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JUSTINE, OR THE
MISFORTUNES OF VIRTUE

A Philosophical Romance

By
Marquis de Sade

Introduction by
Fabienne-Sophie Chauderlot

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INTRODUCTION

Justine, Or the Misfortunes of Virtue by the Marquis de Sade was published in 1791 at the height of the French Revolution, in times as tumultuous as the story of its heroine. At the tender age of twelve, *Justine* and her elder sister *Juliette* are unexpectedly thrust into life on the streets of Paris. In order to survive, *Juliette* chooses to use her body to obtain the favors of powerful men, but *Justine* is determined to remain virtuous at all costs. *Justine* struggles to champion honor, decency, and honesty in a world ruled by corruption, betrayal, and crime. Sade's narration of her plight ruthlessly describes the archetypal confrontation between vice and virtue, and the novel's striking motifs are sadly still relevant today.

Sade's name alone brings to mind the darkest creations of the human imagination, although the man remains a mysterious figure for most readers. Both perpetrator and victim of crimes, Sade had a destiny as unpredictable as that of his heroine's. *Comte Donatien Alphonse Francois de Sade* was born in Paris in 1740, the son of a minor diplomat. As a young boy, he lived at the royal court, where his mother was *dame d'honneur* (lady in waiting) for the *Princess de Condé*. Sade was raised with the princess' son, the famously brutal little prince *Louis-Joseph de Bourbon*. *Mme de Sade* was well known for her coldness toward both her husband and son; this is echoed in the cruelty women demonstrate toward children in Sade's novels. When she abandoned her young son to retire to a convent prophetically located in *Rue d'Enfer*—Hell Street—Sade returned to his father's estate in southern France, where his uncle, the *Abbot de Sade*, became his principal tutor. Now deliberately unattended

ruins, the castle of La Coste still overlooks the soft and colorful curves of the Provençal countryside, east of Avignon. The *Abbé de Sade* was an erudite follower of the *libertines*; young *Sade* was exposed to his uncle's unfettered lifestyle until his return to Paris at the age of ten. After studying at the famous Jesuit high school Louis-le-Grand, *Sade* served in the military until the end of the Seven Years' War in 1763. By this time, *Sade* was already leading a dissolute life. In an attempt to curb his behavior, *Sade's* father forced him to marry, but his wife, *Renée-Pélagie Cordier de Launay de Montreuil*, did not replace his gambling or partying. At the age of twenty-three, *Sade* was incarcerated for the first time, probably for acting out a pathological sexual practice. By the time he died in 1814, at seventy-four, *Sade* had spent thirty years in various institutions and jails, including the legendary Bastille and the infamous Charenton asylum, where he was sent for having written *Justine*. Beyond the actual reasons for his various incarcerations—debauchery, seduction, kidnapping, molestation, sodomy, poisoning, and eventually a false claim that he was insane—it was *Sade's* persona and the social impact of his texts that were too subversive to be tolerated by either the monarchy, for which orgies were common entertainment, or later, the Republic, which destroyed thousands of its own people in a civil war.

Sade lived in a particularly tormented era. While eighteenth-century French thinkers were elaborating on ideas of justice, freedom, knowledge, and social progress, the necessity of overthrowing the political system that prevented their implementation was generating tragic consequences. *Sade's* destiny was woven in the turmoil that destabilized his resisting but condemned class. By 1791, the French Revolution was under threat. The 1789 uprising of starving and overtaxed peasants guided by the Parisian bourgeoisie had successfully toppled *Louis XVI*, a lazy and cowardly king whose incompetence and greedy advisors were ruining the country. Inspired by thinkers who advocated equality and human rights, the movement turned into a force for political reform and social justice. The two major symbols of the *Ancien Régime's* power, the palace of Versailles and the Bastille prison, had been repossessed by the

people. However, neighboring monarchies saw both the progressive philosophy and the rebellious attitude of the French people as a threat to their own absolute power and they gathered to invade France. Material conditions rapidly deteriorated in the isolated capital. Fear and dissension split the revolutionaries into such ferociously opposed factions that *Robespierre*, the most radical leader, seized control of the government and decided to systematically suppress anyone who represented a potential threat to the newly created republican regime. Thanks to the recently invented and extremely efficient guillotine, the Revolution became the Terror: More than 25,000 people, most of them aristocrats, were beheaded between 1793 and 1794.

Though it took horrific forms, popular anger against the French nobility was understandable. The aristocrats benefited from numerous privileges that allowed the elite few to live in extreme luxury, while the people barely survived—and died—in dire misery. Through a perverted discourse and religious propaganda, the nobility justified their self-proclaimed right to exploit others without restraint for pure self-interest. Although an intermediate class, the bourgeoisie, was forming and its members denounced these injustices, the Revolution was rapidly turning into a bloodbath.

The lacerated flesh of *Sade's* characters embodies the general rending of his century, the particular demise of a movement, and his own suffering in prison. It also illustrates the corruption of a singular concept: *libertinage*, or libertinism. Contrary to contemporary definitions that reduce it to moral and sexual dissolution, *libertinage* was a productive trend. In the famous *Encyclopédie* published by *Sade's* contemporary Diderot (1713-1784), *libertinage* is inseparable from its etymology: *libertinus*, the slave made a free man in the early days of the Roman Republic. It is also associated with a Dutch group of religious fanatics who believed, in the middle of a repressively evangelical sixteenth century, that one's soul dies with one's body, and that it was the spirit of God who created everything, both good and evil. For these original libertines, as well as for *Sade*, paradise is an illusion, hell a phantom conceived by theologians, and religion an invention of those with political power to

better "contain people and make them obey their laws." The *Encyclopædia* article condemned such beliefs, but still concluded that it was an error to equate these free-thinking *libertins* with blasphemy and moral depravation. In fact, *libertinage* paralleled progressive political, social, and religious changes initiated by Enlightenment philosophers—among others the recognition of women's equality to men that prevails in Diderot's work and is also granted to *Sade's* female libertines. The seventeenth-century *libertins* were scholars like *Cyrano de Bergerac* who desired freedom from overly strict moral and religious principles inherited from the dark ages. They inspired much of eighteenth-century French philosophy, and a moral version of them that was dedicated to combating oppressive prejudices can be traced in eighteenth-century French art, literature, and social practices.

But *Sade* brought *libertinage* to its apogee, advocating absolute license. In his novel *Aline and Valcour*, he summarizes his outlook on life:

Allied, thanks to my mother, to the most powerful in our kingdom; in control, thanks to my father, of what was most distinguished in our Languedoc province; born in Paris amidst luxury and abundance, I believed, as soon as I was able to reason, that nature and fortune had gathered to shower me with their gifts; I believed it because those around me were stupid enough to tell me so, and this ridiculous preconceived idea made me scornful, despotic, and choleric; it seems nothing could resist me, that the entire universe was there to fulfill my whims, and that it was simply up to me to conceive of and better satisfy them.

Many of *Sade's* characters embody this perverted philosophy. For *Saint-Florent*, the tormentor whose life *Justine* saves, it consists of "the history of the passions, and my principles incline me to think that no curb ought to stop their impetuosity; when they speak, they must be waiting upon: it is my law." *Sade's* law would have been similar if the authorities and his mother-in-law had not put an end to all but one of his passions: literature. Indeed, *Sade* wrote most of his

numerous novels, tales, plays, letters, and philosophical essays while in prison. Many of his works were destroyed by the police or his family; others were lost, including the savage *The 120 Days of Sodom*, which he wrote on a thirty-five-foot-long roll of paper that he had to abandon in a prison cell. Rediscovered and published in 1931, this sequence of atrocious acts would retroactively illustrate the pathological sexual behaviors catalogued and classified by *Dr. Richard von Krafft-Ebing*, who had already coined the term *sadism* in parallel to *masochism* in his *Psychopathologia Sexualis* (1886).

Justine's fate is as complex an illustration of sadistic behaviors as her story is simple. The daughters of a rich banker, *Justine* and her older sister, *Juliette*, had a sheltered childhood and were educated in a famous Parisian convent. When their father, crushed by bankruptcy, died and was soon followed to the grave by their desperate mother, neither their relatives nor the abbesses were willing to help the suddenly destitute young girls. When they were expelled from the convent with a small dowry, fifteen-year-old *Juliette* realized that her only way to survive on the streets was to seduce and swindle powerful lovers. *Justine*, who was only twelve, opted for honesty and trust. Though it soon proved to be an obvious mistake, *Justine* responded with infinite virtue to the endless crimes that simple people, nobles, and clergymen alike perpetrated against her. Thus the tale of *Justine* is a subverted *Bildungsroman*, an edifying life story whose main subject is the moral and psychological development of a young heroine.

But current readers should not be deceived: Though a novel typical of its time, *Justine* pushes to their extreme core components found in comparable works of the same period like *Dangerous Liaisons* by *Choderlos de Laclos* or *Diderot's Nun*. *Justine* also reshapes the archetypal elements of gothic novels found in *Horace Walpole's The Castle of Otranto* or *Ann Radcliffe's The Mysteries of Udolpho* into stunning images that are the forerunners of contemporary horror movies and reflect our modern aggressiveness. In order to demonstrate the grandeur of virtue that remains unflinching despite the omnipotent triumph of vice, *Sade* inflicts one sadistic pervert after

another on his heroine. In ritualistic scenes of her violation, he maintains the suspense by making us wonder what it will take for *Justine* to finally denounce virtue. Does her resoluteness stem from absolute stupidity or defiant self-confidence? This question constitutes the book's obvious enigma but a more perplexing one concerns the extent of human fascination with power. While the melodramatic plot and epic adventures are narrated in a casual tone, in *Justine* power takes the least subtle and most horrific forms.

Justine is neither a text for sensitive souls, nor one for disturbed minds: If this book were *simply* the story of endless rapes, torture, and crimes, its appeal would have faded long ago. On the contrary, *Justine* remains as despised and targeted as it is admired and protected. In the nineteenth century, Sainte Beuve, Flaubert, and Baudelaire considered it a masterpiece. The surrealists rehabilitated *Sade* in the twentieth century, but his works were still attacked as late as 1957, when the French editor Jean-Jacques Pauvert was tried for having published a new edition of *Justine*.

Justine, the most unflinching of all literary figures of martyrdom, is the only female character *Sade* ever allowed to have a voice—a decision he apparently regretted since he took her first-person narrative away in a later version of the story. The attentive reader will soon perceive that *Justine* is much more than a victim of sexual or criminal perversion, she is also a symbol: She suffers because she refuses to abandon her principles. But contrary to appearances, what she stands against is not so much freakish individualized behaviors as a unified and universal power. As a group, libertines embody the indomitable force of a self-granted right to take control over others; they form a class that is beyond all laws because their corruption is always rewarded while the virtue they promote for average people only serves to better oppress them. Thus it is not *Justine's* virtue that we should value; that she never gives up thanks to the strength she finds in a God who does nothing to protect her is neither a condemnation of nor a tribute to Christianity, but simply marks its irrelevance to a socially bound human condition. Instead, what *Sade* pays homage to in *Justine* is humanity itself.

Although *Justine* is irritating—she makes the same mistakes over and over again, telling her story to any stranger, trying to convince the worst sadists to look into their hearts, begging for mercy—it is impossible not to admire her willpower.

Beyond *Justine*, the enduring significance of *Sade's* writings stems from the validity of his insight into the social nature of human violence. *Justine* challenges its readers to rethink a phenomenon with which they are doubtless well acquainted, regardless of their time: the unfairness of life. *Sade* points out this quandary in introducing *Justine*: Although we are "respectful of our social conventions and never erring from the duties they impose upon us, it happens, notwithstanding this, that we have met only with briars, while the wicked were gathering but roses." If you have ever wondered why the least intentional mistake you make creates a world of trouble but your hard work, dedication, and generosity lead you nowhere or even backfire; while at the same time you see that those who deliberately cheat and lie, willingly abuse their power, and carelessly dispose of others are successful, enriched, and often inhabit the highest ranks in society, then *Justine's* story is but a radical version of your own. The villains are no longer called libertines, but sadistic exploitation of those who are weak for the benefit of an omnipotent elite persists on a larger scale. This is why *Justine* remains relevant today.

If the depths of its author's psyche are unfathomable, *Justine, Or the Misfortunes of Virtue* is anchored in the mundane reality of *Sade's* prison cell. As *Simone de Beauvoir* has noted, in captivity "a man agonizes, but an author is born." After three years in the prison of Vincennes, *Sade* still had no idea how long his detention would last. Deprived of any outlet, he indulged in those few activities available to him: He ate voraciously, smoked rabidly, and wrote furiously about out-of-control characters who spiral down into abysmally destructive recreations. Through a long series of lewd episodes, the pace of *Justine's* adventures is ruptured by abrupt changes in the rhythmic use of time that produce a sensation of vertigo. In the Surgeon *Rodin* episode, for example, an hour-long session of punishment can occupy three pages, months are covered

in a single sentence, and many years are summarized in a short paragraph. While reading the novel, it can seem like a lengthy itemization of *Justine's* misery; yet in the end, it lingers in our memory like a race. Thus the impact of *Justine* differs from other famously scandalous novels of the time like *Dangerous Liaisons* (1782), which is similarly replete with cynical plots, perverse seductions, self-indulgent deflections, as well as duels, madness, syphilis, and death. Compared to the misfortunes that befall virtuous *Justine*, *Cécile de Volanges'* ordeal in *Dangerous Liaisons* is like a quiet walk in the park. Then again, *Choderlos de Laclos* was only very briefly imprisoned for his political activity, while *Sade* spent a mere twelve years between the age of thirty-two and seventy-four as a free man. The rage that animates many of his characters and the increasing fury with which they treat their victims is in some way understandable.

Sade's stance, however, remains subversive, disturbing, and fraught with a formidable danger. Only recently was *Sade* granted literary *lettres de noblesse* when he joined the ranks of the world's greatest writers in the legendary *Pléiade* catalogue. Calling itself the Rolls-Royce of editions, this famous French collection publishes authors' complete works with expert commentaries printed on fine paper and bound in leather. It took the prestige of such a luxurious edition to de-marginalize *Sade*. Yet *Justine* still resists containment. The novel has generated a multitude of literary analyses and interpretations, and inspired countless illustrations in art, film, and psychiatry. Thinkers like *de Beauvoir*, *Klossowski*, *Barthes*, and *Deleuze*; contemporary scholars like *Michel Delon*, *Lucienne Frappier-Mazure*, and *Philip Stewart*; and others such as the filmmaker *Pier Paolo Pasolini* and the intensely sharp post-feminist author *Kathy Acker* have all attempted to decode or re-embolden *Sade's* world. Yet in academia, media, or performance art, *Sade's* work retains the secret of its manifold energy.

Even more than in Daniel Defoe's *Moll Flanders* or Abbé Prévost's *Manon Lescaut*, the story *Justine* tells her sympathetic listener explores social history, moral theory, ethics, and psychology. But the textual borders that normally separate these fields are carefully hidden: One passes smoothly from history (the

debatable reasons the count of *Germande* gives for the historical oppression of women) to philosophy (*Sade's* conception of power vis-à-vis nature), via gory descriptions of body piercing. Whenever one tires of repetitive scenes that painstakingly detail *Justine's* torment, such as in the Monk *Severino* episode, a lesson on virtue, equality, or taste re-anchors the discourse in a perverted but fascinating critique that keeps one from putting the book away. Although cruelly beaten by one of the depraved monks, *Justine* still finds the courage to accuse him of having depraved tastes. This prompts *Clement* to interrupt his chasing and hitting her and to start dissenting about a topic very current at the time—the variety of tastes and how they depend upon such complex human faculties as perception and imagination:

Two irregularities have, I perceive, already stricken thee among us; thou art astonished at the poignant sensation felt by some of our fellows for things usually known as fetid or polluted, and thou art likewise surprised because our voluptuous faculties may be shaken by actions which, according to thee, bear only the emblem of ferocity. Let us analyze each of these tastes, and try, if possible, to convince thee that there is nothing simpler in the world than the pleasures which result therefrom.

This seamlessness explains the magnitude of *Sade's* influence on both 'erotic' literature and literature more broadly. Paradoxically, despite the masks, the whips, and widespread deviance, *Sade's* anti-morality is universal. Precisely because virtue does not prevail over vice, *Justine's* fate speaks to the most fundamental ethical issue: the casual and mundane vileness, violence, and violation of human decency that most of us witness and let happen every day, whether out of helplessness, passivity, or selfishness. As *Chantal Thomas* explains in unequivocal and accurate terms:

The utopia of a form of freedom that would have no limits even in crime does not entail a departure of imagination from social reality. The force of the Sadian utopia comes

from the fact that it is nothing but the radicalization of a factual state of affairs. The discourse of the libertine, in its untiring will to say every single thing, equates the political omnipotence that has an absolute power of doing harm.

Sade's characters dare to voice out loud the unspoken principles on which all elite-based governments are founded. *Justine* should be understood in the context of the limitless impunity that privileged members of the ruling class consider their original right. This license is self-granted although they may claim it is a divine inheritance, and it places these elites beyond the reach of human rules as well as godly laws. Moreover, they use their license to prevent ordinary people from challenging what thus becomes a self-fulfilling mastery. *La Dubois* sums it up nicely early in *Justine*:

I like to hear them, those rich folks, those titled persons, those Magistrates, those Priests, I like to see them preaching virtue to us! It is exceedingly hard to free one's self from theft, when one has three times more than is needed for living; very difficult never to conceive murder when one is surrounded only by flatterers or slaves whose laws are our wills; very painful, indeed, to be temperate and steady, when one is at every hour before dainty dishes [. . .] But we, *Therese*, [. . .] we who are looked on disdainfully, because we are poor; whom they tyrannize over, because we are weak [. . .]; thou wilt have us abstain from crime, when its hand alone opens to us the gate of life, maintains us therein, keeps us together, and hinders us from losing it?

Such license should have been extended to *Sade* himself based on his aristocratic birth, but family and history took his privileges away and made him their victim. Thus with each woman beaten, child deflowered, body defiled, vein pierced, *Sade* displays, in a theater of grotesque cruelty, singular occurrences of the no less murderous and horrifying inequality people experience on the universal stage

of life in the form of poverty, abuse, deprivation of civil and human rights, or elective wars. This injustice struck him all the more powerfully as it even worked against *Sade* himself.

Justine's struggle against power, though literally embodied in sexual confrontations, characterizes the political dimensions of both *Sade's* thinking and his times. An avid reader of his contemporaries, he did not adhere to any new system of thought produced during his intellectually active century, yet beneath the provocative surface of *Sade's* work, one finds a patchwork of various theories. *Rousseau's* already famous *Discourse on the Origin of the Inequality among Men* (1755) and *Social Contract* (1762) questioned the nature of and right to freedom; the *Social Contract* opens with the now famous quote: "man was born free and he is every where in chains." The libertine's way of life illustrates the contradiction: Its fundamental principle is the exact opposite of *Rousseau's* idea. In the wake of *Montesquieu*, *Hobbes*, and *Locke*, *Rousseau* asserted that no one's moral and civil liberty should be infringed upon for the benefit of someone else. Rather, *Rousseau* posited that each citizen should agree to renounce part of his or her individual freedom and submit to laws that protect the general interest in return for security and the protection of his or her equal rights. In other words, law and human culture would compensate for the Darwinian natural tendencies of the strong to impose arbitrary force on the weak. But *Sade's* libertines ferociously oppose *Rousseau's* concept because it distributes power more evenly and thus goes against their interests:

Men were all born isolated, envious, cruel and despotic; wishing to have everything and give up nothing, and incessantly fighting to maintain either their ambition or rights, the legislator came and said: Cease from fighting thus; in yielding a little on both sides, tranquility is about to spring up again. I do not blame the proposition of this pact, but I hold that two classes of individuals ought to never submit to it: those who, feeling themselves the strongest, and no need of parting with

anything in order to be happy, and those who, being the weakest, found themselves parting with infinitely more than was secured for them.

Similarly, many of *Sade's* arguments radicalize, distort, denounce, or defy the thinking of other of his contemporaries, including *Diderot* and the Encyclopedists, the rationalist *Voltaire*, and the materialist *La Mettrie*. *Sade's* work is thus an alternative but intrinsic part of his epoch. It also offers an infinite anomaly: The timeless allegory of vice and virtue one too hastily sees in *Justine* self-destructs. Defined by culture, virtue is subject to change, and that challenges the basis of its validity as soon as it is proclaimed:

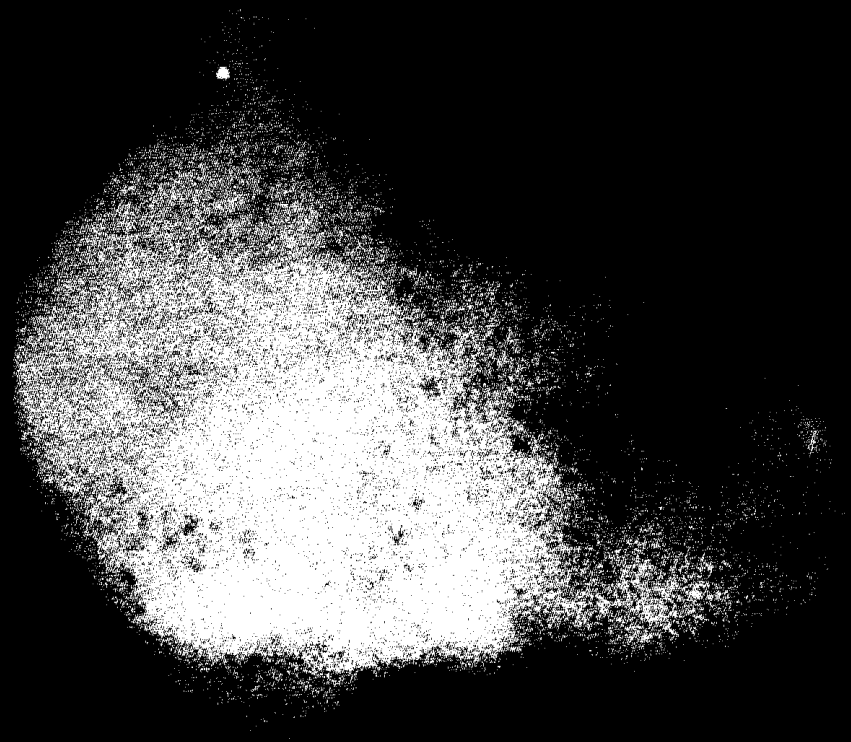
I am not therefore wrong when I assert that [virtue's] necessity is only of opinion, or of circumstance; virtue is not a fashion of an incontestable price, it is but a manner of conducting one's self, which varies according to each climate and which consequently has nothing real: that alone proves its uselessness. That only which is constant is really good; that which perpetually changes could not pretend to the character of goodness. That is why they have placed immutability in the rank of the perfections of the Eternal; but virtue is wholly deprived of this character: there are no two nations, on the face of the globe, which are virtuous in the same way, therefore virtue has nothing real, nothing intrinsically good, and nowise deserves our worship; it is necessary to use it as a stay, to politically adopt that of the country in which one lives, in order that those who practice it from taste, and who ought to revere it from taste, may leave you in peace. . . .

Contrary to appearances, *Justine's* virtue does not stand for allegedly universal "moral" principles because such morality is decided by the local political and social forces that impose it. However, *Justine's* suffering embodies the resistance that people can demonstrate to the particular vices of their own era. In today's troubled and dangerous times, when virtues are all too clearly defined by

those in power and used to rally the masses in support of abusive acts and violations of human rights that only serve the elite, *Justine* serves as a deeply disturbing but vital reminder of the urgency of rethinking violence. Though we may be shocked and revolted by what the novel's sadistic characters do, nevertheless like them we treat lightly the daily forms of oppression that are common to our culture and the various wars of our own new century. Like *Justine* does for her masters, we enable our leaders to kill and torture, and we neglect the victims exploited by society's elites in pursuit of their own selfish interests. *Sade's* corrupt darkness withstands time and accusations because it is itself an indictment of corruption; yet he does not accuse the perpetrators, instead he denounces the witnesses. Just as *Justine* creates a discourse of self-justification as she prepares the women or undresses the children, we participate, albeit indirectly, in the crimes that feed today's greed and hunger for power. *Justine* recounts tortures; we contemplate wars, class, gender and race struggles, ethnic cleansing, religious mutilation, institutionalized poverty, and preventable famines that sacrifice victims by the millions. *Justine* flees; we turn our eyes away. *Sade*, the ultimate libertine, was put in prison; yet the libertines of our own age remain at large. Until we can answer why this is so, *Justine's* sublime sadness will remain not only part of our own story, but also our shame, and the world's sorrow.

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JUSTINE



MARQUIS DE SADE

with an

introduction by

Fabienne-Sophie

Chauderlot