

Yukio Mishima (1925-1970)

Madame de Sade

The London theatre critics demonstrated their ineptitude in their responses to two simultaneous Donmar Warehouse productions in the spring of 2009, *Madame de Sade* and Fugard's *Dimetos*.¹ Apparently they had decided in advance that since Mishima was a perverse madman (there is actually a book on him called *The Madness and Perversion of Yukio Mishima*), he could not possibly be either intelligent or a competent dramatist. One unanimous charge was that the play is all talk and no action. This charge could equally be brought against the whole of Greek drama, where the action is invariably off-stage, and many of the world's greatest plays, including most of Chehov, Beckett and Pinter.

They also committed the schoolboy error of confusing the opinions of a character with those of the author. Michael Billington,² while praising the production, says that 'the play itself is an example of the Higher Tosh', but the only example he gives is Renée's claim that her husband 'has built a back stairway to heaven'. It seems not to have occurred to any of the reviewers that all the lines they found similarly overblown and outrageous are spoken by Renée, nor that Mishima might have been fully aware of how ridiculous they are, and have made them so for a purpose. At one point her mother says: 'You've started your roundabout similes again'.

Mishima makes no attempt to justify de Sade in this play. He can take for granted that the audience will immediately condemn him as a 'monster of immorality'. The play is not about him, but about the six women, divided by their reactions to him. What interests Mishima, and what he dramatizes through them, is the question of whether our facile definition of immorality purely in terms of sexual aberrations and excesses might blind us to other less blatant and lurid perversions, perversions perhaps to be found hiding beneath such guises as the religious horror of sin, the defence of moral and social values, and wifely devotion.

Anyone approaching the play without preconceptions must recognize first that the six women are divided into two camps. Three of them, Renée's unconventional and forgiving sister Anne, the sexually hyper-active Comtesse de Saint-Fond, and the stolid housekeeper Charlotte, are alike in that they have no illusions about themselves or others. They are without hypocrisy, caring nothing for the good opinion of society, and its notions of propriety. They are at ease with themselves, living, in Existential terms, 'in good faith'.

¹ See my essay on *Dimetos* on this page.

² *Guardian*, 19 March 2009.

The other three are quite the opposite. The Baronesse de Simiane is a comic embodiment of religious hypocrisy, drooling over stories of sexual activity she is too timid and 'pure' to experience for herself. Safe within her nun's habit, she can interest herself in de Sade vicariously. She is rather like the figure of Joseph in *Wuthering Heights*, whose vocation was to be 'where there was plenty of wickedness to reprove'.

Renée's mother Madame de Montreuil cares for nothing but appearances, respectability, decorum and status. Renée accuses her of reducing even her sex life to 'the usages of society': 'The two of you slept with convention and morality and normality, and you emitted groans of pleasure. That, surely, is how a monster behaves'. The very 'virtues' in terms of which we condemn the de Sades of this world can become monstrous. Shakespeare's Angelo in *Measure for Measure*, is a monster of virtue 'who scarce confesses that his blood flows'. Renée uses metallic imagery of her mother: 'The world is filled with people who despise what they cannot imagine. But before they know it they acquire breasts of brass, a belly of brass, and they sparkle if you polish them. ... Yes, your whole body ... is sheathed in armor glittering with the thorns of hypocrisy'. Madame de Montreuil's home, which is also her prison, suggests, in the Donmar production, huge pillars and panels of gold which have peeled and tarnished. She is encased in corsets, jewelry and wigs. She is living in bad faith, inauthentically. She resembles the stilted portraits of pompous worthies in the Municipal Portrait Gallery of Bouville which Sartre depicts in *Nausea*:

I looked at them in vain for some link with trees and animals, with the thoughts of earth or water. ... They had enslaved the whole of Nature: outside themselves and in themselves.

But by far the most interesting of the six women is the title character, Renée herself. At the beginning we can have some sympathy for her wifely devotion, her determination to stand by her husband whatever he has done, campaigning for his release from prison, and, when that fails, engineering his escape. She uses an increasingly tortured logic or rhetoric, taking literally Blake's proverb 'The road of excess leads to the palace of wisdom', in her own attempt to marry heaven and hell. Even when de Sade involves her directly in his sado-masochistic activities, she convinces herself not only that this still falls within the obligations of wifely devotion, but even that he is 'a kind of threshold between me and the impossible, or perhaps between me and God'. She has invested so much by that time in her fantasies about her golden-haired husband that her knowledge of and participation in his activities becomes a substitute for religious experience.

The psychological condition Mishima is dissecting here is very similar to that of Troilus in *Troilus and Cressida*. With Cressida as more or less accidental object, and without regard for her intrinsic qualities, Troilus works himself up to a pitch of sensual and emotional excitement which he mistakes for heaven – an absolute, untouchable by time or chance. He then invests his life and soul in that false love, and in the unfortunate Cressida, who has never laid claim to any of the qualities with which he invests her. Hector points out to Troilus that it is ‘mad idolatry / To make the service greater than the god’, to claim that value is purely subjective, needing no corresponding intrinsic value in the object. Later Troilus has to repudiate the evidence of eyes and ears if he is to hold on to the illusion on which his integrity has come to depend. Eventually the disparity between the idol and the reality is too blatant for any evasion: ‘This is, and is not, Cressid’. Deprived of his illusion, Troilus becomes a monster, committing ‘mad and fantastic execution’ on the battlefield.

Similarly, in order to justify her absolute devotion, Renée is obliged to make wilder and wilder claims for her husband, claims which create a wider and wider gap between the actual living fallible and ageing man, and her madly idolatrous image of him. She makes the mistake of visiting him regularly in prison, and the evidence of her eyes and ears gradually forces her to recognize that the pitiful wretch he has become is not the de Sade she has worshipped. He is not above time and chance: they have made a wreck of him. Her solution is to stop visiting him, so that she can cling on to her faith by investing it in his deathless books rather than their ageing author. But his release from prison and desire to live with her again threatens this solution. She asks Charlotte how he looks, and Charlotte, with typical frankness, says that he looks like an old beggar, fat and toothless. This is, and yet for Renée is not, de Sade. Without her illusion, Madame de Sade also becomes a monster: ‘And tell him this: “Madame de Sade will never see her husband again”’. So much for wifely devotion.

Thus Mishima demonstrates, as Shakespeare does in *Measure for Measure*, that we should expect to find monsters not only in the stews and underworld, but also among those who purport to speak for religion, morality and ‘family values’.

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