

Introduction:

To analyze a work of art, a novel (as though its author were clutching it to his chest on a psychoanalyst's couch, occasionally reading long passages aloud for validation) is a tricky thing. A novel we have read has said every word it ever will; they are all there, on the page. It is our job, the readers' job, to investigate what the novel meant to its author, and what it means, and has meant, to readers. This last-- the potential relevance of a work of art through time-- inspired me to describe the historical, political and literary context of *Les Liaisons Dangereuses*. Thorough investigation of the author's influences and intended audience will yield a great deal more than analysis in isolation: viewing a novel as a self-contained system. Any attempt to treat a book "on its own terms" is a reductive error. It creates false categories and inappropriate modes of interpretation.

Laclos' contemporaries and first readers were vituperative in their criticism of *Les Liaisons Dangereuses*, calling this serious, complex novel a pornographic work and condemning its serious, earnestly well-meaning author to social exile. As late as 1834, the critic Charles Nodier referred to it as a "barracks Satyricon." (Crit. Apprs, 9) The reverence that modern scholars and critics hold for Laclos' work is well-deserved, but such respect does not indicate that we understand it any better than Nodier did: to analyze a novel "objectively" is to treat the book as a physical object, a collection of printed words lacking any context except that which it provides within itself. Critical reliance on (again) "objective" literary standards can create the false impression that, through examination of character, structure and self-contained symbolism, we can achieve full understanding of a literary work. This examination of context is especially necessary when speaking of novels written long ago, and things that were written before anyone even thought about what a novel could and couldn't be. Yet the compulsory use of the present

tense in discussion of a piece's characters, actions and composition can seem to be an almost heartbreaking cry for intimacy. Thomas Slothrop gets excited, Franny Glass has a nervous breakdown, Emma Bovary falls in love. King Lear is naked on the moors, howling madly at the sky; Heathcliff is also probably on the moors, while Satan falls from heaven to hell, and Grendel crawls back to his swamp, where he dies. Cécile comes home from the convent. It is a yearning for our lives to blend with theirs across space and time.

On a practical level, this solves the issue of discussing books written in various tenses or set in the future ("Sophie Wender will be isolated from other children because of her six toes."). However, I suspect that this technical convenience co-exists with a personal enthusiasm for the writer and characters, a fantasy of being with them in some Platonic and ever-present space. And so it is necessary that, as we attempt to understand the our most impenetrable characters and fathom their actions-- to perhaps try to understand Mme de Merteuil's viciousness or Cécile's complete ignorance-- we construct their world around them as best we can. Writers who set their novels in the future have a distinct advantage in this area, as they can anticipate that their readers will be following characters through an unfamiliar space and can explain basic things like how their characters travel, or why everyone is so surprised about this particular robot insurgence, or what people eat when there are no more plants. We get, in short, a "world." But most novelists write and have written for their contemporaries, and don't bother to explain things that they would consider obvious, so that generally sympathetic characters do inexplicable things like falling in love with thirteen-year-old girls or keeping serfs or dueling with pistols, while the readers frown their brows or perhaps lose a degree of empathy over a matter that the author would have considered perfectly obvious and expected. Such are the dangers of pure textual analysis.

The Intentional Fallacy

I am going to very intentionally commit the intentional fallacy, because the New Criticism game is especially problematic when dealing with a novel like *Les Liaisons Dangereuses*. I say this for two reasons.

The first reason that *Les Liaisons Dangereuses* demands the use of intentional "fallacy" is: we cannot accurately describe it in modern literary terms-- rather, we cannot be assured of our own accuracy of judgment, because fiction was a very different medium during the lead-up to the Revolution. Formal restraints and literary tropes were present, but they were not considered an end unto themselves. That is, one did not write fiction for the sake of fiction, but to make a point, or to instruct, or lampoon well-known socialites and aristocrats with barely disguised caricatures, or masquerade as a work of non-fiction (like the slanderous, anonymously penned *Life of Mme du Barry*). It is useless to apply modern literary terms like "tragic hero" to a denizen of such a novel, because an anachronistic appellation denies the character his or her rightful place. This would place the character in a box which the author-- the creator-- never imagined. Their actions can take on false meanings through the misapplication of literary terms.

Secondly, *Les Liaisons Dangereuses* is intentionally stripped of any vestige of the author's voice. It is written in letters and only letters, and none of those letters are from Choderlos de Laclos. There is a brief epilogue from an unnamed source, but (unlike many of the textual interjections with which writers of the time liked to pepper their books) the speaker in the epilogue does not self-identify as the author; in fact, he or she appears to inhabit the world of the

novel, speaking of the characters' fates as though they were real people. Nor does the novel contain any trace of autobiography: Laclos was a strict moralist and a serious political thinker, whereas his characters are childishly self-centered and appear to have no idea that anything exists outside their Paris salons, country houses, and the plush carriages which carry them between the two. Moreover, the state of France at the time would have been difficult to ignore, full as it was of angry, starving workers on the brink of revolution; real fear may account for the characters' utter devotion to the small dramas of their social milieu and complete political apathy. Conversely, Laclos may have wanted to chronicle the libertines' small, upper-class sexual revolution and/or to display libertine society's deliberate amorality as part of a much larger structure of cruelty and oppression. (It is questions like these which demand that attention be paid to the artist's milieu and possible intentions.)

All we receive is Laclos' interpretation of his characters' thought processes. There is little background and almost no physical description, and Laclos expects his readers to know the world which he describes quite intimately. Towards a deeper understanding of the novel's influences and place in its own society, an invaluable understanding for modern readers, I hope to accurately describe the French libertine culture in pre-Revolutionary France, as seen through contemporary novels and plays (such as those of de Sade, Moliere, and Crebillon *films*) and through historical research on these last lustful gasps of the *ancien regime*.

A Brief Summary; A Cast of Characters

Laclos populates his work with stock figures, immediately recognizable to anyone with an enthusiasm for French farce and drama: Mme de Merteuil, the dangerously entrancing older woman; Cécile, the naïve convent-educated girl; Valmont, the young rake; the Comte de Gercourt, the jealous cuckold who effects his own undoing. Speaking through them, Laclos makes the stereotypes human again. Their lighthearted scheming-- think of Molière's swains-- has a dark underbelly of deception, emotional cruelty, and the exploitation of innocence and generosity. By contrast, Laclos inverts his comic figures so that we see all their frailties and doubt and hatred and fear. Instead of displaying the theatrical persona they cultivate for social effect, he exposes the sinister mechanics of such a persona's origination. He is not a plodding moralist, however, but a brilliant satirist who shuffles his letters with care. To best show us the inner workings of this parallel world, this libertine inversion of religion and chivalry, Laclos writes his letters from the scene of a traditional French narrative with a traditional French cast of characters, expressing each personality with remarkable precision.

Like Italian *commedia dell' arte*, libertine literature draws on stock folkloric characters, but it draws on more modern, written sources as well: courtly ballads, early novels and plays, notable historical figures. The literature of personal freedom from God and the social contract, libertine writing is, in the end, a child of the Enlightenment, drawing on everything from social criticism to medicine. *Thérèse Philosophe*, one of those popular writings that combines elements of a racy narrative, social satire, and sexual how-to manual, portrays a young woman who is debilitated-- and nearly expires-- from the build-up of "Fluids" that apparently occurs when a lustful young person is confined in a convent and denied her natural right to sex. In the darker

realm of sexual exploration/ exploitation, De Sade's characters live extremely nasty, brutish and often short lives. Yet the libertine mindset is also informed by centuries of aristocratic tradition, with its constant inversion of social norms and religious customs. The general Libertine picture is of a social circle where no one will abide any sort of social contract, though the salon culture of gossip, hypocrisy and boredom can always be turned to one's advantage-- and indeed, opportunism is one of the most desirable traits in a successful libertine-- and by "successful," I mean a libertine who avoids blackmail and scandal, who doesn't get caught.

The Plot: A Brief Summary

Mme de Merteuil, forever seeking to avenge herself against a never-ending onslaught of perceived attack, thinks up a plot to humiliate the Comte de Gercourt, who has slighted her (how, she never says). Gercourt, she reports, has a "ridiculous prejudice in favor of convent-bred girls" and an "even more ridiculous conviction that blondes are modest and reserved." There is some implied envy or anxiety in her disdain for Gercourt's virginal young fantasy bride, for her primary struggle is to live according to her own desires while dodging social censure (or even turning her own socially unacceptable behavior to her own advantage, once exposing a secret lover almost in flagrante, then claiming that he had sexually assaulted her.) Accordingly, Gercourt's relationship with Mme de Merteuil is fraught, perhaps intimately so. The reader is never directly informed as to whether they are veterans of a mutual affair or not, but the circumstantial evidence is difficult to ignore: what else could inspire such a bitter and sadistic reaction to the news of Gercourt's impending marriage, in their little world of intrigue, but a failed love affair? His plan to marry the blonde, convent-educated daughter (Cécile) of Merteuil's cousin, Mme de Volanges, is understandably irksome.

Mme de Merteuil asks her ex-lover and co-conspirator Valmont to corrupt Cécile, but he is busy chasing the "lovely prude" Mme de Tourvel, a married woman whom he physically and psychologically manipulates (or drags kicking and screaming) into a "love" affair. Meanwhile, Cécile falls in love with her young music-teacher Danceny, but both are too shy and ignorant to take the affair where Merteuil wants it to go-- that is, into bed (and then into the public eye, which will happily oversee the destruction of a sweet-tempered child and rendering of the despised Gercourt into a presumably laughable cuckold).

The innocent and rather ditzzy Cécile, held so tightly within the bounds of convent and home that she has little to no idea of the extent of her captivity, is a sort of *Thérèse Inculte* whose complete ignorance of anything but nuns and schoolgirl crushes does not light the way (as it did for Thérèse of *Thérèse Philosophe*) into a libertine fantasyland of kind prostitutes, secretive aristocrats eager to share their wisdom and best moves, and besotted yet playful dukes with enormous libraries of erotica. Cécile meets a more realistic fate: aristocratic society chews her up and spits her out. Her education has been conducted by nuns (never one's first choice for instruction in sexual or marital matters) and is completely useless in a vicious social climate which craves gossip like a ravenous beast. Like the paranoid Arnolphe in Moliere's *School for Wives*, who thoroughly isolates Agnes, his bride-to-be, in the hopes that ignorance will encourage chaste behavior, the Comte de Gercourt finds that his young fiancée's complete lack of sexual or social knowledge exposes her as passive prey.

Cécile inadvertently displays herself through sheer social naiveté and is beguiled into Valmont's advanced libertinage before she is even allowed to kiss her Danceny, her tutor, with whom she has a brief and unconsummated love affair. Cécile's mother's discovery of her

innocently honest letters to Danceny renders Cécile exposed to censure: her mother, determined to keep her infantilized until she is safely married, takes her key and love letters. This robs her of the small amount of autonomy she had enjoyed and reduces her to a child, albeit a child who can be used to attract a rich man and a large income. It is little more than prostitution; the mother steps into a patriarchal masculine role, as does Merteuil, but where Mme de Volanges wishes to control and use her daughter, Merteuil takes the role of masculine libertine, with a drive to seduce, manipulate, and degrade.

Laclos' powers of observation told him that the confinement and lack of useful education which were the lot of most aristocratic young women were more than comedic fodder or a means to eroticized chastity (as in Perrault's "The Sleeping Beauty in the Woods"). Cécile's childhood imprisonment and lack of useful education renders her completely malleable to anyone skilled in manipulation, and she finds herself abruptly surrounded by expert manipulators. Merteuil wishes to publicly dishonor Cécile by any means possible in order to humiliate her foe (and Cécile's arranged fiancée) Gercourt. Mme de Volanges' behavior is merely aiding the process: when Cécile is deprived of ink, pen, and her mother's (admittedly scant) affection by way of punishment for indulging a love affair, she turns to Danceny with renewed ardor; rather touchingly, she writes (with her characteristic enthusiasm for exclamation points): "These words in pencil may get rubbed out but my feelings never will!" Danceny responds similarly to Mme de Volanges' attempt to stifle his and Cécile's innocent affair, even safeguarding her pencilled words by copying them out, to safeguard them from oblivion. His type of devotion, however, is hardly worth the ink: he eventually decides to shack up with Mme de Merteuil and publicly denounces Cécile for her defilement, as though she were to blame for being raped.

The second half of the novel contains a series of crippling blows to each character. Merteuil and Valmont are eventually felled by the cynical, superficial society that they had previously used towards their own ends (Merteuil for framing her suitor Prévan as a rapist, and Valmont for threatening to expose her affair with Danceny). Valmont, so practiced in the art of gallantry, falls to the ancient, violent system that underlies it. The fundamental problem in the libertines' way of life, we are shown, is their reliance on the codes of a society that would gladly eat them alive at the slightest sign of weakness. It's a reliance based on the individual's need for large-scale threats to back up his desires. A king has an army; a libertine has polite society. The problem is that libertines who use social exposure as a threat, like double-crossing spies, create the potential for their own destruction in both camps. (Of course, a king with an army-- even a king with a populace-- has created the potential for his own destruction as well; just ask Louis XVI.)

The French aristocrats of the pre-revolutionary years were, in general, completely lacking in social conscience (and resumed their ways under the rule of Napoleon). Louis-Sebastien Mercier, in his 1771 novel *L'An deux mille quatre cent quarante* ("The Year 2440"), imagines a peaceful utopian Paris, free of the excesses of the rich. "Have you no more financiers or courtesans or dandies?" asks the time-travelling protagonist. "In the past, these three miserable types insulted the public...Our noble lords... prided themselves on working their horses to death. In those days everyone had to run for his life." (*L'An deux mille quatre cent quarante*, 307) The entitlement of the "miserable types" allows them to act as though they own the city, using "the sidewalks of Paris for an Olympic battleground," running down the pedestrians that made their home there. One of Mercier's characters, the eighteenth-century protagonist's guide through the

future, describes the narrator's style of dress as "constricting and unhealthy," his habit of carrying a sword as "more fitting for a soldier in a town under siege." The narrator rejoices at the simple new hair styles, with "no drooping side wings, which give off such an air of gloom, nor motionless curls, which instead of floating like a mane only create an impression of stiffness devoid of grace."(*L'An deux mille quatre cent quarante*, p. 303) In general, Laclos' characters' personal lives do little to disprove this grim outlook. They are unbearably constricted and completely out of control.

To recap: Valmont, at Merteuil's urging, eventually rapes both Cécile and Mme de Tourvel; Mme de Tourvel, apparently weakened with shame and grief and inner turmoil, falls ill and dies; Cécile is packed off to the convent again, never to return. Valmont dies in a duel with Danceny, fought over Cécile's honor. Merteuil contracts smallpox and flees the country, having lost both social cachet and beauty.

Readers are generally puzzled by the dire nature of this ending; is Laclos as a scolding moralist, making an example of his temptresses and fornicators, or does he revel in their mischief and punish them in an oddly abrupt, almost perfunctory manner to keep the novel respectable? I would argue: neither and both. The confusion of Laclos' obvious pleasure in narrating his most evil and seductive characters set against his eventual castigation of innocent and guilty is not, in the end, a confusion or discordance in any way.

Blackmail and Revenge

It is important, at this point, to note that Laclos does not view sexuality as necessarily evil or dehumanizing (though, of course, some contemporary writers' treatment of sex makes it seem just that-- evil and threatening-- and you must understand why I can't help bringing up Sade again, like a puppy with a slobbery ball: he is unavoidable as the demented extreme of sexual philosophy. Just as Fascist and Communist leaders hold opposite beliefs about the role of humans in society but end up oppressing their citizens in similar ways, Sade set his moral standards so far from Catholicism that they came full circle. *120 Days of Sodom* is as terrifying as any good Catholic description of Hell.) Laclos was an avid reader of philosophy, and doubtless admired the libertines' witty social criticism, coupled with the visceral and commercial power unavoidably obtained by books dealing with the sexual habits of attractive young aristocrats. (Robert Darnton places the imaginatively perverse *Thérèse Philosophe* at the top of his eighteenth-century French "bestseller list.")

The gleeful amorality of Valmont and Merteuil is charming, even seductive, especially in the suffocating milieu of eighteenth-century France. However, when common morality runs opposite to reality and enforces the necessity for a virginal reputation. This restrictive, punitive culture leads to clandestine affairs, which in turn lead to secrecy, lies and the opportunity for blackmail and revenge through public exposure.

It is these last two-- blackmail and revenge-- that Merteuil and Valmont are capable of using to such devastating effect. Indeed, though they are capable of anything amongst themselves, it is their coercion with the social enforcement of the moral code that truly tarnishes their characters. For Laclos, their wrongdoings are not so much carnal as social. Though this argument may seem to compound the critical view that they are persecutors, one of Laclos'

principal arguments in *Les Liaisons Dangereuses* is that they are bound up in a system of fealty and vengeance-- a holdover from days of warfare, patterned into the cultural memory. His libertines are less original than they might like to believe. Valmont and Merteuil are similarly compromised because they are against a sexually restrictive society, yet they use that same society to injure their lovers and avoid attachment. That is why society-- the culturally codified duel, the court of law, the demand for beauty-- finally "gets" them. If common French morality was troubling, the reactionary qualities of libertinage could be even more so.

The Place Of A Pornographic/ Philosophic Book

A libertine novel offers sharp and much-needed social criticism and satire in the form of an erotically charged narrative that is structured to draw in the reader, sometimes against his will, even to the point of sexually stimulating its reader; it can be philosophical, pornographic, or both at once. Darnton, citing *L'escole des filles*, says: "The early novel celebrated love, both refined... and crude... Works that in retrospect seem central to the history of pornography also belonged to the rise of the novel as a genre..." (*The Forbidden Best-Sellers of Pre-Revolutionary France*, 86)

To the modern reader, it seems counterintuitive to put philosophic and pornographic tracts in the same category. Enlightenment-era French readers and publishers, however, did just that. We often think of philosophy as stuffy or academic, but useful to personal development, a sort of medicine in print. Our concept of pornography assigns it completely opposing values and qualities. It is trashy and exciting, but useless, offering no intelligent analysis and ultimately rendering itself a waste of time. A modern pornographic work could be defined as a direct portrayal of a sexually exciting act or situation; it is internally devoid of the criticism that defines

philosophy, and created solely to provoke a physical response in its watcher or reader.

Things were different in 1782, when Laclos published *Les Liaisons Dangereuses*. Darnton writes of the eighteenth-century reader, who 'did not... distinguish a genre of "pure" pornography from erotic fiction, anti-clerical tracts, and other varieties of "philosophical books.'" Pornography may or may not have changed since the Enlightenment. However, given the ambivalent nature of pornography in any society, it is more useful to consider the place and function of written sexual material. If we think of books and pamphlets in terms of their potential threat to the established order, it suddenly makes perfect sense that eighteenth-century treatment of philosophy and pornography resulted in their mutual conflation. We make a false distinction when we try to identify *Les Liaisons Dangereuses* as either a sexy book or a serious social-critique book. It is a perfect synthesis of presently opposing themes, yet not a synthesis: these themes had not, at the time he was writing, been separated and set against one another, Athena battling Aphrodite. *Les Liaisons Dangereuses* was not written as pornography, philosophy, or a synthesis of the two. It was, rather, a novel written to express the social conditions of his age.

Maternal Love

If there is a literary key to Laclos' intentions for his novel, they lie in his writings on the education of women. He is deeply critical of the way French aristocrats raised their children; he suggests their distance and lack of affection is unnatural, saying, "We ask, now, despite the ostentatious display of obstetricians, guards, nurses, governesses, which of the two is abandoned at birth, the son of a prince or [a] primitive child?" (*On the Education of Women*, p. 134) He continues in this vein: "Whoever wishes to know how delightful and strong is the feeling of maternal love should not enter the palaces of the great, where procreation is prompted by interest

and vanity alone..." (*On the Education of Women*, p. 133) Certainly, Mme de Volanges treats her daughter like chattel. In one scene, she unlocks a "very pretty secretaire" (Cécile happily reports in her first letter to her friend Sophie that "They've given me the key and I can lock away anything I like") to discover her daughter's love letters as Cécile stands by weeping. (Letter 1, p. 9) Her mother's actions-- forcing the key into the lock, opening the drawer that holds Cécile's ill-kept secrets and completely ignoring her victim's distress-- carry an unpleasant symbolism. "My only worry had been that Madame de Volanges might have seized the opportunity to gain her daughter's confidence by treating her in a gentle and friendly way... fortunately she'd taken a firm line, in fact she'd behaved so badly that I could only applaud her," Mme de Merteuil crows to Valmont. (Letter 63, *Les Liaisons Dangereuses*, p. 119) She has essentially used Mme de Volanges' prudery against her, to edge Cécile a little further away from her morals, a little closer to complete exposure and vulnerability.

Is *Les Liaisons Dangereuses* a libertine novel?

Yes and no.

Les Liaisons Dangereuses is not a libertine novel in the sense that Sade's works are libertine novels: Laclos offers social criticism rather than titillation and erotic instruction. The novels of Sade and Crebillon *films* are libertine in character; the Marquis d'Argens' *Thérèse Philosophe* is a libertine tale. These books seek both to instruct their readers in the act of lovemaking, to provide elaborate philosophies that explain why lovemaking is not a bad thing and is to be encouraged.

The instructive aspect of a book of sexual philosophy requires a large amount of explicit language. Explicit writing, in fact, served a number of important functions: it was intended to

explain, to provoke a reaction, and to use the language of science and philosophy to describe sexuality. Marcel Hénaff suggests that, for the Marquis de Sade, words even took the place of direct physicality. "For Sade," he writes, "the only sexual pleasure is the sexual pleasure of the head-- that is, of representation." Of libertinism in general, he writes that when "submitted to the law of language," it "penetrates the realm of reason, takes it over, and co-opts its structures and methods (such as order, classification, and systemization)" and overturns the old Christian dualism of mind and body. "Sade unceremoniously disposes of this age-old contradiction," he writes; "philosophy is taught in the bedroom, and exposition takes place in the midst of an orgy." (*Sade*, P. 68-69) There is an implied mischief in Sade's juxtaposition of the two styles: he famously interrupts *Philosophy in the Boudoir* to issue a long political exhortation from the mouth of the Chevalier: "Frenchmen, Some More Effort If You Wish To Become Republicans." Sade implicitly endorses his own style of philosophizing in the young Eugénie's response: "Ah, believe me, Chevalier, if you want to convince a woman, you should appeal more to the passions than to the virtues." Perhaps the Chevalier himself sums it up well: "We are here for a different goal, I know... That's fine with me." (*Philosophy in the Boudoir*, p. 152)

This breed of libertine writing, in which sexual acts are the setting for social, religious, political, and even medical discourse, is not Laclos' territory. He has little interest in using explicit sexual language to tickle his readers' fancy or to redefine the sexual act in his readers' minds. His interest lies in the context of the sexual act: how the characters feel about it, how it will affect their social position, its emotional and interpersonal lead-up and aftermath.

Laclos' novel is not the work of an established author of the libertine-philosopher type (remember Sade, constantly shuttled between prison and various brothels where he enforced his sexual demands-- to the general unhappiness of his victims-- and rather romantically churning

out *Dialogue between a Priest and a Dying Man*, *The 120 Days of Sodom*, *The Misfortunes of Virtue*, *Aline and Valcour*, thirty-five plays, and a number of short stories while incarcerated for perversion and dementia.) Choderlos de Laclos was a more somber figure: it appears that the only scandal-worthy thing he ever did was publishing *Les Liaisons Dangereuses*, to widespread, possibly feigned shock at the contents. Nor was Laclos a very sociable or charming man. Most biographers report a certain disappointment with their subject, calling him "tightly buttoned," "'cold,' 'taciturn,' and 'methodical,'" "a methodical man of fastidious, even ponderous inclinations," and noting that "certainly there is no trace of a proto-Valmont at work."

(Introduction, *Les Liaisons Dangereuses*)

The Literary Libertine: A Precedent

As a guide to the libertine precedent, we can do little better than the popular novelist Crébillon *fils*, author of *The Wayward Head and Heart*, *The Sofa*, and a raft of other novels. Crébillon *fils* had very exacting ideas about literature by the time he wrote "The Wayward Head and Heart" in 1738, but these ideas are subtly expressed and somewhat difficult to parse. In his preface-- which he refuses to call a preface because, in his opinion, "[p]refaces, for the most part, seem to have been written only to impress the reader," and he "scorn[s] this practice too much to adopt it"-- he lays out his opinions on novels. "A writer can have but two goals--" he writes, "utility and entertainment." He opines that each of these goals lacks the virtues of the other: "He who instructs either considers it beneath him to entertain or lacks the skill; and he who entertains does not have sufficient power to instruct;" says Crébillon *fils*, leaving his readers wondering where he considers himself, utility/entertainment-wise. Neither, it would seem: the "inevitable result" of this dichotomy, he says, is "that one is always tedious, the other

frivolous." (*The Libertine Reader*, p. 767-768) He then proposes a synthesis of the two, wherein the virtues of each form-- stylistic elegance and earnest morality-- would be harmoniously intertwined. Whether he believed this to be possible, or was simply putting one on, is up for debate.

Perhaps I am one of those "many readers" he describes "who remain untouched by simple things," who "would never approve of stripping the novel of the the childish extravagances they believe to be the secret of its charm," but I side with the readers who don't believe him one bit. The whole thing seems like a well-engineered piece of mischief. Crébillon *films* commences his preface by saying that he refuses to write a preface, because they were just an excuse for authors to show off; he then immediately launches into a lofty discussion of The Novel that is designed to be contradictory with everything we know about him. He condemns the author who writes of "adventures in the seraglio, where the Sultana is snatched up from vigilant eunuchs through some amazing feat of skill," thereby "sinning against propriety and reason." Crébillon *films* has much more serious intentions: he has, it appears, decided to write a psychological modernist novel a century early, explaining that he finds "nothing that either should or can prevent an author from deriving his characters and portraits from the mold of Nature," and creating a protagonist who is "full of false ideas and riddled with follies," who is eventually "restored to himself, owing all his virtues to a good woman." However, unless he left *The Wayward Head And Heart* unfinished upon publication, there was never any intention of restoring the narrator to himself-- if there was any self to begin with. Cusset explains this using Foucault's reading of the novel as a "theory of conceit," and raises an interesting point about the ending's relationship with the preface; it "replaces such a moral concept of the self with a libertine concept of the nonself, of the divided, playful, and ambiguous self." (*The Wayward Head and Heart*, p. 763)

The protagonist of *The Wayward Head and Heart*, Meilcour, is the amatory everyman, going through the standard processes of education and intrigue, jealousy and rivalry with the arch-libertine Versac. The good woman, Hortense, makes an appearance, but the novel ends before she gets a chance to save Meilcour. In her introduction, Catherine Cusset astutely points out the final sentence as a possible key to Crébillon *fils'* intentions: "Thanks to the proprieties that Mme de Lursay observed so strictly, she dismissed me at last, and I left her, promising, in spite of my remorse, to see her early the next day, firmly resolved, moreover, to keep my word." Cusset argues that the sentence is self-contradictory, that it "mocks the moral value of faith by associating it with the pleasure of the moment, that is to say, with the very proof of infidelity." That is to say, Meilcour exits the novel a fully indoctrinated libertine, romantic intrigue his new religion. He is "firmly resolved" to see Mme de Lursay again, though he perhaps has what Cusset terms "genuine love for Hortense". (*The Wayward Head and Heart*, p. 755)

Meilcour is fully committed to the actions of love or desire-- the secrecy and infidelity-- without experiencing emotion as a powerful or guiding force. He faithfully adheres to the dogma of falsity because, for him, it is a social duty. His cheating also keeps him in control of his affairs with women-- he will be the heartbreaker and not the heartbroken. Meilcour is "firmly resolved" to see Mme de Lursay, not "desperate" to see her again, or even "eager." It is as though the affair exhausted him and he were conducting it on someone else's behalf.

Crébillon *fils* drove the last nail into his preface's coffin four years later, with his exotic novel "The Sofa." Jean Sgard calls it "libertine in nature, in every sense of the word." (LR 170) His hero is temporarily trapped in a series of couches as divine punishment, and must observe mutely as characters of every age and social station fornicate on top of him. (This, in general, is

the position of the libertine author and student.) The reader follows him into the inner sanctums of characters' lives, joins him in watching from the view of a mute and immobile sofa. The sofa is not what it seems-- it watches and takes note, rather than filling its duty as passive instrument of pleasure. Sgard explains its position as a useful one, allowing the author "to expose the ruses of false virtue, worldly hypocrisy, and religious scruples..." (*The Sofa*, 170)

Laclos' Use of the Epistolary Form

The epistolary novel is at once hermetically sealed and deeply violated; it is a form that will always place the reader far outside the course of events, while at the same time intruding upon secret after secret, confessed by the very characters who wish to preserve their secrecy. I say "hermetically sealed" because there is no textual evidence of a single author, but the book presents itself as a packet of stolen letters-- in the sheet form in which most books came, unbound yet with the author's distinctive handwriting smoothed over by the anonymous letterpress, they would be indistinguishable from the real thing. Therefore we have a packet of letters that straddle the line between fact and fiction: a bundle of love letters and a complex novel all bound up together and sold to a scandal-hungry public. As Françoise Meltzer notes in her essay *Laclos' Purloined Letters*,

"Reflexivity, or that characteristic of a work which points the finger back at itself by consciously alluding to the tools of its medium, is apparent in the epistolary genre in its direct allusions to ink, paper, pens, writing desks or the lack thereof, waiting for the mail, asking for new addresses, and so forth." (*Laclos' Purloined Letters*, p. 516)

One of the "tools" which Meltzer forgets to mention is that of genesis. That is, why do these letters exist in the first place? Why are the characters separated, and therefore forced to

communicate via writing? The strict epistolary form, consisting only of letters, enforces a constant set of separations between close friends, lovers, and family members; these generally are the people who would bother to write to one another. Though the period did produce great public letter-writers like Voltaire, most correspondence was limited to family and friends. Therefore, the form in which Laclos decided to write his novel reflexively informed a number of plot and character points.

As mentioned, there must be sets of characters that are close enough to write to one another, and preferably close enough that the characters can attempt intimacy and the trust of their correspondent. We see the importance of trust and comfort demonstrated early on: the first letter of the novel is written by Cécile, a charmingly naïve fifteen-year-old, to her close friend at the convent she has just left. There are eleven letters from Cécile to Sophie Carnay, all of them in parts I and II, diminishing in frequency and eventually discontinued as Cécile is drawn into a social milieu which she cannot expect her friend to understand.

Some Epistolary Devices

The physical ambiguity of the novel made of letters lends it a unique fascination, for within the letters one finds a cohort of questionable characters baring their souls and other things to one another, blithely unaware that they are being watched. Even the "watchers" of the novel (Mme de Rosemonde and co.-- those who create the scene for a scandal and then crow triumphantly over their friends' downfall) are caught in the act, shown to be less temperate and kind than they might wish an onlooker to believe.

Françoise Meltzer, again, examines the relationship between letters and novels, and the

delicate balance required of an epistolary author. She writes:

"The role of the reader is central to the epistolary genre because the letters anticipate a reader within the novel's framework. There is the letter's intended recipient (*destinataire*), the occasional interceptor, the invented publisher and/or editor who organize(s) the collected correspondence, and the extra-fictional reader who reads the collection in its entirety, including the disclaiming or condemning prefaces which precede it." (*Laclos' Purloined Letters*, 517)

This "extra-fictional reader" is an especially intriguing creature. The intended reader of an epistolary novel could exist in two worlds: the world of or within the novel, where a secret correspondence has been unearthed from the wreckage of a scandal (*Les Liaisons Dangereuses*) or-- as Hawthorne claims as his source for *The Scarlet Letter*-- found in a customhouse attic, wrapped in an ancient badge of shame, embroidered with an enigmatic "A." This lengthy and apparently pointless tale, used as introduction to the non-epistolary *Scarlet Letter*, serves to inform the reader of his author's temporal and emotional remove from his subjects, and, accordingly, his (the authorial persona's) decision to tell the story in his own words, rather than publishing the documents (which, with no disrespect meant to Hawthorne, might have resulted in a far more captivating *Scarlet Letter*). It is thought to be difficult, if not impossible, to write a fully expressive novel solely in letters; Sir Walter Scott proclaims in *Redgauntlet* that "a genuine correspondence ... can seldom be found to contain all in which it is necessary to instruct the reader for his full comprehension of the story." (*Laclos' Purloined Letters*, p. 515)

Meltzer's list of plot devices which the epistolary novel employs to explain its own publication-- the interceptor, the editor, the "extra-fictional reader"-- all contribute to an unsettling whiff of postmodernism. However, while the postmodernists use frame narratives as commentaries on the nature of the framer (or the storyteller, or the author), Laclos was using his form to comment upon his readers' moral bankruptcy. Hawthorne is using the morality play at

the heart of his fictional documents as an allusion to the social conditions of his own time. With Laclos there is no such remove. At a time in which notably salacious novels were expected to contain barely-disguised caricatures of notable aristocratic miscreants, he chose to write in a form and genre which might imply a full-on attack of his contemporaries. And though the story in *Les Liaisons Dangereuses* was not, like *Thérèse Philosophe*, taken from the headlines or salon gossip of his own Paris, Laclos is speaking directly to his audience. He holds up the mirror to his readers, and most directly in criticism of his own social milieu. However, any reader of his novel will feel a guilty pleasure or uncomfortable complicity in our one-sided, yet intimate, relationships with the letter-writers and receivers.

How The Characters Use Letters

Laclos' characters view letter-writing as simply another way to establish social dominance through manipulation and threats. If women were indeed the "arbiters of good taste and of what was socially acceptable" (*Schooling Sex*, p. 12), then men were forced to "survive" under the auspices of women, often by subjugating other women. Consider Valmont's relationship with Merteuil and Mme de Tourvel: he undertakes his seduction as much to please Merteuil, and the high society she represents and arbitrates, as for any pleasure of his own. The seduction of a "lovely prude", as Merteuil calls her, would be the eighteenth century equivalent to the conquest of a rich and well-fortified city, replacing military values with amorous ones but neglecting to change the rules of combat. The methods, however, require more subtlety than the average soldier possesses. Crébillon *filis'* creature Versac, one of Merteuil's precedents, reflects: "Virtues, beauty, talents are all things purely arbitrary, and one cannot succeed except by twisting oneself ceaselessly into conformity." (*The Wayward Head and Heart*, p. 820)

Diderot's advice on acting sums up the libertine's methods towards these quicksilver changes of character, this "twisting oneself ceaselessly into conformity". In *Paradoxe sur le comédien*, Diderot commands the actor "to be passionate without feeling, to weep without being moved, to plague without being jealous: those are all the rôles that you have to play, that is the sort of man you have to be." (*Paradoxe sur le comédien*, p. 29)

Indeed, acting is crucial to the libertine's mode of existence, yet there is not a pure actor-audience relationship. Diderot's stage actor might feign emotions to convey the playwright's words and intentions more forcefully, and to inspire emotion in his audience, as well as admiration at how skilled he is at weeping "without being moved." The stage/audience relationship implicitly requires that the actor admit he is not truly feeling the projected emotions. The French libertines also desired to stir emotion and admiration in their audience: emotion in their victims, admiration in their peers. Only their fellow actors could know that they were acting.

To continue a comparison with theater, we might say that the epistolary novel follows many of the same means of character portrayal found in scripted drama. Laclos uses the form to demonstrate this concept of one person becoming many in order to satisfy a varied audience. The letters of his confirmed libertines, Merteuil and Valmont, are formulated to produce a specific reaction. As Free puts it, "in the letters of non-libertines, the writer is sincere and reveals his true nature... Valmont and Merteuil practice a counter-philosophy-- letters are not to be written to express one's real ideas or feelings; they are written to act as a catalyst upon the recipient's perception of reality and his emotive responses... to produce a preconceived effect on [the] reader." (*Laclos*, P. 22) The author is absent, allowing his characters to speak directly to one

another without narrative intercession. The plot rides purely on human interaction, and, with the loss of an intertextually omnipotent/ omnipresent/ objective narrator, all characters are reduced to their spoken or written words. We lose true interior knowledge of a character, but we are treated to a show of mutability that demonstrates how many characters one person can play. The Valmont who writes to Mme de Merteuil is not the same Valmont who writes to Mme de Tourvel.

The emotions that these artful letter-writers sought to stir in their audience were not the channeled forces of another's love or despair, but rather true and genuine reactions to false emotion, which reactions would benefit the libertine in question, such as pity, misplaced moral admiration, and sexual attraction or "surrender." Valmont's attempts at the psychological manipulation or torture of Mme de Tourvel lead him to write things like "And I, who perhaps was more ready than others to love and follow the paths of righteousness even though I had been led astray by certain youthful errors, have been brought back to them by you... Will you brand this new-found love of mine as a crime? Will you condemn your own handiwork?" (Letter 83, P. 172) Valmont is suggesting to Mme Tourvel that she leads him to sin-- not through any conscious action, but merely by existing and provoking his "love." This appears to be a tendency of thought that was common to eighteenth-century males.

Valmont lies so effortlessly that it appears thoughtless, even instinctive. He thinks up a rôle-- in this case, the reformed libertine, a man at odds with himself, and doubtless a very comical figure to Valmont-- then surrenders himself to play the part of the buffoon with an apparent lack of self-consciousness. He will lie to Madame de Tourvel, and he will rape her, all in character. The ends-- sexual conquest, the humiliation of Mme de Tourvel-- justify the means. The ends, in fact, are so attractive that, for Valmont, creating and acting out characteristics

which he would despise in another is perfectly natural. The "penitent" model fits the situation best; therefore, with an admirable lack of regard for facts, Valmont makes himself a Machiavelli of the bedroom.

The old problem of the libertine then arises: these political maneuvers, formulated for kings, are now in more-or-less common circulation; in peacetime, for an idle French dandy, they are useful for interpersonal conflicts (not international ones). But Machiavelli's monarch lies and manipulates others, at least nominally, for their own good. He wants to defend his subjects, control them, pacify them, secure new lands to safeguard their loyalty and prosperity. The libertine who uses the same tactics-- violence, manipulation, repression-- has only himself in mind.

In *Il Principe*, Machiavelli frames the choice (the choice to sin and conquer, rather than repent and be defeated) as a self-sacrificing act. A king acts for his nation, taking on the burden of sin himself to protect others; perhaps he is forced to act contrary to his own religious beliefs, to become a symbol of violence to protect some greater peace: a scapegoat of sorts. According to contemporary European morality, Valmont is splitting himself in two. He is both sacrifice and object of sacrifice, along the Cartesian line of demarcation: his mind must be forced through the contortions of playacting, pretense, and fervent avoidance of truth or consistency, all to provide his body with pleasure.

Where does all this leave the reader? Are we voyeurs, implicated in some sort of fictional scandal? Are we also the victims of some unknown sleight of hand? How are we to know these people do not exist? (This is especially pertinent to the modern reader, to whom the only thing

standing between a real Valmont and a fictional Valmont is a headstone.) We know more about him, and Merteuil and Cecile and Mme de Tourvel, than we know about most of their real-world contemporaries. We certainly know more of their thoughts and wants than we can ever know of Laclos'. The beauty then becoming this: they are both individuals and avatars of Laclos and his experience of libertine culture and literature. And though Lacan, in his essay *The Instance of the Letter in the Unconscious, or Reason Since Freud*, would have it that "The letter was able to produce its effects within the story: on the actors in the tale, including the narrator, as well as outside the story: on us, the readers, and also on its author, without anyone's ever bothering to worry about what it meant," we will worry a good deal about what it means; that is our job, I to write you a letter about what the letters mean, and you to intercept it.

The Characters

If Laclos was such a buttoned-up creature, where do his characters, so quick to unbutton things, come from? One could give two simple answers: they come from aristocratic French society-- they are its inevitable creatures-- and they are from other books, French popular lore, philosophic-pornographic tracts (pornosophic tracts? philographic tracts?) that describe a secret society of libertines, some fresh from the walls of an amoral convent, all belonging to a class that had reached a rare height of over-privileged decadence. Merteuil and Valmont are not Laclos' creation alone. They are-- like the people they would have rubbed shoulders with in Paris salons-- creatures of their own society. Laclos' task was not to invent them, but to describe them as they appeared in art and in life. It is not fair to remark upon their unoriginality, as Lloyd R. Free does when comparing "Versac, the master libertine, in Crébillon fils' *Les Engarements du couer et de l'esprit*." "The parallels," he writes, "are so obvious as to nullify Merteuil's claims to originality." (*Laclos*, p. 27) Yes, Laclos' characters are literary types that have been explored by other

authors, before and after the publication of *Les Liaisons Dangereuses*. He was not the first or the last to describe the social and moral aspects of the creatures known as Cécile and Danceny, Mme de Volanges and Mme de Merteuil, M. de Valmont and Mme de Tourvel; these were specific names for general archetypes, mutable to almost any form and function desired by the author. Laclos never laid any claims to his characters' originality; in fact, they are strengthened by the literary tradition from which they came.

The characters are derived from the medieval traditions of militarized France, their customs the bizarre creations of a country suddenly plunged into a period of stultifying peace. The male aristocrats who lived during the reigns of Louis XV and Louis XVI were bred for war and then left to languish in high society, which was traditionally the purview of their mothers, sisters, lovers and wives. It was a society that delighted in aesthetics, wit, hypocrisy, and vicious gossip. For these young men-- suddenly released into the salon culture and obliged to navigate between their family and their affairs-- the need for secrecy competed with the desire for conquest, a chance to prove their masculinity. Laclos' character Valmont, an arch-libertine, is by turns predatory towards young women and fawning towards rich mothers and aunts. Valmont's maneuvers, and those of his equally liberated friend Mme de Merteuil, are necessarily accomplished through sheer falsity. They must fashion various identities for the broad range of people watching them: close relatives, spouses, friends, potential and current lovers, etc. The first two categories, relatives and spouses, must be kept ignorant of all love affairs. Ideally, only the lovers (and a few trusted servants) could know.

A reputation for virginal behavior and passivity was an even more strictly imperative façade for women to maintain; they belonged to a culture that widely relied on outdated, rigidly enforced gender and status signifiers. It was also a cartoonish, absurd culture of repression which

cried out for critics. The *grandes dames* of libertine literature have wonderfully scathing things to say about their chaste counterparts; de Sade's Madame de Saint-Ange, of *Philosophy in the Boudoir*, might as well speak to Cécile as to her young plaything Eugénie when she says

"If there is any mother in the world who deserves to be despised, it is assuredly *your* mother! Ill-tempered, superstitious, sanctimonious, grumbling... and revoltingly prudish! I would bet that this straitlaced creature has never made a faux pas in all her life... Ah! My darling! How I hate virtuous women!" (*Philosophy in the Boudoir*, p. 21)

Merteuil and Valmont

Merteuil and Valmont, though they might appear to be stock figures plucked from any libertine novel, are significant characters and a complex, sophisticated elaboration on a theme. With the use of letters, Laclos can demonstrate the pains and weaknesses of his libertines, as well as their maneuvers and lies. The portraits that emerge are ambiguous: people who can play the system to satisfy their sophisticated desires, to elide scandal and controversy while having forbidden affairs. They can play the system, that is, up to a point, whereat they become the victims rather than the arbiters. So they cling to their hysterically disapproving, malicious social system: they are in thrall to it, and there is no middle ground between scandalized and scandalous.

Their code of ethics is based around personal force and power; one's power and bravery are marshaled to protect and fight, not for King or Church, but for the Self. In the social world of *Les Liaisons Dangereuses*, any attempt at independent morality, any attempt to preserve the secret society running counter to the very public culture of its constituents, is subject to the same expectations that rule the public culture. Amongst themselves, the libertines enforce fealty and loyalty with blackmail or the implied threat thereof, and take full advantage of those weaker than they. It is the same set of expectations that ruled European politics and warfare for millennia.

With the absence of an outside threat, the pattern of brutal force (and of the mutually assured destruction of equally powerful foes) was applied to the bedroom. In her first letter to Valmont, Mme de Merteuil demonstrates full awareness of the militancy of sexual culture. She says:

"I've dreamed up a really wonderful scheme and I'm ready and willing to let you put it into practice... These few words should be quite enough for you to feel so honored that my choice has fallen on you that you'll rush to fall at my feet, panting to receive my instructions; but you're still taking advantage of my kindness of heart even now you've stopped taking advantage of my kindness in other directions, leaving me with no alternatives but implacable hatred or sublime forgiveness... you must give me your word, as a perfect gentle knight, not to embark on any other adventures until you have brought this one to successful completion." (Letter 2, P 11)

In this passage, Mme de Merteuil pokes fun at old customs of chivalric or romantic love, calling Valmont her "gentle knight" and casting him as a comically ardent lover "panting to receive... instructions," then abruptly accusing him of losing interest in her (she knows very well what is going on at his aunt's estate). In essence, she simultaneously casts them as partners in crime while threatening him with her "implacable hatred," which will indeed lead to his death. She channels her fury and jealousy into diverting machinations, preferring the role of puppet-master to that of puppet.

Perhaps this gave rise to the current critical opinion that *Les Liaisons Dangereuses*, which occasioned such horror upon its publishing that Laclos went into social exile, is in fact a book of serious morality and solemn warnings. Douglas Parmée, in the introduction to his translation of the novel, examines Laclos' treatment of his hardcore libertine characters, Valmont and Merteuil, and concludes that

"...while Laclos might well have respected their ruthless efficiency and style, he nowhere suggests that they are victims. On the contrary, they are persecutors... Valmont and Merteuil are upper-class bullies who prey on the weak and gullible, spoiled brats who squander their

intellectual gifts on mean acts of petty destruction, beautiful people guilty of the abuse of power and social privilege." (Introduction, p. xxxxi)

I hope to prove this argument wrong—the statement that Merteuil and Valmont are regarded as monsters by their author-- and the one previous to it, when Parmée states that "When their plans clash... one must prevail and the other will not yield... they might be seen as tragic heroes, fatally flawed and doomed by the fate that is character." In this novel-as-moral-tract hypothesis, Valmont and Merteuil are either "persecutors" or "tragic heroes, fatally flawed". This is an analysis which the cognoscenti of the novel-- Laclos, Merteuil and Valmont-- would have hated on its own terms. (I say "cognoscenti" because these three are the only ones who fully understand-- and control-- the mechanics behind the plot of *Les Liaisons Dangereuses*.)

Parmée seeks to portray Merteuil and Valmont as heroes of modern thought, "indulging no flattering beliefs about human nature," with their primary flaw their individual personalities, proud and twisted towards amorality and vengeance. I would argue that, on the contrary, Laclos' treatment of his characters and their respective fates suggests a harsher critique of mainstream society than of libertine philosophy. He sees the values of libertinage subverted by its proximity to strict social censure. Certainly, Laclos does not endorse Valmont and Merteuil's actions, but he does not wholly condemn them as individuals. Their unlikeable characteristics-- pride and vanity-- seem to have been the defining traits of an aristocratic generation condemned to peace and boredom.

Mme de Merteuil

I would like to discuss, somewhat tangentially, an older possible source for the character of Mme de Merteuil. A discussion of witches is almost unavoidable when writing of mature,

powerful, unmarried or self-sufficient women of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries: these women were the main target for those seeking to combat the effects of unrest and misfortune by offering up these assuredly vile scapegoats. The accusations leveled at "witches" on trial were often the direct symptoms of a society ill at ease, a society seeking to cast blame on any available scapegoat. These accusations are the deepest shames and fears of the populace, and someone must be made to pay. If we were speaking psychoanalytically, I might say that witches are the subjects of cultural projection.

An analysis of pre-revolutionary French witch trials might give some insight into the general moral and socio-sexual climate, as well as allowing us to escape, briefly, from our small and well-sealed world of lords and ladies. Religion and its discontents were one of the few things shared by almost every French person, rich or poor, and the Catholic Church exercised power at every level of society. People rallied around the Catholic traditions, as much for public acceptance as religious practice. McManners writes of the Catholic peasantry:

"...[T]hose who did not go to confession... knew they would not qualify for absolution, being tied up in irreconcilable quarrels, having deserted their wives, or being involved in some other notorious public scandal. By contrast, there were cases of estranged married couples getting together again to be able to confess and perform their Easter duty, then separating once more for the rest of the year." (*Church and Society in Eighteenth-Century France*, p. 95)

In a culture of deprivation, widespread fear of death and even extinction was to be expected. The hunt for witches was a crude form of self-protection and re-enforcement of the social order, an action that expressed the violence to which the charivari had alluded for centuries. It was also interpreted, even at the time, as a necessary part of religion: "There was, [Don Calmet] argued, a serious theological consideration against total scepticism: 'to abandon absolutely the belief in apparitions is, surely, to strike at the most sacred beliefs of Christianity, these are: the existence of another life, recompense for good actions and punishment for evil

ones, the utility of prayers for the dead and the efficacy of exorcism'." (*Church and Society in Eighteenth-Century France*, 227-228)

McManners explains 17th and 18th-century outbreaks of superstition and violence thus:

"Intelligent re-enforcement of same: accounts of demonological rituals—the renunciation of baptism, pacts with the Devil, the sabbat and its grotesque obscenities, potent narcotic unguents, and flights through the air—were constructs of educated men, lawyers, theologians, and officials, codifying into a vulgate the incursions of Hell from materials furnished by the magical thought of the peasants and the tales of demonic intervention accumulated through the centuries."

(*Church and Society in Eighteenth-Century France*, p. 230)

One deep taboo that witches were routinely accused of violating was child sacrifice.

During Henri of Navarre's 1590 siege of Paris, when the population was isolated and starving within their walls, "there were said to be experiments in milling bones out of the graveyards for flour, and there was more than one account of cannibalism-- "little children disguised as meat."

(*Seven Ages of Paris*, p. 73) This raises two particularly vexed issues for French Catholics: the proper treatment of children, and the struggle between the desperate utilitarianism of starvation and religious respect for the dead.

French Children

Children were the locus of much cultural anxiety at the time. Their conception was proof of the father's masculinity and the mother's fertility, and others would cast aspersions on a childless couple. For a landowner, a male son was indispensable to the maintenance of the family's fortune, because the Church claimed all lands belonging to heirless men upon their deaths. On the other hand, women routinely died in great agony from childbirth. Even if both the mother and child survived, heartbreak was almost unavoidable: a quarter to a third of the babies born would die before a year had passed. In one study of three Breton villages, 237-285 babies would die per 1000 born; 420-550 children per 1000 would not live past the age of ten. (*Health and the Rise of Civilization*, P. 198) The situation was, therefore, highly imbalanced. Men had

the most to gain from having children-- heirs, support in old age-- whereas women, physically and emotionally, had little to gain and everything to lose. Pregnancy weakened them, childbirth often killed them, every new child meant more hard work and responsibilities, and their children's deaths could not have been anything but traumatic. That is why a strong cultural impetus was necessary to compel women to accept marriage and pregnancy. The good old Marquis de Sade puts it a bit more crudely, though the sentiment is roughly the same: "[O]ur mothers... simply submitted to the act, while our fathers instigated it. Hence, our fathers wanted our births, while our mothers simply acquiesced. What a difference in the emotions!"

(Philosophy in the Boudoir, p. 21)

A childless woman was regarded with opprobrium: perhaps she had sinned against God and was punished with infertility, or perhaps she had committed the unforgivable sins of abortion and infanticide. (She would also have condemned her infant: unbaptized babies were sent straight to Limbo for all of eternity, or at least until 1992.) It is not coincidental that Laclos chose to make Mme de Merteuil widowed and childless. These two basic facts would suggest a lot to a reader for whom most unmarried women lived in convents or brothels, and married or widowed women without children were suspected of using birth control. Birth control could mean anything from sexual acts that would not cause pregnancy (heavily frowned upon), to abortions, to infanticide; by extension, a childless woman was under automatic review for perversion and murder.

I return to the 1590 siege because it marked a new political era and prefigured a century of witch-hunts. Sources described cannibalism among the starving, which creates a dualist's nightmare: the body, threatened with annihilation, requires food to survive, while the only food available is guaranteed to annihilate the soul. During the siege, "[one] mother was found to have

eaten her dead children-- both supposedly interred according to Catholic rites, but a thigh was discovered in an *armoire*." (We know this from the family maid.) Someone found these occurrences interesting enough to record, and (beside the instinctual human reaction of disgust when confronted with cannibalism) it is important to note what details were included in descriptions of cannibalism. Alistair Horne's sources describe people consuming bones taken from graveyards and small children "supposedly interred according to Catholic rites." (*Seven Ages of Paris*, p. 74) The issue, then, is not one of murder (despite the Dahmer-like details), but rather the religious taboo against disturbing graves on sacred ground. This puts some perspective on the following centuries' witch-hunts and accusations. The accused were necessary symbols of the dark heart of Christianity. The hunt for witches was a crude form of self-protection and re-enforcement of the social order. It was also interpreted, even at the time, as a necessary part of religion.

Only a century before Laclos published his novel, there was the "Affaire des Poisons." In his article "Child Sacrifice Among European Witches," M. Murray describes this particular instance at the pinnacle of high society, which began when Marie-Madeleine d'Aubray, the Marquise de Brinvilliers, confessed to murdering her father, brothers and anonymous hospital patients with poison. She also confessed to making an attempt on her husband's life in order to marry her lover.

Though the Marquise was tortured and executed, the poisonings created a panic. Social paranoia concerning the public display of an homicidal upper-class woman reached a pinnacle of absurdity in the trial of the Paris witches (1679-81), "whom Madame de Montespan consulted" in order that "the love of Louis XIV should return to Madame de Montespan, at that time his

discarded mistress ; it seems to be a more or less distorted fertility rite." Apparently "they [the witches] made sacrifices of various kinds, the most important of such sacrifices being that of a child... probably made for some special purpose, for which a new-born child was the appropriate victim." (*Child Sacrifice Among European Witches*)

Merteuil, too, is guilty of child sacrifice. She offers Cécile to Valmont with as little concern for human life as the Paris witches supposedly displayed, and destroys Cécile as thoroughly as though she had un-baptised and bled her to death. Merteuil does not ignore religious scruples or conventional morality; she deliberately overturns them.

The Magical Power Of Love

Valmont, too, acts as though lying and mistreating others is completely without moral consequence. Perhaps he is enough of a nihilist, a sadist, to experience no cognitive dissonance: perhaps he operates independently of moral consequences, or lives to spite them. This is certainly the face he turns towards Mme de Merteuil, to whom he suggests that he takes more pleasure in tormenting women than having intercourse with them. Flaunting his own sadism, he writes of Mme de Tourvel:

"I love watching, contemplating that prudent woman launched unwittingly and inexorably on a steep and slippery slope which is carrying her down despite herself and forcing her to follow me... with death in her heart... by some magical power, she finds herself once more closer than ever to the danger she's been vainly trying to escape." (Letter 96, P. 201)

This "magical power" is love, subject to the same diffracting lens through which a libertine viewed the world. For Michel Delon, there are "four models that constitute libertine culture. In the first, the military model, the libertine is like a conqueror or a general, who assimilates seduction to battles or hunting... " This is called "heroic love," by which we are referring to the "caveman" instinct as it cracks through its sophisticated veneer. It is a power play

in the form of an affair; sexual advances are formulated with veiled aggression. The fact that Valmont starts both of his sexual affairs with an obvious, unquestionable act of rape is testament enough to this. He is well aware and makes no secret of his sadism. He describes watching Cécile, the morning after he rapes her, as amusing:

"I'm passionately fond of seeing how people look the morning after... you can't imagine how this little girl looked! How embarrassed she was! And the trouble she had walking! Never daring to raise her eyes, so terribly swollen, with big blue circles under them! And that little round face had become so long! You can't imagine anything funnier." (Letter 96, 205)

The Convent Girl

Many libertine authors enjoyed writing from a naïf's perspective in order to defamiliarize the world of the boudoir for purposes of social commentary and sexual instruction. The Duc d'Argens, if he did write *Thérèse Philosophe*, was one of these authors; Laclos was another. In the convent girl we have a (usually) virginal young woman who is a stranger, a foreigner to society, and therefore a foil for its ills and a prime candidate for seduction. Oddly, these young women rarely seem to have absorbed any form of Catholic morality from their years with the nuns. Rather, they are sexually naive but not sexually unwilling. The eponymous Thérèse is a creature starved for sexual pleasure, who is removed from her convent because her buildup of "fluids" has caused her to become gravely ill. "The Machine" of the body, we are told, needs sex to release vital fluids.

Thérèse is therefore perfectly suited to her role as a guide through the various aspects of libertinage, hiding in a closet to witness clerical impropriety, befriending (and learning from) a prostitute, and finally marrying a nobleman with a world-class collection of erotica. Poor Cécile is a different case; her sterile education in the convent deprives her of basic life skills, but, in addition to its confining aspect, the convent becomes the only place where she can function.

The Church, which we can assume to inform the popular morality, was unequivocally negative about pre-marital sexuality. Once they were born and raised past infancy, children were to be kept in ignorance of sex for as long as possible. McManners, in his chapter on *The Clergy and Morals*, recounts the story of "a curé of Alsace, who in 1789 put in his village *cahier* a plea for the enclosure of open land, so that it would no longer be necessary to send the young to watch over the flocks and thereby learn how they multiplied." The attitude that ignorance is innocence was almost certainly prevalent within a convent. Cécile's innocence is both comical and heartbreaking, and ultimately crippling. Valmont observes, with typical sadistic glee: "No doubt she hasn't been properly taught in her convent about all the dangers to which a shy, innocent girl is exposed and what parts of her person she has to defend in order not to be overrun in a surprise attack..." (Letter 96, P. 203)

These narratives hold some of the thrill of those tales of Kaspar Hauser and co., raised by wolves or deer and suddenly thrown headlong into a society whose language they barely speak. Whether they thrive or suffer there depends on the author's own views on society. Thérèse's journey from the convent is presented as liberation; Cécile, on the other hand, leaves her physical imprisonment in the convent only that she might enter a tactical marriage to a stranger, twenty years her senior. She receives a series of devastating blows at the hands of salon society: her mother and Mme. de Merteuil use her, pawnlike, to accomplish their own ends, Valmont rapes her, and Danceny abandons her.

As for Mme de Tourvel, Valmont anticipates her capitulation with the lazy pleasure of a cat with a mouse, saying that she will come to worship him for "forcing her to follow" him down:

"Then, having no other guide or support but me, she she abandons any idea of blaming me for her inevitable downfall. And now she offers up to me the fervid prayers and humble entreaties that poor fearful mortals offer up to the Divinity." (Letter 96, P. 201)

Despite all Valmont's braggadocio, we don't need to look far in order to find his source. He is not an original libertine, but rather a sort of groupie. The typical male hero of a libertine work, for all his reckless charm and amorality, is always bound to one woman. She is mother, lover, teacher, and idol. Valmont's principal woman is Merteuil, and she guides his amorality with care, flattery and veiled threats:

"You are the only one of my flames that ever for a second made me lose my self-control. Yet if ever you had wanted to ruin me, how could you possibly have done so?... any honest account would have looked like a badly-constructed novel. True, since that time I have revealed all my secrets to you but you know the concerns we have in common and who is the reckless one of us two." (Letter 81, P. 168)

We are never told what transpired between Merteuil and Valmont, though it is highly improbable that he really did make her lose her self-control, and even more improbable that she ever "revealed all [her] secrets" to anyone. However, it's clear that she holds the cards and that he is "the reckless one." Her flattery is always sparse, and she makes her contempt for him known at every possible juncture. This expression of contempt is always light and playful, and always aimed straight at his ego:

"In point of fact, what have you ever done that I haven't done better? You've seduced and even ruined large numbers of women but what difficulties did you ever encounter in making all your conquests?... What credit can you actually claim for yourself in all that? Good looks? Pure chance. Social graces? How could anybody avoid picking those up if he spends a lot of time in society. Wit? Certainly; but at a pinch fashionable jargon will work just as well. Highly commendable impudence? Yes, but perhaps entirely attributable to your first easy conquests. Unless I'm much mistaken, that's your entire equipment." (Letter 81, 161)

In this series of insults, Merteuil points out a truth that holds for both her and Valmont. They do

not possess their own qualities. I said before that they are the creatures of aristocratic society, but it would be more accurate to say that Merteuil is society's creature and Valmont is Merteuil's creature. When the reader, distraught, asks how this charming *gallant* could be capable of rape, we have this passage as our guide, wherein Merteuil uses her devilish logic and artful turns of phrase to justify an act of violence in the name of love:

"Have you forgotten that, like medicine, love is nothing but the art of giving Nature a helping hand?... She must give herself, say you... But for her ultimately to give herself, the best way is to start off by having her. Such a laughable distinction is really an aberration of love! So tell me, my faint-hearted swain, do you really think that all those women you've had were raped?" (Letter 81, p. 166)

This helpful advice-- *you'll never get her into bed willingly unless you force her first*-- coming from a woman's pen, says less about the nature of love than the nature of the woman in question. Is Merteuil a traitor to her sex, or is there a deeper lawlessness underlying this advice? While I would sincerely like to interpret her savage attitude as pure Sadean anarchy, or endorsement of the sexual triumph of the strongest and most intelligent, there is little to support this argument. Merteuil's views align with Sade's at times, but his exuberant disregard for traditional gender roles (both social and sexual) is completely missing, both in this passage and in her own actions throughout the novel. She doesn't even allow for the possibility that Mme de Tourvel would be capable of fighting Valmont and avoiding rape.

According to the author of *Between Laclos and Sade*, Jin Lu, "there is the libertine of the will, who follows an accelerated rhythm and proceeds as fast as possible to the supreme moment when they can impose their will... [but] here is the libertine of pleasure, who enjoys the process

of seduction, maximizes the duration of pleasure, experiences the progressions of desire with *lenteur*, slowness." Without a doubt, Merteuil is a "libertine of the will," whereas Valmont is a "libertine of pleasure." Valmont enjoys the hunt; he at first declines to ruin Cécile because it would be too easy. To him, Mme de Tourvel is "an opponent worthy of my steel," while Cecile is "a girl who's seen nothing of life... who, to put it bluntly, would be handed to me on a plate..." (*Between Laclos and Sade*, p. 14)

Mme de Merteuil is a different case. She conducts her affairs for power and vengeance, he for pleasure. Sexual acts, for her, are not permissible as a source of pleasure, because the quest for pleasure betrays personal weakness and opens one up to social criticism. Femininity is a pure hindrance for her, for she believes that women are made to be sexually passive and powerless; the male body is designed to invade, and the female body is made to be invaded, like a wealthy city with a large break in its walls. She actively forms Valmont's chauvinism: he takes both her ad hominem attack and scurrilous advice to heart, writing back to her, "Whereas to achieve your goal you artfully deploy the dainty wiles of your sex, I claimed the inalienable prerogative of the male and asserted my authority... I was confident of subduing my prey..." (Letter 96, P. 202)

Merteuil's real desire in this exchange is to convince Valmont of the complete bankruptcy of the idea of love. Love is "like medicine;" the distinction between rape and lovemaking is "laughable". Yes, she concedes that "[i]n this highly unfair contest, if we [women] don't lose, it's our good luck and if you [men] don't win, it's just bad luck for you," but her knowledge that there is no way for women to "win" in the bedroom encourages her to act with more, rather than

less, self-interest. (Letter 81, P. 161) She only brings up the point to demean Valmont, using her gender as self-endorsement and nothing else. Her feelings about women, and about her own status as a second-class citizen, inform her actions more than anything else in the novel. No, she cannot escape her feelings of powerlessness in the sexual act, but she can use that act against her paramours, whom she sees as perpetrators in bed, invariable braggarts and betrayers in society. It's no coincidence that she ruins Prévau by insinuating that he forcibly molested her, calling her servants in the middle of the night to witness his presence in her room. "Up till now the tale you'll have to tell the two Comtesses de P---- and hundreds of others will be rather droll, but I'll be interested to know how you'll be telling the sequel and end of your little adventure," she says right before she goes for the bell-pull and watches her servants, "furious that their virtuous mistress had been subjected to such disrespect," throw him out.

Merteuil constructs a scenario in which she is the sexual victim, and draws attention and commiseration from the "those women who, since they have no possible claim to being attractive, take refuge in integrity and high principles." (Letter 81, p. 167) She both loathes and depends upon the women who run society, and their judgement is powerful. Prévau is ordered to imprison himself, society has a fresh scandal to gossip over, and Mme de Merteuil is paid for this "extraordinary thing" in sympathy and commiseration. (*Les Liaisons Dangereuses*, p. 185) The only thing missing is Merteuil's own pleasure. She and Prévau never even get so far as disrobing; the entire scheme is formulated purely to humiliate him. In this way, she elides even her own sexuality.

Valmont and Merteuil are "experienced" because that they believe love is fleeting and inextricably attached to sexual attraction-- that is, that no one loves selflessly. They manipulate

the people around them to prove this, to bring everyone down to their level. The reason Cecile would be "handed to [Valmont] on a plate" is that she doesn't understand his motives-- sex without attachment-- and the fact that he is willing to lie to achieve it.

Cécile

In a more romantic novel, Cécile might be the immortal virgin of Western adulation. She is so unworldly that she doesn't recognize her own sexual efflorescence. She speculates on the arrival of a boot-maker with fluttery excitement, unaware of her own sexual excitement: "Suppose it's *Him!* I'm not dressed and my hand's shaking and my heart's beating so fast!" (Letter 1, P. 10) But this is not a romantic book; it is a novel written to dispel the romantic ideals that made girls like Cécile so easy to understand and control. That is why she must be sacrificed to the desires of more powerful people, who have the command of the romantic form and all its perversions. Mme de Merteuil, by contrast, knows the power of her own actions and presence over the sexual desires of men. She is the dangerous flirt of decadent French court paintings. We can see her laughing on Fragonard's "The Swing" in a leafy, sun-sparkled grotto, pushed by her oblivious mate, forever lifting a dainty, pointed foot high in the air to allow her admirer a quick peek up her effervescent lace petticoats. The lucky man lurks forever behind a hedge, gazing quietly at the heart of his desire. There is both vulgarity and romance in the character; she is a flirt, but also a lover. She pretends that she doesn't see her watcher, but puts on a show for him nonetheless.

Voyeurism is a key element in the effectiveness of erotic art, both visual and written, and as a young, innocent woman Cecile is presented to the viewer without poise or dignity, with a

sort of emotional nakedness. She's too trusting and sincere, and Merteuil pokes fun at her clumsy letter-writing (said letters being the reader's only method of viewing the character in question). As Free puts it, "in the letters of non-libertines, the writer is sincere and reveals his true nature... Valmont and Merteuil practice a counter-philosophy-- letters are not to be written to express one's real ideas or feelings; they are written to act as a catalyst upon the recipient's perception of reality and his emotive responses... to produce a preconceived effect on [the] reader." (*Laclos*, p. 22) Caroline Weber sees it as a defense mechanism, saying, "...the era's iconic female figures derived their presumed personal "liberation" from an ability to regulate appearances, to hold the pose of modesty, through the strict disciplining of the body... this imperative of sexual self-effacement has as its most troubling effect the transformation of female subjects into "exquisite cadavers," and of their so-called lives into "the oxymoron of a living death." Girls without poise-- that is, without their defenses up-- become default prey. One is reminded of the lecherous Father Dirrag, a character from *Thérèse Philosophe* who seduces his pupil by convincing her to surrender control of her body, then takes advantage of her ignorance: "I have advised you, my dear sister: forget yourself and let yourself go... Can you not imitate those blessed martyrs who were flagellated, tortured, roasted without the least suffering, because their imagination was so totally absorbed in God's glory that there wasn't the tiniest bit left over for other thoughts?" (*Thérèse Philosophe*, p. 256-57)

Cecile's attachment to Mme de Merteuil follows the standard mode, in which an older or more experienced woman teaches her pupil the nature of sexuality, often in a hands-on way. Merteuil is both a mother figure and an object of desire; Cécile is devoted to her and admires her beauty, social graces and intelligence, all of which Merteuil happily displays for her, delighted to

have an audience of one that is attractive and defenseless. Cécile mentions their relationship to Sophie when describing her unhappiness in society: "My only comfort is Mme de Merteuil's friendliness, she's so kind-hearted... At least I can love her as much as I like without it being wrong and I'm very pleased at that. But we've agreed I won't be so fond of her in public..." (Letter 39, P. 77) Merteuil, however, is not the benevolent, dispassionate philosophe of libertine tracts. Cecile finds in Merteuil a friend, lover and mother, but the older woman's generous sharing of wisdom is, in reality, a simple ploy of self-interest. Laclos extends the libertine's sexual self-involvement to an entire world-view of Sadean survivalism and backstabbing. Merteuil states, rather ominously: "I've promised myself to educate her and that's a promise I think I will keep."

In her early letters to Valmont, Merteuil describes her manipulation of Cécile's feelings with both pleasure and disdain. Cécile is, according to Merteuil, "...absolutely scrumptious! vapid and unprincipled: Just imagine what a sweet, easy-going partner she'll make..." That is, she is both pretty and too "vapid" to maintain her scruples in the face of seduction. When Merteuil describes her troubles in encouraging Danceny to ruin Cécile: "[T]he girl assured me that he [Danceny] did want to go further but she was able to defend herself. I bet she's either bragging or trying to find excuses for him..." Merteuil then explains that she "suddenly took it into [her] head to find out in person what sort of defense she [Cécile] was actually capable of putting up" and discovers that it isn't a very thorough defense at all. "With one thing leading to another," she writes, "I got that girl so worked up, and that's by a mere *woman*... take it from me, you can't find anyone easier to arouse..." (Letter 54, P. 105-106) This is typical Merteuil: her distaste for weak men and all "*women*", her relentless drive to demonstrate her own powers of seduction, her

multiple levels of manipulation, telling her tale of seduction to lure her old pro and "substitute phallus" Valmont back in her schemes. "Do you know," she writes, "you've missed more than you think by not taking on that little girl? To tell you the truth, I'm almost jealous of the man who's destined to have that pleasure." (Letter 38, P. 74-75)

Typical, too, are Merteuil's misperceptions of the situation. Because she does not believe in long-term or altruistic love, Danceny's failure to seduce Cécile indicates his weakness rather than his respect and love for her, and Cécile's inability to defend herself against Merteuil's advances (whatever they were) indicates her sexual liveliness, stupidity and suggestibility rather than her trustfulness and attraction to Mme de Merteuil.

Merteuil, despite her apparently impressive track record, simply can't accept the idea of a woman as the active agent of physical seduction, preferring in her own affairs to play dead and then levy whatever social upper hand she has gained by the affair. Like a good chess player, she always thinks two moves ahead; before she allows a man to use her, she's considering how she might use him afterwards. So, for Cécile to become "so worked up... by a mere *woman*" she must be extraordinarily easy to arouse, rather than extraordinarily attracted to Merteuil. Merteuil sees the young girl in her own position-- the subject of sexual advances-- but unaware of the social power she might draw from her own attractiveness. To her, Cécile is not pure-hearted or loving or affectionate, but merely ignorant and weak: practically offering herself up as a victim. There's nothing worse, in their world, than offering oneself in truthfulness and sincerity; truth is the key to one's undoing.

How wonderfully astute of Laclos, then, to write Merteuil in letters. A first- or third-

person narration could have shown only her physical beauty or pleasant mask and subjected the reader to the same lies and manipulations which her friends suffer. But Laclos writes her only in letters, and renders her all the more fascinating for her abyssal depths. He removes her pretty face and shows us the Machine below, which craves not sex, but power and attention. We see her crowing to Valmont about her victory over Prévan, then, a page later, whimpering to Mme de Volanges: "It is always so distressing for any respectable woman who wishes to preserve the modesty of her sex to become the focus of public attention..." (*Les Liaisons Dangereuses*, Letter 87, P. 186) Sadly enough, she is correct; her own downfall comes of her trust in Valmont and the very different sort of public attention given to her letters, which "Monsieur de Valmont produced... representing a regular correspondence which he had been conducting with her in which she recounts, in most abandoned terms, the most scandalous anecdotes concerning herself." Merteuil simply cannot live with the kind of social scrutiny she could previously cast upon others. "Do you know why I never remarried, Vicomte?" she writes. "Certainly not for lack of attractive offers: it was purely so that no one should have the right to criticize my actions." (334) She flees France to avoid public humiliation: she has lost her two best assets, social acceptance and beauty. Laclos does leave us with the rather pleasing image of a one-eyed Merteuil "making for Holland" with her dead husband's diamonds and silver. She fiercely clings to freedom, yet betrays her own defiant words to Valmont:

"But to imagine that I've taken such care only to fail to reap the fruits of my labours; that having raised myself with such arduous efforts above the ordinary run of women, I could ever consent to cringe like them, wavering between cowardice and recklessness, and above all that I could be so scared of any man as to flee for my life, no, Vicomte, never, never!" (Letter 81, p. 169)

The opprobrium of society, however, is far more terrifying than any man. One man would only see one mask; the specter of French society, poring over her letters with voyeuristic glee, sees

her laid bare, and she cannot allow that. For the same reason, the reader never learns of her ultimate fate, though Laclos assures us of a "grim climax" and "ultimate retribution." I believe his afterword (disguised as a publisher's note) exactly as much as I believe Crébillon *fil's* preface to "The Wayward Head and Heart": that is, not at all. Once seen naked, she cannot be seen again. Mme de Merteuil flees the pages of the novel as completely as she flees France, ugly, ruined, but still living on her own terms. Perhaps she finally realized what Cécile saw right away: "Sophie dear," she writes, "society isn't half as fun as we used to think it would be." (Letter 3, P.12)

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