

The Marquis de Sade as Classicist

The scandalous libertine novelist D.A.F. de Sade occupies a special place in the history of Enlightenment ideas concerning sexuality and human freedom. His most theoretical articulation of doctrine, *La Philosophie dans le boudoir* (1795), takes the form of a Platonic dialogue, in which three libertines tend to the sexual instruction of a 15-year old, convent-educated virgin. The chief preceptor, Dolmancé, specifically appeals to the ancient world as a social model and laments the downfall of pagan religion through the “fraudulent cult of Christianity.” Sade reveals a wide familiarity with ancient or Byzantine texts, including Lucretius (from whom he takes his thorough materialism), Sappho, Plutarch, Lucian, Strabo, Sextus Empiricus, Diodorus Siculus, Suetonius, Procopius, Martial, Petronius, and the canonical Roman poets; the moralist Seneca is his *bête noire*. Among the institutions he praises are the Spartan *agogê*, athletic nudity, Solon’s provision of public brothels, the Cretan abduction ritual described by Ephorus, the Sacred Band of Thebes, Plato’s proposal that children be raised communally, toleration of abortion and infanticide, and the Roman gladiatorial games. The sex lives of Alcibiades, Tiberius, Messalina, Nero, Elagabalus, and Theodora are all objects of his admiration.

Dolmancé, a self-identified “sodomite,” repeatedly makes the argument that all sexual penchants, however unconventional, are implanted in individual “constitutions” by Nature, and for that reason should not be subject to moral condemnation. Like many modern gay apologists, Dolmancé asserts that sexual preferences, whether for girls or boys, manifest at an early age due to distinctive physical formation. In one passage, he specifies that Nature has endowed the sodomite’s anus with softer membranes more like those of a woman, giving him a special inclination to anal pleasure. This argument has no known precedent in 18th century medical

literature, but is directly paralleled in Ps.-Aristotle, *Problemata* 4.16; Sade's fidelity to Aristotelian physiology (as for instance, in his insistence that only male seed is genetically determinative – an outmoded view by his time) is notable. This biological determinism contrasts with the environmental explanations of “deviant” sexuality found in Voltaire, Montesquieu, Diderot, and other Enlightenment writers.

Although given scant notice in Foucault's *History of Sexuality*, Sade stands as the first modern thinker to insist on a sexual “identity” implanted at birth, a position central to present-day gay apologetics. I will argue that he found precedent in a range of ancient texts.