

Francine du Plessix Gray's *Sade* : Up Close and Personal with the Marquis

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"I write out of hate, out of a desire for revenge against all the men who have oppressed and humiliated me."

Francine du Plessix-Gray¹

In 1998, Francine du Plessix Gray, prolific author of novels, biographies, sociological studies and frequent contributions to *The New Yorker*, published her most acclaimed work to date: *At Home with the Marquis de Sade: A Life*. A Pulitzer Prize finalist that has already appeared in multiple English-language editions as well as translated ones, Du Plessix Gray's biography has met with crowning achievement and recognition on all fronts. Accolades have accumulated from the most acclaimed of eighteenth-century luminaries, such as Robert Darnton, in a lengthy review in *The New York Review of Books* that compares her biography with Laurence Bongie's *Sade: A Biographical Essay*, to the list of scholars whom she thanks in her acknowledgements for having read the manuscript: Lynn Hunt, Lucienne Frappier-Mazur, and Marie-Hélène Huët.² Surely, any scholar can appreciate the vast amount of research that undergirds Du Plessix Gray's narrative, and indeed, she takes great pains to meticulously inform the reader who might care to look at her sources and read her acknowledgements that she has done her homework and knows every inch of the scholarly terrain.³ Du Plessix Gray wisely begins her acknowledgements with a debt of gratitude to Maurice Lever's studies, which rest on years of archival research.

¹ Francine Du Plessix Gray, "I Write for Revenge Against Reality," *The Writer's Presence: A Pool of Essays*, Donald McQuade, and Atwan, Robert, eds. Boston: Bedford, 1994.

² Robert Darnton, *The Real Marquis*, a review of Francine du Plessix Gray, *At Home with the Marquis de Sade: A Life*, Simon and Schuster, 491 pp., \$27.50 and *Sade: A Biographical Essay*, University of Chicago Press, 336 pp., \$29.00. January 14, 1999, *The New York Review of Books*.

³ See Francine du Plessix Gray, *At Home with the Marquis de Sade: A Life*, Simon and Schuster: New York, 1998. See the Notes, Bibliography, and Acknowledgements sections, p. 425-464.

However, what really frames Francine du Plessix Gray's biography is not so much the "fin du dix huitième siècle" but the "fin du vingtième siècle" and the "reality" material from Sade's life that made it possible to represent the Marquis, his sons, his wife, mother-in-law, father-in-law, and uncle as so many of the people who populate the running narrative of criminals, deadbeat dads, incestuous relatives, date-raping playboys, and battered women that fill soap operas, day-time talk, women's magazines, talk radio, and the tabloids. This paper, then, explores Sade's biography not as a narrative of (the Marquis de Sade's) his life, but as a narrative that pleases today's reader because it serves up a voyeur's view of (in) his "dysfunctional" family life "at home" that we are all too familiar with. This becomes abundantly apparent when du Plessix-Gray's rendering of the Marquis and the Marquise's lives are superimposed over the récit of lives that we read about all the time in the popular press and observe in television soaps and other series. Ultimately, we are interested in what such a reading, writing and representation of Sade's life does to Sade's persona and status, both in the world of letters, but more importantly, in the world at large. Finally, this paper will address the ways in which the Marquis de Sade and his "family" provided Francine with the ideal subject upon which to continue her own self-fashioning, a project whose roots can be discerned in her first work, the 1967 novel *Lovers and Tyrants* and continuing on through her 2001 biography *Simone Weil*, the disturbing portrait of another figure wracked by contradiction and excess.⁴ This brief perusal of her previous work establishes a provocative background against which to judge the author's selection of Sade and to analyze how he and the family, especially Renée Pélagie, the Marquise de Sade, stack up against the subjects she has previously probed in her writing.

Although the biography is purportedly to focus mostly on two women in the Marquis de Sade's life, namely his wife Pélagie and his mother-in-law, the Présidente de Montreuil, du Plessix Gray starts with the Marquis, stating in her forward that she was initially attracted to Sade, the figure behind his mixed epithets: Sade, who for Apollinaire was "the freest spirit who ever lived" or Michelet's characterization of Sade as "a Professor Emeritus of Crime," or "The most lucid hero of Western thought" as Lely found him to be" or Soulié's assessment, of Sade as "a frenetic and abominable assemblage of all crimes and obscenities," or Aldous Huxley's characterization of Sade as "the one completely consistent and thorough-going revolutionary of history." Instead, when she began reading the Marquis' correspondences, she became "entranced by the more modest, familial motifs of his saga," realizing, "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 man's nomadic sexual energies, to enforce civilization and its attendant discontents."⁵

From this assessment, an unnamed source and discipline emerges as part and parcel of her inspiration—evolutionary biology, popularized by Jared Diamond's study *The Third chimpanzee*, in which conjugal life is portrayed as the universal struggle between the wandering, philandering male and the more stabilizing female force in nature,

⁴ Francine du Plessix Gray, *Simone Weil*, Penguin, New York : 2001.

⁵ Francine du Plessix Gray, *At Home with the Marquis de Sade: A Life*, Simon and Schuster, Forward, Penguin Books, p. 11-13.

biologically incapable of fully participating in and understanding the Sadean agenda as he sees it. It is important to pinpoint this early moment in the text, as it belies the dynamic of the entire narrative: Pélégie's mother and the Marquis' mother-in-law, the Présidente de Montreuil, represent woman in her biological destiny to tame and domesticate. Du Plessix Gray's need to address this topic determines both the choice of Sade's family romance and the narrative structure of the biography, which alternates between paraphrased bits of the family correspondences, with multiple direct quotes, from the letters themselves, and du Plessix Gray's interwoven authorial interventions, whose intent it is to direct the reader's judgment to her own point of view about the nature of things. Extracted from their place in the narrative and read together, these authorial interventions function as a discrete philosophical text on the lot of women throughout the centuries in their relationships with certain kinds of men.

Rénée Pélégie and her mother offer a study in female contrasts, both examples of the different female strategies employed in taming the male of the species and ultimately, liberating oneself from this task to live life on one's own terms.

We first meet the Marquis de Sade's bride to be as the ideal bourgeoisie match for the Marquis as selected for him by his father, the Conte de Sade. Du Plessix Gray greets this mixing of the bourgeois/aristocratic blood lines and money lines, new plus old, with great enthusiasm. But while technically this match carries great promise, the reader awaits with dread in anticipation of the entrance of the real Marquise de Sade into the narration, because we understand there is virtually no woman who will ever be able to match the Marquis in any of his sublime attributes and characteristics.

Rénée Pélégie is plain in every way, and she is not particularly brilliant intellectually. Her salt of the earth portrait presents her to us attired in mended clothes and resoled shoes; devoted to husband and household, and for many years, the Marquis' primary accomplice in the procurement of suitable subjects for his pleasure. Any reader of advice columns or popular psychology books can immediately identify the uneducated, unattractive and abused Pélégie as the perfect match with the profile of the abused woman, whose future redemption will be found in her strength of character and her ability to eventually see through falseness.

“What Rénée Pélégie lacked in beauty and polish she redeemed by strength of character and sterling independence. She was a resolute, homespun young woman, totally uninterested in the machinations of social life” (53-54)

As the narrative progresses and the Marquis and the new Marquise set up their household, the newly-wed bride is quickly recruited to aid and abet her husband in the procurement of his pleasure, the recounting of the abused wife syndrome begins. Du Plessix Gray describes Pélégie's complicity in the hiring of a new household staff that would necessarily result in the « Little Girls Episode. » Du Plessix Gray contends that Pélégie both watched and participated in the Marquis' well-orchestrated orgies. Du Plessix Gray articulates the questions that have been planted in the reader's mind:

“Many of us would have a lot of tough questions to ask Pélégie: How did she manage to suspend her moral judgment, her ethical scruples, the entirety of her conscience? Did she miss the sacrament of confession and the solace it has often brought to downtrodden women?...Was she ever able to transcend her individual plight and marvel at the atrocities women can commit, or allow themselves to suffer, in order to retain their men’s love?” (p. 159)

Du Plessix Gray continues with an explanation that also emerges from the profile of the battered women—the attempt to arrive at intimacy through sex, and the ensuing neglect of children. Gray now develops this new aspect of the battered woman’s profile. She reflects on Pélégie’s certain anguish at being separated from her three children, who are away being raised in Paris by her mother, the Présidente of Monteuil, by collapsing any distance that might exist between today’s battered women and Renée-Pélégie:

“Many women in different phases of their lives, must make the bitter choice between wifehood and motherhood and spend some years sacrificing their offspring to their men. The renunciation of motherhood Pélégie endured throughout the 1770s helps to explain the outburst of maternal guilt and commitment that would consume her a decade later.” (p. 160)

Pelagie the Enabler

Du Plessix Gray has written Pélégie as a classic case study taken from the annals of the psychology of battered women, as can be seen by a comparison with the document “Common Characteristics of Battered Women” that appears at Aardvarc.org’s Abuse Rape and Domestic Violence Aid and resource Collection is the reflection of Pélégie:

1. have low self esteem
2. believe all the myths about battering relationships
3. be a traditionalist about the home, may strongly believe in family unity and the prescribed feminine sex-role stereotype
4. accept responsibility for the batterer’s actions
5. suffer from guilt, yet deny the terror and anger she feels
6. have severe stress reactions with psychophysiological complaints.
7. use sex as a way to establish intimacy.
8. believe that no one will be able to help her resolve her predicament.

Pélégie’s first visit to the imprisoned Marquis after four and a half years in jail provides fodder for yet the next step in the battered wife syndrome—the rage of the jealous husband. The Marquis becomes enraged when he sees his wife dressed up for the visit and complains that she “looks like a whore.” Here Gray is particularly heavy handed in guiding her readers:

“Consider the careful cosmetic preparations any wife would make for such a reunion, planning the costume, the coiffure, especially if she was the Marquise de Sade, especially if she was as insecure as Pélégie and as filled with passion for her husband.

Think, too, of the prisoner’s thoughts when he sees his wife for the first time in four and a half years, dressed to kill in a décolleté white dress, her hair curled in the latest style. While I’m here, as good as dead, he might well think, she’s out there enjoying the world a world filled with potential rivals. I find her desirable, thus they find her desirable, thus she is/is about to be/ already has been unfaithful to me.” (240)

Though we are told that there is no account of the meeting, problematic if we consider Gray’s most definitive reading, we do know that the Marquis refers to it in a letter, displaying a jealousy so violent, that the destitute Pélégie promises to go live in a convent. Little did the Marquis realize that this was the first step toward Pélégie’s subsequent separation from her husband, the equivalent of the battered women’s home shelter today. Eventually, Pélégie gives up her room in the Marais and moves into the convent on a permanent basis. This second move to the convent prompts Gray to provide a historical digression about how women have had to form their own communities as a form of protection.

“Since the early Middle Ages, many thousands of wellborn women who were forced to live alone—spinsters and widows, abandoned wives, women who like the marquis’s own mother disliked family life or who like Pélégie were just poor—had chosen to rent lodgings in Parisian convents.” (244)

In a chapter entitled “Liberation,” the Marquis is released along with all other prisoners jailed on *lettres de cachet*. The year was 1790, this being a belated result of the revolution. However, the true liberation is that of Pélégie, who refuses to see her husband when he comes by her convent. “Pélégie refused to appear. She sent down a message informing her husband that she never wished to see him again.” (300)

At this juncture, du Plessix Gray makes her battered woman reading abundantly clear. Again, Pélégie is collapsed into “every battered woman” happily assuming, once more, her simple, plodding nature, relieved from trying to appease her husband’s sublime, yet tyrannical ramblings.

“For years this woman of limited learning but great shrewdness had been transformed by an exalted passion, had been impelled, as her mother once put it, to love “beyond all limits.” Like innumerable wives of our own time who have suffered through years of psychic battering, she had been led to a breaking point by an accumulation of griefs—her husband’s repeated threats and insults, the painful acknowledgement of her own blundering dedication. Her infatuation waning, her illusions about her

husband dissolving, she had returned to her natural gravity, to being the conformist, prosaic creature she had been as a girl.” (301)

What a sad, flat, anticlimactic end to Pélagie, then. Du Plessix Gray reconsiders this end and visits it again to try to infuse some meaning into the plain, bloated figure who, in the absence of any relationship with her ex-husband, has now been sucked of all life and for the author who has just liberated her, of all interest. Du Plessix Gray almost seems surprised herself by Pélagie’s erasure once the separation becomes real. She returns a few pages later to write Pélagie’s epitaph:

“For the time being, we must take leave of Pélagie as a central character of the Sadeian epic....Her marriage had been her work of art: for good or for worse, it was solely through Pélagie’s love and dedication that the Marquis de Sade’s talents were able to flower and become part of the Western heritage. There lies the principal legacy of this potentially intrepid soul, whose saga leads us once more to marvel at (or to deplore) the phenomenon of female malleability.” (p. 309-310)

As riveting as du Plessix Gray’s book is, the case for Pélagie is clearly overstated. Try as she might, the irrepressible Marquis steps front and center yet one more time in the final chapters of the book, even without his wife. In 2001, Francine du Plessix Gray was still trying to figure out what to do with him in a talk she gave at Vassar College, whose title “What should we do with the Marquis de Sade” carries the same condescending sonority as the Mother Superior’s lament in *The Sound of Music*, “How do you solve a problem like Maria?” In the Vassar publicity piece for the talk, Francine du Plessix Gray cuts a romantic figure, with long, flowing hair, and a slim body dressed in flowery clothing. Although she has “liberated” Pélagie, she does not identify with the Marquis’ prosaic spouse. Indeed, she is drawn to the Marquis, his ability to remain torn “by the conflict between his actual impotence and his dreams of omnipotence.” This is the writer’s profile, the performer’s profile, one that is much closer to the author than it is to Pélagie. The autobiographic dimensions to Francine du Plessix Gray’s literary biography paradoxically lead back to Sade, from whom there is no liberation. Her 1967 novel, *Lovers and Tyrants*, eerily echos the need of the non-prosaic type to continually remove that which keeps coming back:

“... every woman’s life is a series of exorcisms from the spells of different oppressors; nurses, lovers, husbands, gurus, parents, children, myths of the good life, the most tyrannical despots can be the ones who love us the most.”⁶

It is surprising in the numerous reviews in several languages that can be consulted on Francine du Plessix Gray’s take on Sade that no one has tried to link her interest in the Marquis to her own life and psychological profile. Sade appears early in her writing career in *Lovers and Tyrants*, the author’s woefully inadequate attempt to write the novel of orgasmic liberation that only an Erica Jong would be able to pull off with *Fear of*

⁶ Francine du Plessix-Gray, *Lovers and Tyrants*, Simon and Schuster, 1967, p.

Flying six years later in 1973.⁷ While Jong succeeds in empowering women through forms of autobiography and historical fiction that portray the female of the species as fully cognoscente of their highly complex potential as mothers, lovers and savants and equipped with the savvy to negotiate the inherent drawbacks of the slow-to-evolve social context, du Plessix Gray, instead, loves female victims, such as Pélagie, for whom she either perennially slays the dragon to extinguish his fire, or fans the burning embers to rapturously worship his full blaze.

Du Plessix Gray's ambivalence about tyrannical figures and the challenge they pose naggingly returns throughout her ever-growing body of prose-genre works. Her personal fascination with Sade as lover in *Lovers and Tyrants* and depravity as the quintessentially sought-after quality in the male of the species will be thoroughly explored more than thirty years later in *At Home with the Marquis de Sade*. In her first novel she contemptuously refers to her lover as a "Sade *raté*" for his uninspiring sexual performance, which is merely a symptom of a greater lacking: "the passion for human liberty." For Francine du Plessix Gray, political and the sexual dimensions always go hand in hand. The attractive man appears in all of his "revolutionary splendor," his hero status established by his need "to seek prurience." The lover she describes in her autobiographical novel is woefully inadequate:

"He keeps reciting voluminous passages from Sade, Verlaine, Baudelaire. But how could he have the revolutionary splendor of men who are truly depraved, since he is unable to shed centuries of family precepts? Lacking that passion for human liberty which led his heroes to seek prurience, he is a Sade *raté*, a real failure as a pervert. His playing at evil is but another role to hide his monumental fear of freedom; of choosing himself; of shedding the carapace of prejudices history has encrusted him with."⁸

In "The Marquis de Sade at La Coste," an essay written in 2000, two years after the publication of her life of the Marquis de Sade, Francine du Plessix Gray returns once more to -- La Coste, "The writer's idyllic estate in Provence was where he created some of his most shocking work," as the subtitle of the essay explains. Read following Francine du Plessix Gray's biography of Sade, the article on La Coste provides considerable insight. Here the author cuts to the chase. At the outset of the article where she describes the beauty of what was formerly a 10th-century fortress against the Saracens, du Plessix Gray offers a taste of the kind of domestic details of Sade's life that fill page after page of the biography. However, she immediately expresses reservations about the domestic approach, reminding us that he is a batterer of women:

"There's a potential danger to this kind of domestic approach to the Marquis de Sade. Such domestic ironies, such pleasant trivia of Sade's life as his love of baked apples might defang him, and turn this borderline

⁷ For a taste of Du Plessix Gray's attempts at portraying a blithe, happy-go-lucky attitude toward sex, the following is sufficient: "Orgasms, orgasms, I never know what to make of them." *Lovers and tyrants*, p. 108.

⁸ Francine du Plessix Gray, *Lovers and Tyrants*, p. 109

psychopath and woman-batterer into a pleasant fellow. It should not be forgotten that one of the most terrifying features of Sade's persona, as with many batterers of women, is the vast range of his behavior -- his occasional capacity for great tenderness and integrity, his considerably more frequent manipulateness and brazen authoritarianism. Sade was a power freak if there ever was one. His tyrannical streak, in fact, is very tied in to his cult of La Coste, and there is a link between his passion for this feudal village and his political ideology.”⁹

The irony here is that she herself is the one who has concocted this mode of presenting the Marquis. Indeed, it's the only method that allows her to present him in the full bipolar profile of the “lover and tyrant” that has always fascinated her. In fact, after the disclaimer her domestic approach in the biography, and again in the briefer space of the article, du Plessix Gray gives free rein to her descriptions of the Marquis' sexual encounters, featuring her favorite, the orgy at Marseilles, where he plied his young partners with exorbitant amounts of Spanish fly.

Du Plessix Gray has banalized Sade, made him a good read for the liberated woman, and in the process, she's flattened him for us by trying to exorcise herself from the spell of his persona and prose.

I personally prefer Chantal Thomas' Sade. She preserves the writer by refusing to represent his oeuvre, by letting it stand alone:

« Il est vrai aussi, et je l'ai compris progressivement, qu'au fond toute tentative de représenter l'oeuvre de Sade m'est pénible. Elle détruit la marge de silence et de secret –de peur aussi (peur de soi, peur de l'énigme qu'on est à soi-meme)—qui double nécessairement sa lecture. Elle fait voler en éclats le transparent et voluptueux enfermement inhérent à toute lecture, mais plus spécifiquement à celle de Sade.»¹⁰

While the up front intent of the book is to look at the Marquis de Sade through his wife, the “lover” and his mother-in-law the “tyrant,” the true function of the book is to look at the Marquis de Sade through the prism of Francine du Plessix Gray's psyche in order to dominate, exorcise, and control him. Indeed, the overwhelming popularity of the book may have everything to do with the fact that the biographer's psyche is more reflective of that of the majority of women than is that of Chantal Thomas. As du Plessix Gray's career continues at full tilt, injected with new vigor subsequent to her biography on Sade, she has been spending more of her time writing about writing and the undeniable affinity between the factual writer and the facts. Always a topic she has dabbled in, her reflections on this aspect of her career in an essay she wrote some ten years prior to publishing *At Home with the Marquis de Sade: A Life*, confirm the ways in which Sade has been and remains a “fixation,” a “secret lust,” and an “unadmitted fault and grief”:

⁹ Francine du Plessix Gray, “The Marquis de Sade at La Coste.: the writer's idyllic estate in Provence was where he created some of his most shocking work,” *salon.com*, “Sex”

¹⁰ Chantal Thomas, *Sade, la dissertation et l'orgie*, p. 11-12.

“On of the many myths which distort our views of literature is the notion that the writing of factual prose is a process more calculated and objective, less intimately personal than the writing of fiction. In fact, the practice of journalism or the essay form can be inspired by sources quite as Orphic, subconscious, intense as those that fuel the writing of novels or short stories; the choice of a subject to report on feeds just as much on our childhood hang-ups and their resulting fixations, on our most secret lusts, our most unadmitted faults and griefs.”¹¹

In the gallery of women who have worked on the Marquis de Sade and the oeuvre that was his life, Francine du Plessix Gray occupies a position somewhere in between that of Simone de Beauvoir’s condemnation and Chantal Thomas’ acceptance. Francine du Plessix Gray’s Sade satisfies both post feminist and politically correct exigencies of contemporary society. While that might be what it takes to keep him alive in our antiseptic age, and certainly every generation writes its own Sade, the problem with this domesticated Sade surfaces not so much because, as feared, we might not recognize the woman batterer, but because once we really read Sade, we won’t recognize him at all.

As a personal coda, I should like to relay what happened during a course I taught a few years ago. I had assigned Sade’s *Philosophie dans le boudoir* at the end of a course on eighteenth-century literature, and as a way of steeping the students quickly into this new reading, they read du Plessix Gray’s biography before reading Sade himself. The students found the womanizing, woman-persecuting scoundrel they encountered in her account deliciously wicked, but nothing to lose sleep over. In fact they found him remarkably similar to Max Factor fortune heir Andrew Stuart Luster, 36-year old father of two, who was at large and wanted for having seduced three women to whom he had given a variety of home-made aphrodisiacs, or in current parlance, “date-rape drugs.” The following Associated Press account of the charges and the perpetrator could have been lifted from the Marquis de Sade’s biography:

“An heir to the Max Factor cosmetics fortune was charged with 40 sex, drug and weapons counts for allegedly slipping date-rape drugs to three women and sexually assaulting them at his beach house. A judge on Wednesday ordered Andrew Stuart Luster, 36, held on \$10 million bail after a third woman came forward and prosecutors added 19 new counts to the 21 he already faced. Previously, bail had been set at \$1 million.

"There is no question Mr. Luster is a clear and present danger to women," Superior Court Judge Art Gutierrez said. "I am satisfied the defendant is a threat." He remained jailed Thursday. Prosecutors have said that Luster, a great-grandson of makeup company founder Max Factor, videotaped his victims.

Among the items seized during a search of his home last week were photographs and homemade videos, plus 13 guns, including an illegal AK-

¹¹ Francine Du Plessix, “The Ultra-Resistance,” *Adam & Eve and the City: Selected Nonfiction*, Simon and Schuster, New York: 1987, p. 15.

47 assault rifle, several small bottles of an unknown liquid, and cocaine, authorities said. "We believe the defendant presents a very serious and credible threat," Deputy District Attorney Becky Day said in court.¹²

In other words, the students were merely reading another account of crime of the type they were all too familiar with thanks to news stories such as these and the proliferation of television programs with reenactments of crimes. However, when confronted with the real Sade in the *Philosophie dans le boudoir*, his most enlightened anti-enlightenment work, these same students cried foul and ran scared. Having scoped the periphery of Sade's world in a journalistic discourse that was familiar to them, nothing had prepared them for the disorienting nature of Sade's prose. The contrast between "The Real Marquis" and Francine du Plessix Gray's Sade was too great. They never were able to move beyond the biographical Sade to grapple with his essence.

This classroom experience has taught me a profound lesson, one that I hope I can stay true to for the rest of my career. Continue to teach the original works of literature rather than works about them, at all costs. And resist the temptation when writing about literature to write about your own secret lusts as Francine du Plessix Gray has, unless you have the power of a figure like Sade to filter them through and make them worth reading. Otherwise, no one will be interested.

¹² "Max Factor Heir in Date Rape Bust," *CBS News.com*