TILL DEATH DO THEM APART: A MARRIAGE FOUNDED ON DIVORCE IN LES LIAISONS DANGEREUSES

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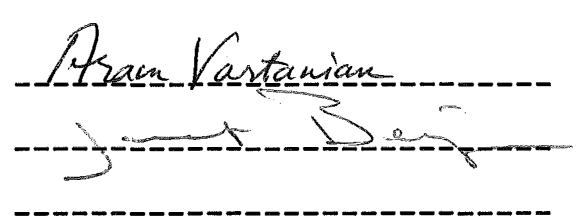

"Concealment and ego protection are of the essence of social intercourse."

--Everett Hughes

The liaison between the Vicomte de Valmont and the Marquise de Merteuil in Les liaisons dangereuses is central and of crucial importance in comprehending the genius of Laclos' epistolary masterpiece. Without examining the complexity of this rather troubling relationship, one can easily reduce the novel to a simple and ordinary account of Don Juanism, stripping it of its key element which, most surely, earned it a place on André Gide's list of favorites. The richly laden correspondence between Valmont and Merteuil unveils the pivotal relationship of the work, one in which is cradled a complex hierarchy of manipulation, fueled by obsession with revenge and passion for destruction. Like two poisonous spiders, the Vicomte and the Marquise methodically weave an intricate web which ultimately entangles each of the novel's characters, while enveloping each subplot in a silken net of carefully measured cunning. It is through this web that is born the unparalleled power of Valmont and Merteuil as monarchs of evil. As the progressive weight of their victims gradually strains its complex architecture, the couple can no longer maintain the delicate balance on which their dangerous liaison depends. In keeping with their "poisonous" nature, the monarchs finally devour each other, their webs ultimately becoming their

battleground and the vestige of a self-imposed entanglement. Only in attempting to penetrate, to "unravel" this web, can one truly appreciate the literary **grandeur** of Laclos' **chef-d'oeuvre** which, however, also brings to light several challenging problems, because the dismantling perpetuates ambiguity and necessitates hypothesis. How was it ever possible for so fragile a relationship to have come into being in the first place? If such a tenuous relationship was possible, how could it survive in such a form for so long? Where does the first area of weakness in the Valmont-Merteuil web reveal itself? After the **déclaration de guerre** of Merteuil and subsequent combat, was survival possible on the part of either of the warring parties or did the novel have to end with a mutual cancellation, a "holocaust" of the protagonists?

Before attempting an answer to any of these questions, the supreme importance of the Merteuil-Valmont liaison must first be established. How, though, is one to measure the enormity of the effects of this epistolary communication between the Vicomte and the Marquise? In a "letter-defined" novel, such as this one, protagonists are obviously created and defined by the very letters which they write, thereby contributing

to, if not exclusively establishing, their own substance and their own fictions. It is similarly evident that in this epistolarily created world of Les liaisons dangereuses, escape from the finely attuned scrutiny of the cruel Valmont-Merteuil couple is impossible; they seem to influence everyone and every situation, and if they do not do so outwardly, they make it their duty so to do behind the scenes. In his study of the novel, Ronald Rosbottom identifies what he considers to be the four central themes, or "stories" of the novel: the seduction of Cécile and the project to dishonor Gercourt; the seduction of the Présidente de Tourvel; Valmont and Merteuil's effort to make amends and the fruitlessness of this endeavor at the novel's end; the reconstruction, the sequencing, and the publication of the three preceding "stories," in other words, the Liaison dangereuses' composition. (54) According to Rosbottom, the third "story" in his proposed sequence, the one in which only Valmont and Merteuil feature, is the most rich in meaning, thus the novel's most significant. Aram Vartanian agrees:

> It is apparent to the reader of Les liaisons dangereuses that the strange relationship of Valmont and the Marquise de Merteuil must hold the key to the interpretation of the novel. Not only does this **entente infernale** initiate and control the events that take place, as well as decide the destinies of the other characters, but it serves as the focus for whatever, in Laclos' masterpiece of transparent analysis, remains murky, obscure, unexplained, or latent (172).

Indeed, their «entente» dominates Laclos' work. Jean-Luc Seylaz, correspondingly, accords that the liaisons unveiled to the reader owe their «unité organique» to the Valmont-Merteuil «complicité» (27).

While the couple mastermind the events of Les liaisons dangereuses, their "conspiracy" appears, from the novel's first letter, most unusual and of highly uncertain solidity.

> La complicité qui unit Mme de Merteuil et Valmont apparaît donc dès le début comme perilleuse, leur amitié comme menacée. Il suffit, pour s'en convaincre, de relire les premières lettres qu'ils échangent. Elles frappent par le ton de persiflage, un mélange de badinage et de violence. Malgré l'ironie dont elle les enveloppe, ce sont des ordres que Mme de Merteuil prétend donner à Valmont, c'est une puissance qu'elle veut exercer sur lui ou lui faire avouer. Et, sur le même ton, c'est un refus très net que lui oppose Valmont (Seylaz 41).

But Merteuil does not exclusively give orders to Valmont. The Vicomte, himself, neither exclusively refuses to obey them nor always follows them out. This central "story" does not depend entirely on an awkward onesidedness. Instead, while flavored by a remarkable common taste for power, for competition, even for conquest, the Valmont-Merteuil liaison reflects a certain equivalence, a tenuous equilibrium where the respective roles of the protagonists are complementary; each heeds the suggestions and advice of the other, each

accomplishes what is suggested, thereby answering the wishes, be they only alluded to indirectly, of the person that he or she collaborates with. In response to a letter filled with the demands of Valmont, the Marquise writes:

> Je n'ai pas perdu mon temps depuis votre dernière lettre, et j'ai dit comme l'architecte athénien: «Ce qu'il a dit, je le ferai» (Letter LXIII).

Here is the same Marquise, this «fleur suprême, fleur monstrueuse...du don-juanisme féminin du XVIIIe siècle...sans ascendance ni postérité romanesques» (Georges Daniel 15), who appears so inflexible and self-directed in her first letter; while using her correspondence to her advantage, she exposes, nonetheless, her sensitivity, albeit diluted by her boasting, to outside suggestions and her capacity for cooperation. The Valmont-Merteuil union is thus balanced and holds potential for an equal exchange. Henri Duranton elucidates the epistolary complicity in which is "defined", "exposed," the true personalities of these **libertins**, their correspondence serving three purposes: the communication of pure and simple information, transmission of orders or advice, and announcements of victory (140). Merteuil sums up and reinforces the importance of their letter writing when she points out:

> ...vous n'ignorez pas que dans les affaires

> importantes, on ne reçoit de preuves que par écrit (Letter XX).

And Seylaz adds:

> L'originalité de Laclos, c'est d'avoir donné une valeur dramatique à la composition par lettres, d'avoir fait de ces lettres l'étoffe même du roman et d'avoir réalisé ainsi, entre le sujet du livre et le monde de narration, un accord si étroit que ce monde en devient non seulement vraisemblable mais nécessaire. Et de ce point de vue, le coup de maître, c'est d'avoir conçu l'intrigue comme une espèce de toile d'araignée que Mme de Merteuil tisse à coup de lettres; c'est surtout l'invention du couple Valmont-Merteuil (19-20).

Perhaps it is accurate to consider that the Marquise spins the initial web and owes a large degree of its upkeep to her partner in crime, the Vicomte. In any case, their world gains definition only through their insidious correspondence, as is demonstrated by Letter C from Valmont to Mme de Merteuil:

> ...je parle à quelqu'un qui m'entend, et non aux automates près de qui je végète depuis ce matin. En vérité, plus je vais, et plus je suis tenté de croire qu'il n'y a que vous et moi dans le monde, qui valions quelque chose.

Only through the optic of the «entente infernale», the "deformed symbiosis" symptomatic of the primary liaison, can the letters of Mme de Volanges, Danceny, Cécile, la Présidente, of all the secondary characters, the satellites of the Vicomte and the Marquise, their pawns and victims in the complicated and sticky plot, be put in their true and miserable context.

In attempting to demystify this dominant couple, the lack of stability of their liaison becomes readily apparent. Theirs is not the case of two superpowers working together in unison to maintain or increase their reign over their chosen victims. No, these two rivals define themselves primarily by their differences, their efforts to boast, to outdo both those whom they see beneath them and each other. The deceptive friendship which seems to unite Valmont and Merteuil is based, disturbingly, on an ambiguous game which courts conflict and disaster (Seylaz 42). While proclaiming an «amitié inviolable» (Letter XV) theirs is a relationship based on a peculiar marriage of sentimental love, hate, and ruthless competition, always enshrouded by the omnipresent danger of destruction, of absolute and total retaliation should either partner ill-fatedly overstep his or her precarious boundaries.

> L'amour, la haine, vous n'avez qu'à choisir,
> tout couche sous le même toit; et vous pouvez,
> doublant votre existence, carresser d'une main
> et frapper de l'autre (Letter LXXIV).

explains the Vicomte to Merteuil. To which he adds:

> ...je serai ou votre amant ou votre ennemi....
> il vaut mieux m'avoir pour ami que pour ennemi
> (Letters CLIII, CLVIII).

Indeed, he is quite correct.

Nor should the extreme stubbornness of both characters be overlooked; neither the Marquise nor the

Vicomte ever wants to, or, more particularly, with regard to their personalities, is ever able to easily accept compromise. This only adds to the tension which crowns their correspondence. At the same time that neither willingly nor consciously gives in to the other, in order for their «entente» to enjoy any measure of survival, each partner has to allow for some degree of flexibility. It does indeed seem that both have sense enough to recognize where to compromise, where to accept cooperation; unless such a move were to reveal a serious crumbling of the protective walls surrounding each of the protagonist's veritable power, that which they rely upon for character definition, for their very identity, each is willing to budge, if pushed hard enough. Merteuil writes: «conquérir est notre destin» (Letter IV); she draws attention to the plural nature, the common goal of her and Valmont's existence, thereby revealing, too, the insurmountable obstacle which leads directly to the all-out war which will envelop and destroy them both later. How else can the Marquise's "sacrifices" be explained without recognition of her "sensitivity" to, her realization of, the necessity of certain accomodations, albeit very small and without much significance?

> En vérité, Vicomte, vous êtes insupportable. Vous me traitez avec autant de légèreté que si j'étais votre maîtresse. Savez-vous que je me fâcherai, et que j'ai dans ce moment

> une humeur effroyable?...Vous êtes cause que je suis arrivée **indécemment** tard chez madame de Volanges, et que toutes les femmes m'ont trouvée **merveilleuse**....A présent il est une heure du matin, et au lieu de me coucher, comme j'en meurs d'envie, il faut que je vous écrive une longue lettre, qui va redoubler mon sommeil par l'ennui qu'elle me causera (Letter LI).

Would such a "sacrifice", admittedly slight, ever be possible if the Marquise were truly an unbudgeable tyrant? It is doubtful. Her passion for «la gloire de la défense» and «le plaisir de la défaite» (Letter X) does have limits. She is well aware of the shared nature of the web that she and the Vicomte have started to spin and recognizes the necessity for some slack in times of challenge.

Having now established the importance and central nature of this perilous liaison between Valmont and Merteuil, how can its apparent "longevity" be explained? Why does this unstable couple survive as a team so long? It seems that they are inseparable, even after the termination of their love affair that preceded the events of the novel itself. What do the Vicomte and the Marquise gain in "giving" themselves one to the other in this epistolary fashion? Important to keep in mind is Letter C in which Valmont admits that only the Marquise truly "understands" him. Only she has a "worth" in his world. Already in this letter he reveals his tendancy

to classify, to evaluate everyone. In his universe it is only the Marquise who "counts" besides himself, who gives him «vigueur». Merteuil, too, recognizes Valmont's strength, is troubled by it, and strives to prove herself above it.

> Séduite par votre réputation, il me semblait que vous manquiez à ma gloire; je brûlais de vous combattre corps à corps (Letter LXXXI).

Her admission here already announces the catastrophic **dénouement** of their liaison and similarly reinforces the danger which is married to her seemingly perpetual fascination for the Vicomte. Like Duranton, Madeleine Therrien explains the Valmont-Merteuil relationship in the following manner:

> Les deux héros vivent sous le regard l'un de l'autre; l'essentiel pour eux réside dans l'image que chacun donne de lui-même à l'autre ....Les deux héros ont donc besoin de la confirmation de leur puissance et de leur force dans les yeux du témoin, ce miroir, soit un être de mérite égal, et non pas un inférieur qu'ils n'auraient eu aucune peine à éblouir (154-55).

When Valmont writes «Je suis sûr que vous admireriez ma prudence» (Letter VI), the Marquise is almost obliged to respond that she admires him. Whether the Vicomte is really sure of her admiration or not, the important thing to realize is that he is weakened by revealing his need for assurance. Only after receipt of much sought confirmations by way of a mirror-type process can Valmont really admire himself. According to Dianne

Alstad:

> Since the awareness and superior intelligence of this couple alienate them from the rest of society, they depend on each other for understanding and approval, each serving as a mirror for the other's narcissism (156).

Only through Merteuil, his self-agrandizing "sounding board," is Valmont capable of peace, of true self-equilibration.

Although a partner in this extraordinarily manipulative duo, does Merteuil profit in the same fashion as Valmont? Besides the «regard de l'autre», what can these two **libertins** possibly gain from it? Surely both have different needs, the fulfilment of which cannot categorically be assumed time after time from the complicated letter exchanging process in which they are involved. Maybe it is precisely the particular needs of each partner, if of course such needs do exist, that help to account for the unusually long duration of their state of complicity. It is, indeed, true that the Marquise is much different from her Vicomte, who can, parading in the spotlight of his rather "public" role as **libertin**, attain a sort of "social" self glory which results from his many successes as a renowned and formidable seducer of women. But the Marquise, for her part, is forced to work in secret, "behind the scenes," so to speak, which, according to Therrien's analysis, is

quite obviously a lot more difficult (154). Right up to the cataclysmic ending, Merteuil manages, somehow, to keep her public reputation, as a virtuous and perfectly respectable woman of society, intact, all this despite her admissions to the contrary, her often overly enthusiastic outpourings of pride shared secretly with the Vicomte. Because she is restricted, in the social étiquette of her time, from the **libertin** advantage which is «tirer une gloire publique de ses faits d'arme» (Therrien), her need for a secret "witness" is easily explained. What is this étiquette under which she is so careful to act and react? Why is she so afraid to publicly reveal her meticulousness, her careful calculations, which, after all, are only parallel to those of her rather more public rival and confidant? Anne Jaton explains that Valmont and Merteuil's social situations, their positions in their "world" are «en revanche diamétralement opposé[es]». Libertine conduct is not acceptable from women, thus the Marquise's eagerness to hide her real self from the eye of the «grand public».

> Le libertinage féminin, qui n'est apparemment pas plus audacieux, a une puissance de scandale plus grande et représente une attaque plus virulente contre l'intégrité de l'ordre social ....[Il] apparaît comme l'ombre inquiétante du libertinage masculin: plus solitaire, plus audacieux et plus secret, il est intuitivement ressenti comme plus dangereux et comme digne de plus grands châtiments (Jaton 153,155).

For his part, as **libertin**, Valmont has no need to disguise his conquests:

> C'est un héros à sa manière; son prestige dépend du nombre et de la qualité de ses victimes. Chez lui, pas besoin de masque, ses faits d'armes sont publics. Le libertinage est donc le moyen de briller dans le monde; et aussi de démontrer sa supériorité (Therrien 75).

But if the Vicomte is permitted to expose himself in such a way, why then does he somehow feel the need to confide, in the secret fashion that he does, in someone else? Evidently he is a recognized seducer, his past conquests public knowledge. Indeed it seems that he has no rivals, no secrets to hide. Could there exist something more prestigious for the Vicomte to gain? What does such a **liaison dangereuse** hold for him? Where the public's respect amounts only to admiration by inferiors, attention by the Marquise inspires him. Playing to Merteuil, Valmont continually strives to outdo himself, the result being his satisfying a burning desire to experiment where no one has dared before (Therrien 155). Only in collaborating secretly, in surpassing, bypassing the rules of this world of «automates», can Valmont outdo himself. The Valmont-Merteuil "marriage" is founded, so it appears, on a reciprocity, a symbiotic exchange from which both **libertins** profit. In this mutual profit, this interdependence, is hidden the key to demystifying their

relationship's lengthy duration.

Although, given its questionable foundations, this relationship lasts far longer than might be expected, it is a quest for personal profit that artificially maintains and bolsters it. Its survival can only be illusory, but both Valmont and Merteuil cling to this illusion, refusing to recognize its hopelessly flawed artificiality. Nevertheless, as Alstad observes:

> The accomplices [Valmont and Merteuil] are honest with themselves and with each other, scornfully rejecting all comforting illusions; the others, because they do not recognize their own illusions, are vulnerable to exploitation by those who outwardly profess the same ideas (157).

This undoubtably rings true in the cases of Cécile Volanges, la Présidente, le Chevalier Danceny, and the host of other "victims" of the ruthless central couple, who are subject to blindness by illusion. But do Valmont and Merteuil avoid the same trap? Do they not, too, exhibit the same degree of **naïveté** regarding their own highly problematic liaison? How is it that this couple, apparently so immune to illusions, ignore their deep incapacity to unite together, to maintain so artificial an «entente»? By not recognizing the deceptive calm, the tempestuous reality, they only postpone the inevitable, their unavoidable war. Indeed, so basic is this denial, so serious this handicap, that

it represents, rather, their leaning to convenient mutual lying; they are thus plunged into an abyss in which they, too, flail helplessly as victims of their own shared illusions. Like Alstad, D.Coward also seems to ignore this fundamental and destabilizing flaw.

> They like results and they select their weapons out of the illusions which comfort mankind (433).

He is correct but fails to recognize the parallel illusion on the parts of the Vicomte and Marquise when they profit from the illusions of others. Theirs is a mutual comfort, a gradual paralysis.

Beyond the nature itself of the liaison, quite possibly the most striking example of this tendency to illusion is manifested in the person of the Marquise de Merteuil. While recognizing the danger of exposing herself to everyone in her **cabale**, she seems not to realize that in writing letters, in leaving permanent epistolary traces, she risks fatally exposing herself. It would be far better for her to scorn everybody, even those through whom she might feel the inclination to bolster her self-esteem, those people whose encouragement and attention she might feel inclined to seek for "self-validation." Merteuil strives to avoid, on the one hand, the danger of self-compromise in front of the «grand public». On the other hand, however,

recognizing the tendency of certain acquaintances to gossip, she is keenly aware that those letters she writes to "inferiors" will doubtfully retain their private nature. Being the cunning woman that she is, Merteuil doesn't hesitate to profit from time to time from this realization, this social reality:

> C'est à ma solitude que vous devez cette longue lettre. J'en écrirai une à madame de Volanges, dont sûrement elle fera lecture publique et où vous verrez cette histoire telle qu'il faut la raconter (Letter LXXXV).

But how is it possible to share secrets without running the risk of betrayal? Peter Conroy observes:

> The dangers of reading are then legion and subtle. Both Valmont and Merteuil know well how traces can implicate their author and deceive their reader (38).

The Marquise is therefore extremely careful to substantially distance herself from the «automates» of her world, but she never questions the loyalty of her most private ally.

> Malgré leur séparation, ils continuent de maintenir entre eux un climat de mutuelle confiance, qui justifie leur correspondance à coeur ouvert....Valmont la sauve....A lui, qui est en outre le juge le plus averti, on peut tout dire sans danger (Duranton 127, 139).

Is this really true? Can Merteuil truly and unquestionably confide one hundred percent in Valmont?

> Pour Valmont seul, la marquise, le soir, enlève son masque. Elle se montre à lui dans sa réalité, la plus scabreuse. Elle lui confie ses exploits galants, ses projets les plus scandaleux

(René Pomeau 156).

Is this not folly? As has already been mentioned, in Valmont can be seen the role of "mirror." But shouldn't this mirror be mistrusted? Is the reflection in which the Marquise finds solace not flawed? Her complete and utter confidence does, indeed, seems self-intoxicating and dangerous.

> In the end, Merteuil is defeated precisely by this unwanted and unintended reader whom she has always feared and whom she has valiantly but in vain tried to escape. The very same letters which establish the high-water mark of her libertine conduct also contain the seeds of her defeat....[Merteuil's] failures to control her ultimate and unforseen readers cause her downfall....In purely literary and structural terms, Merteuil's defeat comes in the form of these unwanted readers who intrude into the private space of her correspondence and who were totally unforseen when she wrote these letters (Conroy 76, 78).

Having completely stripped herself (Vartanian 179) in her letters to Valmont, it is the Vicomte, the only fully sympathetic and understanding party, who exposes her and pushes her to her demise. Her confident transforms her most intimate secrets into the arms with which he socially "rapes" her in front of her public.

In the same manner Valmont, too, is misled and finds himself ultimately suffocated by an illusion of sorts. While he tremendously admires this woman who strives to equal him, the Marquise's mysterious and

uniquely dangerous manner of conquest intrigues him. He respects her, adores her, while fully fearing her. Without understanding her, he respects her cruelty:

> C'est la virtuosité dans le libertinage et le manque de scrupules qu'il respecte en elle et qu'il estime dangereux. Il sait qu'elle ne reculerait devant rien pour porter un coup mortel à ceux qui ont eu le malheur de lui déplaire, à Gercourt, à Mme de Tourvel (Daniel 61).

But he never believes himself to figure so prominently on the list of victims before whom the Marquise would never retreat. He considers himself excluded from her vicious but so easily admired cruelty.

> Il ne sent pas le noeud coulant de l'amour-propre qu'elle vient si adroitement de passer à son cou. Et même à la veille d'être étranglé...il ne se rendra pas compte que le coup qui l'atteint est le fruit d'une longue pré-méditation (62).

When exactly does Merteuil begin passing this stifling "noose" around the Vicomte's neck? At what moment in their epistolary sharing does the "symbiotic mirroring," the mutual confidence metamorphose into a less tolerable danger? At which level does the "artificial" and "illusory" nature of the liaison between Valmont and Merteuil peter out and give way to the abrupt realization of its emptiness, its total lack of value, its incredibly harsh starkness?

Due to the inherent instability of the relationship from its genesis, some sort of change, some shift to

harsher but more truthful measures is inevitable. The source of weakness, the fatal flaw seems, moreover, couched at the very base of the socially destructive but not very solid web wickedly spun in synchrony by the poisonous team of the Vicomte and the Marquise. There exists, more particularly, a very definite change after a certain point in the novel, which demonstrates the onset of a severe and chilling blow to their orchestrated evil. Where and why does this change occur so dramatically? Vartanian argues that Merteuil's declaration of war represents an unfortunate error on her part. He continues:

> What follows makes it plain that the Marquise, whose lucid calculations we have up to now admired, is engaged in a colossal blunder. When Valmont succeeds in temporarily breaking up her intrigue with Danceny, and rather boorishly insists that she has no choice but to renew their liaison, she loses her head. She promptly divulges to Danceny Valmont's betrayal of him and the seduction of Cécile--an action which by its impulsiveness is completely inconsistent with all the principles she has observed until then....the Marquise's reprisal is completely senseless (174).

It is certainly arguable that up until this point of "crisis" Merteuil demonstrates an exemplary lucidity which might only be reduced by her self-effacing letters to Valmont, her unquestionable confidence in his faithfulness. She praises her rival in writing: «Votre conduite est un chef-d'oeuvre de prudence» (Letter XXXIIII). One can only suppose that the Marquise speaks

from experience, and her emphasizing to Valmont (Letter CVI) «de ne rien laisser entre ses mains qui puisse [les] compromettre» confirms her intolerance of negligence. Confirmation of her unparalleled care occurs in letter LXXVI, a "mirroring" of Merteuil's praises for the Vicomte in letter XXXIII, where Valmont describes her as his beautiful friend «dont la conduite est un chef-d'oeuvre». Why and how indeed does Merteuil suddenly fall victim to such imprudence? In letter CXXIX Valmont ponders the source of «ce ton d'aigreur et de persiflage» which "reigns" in her last letter to him. Even before then he remarks:

> Tant que j'étais auprès de vous, nous n'avions jamais qu'un même sentiment, une même façon de voir; et...je ne vous vois plus, nous ne sommes plus du même avis sur rien (Letter CXV)

It appears, furthermore, that these problems, the "strained relations" between the Vicomte and the Marquise quite often avert catastrophe. Consider, for example, Valmont's observations in letter CXXXIII:

> Nos liens ont été dénoués, et non pas rompus; notre prétendue rupture ne fut qu'une erreur de notre imagination: nos sentiments, nos intérêts, n'en sont pas moins restés unis.

But the crisis can only be postponed; complete and total rupture of all ties between Merteuil and Valmont is unavoidable.

> The catastrophe is precipitated as their philosophical detachment disappears under an upsurge of emotion (Coward 436).

Victims now of the rampant siege of their emotions, the Vicomte and Marquise are no longer in control of themselves. Their self-spun "web" loses its wicked charm. Coexistence and cooperation have suddenly become intolerable.

> ...it may be argued that Valmont and Mme de Merteuil, by attempting to subject their affective being to rigid intellectual controls, are responsible for their own downfall, their vanity and sense of superiority are ultimately self-destructive (Coward 435).

Whereas in most "normal" love relationships a small degree of vanity, of pride, is often healthy, in the Merteuil-Valmont liaison their heightened self-awareness seems artificially preeminent, magnified, in fact, by the epistolary process by which the protagonists define themselves, as a blindingly destructive mutual narcissism. Gide, in his introduction to the novel, explains:

> In each of these characters in varying degrees is manifested a basic strain of diabolical pride intermingled with the pursuit of sensual satisfaction, a ferocious self-love and vanity, a coldheartedness linked with refinement of desire, and that is why they soon go so far as to introduce pure evil, cruelty, criminal villainy, even into the gentlest of propensities, the tenderest of weaknesses.

Important to recognize is that the protagonists themselves are well aware of, admit, even justify their

narcissism. Therrien goes so far as to point out:

> ...la nature même de leur entreprise
> est de démontrer leur excellence (16).

In fact this is the very problem of the liaison; it is founded upon narcissism.

> Le problème des relations Merteuil-Valmont,
> c'est celui de l'estime et de la fidélité
> non à un autre, mais à soi-même....
> (André and Yvette Delmas 405)

What is it that this «soi-même» really represents? Does it not engender an **overblown**, stretched, multi-faceted pride? According to Sigmund Freud's study of the narcissistic "type," a person may love what he himself is, what he himself was, what he himself would like to be, or someone who was once part of himself ("On Narcissism: an Introduction", 90). Is it not amply true that both Valmont and Merteuil exemplify all four of these traits? Letters of conquest, for example, past, current, or planned, consistently reveal the first three. Recall, too, that, in addition to Merteuil and Valmont's hideous combination of mutual teasing, challenging, and praise, in the past they were lovers, hence the presence of the fourth, if not most dangerous, trait. What more perfect textbook examples could Freud have employed than their observations, their epistolarized "case histories," liberally furnished at that!

It is interesting to note, in addition, that correspondence itself is symptomatic of a curious self-valorization. What is a letter if not a written testament of the sender's conviction of some value which will personally engage his or her reader? When speaking of a new adventure with which to engage the Vicomte, Merteuil writes:

> Elle est digne d'un héros...ce sera enfin une **rouerie** de plus à mettre dans vos Mémoires, car je veux qu'ils soient imprimés un jour, et je me charge de les écrire (Letter II).

But Valmont's letters themselves are his **Mémoires**. He has no need for her almost "twisted pride" (again a manifestation of the "symbiotic mirroring" inherent in their relationship), for his letters, like those of the Marquise, offer a permanent recording of personalized events, of triumphs and torments, a bitingly honest and unfolding biographical phenomenon.

> Valmont se conçoit bien comme Valmont. Il projette devant lui une représentation de lui-même faite d'un ton particulier, de lucidité, de désinvolture et de cynisme, très concrète pour le lecteur; et les moyens qu'il emploie pour se conformer à cette image sont ceux que Laclos suggère au lecteur pour ressembler à Valmont. Cette fascination par son personnage est la seule passion véritable du vicomte....
> (André Malraux 34)

Besides the role of letters in general as they contribute to the narcissistic exchange between sender and reader, the case of the protagonists of Les liaisons

dangereuses is, interestingly, doubly symptomatic of this overblown pride. The couple are acutely aware of the dangers of being observed, of their plots being discovered, let alone foiled, by members of the less intimately involved «grand public». For Merteuil and Valmont, closely guarded letters serve, in addition to being narcissistic self-written testaments of their own accomplishments, warnings, or desires, as a means by which to bypass and, in their own way, to foil this intruding and unworthy public.

Consistent with its foundation upon a shared narcissism, an inevitable crisis in the Valmont-Merteuil liaison seems perfectly plausible, if not necessary. Kernberg's detailed analysis of the "creative self" approaches the already discussed self-valorization of narcissists with a new twist:

> ...self-hatred is more dominant in the narcissist than is self-love. Narcissists have very low opinions of themselves and this is why they constantly seek approbation. They consider themselves unworthy and unloveable, and seek constantly to hide this fact from themselves by trying to get the outside world [in this case a very "inside," individualized world] to proclaim them unique, extraordinary, great (12).

His continuing observation concerning the need for destruction, an almost pre-programmed "outdoing" of outsiders, of "competition" to the self, is no less applicable to the case in Les liaisons dangereuses:

> But beyond that they suffer from intense, unconscious envy that makes them want to spoil, deprecate and degrade what others have and they lack, particularly others' capacity to give and receive love.

But why this sudden lurch forward to destruction? What causes its activation, its **mise en marche**? Why, indeed, in the case of Valmont and Merteuil, does the "crisis" arrive so suddenly? According to Duranton, the final catastrophe is:

> la conséquence de la jalousie de Merteuil et du désespoir de Valmont, berné par la Marquise et dépossédé d'un amour auquel sa vanité l'a fait renoncer (127-28).

In order for all-out war to ultimately result from the Valmont-Merteuil liaison, all that is necessary is for either the Vicomte or the Marquise to begin holding a third person, an "outsider" in esteem (Dorothy Thelander 50); by so stretching his trust, the guilty party "betrays" the fragile equilibrium incarnate in the secret two-way conspiracy, thereby irreparably "diluting" or damaging it.

> At the same time, Valmont has injured the pride of Mme de Merteuil, not only preferring Mme de Tourvel, but by escaping from her control and by making her feel the humiliation of being involved in a situation which she has not engineered herself. It is not out of caprice or boredom or her customary disinterested callousness, but out of resentment that she provokes him. By taking Danceny as a lover, she hopes to reassert her power and detachment: in fact, she has done no more than lose her temper (Coward 436).

Is the fact that Merteuil tries to regain her dominant position, that she starts treating Valmont as she does all her previous lovers (Pomeau 157), the real catastrophe in question here? When Valmont observes that the Marquise "loses her head," is he referring to Merteuil's having chosen Danceny as a lover? This seems doubtful. It appears, rather, that the Marquise exhibits several levels of anger; Valmont's verbal betrayal, which we assume was either shown or mentioned to Merteuil, his description of her to Danceny as «une femme parfaitement **usagée**» (Letter CLV), unleashes her multi-dimensional fury and forces their liaison quickly and directly to its catastrophic dissolution at the novel's end. Merteuil's already perilous ties with the Vicomte are endangered, then patched up, then again threatened by her jealousy, and ultimately severed when she "unmasks" the Vicomte to Danceny. Vartanian sees this final «négligeance» of the Marquise as her most serious and most difficult to interpret:

> ...our fascination with the Valmont-Merteuil exchange derives much of its force from a curiosity, a tantalizing uncertainty which, instead of growing less and less through observing their concerted intrigues, increases as we get to know them better, until, as the novel approaches its catastrophic ending, the enigma is greater than ever (172).

So as to respond to Seylaz who explains

> ...voici que pour les meneurs du jeu, pour ceux qui ont paru longtemps les plus lucides, les plus cyniques, par conséquent les plus

> «ouverts», nous ne saurons jamais pour finir ce qu'ils étaient exactement (45),

Vartanian proposes an "unveiling" of the troubling mystery which seems to enshroud this treacherous duplicity. Letter CLIII announces the «moment de la franchise» in which the Marquise loses all control. For a moment whose catastrophic implications resound right to the novel's end, Merteuil forgets that she is inferior, unequal to the men who dominate her world. Her «bisexualité curieuse», her personification of an "equivalence," of a "confusion" or dangerous "mixing" of sexual boundaries, which has, previously in the novel, characterized her "dominance," her mastery and control over men, finally trips her up and destroys her. This "mistaken identity," this "blindness" nullifies the couple's lucidity (Vartanian 178). To the already tenous links in the "web" that they have spun, to the plurality of "illusions" which characterize their liaison, is now added the «illusion sexuelle», this devastating, penultimate blow.

But the sudden change, the true crisis in Les liaisons dangereuses might also be explained through Merteuil's reaction to Valmont's **libertinage.** In the Marquise's Letter XX to the Vicomte, she promises him:

> Aussitôt que vous aurez eu votre belle dévote, que vous pourrez m'en fournir une preuve, venez, et je suis à vous.

As if to respond to the "challenge" of the Marquise, Valmont succeeds, finally, in "having" the Présidente, and the Marquise is painfully aware of it. As a consequence, a reaction, perhaps, to her surprise at the Vicomte's "conquest," she involves herself with Danceny who might serve, for her, as a "protective screen" by which to ward off the increasingly insistent demands of Valmont. She is completely thrown off balance the moment that she realizes the Vicomte's success in "penetrating" her "screen."

> ...Mme de Merteuil sees herself at the edge of a trap of her own making, but of whose danger she has become conscious much too late to find a way out....Valmont...shows no inclination to leave her an avenue of escape, the Marquise feels cornered, loses her head, and lashes out in blind fury with the retaliatory action that will precipitate their mutual ruin (Vartanian 180).

But it is important to bear in mind that Merteuil has built this dangerous trap for herself. Valmont has done nothing more than earn his just "reward," which the Marquise has promised him, "winning out", as it were, in the challenge he sees laid before him in her Letter XX. It appears, consequently, that this "suicide" of the Marquise is premeditated. She is not ruined by her love, by her «faiblesse sensuelle» for the Chevalier de Danceny; in fact, comparatively speaking, she shows barely any interest for him at all. Instead, she plans things in such a way that she "encloses," shelters

herself from her true, but indomitable feelings for the Vicomte.

> She is heading for destruction by rigidly adhering to this course, for to do otherwise would be to succumb to her own heart and Valmont's demands to take up with her again. To maintain her autonomy and her "persona," the Marquise knows she must not allow this to occur, and she chooses Danceny as the pretext to assure the irrevocable split between Valmont and her
> (Suellen Diaconoff 96).

However in so reacting, she is destroyed by her **libertinage**, by her refusal to submit to her "inferior" role as woman.

> The locatable crime for which she is punished...is usurping the masculine prerogative, to make advances. But more generally, she is banished and silenced for undervaluing the privileged signifiers of eighteenth-century fiction and sociality
> (Nancy Miller 137).

The Marquise simply loses sight of her sexual "role" in the world. Her "bisexuality" pushes her to present herself as a "masculine hero," as the "desiring" party, not the "desired" party, her confusion ultimately resulting in disaster. At the novel's end she isn't even desired; she is destroyed completely without having even tasted seduction.

Following the **dénouement** are there **any** survivors, **any** victors, or does the Valmont-Merteuil conspiracy result in complete and utter destruction for all involved? Permanently set in the "ruthlessness" mode

and having gone haywire not by straying from its carefully planned course of action but by faithfully executing what it was programmed to do, does the «merveilleuse machine» (Duranton 143) operate solely with a view to the double elimination of Valmont and Merteuil? Psychologically and dramatically, since their liaison has "soured," is it, as Coward claims (434-5), plausible and even necessary that both protagonists fail? Is the ruin of one or other or both inescapable? Should the cruel ending to the novel be interpreted as proof of Valmont's observation in an early letter when he writes: «conquérir est notre destin» (Letter IV)? If the Vicomte and the Marquise must conquer, is it not essential that they destroy each other, thereby living up to their «destins», doubly conquering and manifesting a double defeat? The Vicomte, in dying after he is fatally wounded in his duel with Danceny, is obviously defeated. And Merteuil is punished in the end, too, when her **libertinage** is exposed to all those from whom her private letters to the Vicomte had, up until this point, guarded her disgraceful secret. She is destroyed when she experiences social, financial, and even physical, "bankrupcy." But can a free comparison rightfully be drawn from these two downfalls, these two dangerous and final "symptoms" of the key liaison of Laclos' work? Is Valmont's "undoing," for example, less

intense, less devastating than that of his rival? Perhaps it is useful first to consider the Marquise's punishment for her wickedness. According to Thelander, Merteuil's ultimate poverty together with her disgraced reputation are not insurmountable personal and social catastrophes for her. She can always reestablish herself abroad, independent once more of her cabale. Looking at her defeat in this light, her remarkable intelligence, her understanding of her rivals' conduct, her capabilities, and her deeply engrained desire for "mastery," for "supremacy," are not hopelessly crippled by the public's ostracism of her conduct, nor by the evaporation of her financial fortune.

> The disease [smallpox] ruins Mme de Merteuil as nothing else could....by making her really ugly, not pathetically scarred but repulsive, Laclos did strike at her power. Social opinion may change or be changed. Money can be acquired....But after her illness, Mme de Merteuil would find it difficult to become a member of any society, even with wealth and an excellent reputation (68).

Coward, however, underlines the fact that the Marquise is already ruined in losing her credibility. By destroying her carefully created and maintained "identity," the public has rendered her entirely powerless. Coward continues to note the profound change in Laclos' creative genius, a shift in register accentuated by Mertueil's ruin.

> ...we are puzzled by a sudden change in the tonality of the novel. Laclos' world

> suddenly ceases to be self-contained. The introduction of an extraneous factor--chance or fate or Providence--is dramatically implausible and psychologically irrelevant (437).

By adding this providential ingredient, «la petite vérole de très mauvais caractère» (Letter CLXXIII), it seems that Laclos guarantees and emphasizes Merteuil's absolute and categorical elimination. Punishment for the Marquise is earned and assured; its consequences are irreversable and permanent.

Valmont's punishment, on the other hand, is quite different from this "living death" which characterizes the rest of Merteuil's days, and is contained, essentially, in the fatal stroke of Danceny's sword. He dies, but in this his final "act" does he not triumph too in some way? Is his death not the result of choice, of a curious premeditation? It is important to underline that in ruining her reputation, losing her fortune, suffering through the «attaque de vérole», Merteuil, for her part, prepares herself for death, for the permanent isolation by which her final days will be gauged. Valmont, though, in dying, seems to liberate himself, glorify himself, once again attract the respect, only this time posthumously, of the «grand public». The figurative "death" which follows Merteuil's "colossal blunder" announces Valmont's final

triumph. But before exploring the possible meaning thereof, some consideration must first be given to the circumstances surrounding Valmont's very "real" death. Daniel offers the highly debatable hypothesis that the Vicomte allows Danceny to kill him; he proposes four lines of argument by which to back up this supposition (88-9). It appears, firstly, that Valmont is completely "undone" when he learns of the approaching death of the Présidente de Tourvel, «le seul être qui lui ait fait découvrir l'amour»; this, according to Daniel, leads directly to Valmont's suicide. In addition, Valmont's "metamorphosis" at the end of the novel must be considered. He seems, finally, to demonstrate "sincerity"; he discards all his libertine values, if they can even be considered as such, and, much like the addict deprived of a "fix," he is trapped in death's grip. Coward supports Daniel's suggestion:

> It is [difficult] to accept the death of Valmont at the...hands of Danceny: the implication is that Valmont allows himself to be killed. It is even possible that he gave the letters of Mme de Merteuil to Danceny less out of a desire for vengeance than in a spirit of chivalry or virtue or even penitence. Valmont seems to concede his battle with the gods not so much to ruin Mme de Merteuil or to repair wrongs due to Prévan and others but rather to atone for what he has been. Valmont becomes the Rake Reformed By Love and dies in an odour of sanctity, mourned by his aunt and respected by his killer (436-7).

The Vicomte's end is, in such a way, dramatically unlike

that of the Marquise. By suggesting a final conversion on the part of Valmont, Laclos seems to suggest that through «l'intermédiaire du sentiment» (Daniel), the Vicomte ultimately comes to terms with more elevated, more worthy values than those symptomatic of his earlier **libertinage.** It appears, too, that the Vicomte anticipates Merteuil's denouncing him, even if he kills Danceny, thus forcing her secrets into the open; this seemingly impressive bargaining tool might not, so Valmont anticipates, wield quite so much power over his female rival. He is further discouraged by the likelihood of judiciary proceedings which would, inevitably, result from such a duel. Daniel, consequently, interprets Letter CLXIII as the final proof of Valmont's suicide.

> ...il paraît, par le billet que j'ai trouvé encore dans la poche de M. le Vicomte...que [Valmont] n'était pas l'agresseur. Et il faut que ce soit lui que le Ciel ait permis qui succombât!...M. votre neveu [était] porté par deux de ses gens, et tout baigné dans son sang. Il avait deux coups d'épée dans le corps, et il était déjà bien faible. M. Danceny était aussi là, et même il pleurait.

M. Bernard's letter to Mme de Rosemonde appears to indicate that Danceny was crying, had "pardoned" his wounded adversary when he accompanied him after the duel, this before the Vicomte had even unveiled the Marquise's double dealings.

> Quelle pourrait être la cause du pardon dont témoignent ces larmes, sinon le repentir du scélérat manifesté par son refus de se défendre?

Daniel asks. And Delmas feels that Valmont's apparently premeditated death further reveals the Vicomte's narcissism, proving that he prefers death over infidelity to himself. It is only in dying that the Vicomte becomes the true Valmont again. Without remorse and shunning religious aid, all he wants is to get revenge, continue his battle, and measure himself against the Marquise **beyond** death. With death, disappears forever the part of him "soiled" by his love for the Présidente de Tourvel. Likewise, with his death, the Marquise is once more able to recognize the Valmont that she always knew and respected (406-7). Interestingly, Gregory Rochlin's study on narcissism might bolster both Delmas' and Daniel's arguments:

> The common denominator in suicide which the hero shares with the villain is in the wish to quit life. The aim in either case is the sacrifice of oneself. And it is dictated by feeling less worthy than if the self were preserved. What may appear to be a resignation to death, either through suicide or a heroic death, is in actuality a dread of the degradation of the self from which there is no expectation of recovery. The need to redeem oneself from ignominy is the compelling and governing wish. To give up one's life to satisfy one's narcissism on the surface may appear to be a contradiction. But, of the two, it seems narcissism is the more important. The self is best served through maintaining self-regard. In order to do so, life must be forfeited, the risk of our existence comes from whatever menaces our

narcissism (15).

If one can interpret Valmont's death at the hands of Danceny as such a narcissistically-based suicide, he does, thereby, indeed arrive at a liberation, an elevation, of sorts. While he posthumously wins the war declared by Merteuil by providing the «grand public» with proof of Merteuil's «machinations», Valmont also impresses and dazzles his **cabale**. He dies, then, as a "generous" hero (Vartanian 180) who, through self-sacrifice also attains self-glorification.

But doesn't this suicide, or, respecting the view of many critics who disagree that Valmont dies by suicide, this **death** at the hands of Danceny, also demonstrate the Vicomte's absolute defeat, his final ruin? Does he not, in so dying, whether by suicide or by simple mortal defeat, lose the war? Surely, following Merteuil's observation that «il faut vaincre ou périr» (Letter LXXXI), Valmont is "guilty" of "perishing." Indeed, death offers him the ultimate shelter. But from whom, from what? Is it only the Marquise's declaration of war that he must respond to? Is it his sole challenge? Diaconoff draws attention to the fact that Valmont's life reflects a certain spontaneity, something of an «éros égocentrique». His libertine conduct unveils his absolute and unchallenged

liberty. Unfortunately, though, by the end of the novel, buried deeper and deeper in a complicated epistolary tangle, Valmont has, seemingly, trapped himself in a very sticky "web" which increasingly endangers his well-being.

> ...when he became the captive of pre-meditated action ruled by a philosophy that was basically alien to his natural self, he found that he was required to become too many different personages, whose beings could never be reconciled with one another rationally and emotionally. His selves were in constant conflict.

By the novel's end Valmont is no longer capable of maintaining his multiple roles, neither those prescribed to him by his Marquise, nor those forced upon him by the Présidente.

> A sense of failure stalks him, though he does not acknowledge it, but rather seeks to escape it, first by sending Madame de Merteuil's letter, then by taking absolute steps with regard to her, and finally by submitting to a duel with Danceny in which he most assuredly allows himself to be fatally wounded (101).

Diaconoff feels that the Vicomte's future offers him nothing of value and holds no "escape hatch." His suicide, thus, provides him with his sole alternative. Dramatically different from Merteuil's arrangement of events so as to "entrap" herself, Valmont appears, rather, as an involuntary prisoner of circumstances, of a **situation infernale.** His death does, however, represent his final course of action, his definitive

choice, his ultimate freedom to escape the sense of failure which haunts him. He seems, then, to triumph in the end; in inviting his defeat, he "reaffirms" himself, restores in his wasted life its true **signification.** By betraying his rival, Valmont wins the war, evading the twisted web in which he has suffered increasing discomfort.

Whether arguably a death by suicide or not, Valmont obviously ceases to "exist" physically after his duel with Danceny. And Merteuil's life becomes devoid of all true meaning after her betrayal by the Vicomte. Valmont's victory is "posthumous," while Merteuil's death is "premature." Recall that the crucial liaison between the Vicomte and the Marquise is imperilled, «envenimée», from its conception; Vartanian explains:

> ...a "mistaken identity" undermines from the first their secret agreement (178).

Rather than the result of simple misinterpretation, resulting from Merteuil's "bisexuality," it appears that the libertine couple has committed a very grave error stemming from the very nature of their liaison itself. Their assumed mutual exchange, their supposed ties of equality are paradoxical,

> contraire à l'éthique profonde du libertin, cet être solitaire (Duranton 137).

Theirs is a doomed and unnatural union.

> Evil engenders its own defeat through the workings of existential forces inherent in it (Lester Crocker 115).

"Separated" for once and for all, Valmont seems to triumph even after his death. Outdoing Merteuil, this "monster" who defies the sexual norms of eighteenth century society, the Vicomte, in escaping the impossible union represented by his «entente infernale» with the Marquise, is the true **libertin** of Laclos' masterpiece. He succeeds finally in wallowing in his triumphantly singular **libertinage pur**, metamorphizes, so to speak, having permanently abandoned his overcrowded and inhospitable "web" in which it is the Marquise who is left writhing, further deforming it, of which she has now become the final and most prized victim.

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