

## Libertinism: A Form of Structuring the Self

*Les Liaisons dangereuses*<sup>1</sup>, the eighteenth-century French libertine novel and *The Golden Lotus*,<sup>2</sup> the Chinese erotic novel of the sixteenth century, share one point in common: the perverse attitude of their heroes toward sexual relations. Despite the similarity, however, the two works are strikingly different in the manners in which their respective protagonists pursue their perverse measures.

In the Chinese novel, the self of the erotic hero is materialized by and dispersed into numerous objects of desire. The dispersal of the self leads to a collapse of the family, which is, at the same time, a destruction of the country since, in the Confucian tradition, the individual, the family, and society form a chain of mutual dependency.<sup>3</sup> By contrast, Laclos's novel, written in 1782, bears the mark of its century in its idolatrous portrayal of knowledge and reason in the form of the pursuit of psychological power that can be wielded in the perverse game of love.

This may in part explain the difference between the "libertine fortress"<sup>4</sup> in the case of the French libertines and the dispersal of the self in the case of the Chinese erotic master. The "fortification of the self" is motivated not only by the intellectual ambience of the century of Enlightenment, but also by the heritage of the Christian tradition itself as the object of its transgression. The human soul is supposed to be the "glass" through which one "sees darkly" the image of God.<sup>5</sup> The search for a transcendent self becomes the way of seeking the image of God, as in St. Augustine's *Confessions*. Romanticism "naturalizes"—to borrow Meyer Abrams's expression—this supernatural version of the self by substituting a creative individual or a sensitive soul for the image of God.<sup>6</sup>

Laclos's libertine heroes react against Rousseau's romantic heroes. Their pleasures derives not only from profaning the notion of a transcendent self but especially its humanized version. The Marquise de Merteuil and the Vicomte de Valmont try to assume a godlike position in the hearts of their victims, mocking all sentimental values and the human relationships of friendship, love, family ties, marriage, and the like. But in doing so, they risk being contaminated by these values, as in the relationship of Valmont with Tourvel.

Moreover, their world of the self is determined by its own object of parody—namely, the romantic or preromantic self. Therefore, it is not an exaggeration to say that Laclos's libertines are the mirror images of Rousseau's romantic lovers. Some critics consider Merteuil an anti-Héloïse and Valmont an anti-St. Preux.<sup>7</sup> Indeed, they remain, nonetheless, the sister and brother of Rousseau's heroes—perverse as they are.

### *Pleasure of Knowledge, Pleasure of Power*

Joan DeJean was right in her definition of the Marquise de Merteuil's subjectivity as a "libertine fortress," because not physical pleasure but rather the pleasure of power acquired through her superior knowledge and intelligence is what motivates her in her game. Pleasure and power become interchangeable, as Malraux has shown.<sup>8</sup> She is a creature of the century of Enlightenment, despite the author's claim to the contrary in the

"Publisher's Note."<sup>9</sup> In fact, the knowledge and art of hypocrisy are complementary, since for Merteuil, the one most powerful is that individual who knows the most but is the least known.

In letter 141, the Marquise de Merteuil reproaches Valmont for being unable to become the lover or the friend of a woman: "never a woman's lover or friend, but always her tyrant or her slave" (4:141:310). In a metaphor Merteuil uses frequently, she compares the Vicomte to a sultan, the Présidente to his favorite sultana. At the beginning of the novel, in order to entice Valmont back from the countryside where he has lingered too long near his devout Tourvel, Merteuil describes her erotic experience with the Chevalier:

I pleased myself by considering him as a Sultan in the midst of a harem in which I was successively the different favorites. (1:10:22)

Later on, when Valmont insists on renewing their past relationship, Merteuil answers:

I may sometimes have claimed to take the place of a harem by myself, but it has never suited me to be part of one. (4:127:283)

In fact, Merteuil herself interprets sexual relationship in the same terms—namely, as the relationship between master and slave. The only difference is that she wants to reverse the roles of sultan and sultana. By herself constituting the entire harem of the chevalier, she actually becomes his sultan: she is everything he may desire, but he is only one of her objects of desire.

This reversal, instead of changing the rules of a male dominant society—such as those of harem—only reinforces them by playfully exchanging sexual roles. According to Merteuil, a woman who plays the role of sultan must be a merciless tyrant, precisely because she cannot expect any merciful treatment from the society.

Libertinism is thus a game through which Merteuil acquires the freedom of tyrannizing others. Devoid of any practical aim, this game is ludicrous. But, at the same time, it is serious in its mercilessness, as in her rivalry with the Présidente de Tourvel. The value of another human being for Merteuil lies only in his or

her function in this game: Is that person useful or harmful to the player? The society around her is nothing more than a drama in which everyone exists only to play a role as the object of her exercise of power. The Marquise writes in letter 81 about her late husband:

He died, as you know, shortly afterward; and although, taking it all round, I had no reason to complain of him, I felt none the less keenly the value of the liberty my widowhood would give me and I promised myself to make good use of it. (2:81:163)

She views him dispassionately with neither hatred nor love, but only as a potential restraint of her so-called freedom—that is, family ties, friendship, love and in short, all human affections—are reduced to and also serve to camouflage a utilitarian relationship of power.

To a certain extent, this position is justifiable in that widowhood would have afforded the only possible freedom for a woman who lives under the authority of her father before marriage and under the authority of her husband afterward. Only after the death of her husband can she be herself to enjoy financial and personal freedom.

The free and independent widow is also a common figure in Pierre Marivaux's plays.<sup>10</sup> Nevertheless, Merteuil's matter-of-fact tone in describing the death of her husband remains striking, since this emotionless attitude is also dominant in her relationship with any other person. Because she does not allow any emotion to disturb her reason, she can win battles as a mathematic genius in her infallible calculations. Moreover, depriving herself of most sentiments of ordinary people, she plays the role of an impassible divinity. The only emotion that is left, besides the pleasure of power, is anger. This emotion, which divinities seem to share with human beings without too much difficulty, is the cause of the Marquise's downfall at the end of the book.

The Marquise indeed compares herself with God from time to time, as the following passage shows us:

At my waking, I found two notes, one from the mother and one from the daughter; I could not keep from laughing when I found literally the same phrase in both: "It is from

you alone I expect any consolation." Is it not indeed amusing to console for and against, and to be the only agent of two directly opposite interests? Here I am like the Divinity, receiving the contrary prayers of blind mortals and changing nothing in my immutable decrees. (2:63:115)

Just as between God and his believers there may not be any equality, so between the player and her plaything. To this extent, the idolatry of a lover is less satisfactory than the blind trust of someone who has the illusion of being her friend. A stupid lover still expects a concrete proof—such as physical pleasure—whereas a stupid friend does not expect anything else but advice. The fact that physical pleasure has to be shared implies a limited equality, whereas the so-called friendship can be based merely on illusion.

However sincere the praise of a lover may be, it may, nevertheless, be used as a means of exchange for sexual favor. The advice that Cécile and her mother expect from the Marquise facilitates her power game. The desire for her advice is equal to the implicit recognition of Merteuil's absolute power, because the trust of these "mortals" is "blind," and based on complete ignorance of their omniscient master. Both of them are victims of a situation created by Merteuil, whom they paradoxically take to be their savior.

The mutual mistrust between the two closely related persons, mother and daughter, sets off their common "blind" faith in the one who is their true enemy. Moreover, at the linguistic level, the unconscious repetition of the same formula further confirms the religious nature of this "faith": like a prayer, it is repeated by various believers.

In this situation, Merteuil derives absolute power from her monopoly on knowledge. The master, in other words, is the one who knows, and the slave is the one who remains ignorant. Conversely, the master is the one who does not let others know himself or herself, whereas the slave is the one who is easily known by others. For this reason, Merteuil prefers hypocrisy to honesty: since a powerful person is the one who possesses others by his superiority of knowledge, a hypocrite is in a better position to safeguard this superiority.

According to Merteuil, no one is truly sincere. That people believe they are sincere, she contends, is based more on their own illusions than on tangible facts. Because the fundamental truth of the society is the discrepancy between "being" and "appearance," sincerity can result only from a misinterpretation of this fact, or from the art of self-deception. Thus, the critical issue is not how to distinguish between sincerity and hypocrisy, but rather how to take advantage of the self-deception of those allegedly sincere people in order to exploit their ignorance. The honest people are "the fools" "for our tiny pleasures"—as Merteuil and Valmont say, quoting Gresset. (2:63:124)

Merteuil, for example, can exploit Mme. Volanges's vanity to keep secret the Marquise's pretended confession to Volanges's own daughter because the latter "wishes to impress her daughter with her own acuteness." (2:62:123) As Merteuil sees it, people who seek to attain a reputation that is undeserved are liars. Needless to say, Merteuil does not give any credit to virtue, since women who "claim merit and virtue since they can have no pretension to charm" (2:81:164) merely provide another example of self-deception for her.

In the final analysis, everyone is a liar, and there is no socially significant distinction between truth and falsehood. There is only a distinction between cleverness and stupidity: some people are aware that they are lying and try to take advantage of this fact, whereas others lie unconsciously and to no purpose. The divergence between "appearance" and "being" within the society forces everyone to lie in one way or another, willingly or not.

According to the Marquise, it is better to be a liar who assumes responsibility for his or her lies than to be an alleged sincere person who lies at random and unconsciously. Ultimate truth, then, is nothing else but power acquired through knowledge. Understanding the subjective nature of truth constitutes a major part of this knowledge. Furthermore, the obtuseness of the common people justifies their roles as "playthings" in Merteuil's game: they fall into her traps because they are, first of all, the victims of their own illusions.

Although Valmont represents for Merteuil a different category of people—that is, those who understand this reality—she

still considers herself to be superior. Concerning the trap set for Prévau, a libertine like Valmont, she writes in letter 85:

How convenient it is to have to deal with you "men of principles!" Sometimes a bungling lover disconcerts one by his timidity or embarrasses one by his passionate raptures; it is a fever which, like others, has its cold shiverings and its burning, and sometimes varies in its symptoms. But it is so easy to guess your prearranged advance! The arrival, the bearing, the tone, the remarks—I knew what they would all be the evening before. (2:85:178)

The "men of principle" are different from ordinary people because they realize the nullity of the social rules that guide the behavior of the common people. On this point, they share a common ground with the Marquise de Merteuil. Nevertheless, if they scorn the common people who blindly believe in the social code, their actions are no less "coded"; and their code, though less familiar, cannot sustain a claim to freedom and creative imagination either.

Their understanding of the divergence between "being" and "appearance" in society puts them at an advantage in comparison with the common people, but, in Merteuil's opinion, they remain students, not masters of this knowledge. They follow the rules set up by others and do not base their actions mainly on their own observations as the Marquise does. In this sense, they also follow a code blindly.

Merteuil, however, has no choice but to invent most of her principles, for it requires much more resourcefulness for a woman—who has fewer role models—to play the role of a libertine than a man.

According to Merteuil, this is the major difference between herself and male libertines. As they are mastered by their knowledge of "libertine principles," she, by contrast, is the master of the same knowledge. She can shake their power through her knowledge of their principles; yet she can still prevent them from shaking hers since her principles, based as they are on her own observations, are less predictable and less susceptible to appropriation. Because the position of women forces her to invent new

rules if she wants to join the libertine game set up in accordance with men's rules, Merteuil becomes the champion in this game. The invention of new rules enables her to be unpredictable—and thus more powerful—than others in this game of knowledge and power.

Contrary to what the author states in the so-called "Publisher's Note,"<sup>11</sup> the valorization of knowledge based on one's own understanding makes the Marquise a person well adapted to the milieu of an aspect of the Enlightenment. As Christopher Lasch writes about Sade's "sexual utopia":

In a society that has reduced reason to mere calculation, reason can impose no limits on the pursuit of pleasure—on the immediate gratification of every desire no matter how perverse, insane, criminal, or merely immoral. For the standards that would condemn crime or cruelty derive from religion, compassion, or the kind of reason that rejects purely instrumental applications; and none of these outmoded forms of thought or feeling has any logical place in a society based on commodity production. In his misogyny, Sade perceived that bourgeois enlightenment, carried to its logical conclusions, condemned even the sentimental cult of womanhood and the family; which the bourgeois itself had carried to unprecedented extremes.<sup>12</sup>

The cult of knowledge necessarily undermines the worship of God or of any kind of authority, religious or ethical: knowing can only begin with questions, whereas the nature of authority is to be unquestionable. To question an authority is to doubt or even to deny its validity. In the end, what replaces ethical or religious authority is the authority of interest, or a commodified reason as an instrument with which one acquires power, as in the Marquise's case. In fact, Merteuil is like a Sadian character in that her acquisition of knowledge carries her to one of the "logical conclusion" of the "bourgeois enlightenment": everything is permitted.

As she states, "I did not desire to enjoy, I wanted to know; my desire to learn suggested the means to me". (2:81:162) Any "means" must be good, if they satisfy her "desire to learn," because a commodity is not judged in accordance with its moral value, but with its exchange value.

To this extent, her utilitarianism even in the unpractical world of aristocracy remains more bourgeois than the sentimental revery of Tourvel, whom most critics since Baudelaire consider the representative of the bourgeoisie par excellence.<sup>13</sup> As the old lady Rosemonde reminds us in her letter to Tourvel, "I notice it because I recollect that was always the style of love. I see it is now as it used to be." (3:103:222) On the other hand, Merteuil "rarely listens to anything of this kind which is not a topic of the day." (2:74:137)

In this sense, Tourvel belongs to an almost vanished past; Merteuil belongs to the present. The devout *présidente* bases her behavior on religious and ethical principles, whereas the Machiavellian Marquise uses her reason only for "instrumental applications."

According to Nobert Elias, ever since Louis XIV, the aristocracy has been "contaminated" by the value system of the bourgeoisie, which in its turn imitated courtly society.<sup>14</sup> Rationality, usually attributed to the bourgeoisie as its exclusive property, becomes the central value that dominates the aristocratic society of Laclos's libertine novel. Indeed, Merteuil believes that the difference between herself and a good politician of her time is merely superficial. Instead of developing her talent on the political stage with the objective of acquiring social power, she uses it to explore the battlefield of the libertine game with the objective of achieving psychological domination. In short, one can say that her personality captures best the spirit of her time.

I was not yet fifteen and already I possessed the talents to which the greater part of our politicians owe their reputation; and I considered myself still in the first elements of the science I wished to acquire. (2:81:162)

Merteuil must be stronger than anyone else in this game of power, because the game is, supposedly the exclusive propriety of men. Even though she claims to be born "to avenge my sex and to dominate yours," (2:81:160), in no way does this mean that she is interested in defending the interests of her sex or that her thinking anticipates feminism as several critics, such as Anne-Marie Jaton,<sup>15</sup> believe.

To "avenge her sex" for the Marquise means to excel in the art of living in a male-dominant world in accordance with their rules of domination and power. She wants to be the master of men as well as of women. As a matter of fact, being a woman is accidental for Merteuil. The fact that her sex is supposed to be weaker is merely additional proof of her personal merit, for a woman who plays the game of love must necessarily be superior.

As to prudence and shrewdness, I do not mention myself—but where is the woman who would not possess more than you? . . . Believe me, Vicomte, people rarely acquire the qualities they can dispense with. You fought without risk and acted without wariness. For you men, defeats are simply so many victories the less. In this unequal struggle our fortune is not to lose and your misfortune not to win. If I granted you as many talents as we have, still how much we should surpass you from the continual necessity we have of using them! (2:81:159)

This judicious observation is not so much a protestation against the inequality of the sexes as an expression of Merteuil's self-admiration. If for a woman "not to lose" carries as much merit as does the victory for a man, what should be the merit of a woman who always prevails over her male partners, including the best of them: the Vicomte de Valmont?

However, the inequality of sexes is the motivation for the Marquise's self-training. Her training is modeled upon male examples, because she wants, not only to surpass the opposite sex in this libertine game, but also to become different from her own sex. Indeed, the more she excels in this game, the more she distinguishes herself from her own sex. In fact, other women are merely counterexamples of her superior image. The Vicomte also implicitly acknowledges her superiority by writing the following sentences:

I do not think I am more stupid than others. I have found a hundred, I have found a thousand ways of dishonoring a woman; but when I have tried to find a way to save her from dishonor, I have never found the possibility of it. (2:76:141)

Although he qualifies this statement by adding that Merteuil's victory is due more to her luck than to her skill, he recognizes that his role is a "hundred" times, if not a "thousand" times, easier than Merteuil's. Valmont's warning later on prompts the Marquise to write her famous autobiographical letter. In her assessment, she has completely reversed the situation by virtue of her "finesse" and "prudence" in order to achieve what Valmont considers as beyond his possibility:

If you have seen me directing events and opinions and making these formidable men the toys of my caprices or my fantasies; depriving some of will, others of the power of harming me; if in accordance with my changing tastes I have turn by turn attached to my train or cast far from me "those enthroned tyrants now become my slaves;" if through these frequent revolutions I have kept my reputation intact; ought you not to have concluded that, since I was born to avenge my sex and to dominate yours, I must have created methods unknown to anybody but myself? (2:81:160)

"Toy" (*jouet*) signifies a passive object of pleasure that abandons itself utterly to an external force. In this sense, Merteuil presents herself as God, who manipulates human fate according to her "caprices" or "fantasies" without any rational explanation to her "toy." In "dethroning" men, Merteuil overturns the social order that bestows on them an unjustifiable and arbitrary superiority over women, and creates a new social hierarchy. She alone controls the fates of these men who normally tyrannize over the other sex; they are reduced to slaves by her superior intelligence.

Wicked as it is, her new order is supposedly more "rational," since it is based on personal talent and capacity. At the same time, it mirrors the order that it replaces in terms of its arbitrary and tyrannical nature. To "dethrone men" is also an act of castration: these men are reduced to roles traditionally assigned to women. Furthermore, they are deprived of language, as well as of their "puissance," because their secrets, as mastered by Merteuil, force them into silence on her own secret life—thus into "impuissance."

In this sense, sexual power is identified with power of speech. Put another way, it depends on "who has the voice." Indeed, the Marquise wins her battles often by discrediting "the voice" of her opponents.

By contrast, in the Chinese erotic novel, *The Golden Lotus*, sexual power is much more closely associated with social position. Since social power in the past was, in most cases, an exclusive propriety of men, it is much harder for P'an Chin-lien or any other female characters to play dominant roles as Merteuil does.

To a large extent, this "sexual" power which is reinforced by "textual" power must also be articulated in order to intensify its pleasure. In other words, sexual pleasure is also textual. The Marquise de Merteuil, for example, compares herself to a hero or a heroine of the past. Unlike Valmont, who makes a similar comparison in order to intensify the dramatic effect of his action, Merteuil's comparison emphasizes her position of power: she is superior not only to her contemporaries but also to her mythic predecessors in regard to the manipulation of power.

Like a new Delilah I always used my power as she did to surprise this important secret. Ah! How many of our modern Samsons are there whose hair I keep under my scissors! (2:81:166)

Whereas Delilah learned the secret of one Samson, she, Merteuil, holds the secrets of a great number of "modern Samsons." Moreover, whereas in the Bible, Delilah actually cuts Samson's hair to accomplish an act of revenge, the Marquise needs only "to keep the hair under her scissors"—thereby prolonging and reinforcing the power and control that she enjoys over her lovers. One woman acted in reaction to the actual situation; the other "produces" a new situation by her performance. Moreover, the "modern Delilah" outdistances the ancient one in terms of both the duration and the intensity of the power.

### *Divinity of Opera*

Whereas the Marquise de Merteuil actually *is* the libertine who seeks to dominate the battlefield of love affairs, the Vicomte de Valmont only *plays* the role of libertine: his world is a dramatic spectacle.

Not only is he a leading actor, but he is also the most important spectator. Moreover he is also the director who induces his victims, such as the *Présidente de Tourvel*, to act out his script. His scenario, or his libertine project, consists of mastering "time," which, in Poulet's terms, becomes a metaphor for the objective world. In other words, he would like to control the future for himself and his selected victims.<sup>16</sup> However, by lingering to admire his own performance, Valmont ends up being mastered by "time." To a degree, the passion for aesthetic enjoyment transforms the player of love into its plaything—just like his victims—since he is no longer only the master of the others' passion, but also the slave to his own passion.

Valmont is his own best audience. He is thoroughly impressed by his own performance as, on one occasion, when he returned unexpectedly to the house of his old aunt:

In fact, I dropped from the sky like a Divinity at the Opera, who comes to wind up the plot. (2:76:152)

Unlike Merteuil who wants to equal divinity with her psychological power, Valmont is more interested in playing a dramatic god. In this case, the division of traditional sexual roles between man and woman is reversed in their libertine game. Whereas Merteuil has become a hard-working "professional," Valmont lingers in his aesthetic pleasure. As Roger Laufer points out, Valmont and Merteuil both try to succeed by using the means usually employed by the opposite sex: "The masterpiece of the woman tends toward pure action; that of the man sinks into the depth of life experience."<sup>17</sup>

This reversal of roles is also motivated by the special situation of their sexes. Merteuil explains to Valmont:

For my own part, I must confess that one of the things which most flatters me is a sharp and well-conducted attack; where everything is carried out with order but with rapidity; which never puts us to the painful embarrassment of having ourselves to repair an awkwardness by which we ought to have profited; which preserves an air of violence even in those things we grant, and cunningly flatters our two favorite passions—the glory of defense and the pleasure of defeat. (1:10:9)

To a large extent, libertinism for Merteuil is not a game, but a war. Since a woman has to gamble on her reputation if she wants to join this game which is mainly reserved for the opposite sex, she must act with efficiency. In other words, a woman libertine is not only an ordinary player, but also a warrior. Needless to say, she must use the same means which her opposite sex normally uses in the war.

Indeed, unlike Merteuil, the Vicomte does not even consider the game as a "profession" since it is so easy for him. Libertinism is his hobby, his pastime. It is not surprising, therefore, that he adopts the attitude of his opposite sex toward life, since women in his class did not have any serious occupations. This difference is reflected in the writing styles of the two libertines. The Marquise's style is concise, precise, and sarcastic; the Vicomte's is precious, exaggerating, and sometimes ironically sentimental.

The two differ in other ways. For Merteuil, love is an illusion in which she cannot indulge: it could ruin her libertine career and her reputation. "It was there that I made certain that love, which they tell us is the cause of our pleasures, is, at most, only the pretext for them." (2:81:163)

Valmont, on the contrary, understands the illusory nature of love perfectly well, and thrives on it. Without it, victory is too simple, hence meaningless. Because he does not believe in love, to act as a lover is more challenging, thus more exciting.

A woman's fairest moment, the only one in which she can produce that intoxication of the soul, which is always talked of and so rarely experienced, is the moment when we are certain of her love but not of her favors; (1:44:84)

In other words, the "fairest moment" is also the moment of illusion maintained by hope. Once obtained, the object of desire is no longer embellished by illusion and loses its values. In this sense, Valmont is not so remote from Rousseau's preromantic lovers. The difference is that the Vicomte lucidly "cultivates" his illusion to enhance his enjoyment of the game, whereas Julie and St. Preux are intoxicated with the superiority of illusion over reality.

Illusion, further, adds interest to life: "What! Do you think that very spectacle which makes you rush eagerly to the theatre, which you applaud there wildly is less interesting in reality?" (3:96:199). The Vicomte sinks so well into illusion that, in the end, he almost becomes a victim of his own "work" (*oeuvre*)—Tourvel. In fact, he is not completely deceptive in calling his so-called love for the Présidente "her work," (1:35:63) because he ends up identifying his libertine self on an existential level with his role of passionate lover on an aesthetic level.

Indeed, if to be in love is not to be able to live without possessing that person one desires, to sacrifice to her one's time, one's pleasures, one's life; then I am really in love. (1:15:28)

Valmont, however, differs from someone "really in love" (*réellement amoureux*) in that he is always the spectator, watching his own performance carefully and judging himself in the place of other spectators.

Sometimes, Valmont plays so seriously a role that it is even difficult for himself to tell whether his feeling has become identical to that of his role. For example, in order to win favor with Présidente de Tourvel, he, on one occasion, plays the role of philanthropist to save a peasant family from bankruptcy. He describes the impression that he has made on these people in a theatrical way:

In the midst of the wordy benedictions of this family I was not unlike the hero of a play in the last scene. (1:21:38)

In whose eyes does he look like the "hero of a play"? Not necessarily in the eyes of those peasants, who take too seriously his good action to compare the scene with a drama. Not even in the eyes of the devoted Tourvel, who observes him through a servant charged with spying on the beloved libertine. She loves him too much to take this wonderful action as merely a performance.

It is rather in his own eyes that he is perceived as such. In other words, acting for him is not only a performance but also an entertainment. He enjoys and appreciates his own performance

as a refined and cultivated spectator. The pleasure of watching intensifies the pleasure of action:

My eyes filled with tears and I felt an involuntary but delicious emotion. (1:21:38)

Paradoxically, the intended cheater feels genuine emotion for his "good" deed, because the feeling caused by his successful cheating is "delicious." The distinction between a "philanthropist" and a "cheater" is blurred. So is the distinction between a lover and a libertine.

The same thing happens once to Hsi-men Ch'ing, the protagonist of *The Golden Lotus*. Like Valmont, Hsi-men also wants to exchange money for favor—not from his lover, but from Bud-dhas. Since he claims he would be able to buy sexual favor from all the divine beauties if he is willing to spend his propriety, he does not feel the need to disguise his exchange. As a result, he intends to remain cynically greedy and lustful even before any divinities. On this point, Hsi-men differs from his French counterpart in that the former has never thought about playing the role of the sincere lover.

One of the Vicomte's favorite roles is the lover *à la Saint Preux*, the hero of Rousseau's novel, who provides him with both the strategy of seduction and the object of parody. As the tender St. Preux tries to convince Julie of his feeling by referring to her own heart as the guarantee,<sup>18</sup> the libertine Valmont writes to Tourvel, the selected victim of his art of seduction:

Well, I have one guarantee to offer you which you at least will not suspect: it is yourself. I only ask you to question yourself in good faith; if you do not believe in my love, if you doubt one moment that you alone reign over my soul, if you are not certain that you have attached this heart, which indeed has hitherto been but too fickle, I consent to bear the pain of this error. (2:52:98)

But St. Preux's argument is based on similarity between the two lovers, whereas in Valmont's case, the similarity is only a false appearance that masks the fundamental difference. The Présidente's "good faith" (*bonne foi*) enables the Vicomte's trick to

succeed. In this sense, Tourvel herself becomes truly the "guarantee" (*garant*) not of sincere love, but of Valmont's successful acting.

Behind this irony lies a fundamental truth in this novel: the illusion or self-deception of allegedly sincere people is, in fact, what guarantees the success of the libertine trap. Or, the best way to corrupt an innocent person is, indeed, to confirm his or her illusion. In the end, Tourvel's good faith makes her believe in Valmont's acting so completely that she trusts him as much as Julie trusts St. Preux. As she writes to Mme. Rosemonde:

Who knows whether we were not born for each other!  
(4:132:293)

At the same time, this belief is not necessarily wrong, since she is the perfect actress for Valmont's scenario. Moreover, their performance is so perfect that Valmont is contaminated by his role as a romantic lover. In the end, truth and acting is no longer distinguishable. In other words, the trap set by Valmont traps not only the game but also the hunter.

Very often Valmont himself needs illusion: he attributes to his spectators those reactions that he wishes to elicit from them. For example, he writes to Merteuil imagining his future victory over Tourvel's resistance:

You yourself, my fair friend, will be seized by a holy respect and you will say enthusiastically: "Here is a man after my own heart." (1:4:8)

No one truly understands how Merteuil can believe this, since she can hardly praise anyone "enthusiastically" (*avec enthousiasme*) much less be "seized by a holy respect" (*saisie d'un saint respect*)—especially for Valmont's successful conquest of Tourvel's "tender" heart. Nevertheless, this sentence provides the Vicomte with a self-image which is "deliciously" satisfactory.

By using this expression with its religious connotations, Valmont no doubt has in mind his "tender devoted." Thus, by virtue of this displacement, he imagines that he gains a certain control over both Merteuil and her rival Tourvel, the two women

he most eagerly desires to possess. He affords himself the aesthetic pleasure of having his possessions in a fictional situation.

This dramatization of power is more playful than the Marquise's search for psychological superiority. Where Merteuil relies more on the artful manipulation of her victims, her partner relies more on the opinion of his audience.

At first glance, the Marquise's psychological power seems more substantial than the Vicomte's dramatic effect. But in reality, the Vicomte can safely assume an attitude of detachment by identifying his spectators with himself, whereas the reality of the Marquise's supreme power depends upon the recognition of her potential rival. To this extent, one may say that Valmont plays a more self-sufficient role in the game than does Merteuil. This is determined by the different positions of their sexes in society.

The man can be publicly admired and also accepted in society for his skill in playing the libertine game. Even a prudish woman like de Volanges cannot close her door to him. (1:32:56) The woman, on the contrary, must hide her skill in order to maintain her respectability. The world is a stage for Valmont, since he can welcome other spectators besides himself. The Marquise can have only a single spectator in whom she has a little trust: Valmont.

The relationship between Merteuil and her only "connoisseur" belongs, by its very nature, to the category of the "*liaisons dangereuses*," since a woman has no right to "show" her libertine skill on the stage of society. This relationship—antisocial as it is—nonetheless constitutes a social tie. It is more dangerous because of the Marquise's total dependency on Valmont's recognition. The Vicomte is completely secure within the confines of the game; only outside of it is his security threatened. The weapon that the Marquise uses against him at the end—politics—is not concerned with his private life but exclusively with his public life.

Valmont directs and coaches all the performance—his own and also of that of others, especially that of Tourvel. If she is the ideal victim and the perfect actress, it is, first of all, because of her reputation for invulnerable virtue:

If they prefer the heroic, I shall point to Madame de Tourvel, that often quoted model of all the virtues! Respected

even by our greatest libertines! To such an extent that they had even abandoned the mere idea of attacking her! (3:115:254)

The gesture of singling out Tourvel allows Valmont to "show" his victory—for its dramatic effect. It is precisely this "sacredness" of Tourvel's virtue that arouses that most intense desire to profane it. As Valmont explains in letter 96:

Yes, I like to see, to watch this prudent woman impelled, without her perceiving it, upon a path which allows no return, and whose steep and dangerous incline carries her on in spite of herself, and forces her to follow me. There, terrified by the peril she runs, she would like to halt and cannot check herself. Her exertions and her skill may render her steps shorter; but they must follow one upon the other. Sometimes, not daring to look the danger in the face, she shuts her eyes, lets herself go, and abandons herself to my charge. More often her efforts are revived by a new fear; in her mortal terror she would like to try to turn back once again; she distances herself and very soon a magic power replaces her nearer the danger from which she had vainly tried to fly. Then having no one but me for guide and for support, without thinking of reproaching me for the inevitable fall, she implores me to retard it. Fervent prayers, humble supplications, all that mortals in their fear offer to the divinity, I receive from her; and you expect me to be deaf to her prayers, to destroy myself the worship she gives me, and rouse in casting her down that power she invokes for her support! Ah! At least leave me the time to watch these touching struggles between love and virtue. (3:96:198–99)

The more time-consuming the conquest, the more intense the aesthetic enjoyment. In this passage, Valmont uses verbs that describe a vision: "see" (*voir*), "consider" (*considérer*), and "observe" (*observer*) for describing the Présidente's mind. By visualizing Tourvel's fall, he makes it a "spectacle" of a psychological state.

The "new method" used by the Vicomte is more than a necessity, it is an object of contemplation in its own right. On

the one hand, it vanquishes Tourvel's reputation for inflexible virtue; on the other hand, it makes of her an actress whose inner struggle becomes an exciting spectacle presented for her seducer.

Certain of the "end" (*dénouement*), the final success, Valmont, the director, can watch this struggle with a detached aesthetic pleasure, since his scenario is based on his "method." Tourvel must follow the "path" (*sentier*) that leads to the "inevitable fall" (*chute inévitable*), a route mapped out by her director.

As Laurent Versini points out in his notes in Laclos's *Oeuvres Complètes*, the libertine uses the language of a preacher. In this case, Valmont makes the devout Tourvel play the role of Julie in *La Nouvelle Héloïse*. Like Julie with regard to St. Preux, Tourvel, as a preacher might, would like to convert Valmont. Thus Valmont consciously plays the role of St. Preux, as Tourvel unconsciously identifies herself with Julie. The difference between the two actors is that the Présidente is ignorant of the true nature of their relationship: that is, as a romantic drama, not a romantic love.

By virtue of this discrepancy of knowledge, Valmont is the director—the master—and Tourvel is essentially the passive actress—the victim. For this reason the sincere prayer of the devout Tourvel (the substitute for Julie) addressed to Valmont (the fake St. Preux) does not serve to avert the fall but rather to make it inevitable. But, at the same time, it also postpones the "fall" and thereby prolongs Valmont's visual pleasure.

Ah! The time will come too soon when, degraded by her fall, she will be nothing but an ordinary woman to me.  
(3:96:199)

Whether she *is* extraordinary or ordinary is not an important issue for Valmont, since he is more interested in her "performance" than in her person. Her performance is the image of his power—or the image of his self—because his subjective world is mainly based on the reaction of the outside world to his power game.

A show depends upon the reaction of its audience. Valmont's subjective world is, to a large degree, a long drawn-out drama, ever in search of theatrical effect. That is probably why