Male Theology in the Bedroom: Foucault, de Sade and the Body

JEREMY R. CARRETTE
Department of Religious Studies, University of Stirling

In the 1960s, during what became known as his 'literary period', Foucault touched upon a number of avant-garde theological issues related to the writings of the Marquis de Sade. In this essay I wish to explore the representation of gender and religious experience in this literary sub-text of Foucault's work. I want to assess critically Foucault's development of an embodied theological discourse from the perspective of gender identity. Such a critique begins from the assumption, established by Lois McNay and other feminist thinkers, that Foucault's language is fundamentally gender blind and operates on male normative models of the body. 1 By reading Foucault's texts as referring to 'male' sexuality I wish to show how his work can be seen as holding the basic rudiments of a male theological model. In this sense I am suggesting that by owning the male perspective of Foucault's theological sub-text of the 1960s we can find a valuable resource for contemporary debates in gender and religion. It is to recognize how Foucault's work can be read in a gender context.

There are however a number of difficulties in isolating a specific 'male' perspective from the basis of a gender blind universal subject in Foucault's work. The universal subject to some extent obscures both male and female sexuality in so far as it lacks any sexual and social location. To some extent the non-sexual body and the generalized idea of sexuality in Foucault's work distorts a 'male' position by its lack of specificity. This is not to presume an essential 'male' perspective can be isolated but to recognize following recent studies on the social construction of masculinity, that Foucault's work holds a particular undeveloped 'male' discourse. 2 Foucault in this sense writes not so much from the


position of a male norm as from the position of a certain culturally 'undifferentiated' male perspective. In this work I will hope to locate aspects of this 'male' perspective in its literary and social context.

In order to illustrate the complexity of ideas behind this gender reading of Foucault's theological sub-text I will follow a number of stages of elucidation. I will firstly critically assess the historical background to Foucault's work on Sade. This will enable me to locate Sade in the context of French avant-garde thought and show how Foucault inherits a specifically male Sadeian theological model into his work. I will then detail the specific coordinates of Foucault's theological model through the themes of language, the death of God/man and sexuality and entertain the male perspective behind these ideas. It is important to remember that in this discussion I am not attempting to incorporate the growing literature on masculinity but rather to detail the fragments of Foucault's own work which can illuminate this debate. I am in effect attempting to do no more than to draw out Foucault's theological sub-text of the 1960s in the light of gender identity.

**Foucault and the Interpretation of Sade**

The eighteenth-century writer the Marquis de Sade is a problematic figure. His life was marked by long periods of imprisonment for the crimes of 'debauchery', 'excessive libertinage' and obscene literature. In such novels as *The one hundred and twenty days of sodom* and *Philosophy in the bedroom* we find a catalogue of extreme sexual acts. We may also note, for the purpose of this work, that these acts were often interlaced with attacks on the existence of God, where the orgasm becomes a statement of atheism. In one historical reading, Sade stands as a figure representing the dark side of the Enlightenment, the rational enterprise taken to its most macabre and extreme. These extremities of Sade's work mean that we now hear, as Said states, the words 'de Sade' as a particular 'event'. This 'event' has been well documented by feminist writers and more recently has been historically disentangled in the excellent work of such scholars as Jane Gallop and Carolyn Dean.

The crimes of violence and sexual assault against women in Sade's work have, not surprisingly, been cause for much criticism.

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3 The literature on masculinity is expanding rapidly, for a useful overview of the issues see J. Hearn and D. Morgan (eds), *Men, masculinities and social theory* (London: Unwin & Hyman, 1990).


Radical feminists such as Andrea Dworkin see Sade as 'the world's foremost pornographer' and she strongly attacks the literary and artistic interest in Sade as evidence of a 'women hating culture'.

While Andrea Dworkin is correct in the assessment that the crimes and the victims almost become 'invisible', her analysis fails to address the complex cultural significance of Sade in France, and why Jane Gallop can justify her own feminist interest in Sade's work. This is not to diminish the central force of Andrea Dworkin's argument, but to show that the works of Sade are filtered through a specific historical evolution and tactical illumination of misogyny (and arguably at times misandry). The literary significance of Sade means that writers such as Simone de Beauvoir engage with Sade as a specific cultural figure in French thought. Feminist interest in Sade often views his work as promoting an awareness of crimes against women, as in Angela Carter's *The Sadeian women* (a work regarded by Angela Dworkin as 'pseudofeminist'); and Luce Irigaray, as Gallop demonstrates, 'considers Sade valuable in as much as his work lays bare "the sexuality that subtends our social order"'.

In the 1960s, when the *Tel Quel* group and Foucault addressed the issue of Sade's writing, Sade was hidden and concealed, even distorted, in the strands of literary discourse; 'de Sade' had become an 'event' outside the actual texts. This transformation of Sade is clearly documented by Carolyn Dean, in her valuable examination of the notion of self in modern French thought, and by Jane Gallop, in her examination of the 'textual network' of Bataille, Blanchot and Klossowski which transformed the contemporary reading of Sade in the 1960s. There was in effect a gradual reconstruction of Sade through the psychiatric discourse of 'sadism' in Richard von Krafft-Ebing's 1886 work *Psychopathia sexualis*; and then through writings of surrealism, and Apollinaire in particular, who saw Sade as victim and humanitarian revolutionary against the forces of repression. Sade was then further mutated in the works of later avant-garde writers.

In the search to find some underlying rationale avant-garde writers such as Bataille and Klossowski put forward, amongst other suggestions, a number of religious explanations. Sade's work was

9 Simone de Beauvoir, 'Must we burn Sade?', *The one hundred and twenty days of sodom*, Sade, 3–64.
10 Angela Carter, *The Sadeian women: an exercise in cultural history* (London: Virago, 1979); Dworkin, *Pornography*, 84; Gallop, *Thinking through the body*, 54; Luce Irigaray, "'Frenchwoman,” stop trying’, *This sex which is not one* (Ithaca: Cornell University, 1985).
seen to hold attacks on theology and hidden gnostic themes. It was
these avant-garde religious interpretations of Sade which led
Foucault to explore his own theological question in the 1960s. And
while Foucault did not wholeheartedly accept the avant-garde
religious interpretations of Sade they would shape his theological
model and, unfortunately, also reinforce his gender blind
perspective.

Klossowski and Bataille
The theme of theology and the body in Sade’s work was developed
initially by the writer and artist Pierre Klossowski, a man who like
Bataille had earlier in life entered monastic orders and who later
developed an interest in eroticism. Blanchot, as Macey notes, saw
Klossowski’s work as ‘a mixture of erotic austerity and theological
debauchery’. Foucault was deeply impressed by Klossowski’s
work and although he never took up his interest in gnosticism, the
theological tone of the work has clearly infiltrated Foucault’s
overall model of religious reflection.

In a series of articles in the 1930s Klossowski rejected the
atheistic quality of Sade and attempted to devise a reading based
on Manichean gnosticism and the Carpocration cult of orgasm.
The original purity of the soul was found through the Carpocration
doctrine of non-resistance, based on a peculiar reading of Matthew
5:25–26, ‘Agree with thine adversary quickly’. Through such
immersion into the world of darkness the creator would restore the
human being back into the rightful place with God. The soul
tries to extinguish its sense of separateness from the divine by
repudiating God’s existence and its own immortality, and in the
end the soul returns to God by exhausting its own alienation.
According to Klossowski, Sade’s work held a similar theological
perspective. ‘The libertine’s atheism’, as Dean commenting on
Klossowski points out, ‘is not a denial of God but an angry
attempt to force God to manifest himself (sic)’.

Klossowski’s essays were collected in his 1947 work "Sade my
neighbour", probably the most well known study of Sade. However,
as Gallop has shown, Klossowski modified his work and played
down his earlier gnostic excesses in the 1967 edition. Although
Klossowski’s later work loses its gnostic overtone the paradoxical
process of redemption continued in the idea of ‘integral
monstrosity’. The idea of ‘integral monstrosity’ is based on the

14 Macey points out how Foucault saw Klossowski’s work as equal to that of Bataille and
16 Ibid., 127.
17 Ibid., 117, 120.
establishment of integrity in the (male) outrage against normative reason and God. The value system is turned up side down in what Klossowski sees as an ‘inverted monotheism’ at the heart of Sade’s work. Perverse actions become moral imperatives against a normalizing authority. The ‘key sign’ of such thought is the act of sodomy, homosexual or heterosexual. Sodomy breaks the institutional control over the body which propagates the preservation of the species and becomes a moral testimony to the death of God. Klossowski sees the Sadeian pervert as simultaneously attacking the controls imposed on the body and extinguishing the ego-identity.

Many of these ideas re-surface in Foucault’s later work on ‘docile bodies’ in his study of the prison, but what is significant in the 1960s is how Klossowski’s obscure work forms a backdrop to an emerging theological sub-text in Foucault’s writing. Klossowski’s examination of Sade establishes the interrelation of the language of bodies and God’s existence. What again is so absent from this discussion is the awareness of gender identity. There is a persistent and inaccurate assumption that references to the body or sexuality implied both male and female. Klossowski’s work brought together a cultural package of powerful images which fascinated Foucault, but Foucault’s subsequent theological response failed to grasp the male and misogynist quality of this work. There was no recognition that the theological ‘debauchery’ and anger was male.

Klossowski’s religious reading of Sade and the breaking of traditional (male) binary opposition between body and spirit was continued by Bataille. It was Bataille, as Jane Gallop has documented, who was to have the greatest influence on postwar readings of Sade in France. In Gallop’s disentangling of the intertextual matrix surrounding Sade she clearly indicates the impact of Bataille. As Gallop explains: ‘A reader of Sade, exposed to the atmosphere of modern French thought, cannot escape being infected by Georges Bataille’.

Throughout his work Bataille was interested in what he called the ‘inner experience’ of religion, rather than in its diverse forms of expression. In his later work *Eroticism* in 1957, strongly influenced by Sade, he links the workings of Christian religious experience with erotic impulses through the anxiety of death and

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21 Ibid.
22 Klossowski’s ideas of bodies and language were developed further by the French philosopher Gilles Deleuze. See Gilles Deleuze, *The logic of sense* (London: Athlone, 1990), 280–301.
23 Gallop, *Intersections*, 11. Gallop’s work showed how the idea of ‘sovereignty’ in Bataille’s Sade was to form the dominant strand of interpretation in French thinking about Sade, albeit, in her view, misguided and incorrect. See Gallop, *Intersections*, 10, 115.
discontinuity. Death is, paradoxically, the continuous aspect of being, while life because of death is discontinuous. 'We are', according to Bataille, 'discontinuous beings, individuals who perish in isolation in the midst of an incomprehensible adventure, but yearn for our lost continuity'. 25 The desire in eroticism is to find continuity in the face of discontinuity, and thus in erotic activity there is a 'dissolution', a nakedness, where the orgasm becomes the 'little death'. 26 In Bataille's view: 'The whole business of eroticism is to destroy the self-contained character of the participators as they are in their normal lives'. 27

The sexual act thus involves a 'violation' of the other's state of self possession and, echoing Sade, Bataille sees eroticism as existing in the same domain as violence. (This is a view also found in Andrea Dworkin's work *Intercourse* but with very different implications.) 28 Bataille seems to be unaware of the fact that in eroticism the so-called 'violation of self possession' can be a mutually agreed adventure and an 'affirmation' (not violation) of the other; whereas in an act of violence the action is usually based on a conflict of interest. The preoccupation with 'violence' reflects a specifically Sadeian male thematic and it is this limited male identity which pervades the work of the avant-garde writers and Foucault.

Eroticism is different, according to Bataille, from the simple physical sexual act because it brings into play the whole problem of existence, it is a philosophical and theological issue. 29 The erotic expresses a condition of being related to the problems of discontinuity which is overcome in the sexual relationship. Religious behaviour perpetuates the same dynamic of sexual interaction in its attempt to overcome the isolated discontinuity of being with a sense of continuity. This dynamic is seen at different levels in a variety of religious practices and beliefs. In religious acts of sacrifice, for example, the participants share a feeling of continuity by witnessing the death of a discontinuous being. 30 In the absence of a specific religious object, like sacrifice, the sense of continuity in death or the beyond is experienced through certain practices which break the sense discontinuity. Bataille places mystical experiences in this category. 31

When Foucault takes up Bataille's argument, as Richardson identifies, he dramatically shifts the context of Bataille's discussion and introduces the idea of the death of God with a reading of Bataille's idea of transgression and the limit. Richardson's criticism

26 Ibid., 170.
27 Ibid., 17.
30 Ibid., 22.
31 Ibid., 18, 23.
is direct, when he writes: 'It is not so much that one can say that Foucault is in disagreement with Bataille, but that what interests him belongs to a different discourse'.

Foucault's theological model is principally built through his commentary on Bataille's work, but the re-arrangement of ideas produces a slightly different sound. In Foucault's work, as we shall see, there is a bringing together of issues concerned with language, the death of God/man and sexuality around the figure of Sade. Foucault in this sense breaks up Bataille's religious concerns into a wider cultural context. What Foucault carries forward from Bataille is a relationship between sexuality and religion derived from a Sadeian male thematic, a thematic of death, violation and aggression.

This outline of the cultural context of Sadeian scholarship in French avant-garde thought enables us to see the complex and often confused ways in which Sade becomes the screen upon which a constellation of contemporary issues are projected. The experimental literary and philosophical debates smother the texts of Sade and have led to scathing criticism by such writers as Annie Le Brun. In her extensive introductory essay for the French edition of Sade's collected works, Le Brun argues that Bataille, Blanchot, Klossowski and their followers, have completely distorted Sade in the process of abstract theory and linguistic analysis. Her critique also extends to Foucault:

Nothing in the whole of Sade had ever walked into this hall of half-measure. How could anyone still take Michel Foucault seriously, referring, in his *Madness and Civilisation*, to 'Sade's calm and patient language'? Le Brun exposes the way Sade is tamed and filtered by the avant-garde writers. Andrea Dworkin would agree with Le Brun about the way real physical events have been ignored in the theory surrounding the excessive writing of Sade, although she would dispute Le Brun's underlying motive in rescuing the surrealist indulgence in such writing. It soon becomes clear that Sade is caught in a number of political struggles. As Carolyn Dean states:

Thus, while there is no 'correct' reading of Sade, no Sade to 'get right', there are clearly more or less valuable readings of his work. Of course, those readings are less about Sade than about the politics or the fantasies of the people who read him.

Foucault's Sadeian theological model is therefore caught in a multilayered interpretative matrix shaped by French artistic and literary culture. This history is not however an excuse for

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34 Dean, *The self and its pleasures*, 182.
uncritically adopting Sade. If anything the history of Sadeian scholarship confirms Dworkin's critique of the artistic and literary interest in Sade as reflecting a 'woman hating culture'. Sadeian scholarship can however be valuable, as I intimated earlier in relation to Gallop and Irigaray, in revealing not only the agonies and pains of a misogynist social order but in highlighting the violent and oppressive constructions of male identity. The use of Sade, as Dean acknowledges, reflects the 'politics' and 'fantasies' of the reader and not 'de Sade' (whoever he may be).

**Foucault, Male Sexuality and the Sadelian Body**

The diverse readings of Sade reveal a profound tension in the location of Sade in Foucault’s theological model. Sade on the one hand allowed avant-garde writers and Foucault to find a more embodied reflection of religion through sodomy and sexual excess. But on the other hand these reflections were undermined by misogynist attitudes. The embodied enlightenment of religion is therefore constructed at the cost of women. There is a fundamental alienation and obliteration of women (and to some extent men) in the rescuing of the (male) body in Foucault’s work. In approaching Foucault’s theological model I want therefore to show how the specific ‘politics’ and ‘fantasies’ in Foucault’s reading of Sade hold a specific male theological quality. Sade enables Foucault to rescue the male ‘spiritual’ body according to a specific (and limited) construction of male sexuality. Foucault is in this sense operating on a culturally constructed avant-garde Sadeian male paradigm to reinstitute the (male) body into a theological discourse. It is however not the only male paradigm. What I am calling the Sadeian male paradigm is a male sexual construction built on the themes of death, domination, sodomy, pain and ‘theological’ anger (an anger towards the restrictions imposed on the male body by traditional Christianity).

These negative themes of the Sadeian male paradigm have led feminist writers like Somer Brodribb to dismiss Foucault’s work. She writes: ‘Foucault is preoccupied with the precarious nature of being, with the seed of death in life, and he chooses annihilation as the foundation of his particularly masculinist metaphysics’. Foucault’s theological model can clearly be seen as a ‘masculinist metaphysics’. The themes of Foucault’s theological reflections in the 1960s are inescapably wrapped up in a male perspective. This does not mean we have to reject such work. It rather means we can understand Foucault’s theological model inside a male context. Such a strategy is to follow Bartkowski in seeing Foucault as one of the men responding to Hélène Cixous’ statement, in a

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36 Brodribb, *Nothing mat(i)ers*, 50.
significant footnote to her central French feminist essay, 'The Laugh of Medusa', that 'men still have to tell us about their sexuality'. By locating the theological strands of Foucault's work in a male context of Sadeian scholarship we can establish the wider connection between religion and gender. It will enable us to see the preoccupation with the issues of death and annihilation as distinct, although not exclusive, male concerns.

Foucault's Theological Model

Foucault's theological model of the 1960s is unfolded through a triangulation of issues held together on the basis of the Sadelian male paradigm. Sade was the violent foundation stone of the avant-garde challenge to religious and theological values but Foucault repositioned this work according to his own contemporary interest in language, the Nietzschean thematic of the death of God/death of man, and sexuality. These strands are brought together in Foucault's study of Bataille in 1963 when he writes:

Perhaps the importance of sexuality is our culture, the fact that since Sade it persistently been linked to the most profound decisions of our language, derives from nothing else than this correspondence which connects it to the death of God.

The passage conceals the dense interweaving of issues which has little meaning or validity outside the reified atmosphere of avant-garde discourse on Sade which I have outlined above. In order to clarify the underlying triadic basis of Foucault's theological model we can present the work as follows:

![Triangular diagram with Language, death of God/Man, Sade, and Theology, and sexuality connected by lines]

Foucault's Theological Model in the 1960s


If Foucault’s theological model is based on a Sadeian male paradigm then it is possible to see how the coordinates of this discussion reflect hidden issues about male identity. Although Foucault is unaware of the gender specific nature of his work, by reclaiming the male perspective we can see the discussion of language, the death of God/man and sexuality as reflecting certain ‘anxieties’ in male identity. I will examine each of the coordinates of Foucault’s theological model in turn and not only show how Foucault repositions religious discourse but also reveal the hidden anxieties of male identity held in each thematic.

i) Language
Foucault’s understanding of the nature of language in the 1960s is influenced, on the one hand, by the waves of structuralist theory and, on the other hand, by Blanchot’s enigmatic theorizing about the link between language, death and negation. These issues of language form the central platform from which Foucault builds his own theology of language; for the nature of language is determined by God’s existence and disappearance in Western consciousness. Many accounts of Foucault’s work *The order of things* examine the idea of successive epistemes (the discursive relations that give rise to different forms of knowledge throughout history) and the evolution of language, without considering how dependant they are on the notion of God.

In Foucault’s *The order of things* the basic pattern of the historical analysis of language (Renaissance period- Classical age- Modern Period-decline of the modern edifice) is grounded on two major considerations of the position of God in human thought. At the beginning, Foucault describes the Renaissance world as one where language is a sign of the reality of God. As Kearney explains, and the exclusive language is important: ‘The world was deemed to be a Divine Script authored by God Himself for man to read’. Everywhere there were marks and signs of God’s existence. Language was seen as part of the ‘similitudes and signatures’ of nature to be studied and explored. Foucault recreates a mythic atmosphere of the Renaissance, rather than factually representing it, in order to portray a world of ‘resemblance’ where words (God’s words) and things were one.

39 The concept of anxiety is here taken from psychoanalytical discourse. I am referring in this work to Freud’s idea of ‘primary anxiety’. This is defined by Charles Rycroft as ‘the emotion which accompanies dissolution of the self’. (Charles Rycroft, *A critical dictionary of psychoanalysis* (London: Penguin, 1977), 8.) I am grateful to Hugh Pyper for his helpful comments on the idea of anxiety.

40 For a definition of ‘episteme’ see Michel Foucault, *The archaeology of knowledge* (London: Routledge, 1991), 191.

There is no difference between the visible marks that God has stamped upon the surface of the earth, so that we may know its inner secrets, and the legible words that the Scriptures, or the sages of Antiquity, have set down in the books preserved for us by tradition.\textsuperscript{42}

Foucault goes on in his mythical construction to use the Biblical imagery of Babel from the Old Testament to show how the ‘transparency’ between words and things came to an end with the breaking of the alliance of God and His people. This relationship is preserved only in fragmentary form in Hebrew, in order to show ‘it was once the common language of God’.\textsuperscript{43} There still remains a connection to God’s original word but ‘primal visibility’ is lost. In the Classical Age a gap emerges which creates the space for the emergence of ‘representation’ in language.

And though God still employs signs to speak to us through nature, he is making use of our knowledge, and of the relations that are set up between our impressions, in order to establish in our minds a relation of significance.\textsuperscript{44}

Once there is a space between words and things through the process of representation, human beings begin to read and interpret the world without God. The Classical Age, as a result, becomes the time when in the absence of God, human beings begin to name, classify and order things, as we see established in Galileo, Descartes and Darwin.

Foucault then goes on to describe the final transition to the Modern period in which Sade is a central figure, as Don Quixote was in the transition between the Renaissance period to the Classical Age. Sade exists at the transition point from the classical to the modern period, where language is exposed to the tension between ‘simple’ representation of sexual acts and the limits of representation in attempting to portray desire. Sade’s writing shifts between these two poles of thought, one where there is a ‘meticulous ordering’ and Law behind every sexual act, a feature coterminous with the Classical Age, and another pole where there is a continual stretching of the limits of language, as Foucault wrote, ‘the obscure and repeated violence of desire battering at the limits of representation’.\textsuperscript{45} In this situation language turns in on itself and opens up strange and complex enigmas.

After [Sade] violence, life and death, desire and sexuality will extend, below the level of representation, an immense expanse of shade which we are now attempting to recover, as far as we can, in our discourse, in our freedom, in our thought. But our thought is so brief, our freedom so enslaved, our discourse so repetitive, that we must face the fact that that expanse of shade below is really a bottomless sea.\textsuperscript{46}

\textsuperscript{42} Michel Foucault, \textit{The order of things} (London: Routledge, 1991), 33.
\textsuperscript{43} Ibid., 36.
\textsuperscript{44} Ibid., 59. Cf. 78.
\textsuperscript{45} Ibid., 209–10.
\textsuperscript{46} Ibid., 211.
What emerges in this new phase is an uncertain space where words recover an 'ancient, enigmatic density', not like the Renaissance period, but one where 'language may sometimes arise for its own sake in an act of writing that designates nothing other than itself'.

As Foucault saw in the works of Mallarmé and Nietzsche, what was speaking was nothing other than the word itself, the vibration of its 'enigmatic and precarious being'.

This theo/ontology of language is explored with specific reference to Blanchot in Foucault's 1966 essay for the journal *Critique*. In his discussion of Blanchot's 'thought from the outside' Foucault sees Sade as the first in a line, through Hölderlin, Flaubert and Nietzsche, to shed light on a language without subjectivity or an objective referent. Language ceases to be simple representation of thought and assumes a quasi-religious function in holding its own mystery and enigma. The influence of Blanchot is central in the development of Foucault's theological understanding of language. This point is underlined by Timothy Clark when he stresses how Blanchot's 'radical notion of writing' puts into question a whole series of religious ideas. 'Blanchot eschews the dominant subjectivizing and historicizing approach to literature and renders it the field of a life-long meditation on the borders of philosophy and religion ...'.

But it is not the transformation of language by Blanchot alone that initiates Foucault's own theological question. What is also significant for Foucault's theological model is the centrality of 'God's disappearance' or the 'death of God' to the positivity of language, and the curious place Sade occupies in this development. Although there is an absence of discussing Sade's vehement attacks of God's existence it is intrinsic to the discussion. When language loses its theological reference, the language of desire assumes a powerful unrestricted force which ruptures language itself. In Sade theological and sexual language are fused together, a relationship that Bataille was to explore in his 1957 work *Eroticism*, which Foucault would closely draw upon in his own essay on Bataille in 1963. When language is taken out of the restrictions of theology it finds not only its enigma but the force and passion of unrestricted desire. There is a joining of the erotic and the religious.

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48 Ibid., 305; 382. This conception of language pervades the literature of the period, see Maurice Blanchot, *The infinite conversation* (Minneapolis: University of Minneapolis, 1991) and Deleuze, *The logic of sense*.
52 See Sade, *Justine, Philosophy in the bedroom, Eugénie de Franval*, 212.
53 See Foucault, 'A preface to transgression', 29-52.
Foucault reveals the inadequacy of language to hold and express desire. There is something which exceeds language in Sade, where man is faced with a desire outside rational categorization. Language, according to the theory of the French avant-garde, is faced with its self-referential and limited capacities. In this situation there is a tension in the Sadeian male desire for mastery and domination. As Gallop suggests in her radical positioning of the body, there is always something which exceeds the philosophical discourse, which is never contained in rational categories.\(^{54}\) There is in effect an experience of mental 'impotence' with language to function according to the male desire for order and control. In this situation men are faced with the problem of 'how to speak' and 'write' with uncertainty, with a language which turns back on itself and turns man back to his finite body. This uncertainty and vulnerability of male expression begins to open up other areas of male experience outside the Sadeian paradigm. We may note for example how the recent work of James Nelson has shown the need of men to learn not only to think with the erect phallus but also with the flaccid penis. Foucault's theological model while prefiguring contemporary debates on the body and religion is therefore restricted not only in its lack of gender specification but also by its failure to register the diversity of male experience.\(^{55}\)

**ii) The Death of God and the Death of Man**

The unification of (male) sexuality and theology through the new ontology of language is extended in Foucault's discussion of the death of God and the death of man. These themes which dominated the literature in the 1960s were not new; as Descombes notes, the death of God/man was prefigured by Alexandre Kojève's lectures on Hegel in the 1930s.\(^{56}\) It was from these lectures that Sartre built his humanist atheism where man replaced God in the creation of an 'inverted theology'.\(^{57}\) This 'theologizing of man', as Foucault put it in his own reaction to Sartre, was not the only response to the death of God.\(^{58}\) The death of God assumed a different form in the anti-humanist literature of the 1960s, where it was coupled with the death of man in the critique of subjectivity.\(^{59}\) The attack on God is linked to the attack on man, opening a new space of reflection where, as Foucault put it, the

\(^{54}\) Gallop, *Thinking through the body*, 7.


death of God and the last man are 'engaged in a contest with more than one round'. When this struggle is read in terms of a gender specific discourse, as opposed to the language of the universal subject, we can see how the absence of a male theological authority figure and the destruction of a dominant discourse about the male subject raises questions and anxieties about male identity. After the death of God and the death of man the body and sexuality assume a priority which destabilises male identity.

There are two dimensions to Foucault’s discussion of the death of God, the first, exploring the relationship to sexuality in terms of Bataille and Sade; and, the second, which has received more consideration, deals with the more specifically Nietzschean emphasis found in The order of things, where Foucault links the death of God to the death of man. The importance of Nietzsche has been adequately explored elsewhere. It is however the combination of Sade and Nietzsche, two great figures of the death of God, as they are disseminated into the French literary and philosophical circles, which forms Foucault’s theological question. The dead God of Sade is joined with the dead of God of Nietzsche to create a new theological territory constructed on (male) sexuality.

The central emphasis given to the Nietzschean idea of the death of God is seen in Foucault’s short 1966 interview, ‘What is philosophy?’. In this interview Foucault isolates the different notions of the ‘death of God’ in writers such as Hegel, Feuerbach and Nietzsche. While in Hegel and Feuerbach reason and man’s conscience replace God, in Nietzsche the death of God signified the end of metaphysics, but this was not just a matter of man taking the place of God but the opening of an ‘empty space’. This is crucial in understanding Foucault’s Nietzschean interpretation of the death of God and the way he links this to the death of man. ‘Rather than the death of God — or, rather, in the wake of that death and in the profound correlation with it — what Nietzsche’s thought heralds is the end of his murderer; it is the explosion of man’s face in laughter ...’.

The ‘death of man’ has its own distinctive literary and philosophical tradition, established before structuralist theory. It is therefore important to see Foucault’s concern with the death of

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60 Foucault, The order of things, 385.
61 For an extremely useful discussion of Foucault and Nietzsche see Alan D. Schrift, ‘Foucault and Derrida on Nietzsche and the end(s) of man’, Michel Foucault: critical assessments II, ed. Smart, 278ff. and Michael Mahon, Foucault’s Nietzschean genealogy: truth, power and the subject (Albany, New York: SUNY, 1992).
63 Schrift, ‘Foucault and Derrida on Nietzsche and the end(s) of man’, 282; Foucault, The order of things, 385.
64 Foucault, The order of things, 385.
man as a specific strand of discussion within a wider tradition.\textsuperscript{65} In \textit{The order of things} Foucault sees the Modern period as defined by the creation of 'man', what Foucault calls in his analytic of finitude, the 'empirico-transcendental doublet'.\textsuperscript{66} This is where 'man' becomes both the subject and object of 'his' own knowledge.\textsuperscript{67} Foucault's use of the term 'man', as Schrift has clearly illustrated, should be seen in a technical sense to refer to the Kantian summation of all knowledge under the question 'What is man?'\textsuperscript{68} Foucault, as Schrift goes on to show, links this to Nietzsche by showing how the 'death of man' is the death of the 'last man', and that the 'übersmensch' (the superman) is a new being not defined in terms of Kantian anthropology or subjectivity.\textsuperscript{69} The language of 'man' obliterates the gender question and conceals the more awkward question: what is male identity after the death of God and the death of man?

In one of the first attempts to link Foucault and theology, James Bernauer attempted to build a theology out of Foucault's notion of the 'death of man'. Bernauer argued that the death of God paralleled the divinization of man, as seen in the work of Sartre, and that by breaking the privileged position of 'man' an opening was made for the possibility of new conceptions of God.\textsuperscript{70} Bernauer's study left open the possibility of a wider theological engagement with Foucault. When we bring the issues of language and (male) sexuality to Bernauer's discussion we can see how new conceptions of God are to be found in Foucault's theological model of the 1960s, in the questions of the body, sexuality and gender. In this sense Nietzsche and Sade form a unity in understanding the death of God in Foucault's work.

The inter-relation between the death of God, the death of man and the body is crucial in Foucault's theological model. God, as Irigaray has suggested, provides a symbolic framework for gender relations.\textsuperscript{71} When God dies there is a loss of authority. In a similar fashion when the notion of 'man' is questioned there is a loss of ontological stability. When theology and anthropology have provided a conceptual matrix to assert the power and domination

\textsuperscript{65} David Macey locates Malraux as one source of Foucault's notion of the death of man/God, see Macey, \textit{The lives of Michel Foucault}, 90 and André Malraux, \textit{The temptation of the west} (New York: Jubilee Books, 1974), 97-8.
\textsuperscript{66} Foucault, \textit{The order of things}, 318-19.
\textsuperscript{67} Ibid., 312. The exclusive language in the text has a specific relevance to male sexuality.
\textsuperscript{68} Schrift, 'Foucault and Derrida on Nietzsche and the end(s) of man', 281. Cf. Foucault, \textit{The order of things}, 385.
\textsuperscript{69} Schrift, 'Foucault and Derrida on Nietzsche and the end(s) of man', 281.
\textsuperscript{71} Luce Irigaray, \textit{Sexes and genealogies} (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993), 57-72. 'God', as Irigaray points out, 'has been created out of man's gender.' (Irigaray, \textit{Sexes and genealogies}, 61) Irigaray argues that women need to find a god figure to affirm and validate their own subjectivity. (Irigaray, \textit{Sexes and genealogies}, 64).
of man, the collapse of such a structure threatens the whole of male identity and precariously throws man back to the reality of his own body. At this point in Foucault's theological model the death of God is coupled with an explosion of desire according to a Sadeian male paradigm of death, discontinuity and isolation. Brodribb dismissed these male issues as 'masculinist metaphysics' but they seem to reflect something fundamental about the anxiety of male identity in the face of the death of God and the death of man. There seems to be a fundamental question in the social construction of male identity about continuity, power and extinction. It is interesting in this respect to note how Hugh Pyper sees the preoccupation of the Old Testament writers with male inheritance as an anxiety about fathers and the preservation of the male lineage. When the traditional frameworks of male authority are threatened the question of sexuality assumes priority. The death of God in Foucault's work brings religion back to the awkward space of the body.

iii) Sexuality
Although Foucault does not offer any answers to the predicament of the death of God and the death of man he does provide his readers with a direction, he presents an 'open site' from which new possibilities may emerge. The situation is made clearer when we consider Foucault's thoughts about the disappearance of the author.

It is not enough, however, to repeat the empty affirmation that the author has disappeared. For the same reason, it is not enough to keep repeating (after Nietzsche) that God and man have died a common death. Instead, we must locate the space left empty by the author's disappearance, follow the distribution of gaps and breaches, and watch for the openings that this disappearance uncovers.

If Foucault feels it is not enough to leave the empty space of the death of God, what, we may ask, is left by the death of God and the death of man? Foucault's answer to this closely follows Bataille in the way it is linked to the question of (male) sexuality.

Language, the death of God and sexuality are interwoven threads. When language is not longer a simple referent to God, when the idea of God and the idea of man disappear, there is an anxiety and crisis about the nature and limits of existence. These

72 Hugh Pyper, 'Surviving writing: the anxiety of historiography in the former prophets', The Hebrew Bible and the new literary criticism, eds J.C. Exum and D.J.E. Clines (Sheffield: J.S.O.T., 1993).
73 Michel Foucault, 'Foreword' to the English language edition of The order of things (London: Routledge, 1991), xii.
ideas come together in Foucault's essay on Bataille in 1963. In this piece Foucault outlines the predicament of the death of God and how the situation since Sade has brought about the emergence of sexuality at the limits of existence. At the limits of existence there is the possibility of transgression. Foucault, as Richardson notes, extrapolates the idea of transgression from Bataille's work on society, where transgression completes and transcends the taboo, to create an elusive and enigmatic notion. Transgression, Foucault argues, is not to be seen as black to white, or prohibited to lawful, but a 'spiral' which constantly 'crosses and recrosses', the point where everything is always, following Blanchot, 'contested'. The idea of an embodied theology is one such contestation. Foucault does not see transgression in this sense as negative but as something which affirms the limits of being. This concept of 'limit' is important in the way Foucault joins together, using Sade, the idea of the death of God and sexuality.

God's existence, Foucault argues, provided a limit to the apparent limitless nature of being. When God is killed the limits of existence are broken and the individual is apparently liberated, but the individual is also brought back to the limits of existence in the face of what is 'impossible'. Sade's work is an impossible book, it exists at the limits of what can be written. The death of God thus created possibilities but also 'impossibilities in which it entangled thought'. As Foucault points out the death of God is not a statement of the non-existence of God but 'the now constant space of our experience' where we face the limits of our existence.

By following Bataille's idea that religion and sexual eroticism are grounded in the same experience, Foucault believed that the limit God had once provided could now be found in sexuality. Sexuality, especially since Sade, is demarcated by limits, the limit of consciousness in face of unconscious desire, the limit of law in the light of universal taboos and the limit of language in its incapacity to express desire. These limits mean it is still one of the few areas, 'in a world which no longer recognises any positive meaning in the sacred', where profanation and desecration can occur. Sexuality thus becomes an act where the 'absence' of God is manifest. Foucault sees Sade's work as representing the precise

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75 Foucault, 'A preface to transgression'.
76 Foucault, 'A preface to transgression', 34–6. For further development of the idea of 'contestation' see Foucault, 'A preface to transgression', 36 n.13. and Foucault, 'Maurice Blanchot', 22.
77 Foucault, 'A preface to transgression', 35.
78 Ibid., 62.
79 Ibid., 32.
80 Ibid., 32.
81 Ibid., 30.
82 Ibid., 30.
point where the language of (male) sexuality emerged out of the
death of God.

From the moment that Sade delivered its first words and marked out, in a
single discourse, the boundaries of what suddenly became its kingdom, the
language of sexuality has lifted us into the night where God is absent, and
where all of our actions are addressed to this absence ...

Sexuality and the death of God are thus intrinsically connected,
tied together at the limits of human thought. According to
Foucault, in (male) sexuality we not only face the absence of God
but our own death. The body and God are thus fundamentally
fused together in the realization of the finitude of human life. This
problematic of the finite nature of existence is taken up in a
different context in Foucault’s The order of things. Here Foucault
saw the modern creation of the figure of ‘man’ as born out of the
realization of finite existence. The body, desire and language are
discovered at the limits of existence, at death. At the limit, at the
point of transgression, a discourse silenced by religion is opened
up and the space for an embodied spirituality emerges.

Rescuing the (Male) Body
Foucault’s theological model is part of a wider group of writings
which Jane Gallop recognized as holding a desire to ‘mess up
philosophy’. It attempted like surrealism to ‘contaminate’ religion
by subverting the ideology of respectable subjects. The adoption
of a Sadeian male paradigm challenged not only the traditional
male division of the body and mind but the religious division of
body and spirit. While Sade’s works are outrageous and extreme
they provide the uncomfortable background to understand the
atrocities in thinking and acting against women and men which
formed male sexuality and its relationship to God and the death
of God. Sade provided the platform to break the constraints of
Western Christianity.

However, despite its value in rescuing the male body silenced by
religion, Foucault’s adoption of a Sadeian male paradigm still held
a number of profound tensions. Foucault’s work operated on
models of isolation, distrust and anxiety. It excluded the positive
quality of relationship and failed to appreciate the diversity of
masculinities and sexualities. It also ignored the inter-related
question of women’s sexuality. These tensions demonstrate the
problems of translating Foucault’s universal subject into a gender

84 Ibid., 51.
85 Gallop, Intersections, 3.
86 The division of the body and mind is one of a whole series of characteristics identified
as forming male social experience. See Jean Grimshaw, Feminist philosophers: women’s
specific language. The limits and constraints expose the undeveloped male discourse and the lack of concern for women in such an analysis. While Foucault’s theological model holds the body in theory his work never follows through the implications of such ideas. The spiritual body in Foucault remains ‘a fragment of ambiguous space’.  

These tensions in Foucault are reflected in Jane Gallop’s later work *Thinking through the body* where she argues that male European philosophers have failed, despite some recognition, to allow the body to be ‘a site of knowledge’. Male European philosophers continued, according to Gallop, to contain the body in a rational scheme of male order and control. As Gallop states:

The tension between a desire for neat order and the specific details that seem outside any order enacts one of the central Sadian conflicts: the conflict between rational order, that is, ‘philosophy’ and irrational bodily materiality. Sade’s work seems to be a long, concerted effort to bring Philosophy into the Bedroom, that is, to subsume the body, sexuality, desire, disorder into categories of philosophy, of thought.

Foucault’s Sadeian male paradigm brought theology into the bedroom but it was restricted by the failure to explore the hidden anxieties and uncertainties of the male order it propagated. The body had been introduced into Foucault’s work without any recognition of the oppressive Sadeian basis and the sexed nature of his expressions. While Foucault’s theological model never recognized the fundamental question of gender identity it did indicate how the ‘spiritual’ can be located in the body, how naked bodies inform religious thinking. Foucault opened the space but missed the opportunity to show how male and female bodies could become organs of religious belief — perspiring, excreting and coming with revelations of God’s absence.

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87 Foucault, *The order of things*, 314.
89 Ibid., 47.