

THE CHILDREN OF LIBERTINE NOVELS: LOST IN THE MOMENT

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A thesis substitute submitted to the faculty at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Masters in the Romance Studies Department (French) in the College of Arts and Sciences.

Chapel Hill
2015

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ABSTRACT

Cameron Bunch: The Children of Libertine Novels: Lost in the Moment
(Under the direction of [Jessica Tanner])

This essay endeavors to resolve an apparent contradiction: though French society in the years preceding and following the Revolution was marked by a concern with a perceived decline in birthrate and a need to increase the rate of reproduction in order to strengthen and revitalize the nation, reproduction and children are almost entirely absent from the body of libertine novels, despite these texts' central concern with the private and public discourses surrounding sex. This essay discusses contemporary concerns about reproduction and consults literary fiction by Sade, Denon, and Laclos in order to shed light upon and discuss this contradiction.

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The Chevalier de Jaucourt (an 18th-Century French philosophe) writes in his article “Famille” from Diderot and d’Alembert’s *Encyclopédie*: “Les familles commencent par le mariage, et c’est la nature elle-même qui invite les hommes à cette union; de-là naissent les enfants, qui en perpétuant les familles, entretiennent la société humaine, et réparent les pertes que la mort y cause chaque jour.” Jaucourt highlights the historical significance of marriage, emphasizing that it is a bond between two people that creates a strong family unit and prolongs the human race; marriage unites the sexes, creating a connection between instinctive impulses to procreate and the construction of a societal structure that contributes to the success of a nation. However, leading up to and following the French Revolution in 1789, French writers engendered a fear and anxiety by stating that the population was in decline. According to Leslie Tuttle, this perceived, yet nonexistent, population decline was a result of previous wars, barren crops, famine, and rural suffering. However, the writers that wrote about this imagined population decline did not rely on empirical data to support their claims; in fact, as Tuttle notes, “France’s population rose to about twenty-eight million by 1800, representing a growth of more than 30 percent over the course of the century” (6). In this paper I will examine social and literary movements aiming to change law and collective thought regarding sex in France and discuss how contemporary thinkers sought to combat the perceived population deficit by bringing forth private sexual behaviors into the public eye as acceptable and normal. Furthermore, drawing evidence from contemporary aristocratic opinions about pregnancy and from the works of authors such as the Marquis de Sade, Vivant Denon and Choderlos de Laclos, I will propose a hypothesis as to why, in the context of discourses and policies promoting population growth, this

increased attention to reproduction is generally absent from libertine writings. Despite the fact that libertine works depicted freer sexual behavior -- similar to, though distinct from, that associated with pronatalist movements such as Louis XIV's edict of 1666, which explicitly promoted the birth of more French people -- the disconnect between sex and reproduction in libertine works reaches beyond the literal relationship between carnal pleasure and pregnancy and symbolically encompasses the aristocracy's decline and lack of production.

Contemporary Discourses Regarding Reproduction and Population

In seventeenth- and eighteenth-century France, intellectuals, writers, and philosophers, both men and women alike, studied the perceived population decline in order to provide solutions for the future of France. As Carol Blum writes, the drive to bolster France's population overpowered religious and monarchical influence:

The notion that France was losing population, uneasily endemic throughout the latter years of Louis XIV's reign, became one of the eighteenth century's most effective entrees into, and pretexts for, a widespread, sustained critique of the monarchy and its validating body, the Catholic Church. By the time of the Revolution, the foundations of the absolute monarchy and the Church's moral authority had been seriously undermined by the power of the natalist cause. (2)

This critique of the monarchy and of the Catholic Church addressed many of the moral restrictions placed upon French citizens regarding their sexual behavior, restrictions which dictated social norms regarding marriage and reproduction. Furthering the critique that ideas about marriage were guided principally by the monarchy leading up to the Revolution, James Traer writes that "Despite disputes concerning their respective areas of authority, the Catholic Church and the French monarchy had created an orthodox view of marriage in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries" (48). The aforementioned edict of 1666 was one of these royal decrees that strongly encouraged marriage as the best medium through which large, populous families

flourish. Many who studied France's demographics decided that in order to attack the issue of a declining population, French society would need to rework normative ideas of marriage and consider the new alternatives to the traditional model of monogamous marriage. Blum describes these new ideas, illuminating how writers such as Montesquieu and Diderot believed national demographic needs should take precedence over monarchical and religious proscriptive ideas about sexuality: "[Their] texts urge such programs as the reduction or even interdiction of celibacy, the legalization of divorce, the introduction of polygamy, and the elimination of a whole variety of ecclesiastical and legal sexual taboos, even those against violence and incest" (ix). In this, Diderot and Montesquieu are aligned with many of their contemporaries, who sought to deprioritize religion in state affairs; as I will later demonstrate, Sade had similar sentiments opposing religion.

Anxiety about the perceived population decline during the eighteenth century accompanied the pre-existing pronatalist drive that had been in effect since the seventeenth century, and this social craving for change led many French thinkers to cast away traditional, religious, and royal ideals regarding sexual behavior in the interest of boosting the population. Laws regarding marriage and sexuality had been in the hands of the monarchy, but at this moment in history French people no longer wished for the government and church to dictate sexual norms by classifying certain behaviors as legal (despite the reality that illegal or non-normative sexual activities occurred behind closed doors).¹ However, in order to achieve this agency in their private lives, the French needed to rework certain laws; as Traer writes, "The moral and legal authority of church and monarchy provided the positive sanction of example and the negative one of potential punishment" (16). While laws do not always govern how people

¹ See Kavanagh's article "The Libertine Moment" in which he describes at length the social implications of private and public knowledge and behaviors.

actually behave in private, they do determine which human behaviors are acceptable in the public eye; for the French during this era, a failure to ensure legal (and social) compliance before disobeying contemporary laws regarding sex and marriage could have yielded undesired consequences, both legal and reputational, for those whose private actions became public knowledge.

Most notably, these hazardous consequences threatened women, whose reputations related largely to socially lateral suspicions and judgments about their sexual discretions. A woman's infidelity raised many more questions than a man's infidelity. Not only could the father question the legitimacy of a child, but his wife's infidelity could also complicate matters of inheritance and the passing of estates.² As Foucault has famously argued, during the 18th century, the discourse of sex became more prominent in the public sphere: "Le sexe [...] au XVIII^{ème} siècle devient affaire de police" (35). By bringing questions of sex into the public eye, sex increasingly became a matter of scrutiny subject to conversation, debate, and the aforementioned legal issues regarding inheritance. Additionally, Blum comments on the magnitude of this social and sexual revolution that conjoined private and public affairs, underscoring the increasing priority of individual and social concerns over religious restrictions:

Populationism in eighteenth-century France drew private sexual behavior into the public arena, judging its worth not according to the hallowed teachings of the Church but on the modern criterion of productivity. The massive propaganda campaign in favor of procreation, in which an emerging nationalism overrode a traditional religion and salvation came in second to natality, was part of the great Enlightenment shift in values from the transcendental to the quantifiable. (x)

Simply put, the existing laws governing sexual morality and marriage did not reflect the reality of French society's behavior and their need to address anxiety about their population. As popular demand required, some legal changes did indeed occur after the Revolution. According to Traer,

² See Tuttle's chapter "Gendering Reproduction" in which he discusses male and female roles within a marriage in early modern France.

legislators took advantage of the social momentum, the drive to effect change in politics, and of the dawning of a new era in order to modify family laws. In the interest of the people, not the government or the church, legislators modified and expunged existing French laws governing marriage and relationships in order to make way for new, developing mentalities about the family.

Previous laws, which had been royally or religiously imposed, strongly discouraged the willful termination of marriage, and yet eighteenth-century legislators considered allowing for divorce in new marriage laws as part of a reworked pronatalist approach. Ideas about divorce among contemporary thinkers varied,³ and the diversity of these ideas is a testament to how the governance of sexuality was changing as well as how societal structure was evolving. The Marshal de Saxe, who served in the French military in the decades preceding the Revolution, proposed that marriage contracts should be validated repeatedly after a set period of years only if the couple had produced children. This idea tied in an incentive that very fruitful couples should receive official recognition for their contribution to the population. While the Marshal de Saxe did not directly support divorce, his ideas implied that marriage was not a right but a privilege reserved for couples that agreed to have children, and that divorce was an appropriate action to take so that members of an unproductive couple could find new partners with whom they would bear children, and therefore fulfill God's instruction that man should "multiply" (Traer 58). Perhaps The Marshal de Saxe's ideas were too systematic and strict to take root in a post-revolutionary France that had just overturned an oppressive monarchical system. However, his rhetoric anticipating and debunking of the Church's expected opposition cleverly prioritizes France's population needs over the religious doctrine stating that only death should end a

³ See Hunt (161-162)

marriage. His acknowledgement of religious criticism was prudent because although many French citizens no longer wished to be governed by religious law, a major contingent of devout Catholics still existed within France.

The Marshal de Saxe's anticipation of righteous criticism places him in a body of thinkers who would be subjected to similar criticism, such as Sade. Simon-Nicolas Henri Linguet, a journalist who lived through the Revolution, more directly voiced support for divorce, proposing that marriage should possess a temporality free from the religious obligation that marriage should bind a couple until death.⁴ With this question of temporality, Linguet's ideas of marriage, that involve the potential for divorce, possess a finite quality that in many ways defines the libertine novels as a genre: the "libertine moment," as conceptualized by Thomas Kavanagh. This theme, which I will revisit in reference to the works of Sade, Denon, and Laclos, most often surfaces in a passionate sexual encounter occurring between two (or potentially more) characters who are caught up in the fantasy of the immediate present and who embrace their aristocratic idleness, an idleness that Pierre Saint-Amand characterizes as "the only pleasure that can be counted on, when all possessions are forgotten" (35). At a time when the aristocracy was losing social and political power, their lack of a foreseeable future distanced them from an attachment to their riches and power; they found pleasure through sexual means while the former assets that

⁴ Not only did these philosophers ruminate about social change within France, but they also took inspiration from antiquity and from exotic social structures. By examining how other societies operated, they were able to take an introspective point of view and consider how the French familial structure could be altered and improved by allowing for divorce. Traer writes: "The *philosophes* developed a variety of ideas and attitudes clearly contrary to the conception of marriage and family established by Catholic doctrine and royal law... Their fascination with the diversity of ancient and contemporary cultures led them to an awareness of the practice of divorce in other societies and encouraged them to question parental authority, arranged marriages, conventional sexual morality, and even the institution of marriage itself. Writing from the viewpoint of utility, many authors stressed that changes in the law of marriage, principally the introduction of divorce, could create happier marriages, purify public morals, stimulate population growth, and achieve other socially desirable goals" (78).

largely defined their identity as aristocrats were in jeopardy. It is worth examining how

Kavanagh defines the libertine moment as a contemporary aristocratic fascination:

Enlightenment culture, its tensions, contradictions, and achievements, flowed from a new sense of existence within a present freed from the weight of past and future...In choosing the moment, a number of the period's most important writers and artists lowered their eyes from the grandiose sequences of society's structuring narratives and looked instead at reality in the nakedness of a here and now freed from any allegiance to an assumed past and an expected future. (79-80).

As Kavanagh shows, the linear temporality of progress no longer seemed important to writers representing the eighteenth-century French aristocracy. Their decline left the future uncertain and led them to indulge in the freedom of the moment through instant sexual gratification - impulsive behavior that is represented in the work of Sade, Denon, Laclos, and other libertine authors.

Social ideas about sexuality and divorce did not only stem from the minds of philosophers and the realm of public discussion; they were also considered, negotiated, and explored in literary fiction. The Marquis de Sade, a writer infamous for his controversial ideas about sex and pleasure, was a major contributor and punctuating contemporary commentator, as he was one of the final canonical writers to contribute to a body of literature challenging the boundaries of eighteenth-century social and legal norms. He published *La philosophie dans le boudoir* in 1795, and this book of conversations between libertines and their student is part of what was a rising genre that Lynn Hunt describes as “political pornography.” Following the Terror, as Hunt shows, strict censorship of pornography was ineffective. Therefore, it was convenient for Sade and other contemporary authors to embed parodic political arguments within a pornographic setting. In Sade’s case, innovative political ideas accompany didactic libertine dialogues: for example, his insertion of “Français, encore un effort si vous voulez être républicains” a political pamphlet that seemingly interrupts the pornographic education of Eugénie before allowing her licentious sexual instruction to resume. Sade’s ideas, like those of

earlier philosophers who had ruminated about a perceived population crisis in France, challenged royal and religious ideas governing sexuality.

At this point I will examine the ways in which Sade contributed to the discourse on religious and monarchical laws that policed sexual behaviors, and then I will return to discuss how contemporary women's ideas about pregnancy and more importantly how libertine works figure into (or rather distance themselves from) the discussion on reproduction. Kavanagh describes Sade's political pamphlet as follows:

A text like the section of *La philosophie dans le boudoir* entitled "Français, encore un effort si vous voulez être républicains" imposes its carefully reasoned redefinition of the natural law as the basis of a deontology necessitating crime, murder, prostitution, and the immediate satisfaction of every desire as the necessary foundation of any truly republican social order. (100)

Sade's deontological approach to morality, though perhaps extreme, aligns with the anti-religious platform many other thinkers of the time adopted in order to renovate the state. Sade did not agree that people should be arrested for crimes like adultery, incest, or sodomy where the justification for arrest had its foundation in religion. His writings promote the prioritization of the self and the wellbeing of the state over religion and monarchical systems of government: "Nous sommes aussi convaincus que la religion doit être appuyée sur la morale, et non pas la morale sur la religion. [...] Cessons de croire que la religion puisse être utile à l'homme" (478, 483). Sade further encourages his readers to consider whether religion is an appropriate source from which an individual should develop morals and by which a society should make laws regarding sexual politics: "Mais la sodomie, mais ce prétendu crime, qui attira le feu du ciel sur les villes qui y étaient adonnées n'est-il point un égarement monstrueux, dont le châtement ne saurait être assez fort? [...] Est-il possible d'être assez barbare pour oser condamner à mort un malheureux individu dont tout le crime est de ne pas avoir les mêmes goûts que vous?" (509). He

encourages his reader to think introspectively and decide for themselves whether sexual behaviors deemed unorthodox by Christian standards actually do merit punishment or whether these divergent sexual behavior can be accepted among a larger body of diverse comportments. In short, if there were a societal structure in place that prevented the state from bettering itself in the name of religion, Sade would see it banished.

Hunt observes that often in Sade's texts it is often unclear if he uses his characters as mouthpieces to express his own personal thoughts, especially in the case of Dolmancé (140). At times Sade's reasoning seems rather circular and contradictory; in the following instance, assuming that Sade is in fact using the character Dolmancé as a vessel to convey his opinion, he simultaneously promotes the welfare of the individual and the collective state:

Dolmancé: Parce que les lois ne sont pas faites pour le particulier, mais pour le général, ce qui les met dans une perpétuelle contradiction avec l'intérêt, attend que l'intérêt personnel l'est toujours avec l'intérêt général. Mais les lois, bonnes pour la société, sont très mauvaises pour l'individu qui la compose... (3).

When compared to his statements in other parts of *La philosophie dans le boudoir* it may be difficult to discern whether Sade prioritizes egocentric concerns regarding the individual's pleasure or prioritizes an organization of society where egocentric concerns are aligned with the social good. However, this gap in consistency does not muddle the fact that Sade's writings imply a desire for change within his country. Without drastic change, Sade warns, France would revert back to a system of monarchy guided by religion:

Ne perdons pas de vue que cette puérile religion était une des meilleures armes aux mains de nos tyrans: un de ses premiers dogmes était de rendre à César ce qui appartient à César; mais nous avons détrôné César et nous ne voulons plus rien lui rendre. Français, ce serait en vain que vous vous flatteriez que l'esprit d'un clergé réfractaire; il est des vices d'état dont on ne se corrige jamais. Avant dix ans, au moyen de la religion chrétienne, de sa superstition, de ses préjugés, vos prêtres, malgré leur serment, malgré leur pauvreté, reprendraient sur les âmes l'empire qu'ils avaient envahi; ils vous renchaîneraient à des rois, parce que la puissance de ceux-ci étaya toujours celle de l'autre, et votre édifice républicain s'écroulerait, faute de bases. [...] Anéantissez donc à jamais tout ce qui peut détruire un jour votre ouvrage. (478-479)

According to Sade's logic, it follows that if society suspects a population decline, religious inhibitions should not prevent France from doing what is necessary to rework social norms and augment the population. By undermining religion as a basis for individual and collective social decisions, Sade implicitly supports individuals' sexual freedom, procreative or not. Even if his ideas were extremist by postulating incest, orgies, and rape as valid pathways to population growth, Sade contributed valuable input to the discussion of sexual politics; As Roland Barthes puts it, "[Les idées de Sade sont] fonctionnellement inutile[s] mais philosophiquement exemplaire[s]. [...] L'univers sadien est l'univers du discours" (714, 731). Here, Barthes addresses an element of Sade's writing that does complicate its interpretation. Sade's extreme writings can rarely be understood to coincide with his intimate beliefs, or to represent a program for could feasibly occur in society. As he famously wrote, "I am a libertine; I have imagined all that can be imagined in that domain; but I have certainly not done all I have imagined, and certainly shall never do it all" (Le Brun, 73). Sade is in many respects the devil's advocate of the sexual imagination, and his world much like the world of other libertine writing is a realm of discourse and hypotheticals. With their literary works, he and many other authors furthered thought and discussion regarding religion and politics in the late eighteenth century.

The Absence of Reproduction in Libertine Works

Throughout the eighteenth century, many authors (e.g., Crébillon fils, Diderot, Laclos, Denon) wrote novels about libertine relations and the sexual identities in French society (e.g., Crébillon fils, Diderot, Laclos, Denon). The libertine novel was a potential, yet unused space for authors to negotiate the pronatalist movement and anxieties about population decline. As Thomas Wynn writes, “[Libertinage] is characterised by an aspiration to singularity, opposing as it does religious, moral, and political orthodoxy. Concerning above all the theorisation, practice, and expression of sexual pleasure (not love), libertinage is an affront to conventional behaviour” (412). In the rest of this paper I explore two possible answers to the question of why the libertine genre neglects to represent reproduction at a time when many French people were concerned (albeit unfoundedly so) about demographic shifts? One potential answer gathers its support from contemporary women’s hesitations about pregnancy, which stem mainly from health risks associated with childbirth. More notably, this absence reflects the pervasive sense of decline in libertine works – the notion that the waning of the aristocracy engendered apathy for the future and a relish for instant sexual gratification, a sentiment Pierre Saint-Amand characterizes as the “despondent view of the century” (1). I will discuss how Sade, Denon, and Laclos in their respective libertine works *La philosophie dans le boudoir*, *Point de lendemain* (1777) and *Les liaisons dangereuses* (1782) emphasize the sexual encounters, not reproduction (or even production), as a primary focus of their novels.

The libertine novel focuses primarily on the lives and experiences of aristocrats. Scholar Christine Théré’s exploration of mid-to-late-century aristocratic women’s opinions and perceptions about procreation yields important insight into the historical climate in which many libertine novels were written. Within the aristocracy, opinions differed among women about the

question of pregnancy; some espoused the orthodox views of the monarchy and religious institutions, believing that marriage was the best medium for procreation. Other women, however, postulated that they could manipulate their maternal bodily functions to act as a method of natural birth control. For example, one of the women Théré studies, Mme Le Rebours, while promoting the birth of children, suggests that mothers breast-feed babies themselves instead of requesting a wet nurse. According to Théré, these babies would have been healthier and more likely to survive due to the nourishment of their mothers' milk, but the natural sterility that the process of breast-feeding provides for the mother meant that women would have babies less frequently. While some women quibbled about how often to have babies or how they should choose to breast-feed their babies, there also existed a great fear and disgust among the French aristocratic women for becoming pregnant altogether. This fear was tied to the risks that pregnancy involved such as infection, pain, and miscarriages,⁵ and it was so strong that many aristocratic women felt it was not their cross to bear, and that pregnancy was a task that should be reserved for lower-class women. The fact that many aristocratic women had an aversion to becoming pregnant may be one contributing factor as to why libertine novels typically do not portray reproduction. Pregnancy is an undeniable trace of a previous sexual encounter, and the physical, social, and reputational consequences for a woman who becomes pregnant bind her to her fate. While not all aristocrats were libertines, libertine novels (as I have

⁵ As Théré writes, "The fear that women felt with regard to childbirth could henceforth be expressed all the more openly as their contemporaries felt it justified... The campaign against abuses committed by mid-wives provoked an avalanche of accounts of stillbirths and monstrous children, which reinforced women's fear of delivery. However, it seems that there was always a certain discrepancy between the objective risks to which women were exposed and their perception of these risks: current available facts on maternal mortality suggest that the danger was much exaggerated. Whatever the case may be, motherhood entailed risks that scared women. Besides the fear of the dramatic turns that any birth could take, the texts consulted reveal a certain rejection of the suffering that accompanies any birth. Perhaps what is new in the eighteenth century is that women were less resigned to such 'ordinary' pain... Thus it is a punishment 'from which we are exempt when we have the good taste not to take a husband'" (558).

previously stated) typically depict aristocratic storylines. Additionally, I postulate that while it was *men* who wrote most libertine novels, eighteenth-century authors may have been socially aware of these feminine fears, aversions and the general negative view against pregnancy.

More convincing evidence explaining the absence of contemporary population anxieties in libertine works, however, lies within the libertine texts themselves. Sade's constructed discourse between the characters Eugénie and Mme. de Sainte-Ange in *La philosophie dans le boudoir* echoes aristocratic fears about pregnancy, and the discourse even goes so far as to suggest the libertine's exemption from the duty of procreation: "Mme. de Sainte-Ange: Une jolie fille ne doit s'occuper que de foutre et jamais d'engendrer. Nous glisserons sur tout ce qui tient au plat mécanisme de la population, pour nous attacher principalement et uniquement aux voluptés libertines dont l'esprit n'est nullement peupérateur" (386). Sade also glorifies sodomy for the woman. While many critics argue that interpretation of Sade's writings should be understood through a misogynistic lens, taken from a different angle, female sodomy accords the woman agency and provides an escape from the fears and dangers of pregnancy consistent with sentiments of the era:

Mme. de Sainte-Ange: [...] rien ne peut plus rendre les plaisirs que l'on goûte, et celui qu'on éprouve à l'introduction de ce membre dans nos culs est incontestablement préférable à tous ceux que peut procurer cette même introduction par-devant. Que de dangers, d'ailleurs, n'évite pas une femme alors ! Moins de risques pour sa santé, et plus aucun pour la grossesse (386).

Nancy Miller comments on the type of woman Sade depicts here, characterizing her as a woman who welcomes and identifies with "the phallic mode" (a virile drive and persona), a woman who rejects the labels of inferiority that being the object of sodomy implies (24). By appropriating the inferior and non-reproductive position as hers, one that she prefers and has chosen, this woman reclaims her power. If becoming mothers did not appeal to women of the aristocracy, this fact

speaks to the decline, idleness, and lack of vision for the future that the aristocracy experienced leading up to and following the French Revolution. Another factor to take into account once again is that the majority of libertine authors are men. Thusly, it is important to consider that the texts of male authors likely reflect a masculine detachment from the duty of childbirth. Catherine Cusset and Miller address this caveat in a conversation (1998) that centered on libertinage and feminism:

CC: [...] you write that there are things that men can easily forget but women don't have the luxury of forgetting...

NKM: [...] even when women are sexual subjects and performing seductions of their own, they still cannot escape the rule of consequence – except maybe in *Point de lendemain...* but I still don't see an eighteenth-century woman writer staging that game. (18-19)

Men have different obligations regarding the consequences of sex, and therefore writing about libertine moments, passionate sexual encounters, and wildly erotic debaucheries (in which vaginal penetration does indeed occur) that do not consider the potential infants conceived may have been more conceivable to them than women writers.

Sade, Denon and Laclos - who all wrote in the latter half of the century, when the decline and imminent demise of the aristocracy was most acutely felt - choose rather to write about sexual exchanges occurring in the 'here and now,' depicting characters that cast away all care for the future. In *La philosophie dans le boudoir*, Sade refers to the brevity of the act of sex and how this fleeting moment of pleasure should not prevent those within a marriage from seeking sexual encounters with those outside the marriage: "Les femmes ne sont pas faites pour un seul homme: c'est pour tous que les a créées la nature" (3). Likewise, Sade's literary fleeting passionate encounters address by way of rhetorical question the unimportance of worrying about a child after the brief act of sex:

Direz-vous, par exemple, que le besoin de me marier, ou pour voir prolonger ma race, ou pour arranger ma fortune, doit établir des liens indissolubles ou sacrés avec l'objet auquel je m'allie? Ne serait-ce pas, je vous le demande, une absurdité que de soutenir cela? Tant que dure l'acte du coït, je peux, sans doute, avoir besoin de cet objet pour y participer; mais sitôt qu'il est satisfait, que reste-t-il, je vous prie, entre lui et moi? et quelle obligation réelle enchaînera à lui ou à moi les résultats de ce coït? (2)

By posing the question "quelle obligation réelle?," Sade refuses the obvious, insisting that the child byproduct of sex and a binding responsibility to it are irrelevant (for the man) in the moment of sexual intensity and pleasure.

Sade's contemporaries as well as the libertine aristocrats preceding him did not worry themselves with liability for the future. For example, Denon's *Point de lendemain* is another libertine novel in which we see no children but rather an indulgent appreciation for the here and now. He captures the boredom of the aristocracy with characters who refuse responsibility and morality, but rather seek only pleasure: "Ah! Point de morale, je vous en conjure; vous manquez l'objet de votre emploi. Il faut m'amuser, me distraire, et non me prêcher" (38). A twist in Denon's novel, however, is that his primary libertine, Mme de T..., is a woman; she is the predatory character who leads the narrator into the sexual relation. Typically in the libertine novel one encounters a male libertine as the active character who seeks to sexually exploit a multitude of women, but in *Point de lendemain* Denon turns this structure on its head. He shows that because his libertine woman controls the circulation of knowledge about her affairs and because they are never made public, she does not have to worry or focus on 'tomorrow' - a future involving a child or a damaged reputation as a result of sexual debauchery. This detachment from consequence does not unequivocally pervade libertine works, however. For example, *Les bijoux indiscrets* (1748) by Diderot also depicts the fleeting sexual encounters. However, the women involved in this earlier libertine work were indeed "chained" to their

actions due to a magic stone that gave their genitals the capacity to speak and retell their sexual history, therefore damaging their reputations.

Denon's vocabulary, which frequently captures the essence of imagination, dreams and fantasy, suggests that the libertine moment occurs in an atemporal space, thereby emphasizing that the real world children born from male/female sexual relations are unimportant and not relevant to this quasi-superhuman experience of the fleeting and extremely pleasurable libertine moment: "Eh bien! Lui dis-je, verrai-je se dissiper ici le charme dont mon imagination s'était remplie là-bas? Ce lieu [the libertine moment, here characterized as a space] me sera-t-il toujours fatal?" (52). Denon's narrator associates the libertine moment with a space within the novel in that when the narrator enters the garden, he experiences a sexual encounter. This libertine garden, much like the libertine novel as a genre, seems to excise itself from the mundane – the house, normal life, and France. While the narrator and his mistress are in the garden they worry themselves over when they should exit the garden and resume their lives. The verb "rentrer" (and "entrer") used by Denon have a double resonance: as the characters discuss 're-entering' their homes, they also debate 're-entering' the real world, weighed down by the obligations and consequences associated with a reentry into a linear or historical temporality. Denon also characterizes the moment as a dream after it is over, suggesting that during libertine passion there is a denial of the future consequences, including children: "Adieu, Monsieur; je vous dois bien des plaisirs; mais je vous ai payé d'un beau rêve" (68). With the departure of Mme de T..., the narrator's sexual adventure is over and only a nostalgic vision of it remains; the narrator's life continues as if nothing had ever happened between him and Mme de T.... As the narrator says, "Je cherchai bien la morale de toute cette aventure, et...je n'en trouvai point" (69). His existentially perplexing experience with Mme de T..., a "utopian dream of pleasure" that rapidly

vanishes as if it never happened, parallels the idleness and apathy that the aristocracy felt toward their own society (Cusset 144).

Laclos flirts with the presence of reproduction when in *Les liaisons dangereuses* he writes a child into the womb of Cécile – though this faint spark of a child quickly vanishes when in Letter 140 the reader learns that Cécile has lost the child. The father, Le Vicomte de Valmont, possesses qualities of the typical aristocratic libertine, occupying his time with social manipulation, pleasure seeking, and courtly life rather than labor. Valmont shows no trace of remorse or responsibility being the father of an unrealized fetus conceived through rape, unless one considers his half-hearted efforts to conceal and obliterate the dead child's short-lived existence from memory. Though Valmont would have been delighted Cécile's child with Gercourt would actually have been his, when he knows for sure the fetus is lost, he bribes the medics for their silence as they care for Cécile. The loss of this child represents a failure of reproduction as well as a lack of production within eighteenth-century aristocracy. As Mary McAlpin writes, "We have only the testimony of her mother to help us grasp Cécile's reaction to the knowledge that she has become a debauched woman, and, worse yet, she has no hope of a future with Danceny (14). Cecile cannot marry Danceny, nor can she aspire to continue his aristocratic family line, though Danceny still has hope for a future marriage because the physical and reputational implications of pregnancy do not touch him. Laclos' novel contrasts Denon's *Point de lendemain* in this respect because we see the gendered consequence of pregnancy and premarital sex.

Eighteenth-century aristocrats, due to their riches and assets, were those who were the most equipped to bear children and raise large, powerful families (Tuttle 11). However, during the eighteenth century, the French developed anxieties regarding their population, despite the

fact that it was actually growing. In order to combat this erroneously perceived demographic decline, contemporary thinkers suggested revising male/female sexual relations, and the relationship of individual sexual practice to religious and political laws. The traditional structure of marriage and the family once supported strongly by the Catholic Church and the monarchy fell under scrutiny as philosophers and writers argued in favor of divorce, among other pronatalist modifications of the family, as a means of catalyzing French fecundity. The literature of this era representing libertinage and freer sexual relationships between men and women does not align itself directly with the pronatalist movement, nor does it address this effort to augment the population of France. Rather, the sexually charged behavior in libertine novels is separated and estranged from the discourse on reproduction. Likewise, the libertine genre embodies its thematic absence of reproduction in that the temporal sexual encounters with no tomorrow resemble the genre's and aristocracy's rise and fall in literary history.

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