

Differences: Sex, Separateness & Marriage

BY SHIFRA SHARLIN

I used to scorn carpeting for the same reason that I would rather squint than wear sunglasses. The late Russell Hoban put it best: "I don't want anything to come between me and It." While I doubt that religion and flooring have anything in common, I am certain that I was reaching for the same thing as Hoban. I'm not sure what to call it. Truth? Authenticity? Unmediated experience? Or did Chase and Phillips in *A New Introduction to Greek* put it best? *Chalepa ta kala*: difficult things are beautiful. I used to think that Chase and Phillips meant that things are beautiful because they are difficult. Authentic encounters were difficult ones: a hard floor, the sun making my eyes water, my beloved and me.

Everything I was afraid to ask about sex I learned from neighbors. Thin walls make the best classrooms. I was a reluctant student. Nothing, let alone the framed and stretched Marimekko purchased for its sound-insulating properties, could prevent those lessons from reaching me. I was newly married and living in Berkeley then.

Reading the Marquis de Sade reminds me of my Berkeley neighbors, but that is not why I am reading him. I am out to prove that Michel Foucault was wrong about modern life. In his 1966 book, *The Order of Things: An Archaeology of the Human Sciences*, Foucault argues that the Marquis de Sade marks the "frontier" into the modern world. "After him,

violence, life and death, desire and sexuality will extend, below the level of representation, an immense expanse of shade..." Why should death and sadism define the modern world? Why does being hidden and violent have to be its most salient feature?

My motives for pursuing this line of inquiry are selfish. I do not want a Marquis de Sade kind of life. My husband and I met in a Biblical Hebrew class. By the end of the first class I had formed my opinion of him based on three things: his beautiful hands, his receptiveness to my delight that squirrels were entering the building opposite via its ivied walls and an open window, and his *Biblia Hebraica*. In her book on Sade, Simone de Beauvoir wrote, "If ever we hope to transcend the separateness of individuals, we may do so only on condition that we be aware of its existence." I got married believing that I always could, probably would, get a divorce: the bride-to-be as wannabe libertine.

I got married in a Marquis de Sade kind of world. Foucault's claim that Sade marked the frontier into the modern world is plausible if the modern world begins, more or less, with the publication of *The Order of Things*. Apollinaire, who championed Cubism and other avant-garde art, rediscovered Sade at the beginning of the Twentieth Century. The Surrealists adopted him next. By mid-century, Sade had become such a fixture of modern, intellectual life that Frances Ferguson in a 1991 article, "Sade and the Pornographic Legacy," observed "writing about Sade was almost a predictable stage in establishing an intellectual career; what the writing of pastorals and epics had classically done to demonstrate poetic seriousness, writing about Sade did for writers like Klossowski, Blanchot, Bataille, Beauvoir, Barthes, Lacan, and Foucault."

When pornography replaced pastoral and epic, the naked body took center stage. Sade's seriousness is a form of striptease. Clothing is only the first and easiest thing to go. Sade teases most in stripping away everything else; exactly what is stripped and why occupies those demonstrating their poetic seriousness. The desire for stripping occupies *nie*. That impulse seems as romantic as any happy pastoral. Or archaeological dig.

Stripping away proved rewarding for Gideon Algernon Mantel of Oxford. In 1790, several years after Sade had finished *The 120 Days of Sodom or the School For Libertines*, Mantel became the first to unearth

dinosaur bones. Sade was not so lucky. Not content with stripping away their victims' clothes, his libertines kept going until they hit blood and guts. The failure of their excavations to yield more than a passing thrill led Foucault to conclude that there are no lasting thrills to be had between one person and another. In the hope of finding something more, Foucault looks down, digging beneath the surface; Beauvoir looks up, hoping to transcend what both see as mere surface obstacles to desire's perfect consummation.

Not only French intellectuals were searching high and low for the naked truth. Wikipedia has an entry, a long entry, "Marquis de Sade In Popular Culture," which lists all of the movies, plays, and novels that feature or refer to Sade. The majority of them came out between 1966 and 1977. For instance, eight movies about Sade appeared in that period. At about the same time that *The Order of Things* appeared in Paris, my parents could not stop talking about the critically-acclaimed film (based on the 1960's Peter Weiss play) that they had seen in Ames, Iowa: *The Persecution and Assassination of Jean-Paul Marat, as performed by the inmates of the Asylum of Charenton under the direction of the Marquis de Sade or Marat/Sade*. Twelve was too young to see it, but just the right age to learn that mad, persecuted, libidinous, subversive, anti-authoritarian rebellion was serious.

And that I was not. Sade's popularity signaled that his form of seriousness was everywhere, including my bookshelves. Sade fit the profile of the then-reigning counter-cultural hero. Any reckoning of Sade's cultural presence has to list all of the books, movies, plays, and television shows where he did not appear by name but was nonetheless present: Kurt Vonnegut, Ken Kesey, Jack Kerouac, Lenny Bruce, Yukio Mishima, and Russell Hoban. Hoban's quip about religion, for instance, echoes the line uttered by a 15-year-old Brooke Shields about wearing Calvin Klein jeans: "Nothing comes between me and my Calvins." In those days, everybody was scorning whatever came between themselves and their It of choice.

Sade was an equal-opportunity libertine: women were admitted to the ranks. His own Juliette, the eponymous heroine of thousands of pages of relentless libertinage, could be considered a precursor, if not exactly a role model, for the women of Erica Jong, Anne Roiphe, Alison

Lurie, Marge Piercy, Margaret Atwood, and Angela Carter, women all of my friends emulated. I could never manage to be more than a wannabe. Maybe that is the reason I was a wannabe libertine bride-to-be: wannabes never run the risk of becoming disillusioned. Or maybe I was ahead of my time.

The modern world at whose frontier Foucault had placed Sade ended well before my tenth anniversary. A world at whose frontier stands Ronald Reagan and AIDS is not the kind of world I am happy to live in either, much less to have prefigured, however unintentionally. But Lionel Trilling, in an essay he was working on at the time of his death in 1975, suggests another start date and another kind of world. In that essay, "Why Read Jane Austen?" Trilling tries to understand the shift in taste among his students from William Blake to Jane Austen. I would like to think that shift signals a greater, cultural shift, from the world of Sade to the one of his near-contemporary, Austen.

Two books by Angela Carter show that Austen stood for everything Sade opposed. In her solitary book of cultural criticism, *The Sadeian Woman*, Carter celebrates Sade; in her novel *Wise Children*, she imagines a woman at the start of a revolution burning a copy of *Mansfield Park*. Austen-cherished what Sade tried to strip away. The truth of her characters does not lie either below or above the surface. Austen takes the fully clothed body seriously. Her characters are never naked. Why bother? Even if they had been, they would have been nonetheless attired in their social selves.

As Sade's cultural presence dwindled, Austen's took off. In her excellent book, *Why Jane Austen?*, Rachel Brownstein traces the rise of "Jane-o-mania." While there were only a few television adaptations of her work in the early 1970s, since the 1990s and Amy Heckerling's *Clueless*, an *Emma* transported to contemporary Los Angeles, adaptations of Austen's novels and life continue to appear regularly. The membership of the Jane Austen Society of North America has exploded. And, just as with Sade, Austen is often present even when she is not named. In the HBO series *Sex and the City* friendship trumps sex. The true Sadean woman would not get together with her girlfriends to discuss courtship, clothing, and apartments. Wikipedia owes Austen her own popular culture entry. What does the modern world look like when we think of Jane Austen as defining its frontier? What does sex look like? What about my marriage?

Marriage is like the *Biblia Hebraica*. As a critical edition of the Hebrew text, the *Biblia Hebraica* prints both the editor's version of the text in two columns and, arranged horizontally at the bottom of the page in the scholarly apparatus, the variations from different versions that have appeared in the thousands of years of the text's transmission and translation. Like marriage, the *Biblia Hebraica* is subject to an unending process of interpretation.

My husband thinks the comparison is apt. He laughed when I told him. He laughs rarely and when he does, it sounds forced as if he never learned how to do it properly. He did not. Apparently, laughter is not something that can be self-taught like vocabulary and grammar. This was one of his better laughs; its spontaneity and delight surprised me. In response to my email asking for an explanation, he wrote: "Just as we recognize the text as being the Bible, however many variations there might be, so we recognize a particular marriage as being that singular marriage no matter the permutations and reconfigurations." Nobody understands me the way he does.

Our marriage was founded on a key principle of biblical interpretation: *lectio difficilior potior*: the difficult reading is more likely. This means that in choosing among alternative readings, the difficult one is more likely to be correct because a scribe would have been more inclined to err by making the text easier to understand than in inventing yet another textual difficulty. Difficult things are not only beautiful; they are true.

True? Now I think this is a Sadean principle. Foucault might agree, because it dates from the same period as Sade. The Lutheran pietist clergyman, Johann Albrecht Bengel, arrived at the principle about the truth in difficult readings in 1725. Like Gideon Mantel in Oxford, he was also digging deep for origins. Bengel dreamed of divining an original of the Greek New Testament based on textual evidence alone. Philologists, like libertines, search for a perfect match.

Meaning seeks embodiment in words as desire seeks embodiment in fornicating. Sade's libertines fail to find what they are looking for. They are compelled to keep up their relentless fornication because they never find that single person who could realize their singular desire. This is the reason that, in Foucault's account, desire persists in dark, hidden, and violent ways. Thwarted and frustrated, it turns twisted.

Difference troubles Sade and his libertines. Sade's libertines demand a match that is as instantaneous as it is perfect. What they cannot strip away, they transform. Sade turns his women into men. Sodomy is the preferred form of intercourse. When the vagina is not superfluous, it rarely has intercourse with a penis. A female libertine has an elongated clitoris that functions as a miniature penis when aroused. Differences denied are nonetheless differences that enrage. Torture is courtship for the impatient.

Enter Jane Austen. Austen and Sade have different approaches to the resolution of differences. In contrast to Sade, Austen's courtship plots expand on the complications and complexities that intervene before two people can realize their singular desire for one another. Before the happy ending, they must first learn how unlikely it is. They must discover just how different they are. Mr. Darcy can moderate his pride enough to propose marriage to the prejudiced Elizabeth Bennett, but not enough to prevent him from revealing his pride's persistence and depth. Elizabeth Bennett, her prejudices confirmed and inflamed, angrily refuses him. And the novel is only half over.

Fortunate reader. The complications arising from their differences lie at the heart of the novel's drama, wit, and romance. Differences are not an obstacle to marriage; they make marriage both possible and necessary. They make courtship entertaining. How dull Mr. Darcy and Elizabeth Bennett would be if they agreed on all things. Their differences, both of social background and temperament, keep the plot moving. Austen's truths are dynamic not naked.

Austen's modern world was not that of the proto-archaeologist, Gideon Mantel, let alone the Marquis de Sade. Hers was more like the one of those Birmingham inventors and industrialists who called themselves the Lunar Men. Among them was James Watt who was working on improvements to the steam engine at about the time that Jane Austen was born. By the time she was writing her novels, the engines he had designed were moving the machinery of the Industrial Revolution. Austen, like Watt, did not excavate; she made things work.

The differences between Mr. Darcy and Elizabeth Bennett are personified in their friends and family, the very people who, by taking sides, have dramatized those differences all along. In spite of their role in impeding the courtship, or perhaps because of it, Austen's novels

always end with a complete report of their fates and locations, usually somewhere nearby. Their friends and family remain to remind them of their differences. The courtship plot does not end with a happy couple alone.

Our favorite biblical romance does not end that way either. It became our favorite on our road trip to California from Chicago in a so-called drive-away, a car that was being repossessed by a bank. The white Mercury Cougar came with a large knife under the driver's seat and idled at 30 m.p.h. We took turns driving and reading out loud to one another from the *Biblia Hebraica*. He was driving across the Great Salt Lake as I read about the patriarch Jacob and his beloved, Rachel, in the book of Genesis. "And Jacob worked for Rachel for seven years, but in his eyes those years felt like a few days because of his love for her." In Hebrew, the verse scans as poetry.

Nothing in the scholarly apparatus could resolve my Sade-like incomprehension: if Jacob had truly loved Rachel, seven years would have felt like forever. My husband did not try to change my mind. Not like the time, decades later, when he begged me to be his soul mate, because I had wanted to give up on living with him, a person who seemed most animated by rage. Instead we reconfigured ourselves by the kind of work I cannot explain except by saying that I finally understood Jacob's patience.

The scholarly apparatus now functions differently than it once did. No scholar thinks that there is a correct reading, because there is no such thing as an original, true, and authentic version. That belief belonged to a world where the authority of the Septuagint, the Greek translation of the Bible, rested on the story that 70 translators arrived at a single, identical version, proving dictation as divine as that of Moses at Sinai. Now scholars think that those are not competing voices buried in the scholarly apparatus; they are the sounds of different versions making themselves heard. Differences do not mean error.

I no longer prefer difficult things. My husband and I are newly arrived in Manhattan. Here our downstairs neighbors are the problem, complaining about noise from us. We are almost flattered. We put down carpeting at their request. The once-scorned carpeting both insulates and amplifies. Our neighbors' needs are always underfoot. What separates also joins. The friction of differences keeps things moving.