

[Transcript] The Rest Is History / 365. Le Marquis de Sade: Sex and Violence

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I hope you enjoy it.

The président de Cuval was the most senior member of this company of four Libertines.

Over 60 years of age and singularly worn down by debauchery, he was barely more than a skeleton.

He was tall, wizened, gaunt, with sunken and dimmed eyes, a livid and sickly mouth, a prominent chin, a long nose.

As herseute as a satire, with a flat back and flabby buttocks that sagged so much they seemed more like two dirty rags flopping over his thighs.

The skin there so withered by lashes of the whip.

One could wrap it around one's finger without his noticing and in the middle of all this, one could see without having to spread, oh Tom, I can't read this, this is, this will destroy the rest of his history.

It's literally a filthy passage.

Yes, it is literally a very, very filthy passage.

Yes.

From perhaps the most, from perhaps the most revolting and shocking novel ever written.

So it's by the Marquis de Sard.

Yeah.

My word, of course, for sexual depravity and the novel is the 120 days of Sodom, which I've tried to read several times that I've never managed to finish because it is so disgusting.

Yeah.

It's simultaneously disgusting, deeply unsettling, boring and yet at moments very darkly funny.

That's what people say of this podcast Tom.

Right.

So the plot of the 120 days of Sodom is the four Libertines, sorry Tom.

Just as I was about to say, just before you get into the plots, we should probably say right at the outset, if you're listening with people under the age of what?

40.

Yeah.

This is not a suitable topic.

So if you're doing the school run listening to this podcast, I think maybe history's greatest

dogs would be a pigeons or a better subject.

Love Island.

Exactly.

But anyway, now that those people have had a chance to part the podcast, the 120 days of Sodom, Tom, boring, disgusting, darkly funny, et cetera, et cetera.

Sodom himself, as the most impure tale ever written since the world began, which I think is no exaggeration, and it describes four Libertines who retire to a castle called Silling, which is absolutely remote, inaccessible, up on the County of the Mountainous Crag.

Once they've got in there, they demolish the bridge, which is the only point of entry, as it were, into the castle, and they're there with assorted servants and aged prostitutes who will relate them stories, kind of like the Arabian Knights or Canterbury Tales or something like that.

Various people who are sexually proficient, who will be able to stage, I mean, absolutely baroque sexual positionings, and various people who have been chosen as their victims.

And it is, I mean, it's unreadable by the end.

It's unreadable.

This is 1780s, right?

Well, he writes it in the Bastille.

Wow.

That's why I think that the Marquis de Sade is actually a really fascinating topic of discussion, because although, in fact, because he is so disgusting, because he is so unsettling, he pushes boundaries in a way that no one else has really done.

But he's also a person who is kind of situated at an elliptical sense at some of the great events in French history.

So he's imprisoned in the Bastille by Elette de Cache, you know, which are these letters that also serve to imprison the man in the iron mask issued by the king, you know, if they get served or you just get locked up without a trial, so that the Marquis de Sade is a victim of that.

He then gets liberated after the revolution from imprisonment and serves as a very enthusiastic proponent of the revolution, gets monstered by Rose Pierre, gets locked up again, narrowly avoids the guillotine and ends up being sent to a lunatic asylum on the orders of Napoleon's head of police.

So he has the distinction of being imprisoned by the Orsain regime, Rose Pierre and Napoleon.

So I think that that makes him an interesting figure.

But it's above all, it's these novels in which, I mean, revolting scenes of sex and violence, and they really are unspeakably revolting, so revolting that I don't really even want to hint at them.

But they alternate with kind of great watches of philosophy.

And the philosophy is incredibly unsettling.

It kind of pushes elements within the Enlightenment to extremes that foreshadow some of the more unsettling developments in the 19th and 20th century.

And it's been said by various scholars, say, from Somburgh in the 19th century, Mario Pras in the 20th century, that Sade is one of the great subterranean influences on the development of European culture and thought.

That he's underground, that he's banned, that he's very hard to read.
But those who do read him can be quite profoundly influenced by him.
And I would argue that he is actually the most accurate and disturbing prophet of certainly totalitarian regimes, that there is perhaps part from Dostoevsky, and he prefigures elements of Darwin's teachings, of Nietzsche's teachings, of Freud's teaching.

So I think he is a figure who is worth having an episode devoted to.

So the people you've listed, Tom, I mean, some of these people, I hate to do this for you, actually, but they feature in your book *Dominion* as the sort of antagonists, I suppose, to the tradition of Christianity and of compassion and the celebration of victimhood and all those kinds of things.

Absolutely.

And you see the Marquis de Sade as a key figure in the evolution of this kind of counter-tradition.

Well, the Marquis de Sade is a very committed atheist.

He detests Christianity, and he detests Christianity in, I think, a very honest way to the degree that he is not dismissing belief in the Christian God, but trying to hold onto kind of Christian principles and values.

He detests those principles and values, and that is what motivates both the sexual escapades in the novels and the philosophy, which is why he is not just the kind of logical endpoint of trends within the Enlightenment, but also a kind of critic of it, I think.

Jolly good.

So let's start by talking a bit about the Marquis de Sade himself.

So let's sort of get into the history, the biographical history, as it were.

So he's born in June 1740, and I think he's the son of a diplomat.

Is that right?

The de Sade's first come to power in the 14th century against the backdrop of the Hundred Years' War that we were talking about a few months ago.

And yeah, his father, the Comte de Sade, served as a diplomat in Russia, in Britain.

He ended up at the court of the Elector of Cologne, and he and his brother, who was an abbot, are kind of classic Enlightenment figures.

The father was a friend of Voltaire.

The abbot de Sade, very, very sophisticated man, very sophisticated library, Sade relied on it a lot.

And the great tradition of French philosophical pornography in the 18th century was a great kind of *Rue and rake*.

And it's telling that there isn't a churchman in the Marquis de Sade's novels who is not an unspeakable pervert, including the Pope in one spectacular scene where they have an orgy on the altar of St. Peter's.

So the de Sade's have an ancestral castle in Provence, a place called Lacoste.

But the Marquis de Sade is not actually born there.

So he's born in Paris because his mother is quite well connected.

So she is a distant relative to the Princess de Comte, who's a very, very grand figure.

And Sade's mother, she's a kind of lady-in-waiting in the Comte Palace in Paris.

And that is where Sade is born and is where he's brought up.

And he is brought up together with the Princess de Comte, who's going to grow up to be a great

figure.

So it looks like Sade is in pole position for a brilliant career, except that at the age of four, he punches the Princess de Comte in the face.

So throughout his life, Sade has an unbelievable ability to mess things up.

And he writes about it later and says that his spirit was too violent, too aggressive.

He's very kind of honest.

He understands himself very well.

And because of this, because he's punched the Princess de Comte in the face, he basically gets banished from Paris and gets sent away.

At the age of four.

That's very harsh.

Yeah.

He's just sent away to Provence.

So that's a blot on his prospects.

But an even bigger blot is that his father has been up to no good and he ends up being arrested for various kind of financial improprieties.

So his career as a diplomat is destroyed.

And the mother basically gives up on both father and son and she retires to a convent in Paris on the aptly named Rue d'Inferre, say the Hell Road.

Hell Street, yeah.

So I wonder, that probably plays some part in the Marquis de Sade's sort of tortured psychology.

Yes.

And the fact that, again, in his novels, the relationship between parents and children is unbearably violent.

Right.

Parents kill children, children kill parents.

It's a kind of abiding dynamic.

So I don't think the relationship between them was great.

You know, a psychologist would have a field day and indeed psychologists have had field dates with Sade.

So he gets banished.

He doesn't actually get brought up in Lacoste, but in another of the family castles, a place called Saumann.

And this is a place with caves, dungeons, there's a fort and this will very much feed into, I think, the castle of Silling, where the four Libertians end up.

It's a very gothic, actually, a very 18th century gothic.

Yeah.

Yeah.

Very, very gothic.

So from that, he goes back to Paris where he's educated by the Jesuits.

Right.

And again, there's a sense in which the 120 Days of Sodom is a parody of a Jesuit school, because in that, in the 120 Days of Sodom, it's not pure Libertinage.

There is a book of rules.

There are daily routines.

Anyone who breaks the routine gets whipped.

Right.

Sade is drawing on his memories.

I mean, he was, he was whipped a lot at the Jesuit school and he was very, very resentful of the very, very controlled schedule that existed there.

So I think, again, you can see these childhood influences kind of remaining with him.

And then he goes to military school.

I mean, again, boggles, the Valkyriesade at a military school.

And then he serves in the Seven Years' War very, very well.

He takes part in seven campaigns and he, you know, he would boast later that he'd fought well and I think he had done.

They're not, of course, on the winning side.

They're not on the winning side, Dominic.

No, not on the winning side.

But he was never going to have a military career because even while he's a young man serving in the army, his prime interest is debauchery.

And so at the age of 19, he wrote to a priest who had been one of his tutors.

He was absolutely up front about this and says that, you know, that every morning he rose to go in search of pleasure and the thought of it made me oblivious to everything else.

But that's not necessarily incompatible with a military career.

I mean, there must be a lot of sort of hot-blooded young men who are in the French army in the, you know, in the 1750s, 1760s, Tom, surely that's not a problem.

And as you'll know, the tradition of libertinage of debauchery is something that is very, very manifest in the aristocracy of this period.

Yeah.

So if you think of dangerous liaisons, the V. Comte de Valmore, they're all looking like John Malkovich kind of writing letters on the backs of young girls and things like that.

So you're absolutely right that this shouldn't have been a problem.

It should have been perfectly possible for the market to decide to combine the two.

The fact that he doesn't is, I think, because of two things.

And the first is that his tastes are clearly very aberrant.

So he likes a whipping.

I mean, that's not unduly aberrant.

So Rousseau liked a whipping.

Did he?

He did. So it was very, very common.

Boys got whipped a lot in childhood.

Rousseau got, I think, spanked by a girl and then spent the rest of his life yearning for the experience again, but was too shy to ask for it.

Whereas the market side wasn't and no woman generally weren't.

And it was taken for granted in brothels that there would be whippings, because it was seen as a stimulant.

It was a kind of equivalent of Viagra.
And the French have the gall to call this the vis-en-glaise.
Yeah, absolutely vis-en-glaise, was it?
Yeah, absolutely.
But he has other tastes that are illegal, what they would call sodomy.
He's very into that both ways.
Right.
He's a very non-binary figure, to put it in more contemporary phrases.
So he likes swapping social roles.
He likes swapping gender roles.
With his valet, they'll kind of swap clothes.
Sometimes Saad will play the role of a woman with his valet.
And he likes violence.
He clearly enjoys inflicting pain and indeed having pain inflicted on him.
So although the market side is associated with sadism,
he's given his name to that, there is also clearly a very strong strain of masochism within him.
So those are those are tastes that are going to raise eyebrows if he's not careful.
But on top of that, he is interpreting these sexual tastes in a philosophical way.
Well, I was just about to say, so those tastes alone are surely not enough to damn him,
because when you think about the sort of the stories, we've talked about them in earlier
podcasts about the sort of, I don't know, what are they?
They're kind of hellfire clubs and the rakes of the 18th century.
And in England, such sort of extremal, licentious sexual misbehavior,
it's not an automatic social and political disqualification in the 18th century.
But it's the philosophical stuff, I suppose, that takes that a stage further.
I think Libertinism was originally, it came as it was a name that was applied to people who were
skeptical about religion, about Christianity.
So the association of kind of sexual extremes with philosophical extremes is
absolutely part of the current.
But it's just the market side pushes it to limits in every way.
So it's not just that he's skeptical of religion, he's actively hostile to it.
I mean, he's violently abusive of Jesus, of the Virgin, or kind, you know,
I mean, really very offensive.
He's an out and out materialist.
He thinks there is no God, everything is just composed of molecules.
And there is really only nature.
And therefore, if you have impulses, you should follow them.
Why should people stop you?
There are no kind of inherent moral laws that should restrain you.
To be true to nature, you do what nature is prompting you to do,
which is a very modern understanding of sexuality.
Definitely.
Because by and large, the understanding of sexuality was that if you do illegal things,
you do it because you're bad.

Yeah, you've chosen.

You've chosen to do it.

Right.

Whereas the market side has a very, our understanding would be that your sexual tastes are part of your core identity.

In a sense, you can't really help what they are.

And that's absolutely what he feels.

And he says of his own tastes, he describes them as baroque,

but he says, I always hold them worthy of respect for one is not master of them.

And furthermore, he looks at nature and he says it's the way of nature that the strong, the powerful, even the murderous are the ones who have been chosen by nature.

All right.

So they should have literally the whip hand.

So there is your anticipation of what people would see as the wilder shores of Darwinism and Nietzsche.

And Nietzsche, yeah.

Absolutely.

The celebration of strength, power, competition, aggression, all that stuff.

Yes.

So it's quite a potent mix.

And you can imagine that for any young lady, particularly from a devout and bourgeois background, you know, this would be an unsettling man to have as a husband.

But this is what happens in 7063.

The Sardis are on their uppers.

Comte de Sardis, the market side's dad is, he's spend thrift, he's short of money.

And so basically he matches up his son with the daughter of a very socially ambitious judge.

So the Comte de Sardis will get the money and the family of this girl, Rene Pellagys de Montrais, will get the social cachet that comes from marrying into the aristocracy.

Yeah.

And Rene comes with a very, very formidable mother-in-law who initially is quite charmed by Sardis, by this new son-in-law.

But in time, we'll start to lose patience with him, I think very understandably, because the fact that he's married in no way inhibits Sardis from carrying on exactly as he pleases.

And a succession of scandals, kind of royal to the marriage,

and over the course of the decades that follow, come to make the market side an absolute byword for notoriety. And one has to assume that although there are quite a lot of scandals, there must have been a lot going on that was never discovered.

Yeah.

So we don't know what he was getting up to all the time.

So six months after he's married her, the first of these scandals, he has hired a prostitute called Jean Tastard.

And what he is reported to have done to her is absolutely classic Marquis de Sardis.

So he attempts to make her do what I guess the Daily Mail would describe a sick sex act.

Oh, no.

I won't go into any more detail.

But he also engages in philosophical blasphemy.

So the police report said that he asked her, did she believe in Jesus and the Virgin?

And when she said that she did, he replied with horrible insults and blasphemies, saying that there was no God that he had proved it, that he had masturbated directly into a chalice, declared that Jesus was a bastard and the Virgin was a bitch.

That's more than she bargained for when they...

Absolutely.

He's got all kinds of crosses.

He makes her, again, perform various sex acts with the crucifixes, trample on them, urinate on them.

It's simultaneously deviant and blasphemous.

So he gets arrested and he gets sent off to the Royal Donjon of Basin, which is a great royal fortress on the outskirts of Paris, actually built by Philip the Wise, again, who was in our 100 years war.

In the 14th century.

And it's up to Madame de Montray, his mother-in-law, to get him out.

Yeah, that's a hard one to explain to your mother-in-law, isn't it?

So at this point, she's still quite on his side.

I mean, I think she thinks he's a character.

He's a character.

He's a chancer.

He's a lad.

So she gets him out and doesn't let her daughter know.

So it's still slightly under wraps.

But then 1768, on Easter Sunday, and it does seem that Christian festivals bring out the worst.

He pays a beggar woman called Rose Keller.

He invites her in with an offer of working for him as a servant.

And he then, well, according to Rose Keller's testimony, he starts cutting her flesh with a knife, pouring wax into the wounds.

Saad denies this, says this is an absolute calamity.

He insists that he only lashed her with a cat at night.

Oh my God.

So that's fine.

Right.

So again, Madame de Montrayer kind of leaps into action.

She's desperate to keep this all hushed up.

She pays Rose Keller off and she goes to the king.

She goes to the court, has a lecture cache written and so has Saad imprisoned.

So that's a letter that is closed with the seal of the king.

Yes.

Can't be opened.

There's no trial.

And the reason she does that, I'm guessing,
is because she doesn't want the paper trail that would come if he was charged normally.
Is that right?

Exactly.

So she doesn't want it to go to court.

So in a way, I mean, she's protecting her daughter's reputation,
but she's also protecting Saad himself.

Yes.

But he doesn't see it like that.

He sees her as this kind of vengeful harpy who's out to destroy him.

Right.

And so he's let out after seven months imprisonment,

but he is now convinced that she is this kind of baleful figure who wants to destroy him.

He leaves Paris, leaves her behind and takes René off with him to La Coste in Provence.

With the understanding that if he misbehaves,

he's really going to get into trouble,

that the let's cash is now kind of hanging over him a bit like a guillotine one might almost say.

Because you can't cancel it once it's out there.

It's ready to be used.

Yeah.

Exactly.

So the Marquis de Saade's approach, and by this point, his father's side,

so he is by now the Marquis de Saade,

his idea of behaving well is to go to Marseille,

have a massive orgy with his valet and four prostitutes,

to do some gender bending with the valet to, again, commit various sex acts that are illegal,

to poison the prostitutes with Spanish fly, which is a kind of aphrodisiac.

So he laces chocolate with Spanish fly.

Partly it seems to encourage them to keep going,

but also because this gives them bad wind.

And one of the things that the Marquis de Saade really enjoys is smelling the bottom
of a prostitute who's breaking wind.

So that's all stacking up.

And then he comes back and he runs off with his sister-in-law.

Oh, no.

And prospere with whom he's been having an affair under his wife's nose.

Well, that's slightly more conventional, isn't it?

I mean, it's bad behavior, but it's conventional.

It is.

It is.

But it's not the kind of thing that's designed, obviously,

to thrill his wife, or indeed his mother-in-law,

who has him arrested again and imprisoned,

and he manages to escape in a quite a kind of daring escape.

And after his escape, he's kind of almost in hiding,
but still getting up to all kinds of carry-ons.
And it seems that by 1774, he's basically, he's very charming.
And he somehow, he's kind of, I suppose you could say, corrupted Rene.
His wife, yeah.
If that's not too loaded a word.
Huge debate about this, whether she ends up complicit in his orgies.
But certainly, the winter of 1774-75, Saade writes to a friend saying,
we've decided for a thousand different reasons to see very few people this winter.
It's a bad sign, isn't it?
Basically, he and Rene have retreated to a castle in 120 days of Sodom style,
and they've recruited various girls, some of them really quite young,
to be servants, they say, to workers, housemaids.
And in January 1775, the parents of five of these girls bring a formal complaint at Leon,
claiming that basically Saade has abducted their daughters.
And Saade flees to Italy.
When you say quite young, they're teenagers.
They're 15, 16.
14, 15, yeah.
He goes to Italy, hides out there, comes back to La Coste.
There he is almost shot by the father of one of the girls who is in his castle.
It's basically, I mean, the girl doesn't want to come back.
The father has come to pick his daughter up.
The daughter doesn't want to leave.
So the father then tries to shoot Saade.
So it's all looking quite bad in every way.
And then he gets a letter telling him that his mother in Paris is dying.
He arrives in Paris to discover that his mother has actually been dead for three months
and realizes that it's a trap that's been set for him by his mother-in-law.
And again, she's got the letter to Cache.
This orders his immediate incarceration.
So in February 1777, he's arrested.
He's taken to Vincennes, the great royal donjon where he was before,
driven in in a carriage.
It's a wintery night.
All the soldiers who are on guard avert their eyes.
They're not allowed to see who it is who's being brought in.
A warning bell is sounded.
Gates are unlocked, locked up again.
And the Marquis de Saade is imprisoned and becomes Monsieur Numeron's, Monsieur number 11.
And he will spend the next 13 years of his life in prison.
That's why we should leave it.
I think we should take a break now and then we'll return.
I mean, he hasn't really written anything yet, has he?

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So when we return, we'll be able to talk about his adventures in the French Revolution, under Napoleon.

And you can talk us through the Marquis de Saade's ideas and make your case for why he matters, why we should take him seriously as a historic figure.

So join us after the break for more sadism.

Wait, are you gaming on a Chromebook?

Yeah, it's got a high res 120 hertz display, plus this killer RGB keyboard.

And I can access thousands of games anytime, anywhere.

Stop playing.

What?

Get out of here.

Huh?

Yeah, I want you to stop playing and get out of here so I can game on that Chromebook.

Got it.

Discover the ultimate cloud gaming machine, a new kind of Chromebook.

Welcome back to the rest is history.

We're talking about the Marquis de Saade.

As we said, in the first half, not a subject for the school run.

I mean, if your children have been listening to the first half, you're all in now.

So you might as well just carry on.

But social services are on their way.

Tom, Marquis de Saade has just been imprisoned and he stays there for 13 years.

Is that right?

Well, he stays in Bassem for seven years.

And then in 1784, he gets transferred to the Bastille, the notorious prison in the heart of Paris.

Yeah.

And throughout this time, his only real correspondence is René, his wife.

And he's very imperious with her.

Sends her out on kind of shopping missions for eel pâté, apricot marmalade.

And he, well, can I say this on the podcast?

I don't know.

What are you going to say?

Kind of butt plugs.

Oh, right.

Very precise measurements.

He's very finicky about this.

Are these being manufactured in 18th century Paris?

No wonder they had a revolution, Tom.

I think part of the fun of it for the Marquis de Saade isn't just getting the plug on its own, but making his very devout wife go and ask for it.

And it's bespoke.

Rose, you wouldn't get this kind of behaviour from Pit the Younger, would you?

Absolutely not.

No.

And you said just before the end of the first half that he hasn't really written much by this point, but he writes voluminously in prison and particularly in the Bastille.

And that is where he writes 120 Days of Sodom,

which he writes in this kind of great fever of creativity, 37 Days at the end of 1785.

As we said, it's the most shocking novel ever written and it's designed to become ever more shocking.

So one of the things that's quite funny about the novel is that he includes within it lists of things that he's done wrong, which you think maybe quite a lot of novels could do, where the author says, actually, I got this bit wrong.

And one of the notes he makes is that he should have toned down the first part.

So in other words, he goes in, as it were, too hard because the design of the book is that it should become escalatingly horrific and it culminates with horrific murders, I mean, horrible murders.

And so as you're reading it, you know that you're kind of getting this sense of crescendo towards absolute violence, darkness, nihilism.

And this is why I think in the aftermath of the Second World War, he was so interesting to so many people in France.

So many kind of philosophers and thinkers kind of identified the 120 Days of Sodom as a kind of prophecy of the Gestapo of torture camps and death camps.

Because it's the story of these four libertines who basically, they're shackled up in this castle and they imprison a vast number of people and subject them to all kinds of horrible kind of tortures.

And yes, and so the most famous cinematic adaptation of 120 Days of Sodom is by Pasolini, the great Italian director.

It's the last film he made called Salò, which was the plot of 120 Days of Sodom set in the kind of the final fascist republic before Mussolini's death.

Well, that's a constant obsession, isn't it?

The idea that fascism and sadism and sexual sadism, sexual deviance are part of the same sort of mixture.

And I think one of the things that kind of justifies this take is the way that I mentioned before, that actually the castle in 120 Days of Sodom is run like a Jesuit school.

So it's this attempt to impose order on absolute horror, which of course you get in Auschwitz, the trains, the timetables, the mechanized processes.

And I think that it's that that people in the aftermath of the Second World War, when they looked at 120 Days of Sodom, were struck by.

So the sort of methodically regulated obscenity, basically.

Yeah. And actually, Saad loses the manuscript of 120 Days of Sodom.

He's written it in secret, very, very small hand, hides it in the brickwork, but loses it because he gets overtaken by the events of the French Revolution.

So the governor of the Bastille on the 2nd of July, 1789, as the streets of Paris are becoming ever more, you know, starting to see, he wrote to a friend and reported that the Marquis de Saade had appeared at the window of his cell and shouted with all his strength and been heard by the entire neighborhood and bystanders by that they were slaughtering and assassinating the prisoners of the Bastille and that people should come to their aid.

And it's absolutely classic Marquis de Saade that the way he's able to be heard shouting from his window is that he takes what was called a pissing tube. So it was a kind of piece of metal that the prisoner would have to piss through out into the kind of the sewer down below. So he's shouting through that. And this does play a part in inciting the mob that two days later will ransack the Bastille and end up chopping the head of the governor often parading around on a spike. But by that point, the Marquis de Saade himself is not there because he's been transferred. He gets taken to an asylum for the insane place called Charenton, again on the outskirts of Paris, and he loses the manuscript of 120 days while he's being transferred. Just a quick question there, Tom. So he's transferred to a lunatic asylum. You wouldn't say he was a lunatic. Would you? You'd say he was completely irrational? Yes, I think so. I mean, I wouldn't say that he was normal. But I think that saying he's mad is a kind of cop out. But I think the fact that he keeps being transferred, that he's either being imprisoned or transferred to asylums, does suggest that it doesn't matter whether it's the monarchical regime or the revolutionary regime, people find him very, very difficult to cope with. But with the revolution, he can play the part of someone who suffered from despotic tyranny. And so in spring 1790, he's freed. He doesn't go back to Rene because by this point, Rene has become deeply religious and deeply upset by his arguments and so refuses to see him and, in fact, divorces him two months after his release. And on top of that, he has money problems because, of course, he's an aristocrat in a revolutionary world. And so he tries to make money by his pen. So he writes a play, it gets staged for one night. Predictably, there's a massive riot to get smashed up. And he's writing various novels, most famously, Justine, The Sufferings of Virtue, which will come to a bit later. But again, he hasn't lost his charm, despite the fact that while he was in the Bastille, he'd actually become quite obese. He hitches up with a former actress called Marie Constance Kiné. But what he really does is throw himself into revolutionary politics because he has this certain degree of prestige from having been a prisoner in the Bastille. So he casts himself as citoyen sard, citizen sard, and he registers himself in the most radical quarter of Paris, so the Place de Vendôme, which later comes to be called the Section du Pique, and this is the kind of the stamping ground of Rose Pierre himself. And sard seems to actually have done this with some commitment and some sense of duty. He gets voted onto a three-man committee that is charged with inspecting girls' orphanages. That's a terrible, terrible mistake, surely. Me, the marketer sard, the girls' orphanage, what were they thinking? But he actually seems to have executed his duties responsibly. He leads an inquiry into hospital conditions, again, with great responsibility. And the really fascinating example of the way that he seems not to have allowed his violent fantasies to influence his behavior as a kind of revolutionary official is that he ends up being elected president of the Section du Pique. And in that role, he has to work out who should be sent for trial as enemies of the revolution, who shouldn't. And on the list of people who could conceive of who is sent to trial are his in-laws, and he doesn't send them to trial. Right. So he doesn't seek revenge on his mother-in-law who had him in prison for 13 years? No, he doesn't. To his credit, I think. He doesn't behave at all as a monster during the

revolutionary period, quite the opposite, in fact. And it may be that that is actually the sense that perhaps he's too soft, ironically, is what leads to his downfall, because it seems that Robespierre decides that he is a counter-revolutionary. And so, December 1794, he's jailed in the horrible

conditions that the suspects are put into during the height of the terror. For six weeks, he said, I slept in the toilet with seven other people. And he's imprisoned, why? Because he was a former aristocrat or because he has been behaving badly, again, with servants and so on?

No, it's not behaving badly. He is accused of being a very immoral suspect man unfit for society, but that's based on records from decades previously, you know, all the various escapades he'd been going through before he's imprisoned. He is an aristocrat, so that counts against him. And also, he has had sons, and some of these sons have gone abroad to serve with the counter-revolutionary

forces. So again, that isn't a good look for him. So with that against his name at the height of the terror, I mean, it looks really terrible. So, Marie Constance, his partner, is able to kind of dole out bribes and get him moved to a better prison, a former convent in Picpooze. And that is where, almost directly under his window, the guillotine gets set up. It gets removed from the Placidia Concorde and set up underneath his window. And so he's smelling the blood that's spilling out from the guillotine. Yeah, because this is the height of the terror. I think you said it was December 1794, but it's 1793, isn't it, when he's jailed?

Sorry, yes. Yeah. So, I mean, this is the point at which the revolution is beleaguered within and without. They're searching for enemies. So you can completely see why they would identify somebody like him, an aberrant figure, an aristocratic figure, as an enemy within, I suppose. Yeah. And amazingly, he is sentenced for execution on the 27th of July, 1794. He avoids being taken away. And it may be that that, again, is because Marie Constance has a judicious bribe, but it's also luck because the 27th of July, 1794 is the day that Rose Pierre is overthrown and executed the following day. And so, effectively, it's the end of the terror. Cragi, it is, isn't it? It's Termidor.

Yeah. It's the climax of the French Revolution in some ways.

So, he's that close to execution. But again, he's able to, having been in the Bastille just before it stormed, he's at the heart of the terror when Rose Pierre is executed. He's set free October 1794. Right.

And this is when the terror is kind of subsiding. So, he can lead a moderately normal life from this point on. But he's absolutely kind of skinned. He hasn't really got any money at all. He gets a job as a prompter at the Theatre in Versailles.

He sells Lacoste in 1796, his ancestral home. He's endlessly kind of trying to cash money off people. And he starts writing novels again. And the most notorious novel, as I mentioned before, is this novel, Justine. There are various iterations of it. He just kind of keeps writing and writing and writing it. And basically, it's a parody. It's a parody of a novel by the English writer, Samuel Richardson, Pamela. Oh, Pamela, yeah.

And this is the story of a virtuous girl whose virtue ends up being rewarded.

The twist in Justine is that she's incredibly virtuous. And every time she does something good, awful things happen to her. Meanwhile, she has a sister, Juliet, who is the embodiment of vice. And every time she does something awful, you know, she reaps enormous fortunes. And the one time in the novel where Juliet hesitates to commit an atrocity is where her partner,

a kind of Beaumont de Valmont, John Malkovich figure, is proposing to poison the wells across France and wipe out half the population just for fun. And she hesitates and he notices and she plunges into ruin. So she learns that lesson from that point on. She never shows a scruple of conscience ever again, and rises up to become terribly successful. And in the original version, she runs into Justine as her sister is being taken to execution. She's been virtuous and she's been sentenced illegally by corrupt judges. And Juliet rescues her, sets her free. Justine walks off and is struck by lightning through the heart. So what's interesting about this is that this is a point when virtue, the idea of virtue, has become so central to the French revolutionary project, hasn't it? Yeah. So actually, somebody like Rob Speer, we were talking about a second ago. I mean, Rob Speer absolutely believes in this sort of dictatorship of virtue. Yes, he does. So for Sard to be mocking this, is counter-revolutionary actually, it's undermining the entire revolutionary project in the mid 1790s? It absolutely is. So it's very shocking. And Sard has not published it under his name, although he's dedicated to Marie Constance, which you think might give it away, but it becomes very, very notorious. And in due course, after Napoleon's come to power, his chief of police, Joseph Fouché, is instructed by Napoleon to basically clean up the publishing industry. He launches a raid on Sard's publisher, where a copy of Justine is being bound with pornographic illustrations. And they track Sard down, and he's convicted, sent to prison, and then transferred back to Charenton, the Lunatic asylum in 1803. And he stays there for the rest of his life. Conditions there are not so bad. He gets on very well with the superintendent of the asylum, allows Sard to stage plays, he's still absolutely up to his old tricks. So in 1803, there's a kind of the guards go through his room, and they discover, and I quote, an enormous instrument that he fashioned out of wax and which he used on himself since the instrument retained some traces of its shameful intramission. So my word. Right. Yes, the mindboggles. And after the death of Marie Constance, who stays devoted to him, he shacks up with the seamstress in the last months of his life. She is 17. Yeah. He's 74. So absolute tradition of the 120 days of Sodom. 74. He seems to have aged very quickly, but of course, he spent such vast tracks of his life in prison. He spent years, he spent decades in prison. Yeah. And he dies on the 1st of December 1814. Even before he's died, his fame is immense and international in scope. How do people know about him, Tom? I suppose it's equivalent to the dark web. Those who know where to look will find him. So Lady Byron, for instance, amid the scandal of Byron's divorce, claims to have found a copy of Justine in Byron's trunk. And actually, Sard is paired with Byron a lot by critics in the 19th century and 20th century as being one of the two most influential figures on 19th century culture. So perhaps, having given his life, I should now justify the claim that actually he has a significance beyond simply the biographical. Because he does prefigure some of the more unsettling trends for conventional 19th century figures. So Darwin would be a classic. I should say less Darwin than Darwinists, people who interpret Darwin crudely. Yeah. So you don't mean Darwin as a weather biologist. You mean the sort of bastardized, popularized Darwinism. Survival of the fittest. Yeah. Which is coined by Darwin's own cousin and is being propagated within months of the publication of The Origin of Species. But Sard has prefigured all that because he has this materialist sense of nature that all his molecules and molecules are endlessly churning.

And that what nature wants is a kind of turnover of molecules. So this is why nature fosters war and murder. And therefore, war and murder from the standpoint of nature is absolutely desirable. And that this in turn means that nature privileges the strong.

Yeah.

So Sard in one of his novels writes that wolves eating lambs, lambs devoured by wolves, the strong killing the weak, the weak falling victim to the strong, such is nature.

Such are her designs. Such is her plan. So, you know, that is a very radical prefiguring of what will become Darwinist trends.

But I mean, that quotation, you could, I'm thinking back to that podcast we did about the intellectual origins of Nazism in the late 19th century. It's sort of Houston,

Stuart Chamberlain and all the sort of racist manifestos of the 1880s, 1890s.

You could well imagine that those words being written and coming from one of those manifestos, couldn't you?

You absolutely could. And that is, you know, that sort of bastardized Darwinism is absolutely something that feeds into Nazism, as is the, again, the bastardized understanding of nature. And Sard is the great prefigurer of nature. So just as Nietzsche very radically rejects not just the Christian God, but Christian values. So Sard has already blazed that path.

I mean, I said that he is contemptuous of Jesus as a figure, which I think is unusual for atheists.

Most atheists are pretty respectful of Jesus, even if they didn't think he's divine.

But Sard describes him as a leprous Jew born of a whore. He describes, again, Christianity in very Nietzschean terms as a slave religion. So this is a speech from a Rue in Justine, that Christianity represents the weak and the speak and sound like them, nothing surprising in this.

But that he who is neither weak nor Christian subject himself to such restrictions voluntarily entangle himself in this mythical snarl of brotherly relationships, which without benefiting him the least, deprive him enormously. It's unthinkable. So Sard is absolutely claiming that the idea that, you know, love your neighbor, love your enemy, that this is not in nature. It's purely contingent, bread of Christian slaves. And this in turn leads him to argue that there is no absolute morality, that different countries and different times have had different understandings of morality. Therefore, there is no absolute morality. Therefore, people are free to do as they please. And this is the argument that he'd made repeatedly to Renée, as she was becoming more devout, and which leads her in the end to reject and divorce him. So when we were talking about Columbus and we were talking about the kind of the very different moral frameworks that existed

on either side of the Atlantic, Sard fixes on this. So he says that to forgive one's enemies is virtue among Christian imbeciles. In Brazil, it is sort of splendid act to kill and eat them.

I mean, that may or may not be true. But Sard undoubtedly is fixing on something, which is that, you know, Christian ideals are not culturally absolute.

How much is he saying this to shock?

I think he completely believes it. He completely believes it. He returns to it again and again and again. And therefore, because culture is relative, Sard's argument is that ultimately, you can only trust what you yourself feel and the promptings of your own impulses and above all your sexual desires. Oh, that's very 21st century, isn't it?

Well, it is, yes.

Feeling, trumping thoughts, yeah.

He lives his truth. And so this also is what makes him interesting to the kind of psychoanalytical movement as it starts to develop. So in fact, Richard von Kraft Ebbing, who writes this kind of great scientific analysis of different deviances, you call them perversions. He's the guy who coins the word sadism from the Marquis de Sade. And he sees 120 days of Sodom as a work of science rather than as a work of fiction, which is a kind of, I suppose, a kind of taming of Sade in a way, a sense that Sade is not merely a bogeyman, because Kraft Ebbing and Duque's Freud accept Sade's proposition that sexual identity is fundamental to your broader identity, and that in a way it is bad to suppress your desires. I mean, the idea of the ego and the id is kind of implicit in Sade's writings. And in the 20th century, this makes Sade seem very cutting edge, very exciting. And the idea of him as someone who refused to be tamed by convention. So Apollinaire, the great French poet in the early 20th century, described him as the freest spirit who had ever lived. And he stands at the head of a distinctively French tradition, which cast Sade as a kind of great intellectual hero. So he's very influential on Foucault.

I was about to say Michel Foucault is very clearly influenced by the fascination of power with violence and prisons and asylums.

But also, intriguingly, feminists have been fascinated by him and seen Sade as a kind of proto-feminist, because Sade did absolutely see women as being equal to men in terms of what they could do. Juliet, for instance, is a monster, and that for Sade is a kind of source of privilege. I mean, Simone de Beauvoir, Angela Carter, Camille Padilla, they've all kind of faded Sade in a kind of very strange way.

What will have really occurred to, I'm sure, to lots of listeners, and this does sound like a very French intellectual thing to do, is they appear to have slightly overlooked the fact that there are an awful lot of poor beggars, servant girls, teenage girls and so on, who are facade the objects, the instruments that don't have the agency, maybe, because of their economic weakness. They do understand that, but I think they palliate it. And actually, the feminist who really has no time for Sade is Andrea Dawkin, who was very robust on all these kind of issues. But you're right that there is a kind of weird way in which Sade has been cast as actually as a progressive. And you might think, how could this be possible? The answer, I think, is focused in a particular section of a novel he wrote called Philosophy in the Boudoir, which, in a way, is the kind of the perfect phrase for summing up what Sade is all about. And in it, he writes this little essay called Yet Another Effort Frenchman, If You Would Become Republicans. So he's writing this in kind of the revolutionary period. And basically, he is trying to construct a framework of morals that can be rooted in nature rather than in the inheritance of Christianity, which is being thrown aside as a legacy of despotism. And he argues for kind of absolutely impeccably progressive principles. So he is against the death penalty, as Robespierre was, of course. He's in favor, absolutely in favor of female liberation, thinks women should have absolute equality, that women should have a right to abortion, that what we would call gay rights, that gay people should have absolute equality before the law, all of which make him sound like a kind of 21st century progressive. But what makes him unsettling for the 21st century as for the 18th and 19th century is that he then starts to push these principles to incredibly unsettling ends. I mean, in a way, when he talks about the fact that there should be absolute tolerance, he goes further. And rather like trans campaigners now, there's the assumption that a properly

revolutionary and progressive state should constantly be looking for frontiers to push back, that there will always be people who are suffering because of their sexuality or their gender identity or whatever, and that it's the responsibility of a progressive state to push and push and push this forward, to undermine what convention calls virtuous and normal. And inevitably, being the Marquis de Sade, he starts to argue that there should be no limit to tolerance for sexual desire at all. So therefore, rape should be legitimate, that incest should be legitimate. This is particularly the case for a society like Revolutionary France, which is founded on the ideal of fraternity. So he's kind of turning the political ideals, turning on his head.

He then starts arguing that murder sustains Republican virtue, that nature requires constant change and replenishment. And he ends up basically arguing for genocide. So he praises the spectacle

in China of children's corpses clogging rivers and declares that it is both necessary in politics to erect barriers to population growth in a Republican government.

So what's quite interesting, Tom, is he's writing this in the 1790s, at a point when, you know, your Saint-Juice or your Robespierre, they are in their rhetoric are sometimes not far short of that. They're calls for constant terror, their insistence that blood must be spilled to maintain the purity of the revolution. De Sade is pushing that to its ultimate extreme, but it's not unrooted in the circumstances of the day.

Yes. And he's admiring the spectacle of dead children dying of starvation in China. And that in due course is what will come to happen, you know, under Mao, in the name of virtue, of communist ideals, and of course under Stalin as well in Ukraine. So there is absolutely a prefiguring there of communist totalitarianism. But of course, there is also a prefiguring of, as we've said before, a fascist totalitarianism. So just like the fascists, he looks back to Rome and to the ancient world for examples of how states can organize themselves without Christianity. And so he has this theory that the Roman Empire fell because Christians came in and forbade people watching spectacles of torture and death in the arena and it turned the Romans into slaves.

So Gibbon famously had, you know, sort of suggested and then declined a fall of the Roman Empire that the adoption of Christianity was one of his causes. I mean, he had basically implied, hadn't he? There was one of the causes of the sort of decline of Rome from the glories of the Antonine Age. And this is only a few decades after Gibbon was writing, right?

Yes, but it's a much sharper version. And he further extrapolates that because they went soft, therefore they were no longer willing to tolerate that bastards, orphans, deformed children should be put to death at birth, which of course is what the Nazis will do. And in absolutely sardine terms. And when in his novels, Sard is citing ancient sources as justification for the principle that society is made up only of the weak and the strong, that charity is cold and pointless, that the weak should be left to die. He's basically doing what the Nazis do.

And just as he has provided arguments for why, say, a Suidesan progressive state could license genocide, he also provides a license for genocide that the fascists would have recognized.

So he is a very unsettling figure, I think, and remains an unsettling figure.

It's interesting how he contains so much. So as you say, prefiguring the ethos of fascism, the moral ethos of fascism or something. But also in his emphasis on nature dictates your desires to lead an authentic, properly virtuous life, I suppose, you should act on those desires and for society to try to contain them is wrong and all that sort of stuff. I mean, that feels very, very contemporary. It does, which is why what Sard does with all these arguments, push them to

terrifying limits. It retains its power to shock and unsettle in the 21st century. And I think that that's one of the things that mark him out as a fascinating figure and why looking at his influence over the way that he's been interpreted since his death, that every period finds different ways in which he is unsettling. He casts a shadow over different political shibboleths, different political ideals at different stages of the centuries that have followed his death. So we started with a quotation from 120 days of Sodom. I didn't read the whole quotation because I didn't want the podcast to be cancelled. You said you found that book, you said it was boring at one point because it just goes on and on and on. Have you actually ever read it, made it all the way through? I've never managed to finish the 120 days of Sodom. Because it's huge, isn't it? It's enormous. It's not that huge. Juliet is the one that's really huge, as it were. I mean, it's so difficult to talk about Sodom, not strain to kind of turn into Benny Hill. I mean, the thing is, is that Sod was banned in Britain when I was at university. And that was in the wake of the Moore's murders because Ian Bradley had a copy of Justine. And in the wake of that, his books were banned. I think it wasn't until 1989 that it came to be published. And I went to San Francisco in that year and found a copy of it there and bought it. It was in kind of hippie shop, hate Ashbury, and tried to read it and couldn't. I mean, you just end up feeling sick. Actually, having been banned in 1989, it's now a Penguin Classic. So when it came out as a Penguin Classic, I bought it again, tried to read it. I still couldn't. And then I tried to read it again when I wrote about Sod for Dominion. Still couldn't finish it. So I think it's literally an unreadable book. Right. Well, literally an unreadable book. You can hardly get a more ringing endorsement. Penguin Classics will be delighted with that, Tom. All right. So that's the Marquis Dessart. Actually, we were worried before we started this that it would be a podcast full of absolute depravity and debauchery. But actually, the funny thing is, it wasn't, I don't think. Quite a lot of, I mean, quite a lot. I suppose so. But we had genocide instead. Yes. But actually, the Marquis Dessart is genuinely a much more interesting figure than I had realised. I think it's a fascinating figure. Yeah. And I hope that the listeners are persuaded that it hasn't been mere prurience that has led us to record this episode. No, I don't think so. Right. That's the Marquis Dessart. No doubt sales of 120 days of Sod and will rock it after this. And on that bombshell, we will say goodbye. Au revoir.