

AMERICAN CONSERVATORY THEATER

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PRESENTS

# WORDS <sup>on</sup> PLAYS

INSIGHT INTO THE PLAY, THE PLAYWRIGHT, AND THE PRODUCTION

## *Les Liaisons Dangereuses*

by choderlos de laclos  
adapted and directed by  
giles havergal  
geary theater  
september 11–october 12, 2003

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# characters, cast and synopsis of

## *LES LIAISONS DANGEREUSES*

The world premiere production of Giles Havergal's adaptation of *Les Liaisons Dangereuses* opened at the Geary Theater in San Francisco on September 17, 2003.

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### characters and cast

<i>Madame</i>	Joan MacIntosh
<i>Marquise de Merteuil</i>	Lise Bruneau
<i>Vicomte de Valmont</i>	Marco Barricelli
<i>Madame de Tourvel</i>	Libby West
<i>Cécile de Volanges</i>	Elizabeth Raetz
<i>Chevalier Danceny</i>	Neil Hopkins
<i>Ensemble</i>	Anthony Fusco, Lauren Grace, Michele Leavy, Scott Nordquist, Patrick Sieler, Taylor Valentine

### synopsis

**A**ct i. *Vox Humana*. Snippets of letters are interrupted by Madame, who arrives with a packet of correspondence “collected in a certain section of society in a very different age.” These letters reveal two important truths: “First, that every woman who admits a man of loose morals into her company will end by being his victim. Secondly, that the friendship which unprincipled people of either sex offer to the young is always a dangerous trap.”

As Madame begins to peruse the letters, the Marquise de Merteuil and the Vicomte de Valmont practice fencing moves. They pause for a stylized game of sweet seduction and violent rejection as Merteuil reveals how she first came out in society and learned the ways of the world. In her studies of the ways of pleasure, following the death of her husband, she learned that she would never be allowed the freedom that men enjoy. Now she vows to Valmont to revenge her sex and master his. The two pledge themselves to libertine pursuits and Valmont admits that he has longed to “measure swords” with her.

Following this prologue, Madame, the sometimes-caustic moralizer and keeper of the correspondence that reveals the story here unfolding, opens the packet of letters and the action begins.

In the opening barrage of letters, Merteuil asks Valmont, her former lover, to return to Paris from the country to join her in an adventure worthy of his talents: seducing the young

Cécile de Volanges. The naïve Cécile is fresh out of the convent and engaged to be married to the Comte de Gercourt. The Comte recently abandoned Merteuil and now she wants to exact her revenge by ruining his virginal bride before their marriage. Already Cécile is interested in her music teacher, the Chevalier Danceny.

Valmont responds that he is in the country visiting his aunt, Madame de Rosemonde, in pursuit of an adventure of his own. He is attempting to seduce the virtuous Madame de Tourvel, whose husband is away on business in Dijon. In a surprising and perhaps reckless moment of candor, Valmont admits “it has become necessary . . . to possess this woman to save [himself] from the ridicule of being in love with her.”

Tourvel writes to her friend Madame de Volanges, Cécile’s mother, to say that she is enchanted by the goodness, kindness, and gentlemanliness of Valmont, who is nothing like his terrible reputation. Meanwhile Merteuil writes to chide Valmont for taking so long to win Tourvel and announces that she has taken the Chevalier de Belleruche as her most recent lover. Valmont is jealous of this new exclusivity and asks her at least to take a second lover.

Madame de Volanges writes to warn Tourvel about trusting Valmont, who has the principles of a libertine: “Never has he taken a step or uttered a word without some dishonorable intention.” Tourvel thanks Volanges for her concern but assures her there is no need. Meanwhile Cécile has made Merteuil, a trusted friend of her mother, her confidante and is beginning to learn the ways of the world. She and Danceny practice singing at the harp and, with Merteuil’s encouragement, begin a secret correspondence. Merteuil confesses that she is infatuated with Cécile and is tempted to undertake the girl’s instruction herself. She also chides Valmont for being so slow with his prude and agrees that as soon as he can supply written proof that he has seduced Tourvel, she will be his again for a night.

Inspired by the new terms of the game, Valmont keeps Merteuil apprized of developments in his “country campaign.” He has discovered that Tourvel has appointed one of her servants to spy on him and so he has arranged for the spy to see him rescuing a destitute family from the tax collector. Knowing that his action will be reported immediately to Tourvel, he waits for his reward. When Tourvel comes to praise him for his goodness, he flatters her by explaining that he was inspired by her good example. He pushes his advantage too far and confesses his love for her. Tourvel flees in tears and refuses to see him again.

Valmont writes an unsigned declaration of love to Tourvel, which he slips into the mail with a contrived Dijon postmark. When the letter arrives, Tourvel is distraught. She tears up the letter and retreats to her rooms. Meanwhile, Merteuil describes Gercourt to Cécile

in terms calculated to inspire despair and begins to convince Cécile that all chance of happiness will end with her inevitable marriage to the ancient (36-year-old) Comte. Utterly disenchanted with the prospect of married life, Cécile grows more infatuated with Danceny.

Tourvel implores Valmont to leave the estate of his aunt, and he consents if she will allow him to write to her. She agrees reluctantly, and he celebrates this tactical victory. Enraged that someone has told Tourvel the sordid details of his past conquests, he asks her to reveal the name of his accuser, but she refuses. Undeterred, he arranges to sneak into her room and discovers that his accuser is none other than Madame de Volanges. He vows to Merteuil to assist in any way possible her plan to ruin Cécile before her wedding. Meanwhile he leaves for Paris. In Paris he visits his old friend Émilie in the green room of the opera, and they spend the night together. Valmont uses Émilie's naked back as a writing desk upon which to write an impassioned letter to Tourvel, which sends her into a rage.

When Valmont and Merteuil meet, Valmont asks for payment in advance, assuring Merteuil that Tourvel is as good as his. Merteuil, of course, refuses. Meanwhile, she is irritated at how doltish Danceny has proven to be. He has been provided every opportunity to seduce Cécile and instead "has confined himself to vowing eternal love and singing an interminable song." She hits upon a plan to place obstacles in the way of the lovers in order to force their ardor. She alerts Madame de Volanges that a "dangerous liaison" has sprung up between her daughter and the Chevalier. Madame de Volanges at once decides to take her daughter out of harm's way to Madame de Rosemonde's estate. Now Valmont can return to his campaign to win Tourvel and assist the affair between Danceny and Cécile at the same time.

After conveying a few letters from Danceny, Valmont convinces Cécile to steal the key to her room from her mother so he can have a copy made. Suddenly aware of how pretty Cécile is, Valmont decides not to wait for Danceny but to undertake the task of educating her himself. He uses the key to enter her bedroom at night for this purpose. The next morning she is hopelessly distraught and writes to Merteuil for advice. Meanwhile, Tourvel begs Valmont to leave, suddenly confessing her love for him. Valmont falters at the crucial moment and fails to press his advantage to final victory by taking advantage of her in this moment of vulnerable weakness.

**A**ct ii. Much to Valmont's shock and surprise, Tourvel has left Madame de Rosemonde's during the night. He confesses he is obsessed with her and vows to have her. At the same time Cécile has locked him out of her room. Merteuil derides this libertine who suddenly finds himself "locked out by a schoolgirl and deserted by a prude."

She promises to help Valmont with the erotic education of Cécile, who proves to be a talented pupil once she is convinced that she need not worry about Danceny. Meanwhile Tourvel, now in Paris, returns Valmont's letters unread.

Merteuil invites Valmont to return to Paris and announces that she has taken a new lover: Danceny. Meanwhile, Valmont has contrived to convince Tourvel's confessor to intervene on his behalf to arrange a meeting with Tourvel. At this meeting he says that he is leaving for exile in the New World since he cannot live without her. The stratagem works and Tourvel declares her love for Valmont. In her happiness, Tourvel confesses her love to Madame de Rosemonde, who tells her that she is "too worthy of love ever to be made happy by it." Meanwhile Merteuil convinces Valmont that he is making a fool of himself and demands that he give up Tourvel. In a scene of chilling cruelty, Valmont convinces Tourvel that he no longer cares for her: "If I am now bored with an adventure which has claimed my attention for four mortal months, it is not my fault." Tourvel is devastated. Merteuil claims victory over Valmont and refuses to give up Danceny. Instead the two declare war on each other.

In the first volley of the war, Valmont convinces Danceny not to go to Merteuil that night but to go instead to Cécile, who is waiting for him. He then calls Merteuil to boast of his victory. She retaliates by raising the stakes: she gives Danceny Valmont's letters in which he boasts of ruining Cécile. Danceny shows the letters to Cécile, who is destroyed by this revelation. He then challenges Valmont to a duel. As Valmont lies dying, he tells Danceny to fetch the lengthy correspondence between him and Merteuil chronicling the events we have just seen. As the victims of this dangerous game parade past the corpse of Valmont, Madame notes the fate of each: Cécile returns to the convent in ruin and disgrace; Tourvel dies of shame and a broken heart; and Merteuil, ostensibly victorious, tears open her face in grief at the sight of the slaughtered Valmont and in despair at the eventual publication of her letters. She is so disfigured that "her soul is now visible on her face." ■



# seduce and conquer

An Introduction to Choderlos de Laclos and *Les Liaisons Dangereuses*

by jessica werner

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“**T**his book, it burns like ice,” Baudelaire famously wrote of *Les Liaisons Dangereuses*, the French epistolary novel by Choderlos de Laclos that has fascinated readers for more than 200 years with its provocative tale of seduction and betrayal played out in the aristocratic parlors and boudoirs of ancien régime France. The novel—told completely through the letters written between the story’s main characters—chronicles the decadent diversions and unscrupulous alliance of exlovers the Marquise de Merteuil and the roué Vicomte de Valmont, who plot the downfall of two unsuspecting virtuous young women.

*Les Liaisons Dangereuses* caused an immediate and lasting sensation from the moment it made its debut in the bookshops of Paris in the spring of 1782. The tale both scandalized and titillated French society, inspiring the private delight and public censure of 18th-century readers. Condemned on the one hand as a diabolical portrait of scheming aristocrats whose erotic free-for-all was a study in licentiousness, the novel also had an insinuating hold on its audience and was, we now know, read by everyone. The book’s first printing sold out in two weeks and was immediately pirated. Several plays soon appeared based on *Les Liaisons’s* characters, and at least 16 separate editions of the novel had been re-issued by the end of the year. Even Marie-Antoinette owned an early edition—bound for her personal library with a discreetly anonymous, untitled cover.

Laclos’s book has throughout its history been read alternatively as a work of courtly, high-brow pornography, a condemnation of moral depravity, and an objective, even instructive, portrait of the complicated nature of sexual relationships. The prevailing appraisal of each successive era has depended in part on the sexual and political climate in which the book is read. A 19th-century Paris court, for example, banned the book (1815–75) “for outrage to public morality,” and the novel occupied a prominent position in the Vatican’s *Index Liborum Prohibitorum* until that reading list was abolished in 1966. France’s criminal justice system eventually went so far as to prosecute *Les Liaisons Dangereuses*, together with such other controversial great works as Flaubert’s *Madame Bovary* and Baudelaire’s poems *Les Fleurs du Mal*. (Baudelaire was one of the few 19th-century writers to approach Laclos’s novel as a work of art and not as a sordid manual of seduction.) It wasn’t until after World War I that Europeans again began to recognize Laclos’s incontestable artistry and powers of observation. Writers as diverse as Arnold Bennett, Virginia Woolf, and Aldous Huxley openly admired Laclos’s essays, verse, and correspondence, as

well as his one and only novel. But it was really in the 1960s that Laclos came to be ranked among the finest of France's novelists. In the last decades of the 20th century, *Les Liaisons Dangereuses* finally achieved "classic" status, regularly taught among the great works of libertine literature and frequently translated to the stage and screen. Literary critic Luc Sante has written of the novel's enduring reputation: "What really keeps *Les Liaisons* potent after two hundred years is not so much its depiction of sex as its catalog of corruptions, including but not limited to the corruption of language by polite cant and the corruption of morals by manners. It implicates a whole society so founded on falsehood that a single act of emotional truth is tantamount to an act of subversion."

### the "perfect" author

Laclos himself said of *Les Liaisons Dangereuses* that he had "resolved to write a book which would be quite outside the ordinary trend, which would make a sensation and echo over the world after I left it." In both aims he succeeded with a vengeance, leaving readers to speculate about how a petty bourgeois career soldier and family man, with no literary background, could craft a work of fiction with such rare and merciless intelligence. "It is the most extraordinary thing, isn't it, that this rather unremarkable man, who had really never written anything before, wrote this one remarkable book which is among the most widely read volumes of European literature," observes adaptor/director Giles Havergal, whose imagination was stirred by the dramatic possibilities of making the letters themselves in *Les Liaisons Dangereuses* the key players they were in Laclos's time.

Playwright Christopher Hampton, whose dramatic adaptation of the novel in 1987 signaled a vigorous reappraisal of Laclos, perhaps best summed up the enigmatic author's singular achievement: "In many respects, Pierre-Ambroise-François Choderlos de Laclos [1741-1803] is the perfect author: he wrote, at around the age of 40, one piece of fiction, which was not merely a masterpiece, but the supreme example of its genre, the epistolary novel; and then he troubled the public no further."

Very little is known about Laclos, and we can only speculate about the internal forces that brought about *Les Liaisons*, his only work of imaginative literature beyond a few apparently forgettable verses and the libretto for an opera that was booed "from beginning to end" at its single performance. A military man from a recently ennobled family, Laclos served during an unusually lengthy period of peace, and his provincial postings over more than 25 years as a career soldier were to take him practically everywhere in France (Strasbourg, Grenoble, Besançon, Valence, l'Île d'Aix)—except the battlefield. He seems to have been a capable and respected soldier, strategist, and inventor (notably, of the first hollow artillery shell), but, under the ancien régime, truly illustrious military careers were

for the most part reserved for noblemen of rank. Unquestionably, his slow progress up through the military (and stymied attempt to volunteer to serve in the American War of Independence) was a source of frustration, and this has led to the theory that Laclos was motivated by thwarted ambition to write *Les Liaisons Dangereuses* to avenge himself on the aristocracy.

When the Revolution came Laclos joined the Jacobins, and entered the service of the renegade royal cousin Philippe-Égalité. He survived two imprisonments during the Terror, and in 1800 was made a general by Napoleon. He died three years later in Italy, of dysentery and malaria. After *Les Liaisons* he wrote a few tracts on military strategy and a treatise on the education of women, published posthumously. He died before he could begin a proposed novel extolling the joys of family life. His last letter was a dignified but urgent appeal to Napoleon, asking for support for his wife and three children. Laclos never profited from his exceptional novel, nor did he concern himself much with its reception after it was published. It made him more notorious than famous, and inspired various great ladies to announce that they would not receive him should he visit.

## Love letters

Laclos might have come out of nowhere, but the same cannot be said of his book. *Les Liaisons* fits squarely within the 18th-century tradition of the epistolary novel that was then very much in vogue in French and English literature. Tales told in letters were immensely popular in an age of correspondence: the two most influential works of the period, Rousseau's *La Nouvelle Héloïse* and Richardson's *Clarissa*, were both written in epistolary form—and *Les Liaisons's* Valmont has more than a little in common with Richardson's rake Lovelace. Laclos himself wrote that "*Clarissa* showed more genius than any other novel and that only the creator of Lovelace knew how to make a heroic figure of a seducer." (Laclos pays literary homage in *Les Liaisons* by having Madame de Tourvel read *Clarissa* to strengthen her resistance to Valmont's advances.)

Readers have observed that many of the epigrammatic citations sprinkled throughout *Les Liaisons* allude to the period's mildly prurient *romans gallants*—a sort of upper-class pulp, which were frequently set in a mythic Orient and were all the rage. Even Voltaire and Diderot augmented their incomes by writing in the genre. At the other extreme, though often sharing writers and readers, were the *romans noirs*, a literature of debauchery and corruption that detailed the lewd activities of prominent society men and women in crudely illustrated pornographic pamphlets. *Les Liaisons*—neither wholly precious nor prurient—is simply better realized than most novels of its day.

One of the epistolary novel's strengths, as well as its liabilities, is that it affords readers a seemingly unmediated glimpse into the minds and hearts of corresponding characters. Scholars praising Laclos's consummate success comment that, whereas Richardson and Rousseau allowed their characters to analyze their feelings in excruciating detail and deliberate social and moral questions, Laclos succeeds in seemingly silencing the author's voice. By removing himself so completely from the world he creates, Laclos denies us the chance of hearing his own voice and consequently any way of knowing, or even of sensing, where his own loyalties lie. Libertine? Moralist? Ironic observer? He insists we be the judge—and therein lies the fun. ■

# a stroke of genius

An Interview with Adaptor/Director Giles Havergal

by jessica werner

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**A**.c.t.'s 2003–04 season opens in September with Giles Havergal's new a.c.t.–commissioned adaptation of Choderlos de Laclos's masterpiece *Les Liaisons Dangereuses*. An internationally renowned director who has brought his own adaptations of numerous works of great literature to the stage, Havergal is best known to San Francisco audiences for a.c.t. productions of his earlier adaptations of Graham Greene's *Travels with My Aunt* (1997) and Edith Wharton's *The House of Mirth* (2000). The premiere production of *Les Liaisons Dangereuses* features a.c.t. core acting company member Marco Barricelli as the libertine Vicomte de Valmont; Bay Area favorite Lise Bruneau (who played the Angel in a.c.t.'s *Angels in America*) as the Machiavellian Marquise de Merteuil; Libby West as Valmont's romantic victim, the piously virtuous young wife the Madame de Tourvel; obie Award–winning actress Joan Macintosh as Madame; and recent a.c.t. Master of Fine Arts Program graduates Elizabeth Raetz and Neil Hopkins as the virginal Cécile de Volanges and her young swain, the Chevalier Danceny.

Laclos's stroke of genius is in creating convincingly authentic voices for both male and female characters as distinct as the devilish Valmont and the piously virtuous Tourvel. Not only a captivating literary device, this is a “fascinating theatrical device, providing us unparalleled insight into his characters,” says Havergal, who spoke with us about his new adaptation as he prepared to begin rehearsals of *Les Liaisons Dangereuses* at a.c.t.

**jessica werner: what do you think is so appealing about this 18th-century novel, that writers and directors and filmmakers keep coming back to it?**

**giles havergal:** *Les Liaisons Dangereuses* is really that curious thing, a story with a highly moral center, but told in an incredibly diverting way. It is a remarkable reversal of the normal moral model; the characters who are the most immoral are the most attractive. Merteuil and Valmont are so wicked and so funny, and their relationship with each other is so perverse, that you can't help but be attracted and repelled at the same time.

Fundamentally, though, I think this story continues to fascinate people because it hits something very profound in all of us. It's impossible not to get drawn into this world, to be mesmerized and fascinated and amused, even against our better judgment, by these monstrous characters—who embody the monstrous goings-on of all human beings, really.

Of course, the story is also very sexy, and it is fun. One thing about these characters is that they make you laugh, even as you think: Oh, I wish she wouldn't do that! They are tremendously witty, and I'm sure that's why people still read the novel.

**you decided to return to the original epistolary structure of the novel, and tell the story onstage through the letters sent between the main characters. did this present particular challenges during the adaptation process?**

Well, all adaptation is amputation. You can't keep everything, but it seemed to me that there were three principal threads in this story that it was important to dramatize: Far and away the most interesting dynamic psychologically is the relationship between Valmont and Merteuil. Their exchange is so imaginative as a piece of writing, and it is one of the very few truly original relationships in literature. They are every bit as passionate as they are destructive. These two are conceivably monsters, and yet the popularity and absolute force of the book down through the centuries is based on these two diabolically intriguing characters. The letters between them comprise more than half of the 178 letters in the book. The second key plot strand is Valmont's seduction of the teenage Cécile and the attempt to corrupt her before her marriage. And the third strand is Valmont's seduction of the "good woman," Madame de Tourvel.

I decided it was important to concentrate on the fact that the book was indeed written as a series of letters, which was very much the fashion of its time. The appeal of the epistolary style is that it affords you several strikingly different viewpoints on the story, to in effect see a multiplicity of characters through each of their own eyes. Usually [in traditional narrative], we see only through the author's eyes, whereas in this case Laclos puts himself into the minds of about ten characters, of which I've chosen to focus on six or seven. His writing is so lively that each character's style is clearly defined. That is not only fascinating as a literary device, but also as a theatrical device, insofar as it provides us unparalleled insight into characters who express themselves through their own words, rather than through social observation alone.

**it's almost as if laclos wrote each character as an actor, didn't he? i think of the real protagonists of the story as actors in their own lives.**

Yes, and Laclos said that about them. The two primary references he makes in his writing are to military endeavors and to the theater. Valmont sees seduction as a military campaign, as does Merteuil; they refer to "worthy enemies" and the "siege" and "surrender" of sexual

conquest. And Merteuil has matured into the woman she is by learning to act—to feign indifference, if necessary, to conceal at all costs her heart's true desire. She says at the beginning [of the play], "I realized that I needed an author's wit and an actor's talent" to survive the incredibly duplicitous life she leads. Of course, we can see that she has been forced to lead a duplicitous life in order to have the freedom that men enjoy regularly in her world.

**merteuil is a surprisingly feminist character for her time, isn't she?**

I think it is astounding that Laclos wrote what we would now describe as a very feminist novel, in which it is acknowledged that women in society are in a very unfair situation and are very easy prey for men. Laclos was interested in the subject of the education of women, and wrote essays that were quite revolutionary, at the time, suggesting that women were being trained only to enter their narrowly accepted position in society, rather than receiving an education that would allow them to blossom and develop freely. Cécile de Volanges, for instance, falls for Valmont in part because, growing up in a convent, she hasn't been educated at all about sex or even about how to interact with men. Laclos seems to be saying that you can't send people out into the world with absolutely no weaponry against the ordinary to and fro of human behavior. The novel is indeed educational from that point of view.

We can only imagine how shocking it must have been in 1782 to create a female character as powerful and vicious as Merteuil. The more predictable and obvious tactic, if you wanted to prove that women were trapped by their social conditioning and victimized by men, would be to make the villain a man. Instead, Merteuil is powerful precisely because she has learned how to behave like a man. The highly refined seduction techniques of the men of her culture meant that the women had to bloody well sharpen up to defend themselves, and Laclos portrayed a woman as equally culpable. Merteuil wants to be sexually promiscuous, and the only way she can do that is by appearing absolutely impassive and incredibly proper. I think that's a fascinating idea, that a woman who wants the privileges of a man can only get them by behaving appallingly. This is one of the very rare situations in which a heroine, if that's what Merteuil is, is absolutely sexually driven, because in most books of the time that certainly didn't happen.

**laclos's novel reminds us how important letter writing was in aristocratic 18th-century culture, something we've certainly lost today. there seems to be an irony inherent in correspondence: writing a letter feels like an intimate form of expression,**

**yet by writing you acknowledge a separation that keeps you from interacting directly, in person. writing is intimate, yet it simultaneously highlights solitude and distance.**

I absolutely agree. There is both real intimacy and formality to writing letters. And we still encounter that today, in our more modern forms of communication. We see this with the telephone, don't we? And also with e-mail, which encourages a feeling of apparent intimacy and immediacy, but in fact has a curious distance and pronounced formality.

**do you agree that laclos meant the story to be moralistic, insofar as it condemns the behavior he describes?**

Yes, I do think *Les Liaisons Dangereuses* is a moral book. It teaches a moral lesson about corruption, really. It is about two people who plan a series of extremely vile seductions and set out to destroy two other people, and who use the most unfair weapon that you can possibly use, which is to pretend to somebody that you're in love with them in order to get into their knickers—while making it clear that such behavior is morally reprehensible. *Les Liaisons* is really in my mind about blasphemy—about betraying the sacrosanct nature of the most central of our emotions. The most privileged and intimate thing we human beings can experience is the moment when another person says to us, or we say to them, “I love you.” And to betray that event with pretense is to mess about with the most precious thing we possess, which is our love for each other. That's what makes [Merteuil and Valmont] so fiendish, that they play with something so tremendously precious, which is our closest possible relationship with other human beings.

People continue to be drawn to this novel partly because it depicts behavior that is disgusting and erotic, and partly because it has a very powerful moral. I think those two things go together. [Scenic Designer] Kate Edmunds has described [*Les Liaisons*] as a “macabre fairy tale for adults.” The book certainly isn't pornographic, yet it is emotionally graphic. It packs a punch, without having to be crude.

**why do you think it makes sense to bring this novel to the stage again now? and why do a new adaptation when others, like christopher hampton's play (1986) and film (1988) *DANGEROUS LIAISONS* and milos forman's film *VALMONT* (1989), already exist?**

Somebody whose opinion I very much trust once said that adaptations and translations for the theater last about ten years. All adaptations of foreign literature stand to be reexamined on a regular basis, because the acts of translation and adaptation are so much of the time of the person who does them and the audience that experiences them. Even *Travels*



*with My Aunt* could now be adapted in a completely different way. I have no hesitation in saying that *Les Liaisons Dangereuses* can be looked at again and again. Hampton's narrative adaptation was very successful, yet I wanted to see how much dramatic mileage there is in actually returning to the letter format of Laclos's original novel. This is such a wonderful story that I think it needs reinterpreting as often as anybody wants to do it.

I believe this particular piece of material is for all times. It is not locked into its period, it's not just an interesting look at 18th-century social behavior. It is as strikingly contemporary as it is of its own time. *Les Liaisons Dangereuses* is about the most basic behavior of the human heart, and that is why it will never go out of fashion. ■

# a brief biography of choderlos de laclos

by jessica werner

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**P**ierre-Ambroise-François Choderlos de Laclos was born at Amiens [in northern France], on October 18, 1741. The family—only recently ennobled—belonged to the minor nobility. Of Laclos's youth, not much is known. In 1759, he enrolled as an officer cadet in the École d'Artillerie at La Fère. Appointed second lieutenant in the Royal Artillery Corps in 1761, he was posted to La Rochelle the next year. He had planned to join the Colonial Brigade forming there; but the end of the Seven Years War put an end to his hopes of seeing the New World. Laclos was then sent to Toul, near Nancy, in the east of France, where he was garrisoned for two years, the first of the many provincial postings that, for the next 25 years or so, were to take him practically everywhere in France (Strasbourg, Grenoble, Besançon, Valence, l'Île d'Aix) except the battlefield. His progress through the ranks was unspectacular. He seems to have been a capable and respected professional soldier and during his long career he became an expert in fortifications and even came up with the rather brilliant invention of the hollow artillery shell.

But under the ancien régime, truly illustrious military careers were for the most part reserved for noblemen of rank. Unquestionably, the slowness with which he was promoted was frustrating to Laclos. . . . As the English man of letters Richard Aldington put the case: "The canker in Laclos's character is disappointed ambition." . . .

The years in Grenoble (1769–75), where Laclos was welcomed into the "best society," are of particular interest to admirers of *Les Liaisons Dangereuses*. It was in that provincial capital which, in those years, according to Stendhal, was "a charming town, sparkling with intelligence, where the women did not allow themselves to be forgotten," that Laclos supposedly came to know the original of the Marquise de Merteuil. In his *Memoirs*, Tilly, who had long been curious to know what was truth and what fable in *Les Liaisons*, recorded a conversation he had with its author in London in 1789 or 1790, in which Laclos said to him:

I was in barracks in the Island of Ré, bored by the training for a profession which was never to bring me great promotion or great consideration. . . . One of my friends, who bears a name celebrated in the sciences, had had several notorious adventures which only lacked another stage. . . . He had taken me into his confidence; I laughed at his *pranks, and sometimes helped him with my advice*. I knew him to have a mistress who was quite equal to Mme de Merteuil, but it was at Grenoble that I saw the original of whom mine is only a feeble copy, a marquise de l.t.d.p.m., of whom the whole town used to tell stories

worthy of the days of the most insatiable Roman empresses. I took notes, and firmly resolved to make use of them when time and place allowed. . . . I had also put on record several little affairs of my youth which were rather spicy. I blended all these varied fragments together; I invented the rest, especially the character of Mme de Tourvel, which is not ordinary. I bestowed as much care on my style as I am capable of, and after some months devoted to finishing touches, I threw my book among the public. *I hardly know what has happened to it since, but they tell me it still lives.*

. . . Almost immediately after the novel's publication, "keys" began to circulate which claimed to identify the real-life models of [Laclos's] characters, and this surely struck certain members of high society with something approaching dread. . . .

Laclos began to write *Les Liaisons Dangereuses* in 1778. The year before, his adaptation of Mme Riccoboni's novel *Ernestine* was booed "from beginning to end" at the Comédie Italienne. During the writing of *Les Liaisons*, Laclos was employed in fortifying the Île d'Aix near La Rochelle; he was granted several leaves, which he spent in Paris, continuing work on the book. In 1781, he requested (and received) a *permission tacite* to publish his novel (this stamp of approval, as Robert Darnton has explained, was "for books that censors would not openly certify as inoffensive to morals, religion, or the state"). When *Les Liaisons Dangereuses* was published in April 1782, the heretofore only moderately successful military man found himself with a triumph on his hands.

No novel of recent years, the influential French literary journal *Correspondance Littéraire* reported, had enjoyed such a "dazzling" success; and Mme Riccoboni told Laclos, without pleasure, that his *Liaisons* were the talk of all Paris. He had indeed crafted a book which was to "echo over the world."

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Excerpted from the introduction to The New York Public Library Collector's Edition of *Les Liaisons Dangereuses* (© 1998 by The New York Public Library, Astor, Lenox, and Tilden Foundations).

### postpublication intrigues

When the scandal broke in April 1782, Laclos's superiors took the view that he had brought the army into disrepute and, to limit the damage, ordered him out of the limelight and back to the Atlantic coast. At La Rochelle he met Marie-Soulange Duperré, the daughter of a well-to-do official. At a time when girls were normally married by the age of 18, Marie-Soulange was a spinster of 23. When she became pregnant, Laclos, instead of deserting her as any self-respecting libertine owed it to his honor to do, asked for her hand. But he was rejected by the family who had no wish to be connected with a man of such

unsavory reputation. Laclos persisted, however, and he and Marie-Soulange were married in 1786 [two years after the birth of their first child]. They later had two other children and lived very happily together.

Meanwhile, Laclos had not abandoned his pen, which he devoted to a number of causes, some of which surprise by their eccentricity. In 1783 he began the first of three very modern essays on the education of women, none of which he completed. [In 1785 he was elected to the Academy of La Rochelle.]

Laclos had been paid 1,600 *livres* for his novel and was now bringing up a family on his captain's pay of 2,700. He still hoped to make his way up the ranks in the army and in 1788 applied for a military attachment to the French embassy in Turkey. His application was unsuccessful, but later the same year he obtained leave to serve as secretary to the Duke of Orléans who, with an income of three million, was the richest man in France. Laclos received a salary of 6,000 *livres*: it will be remembered that Cécile de Volanges would bring her husband 60,000 a year. Orléans, the king's cousin, though weak and vacillating, carried the hopes of liberal opinion, which would have wished him on the throne instead of Louis xvi. It was a view apparently shared by Laclos, though exactly what role he played in events remains unclear. But as time passed and public unrest grew, [Laclos] emerged as the . . . power behind Orléans, who quickly became known as Philippe-Égalité, the people's choice. When the women of Paris marched on Versailles in October 1789, eye-witnesses swore that Laclos, scattering his master's gold, had led the protest, wearing a dress. When tension mounted further, Philippe-Égalité removed himself to London, taking his secretary with him.

In London, Laclos pushed the Orléanist cause harder than the Duke himself was prepared to do. . . . After his return to France in July 1790, as a moderate, constitutional revolutionary, he gravitated towards the Jacobin Club, which appreciated his talents and made him editor of its journal. By the summer of 1791 (when he retired from the army on a pension of 1,800 francs), he firmly believed that Louis xvi should abdicate and that Philippe-Égalité should rule as Regent. But he was compromised over the wording of the petition which led to the massacre of the Champ de Mars in July and subsequently withdrew from the Jacobins, which by now had ceased to be a club of lawyers and had begun its long lurch into extremism. He lived quietly with his family, but kept an eye on events.

After Louis xvi virtually decided the future of the monarchy by attempting to flee the country in June 1792, Laclos re-emerged from the shadows and, now protected by Danton, was sent to Châlons-sur-Marne to organize French defenses against the imminent arrival of the Prussians. His crucial role in [the] victory at Valmy in September 1792 was duly noted and he was redrafted into the army with the rank of Brigadier-General. . . .

The political mood of Paris was volatile, and he was jailed in the spring of 1793 with a number of other Orléanist supporters. He was freed in May. . . . He was rearrested in November and remained in prison, narrowly escaping the guillotine, for 13 months. When he was finally released in December 1794, his application to rejoin the army was rejected and for the next four years he lived modestly as a public functionary. Somehow, he managed to keep in touch with events and personalities and proved useful, in ways which remain obscure, in bringing about Napoleon's coup d'état in November 1799. For services rendered, he was reinstated in the army and at last heard shots fired in anger in Germany and Italy in the second half of 1800, to the extent of having a horse killed under him. When peace was signed with Austria in February 1801, Laclos returned to Paris, where he was given a number of postings, finally being sent, as a full General, to Italy, where he died of dysentery, malaria, and exhaustion on September 5, 1803.

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Excerpted from David Coward's introduction to the Oxford World Classics Edition of *Les Liaisons Dangereuses*, translated and edited by Douglas Parmée (Oxford University Press, 1998; introduction © David Coward 1995).

## epilogue

There is a volume that without doubt we know was never written: the novel in which Laclos planned, as he wrote to Marie-Soulange from Italy, to prove his thesis that "there is no happiness to be found except within the family." . . . Of the novel which Laclos did not live to write, Gide said this: "I do not think there is much reason to regret that he could not bring this excellent project to completion." For there is, after all, that perfect work of art, *Les Liaisons Dangereuses*.

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Excerpted from the New York Public Library Collector's Edition.

# Laclos's legacy

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In [an era] accustomed to violent death of men great and small, the passing of Laclos the soldier was little remarked. Laclos the novelist left more definite traces though he was not remembered with advantage. During his lifetime, his unsavory reputation had been reinforced by his image as a dark, revolutionary conspirator and his novel had been kept alive by the many pirated editions which had continued to appear. Plays based on its characters had been staged and novelists exploited its notoriety by including the words "Danger" or "Liaison" in their titles. By 1800, however, the Laclos vogue was more or less over. When the conservative order was restored after the fall of Napoleon, Laclos was identified as one of the dangerous rakes and revolutionaries who had brought down the ancien régime. *Les Liaisons Dangereuses* was banned by a Paris court in 1823 "for outrage to public morality," and among Romantic writers, only Stendhal held it in any esteem. Laclos's name continued to be associated with "systematic licentiousness" and "the most odious immorality" and, in 1865, the courts which had prosecuted Flaubert's *Madame Bovary* and Baudelaire's *Les Fleurs du Mal* extended the same treatment to *Les Liaisons Dangereuses*. In Great Britain, its author was unknown to all but Francophiles like Swinburne, and Ernest Dowson's translation, the first in over a century, was privately printed when it appeared in 1898.

But by the end of the century, Laclos was beginning to find defenders on both sides of the Channel who looked beyond the "second-rate Machiavelli" and "consummate immoralist" of academic criticism. His *Essays on Women*, his verse, and his correspondence were published and they showed a new side to him. He found an influential champion in Paul Bourget, while the publication in 1903 of Baudelaire's enthusiastic notes for a study of *Les Liaisons Dangereuses* added considerably to his stature. His biography was written and, after the horrors of the cooler eye, Laclos seemed to articulate very modern concerns. The Surrealists saw his as a paler version of Sade the Liberator; André Malraux, novelist and man of action, saw in Laclos a triumphant demonstration of the "eroticization of the human will." The English began to discover him at about the same time, in spite of the arch pronouncements of the critic George Saintsbury, who called Valmont and Merteuil "prosaic and suburban" and relegated *Les Liaisons Dangereuses* to an "outhouse" of his *History of the French Novel* (1917). Laclos was admired by writers as different as Arnold Bennett, Virginia Woolf, and Aldous Huxley, and Richard Aldington's translation, first published in 1924, made him available at last to a wider Anglo-Saxon audience.

Yet the rehabilitation of Laclos proceeded slowly and his rise to greatness since 1945 provides an interesting lesson in the making of literary reputations. The 19th century, for all its doubts, had expressed broad confidence in social and moral values which, if properly managed, could yet make men good. In such an age, a writer like Laclos, who showed such scant belief in the prospect of human goodness, spoke with a discordant and disturbing voice. But by 1920 the war had destroyed the old world order and Marx and Freud were shaking the established verities by showing that social justice and the distribution of power were unrelated, and that behavior is the product of subconscious motivation, most of it far from admirable. In this new intellectual climate, Laclos appeared more honest than scandalous. Subsequently, the Nazi terror and the Holocaust revealed new depths to which the human spirit could sink, and in their aftermath, which brought the cold war, the threat of global destruction, the increased use of torture, and the apparently unstoppable rise of new dictators, it became increasingly difficult to argue that the health of societies could be maintained on the basis of the old ethical values which seemed irksome, ineffective, and irrelevant. Attempts were still made to hold the old moral pass. In 1957, exactly one hundred years after the prosecution of *Madame Bovary* and *Les Fleurs du Mal*, a new edition of Sade was banned. In 1960 Roger Vadim's screen version of *Les Liaisons Dangereuses* was challenged in the courts and, though his film was granted a certificate, it was denied an export license, a ruling which would have delighted Mme Riccoboni.

By this time, the literary critics had ensured for Laclos a measure of intellectual and artistic respectability. But their efforts were much less significant in promoting his cause than was the liberalization of attitudes which took place in the 1960s. Thus when [Roger] Vadim's film was shown on network television in 1974, it caused no outcry among the French who were by then accustomed to material so explicit that the government introduced measures to limit the growing exploitation of screens small and large. In this new, more liberal climate, Laclos's novel finally dislodged Rousseau's *La Nouvelle Héloïse* as the greatest of 18th-century French novels, and it became widely available in many forms: unexpurgated, bound, or paper-covered, annotated or left to speak for itself. "Classic" status was confirmed when Laclos became a prescribed author for French university students. And, more significantly, Laclos passed an essential modern test: it was discovered that his book transferred well to other media.

The stage adaptation of *Les Liaisons Dangereuses* by Paul Achard in 1952 and Vadim's film had merely paved the way. In 1974 Claude Prey turned Laclos's novel into an "epistolary opera," with recitatives doing duty for the exchange of letters, and two years later Vadim extracted from the book a second film entitled *Une Femme Fidèle*, set in 1826, which proved much less stylish [than his first film, set against a jazz score on the French Riviera.]

and went unnoticed. In the same year Alberto Cesare Alberti freely transposed the text for the stage as *Amor di Guerra, Guerra d'Amore*, which makes use of the characters (including Laclos himself) to dissect the relationship between men and women, which is seen as sexual warfare. In Germany, Rudolf Fleck's play *Gefährliche Liebschaften* (1979) was followed by Heiner Müller's *Quartett* (1981), which again cast Laclos's characters in roles designed to convey an avant-garde and highly personal view of the war of the sexes. But it was Christopher Hampton's stage version, first performed at Stratford-upon-Avon in 1985, which turned Laclos into an unlikely star, even in Paris. The process was completed by a film, *Dangerous Liaisons* (1988), directed by Stephen Frears from Hampton's script, which pleased both reviewers and the general public. Milos Forman's *Valmont* (1991), though less well received, served to maintain the momentum. After a decade of exposure to unaccustomed limelight, Laclos has taken his place alongside Alexandre Dumas and Victor Hugo (and ahead of even Racine and Balzac) in the ranks of classic French authors who travel well.

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Excerpted from David Coward's introduction to the Oxford World Classics Edition of *Les Liaisons Dangereuses*, translated and edited by Douglas Parmée (Oxford University Press, 1998; introduction © David Coward 1995).



## the libertine tradition

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By its tone and subject matter, *Les Liaisons Dangereuses* belongs to the “libertine” tradition of fiction. In common parlance, “libertinage” meant no more than sexual depravity. It was the term adopted by the police to categorize offenses which “outraged public morality.” It was also widely used to describe the notorious debauches of aristocrats like the Duke de Richelieu, who once burned down a house in pursuit of an amour, or the Prince de Conti, who boasted a collection of 2,000 rings, each a token of an abandoned mistress. But in 1782 “libertinage” still retained something of its old sense of “free thought,” which, around 1700, had meant the revolt of a group of radical intellectuals against the Church and established morality. By the 1730s the “free thinkers” had been absorbed by the more generalized rational spirit of the Enlightenment, but not entirely. The word had attached itself to the spectacular rakes of the Regency (1715–23) which spawned a new social type, the roué, of which Valmont, according to Mme de Merteuil, is a worthy exemplar. But “libertinage” survived happily in the novel where it raised opposition to the civil and ecclesiastical Establishment and promoted the cause of liberty (implicit in “libertinage”) in the specific context of sexual mores. The “libertine” novel, therefore, formed one strand of the philosophical novel. Its uniqueness lay in its exploitation of the shock value of eroticism.

Of course, some novelists simply seized on the tradition to peddle cheap pornography. But others, from Crébillon *fills* in the 1730s to Sade in the 1790s, used it to call into question accepted social and ethical standards. At a time when it was dangerous to criticize Church and State openly, “libertine” literature constituted a useful form of contestation which, because it dealt boldly with the private relationships on which public values were based, contained the threat of anarchy. This means that the first rumblings of the Revolution to come were sexual, not overtly political. “Libertinage,” therefore, meant far more than sleaze. Its purpose was to provoke and disturb. Some authors drew back from the brink. Samuel Richardson’s *Clarissa* (1748), which caused a sensation when it was published in France, pressed the libertine tradition into the service of Virtue: the cynical Lovelace ends up a rake reformed by Love. But if in the case of *Clarissa* (which . . . Laclos considered to be a “masterpiece”) the theme of seduction was turned into an instrument for promoting morality, most “libertine” novelists continued to explore the implications of free-wheeling eroticism in a variety of bolder registers, precious, satirical, philosophical, and gross. The pornographers merely showed pictures and were happy to titillate. But the elegant *libertins* dealt with ideas, were highly verbal, and sought to persuade. But all,

though ostensibly concerned with sex, were subversive agents of change and their scabrous tales acts of sabotage.

Now there is nothing of course about Laclos's "libertinage" which is cerebral rather than physical. Eroticism is reduced to a secret game which can only be won by players who ignore the commonly accepted rules of decency and honesty. Manipulation replaces fair dealing, sex is power, and love a form of weakness. But does *Les Liaisons Dangereuses* criticize or promote such attitudes? Is freedom to be achieved by abandoning the moral ideals and social constraints which stand in the way of personal gratification? Or does true self-fulfillment lie in subordinating the self, respecting the feeling of others, and accepting the rules of civilized conduct? Most "libertine" novelists set themselves the task of pushing back the frontiers, of demolishing the old taboos, in the name of freedom. It may be that the bishops Laclos met in Italy believed that he denounced the immorality he describes. Yet most of his contemporaries read the book as though it were a user's manual for aspiring seducers, a view endorsed after 1789 by those who were convinced that what Merteuil and Valmont had done for sex, Laclos, the "monster of intrigue," had acted out in politics.

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Excerpted from David Coward's introduction to the Oxford World Classics Edition of *Les Liaisons Dangereuses*, translated and edited by Douglas Parmée (Oxford University Press, 1998; introduction © David Coward 1995).



The master of the [libertine] genre . . . was Laclos's exact contemporary d. a. f. de Sade, who may not have been much of a stylist but who threw himself into the abyss with unmatched ferocity. Valmont and especially Merteuil bear a distinct family resemblance to his *monstres sacrés*, and indeed the setting and initial framework of *Les Liaisons* makes it sometimes seem like a better organized version of one of Sade's interminable sagas of the pleasures of crime, in particular the first version of *Justine*, a tale of sexual martyrdom. Sade must have been aware of this, perhaps rancorously so in the light of the success of *Les Liaisons*. Even his champion Gilbert Lély finds it strange that Sade omits mention of Laclos's book in his encyclopedic survey of French literature in the preface to *Les Crimes de l'Amour*, and that he shortly thereafter went on to plot out an epistolary novel of his own.

Of course, the other distinction between Sade and Laclos is that the former is constantly testing the limits—of behavior, of retribution, of logic itself. His vast novels constantly prod and dare the reader, attempting to exhaust the reader to the point of a sort of conversion. Sade's response to horror is to wallow in it. Laclos, by contrast, appears a

conventional moralist, but it is perhaps this feature that is the most critical. *Les Liaisons* turns from an alarming comedy into a tragedy with the appearance of love, and with the nearly simultaneous discovery that love is impossible, since it cannot compete with vanity, or gamesmanship, or the simulacrum of order provided by manners and the rules of discourse. Obstacles of this size can be overcome by nothing less than a general upheaval.

Luc Sante, "All Conquers Love," in  
*The New York Review of Books* (August 13, 1998)



Since the pleasures of the mind are the real source of happiness, it is perfectly clear that, from the point of view of happiness, good and evil are things quite indifferent in themselves and he who obtains greater satisfaction from doing evil will be happier than the man who obtains less satisfaction from doing good. This explains why so many scoundrels are happy in this life and shows that there is a kind of individual felicity which is to be found, not merely without virtue, but even in crime itself.

Julien Offray de la Mettrie (1709–51) in his essay  
“*Anti-Sénéque, ou Discours sur le Bonheur*”

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French physician, atheist, mechanist, materialist, and “infamous specimen of the Enlightenment,” La Mettrie argued in *L'Histoire Naturelle de l'Âme* (1745), a materialist work of natural history, the Epicurean notion that the only pleasures are those of the senses. The idea was developed in *L'homme Machine* (*Machine Man*, 1748). For his theories La Mettrie was driven from France to exile in Berlin.



### the “dangerous man”

[E]ighteenth-century libertinism designates not so much a school of thought as an aristocratic way of life that many writers described and analyzed tirelessly, but were also expected to condemn.

This lifestyle, as depicted, primarily centers on a type of decadent aristocrat called the *petit-maitre*, who combines, to the point of caricature, all the worldly practices and all the affectations of his class. Less concerned than 17th-century libertines with the precious freedom reputed to live beneath his masks, he devoted his energies to making his efforts of social conformity pay off; indeed he devotes himself entirely to the “small” pleasures and “small” gains that the world never refuses the well-born, so long as they bend to its rules.

The *petit-maître*, though, is not the only libertine type represented in 18th-century French literature. Writers also depict a unique, more somber character, often called the “dangerous man” or ironically the “man of principles.” Not satisfied with merely living the flaky life of a *petit-maître* and looking beyond the small pleasures and gains sought by his peers, this more ambitious libertine endeavors to take revenge on his milieu. . . . The first goal . . . for a well-born young man . . . consists of “making a name for himself” in society—that is, in the jargon of the century, the *public*, which includes only the high society of Paris and Versailles. This public, whose sole preoccupation is to create and recreate trends and reputations, is subdivided into a constellation of variously influential circles, assuring the circulation of intrigues and conversations. Furthermore, at the heart of each circle, and thus at the heart of the public as a whole, women are empowered to establish reputations. To triumph in society thus amounts to having oneself crowned by the “chorus of women,” the repository of public sanction; it must therefore “appear that all your actions are undertaken with only women in mind, that you believe in no other charm but that which attracts them, and think the kind of wit that pleases them is the only kind that ought to please at all. It is only by seeming to defer to all their wishes that one succeeds in dominating them.”

Unlike the regular *petits-maîtres*, a “grand” libertine [like Valmont] is not content with society’s mediocre pleasures. While he too sacrifices the straightforwardness of his heart and the wealth of his mind to the contemptible approbation of social circles, it is revenge rather than “social benefits” that seem to him a worthy compensation for his lost innocence. Such a revenge clearly takes the public as its target—aiming particularly at the chorus of women—but it must also be carried out in a systematic fashion. By feigning to bend himself to his world’s order, the man of principles endeavors to penetrate its lesser working, then to turn its absurd rules and fallacious principles against the people who abide by them.

# the epistolary novel

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Laclos had certainly every reason to be pleased with his performance as the author of a work which even his sternest critics have admired unreservedly. *Les Liaisons Dangereuses* is an epistolary novel and belongs to another 18th-century tradition which did not survive much beyond 1800. Tales told in letters were immensely popular in an age of correspondence: the two most influential novels of the period, *La Nouvelle Héloïse* and *Clarissa* were both written in epistolary form. But neither Rousseau nor Richardson was alive to the dramatic possibilities of the genre. They allow their correspondents to analyze their feelings in tedious detail and expatiate, at inordinate length, on moral and social questions. The tension drops and the voice of the author intrudes. Laclos never allows the pace to slacken and he is as firm with his correspondents as a sergeant drilling recruits. They march to his orders.

He removes himself almost entirely from the conduct of events and maintains only a minimum presence as the self-effacing “editor” of a supposedly authentic correspondence. He does not address the reader and is completely hidden by his characters, each of whom has a distinctive voice. Cécile is immediately recognizable by the skittishness of her style and the inaccuracy of her grammar, which is so clumsy that Mme de Merteuil feels obligated to give her a few much-needed lessons. Danceny’s youth and inexperience are detectable in his first letters, which borrow pompously from the eloquent poets he admires; only when he has been disillusioned by events does he find a voice of his own. Mme de Tourvel’s letters invariably begin defensively and end defiantly. . . . And although both seducers are on the same side, they write in quite different inks: Valmont’s letters are full of male condescension and self-satisfied banter while Merteuil has a sharper ear and a steelier manner. To others, they write pastiche—Valmont posing to Mme de Tourvel as the contrite lover, or Mme de Merteuil reading suitable pages by Crébillon *fiis* and La Fontaine . . . so that she can strike the right note with her Chevalier. Yet their style does betray something of their natures: Valmont is given to using military images to describe the “tactics” which will enable him to notch up another “conquest,” while Mme de Merteuil favors metaphors drawn from the theater: she plays “roles” and wears “masks.”

Indeed, the whole novel is highly theatrical. Not only are situations stage-managed and roles played to the hilt, the letters are monologues which form a dialogue of sorts, but with this difference: the written word is more effective than any conversational exchange. It allows time to reflect, to react, and to regroup: policy replaces spontaneity and the struggle is removed to terrain which favors those who practice finely contrived deceit. Of

course, not all the characters weigh their words as carefully as Valmont and Merteuil, but all read and ponder the letters which are written to them, Cécile fondly perusing Danceny's notes, say, or Mme de Tourvel agonizing over Valmont's. Laclos orchestrates this dialogue with the precision of an engineer. He gave considerable thought to the order in which the letters should be placed. . . .

Laclos's handling of the epistolary form is responsible for some of the most memorable moments in the novel. The arrangement of the letters generates drama, irony, and a generous measure of black comedy. Their distribution and juxtaposition make character and event stand out in sharp relief and provide the pivots on which the action is articulated. Laclos controls his material with the technical skills of the professional engineer that he was. He is also a master of illusion who shows that few things are what they seem and that the words people speak, like the roles they play, are elements of a performance designed both consciously and unconsciously to replace spontaneity with artifice. But the engineer who plans and the puppeteer who pulls the strings remain frustratingly invisible. By removing himself so completely from the world he creates, he denies us any opportunity of hearing his own voice and consequently any way of knowing, or even of sensing, where his own loyalties lie. He is a supremely absent author who abandons his creation to the reader.

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Excerpted from David Coward's introduction to the Oxford World Classics Edition of *Les Liaisons Dangereuses*, translated and edited by Douglas Parmée (Oxford University Press, 1998; introduction © David Coward 1995).

# human rights: a novel idea?

by john sanford

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Novels played a key role in the emergence of the concept of human rights in the 18th century, according to Lynn Hunt, the Eugen Weber Professor of Modern European History at the University of California, Los Angeles [in a lecture delivered at Stanford University].

That's right—novels. . . . “Human rights as a notion depends on empathetic identification with individuals who are now imagined to be, in some fundamental way, like you,” Hunt said. “A reader identifies with an ordinary person, unknown to him or her personally but with whom the reader empathizes thanks to the narrative form itself. I am arguing that the novel disseminated a new psychology and a new social and political order through the working of the narrative form”. . . .

The novel essentially was born in Richardson's *Pamela* (1740), although some earlier works might be considered protonovels—Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe* (1719) or Bunyan's *The Pilgrim's Progress* (1678–84), for example. Between 1689 and 1776—the respective dates of the English Bill of Rights, which mentioned nothing about the universality or self-evidence of human rights, and the Declaration of Independence, which did—there was a sea change, Hunt said.

She said the earliest reference to human rights, or *les droits de l'homme*, she has found appears in Rousseau's *The Social Contract* (1762). But Diderot evoked the self-evidence of what he referred to as “natural rights” in 1755, she added. (Diderot, however, did not promote natural rights as universal and equal.)

In any case, sometime during the 1750s and 1760s the concept of human rights began to seem self-evident, Hunt said. . . . The notion that such rights are self-evident appears later in many other treatises and documents, including the Universal Declaration of Human Rights adopted by the United Nations General Assembly in 1948. But what's strange about their so-called self-evidence, Hunt noted, is the obvious tautology on which this idea hinges; the self-evidence of human rights relies on believing in them.

Novels, of course, were not the only force that contributed to the emergence of human rights in the 18th century, Hunt said. Other factors included ongoing developments in legal notions of rights, new attitudes about the integrity of bodies and selves, and political revolutions. Human rights resulted from an intersection of these various developments, she said. But she argued that new forms of print culture, especially the novel, were important in promoting empathy between “separate selves.”

“The novel made the point that all selves are fundamentally similar because of their inner psychic processes,” Hunt said. The novel drew readers in and prompted a feeling of “passionate involvement in the narrative.”

So it cannot be coincidental, Hunt contended, that three of the greatest 18th-century novels have protagonists with whom readers often connect at a psychological level—Richardson’s *Pamela* and *Clarissa* and Rousseau’s *Julie; ou la Nouvelle Héloïse*—appeared shortly before the concept of *les droits de l’homme*.

She admitted, however, the difficulty of directly proving the effects these novels had on people living in the 18th century, but she noted scientists now understand that the ability to comprehend narratives is built into the biology of the brain. “Neuroscientific studies have shown that certain kinds of brain lesions affect narrative comprehension, and neuroscientists seem to agree with Freud, however inadvertently, that narrative is somehow crucial to the sense of self,” Hunt said.

She continued, “I believe in the notion that reading epistolary novels has somatic effects that translate into brain changes, through what is called synaptic plasticity, and come back out as new concepts about the organization of social and political life.” (Epistolary novels are novels composed of fictional letters, such as Laclos’s *Les Liaisons Dangereuses*.)

In other words, Hunt said, reading novels created new individual experiences—empathy—which made possible new social and political concepts—human rights: People read novels, identified with their protagonists, and hence learned to empathize with people they did not personally know. What’s more, many men as well as women identified strongly with the central female characters of *Julie*, *Pamela*, and *Clarissa*.

“We know that upper-class men, even military officers, intensely identified with these women,” Hunt said. She read from a letter to Rousseau from a retired French military officer who had read *Julie*: “You have driven me crazy about her. Imagine, then, the tears that her death must have wrung from me. Never have I wept such delicious tears. That reading created such a powerful effect on me that I believe I would have gladly died during that supreme moment.”

. . . Summarizing comments Diderot made about Richardson’s novels, Hunt said: “You recognize yourself in the characters; you imaginatively leap into the midst of the action; you feel the same feelings that the characters are feeling; in short, you learn to empathize with someone who is not yourself.”

Indeed, Hunt suggested that Rousseau’s *Julie*, a bestseller at the time, probably played a more significant role in the development of human rights than did his less read—and often misunderstood—political tract [*The Social Contract*].



# observations on 18th-century life and love

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I was born to revenge my sex and to master yours.

—Merteuil to Valmont in *Les Liaisons Dangereuses*

## on the 18th-century fast set

Libertines were at least a considerable cause of the remarkable intelligence noticed in 18th-century women. It's true that they were often "cruel, courteous, smooth, inhuman"—Mme de Merteuil, in fact—but the necessity for a constant defense against enterprising Don Juans, possessed of a whole strategy of seduction, had sharpened their wits. All the odds were against them in this unequal battle. Sentiment and senses, frustrated by forced matches, warred against them; if they yielded, and were found out, an inconsistent and malicious "world" congratulated the man on a "triumph" and treated the unhappy woman as "dishonored"; if they yielded and were not found out, they had to suffer the arrogance, infidelities, and exactions of lovers who held their reputation, freedom, and happiness in their hands; if they did not yield they were looked upon as hypocrites, or "*fausses prudes*," or were credited with lovers they had not, or were openly claimed by men they had refused. The 18th-century woman needed all her charm and intelligence, all her perfidy and dissimulation, and all the arsenal of feminine weapons to hold her own; and in a society infested with Valmonts, a Mme de Merteuil is a necessary consequence, almost a deserved revenge. . . .

[T]he tone of society was both cynical and libertine; wonderfully refined indeed and glazed over with all the charm of the arts, but essentially false and worldly. Nothing was so ridiculous as for a husband and wife to be in love; it was "*du dernier bourgeois*." The husband went his way, the wife hers; they lived in separate apartments, met only at meals and always on terms of ceremonious politeness. It is hardly a matter of surprise that the women followed the men in libertinage, that they in turn went from lover to lover, amusing themselves by "taking away" a husband from a young wife, a lover from the woman who really loved him. Among this 18th-century fast set there was a fierce competition for the "man of the hour," whether he were Field-Marshal, or *petit-maitre*, the gratification was almost wholly one of vanity. The women even had their secret "*petites maisons*"—small houses kept secretly for amorous rendezvous. The man in power was surrounded by women and if one of them could attract him, dominate him, and keep him (as sometimes happened) she avenged herself and her sex by a tyranny of caprice; during the 18th century France was governed, and not unskillfully, by women who were the real force behind their powerful lovers. . . .

from "the sofa," by *crébillon FILS*

"I have been ten years in society; I am twenty-five; and you are the thirty-third beauty I have conquered in a regular affair!"

"Thirty-three!" she cried. "It is true I have had no more than that," he replied, "but do not be surprised; I have never been fashionable."

"Ah! Nassés!" she said, "how I am to be pitied for loving you, and how hard it will be for me to depend on your constancy!" "I fail to see why," he said, "do you think because I have had thirty-three women I love you any the less?" "Yes," she answered, "the less you had loved the more I could believe that you would have resources left to love again and that your sentiment would not be entirely destroyed." "I think," he replied, "I have proved to you that my heart is not exhausted; besides, to speak frankly, there are very few affairs in which sentiment enters. Opportunity, convenience, idleness, create almost all of them. People tell each other (without feeling it) that they are amiable; they become intimate, without believing in each other; they see it is vain to expect love and they separate for fear of being bored. Sometimes they are deceived in what they feel; they thought it was passion, it was only inclination; a movement, consequently not durable, which disappears in pleasures, while love seems to be reborn from them."

**laclos, rousseau, and the education of women**

"You educate your girls in cloistered ignorance. You fit them for nothing but to be delicious playthings. You abruptly take them from a convent and throw them in their trembling ignorance and against their will into the arms of a man they have barely seen. You thwart their profoundest sentiments; you outrage their most elementary delicacy; you mock at their 'little tears' and 'childish sentiments'; you violate a moral law, because marriage without love is a hideous thing; you violate a natural law, for the meanest of females has a right to a choice of the father of her children. What is the result? The ignorance of some makes them an easy prey to an unscrupulous seducer, with an inevitable corruption of character and misery. The stronger character of others turns to malignancy; the natural desires of a woman become a shameless sensuality, their natural vanity becomes a preposterous egotism, their natural jealousy of other women a devilish hate, their intelligence creates a whole system of hypocrisy to guard against your anomalous standards, and their cunning becomes an almost superhuman perfidy in their battles with you and you, gentlemen, worthy emulators of that '*très haut et très puissant seigneur*,' Monsieur le Vicomte de Valmont. And, supremest wrong of all, the most virtuous and tender of women, capable of a profound and unselfish passion which can never be satisfied by your

*mariages de convenance*, is surprised, tortured, victimized, driven to her grave, by this same scoundrel.”

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Excerpted from Richard Aldington's introduction to *Les Liaisons Dangereuses (Dangerous Acquaintances)*, E. P. Dutton & Co., 1924).



Love is the whole history of a woman's life, it is but an episode in a man's.

Madame de Staël (1766–1817)

### **l a c l o s o n w o m e n**

Oh, women! Approach and come hear me!

Let your curiosity, once it is directed toward useful objects, contemplate the advantages which nature has given you and of which society has robbed you. Come and learn how, born man's companion, you have become his slave; how, fallen into this abject state, you have come to like it, to regard it as your natural state; how, lastly, degraded more and more by a long habit of slavery, you have come to prefer its debasing but convenient vices to the more difficult virtues of a free and respectable existence. If this faithfully drawn picture leaves you unmoved, if you can contemplate it without emotion, return to your futile occupations. *There is no cure for evil once vice becomes habit.* But if at the recital of your misfortunes and your losses you blush with shame and anger, if tears of indignation pour from your eyes, if you burn with the noble desire to recover possession of your advantages, to re-enter the fullness of your being, do not continue to allow yourselves to be deluded by false promises, do not expect the help of the men who created your ills: they have neither the will nor the power to end them, and how could they wish to educate women before whom they would be forced to blush; learn that one does not emerge from slavery except through a great revolution. Is this revolution possible? That is for you alone to say, since it depends on your courage, in itself likely. I will say nothing about this question; but until it happens, and as long as men rule your fate, I shall be justified in saying, *and it will be easy for me to prove, that there is no means of improving the education of women.*

Wherever there is slavery, there can be no education: in every society, women are slaves; thus, the social woman is not amenable to education. If the principles of this syllogism are proven, one cannot deny the consequence. Now, that wherever there is slavery, there can be no education, follows naturally from the definition of the word; it is the nature of education to develop the faculties, the nature of slavery to stifle them; it is the nature of

education to direct the developed faculties toward social usefulness, the nature of slavery to make the slave an enemy of society. If these unquestionable principles leave any doubts, they can be removed by applying these principles to freedom. It is apparent that one cannot deny freedom to be one of woman's faculties, and this implies that freedom can develop in slavery; it implies further that freedom can be directed toward social utility, since the freedom of a slave would be a blow against the social pact based on slavery. It would be useless to try to resort to differentiations or disagreements. One cannot depart from this general principle, that without freedom there is no morality, and without morality no education.

Sincere women, it is you we are questioning. Is there one among you who has had her pleasure constantly without fear, without jealousy, without remorse, or without the difficult tedium of duty or uniformity? You will not answer us; but have the courage to examine your hearts and judge for yourselves. In vain, then, would proud pity feel sorry for the natural woman; she has freedom, strength, health, beauty, and love. What more does she need to be happy?

*On the Education of Women, 1783*

### **Iaclos on theater**

In the theater, one cannot portray everything. Not every character is theatrically appropriate, and even those best suited to the medium cannot be explored in every detail. The same is true of feelings and passions; at least it's my view that one of the principles which separates most decisively the playwright's talent from that of the novelist is that the former must regard everything which is not strictly necessary as superfluous, while the latter must consider everything which is not entirely superfluous as being of use. Furthermore, in a novel it is possible, perhaps even necessary, to endow each scene with the full power of truth, whereas in the theater, one is almost always obliged to soften. Nowadays people very seldom seem aware of these compromises, but they are a consequence of the difference between an action represented and an action described. It follows from this that even the most successfully realized dramatic character leaves a vast area still to be explored by the novelist.

*Essay on Cecilia, by Fanny Burney, 1784*

What one sees is the Revolution preparing itself: it's already there in the characters; you glimpse it, as if through a cloud, in everything they do, everything they say, everything they feel; depending on their personality, they participate in various events, all designed to hasten it, to shape it, or to deflect it...

Through the perspective of the stage, the spectator is carried forward towards a sinister future, which, because he has experienced the course of the Revolution, is already for him a terrible past: in this, it seems to me, resides one of those beauties which cannot fail to have an effect in the theater.

## baudelaire on *LES LIAISONS DANGEREUSES*

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If this book burns, it is only in the manner of ice.

The Revolution was made by voluptuaries.

Has morality improved? No, it's only that the energy of evil has diminished.

—And stupidity has replaced it.

All books are immoral.

How did one make love during the ancien régime?

More amusingly, that's for sure.

It wasn't ecstasy, like it is today, it was delirium.

There were always lies, but you didn't worship your own likeness.

You deceived him, but you deceived yourself much less.

And besides, the lies were well enough sustained, sometimes to introduce comedy into tragedy.

The love of war and the war of love.

Glory. The love of glory. Valmont and Merteuil speak of it continually, Merteuil less so.

The love of combat. Tactics, rules, methods. The glory of victory.

Strategy used to win a very frivolous prize.

A great deal of sensuality. Very little love, except in the case of Madame de Tourvel.

An essentially French book.

A sociable book, terrible, but playfully so, within the rules.

A sociable book.

# pleasure of the toilette: beauty, natural and artificial

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In his essay *Crito; or A Dialogue on Beauty* (1752), Sir Henry Beaumont described the ideal of female beauty honored throughout Europe in the latter half of the 18th century:

The forehead should be white, smooth, and open. The skin in general should be white, properly tinged with red with apparent softness and a look of thriving health in it. The cheeks should not be wide; should have a degree of plumpness, with the red and white finely blended together. The eyebrows, well divided, rather full than thin, semi-circular, broader in the middle than at the ends. The mouth should be small, and the lips not of equal thickness. A truly pretty mouth is like a Rose-bud that is beginning to grow.

As with all prescriptive ideals, this one was not easily attained in the 18th century. The ravages of small pox, venereal disease, bad diet, and poor hygiene left skin pockmarked, faces misshapen, teeth blackened or missing, cheeks sunken, and hair falling out. For wealthy men and women of fashion, however, who could afford the cosmetics and the time necessary to remake their faces and disguise the scars and blemishes left by disease, there was hope. Knowing that standing in the community was judged by outward appearances, people of fashion spent hours with their “patch-boxes,” gluing bits of colored silk, taffeta, and even leather to their faces in order to hide the pockmarks left by disease. Those who did not want to wear patches on their faces applied thick coats of face powder to achieve the smooth, white complexion prized by the standards of beauty of the day. Powder was applied not only on the face but down over the bosom, as well, as any sign of suntan on the skin suggested that one spent one’s days laboring in the fields. Unfortunately, the base element in face powder at the time was finely flaked lead, which caused severe head pain, nausea, dizziness, bowel problems, blindness, and eventually paralysis and death. In contrast to the very white complexion, cheeks and lips were excessively rouged with rough and coarse implements made of mercury- or lead-based pigments like carmine. People daubed spots of pigment onto their cheeks with wet bits of wool or rubbed their lips with sticks of solid rouge (carmine mixed with plaster of Paris). Eye make-up was not used, but the eyebrows were darkened or thickened using mouse skins. Cheeks sunken by lost or decayed teeth were filled with plumpers of cork or leather inserted into the mouth.

In addition to attending to their complexions, 18th-century women spent a good deal of time on their hair. Hair was curled with hot tongs and then coated with a base of lard

and powdered with a fine white powder. Fashion demanded that women have big, complicated hairstyles to complement their clothing. Many women resorted to wearing hair-pieces and wigs to add “volume” to their hair. Since many of these were difficult to attach and sculpt on a daily basis, women often had their hair done (curled, larded, powdered, and then adorned with small flowers and feathers) once every few weeks. Between times they would leave their hair unwashed so it would not lose its fastidious styling. Infestations of lice or fleas were common, and stories abound of mice nesting in the larded hair of ladies of fashion (perhaps the source of the skins used to enhance the eyebrows).

Though baths were taken far and few between, people did wash themselves with home-made soaps and tonics derived from such garden herbs as rosemary, lavender, and thyme, as well as wild flowers from the fields. They also doused themselves with large amounts of perfume in an effort to keep away not only bad odor, but also what they believed caused sicknesses.

The following recipe for face powder should not be tried at home: Steep several thin plates of lead in a big pot of vinegar, and rest it in a bed of horse manure for at least three weeks. When the lead softens, pound into powdery white flakes, then grind to a fine powder. Mix with water, and let dry in the sun. After the powder is dry, mix with the appropriate amount of perfume and tinting dye.

The following recipe for a face pack (fard) is far less dangerous: Take two ounces of oil of sweet almonds, ditto of spermaceti: melt them in a pipkin over a slow fire. When they are dissolved and mixed, take it off the fire, and stir into it one tablespoonful of fine honey. Continue stirring till it is cold; then it is fit for use. This paste is good for taking off sun burnings, effects of weather on the face, and accidental cutaneous eruptions. It must be applied at bedtime. First wash the face with its usual ablution, and when dry, rub this fard all over it, and go to rest with it on the skin.

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Sources: Fenja Gunn, *The Artificial Face* (London: Trinity Press, 1973), provides a history of the development and abuse of cosmetics, as well as studies of individual cultures in which beauty aids and cosmetics played a significant role; “The Faces Behind the Masks: The ‘Toilette’ in 18th-Century England,” [www.umich.edu/~ece/student\\_projects/leisure/sanitation.html](http://www.umich.edu/~ece/student_projects/leisure/sanitation.html); “Make-up Techniques in the 18th Century,” by Hazel Dickfoss, [www.nwta.com/Spy/Winter/Makeup.html](http://www.nwta.com/Spy/Winter/Makeup.html).



# *LES LIAISONS DANGEREUSES*: a few notes on the text

by paul walsh

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## **“when i first came out in society”**

In French society of the 18th century, the daughters of the nobility were often sent away at an early age to a convent school, where they were taught “the virtues,” including such social graces as manners, comportment, and moral uprightness, in order to make them good Christian wives and worthy members of their class. That the social graces were taught in strict isolation from society was deemed not only appropriate but also necessary to avoid temptation and corruption. At the age of 16, a girl would leave the convent to be presented “on the great stage of society,” as the Marquise de Merteuil calls it. In the days of arranged marriages, when the daughters of the landed aristocracy married within the small circle of their own class and often had large dowries that went with them, it was of utmost importance for marriageable daughters to be properly presented to society and at court. One of the consequences of convent schools, however, was a general lack of what today we would consider real education for young women. Reading and writing were of less importance than manners, morals, music lessons, and needlepoint. This caused major concern among such Enlightenment writers as Rousseau. It has been argued that *Les Liaisons Dangereuses* is itself an impassioned plea for female education, including sexual education, to better prepare young women to recognize and deal with the dangers of the world. Shortly after finishing his novel, Laclos argued in *De l'Education des femmes* (*Essays on the Education of Women*) that women were prevented from receiving proper education in order to ensure their continued enslavement to men and to the norms and customs of society.

## **“i longed to measure swords with you.”**

Here Laclos's provocative phrase, in which Valmont suggests meeting Merteuil “*corps à corps*” (which generally means “hand-to-hand,” as in hand-to-hand combat, but literally means “body-to-body” in a traditionally more provocative sense), is translated with a locution typical of the 18th century that plays upon the double meaning of “sword” and “swordplay” to refer metaphorically to sexual matters.

**“i have an excellent idea . . . worthy of a hero”**

Throughout the novel Laclos draws upon phrases taken from the martial vocabulary of late medieval and early Renaissance romances. This is not surprising, since Laclos was himself a military man expert in questions of munitions and fortifications. Here, however, the citadels his characters seek to storm are metaphorical. This vocabulary of heroes and amorous warfare peppered the libertine literature of the 18th century, as it does the historical romances of today. That Merteuil’s idea of seduction and betrayal is more worthy of an “anti-hero” than a hero is one of the factors that contributes to the modern appeal of the novel. When later Merteuil invites Valmont to “bring me the token of your triumph like those knights of old who come to lay the brilliant spoils of victory at their ladies’ feet,” her tone suggests the mock heroic style of Alexander Pope’s *The Rape of the Lock* (1711–17), though what is at issue here is far more serious and far more scandalous.

**“it is here that his inconsolable spouse is to spend her grass-widowhood.”**

There is a delicious ambiguity in Valmont’s reference to Madame de Tourvel’s sojourn in the countryside while her husband is presiding over a trial in Dijon as a “grass-widowhood.” In the 19th century, a grass widow was a married woman whose husband was absent from her, especially one whose husband had been called away to serve in India. But the term dates back to the 16th century, when it referred to “a woman who is separated, divorced, or lives apart from her husband,” as *Webster’s New World Dictionary* has it. The Dutch term *grasweduwe*, from which the word is derived in English, refers to a discarded mistress and to the bed of grass or straw to which she has been relegated.

**“you must give up all hope of pleasure. can there ever be any with a prude?”**

The English word prude comes from the French *prude femme*, meaning a virtuous woman (from the Old French *prod*, meaning “wise, prudent”). It is interesting that the word is no longer considered a compliment in English, attesting perhaps to the victory of attitudes like those of the Marquise de Merteuil. When first introduced in French, the word referred to a woman who was both virtuous and wise, “but,” according to the *American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language*, “apparently a woman could be too wise or, in the eyes of some, too observant of decorum and propriety” (sv. “prude”). Thus the word prude took on in French the same derogatory sense of “excessive concern with appearing proper, modest, or righteous” that it has had in English since it was first introduced in the early 18th century.

**“your lovers remind me of the successors of alexander the great . . . unable to maintain between them that mighty empire where i once ruled alone.”**

While Alexander the Great (365–23 b.c.e.) conquered much of the classical world, from Greece and Macedonia to Syria, Mesopotamia, and Egypt, his successors were unable to hold onto and consolidate the empire he left them. Instead the great Macedonian empire fragmented shortly after his death into a shifting collection of minor states. By 280 b.c.e., new Hellenistic monarchies, whose leaders ruled by force and lacked Alexander’s organizational ability, were fighting each other and suffering internal struggles, as well.

**“and my toilette will take some time”**

Women of the upper classes in France, and men, too, spent hours preparing to be seen in public. Cosmetics, coiffeur, and clothing were considered of paramount importance. Beautiful clothes, powdered wigs, and porcelain faces, however, could only seek to hide a general lack of personal health and hygiene that would shock us today. A thick coat of lead-based face powder, augmented by rouges made of carmine or mercury, were used to cover up the pockmarks left by smallpox and venereal diseases, leaving the skin looking white and smooth on the surface while being eaten away beneath. Elaborate hairstyles were held in place with lard that attracted fleas, lice, and even small rodents. “Cheek plumpers” of cork or leather were inserted to fill cheeks sunken by tooth loss. While eye make-up was not used, eyebrows were darkened or thickened with mouse skins. The process did indeed take some time. In the first canto of *The Rape of the Lock*, Alexander Pope offers a delightful description of Belinda at her toilette, written in imitation of the epic trope of the hero arming for battle:

Now awful Beauty puts on all its Arms;  
The Fair each moment rises in her Charms,  
Repairs her Smiles, awakens ev’ry Grace,  
And calls forth all the Wonders of her Face.

**“with a little further practice, your singing would rival that of the angels”**

Danceny employs a trope familiar from biblical commentaries and sermons since the Renaissance, but for more secular reasons. According to theological arguments, the spiritual side of human beings strives to transcend its physical side by becoming pure spirit like the angels. Because music was considered a spiritual endeavor, worthy of the angels, one

was said to be closest to God when singing. The early church father John Chrysostom (347–407), for example, had employed a similar trope in his essay “On Virginity”: “But mankind, inferior in its nature to the blessed spirits, strains beyond its capacity and, in so far as it can, vies eagerly to equal the angels.”

### **“ah valmont, you blackguard”**

Originally, the term “blackguard” (pronounced “blaggard” and dating in English to the 15th century) probably referred to the lowest servants of a large household who cleaned the pots and pans. Later the word expanded to refer first to someone who uses coarse or abusive language and eventually to refer to scoundrels or villains of any profession. It has also been suggested that this term of utmost opprobrium might have derived from the habit of villains in plays being costumed in black or perhaps from an elite unit of soldiers or palace guards in the later middle ages who dressed completely in black and terrorized the countryside, but these suggested derivations seem more fanciful than likely. One commentator suggests that ideally the word should be spat out with an emphatic sneer of contempt.

### **“this morning i set out for the village, found the afflicted family, summoned the tax collector, and generously handed him fifty-six *LIVRES*.”**

In pre-industrial France, the *livre* was the basic monetary unit, much as the euro is today. A middle-class family of two married workers and one child received a family income of approximately 380 *livres* a year to meet basic necessities amounting to approximately 336 *livres* a year. A pair of shoes cost about one *livre*, a jacket cost about ten *livres*, and a servant earned between 40 and 50 *livres* for a year’s work. In 1795 the *livre* was legally converted into the franc, at the rate of 81 *livres* to 80 francs, the silver franc being made to weigh exactly five grams.

### **“these very letters are a little *CASUS BELLII*.”**

The phrase “*casus belli*” is from the Latin (*casus*, occasion + *belli*, genitive of *bellum*, war), meaning “an event, occurrence, occasion, or combination of circumstances that cause war, or may be used to justify starting a war.”

### **“what you call happiness is nothing but a tumult in the mind, a tempest of passion.”**

In the “age of reason,” Enlightened men and women eschewed the passions as dangerous excesses and aberrations that obstructed the proper control of the mind by reason.

Civilization was said to rest on the ability to control the feelings and not give in to them. Control assured actions and responses that were reasonable and enlightened. At the same time, men and women of the Enlightenment were fascinated by the study of emotion and excess because explosions of the passions were said to shed light on the relationship between spirit and matter. One of the great pleasures of art, and especially of literature and the theater, was the display and diagnosis of the passions.

**“since you have abandoned the role of lover for that of don juan, you have become elusive.”**

The heartless seducer Don Juan has been a perennial presence on the world stage since first introduced in Tirso de Molina’s *El Burlador de Seville* (1613). Dozens of plays and operas, including Molière’s *Dom Juan* (1665), Shadwell’s *The Libertine* (1676), Goldoni’s *Don Giovanni Tenario* (1736) and Mozart’s *Don Giovanni* (1787), have celebrated and punished the 1001 seductions of this man who, as Kierkegaard wrote, “is a picture that is continually coming into view but does not attain form and consistency, an individual who is continually being formed but is never finished” (*Either/Or*, 1843).

**“i hope you are willing to present yourself between eight and nine o’clock in the morning at the gate of the bois de vincennes.”**

Private duels were outlawed in France in the 17th century, though they continued to be fought well into the 19th century. Because dueling was a criminal offense and duels were held in contempt of the law, combatants sought an out-of-the-way place for their battles. In the years before it was redesigned as a public park in the second half of the 19th century, the large wooded area on the eastern side of Paris known as the Bois de Vincennes provided a suitable venue for dueling as it was generally isolated and not patrolled by police.

# the french nobility

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*The society of pre-Revolutionary France was succinctly demarcated by titles and distinctions that served to delineate a strict hierarchy of class. The importance given these titles cannot be overstated, as they determined not only social precedence and prestige but also power and wealth. It was, after all, the excesses of legal, political, and financial privilege enjoyed hereditarily by a small minority of the population that led to the French Revolution of 1789 with its proclamation of “liberty, equality, and fraternity.”*

*The following are the hereditary titles of French nobility in hierarchical order under the king.*

A **duc** (duke, from the Latin *dux*, literally “leader”) was the governor of a province and usually a military leader. The title originally referred to the traditional leader of a subject people retaining a level of autonomy under the Frankish empire or one of its successor states. When the title of duke was introduced into England in the 14th century, it was by a king looking for a title to give his son that would outrank the existing earls, and so it was arranged.

A **comte** (count, from the Latin *comes*, literally “companion”) was originally an appointee of the king who exercised jurisdiction over a city and its immediate surroundings and over the lesser lords of the area. Later the title also referred to a high-ranking official in the king’s immediate entourage (also called palace counts or counts Palatine).

A **marquis** was, in the Frankish empire, the governor (or *comte*) of a march, a region at the boundaries of the kingdom that needed particular protection against foreign invasion. Soon this became an inherited hierarchical title.

A **vicomte** (viscount) was, originally, the appointed deputy of a count, who took over administrative and judicial functions when the count was away, or when the county itself was held directly by the king. When countships became hereditary and began to be divided up among heirs, *vicomte* was the title used by men who had inherited part of an old county. In southern France, old Burgundy, and northern Italy a *vicomte* sometimes had authority over barons within his viscounty.

A **baron** (a later title) is a direct vassal of the king, or of a major feudal lord like a duke or a count. Originally the title applied on an informal and extralegal basis to men who, by wealth in land and the strength of dependents it brought, disposed influence.

A **chevalier** (knight, from Latin *caballus*, “horse”) was not a title of French nobility but a residual reminder of the medieval warrior class. While an *Ordonnance* of 1629 prohibited anyone from using the title *chevalier* “who has not received it from our prede-

cessors or ourselves, or who does not deserve it by the eminence of his quality,” by the late 18th century *chevalier* had become an honorary title that was used rather loosely to refer to any gentleman of quality and nobility, which is how Diderot’s *Encyclopédie* used the term. Not only members of the titled nobility but even members of the families of the nobility, whether titled or not, and all members of the orders of knighthood of the king were entitled to be called *chevalier*.

**Lord** (*seigneur*) was not a title and someone who was only a *seigneur* was not titled. The term lord only meant “the possessor of a certain kind of property” in the feudal system, a mixture of actual real estate and rights over people (rents and fees could be collected from them, certain obligations could be imposed on them, etc.). The owner of a lordship, even a commoner, was its lord. All lordships disappeared when feudalism was abolished in 1789.

The honorary titles of **monsieur** and **madame**, reserved for members of the lesser nobility and prominent members of the middle class during the ancien régime, were replaced by the deliberately egalitarian term *citoyen/ne* (citizen) following the declaration of the Republic in 1792. By the late 1790s, opponents of the excesses of the Revolution revived the terms *monsieur* and *madame* to replace the social leveling implied by *citoyen/ne*.

Other members of the middle class during the ancien régime were called by their personal occupational titles or those of their husband. For example, Madame de Tourvel is called *Présidente* in Laclos’s novel, indicating that she is the wife of a presiding judge (*président*).

### **number of noble families in france**

In 1789, there were between 17,000 and 25,000 noble families in France (approximately 80,000–120,000 individuals in a population of 28 million). Of these, approximately a quarter had acquired nobility during the 18th century. About 1,200 nobles were tried and executed during the Terror following the Revolution of 1789 and another 30–40,000 emigrated.

# a select chronology of 18th-century france

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- 1713 Birth of Denis Diderot; Papal Bull *Unigenitus*, condemning the Jansenist Quesnel's *101 Propositions* and forcing a confrontation between the parliament and Louis xiv over control of French religious matters.
- 1715 Death of Louis xiv; beginning of the regency of Philippe d'Orléans, establishment of the *Polysynodie* (government by aristocratic councils), and revival of the French parliament's political role; Peace of Utrecht (1713–15) brings an end to Louis xiv's wars.
- 1718 Disbanding of the *Polysynodie*.
- 1721 Montesquieu, *Persian Letters*.
- 1723 Death of Philippe D'Orléans; end of the regency.
- 1725 Marriage of Louis xv and Marie Leczinska, daughter of Stanislaus, former king of Poland.
- 1726 Swift, *Gulliver's Travels*.
- 1730 Bull *Unigenitus* declared a law of state.
- 1733 Pope, *Essay on Man*.
- 1734 Voltaire, *Philosophical Letters on the English*.
- 1738 Voltaire, *Elements of Newton's Philosophy*; Crébillon  *fils*, *The Wayward Head and Heart*.
- 1739 Louis xv suppresses all printing establishments in 43 towns.
- 1740 Birth of Donatien Alphonse François Sade (Marquis de Sade); Hume, *Treatise on Human Nature*, Abbé Prévost, *The Story of a Modern Greek Woman*.
- 1741 Birth of Pierre-Ambroise-François Choderlos de Laclos.
- 1742 Crébillon  *fils*, *The Sofa*.
- 1745 Madame de Pompadour becomes titular mistress of Louis xv.
- 1746 Diderot, *Philosophical Thoughts*.
- 1747 Voltaire, *Zadig*, La Mettrie, *Machine Man*.



- 1748 Diderot, *The Indiscreet Jewels*; Montesquieu, *The Spirit of the Laws*; Hume, *Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*.
- 1749 Rousseau, *Discourse on the Arts and Sciences*.
- 1750 La Mettrie, *Anti-Seneca* and *Epicurean's System*.
- 1751 First two volumes of Diderot's *Encyclopédie* (1751–52).
- 1752 Voltaire, *Micromégas*.
- 1754 Condillac, *Treatise on Sensations*; Diderot, *On the Interpretation of Nature*.
- 1755 Rousseau, *Discourse on the Origins of Inequality*.
- 1756 Seven Years War (1756–63), colonial and continental struggle matching France and Austria against Prussia, England, and Russia.
- 1757 Hume, *The Natural History of Religion*; Damien attempts to assassinate Louis xv.
- 1758 Helvétius, *Of the Spirit*; Rousseau, *Letter to d'Alembert on the Theater*.
- 1759 Voltaire, *Candide*.
- 1761 Rousseau, *The New Héloïse*.
- 1762 Rousseau, *The Social Contract* and *Émile*, execution of Jean Calas, a Toulouse Protestant accused of murdering his father, defended by Voltaire and others in a great *cause célèbre*.
- 1763 Peace of Paris ends the Seven Years War, marking France's defeat as a colonial power and touching off a series of state reform movements in France and throughout Europe.
- 1764 Voltaire, *Philosophical Dictionary*; death of Madame de Pompadour.
- 1770 Ministry of Maupéou and Terray (1770–74), leading to the exile of the French parliaments (1771).
- 1774 Death of Louis xv; accession of Louis xvi; recall of the French parliaments; Turgot named Comptroller-General.
- 1776 Smith, *An Inquiry into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations*.
- 1778 Deaths of Voltaire and Rousseau; France enters the American War of Independence, severely taxing the fiscal resources of the monarchy.
- 1780 Lessing, *On the Education of the Human Race*.

- 1781 Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, Necker's *Compte Rendu*, published account of French finances, which vitalized public debate about the monarchy.
- 1782 Laclos, *Dangerous Liaisons*; Rousseau, posthumous publication of first six volumes of *Confessions*.
- 1783 Laclos, *On the Education of Women*; Kant, *Prolegomena to Any Future Metaphysics*; Treaty of Versailles ends War of American Independence.
- 1784 Death of Diderot; Beaumarchais, *The Marriage of Figaro*.
- 1785 Sade, *The 120 Days of Sodom, or the School of Libertinage* (published 1931); the Diamond Necklace Affair, the court scandal that further diminished Marie-Antoinette's reputation.
- 1787 Meeting of the Notables, an assembly convoked by Louis xvi to resolve the fiscal crisis in France; Edict of Toleration of French Protestants.
- 1788 Kant, *Critique of Practical Reason*; suspension and recall of French parliaments; convocation of Estates General, according to their 1614 format.
- 1789 Sieyes, *What Is the Third Estate?*, pamphlet advocating equal representation of the Third Estate; outbreak of the French Revolution.
- 1790 Kant, *Critique of Judgment*; Civil Constitution of the Clergy, confiscating church lands and turning the French clergy into civil servants.
- 1791 Sade, *Justine; or, the Misfortune of Virtue*; Declaration of Pilnitz (July), threatening the intervention of Austria and Prussia in defense of Louis xvi.
- 1793 Establishment of the Committee of Public Safety; Law Against Suspects and General Maximum (price controls) decreed; execution of Louis xvi as Citizen Louis (January) and of Marie-Antoinette (October); Condorcet, *Sketch of the Progress of the Human Mind*.
- 1794 Fall of Robespierre and end of the Terror (July).
- 1795 Rule of the Director begins (1795–99); death of the Bourbon claimant to the throne, Louis xvii.
- 1797 Sade, *The New Justine*, *Philosophy in the Bedroom*, and *The Story of Juliette*.
- 1799 Napoleon Bonaparte's coup d'état of 18 Brumaire, establishing himself as the "savior of the Revolution" and First Consul; Chateaubriand, *The Genius of Christianity*.

- 1800 Sade, *The Crimes of Love and Oxtiern, or the Miseries of Libertinage*.
- 1802 Concordat promulgated, temporary settlement of the church question in France; Napoleon named Consul for Life.
- 1803 Death of Laclos.
- 1804 Coronation of Napoleon; proclamation of the Empire; establishment of the Civil Code.
- 1808 Criminal Code proclaimed.
- 1810 Madame de Staël, *On Germany*; Penal Code proclaimed; Napoleon divorces Josephine, marries the Austrian Marie-Louise.
- 1814 Death of Sade; Constitutional Charter of Louis xviii.
- 1815 Abdication of Napoleon; restoration of Louis xviii.

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Excerpted from *The Libertine Reader: Eroticism and Enlightenment in Eighteenth-Century France*, edited by Michel Feher (Zone Books, 1997). © Urzone, Inc. 1997.

# questions to consider

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1. What is the relative hierarchy of the characters, and how does it change throughout the play? How can you tell who has higher status or more power? Does your sympathy for the characters change as their status changes?
2. How would you characterize the relationship between Merteuil and Valmont? Are they antagonists? Hero and heroine? Anti-hero and anti-heroine? What do you think happened between them before the play begins? How is Merteuil vulnerable to Valmont? Why do they embark upon, and follow through with, their dangerous game? What does each of them hope to accomplish? Do they?
3. If you have seen any of the film versions of *Les Liaisons Dangereuses* and/or read the novel, how is the structure of Giles Havergal's adaptation different? How is it similar? How does the epistolary structure of the play affect your experience of the story? How is the meaning of the words read/spoken by the actors confirmed or contradicted by the action onstage?
4. *Les Liaisons Dangereuses* is very much a novel about what people say to each other—but is there any place in the play where what is unsaid seems more important to you than what is said? How is silence expressed in the writing and the staging?
5. Love is compared to war, to religion, to theater, and to illness in the course of *Les Liaisons Dangereuses*. Which characters use these metaphors for love, and how? Why do you think a certain character is more or less likely to use a particular metaphor? Which of these metaphors seems more appropriate to describe love to you?
6. How is the notion of “education” used in *Les Liaisons Dangereuses*? Who educates whom, and how? Who benefits from that “education”?
7. How does Valmont succeed in “corrupting” Cécile? Why doesn't she protest his advances? Is she better or worse off after her experiences with him? How?
8. Consider the different roles played by women and men in *Les Liaisons Dangereuses*. Is one sex portrayed as more powerful or more skillful than the other? Do women use different techniques to get what they want from men, and vice versa? What are the different ways each uses language to get what he or she wants?

9. Laclos's novel was published in 1782 and very much of its time. How does Havergal's production for a.c.t. reflect the period in which the story is set? How and where does it transcend that historical period? Why do you think the director chose to allow the story to transcend its original period?

10. At the end of the play, who "wins"? (Does anyone?) Is anyone "redeemed" by the end of the play? How? Why do you think the play ends as it does? What do you think the author is trying to say about manipulation? About love? Do you think that message is still true today?

11. George Bernard Shaw once remarked that "a perfect love affair is one which is conducted entirely by post." What do you think he meant by that? After watching this play, what do you think of his statement? How might this story have been different if the characters had spoken directly, rather than written, to each other?

## for further information . . .

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