity to arouse him with her tales. On January 11, for example, with four girls and boys of the harem he enacts “countless little wantonries of a kind very analogous to those Duclos had been describing” (379).

The power of her words and of her body on the Duc is obvious. Because of her ability as a storyteller and her expert libertinism the four men decide to spare her life. After Duclos has finished her storytelling for the month of November, the four libertines “recompense [her] for the pleasures she had given them” by naming her “governor-general of the two harems” of boys and girls. Furthermore, the men agree “no matter what the extreme treatment to which they might expose the women in the course of the sojourn, she [Duclos] would always be dealt with gently, and very certainly taken back with them to Paris, where the society would amply reward her for the trouble she had gone

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2 Foucault compares the narration of sexual pleasures in Sade’s novel to “treatises of spiritual direction” (21), where the libertines elicit specific details of the various accounts told by the four women.
to in order to help Messieurs procure a little good cheer” (569). The “little good cheer” that she helped procure the libertines include her art of conversation, her storytelling, as well as her sexual performances (568-569).

The third reason for Duclos’ powerful position in Sade’s otherwise misogynistic fictional universe lies in the fact that she does not merely tell stories, she also comments on them. Foucault’s affirmation that confession is hierarchical and that “the agency of domination does not reside in the one who speaks (for it is he who is constrained), but in the one who listens and says nothing” (62), therefore does not apply to Sade’s works, where this hierarchical situation seems to be leveled. Duclos participates in the analysis of her experiences and is not limited to a simple testimony of her past crimes, which changes her role from passive narrator to active commentator. While she is narrating her first experiences, for example, Duclos comments on the manifestation of disgust and rejection achieved by one of her clients after he reached climax with her help (274, 276), thereby adding a commentary to the story she just told. Furthermore, her remarks incite the libertines to discuss this topic in detail, which reveals her ability to spark the conversations of the libertines.

Duclos even admonishes the four men when their comments steer away from the topics they assigned themselves. On the sixth day, she describes the unusual pleasure of “a brothel-hound” (336) who requested that she vomit in his mouth. This description provokes a long discussion among the men diverting from Duclos’s narration and it causes her to gently reprimand her audience: “Since, said our chronicler, these gentlemen are so fond of that kind of drollery, I greatly regret they were unable to restrain their enthusiasm yet another minute, for the effects of what I have still to relate this evening might, it seems to me, have better found their mark” (338). As a storyteller, she thus obeys the rules that the foursome imposed on her, that is the importance of enhancing her narrations “with the most numerous and searching details” (271), yet she also reflects on her own stories, as well as on the behavior of her audience.

As Gallop states, “the four friends have alienated their liberty to the rules that they themselves drafted […] Any talk of freedom by these four monsters is offset by their obvious dependence on loyalty to the pact between them” (1981: 17). Hence, the victims as well as the libertines are bound by sets of rules. Therefore, the Law that the libertines establish is independent of its creators, and Duclos can embody their Law and reprimand them any time they transgress it. Applying Judith Butler’s critique of the construction of social norms to Duclos’s embodiment of the Law allows us to better understand how the act of reiterating the Law can function as a site of disruption. Butler understands the construction of gender norms as “a process of materialization that stabilizes over time to produce the effect of boundary, fixity” (1993: 9). Quoting Foucault’s definition of power, Butler states that “there is no power that acts, but only a reiterated acting that is power in its persistence and instability” (9). When Duclos embodies the Law, she enacts a “process of sedimentation” or “materialization […] through the citing of power, a citing that establishes an original complicity with power in the formation of the ‘I’” (1993: 15). Yet this complicity with power through reiteration also allows for “possibilities for rematerialization opened up by this process” since power is instable and its reiteration can be done differently. Thus reiteration can turn the regulatory law against itself and question its hegemonic force (1993: 2).

This possibility of rearticulating and calling into question hegemonic forces is the first of the strategies that Duclos applies in order to advance a counter-narrative in the stories that the libertines

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3 A striking example of Duclos’s complicity with the libertines is when she falsely accuses one of the girls, Augustine, to have transgressed one of the rules of the Château of Silling. She thereby partakes in their “barbarious means of multiplying vexations” (518), knowing that the libertines experience more pleasure in punishing the innocent.
expect her to tell. The second strategy resides in fooling and evading the men’s power. As Foucault states, “the pleasure that comes from exercising a power that questions, monitors, watches, spies” is linked to “the pleasure that kindles at having to evade this power, flee from it, fool it, or travesty it” (45). Through her silence regarding specific acts and pleasures, she is able to circumvent the libertines’ mastery. In the following paragraphs, I will examine more in detail Duclos’s strategies of rearticulating, fooling, as well as evading power through counter-narratives and silence that cause performative acts of resistance.

II. Duclos’s counter-narratives, strategies, and performative actions

On day one, Duclos recounts her initiation as a prostitute at the age of seven in a monastery. These experiences include an unpleasant encounter with a monk named Geoffrey who asked the little girl to urinate in his mouth while he was masturbating. As soon as he reached climax, Duclos observed “that he no longer had for his idol, once the incense had been extinguished, the same religious fervor he had while delirium, inflaming is homage, still sustained its glory” (274, 276). The monk asked her to leave, shutting his door abruptly into her face “without affording me [Duclos] the chance to answer him” (275). The libertines interrupt Duclos’s narrative to comment on it. According to the Duc, “one’s pride suffers when one lets a woman see one in such a state of feebleness” (275). Yet the President Curval disagrees with the Duc’s analysis, stating that this disgust is not caused by pride, but by the realization that “the object which is in the profoundest sense devoid of all value save the one our lust endows it with, […] shows itself for what in truth it is once our lubricity has subsided” (275).

While the seven-year old Duclos was literally left speechless by Geoffrey after he closed the door on her, the forty-eight year old Duclos who recounts her sexual experiences in the Château of Siling, is asked by the four libertines to speak. Hence, she can comment on her own experiences and indirectly counter the libertines’ analysis of Geoffrey’s disgust. While the Duc is focused on male pride that would be offended by a female spectator, Duclos emphasizes that “Geoffrey’s tone had wounded” her “little pride” (276), and consequently decided to never again return to the monastery. She therefore juxtaposes the notion of male pride to the feelings of pride in a young girl.

In addition, she changes her status of “object” that Curval had imposed on her with that of a “subject.” The “worthless” object that, according to Curval, is only endowed with value by the libertine’s lust, replies in a twofold manner to Curval’s observation. First, Duclos emphasizes that she was “not very well pleased” by Geoffrey’s behavior, underlining again her feelings from the vantage-point of a subject. Second, in the narration that follows her encounter with Geoffrey, which brought her back to the monastery, Duclos describes a mutually pleasurable sexual relation she experienced with Father Etienne. This experience is opposed to Geoffrey’s objectification of Duclos and his disgust for her. Etienne states from the beginning that “tis only fair that” (277) he will not only teach Duclos how to please him, but also show her how she can receive pleasure. He explains to her how to titillate her clitoris and while she is masturbating him, “he placed his hands so adroitly, he wriggled his fingers with such high art that pleasure rose at last to grip me, and it is without a shadow of a doubt to him I owe my initiation” (279). Etienne “consented to forget his pleasure for a moment in order to devote himself exclusively to cultivating” hers.

Not only does Etienne see in Duclos an equal partner who deserves to experience pleasure as much as he does, he also treats her in a “gallant” (279) way, so much so that Duclos insists on comparing his behavior to that of Father Geoffrey’s. After his climax, “the gallant Etienne, so unlike his piss-swallowing colleague, emerged to tell me that I was charming, that he greatly hoped I would come back to see him, and that he would treat me every time as he was going to now”(279). By paraphrasing
Geoffrey as a “piss-swallowing colleague,” Duclos satisfies her pride and objectifies and ridicules not only Geoffrey, but also the four libertines and their analysis focusing on male subjectivity and “worthless” female sex objects. Duclos thereby reaffirms her subject status and through her narration insists on the pleasure of mutually enjoyable and respectful relations. It is decisive that her experience with Etienne is the last story for the first night, leaving the formerly speechless, young Duclos with the final word.

In her stories, Duclos also focuses on the female genitals, which the libertines generally despise. Therefore, Duclos’s tales represent counter-narratives. Even though the Duc performs cunnilingus and is said to fuck “cunts with the greatest pleasure,” he engages in those “more through cruelty than from taste” (211). Despise for the female body is certainly linked to the underlying misogyny of Sade’s male libertines. In addition, “penile-vaginal intercourse, the sexual activity most common in most fiction” is the “least common in Sade’s” (Edmiston, 2013: 6) who counters heteronormativity because of its relation to reproduction, with any form of non-reproductive sexual activities. According to Edmiston, even “non-reproductive sexual acts, as long as they are performed by a man and a woman together, have been appropriated by the heteronormative order” (6). Consequently, the four libertines all prefer sodomy, worship “behinds” (211) and prefer men to women (458-459). On January 8, the narration of Duclos unmasks Durcet, by identifying him as her former client who asked her “to squat above his face” thereby exposing her vagina (360). She underlines contradictions in the misogynistic statements made by the libertines as she uncovers inconsistencies in their sexual preferences.

The narration by Duclos restores value to the female body by stressing the fact that the libertine experienced pleasure from a sexual encounter involving her sexual organs; it also ridicules him. While the narrator states that the financier Durcet “is small, short, broad, thickset” and that his entire body is like a “woman’s” (210), Duclos describes him as “Cupid himself” (360). Yet this “Adonis” has “a very mediocre prick,” an observation that allows Duclos to poke fun at his sex. Furthermore, she compares Durcet and the unpleasant monk Geoffrey since Durcet asks Duclos to have her “cunt […] flood urine into” his mouth. Durcet is therefore no more than a “piss-swallowing-colleague” of Geoffrey’s. Thus Duclos makes fun of the pretentious libertine and his “little anchovy” while she stresses her own “skill and grace” (360). Duclos’s subtle parody of Durcet is reinforced by the Duc’s reaction. He laughs at Durcet “who scarcely dare look at a cunt today,” but “used to have ’em piss in the old days.” Durcet himself admits to blushing “for what could be more dreadful than to have such turpitudes upon one’s conscience?” (361).

While sexual pleasures involving women are “turpitudes” to the libertines, they are Duclos’s delight. First it is because she can shame the libertines by exposing their secrets, like her encounter with Durcet. Second, she states that she has an “extraordinarily libertine” mind (389), but her libertinism differs from that of her four companions in the Château of Silling. Duclos openly affirms that she “had very little love for men […] I love women, Messieurs, I don’t deny it” (389). This preference is due to the fact that the pleasures women have procured her “have always exerted a more powerful sway over” her “senses than masculine delights” (389). It is true that she shares the men’s taste for anal sex and that the “heavenly little rosebud […] is a woman’s most magical attraction.”

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4 See for example the 27th day in November, when the Duc undertakes an “experiment” with one of the girls to prove “her discharging capacities” by simultaneously polluting “the edges of her vagina, her clitoris, and her asshole, at first with his fingers, next with his tongue” (527).

5 Even though the terms of homo- and heterosexuality did not exist during the eighteenth century, the “understanding of a sexual orientation toward one’s own sex, a preference for a sexual activity with members of one’s own sex, and even a sense of identity with others who shared this orientation and preference, were in fact present in eighteenth-century Western Europe” (Edmiston, 2013:31).
However, she indirectly criticizes the libertines’ use of it, referring to their coprolagnia. On November 12, Duclos recounts her experience with Monsieur d’Erville and Desprès who take pleasure in eating feces. “Intoxicated […] with pleasure,” d’Erville examines Duclos while she pushes a turd on a white porcelain plate. He then handles, kisses, sniffs the turd and buries his face in it. Yet, when Desprès asks Duclos to kiss his ass while he relieves himself, Duclos does so only reluctantly. While she brings her lips “to the vicinity of the hole,” the eruption is so violent that one of her “cheeks was splashed from temple to chin.”

This narration is an indirect critique of two aspects of the philosophy promoted by the libertines of Silling. First, Duclos does not appear to enjoy coprolagnia. When she sees Marianne naked, she experiences a strong sexual desire, fondling “several times in a joking manner” Marianne’s ass, and indirectly stating that Marianne is too pretty for Desprès’ use of her. Duclos’s critique of the nature of their relationship points to the fact that she would not engage in coprolagnia with Marianne. Second, through the narration of her experience, Duclos indirectly disagrees with the Bishop’s comment that “a woman’s tongue” is only useful for wiping assholes. Even though she is compliant with Desprès’s request, she clearly describes her disgust, thereby expressing that she would prefer to pronounce counter-discourses of such practices with her tongue.

While Duclos admits to preferring women to men, the force of her counter-narrative rests not so much in this preference, but in the fact that she disguises her relations with other women and rarely reveals information about her interactions with them. Her erotic experience with Marianne is a case in point. Even though the libertines had advised her to be very detailed in her narrations, she discloses nothing about her relations with Marianne. Her silence is probably due in part to the fact the four men do not care to learn more about Duclos’s homo-erotic experiences. As Gallop states, the prostitute obeys the law, since she “is not self-identical,” and represents “the reveries of men.” However, her evasiveness, which Gallop calls the whore’s “relation to the unknown,” also grants her power. According to Foucault, silence is not “the absolute limit of discourse,” but “an element that functions alongside the things said, with them and in relation to them within over-all strategies”: it is therefore important to analyze the different types of silences and their relation to what is being said, as “There is not one but many silences, and they are an integral part of the strategies that underlie and permeate discourses.”

When Duclos relates that her sister to whom she “had grown very attached” and with whom she had worked in the same brothel at Madame Guérin’s had disappeared one day, she admits that this event “had a deep effect upon” her and caused her to leave Guérin for a more lucrative brothel. Interestingly, she presents this personal tragedy as a turning point in her career as a prostitute that led her to engage with elderly debauchees of a higher tone and greater means and also of greater perversions. Hence, the disappearance of her sister indirectly allowed her to advance in her libertine apprenticeship.

However, Duclos cannot completely hide her dismay. Although she reassures her audience that she will never again speak of her “beloved sister,” she engages in a lengthy dialogue with Madame Desgranges, the fourth storyteller experienced in murderous passions, who informs her that her sister died the very same day she left Guérin’s brothel with one of her clients. Duclos is deeply shocked.

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6 According to Gallop, in The 120 Days, coprolagnia “comes to pester the other perversions, to invade their place: so we have whipping with shit-eating, buggery with shit-eating, killing with shit-eating” (1981: 46).
7 The Bishop of X*** is the Duc’s brother and has “the same black soul, the same penchant for crime, the same contempt for religion […] a yet more supple and adroit mind, however, and more art in guiding his victims to their doom” (203).
since she thought that her sister was still alive. According to Desgranges, the client of Duclos’s sister was merely working for another libertine who engaged in murderous passions. He deceived Duclos and her sister. Duclos is eager to learn more about her sister’s death, yet Desgranges admonishes her to go on with her tale: “these clarifications might prove tedious to their Lordships” (355). And indeed, the Duc prohibits Duclos from giving “any emotional demonstrations,” regarding her loss, after noticing that she had “to keep back a few involuntary tears” (355). According to the Duc, tears are for “idiots and children and may they never soil the cheeks of a clearheaded, clear-thinking woman, the sort we esteem” (355). Her relations with women, and specifically her bond with her sister, are of no interest to the libertines. After the Duc’s comments, Duclos takes “herself in hand” and resumes “her narrative at once” (355). In her following tale, Duclos discloses her sexual encounter with Durcet and his “youthful childishness” that led him to engage in sexual performances involving her vagina. Having exposed too much of herself, she proceeds to reveal passions that humiliate the libertines in return.

In the following tales, Duclos proves to have learned her lesson. When she tells of another loss she had to endure, this time her partner Eugénie, another prostitute whom she “loved with a passion,” she repeats the exact same words that she used for her sister’s disappearance. Eugénie’s loss “had a deep effect upon” her. Once again she is informed by Desgranges that Eugénie was killed by one of her clients. Yet, this time, Duclos manages to hide her feelings and rapidly states that “Lucile was the girl who took her [Eugénie’s] place,” “both in my heart and in my bed” (446). She even goes so far as to say that she has “never dropped a tear for the afflictions of others” nor over her own troubles and cites again the death of her sister. “I loved my sister, and I lost her without the least twinge of grief, you were witness to the stoic indifference with which I greeted news of her undoing” (389-390). Her actions (the involuntary tears she dropped at the news of her sister’s murder), however, reveal her grief. It seems clear that Duclos is performing the role of the “clearheaded, clear-thinking woman” (355) that libertines esteem, keeping her thoughts and feelings to herself.

Duclos subverts the power of the foursome through silence, and she reaches her apogee when she engages in a sexual friendship with Julie, who is the Duc’s daughter and the wife of the President Curval. The reader only learns about this illicit relationship — according to the rules of the Château of Silling, women are not allowed to build friendships (252) — through the omniscient and extradiegetic narrator. After having emphasized the influence of Duclos over the Duc, the narrator praises Julie who “was already announcing signs of imagination, debauchery, and of libertinage” (432). She manifests those through her sexual performances and her astuteness by caressing “those very persons for whom perhaps she did not at heart have a very great fondness,” but whose protection she needed. Knowing that women are generally despised in the Château of Silling, and that she is falling into disgrace in the eyes of her own husband and of Durcet, “she felt an extreme need for a protector [and] sought to cultivate Duclos” (433). Just as the experienced Madame de Saint-Ange in Sade’s Philosophy in the Bedroom (1795) instructs the young Eugénie in the mysteries of libertinage, Duclos becomes Julie’s model. “Every time her turn came to lie with the Duc, she would adopt Duclos’ techniques and emulate them so successfully, give proof of such skill […] that the Duc was always sure of obtaining delicious discharges whenever he used those two creatures to procure them” (423-433). As the narrator states, Julie’s erotic friendship with Duclos is crucial, since Duclos “consistently spoke well in her [Julie’s] behalf?” and without Duclos’s support, Julie would not have been in the Duc’s “good graces” (433).

Duclos’s instructions help Julie become “a very amiable creature who deserved to be ranked among those objects for whom Messieurs had some regard” (486). She therefore is admitted to the rank of the four storytellers and after a night of drinking and orgies spent with the storytellers, her father, and her husband, Durcet discovers the traces of their debaucheries. “The following morning,
while making his rounds, Durcet found all seven of them dead drunk. The naked girl [Julie] was discovered lodged between her father and her husband and in a posture which gave evidence to the financier that […] they had both enjoyed her simultaneously. Duclos who, from all appearances, had functioned as an instrument to this crime, lay sprawled near the compact trio” (486).

Even though we know that Duclos played a part in these orgies, we learn nothing about her relationship with Julie. Duclos’s evasiveness is carried to the level of the extra-diegetic narration and the details of the previous orgies remain unknown. This mixing of extra- and intradiegetic narrators culminates in the succeeding chapter when the omniscient narrator takes on Duclos’s role. “Duclos, weak and queasy after the preceding day’s excesses, took her place with drooping eyelids, and her tales were so brief, they contained so few episodes, were recounted so listlessly, that we have taken it upon ourselves to supply them, and in the reader’s behalf to clarify the somewhat confused speech she made to our friends” (487).

The evasiveness of the extradiegetic narrator, as well as of the intradiegetic storyteller Duclos is always resistant and resisting. Sade/the narrator replaces the whore in the narration for reasons of clarity. Yet, as Gallop states, “the expression of Sade’s thought plays the peculiar game of the hussy, […] giving everything you want until you have all you have asked for and yet she is still there, other and resistant just by being other. The radical movement of Sade’s writing as whorish flirtation exposes the noncontingency of resistance, reveals the ultimate irretrievability of the available, the obscurity in that which is absolutely clear, the taunting metaphoricity of even the most naked word” (1981: 60). Its irretrievability corresponds to David Halperin’s definition of queerness as “an identity without an essence”: “There is nothing in particular to which it necessarily refers” (1995: 62).

This lack of reference might seem surprising in a work that presents itself as an “anthology” (254), thereby claiming a certain exhaustiveness of sexual pleasures. As the narrator states at the beginning of the novel, the reader “will be delighted by this increase of possibilities” (254) that s/he will discover in the book. But the reader’s delight might even be stronger by the possibilities that are never fully disclosed. The readership is even given a certain agency since the narrator states that if everything is not disclosed and analyzed, partiality is not to blame. “Rather, it is up to you [reader] to take what you please and leave the rest alone” (254). The reader has to actively seek and interpret the narratives and actions, like the libertines who listen to the storyteller. Yet, there is always something that escapes their eyes or their ears. It may be ironic that Sade sends his readers in search of untold pleasures, while he pretends to have “carefully distinguished” (254) each of the 600 passions told.

It might also be a lesson that Sade/the whore/the storyteller is giving to the reader. Having spent almost thirty years of his life in prison because of his acts of debauchery and his writings, Sade knew very well the alternative powers of words and silence, as well as the pleasure they can procure. As Foucault states, “power that lets itself be invaded by the pleasure it is pursuing; and opposite it, power asserting itself in the pleasure of […] scandalizing or resisting” are not part of a top-down-structure and exclusive, but “perpetual spirals of power and pleasure” (45). Power circulates in all of the strata of The 120 Days of Sodom. As William F. Edmiston states, the queerness of Sade’s work lies in the “breaking down of the boundaries creating binary oppositions, in order to denaturalize heteronormative conceptions of sex, gender and sexuality” (2013: 3). This act of breaking down might equally include the norms and rules established by the four libertines that invite others to transgress them, as in the example of Madame Duclos. In a misogynistic and murderous environment, Duclos and Julie know how to make use of the power of words, actions, and silence. The success of their performances guarantee them their survival in Sade’s claustrophobic fictional world and the reader might take these two female figures as an example of resistance to the power of the libertines. According to Abramovici,
the latter extends from the intradiegetic victims to the readers (2013: 23) and engages new untold possibilities.

**BIBLIOGRAPHY**


