

## Abstract

This dissertation situates the four libertine books that were published in Sade's own lifetime (*Justine*, *La philosophie dans le boudoir*, *La Nouvelle Justine*, and *Histoire de Juliette*) within the context of their original publication, the years of the French Revolution and its aftermath.

Instead of analyzing these violent fictions merely as isolated responses to works of prior authors whose writings belong in today's canon, the dissertation interprets them in light of antagonistic polemics at issue.

Notably, Sade's works complicate a neat separation between pro and counter-Enlightenment views, as well as a fixed division between pro- and counter-revolutionary political positions. A critic of *Ancien Régime*, his works simultaneously reveal deep scepticism towards new ways of governing republican France.

In order to bring to light new levels in Sade's multi-layered social criticism, the thesis insists that in his works, the topic of politics is intimately linked to poetics. The libertine fictions are notorious for their revolt against poetical rules due to their crude manner of showing what should not be represented directly in art. Notably, acts of homicide are graphically depicted with libertine perpetrators always scripted to getting away with murder.

Alongside such subversions, however, the thesis unearths ways in which Sade strategically and playfully employs poetic conventions in an ongoing and revealing construal of how relations of power are covertly formed by the use of artifice.

The works carry out performances of how artifice functions as a constituent to maximize evil. Thereby, they cunningly convey historically embedded social critique when developing new methods to artfully get away with murder.