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Aretino's Legacy: *L'Ecole des filles* and the Pornographic Continuum in Early Modern France

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Religion, Ethics, and
History in the French Long
Seventeenth Century /
La Religion, la morale, et
l'histoire à l'âge classique

WILLIAM BROOKS
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RUSSELL GANIM

Aretino's Legacy: *L'Ecole des filles* and the Pornographic Continuum in Early Modern France

The problematic reaction that pornography evokes as both a literary and cultural construct stems partially from the fact that it is as anti-modern as it is modern. This paradox is implicitly outlined in Lynn Hunt's definition of pornography.¹ The ironically traditional, if not presumably timeless, quality of pornography she describes as 'the explicit depiction of sexual organs and sexual practices with the aim of arousing sexual feelings'; at the same time, however, the 'modernity' of pornography, especially in the early modern period, stems from the fact that such works, 'us[ed] the shock of sex to criticize religious and political authorities' (p. 10). Consequently, the transgressive nature of pornography is rooted in the desire to mock, to upend, and in some cases to reshape the mores of the dominant culture. In Foucauldian fashion, the effort made through pornography to challenge existing authority and to suggest new paradigms of thought, identity, and behaviour is what makes it 'modern' in the current sense of the term.²

Within the last fifteen years, Hunt, Joan DeJean, and others have examined the relationship between pornography and modernity, with the work *L'Ecole des filles* (1655) figuring prominently in the discussion.³ This paper analyses *L'Ecole* in terms of what precedes and

- 1 Consult the Introduction (pp. 9–45) to *The Invention of Pornography: Obscenity and the Origins of Modernity, 1500–1800*, ed. by Lynn Hunt (New York: Zone Books, 1993).
- 2 See especially vol. 1 of Michel Foucault, *Histoire de la Sexualité*, 3 vols (Paris: Gallimard, 1976–84), where Foucault discusses his critique of the 'hypothèse répressive' (pp. 13–21).
- 3 References to *L'Ecole des filles* come from *Œuvres érotiques du XVIIe siècle. L'Enfer de la Bibliothèque Nationale*, ed. by Michel Camus (Paris: Fayard,

follows it in the genre of licentious literature. Specifically, I situate *L'Ecole* within the context of early modern erotic literature as defined by Pietro Aretino (1492–1556), then compare and contrast it with the Baroque era *Cabinet* and *Parnasse satyrique* (1618, 1622) as well as Sade's *Justine* and *Philosophie dans le boudoir* (1795).⁴ I will argue that while all these texts were dismissed as excessively libertine or lascivious, *L'Ecole des filles* represents by far the most 'modern' of the works in terms of what it says about female sexuality and intellect, the methodology of erotic behaviour, and the mind/body synthesis that proposes a rational morality of sex aligned with the neo-classical thinking of the day. Of key importance is the discussion of pleasure as a personal and philosophical ideal in *L'Ecole*. The depiction of sexual activity in *Le Parnasse satyrique* often takes place in warehouses, and is bawdily portrayed in terms of fleeting gratification, exploitation of the other, and venereal disease. Pleasure, if it exists at all, is only momentary and is experienced principally by males. Such cynicism and phallocentrism find echoes, of course, in Sade, with the emphasis on perversity and violence underscoring the notion that pleasure is derived chiefly from inflicting harm and in finding a language to justify abuse. In both *Le Parnasse* and Sade, the reader is frequently left more disgusted than titillated.

While *L'Ecole des filles* certainly constitutes an example of filthy literature and presumably evokes male fantasies about female sexual initiation, it illustrates sexual discovery in a way that emphasises a kind of natural, but rational, excitement about the physical and emotional pleasures of human development. The preface states that its goal is to stimulate the reader erotically, thus engaging the public in a particularly challenging manner. In this challenge, and in representing an adolescent quest for sexual understanding, the work largely succeeds. In its most sophisticated moments, *L'Ecole* is, as it were,

1988). See also Joan DeJean, *The Reinvention of Obscenity: Sex, Lies, and Tabloids in Early Modern France* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002). Her discussion of *L'Ecole* is found primarily in Chapter 2, pp. 56–83.

4 See *Le Cabinet Secret du Parnasse. Théophile de Viau et les libertins*, ed. by Fernand Fleuret & Louis Perceau, 2 vols (Paris: Cabinet du Livre, 1935). For Sade, consult Michel Delon's edition of his *Œuvres*, 3 vols (Paris: Gallimard 1990).

a neo-classical 'coming of age' work whose relatively progressive depiction of human sexuality renders it, by current standards, strangely enlightening with respect to the pornographic literature that appeared before and after.

At the beginning of this continuum is Aretino's *I Modi*, or *The Ways*, published in 1525.⁵ From a structural and thematic standpoint, one could argue that Aretino's *I Ragionamenti*, or *The Dialogues*, published in 1539, is the text that most resembles *L'Ecole des filles* since it largely consists of dialogues between women on the subject of sexual experience.⁶ For this paper, however, I emphasise *I Modi* because it sets the precedent for the erotic texts to follow. While erotica certainly did not begin with either Aretino or *I Modi*, the work's open, humorous, and unashamedly joyful depiction of sexuality made possible the development of the genre during the Renaissance and afterwards. As a consequence, everything that followed this foundational text of Western erotic literature must, in some way, be judged against it.

The work represented a collaborative effort on the part of the designer and architect Giulio Romano (ca. 1499–1564), the engraver Marcantonio Raimondi (ca. 1475–1534), and Aretino. In 1524, Romano's sixteen drawings of sexual positions were made into engravings by Raimondi. The following year, Aretino then wrote sixteen sonnets, known as the *Sonnetti lussuriosi*, to accompany the images. In his *Recueil des dames*, Pierre de Brantôme mentions that *I Modi* had made its way into many French bedrooms during the late 1500s, and that its practices were diligently followed.⁷ There is little doubt that the poets of the *Le Parnasse satyrique*, the authors of *L'Ecole des filles*, and the marquis de Sade knew of the text and were influenced by it. In 1912, Guillaume Apollinaire published his own edition of

5 References to *I Modi* are taken from *I Modi. The Sixteen Pleasures: An Erotic Album of the Renaissance*. By Pietro Aretino ed. and transl. by Lynne Lawner (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1988).

6 Consult Raymond Rosenthal's translation, *Dialogues (I Ragionamenti) by Pietro Aretino* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2005).

7 Pierre de Brantôme, *Recueil des dames, poésies et tombeaux*, ed. by Etienne Vaucheret (Paris: Gallimard, 1991), p. 261.

the *Sonnetti lussuriosi* along with translations of other works by Aretino.⁸

The fact that all three worked on projects of the highest and lowest order demonstrates that the cultural registers separating supposedly 'sophisticated' and 'base' art were not as wide as they are today.⁹ Accordingly, there was a certain fluidity between the lofty and the scandalous which allowed artists and poets to work within both ranges. As a consequence, the chief contribution of a work like *I Modi* is its ability to show how the high and the low do not oppose, but rather reinforce, one another. It also illustrates how the social and moral risk involved in deriving such a synthesis is essential to the genesis of these works.

Aretino defends his work by pointing to the natural character of the subject and the reaction it evokes. Although he would, of course, never use a term such as 'pornographic' since its application during the Renaissance was virtually non-existent, his apology for the scurrilous predates modern definitions of pornography by calling repeated attention to the sex act itself, to the genitalia, and their emanations. In correspondence with Battista Zatti, he asks:

What harm is there in seeing a man mounting a woman? Should beasts be [more] free than we are? We should wear *that thing* nature gave us for the preservation of the species on a chain around our necks or as a medal on our hats; for that is the fountain rivers of human beings come forth from and the ambrosia the world drinks on feast-days. That thing made you, who are one of the greatest living surgeons. It created me, and I am better than bread. It

8 Guillaume Apollinaire, *L'Arétin. Œuvres choisies traduites de l'italien* (Paris: Mercure de France, 1912).

9 Romano was apprenticed to Raphael and worked on numerous projects for the Vatican. Raimondi is often considered to be the most influential engraver of the Italian Renaissance. Despite his superior talent and reputation, Raimondi's work on *I Modi* resulted in his imprisonment. Raimondi's release was negotiated by Aretino who, for his part, was the foremost man of letters in sixteenth-century Italy. Through his work as a playwright, journalist, satirist, art dealer and critic, Aretino became a precursor of the present-day public intellectual. His trenchant wit and penetrating social observations earned him the respect of his peers and the disdain of the ecclesiastical and political authorities.

produced the Bambos [...] the Titians, and the Michelangelos, and after them the Popes, emperors, and kings.¹⁰

Conversely, in signing the praises of *that thing*, Aretino decries body parts such as the hand for gambling, usury, and killing, and the mouth for cursing, spitting, and lying.

The sonnets and images of *I Modi* underscore the primacy of sex and the sex organs in that almost every poem contains the words *fottere*, *cazzo*, *potta*, and *culo*, and the corresponding images are anything but subtle in their concept and execution. Indeed, depiction of the sex organs almost exclusively constitutes the portrayal of the human body, either male or female. With respect to the female body, conspicuously absent are the florid descriptions of the face, the hair, the eyes, hands, and even breasts which comprise the topics of the Renaissance *blason* and other genres celebrating the beloved. Part of the explanation is found in the obsession with the crotch which in part defines pornography. Nevertheless, it is quite possible that, from a literary standpoint, Aretino saw himself as defining a new genre or at least subverting an existing one. Of course, *contre-blasons* satirised conventional *blasons* often in bawdy ways. Yet, fetishistic vaunting of the genitalia in Aretino goes beyond satire and into the realm of fixation which undermines the esthetic and cultural values on which previous literary endeavors were based.

Read as an integrated unit, *I Modi* constitutes what we would now call a sex manual. The text encourages readers and viewers to study and learn from it and, in self-referential fashion, actually declares itself 'in the service of *culi* and *potte*'.¹¹ For a short work, *I Modi* is remarkably comprehensive. In addition to describing various sexual positions, the work debates the physical and philosophical merits of traditional intercourse versus sodomy, while underscoring

10 Lawner, p. 9. The quotation is originally taken from Aretino, *Lettere. Il primo e il secondo libro*, ed. by Francesco Flora (Milan: Mondadori, 1960), vol. 1, pp. 399–400. Claire Gaudiani also mentions the missive (*The Cabaret Poetry of Théophile de Viau* (Tübingen: Narr, 1981), p. 33).

11 Lawner, p. 92. See v. 2 of the Epilogue's second sonnet. The original Italian reads: 'Questi vostri sonnetti fatti a cazzi/sergenti de li culi e de le potta.'

the delights of orgasm and the seemingly pleasurable distaste inherent in the link between sexual and scatological functions.

Taking the Horatian edict to please and instruct to its sexual extreme, the epilogue signals the voyeuristic function of *I Modi* when the poet comments to the reader, 'It seems you experienced great pleasure / Viewing the act dispatched in *potta* and *culo*' (p. 92).¹² The suggestion at the end of this poem that readers will feel the 'proof' of this excitement 'between [their] legs' (v. 17) underscores the invasive nature of the text, which seeks to arouse the public by simultaneously stimulating and offending it.

Given that the sex acts Aretino depicts are between courtesans and men of high social and/or religious standing, standard notions of morality and gender relations are challenged and in many cases inverted. The point of view is almost exclusively male, but unlike most Italian and French Renaissance poetry where women have little to no verbal or physical presence, females actually speak in *I Modi* and express a level of desire and satisfaction on a par with those of their male counterparts. While it may be an exaggeration to contend that Aretino 'empowers' his women, as is the case in some sexually explicit texts of the era, it is true that the female presence in these poems far surpasses what is found in most Italian and French lyric poetry of the same period. In almost all imitations of Petrarch, the presumed beloved is voiceless, if not altogether absent. Certainly, female voices in Aretino exist in part to verbalise male fantasies. Yet, there is the sense that they express, and to a certain extent, realise their own fantasies as well. By their presence, their words, and their pleasure, the women in Aretino's lyric destroy the hermetic and chaste existence to which they are condemned in Petrarch. From a philosophical perspective, Aretino exchanges the transcendence of Petrarch's neo-Platonic universe – which forcibly negates bodily ecstasy – for the momentary transcendence of orgasm. For the proudly heretical Aretino, the 'little death' is the only real rapture, one in which men and women can equally share. Erotic purification becomes, then, one of the chief affective devices of the text.

12 See vv. 9–10 of the Epilogue's first sonnet. The original Italian reads: 'E so ch'un gran piacer avete avuto/a veder dar in potta e'n cul la stretta.'

As far as French successors of Aretino are concerned, during the Renaissance, Marot and Rabelais composed some obscene poetry, some of it directly inspired by the Italian author (see Gaudiani, p. 34). But the greatest amount was written during the Baroque period, with Théophile de Viau, Mathurin Régnier, Charles de Sigognes, and Pierre Motin as the principal contributors to the genre. These poets belonged to the *Cabinet* and *Parnasse satyrique* mentioned earlier. Without question, certain of these poems reveal fascinating links between obscenity and artistic values. The scatological subtext of Théophile's lyric is one example I have discussed elsewhere.¹³

But, as a whole, one must dig deeply in these large collections to find lyric offerings of intellectual merit. For readers, one of the challenges presented by these poems consists of finding the patience to discover which of those works carry meaning beyond their obvious salaciousness. Many of these offerings give the impression of dirty jokes set to verse. Gaudiani observes that these texts were often part of a culture of 'cabaret poetry' where authors shared their obscene ballads, odes, and sonnets, either in an effort to vaunt their sexual exploits or to outdo one another in the art of poetic lasciviousness. Despite the fact they were produced by accomplished authors, the majority of these poems are relatively unproblematic in their composition and tone. The greater portion of the *Cabinet* texts resemble this sonnet attributed to Malherbe:

Là, là! pour le dessert, troussiez-moy ceste cotte,
Viste, chemise et tout, qu'il n'y demeure rien
Qui me puisse empescher de recoignoistre bien
Du plus haut du nombril jusqu'au bas de la motte.

Là, sans vous renfroigner, venez que je vous frotte,
Et me laissez à part tout ce grave maintien:
Suis-je pas vostre cœur? estes vous pas le mien?
C'est bien avecque moy qu'il faut faire la sottel!

¹³ See *Fecal Matters in Early Modern Literature and Art*, ed. by Jeff Persels & Russell Ganim (Aldershot, UK: Ashgate, 2004), pp. 66–84.

- Mon cœur, il est bien vray, mais vous en faites trop:
Remettez vous au pas et quittez ce galop.
- Ma belle, baisez moy, c'est à vous de vous taire.

- Ma foy, cela vous gaste au milieu du repas ...
- Belle, vous dites vray, mais se pourroit-il faire
De voir un si beau C[on] et ne le [fou]ltre pas?¹⁴

Essentially, the poem is a vulgar adaptation of the *carpe diem* genre. There exists the pretension of tenderness in the exhortation of 'Mon cœur', but in reality the epithet is aggressively sardonic. The tone and intentions of the poet become clear enough in the first verse as he orders the woman to 'troussez-moy ceste cotte', and the pornographic imagery of the text reveals itself almost immediately as the narrator declares his fixation on the woman's body: 'Du plus haut du nombril jusqu'au bas de la motte' (v. 4). The poet's commands in verses 10 and 11 that his presumed 'belle', 'get back in line' ('remettez vous au pas') in order to 'screw him and be quiet' ('baisez moy, c'est à vous de vous taire') as well as juxtaposition of the words 'Con' and 'foutre' in the sonnet's *pointe* remove any indication of the verbal foreplay or shared pleasure that characterises Aretino's luxurious verse. What is perhaps most misogynistic and psychologically disturbing about the poem is the depiction of the sex act within the context of a meal. The framing metaphor of the opening quatrain in which the poet directs the woman to undress is that of a 'dessert' which presumably only the poet will enjoy. In the final tercet, when the narrator acknowledges the woman's displeasure over his advances during what one supposes is their dinner ('cela vous gaste au milieu du repas' v. 12), the implication is that her disgust makes it even more difficult to resist his urge to 'foutre [...] le Con'. Effectively, Malherbe's poem conveys a kind of erotic cannibalism where the woman herself constitutes dinner and dessert. The female body is consumed, both in a literal and a figurative sense, for the perverse delight of the male.

The reason for the distinctively misogynistic character of much of this poetry can be explained as a reaction against the Petrarchan/Ronsardian ideal of the beautiful but inaccessible beloved. Unable to

14 Consult vol. 1, pp. 141–42 of the Fleuret & Perceau edition.

realise a neo-Platonic sublimation of their desire, poets seem to be taking out their sexual frustration on the objects of this obscene lyric. Similarly, if the *eloge de la dame* had run its course in secular poetry, it had found new life in the devotional lyric of the period. The celebration of the Virgin Mary as Urania dominated the depiction of the female in religious poetry of the Baroque era, which also saw the artistic and spiritual rehabilitation of Mary Magdalene.¹⁵ To a certain extent, then, it appears that these poets at least believed there was nowhere to go but down in the portrayal of women in the secular lyric. Either because of Church repression during the Counter-Reformation or because of creative fatigue, there was seemingly no middle ground in the virgin/whore dynamic during the early seventeenth century.

Compared to Aretino, irony is either absent or unsophisticated. Literary and other cultural references are either non-existent or carry little importance. Aretino can be accused of being crass by constantly referring to the *cazzo*, *potta*, and *culo*, but his style is more often than not witty and artful, especially when contrasted with the frequent crudeness of the Cabinet poets.

A marked change in tone occurs with the publication of *L'Ecole des filles* in 1655. Authorship is attributed to Michel Millot and Jean L'Ange, but as DeJean points out, this attribution is not at all certain and it is quite possible that these men were more responsible for printing and distributing the text than they were for writing it (DeJean, p. 62). A forbidden classic that found its way into the *boudoirs* of notables such as Nicolas Fouquet and Samuel Pepys, *L'Ecole* recounts the erotic education of Fanchon by her more mature cousin Suzanne. Gleeful in its description of adolescent awakening, the text becomes an apology for human sexuality. While Fanchon's naiveté and Suzanne's worldliness are definitely meant to stimulate the fantasies of male readers, generally absent are the bawdiness, misogyny, and overall sense of disgust that characterise the lyric of the *Parnasse satyrique*.

In terms of literary precedents, the dialogic exchange between women clearly harkens back to Aretino's *I Ragionamenti*. Despite the

¹⁵ See especially Chapters 4 (pp. 94–145) and 7 (pp. 243–93) of Terence Cave, *Devotional Poetry in France* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1969).

precedent *I Ragionamenti* sets for *L'École*, this particular text by Aretino is coarser in its substance and tone. Erotic pleasure dominates the text, of course, but frequent allusions in *I Ragionamenti* to blasphemy, orgies, forced sex, as well as various forms of verbal and bodily abuse, give the work a perverse feel that in many ways prefigures Sade more than it does *L'École des filles*. By virtue of its playful celebration of sex as a mutually enjoyable experience, the mood of *L'École des filles* bears greater resemblance to Aretino's *I Modi*. Similarly, both texts espouse a kind of erotic humanism whose morality is founded on natural and intimate pleasure.

Structurally, the text is composed of two parts, the first and second dialogue, which consist mainly of Fanchon's sexual discovery, and the discourse that follows. In the first dialogue, Fanchon is an ingénue who shows an eager curiosity that is satisfied in the second dialogue. With her lover – aptly named 'Robinet' – Fanchon puts theory into practice and while she may not have reached Suzanne's level of expertise, it is clear that she will be more than ready for her marriage which is announced at the work's conclusion.

Like *I Modi*, *L'École des filles* can be read as a manual describing the language, positions, and sensations of sex for the newly initiated. Similarly, the more experienced reader can consult it either for titillation or advice. Pornographic in Hunt's sense of focusing on the genitalia in an attempt to arouse the reader, it also corresponds to the traditions of the genre in its obsessive and even redundant representation of sexuality as the centre of human thought and action. Although *L'École* emphasises religious and social satire to a lesser extent than *I Modi*, the modernity of both texts stems in part from their secular, non-judgemental depiction of sexual experience and in their emphasis on the equal and outright pleasure inherent in female sexuality. Where *L'École* distinguishes itself as an early modern, if not modern, text is in its construction as a philosophical text which presents a rational argument for changing social attitudes, if not values about sex.¹⁶

16 For more on this idea, see Chapter 3 (pp. 85–114) of Robert Darnton, *Forbidden Best-Sellers of Pre-Revolutionary France* (New York: Norton, 1995).

While it would be an exaggeration to call *L'Ecole des filles* a Cartesian text in its design and goals, certain concepts are too reminiscent of Descartes to ignore. One is struck, for example, by the organisation of the text in which a 'Table mystique et allégorique selon le sens moral et littéral' precedes each dialogue.¹⁷ To a significant extent, these 'table[s] mystique[s]' are more intriguing than the conversations themselves because they outline the intellectual and moral parameters under consideration. For a proto-pornographic text, words such as 'méthode', 'raison', as well as 'doctrine', and 'vertu' are found with surprising frequency. Without question, one could contend that this is part of the satiric quality of the work, and that rather than reinforce philosophical currents of the day, *L'Ecole* seeks to mock them. Still, the appearance of these terms in the paratextual apparatus of the work is significant because it underscores what the text says about itself. Frequent references to concepts that stress argumentation such as 'instruction', 'refutation', 'raisonnement', and 'récapitulation' emphasise the attempt to establish a set of principles and a consistent manner of articulating them. In its defence and praise of sexual pleasure, *L'Ecole* underscores in its 'table[s] mystique[s] et allégorique[s]' what it repeatedly claims as the 'propre' and the 'propriété du plaisir d'amour' (p. 175). Ironically, there is nothing 'mystical' or 'allegorical' about these liminary summaries because they describe actions and emotions grounded in physical and psychological reality. Although *L'Ecole* cannot be classified as scientific in its approach, it is certainly analytical. In what is at least a nod to the Cartesian principle of mind/body duality, the second 'table' mentions how 'on peut aimer l'esprit pour le corps et le corps pour l'esprit', and, as if to prove this assertion, points to a 'conclusion des recherches sur les hommes' (p. 180). *L'Ecole des filles* represents an inquiry into the human psyche which, because of its scandalous topic, attempts to reveal truths which would otherwise remain unknown.

Whether implicit or explicit, the allusions to Cartesian thought underline a neo-classical subtext which itself is reinforced by a neo-Platonic dimension in the work. From a structural standpoint, the dialogic format in which the mentor leads a pupil from ignorance to

17 Camus, *Œuvres érotiques*, pp. 173–83.

truth through a series of questions, examples, and revelations provides an easily recognisable link to Socratic precedent. Thematically, references to Plato abound. In response to Fanchon's question, 'Ma cousine, qu'est-ce donc, l'amour?', Suzanne somewhat surprisingly answers not with a description of an erotic escapade, but with the statement, 'C'est le désir d'une moitié pour servir ou s'unir à son autre moitié' (p. 268). When Fanchon asks for further explanation, Suzanne continues her Platonic line of reasoning by replying that love defines itself as 'un premier mouvement de la nature, qui monte avec le temps jusques au siège de la raison, avec laquelle il s'habitue et se perfectionne en idée spirituelle' (pp. 268–69). While not the last word in *L'Ecole*, this description of progress from physical to mental and then finally to a kind of spiritual perfection marks the final pages of the text. Similarly, the end of Suzanne's apology of human sexuality is distinguished by representations of the ideal female and male lovers. As one would expect from a pornographic text, these idealised portraits furnish sublime descriptions of the buttocks, genitalia, and the expert ability to perform various sexual functions. At the same time, however, Suzanne places nearly equal emphasis on the lovers' manners, education, and personality. Impressed by her cousin's holistic view of sexuality as it relates to beauty and human development, Fanchon states her desire to '[faire] un assemblé parfait de ces deux moitiés accouplées' (p. 281). In this world, sexual behaviour is chiefly a portal to pleasure, but it also serves as a gateway to transcendent experience.

Final emphasis in *L'Ecole* on the couple and marriage reflects not only the bourgeois milieu in which the narrative takes place, but the insistence on intimacy as key to the pleasure derived from human interaction. Fanchon and Suzanne talk only between themselves: Fanchon's trysts with Robinet are for the most part private matters. The lasting impression is that sex is to be enjoyed between two people in a secluded environment, with shared, natural pleasure being the main objective.

Pleasure is clearly a chief motivation in Sade, but the means and ends are certainly more perverse than in *L'Ecole des filles*, or in any text that preceded those of the Marquis. Somewhat curiously, however, there exist a few moments in *L'Ecole* that recall scenes from

Justine, or *La Philosophie dans le boudoir*. They involve sex acts in which spanking is necessary to produce an erection and where switches and rods are used to induce various forms of arousal. These scenes are rare, though, and come across as slightly odd, but none the less acceptable, forms of erotic behaviour. Bodily injury is never associated with these passages from *L'Ecole*, and the discussion of violence is absent from the text. Indeed, by Sadean standards, *L'Ecole* is a pedestrian, even soporific text. The fetishistic violence and blasphemy that distinguish Sade's work from *L'Ecole* and almost everything else that precede it render not only sex evil and pornographic, but human life itself.¹⁸ Sade's obsession with pain, domination, and cruelty is intended to portray existence as aberrant and pathological. In many respects, Sade represents the end of the pornographic continuum not simply because of the exhaustive types of sexual deviance he depicts, but because of what we would now call the profanely nihilistic dimension of his work.¹⁹ For Sade, there is no reality other than total ruin. Language, thought, sex, and literature converge for the purpose of their own demolition. His genius lies in the ability to destroy intimacy in the closed spaces of the mind and the bedroom by laying waste to the idea that the artistic and the erotic somehow provide refuge for the privacy of mind and body. In a sense, when comparing Sade to Aretino, the poets of *Le Parnasse satyrique*, and *L'Ecole des filles*, one can plausibly assume that he felt it necessary to go beyond established norms which, even for pornography, he believed too commonplace. For Sade, there is no *petite mort*. There is only *la mort*. He seeks to kill all sensibility in his reader to the point where the tingle between the legs in Aretino becomes numbness between the ears in Sade. Reacting against the humanising sexuality of Aretino's *Sonnetti Lussoriosi* and *L'Ecole des filles*, Sade de-sexualises his readers as he dehumanises them.

18 One is reminded of the opening paragraphs of *Justine*, where the narrator states: 'si le malheur persécute la vertu et [...] la prospérité accompagne le crime, les choses étant égales aux vues de la nature, il vaut infiniment mieux prendre parti parmi les méchants qui prospèrent' (vol. 2, p. 132).

19 See Georges Bataille, *Œuvres complètes*, 8 vols (Paris: Gallimard, 1970–76), VII, 365–74.