THE CONCEPT OF LIBERTINAGE IN RICHARDSON'S CLARISSA AND LACLOS' LES LIAISONS DANGEREUSES

A THESIS SUBMITTED TO THE FACULTY
OF GRADUATE STUDIES AND RESEARCH
IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE
REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE OF
MASTER OF ARTS

DEPARTMENT OF ENGLISH
McGILL UNIVERSITY
MONTREAL

MARCH, 1971

ABSTRACT

This study seeks to explore the way in which the concept of libertinage is treated in Clarissa by Samuel Richardson and in Les Liaisons Dangereuses by Choderlos de Laclos. It attempts to examine the meaning and substance of libertinage as a concept in its historical and literary development and then to analyse its treatment at the hands of two eighteenth-century novelists. The study seeks to view the ways in which Richardson and Laclos create portraits of libertines; how these are used in the structure of their respective novels; the accuracy with

which these characters conform to traditional, historical views of the libertine figure in literature and to what extent they are divergent. Also under consideration are the relative merits and reputations of Lovelace, on the one hand, and Madame de Merteuil and Valmont, on the other, as prototypes and exemplars of a defined literary character -- the libertine. Finally, this thesis attempts to evaluate on a comparative basis, the overall success of the novelists in achieving their artistic ends.

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BY

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CONTENTS

I. INTRODUCTION

The word 'libertine' has always contained the concept of freedom, of liberty. In Roman antiquity it designated a freedman. In the sixteenth-century the name of libertine was given to certain antinomian sects which arose in Germany, France and elsewhere on the Continent. The antinomians maintained that the moral law was not binding upon Christians under the law of grace, 1645. By extension, people who held free or loose opinions about religion, free-thinkers, were known as libertines. It was in the seventeenth-century that libertine acquired the definition still accepted by the Oxford English Dictionary, "a man who is not restrained by moral law, especially in his relations with the female sex; one who leads a dissolute licentious life."

Tirso de Molina gave to literature its first unforgettable libertine: Don Juan Tenorio, in the play, El Burlador de Sevilla y convivado de piedra (published in 1630). Don Juan has since become a myth and his name is synonymous with libertine. Tirso de Molina's Don Juan seduces women, kills a man in a duel, but still counts on having enough time because of his youth to be reconciled to God before his death. He is, however, overtaken by divine retribution before he can repent, because he has taken the name of the Lord in vain.

Subsequent treatments of the Don Juan theme lessen the moral and metaphysical content of Tirso's drama and some even glorify a hero represented to be superior to the conventions of the society in which he lives.

Molière revitalized and gave a new dimension to the subject. His Dom Juan (1665) is a prefiguration of the eighteenth-century libertine, whose intelligence has dessicated his heart. Although the seduction of women has become second-nature to him, he dominates and analyses his pleasure. He also knows how to refine it; enhancing its flavour with cruelty and impiety. Feminine conquests are for him a means of affirming his freedom in evil. He is a cynical and hypocritical free-thinker who finds delight in challenging God by corrupting His creatures. These latter he despises.

Molière's seducer is satanic. Never once does he show the least velleity of amendment. He at last consciously plays the part of a repentant sinner in order to better deceive and seduce, and because he cynically realises that most people act out a pretense of virtue and religion while actually being wicked. This portrait of the Don is not only an unforgettable picture of a libertine, but also a crushing satire on the moral hypocrisy and licentiousness of the times.

The Regency in France saw the introduction of a new word into the vocabulary, that of roué. The name was first given to the profligate companions of the Duke of Orléans, to suggest that they should be broken on the wheel. These roués, however, were mainly loose-living, rambunctious profligates, who took sensual pleasure in wine, women and song. They had their antecedent in witty rakes such as Rochester in England.

In the eighteenth-century, libertinage became a social occupation among the aristocracy. As wars became relatively scarce and the opportunity for political intrigue almost nil in France, the petits-maîtres and the beaux occupied their leisure and found solace for their boredom in a "sport that had no closed season and where the quarry was human and feminine."[1] Libertinage, as well as duelling, provided men with an opportunity to prove themselves in their own eyes and those of the world. The bon vivant abandon of the Regent's companions to their sensual appetites developed among some aristocrats into a concerted effort at mastery of a social game -- a cruel and deadly game:

> Si Don Juan n'est pas, historiquement, une invention du dix-huitième, du moins ce siècle a-t-il joué par rapport à ce personnage le rôle exact de Lucifer par rapport à la Création, dans la doctrine manichéenne: c'est lui qui ... lui a imprimé pour toujours ces deux traits si typiques de l'époque: la noirceur et la scélératesse.[2]

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[1]Ian Watt, The Rise of the Novel (University of California Press, 1959), p.215.

[2]Denis de Rougemont, L'Amour et l'Occident (Paris, 1956), p. 194.

The literature of the period, especially in France, abounds in Confessions, Mémoires Secrets -- those diary-type novels in which the author narrates complacently an amorous career (see, for example, Tilly's and Casanova's Memoirs) -- and in Correspondances, erotic novels or books on the subject of "liaisons". This literature appealed to an aristocratic public, for it was set in their milieu and, like them, it often anatomised 'love' -- a very restrictive form of love at that!

Here love is not a passion or a feeling of the heart, but rather a challenging and intellectually stimulating sport; a warfare with well-defined strategy and strict rules. Cerebral and sexual satisfaction make the basis of relationships between the sexes. Love in this particular type of literature gave place to eroticism and passion to libertinage.

Laclos dared to do what none of his predecessors had ventured, he gave away the rules of the game. In order to establish his reputation in society, the libertine had to seduce as many women as possible and prove it. His victims had to be well chosen -- the more difficult and virtuous the better, since precisely such conquests enhanced his prestige. Once the choice of the victim is determined the seduction is undertaken, but the libertine will not debase his victory by having recourse to force or by using a momentary weakness on her part. On the contrary, he must, as in hunting, give all possible sporting chance to the intended prey. The fall

of the victim comes as a formality which must be neatly executed. It is the prelude to the deliberate separation which follows shortly after -- the seduction not being undertaken primarily for physical gratification. The break must be made public and as a result achieve the destruction of the victim. Or, as Vailland calls it, using a bull-fighting metaphor, the "mise à mort"[3] either real or symbolic of the victim.

The whole process of libertinage would fail, however, if the seducer should allow himself to fall in love with his victim, since this would put him in the power of another. Hence the libertine must exercise constraint and strict control over his emotions and his senses. Libertinage, an affirmation of freedom from moral, religious and social constraints is also, paradoxically, an abdication of freedom on the part of the libertine who imposes on himself an exacting code and binds himself to it in 'honour'.

Libertinage was encouraged by the far from enviable position of women in society. They were brought up away from the world and married quite young to men chosen by their families. Marriages were usually arranged with a view to the social and economic aggrandisement of the family, not with regard for the compatibility of the couple involved. That these marriages were seldom very successful and more often

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[3]Roger Vailland, Laclos par lui-même (Paris, 1953). p. 51.

gave rise to scandal is hardly surprising, since the partners soon found more congenial objects of desire. Hogarth's Marriage à la Mode is a scathing illustration of a social situation frequently encountered in England as well as in France.

But if husbands could do as they pleased, wives were supposed to remain virtuous, on pain of being ostracised or even placed in Convents. Libertinage among certain strata of the contemporary upper class transformed love into a sophisticated and often unsavoury battle of the sexes, the woman having to exercise all of her cunning and wiles in order to evade the predatory male. Those who yielded to the advances of the seducer were blamed by the world, while the victor was applauded. Those who resisted were labelled as prudes. Naturally, some women whose pride chafed at this state of affairs had to have recourse to a superior intelligence and cunning so as to be able to overcome men on their own petty battlefield.

Both Samuel Richardson and Choderlos de Laclos were ardent feminists[4] who deplored the condition of women, and who depicted in Clarissa and Les Liaisons dangereuses the effects of contemporary marriage arrangements, of the education

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[4]Laclos' concern for women is displayed in his three unfinished essays: De l'Education des Femmes. They are the strongest plea, in his age for the equality of rights for men and women. His arguments in these essays throw light on some aspects of his novel as will be seen subsequently.

given to women and especially the ravages of libertines in society.

This thesis sets out to examine the way in which the concept of libertinage informs these two novels, to analyse the two writers' portraits of libertines, and finally to evaluate their overall success.

II. "LA MERTEUIL, UNE EVE SATANIQUE"
(Baudelaire)

Paradise was lost when Eve, not respecting the clause by which she was to show due submission -- intellectually and physically -- to Adam, decided to lead.

The moral degeneracy which eventually led to the Revolution in France is to be ascribed, in part, to the social and moral conditions in which Eves of the eighteenth-century played an active part.

In the merciless battle of the sexes into which love among the bored aristocracy all too often degenerated, women proved to be sometimes as -- or even more -- dangerous than men. The deceit involved in seduction seemed in keeping with their nature. The libertine woman had an additional and more difficult rôle to perform: that of remaining in the face of the world, a Virtuous Woman. The danger being far greater with an unsuspected enemy who wore the mask of respectability, the corruption and hypocrisy of which some women were capable was boundless. Moreover, if we are to believe the testimony of contemporaries, women themselves were often to blame for the licentiousness of the times:

> "Les femmes de ce temps n'aiment pas avec le coeur, elles aiment avec la tête," dit l'abbé Galiani. Des "débauchées de l'esprit," ajoute Walpole, donnant peut-être la meilleure formule du don-juanisme féminin. Car c'est la femme qui rêve Don Juan, et s'il se trouve pour incarner ce rêve des Richelieu et des Casanova, je suis moins sûr de leur réalité que de celle du désir qui les crée.[1]

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[1]de Rougemont, p. 193.

It is thanks to the Céciles that we have the Valmonts. The Céciles were all too ready to engage in 'liaisons dangereuses', and the Merteuils rejected and desecrated matrimony and child-bearing. They desired man in so far as he served as an instrument of pleasure and by so doing they often abdicated their right to his esteem and respect.

Eighteenth-century nostalgic writings on the subject of man in his primitive state are in part, the expression of a wish to go back to a period where things were not so 'sophisticated', so abnormal, so much against nature; they are man's unconscious desire to return to Eden to find the true Eve. The fact that Laclos started three times, without ever finishing it, an essay entitled De l'Education des Femmes, suggests that he despaired of the possibility of such an education so long as the structure of society remained unchanged. Yet, if unable to sustain for long the description of an ideal state of things, Laclos had no difficulty depicting the actual facts of the Ancien Régime in its state of decadence.

"J'ai vu les moeurs de mon temps, et j'ai publié ces Lettres." This is the quotation from Rousseau that Laclos found fit to place at the beginning of the Liaisons Dangereuses, and, when Madame Riccoboni raised indignant cries at the portrayal of the Marquise de Merteuil, saying:

On vous reprochera toujours, Monsieur, de présenter

> à vos lecteurs une vile créature, appliquée dès sa première jeunesse à se former au vice, à se faire des principes de noirceur, à se composer un masque pour cacher à tous les regards le dessein d'adopter les moeurs d'une de ces malheureuses que la misère réduit à vivre de leur infamie. Tant de dépravation irrite et n'instruit pas. On s'écrie à chaque page: cela n'est point, cela ne saurait être! L'exagération ôte au précepte la force propre à corriger.[2]

Laclos, anticipating the objection and written previously:

> M. de L. ... assure avec chagrin, mais avec sincérité, qu'il ne pourrait effacer aucun des traits qu'il a rassemblés dans la personne de Mme de M. sans mentir à sa conscience, sans taire au moins une partie de ce qu'il a vu.[3]

Laclos' contemporaries preferred not to accept the possibility of the existence of such a woman as Merteuil and wanted to see in her a fabricated monster, but that Laclos intended to draw a realistic picture of Madame de Merteuil is well in keeping with his theory of the novel which he expresses in his review of Fanny Burney's Cecilia. A novel, he tells us, amuses, instructs, and interests. But it can only combine the useful and the agreable if it expresses a deep knowledge of the mind and heart of man. Actually, a novel in his view is the only genre where one can obtain such knowledge. He asks: "Mais qu'on nous dise donc où l'on peut apprendre ailleurs à connaître les moeurs, les caractères, les sentiments et les passions de l'homme?"[4]

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[2] "Correspondance de Laclos et de Madame Riccoboni" in Oeuvres Complètes (Pléiade, 1959), p. 693.

[3] Oeuvres Complètes, p. 687.

[4] "Critique Littéraire" in Oeuvres Complètes, p. 500.

The novel is superior in this respect to either history or drama, for in it alone, "on peut, on doit peut-être donner aux tableaux qu'on présente toute la force de la vérité."[5]

His final appreciation of Cecilia is made on the ground that Fanny Burney's novel "possède éminemment le mérite de peindre les moeurs et les usages; qu'il est rempli d'observations fines et profondes; qu'en général les caractères et les sentiments y sont vrais et bien soutenus."[6] The same judgement applies to the Liaisons. There is not one character in Laclos' book which does not attain a full-fledged roundness, yet that of Madame de Merteuil (like that of Shakespeare's Iago) achieves a stature of its own. She towers over all the other characters because her personality is more powerful than theirs. She holds the strings which will force them to act according to her will and thus transform their lives.

It is interesting to note that the Marquise's letters are relatively few yet her presence is all-pervading. There is hardly a letter in which the other characters do not refer to her or which is not addressed to her. Everyone is to some extent subordinated to her. Cécile sees in her a standard and a guide on which to pattern her behaviour.

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[5] Oeuvres Complètes, p. 500.

[6] Oeuvres Complètes, p. 521.

The virtuous Madame de Volanges cites the Marquise to the Présidente as a rare example of uncontaminated virtue. And Valmont, the libertine, the seducer, acts in front of a mirror which is no other than the Marquise's eyes. She dissects each report that he submits to her, comments on its weakness, and offers constructive suggestions on the basis of her knowledge of the human heart. She also discusses shrewdly the Présidente's letters and points out to the Vicomte his advantages. He eventually becomes a tool in her hands and she is cynical enough to call herself his "Fée bienfaisante". It is probably his realisation of his subjugation to her in their demonic contest of wills that caused the Vicomte to feel contrite for his sins after his final duel.

In a self-analytic and autobiographic letter (letter LXXXI), one of the longest in the book, the Marquise gives a full account of herself and of her principles. She began her career at a remarkably early age. A self-made woman, she has guided her life according to a strict discipline which she has imposed on herself to suit her principles, "Je puis dire que je suis mon ouvrage".[7] This is one of the many factors which make her feel superior to Valmont. The discipline she subjected herself to in order to become the paragon of

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[7] Les Liaisons Dangereuses in Oeuvres Complètes, LXXXI, 176. Subsequent references to the novel will be made in parenthesis within the body of the text.

dissimulation -- dissimulation being the indispensable way to get to her ends -- is such that, had it been employed for higher ends, it would have made of her a saint.[8] Here is an essential duality in the Marquise's character: she is undeniably an <u>être supérieur</u> and thus compels our admiration, but she uses this superiority to such unnatural ends that we cannot but regard her as a monster, a prodigy of nature. In defining her character, she makes it a point to distinguish herself from other categories of women. She is not a "femme à sentiment", she has never identified love with the lover. The latter is no more than an instrument and he is to be treated as such. Nor is she a "femme sensible". Love interests her insofar as it is a means to domination, not a feeling. Love is everywhere mentioned in this book and seldom has it been so well blasphemed. The most cynical and vitriolic comments on the subject come from the Marquise's pen. They all derive from her conviction that "l'amour que l'on nous vante comme la cause de nos plaisirs n'en est au plus que le prétexte " (LXXXI, 178).

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[8]In his analysis of Madame de Merteuil, Hugo Friedrich ("Immoralismus und Tugendideal in <u>Liaisons Dangereuses</u>", <u>Romanische Forschungen</u>, 1935, XLIX, pp.317-342), sees in her self-examination, self-analysis and self-control the principles by which the Stoics, the Cartesians and the Jesuits governed themselves. He points out that the Marquise uses them in order to attain a mastery of soul that enables her to dominate others infallibly.

Since Merteuil and Valmont, in their lucid rationality, choose Power over Love, they deny themselves both the emotional comforts and the sexual satisfaction they provide for their victims. Love as the exchange of two people, the losing of oneself in another, cannot be experienced by the seducer whose principles oblige him (or her, in the case of Madame de Merteuil) to find his happiness within himself (herself) and never to owe it to someone else. If love is the surgical operation that Baudelaire spoke of,[9] then the seducer is always the surgeon.

The Marquise and the Vicomte discuss love as a strategy. This game of love has been compared by Roger Vailland to a Spanish corrida:

> Le libertinage, tel que nous l'a dépeint Laclos, ressemble bien davantage à la corrida qu'au whist. C'est un jeu dramatique, avec des figures bien déterminées aboutissant au "moment de vérité" et à la "mise à mort".[10]

The Marquise's exposition of her strategy is a treatise on libertinage. The warfare she has engaged in is one in which "il faut vaincre ou périr" but she has so mastered the art that she is convinced no one will vanquish her. She has preordained a combat in which nothing is left to chance. This self-liberation of the libertine from contingencies is the important point that Georges Poulet

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[9]Charles Baudelaire, Oeuvres Complètes (Pléiade, 1964), pp. 1249 and 1257.

[10]Vailland, p. 51.

stresses about Les Liaisons Dangereuses in his La Distance Intérieure: "une pensée calculatrice [the seducer's] qui se fixe sur l'avenir pour lui imposer la forme qu'elle s'est donnée comme fin."[11] The seducer or seductress despises the "occasion", they fight destiny. A victory either Valmont or La Merteuil would gain through circumstances would in fact be a defeat. Their code of libertinage is a strict one. The libertine knows beforehand the issue of the intrigues he has set in motion. His interest in the affair is hence concentrated in the observation of the individual performances given him by his victims and in his active contribution to the timing of events. Poulet appraises the Liaisons in these terms:

> ... l'ivresse à froid, l'ivresse purement intellectuelle qu'exhale un tel roman, réside dans la conscience aigüe de cette domination du temps par la volonté humaine. ...Au dessus de Valmont le surveillant, le contrôlant, le critiquant, Mme de Merteuil se présente comme une sorte de superconscience de Valmont, qui, de haut et de loin, sera toujours là pour juger si l'ouvrage exécuté correspond à l'ouvrage projeté.[12]

Merteuil's firmness of purpose assured her success in becoming an example of hypocrisy and earned for her Baudelaire's remark: "Tartuffe femelle, tartuffe de moeurs, tartuffe du XVIIIe siècle."[13]

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[11]Georges Poulet, La Distance Intérieure (Paris, 1952), p. 71.

[12]Poulet, p. 72.

[13]Baudelaire, p. 642.

The manifold and successive masks that Merteuil assumes in order to remain in character, are of a different if not contrary quality to those of the Neveu de Rameau. Although indispensable to her, they are used solely to hide her identity. They hide from the uninitiated a soul too ugly to be seen naked, and a firm, unswerving purpose. And when Madame de Merteuil is unmasked and disfigured by small-pox, the Marquis de *** epigrammatically observes that "la maladie l'avait retournée, et qu'à présent son âme était sur sa figure." (CLXXV, 398). The Marquise's soul was her "portrait", it grew older and uglier all the time while she looked unchanged.

Merteuil is the illustration of the extent to which society has forced some women of that age to deceit and which Laclos has described in his essay on the Education.

The Marquise's erotic tendencies existed in her since her youth. When fifteen, she married, and her wedding night was an objective, detached "expérience" for her. The pleasure she sought out of life was not the "distractions futiles" that one gathers in the "tourbillon du monde" but that of depravation and corruption. She is devoid of the least human affection and her epitaph for her dead husband is "et, quoique, à tout prendre, je n'eusse pas à me plaindre de lui, je n'en sentis pas moins vivement le prix de la liberté qu'allait me donner mon veuvage et je me promis d'en bien profiter." (LXXXI, 178).

She uses people merely as instruments for her pleasure, objects over which she can exert power. If anyone obstructs her plans or even gives her the slightest offense, she avenges herself by destroying the offender. Vengeance, especially against men who think everything is permitted to them, is one of her prime motivations: Cécile must be corrupted because Gercourt, Merteuil's former lover, has the intention of marrying her; Prévan's career must be ruined because he has spoken lightly of her; Madame de Tourvel sacrificed because Valmont has fallen in love with her; and Valmont killed because she feels she is losing her hold on him.

Because she regards people as instruments, the Marquise enjoys perverting them to her own ends. She needs to possess their souls, to be their "divinité". She was originally interested in Cécile because she had hoped to make use of her as an understudy, but when she discovers that the young girl will never become more than a "machine à plaisir", a "femme facile", she decides on her destruction. Any person who allows himself to be governed by an urge, by something less than pure will, is distasteful to the Marquise. The seducer is to be independent not only from people but also from human passions.

"N'étant emportée par aucune passion" is the reason for her success but also the Marquise's most sinister feature. For none of her doings has she the excuse of being blinded

by her passions. Her animating motives -- whether revenge or pleasure -- are cold-blooded, deliberate, and cruel. She has not the excuse of the passionate love of a Medea, or that of the megalomanic ambition of a Lady Macbeth. The Marquise is proud of having annihilated all spontaneity in herself.[14]

Madame de Merteuil has a sovereign contempt for humanity in general which she considers as perverted as herself, but far less strong and intelligent. Her contempt is due to humanity's inability to surmount its weakness as she believes she has done, and its need to hide it under other names.

As an opponent the Marquise is the equal of any man. She knows all the stratagems of libertinage, and hence no seducer, however clever, can outwit her. Where an honest woman like the Présidente is trapped and vanquished, no man can claim victory over the Marquise. Honesty is at a disadvantage against deceit, while deceit can fight deceit. And Merteuil has over the male libertine the advantage of being incognito.

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[14]Her total lack of moral sense is not only displayed in her libertine activities. Of the trial on which her whole fortune depends, she writes to Valmont: "Ce n'est pas que je sois inquiète de l'événement; d'abord j'ai raison...; et quand je ne l'aurais pas! Je serais donc bien maladroite, si je ne savais pas gagner un procès, où je n'ai pour adversaires que des mineurs encore en bas âge et leur vieux tuteur!" (CXIII, 271)

The extent to which she has succeeded is obvious when one compares her true face with her public one, and the interest of the book is reinforced by this constant dramatic irony. One of the most scathing instances of this irony is to be found when both Cécile and her mother turn to Madame de Merteuil for advice on the day following Cécile's rape by Valmont.

"Le style c'est l'homme même" said Buffon, and one can think of few better examples than Madame de Merteuil. In the same manner as she wears masks impeccably she adopts the tone most suitable to her correspondent. She has an unequaled ability for driving people to say or do what she intends for them. She twists logic in such an amazing manner that her poison petrifies her victim before the victim is even aware of the injection. She exercises the fascination of the snake hypnotizing its prey before its imminent death; its blood will be shed, not hers.

The Marquise tires quickly of her worshippers. The sterility of her pleasures, the limited value of her pursuit makes her demand constant variety. She is a praying mantis, once she has used the male, she destroys him. But even more than constancy, her masculine pride resents the complete confidence of a man in her:

> Je remarque surtout l'insultante confiance qu'il prend en moi, et la sécurité avec laquelle il me regarde comme à lui pour toujours. J'en suis vraiment humiliée. (CXIII, 271)

She displays a very masculine sexual pride when she declares to the Vicomte: "J'ai pu avoir quelquefois la prétention de remplacer à moi seule tout un sérail; mais il ne m'a jamais convenu d'en faire partie." (CXXVII, 307). Only a man she would consider superior to herself could fix her affections (if this word can be used at all in connection with the Marquise). Apart from Valmont for whom she has a certain respect, and once even felt something resembling love, she evaluates men from her superior position as no more than "manoeuvres d'amour". Furthermore, the masculine quality of Madame de Merteuil is displayed in her physical attraction to Cécile and in the way in which she seduces Danceny.

Her independence and pride are total. Merteuil does not narrate her adventures to Valmont because she is in need of a confidant. Her self-sufficiency does not require advice or moral support. The correspondence with Valmont is only another facet of the erotic enjoyment she extracts from life. It confirms her in her cynical superiority, and arrogantly she enjoys the praise of an almost equal. Narrating her adventures is a way of reenacting them on a higher intellectual level.

Although she has mastery of the techniques of love-making and greatly enjoys sexual relations (as an expert in the sport), she never permits herself to be ruled by

sensuality alone. She enjoys her own expert performance both objectively and subjectively. There can never be for her the healthy physical abandonment of a Wife of Bath. Her acceptance of sexual pleasure is subordinated to rational motives. This strict self-control ensures that she never gives herself to pleasure without an intellectual decision to do so.

"Caractère sinistre et satanique" wrote Baudelaire of Les Liaisons Dangereuses. Both these traits are most prominently displayed in Merteuil. All human feelings are suppressed in her. She illustrates perfectly Baudelaire's axiom, "La volupté unique et suprême de l'amour gît dans la certitude de faire le mal.-- Et l'homme et la femme savent de naissance que dans le mal se trouve toute volupté."[15]

The portrait of Madame de Merteuil is not an anti-feministic one. Because the Marquise has renounced her feminine attributes, she is in a class by herself. Laclos is not using her as a satire against women. He had feelings of respect, tenderness and affection for them and was a firm believer in the "sensibilité" of women. What Laclos so brilliantly exposed through Merteuil is the society which made such a woman possible. Other eighteenth-century novelists have sketched similar female portraits (Lady Bellaston in

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[15]Baudelaire, pp. 1249-1250

Tom Jones, Madame de la Pommeraye in Jacques le Fataliste, to mention but a few) but none have achieved so complete and detailed a portrait as Laclos.

The key to the Marquise's character lies in her eroticism. She is a being incapable of the passion of love. The seduction she indulges in is always accompanied by corruption both mental and moral. She is totally devoid of sensitiveness.[16] That her eroticism is mainly intellectual is illustrated in Letter X where she says that she read, while waiting for her lover: "un chapitre du Sopha, une Lettre d'Héloïse et deux Contes de La Fontaine, pour recorder les différents tons que je voulais prendre." (X, 30).

The only literary character which to my mind, from the point of view of seduction and eroticism, bears a remarkable resemblance to Madame de Merteuil is Kierkegaard's Johannes in the Diary of the Seducer. Because they both are unable to experience love, they take pleasure in provoking that passion in others in order to observe it and degrade it. The fact that Merteuil is a woman adds to her character a more awesome aspect but then, "ici comme dans la vie, la palme de la perversité reste à la femme."[17]

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[16]These traits conform with Claude Elsen's definition of "Homo Eroticus" in his article of that name in La Table Ronde (11, 1948), p. 1910. He says in particular, "Mme de Merteuil est absolument détachée de toute notion de l'amour; sa passion est purement négative, désensibilisée, désincarnée. Elle nous rapproche de Sade".

[17]Baudelaire, p. 641.

Madame de Merteuil, on the evidence of Laclos, is a composite character made out of traits of several women.

> On insiste et l'on me demande: Mme de Merteuil a-t-elle jamais existé? Je l'ignore. Je n'ai point prétendu faire une libelle... mais j'ai pu... rassembler dans un même personnage les traits épars du même caractère. J'ai donc peint, ou au moins j'ai voulu peindre les noirceurs que des femmes dépravées s'étaient permises, en couvrant leur vice de l'hypocrisie des moeurs.[18]

To make his point clear, Laclos compares his method to that by which Molière describes his Tartuffe. And Madame de Merteuil is indeed a character as unforgettable as that of a Tartuffe or a Don Juan.

Women, Laclos tells us in De l'Education des Femmes, in order to combat the slavery to which they are subjected by men, developed the power of dissimulation. The Marquise is the extreme example of this type. The really worthwhile woman, the Présidente, is the only "femme naturelle" (cf. Letter VI, describing her and the chapter on the victims). She finds it her duty to make the happiness of the man she loves even at the expense of her own. The state of affairs which calls for the existence of women like Merteuil endangers the existence of women like the Présidente. The eighteenth-century climate of opinion which offered man permission to refine and enjoy the libertine's code denied compensating privileges to women. Thus it is not surprising that a woman of exceptional qualities, in struggling against this injustice

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[18] Oeuvres Complètes, pp. 690-1.

should find it necessary to abdicate feminine characteristics, and thereby challenge the exclusive rights of men.

Laclos, the champion of women's equality, knew that he was fighting for an almost impossible cause. He says in De l'Education: "Il n'est aucun moyen de perfectionner l'éducation des femmes."[19] And Madame de Merteuil, "née pour venger mon sexe et maîtriser le vôtre," is the best case in point: trying to equal man, she has only succeeded in overreaching her mark, she has become his superior.

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[19] Oeuvres Complètes, p. 403.

III. LOVELACE, "THE ONLY DON JUAN IN ENGLISH FICTION"

(V.S. Pritchett)

Of Richardson's male characters, the one who has attracted most critical attention is Lovelace. Towards the end of the eighteenth-century he had become a symbol. His name was used to identify a certain category of men: the dashing, bold and irresistible seducer who makes of seduction a deadly game in which he expends all of his energy; "Lovelace est, avec Valmont, des Liaisons Dangereuses, le type de la galanterie du siècle d'un Richelieu ou d'un Baltimore. L'amour s'appelle l'intrigue, la lutte, le sang versé,"[1] says Texte, and later adds, "Valmont, c'est Lovelace français."[2] Mario Praz also refers to Valmont as "the French Lovelace,"[3] while A.O. Aldridge writes, "Valmont descend aussi du vrai Don Juan anglais, non point du mufle absurde du Libertine, de Shadwell, mais le roué accompli du roman de Richardson, Clarisse Harlowe."[4]

Although the character of Lovelace is suggestive of the archetypal seducer, an analysis of his speech and actions reveals certain characteristics which are contrary to the type he is supposed to exemplify. Valmont has a much

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[1]Joseph Texte, Jean-Jacques Rousseau et les Origines du Cosmopolitisme littéraire (Paris, 1895), p. 223.

[2]Texte, p. 275.

[3]Mario Praz, The Romantic Agony (New York, 1956), p. 201.

[4]Alfred Owen Aldridge, Essai sur les personnages des Liaisons dangereuses (Archive des lettres modernes, 1960), p. 29.

better claim to Lovelace's reputation than Lovelace himself.[5] This chapter will consider, on the one hand, the elements in Lovelace's character which conform to those of the libertine, and, on the other, the traits and actions which, by contradicting these elements, negate them.

For Richardson, Lovelace is a representative of a certain section of the nobility and as such he embodies the values most opposite to those of the bourgeoisie. He is what Richardson secretly fears and probably envies and admires. Lovelace presented a very intricate artistic problem for Richardson: to paint an arch-villain who would nonetheless have qualities that would explain his heroine's attachment to him and her preference of him to other men, and at the same time make this villain meditate upon womankind and the difficulties of being evil in order to instruct the readers. Hence the difficulties in creating such a character stem from Richardson's desire to endow Lovelace with attractive as well as repulsive traits of personality. What Richardson considers to be attractive qualities are puritan virtues, which if they might appeal to Clarissa are out of keeping with the character of a libertine. Had he merely made Lovelace pretend to possess these virtues, instead of endowing him with them, his character

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[5] H.T. Hopkinson, in his article, "Robert Lovelace: The Romantic Cad," Horizon, X (1944), pp. 80-104, considers Lovelace as the supreme example of the cad in literature, superior to Valmont. Yet, in order to define the cad, he uses quotations from Valmont's letters!

would have been more convincing. In answering contemporary objections to the authenticity of Lovelace's character, Richardson wrote on two occasions to his friend, Aaron Hill:

> With regard to the Character of Lovelace ... I must own that I am a good deal warped by the Character of a Gentleman I had in my Eye, when I drew both him and Mr. B. in Pamela. The best of that Gentleman for the latter, the worst of him for Lovelace, made still worse by mingling the worst of two other Characters, that were well known to me, of that Gentleman's Acquaintance. And this made me say in my last, that I aimed at an uncommon, altho' I supposed, a not quite unnatural Character,[6]

and,

> I had not in my Aim, to write, after anything I ever read, or heard talk'd of; tho' I had in my Eye something I had seen Years ago.[7]

Despite these assertions, it is difficult to imagine a real Lovelace. Richardson's lack of familiarity with the nobility -- he came from a family of "middling note" -- is at odds with his fascination with them and explains some of the incongruities in Lovelace's character and behaviour.

Richardson repeatedly tells his reader that Lovelace is a rake and a libertine, who prides himself on seducing young girls and, true to the libertine code, is more interested in the process of the chase than in the actual consummation. He writes to Joseph Leman:

> I do assure you, Joseph, that I have ever had more pleasure in my contrivances, than in the end of them.

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[6]Selected Letters of Samuel Richardson, ed. John Carrol (Oxford, 1964), p. 79.

[7]Selected Letters, p. 76.

> I am no sensual man: but a man of spirit -- one woman is like another -- you understand me, Joseph. In coursing, all the sport is made by the winding hare -- a barn-door chick is better eating -- now you take me, Joseph.[8]

Once his purpose is achieved he is no longer interested in his victim, but he does not forget to provide for her and her offspring "according to the degree of its mother" (II,xli,148). His 'morality' makes him "shun common women -- a piece of justice I owed to innocent ladies, as well as to myself ... marry off a former mistress, if possible, before taking a new one" (II, xli, 148). He is easily shocked by lax sensual behaviour and congratulates himself on the fact that he almost never contributed to adultery, which he considers to be a grievous sin.

In fact, Lovelace manages his loves with the same prudence and economy with which Clarissa manages her father's household or distributes alms to the "deserving poor". The moral obligation that Lovelace feels towards his victims -- as well as his generosity "according to degree" -- smacks more

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[8] Clarissa, II, xli, 147. The text is that of the Everyman edition (London, 1967). Subsequent reference will be to this edition.

The very emphasis with which Lovelace asserts his lack of sensuality -- the almost hysterical need to have his correspondent believe him -- arouses the reader's suspicions about his statement. It reflects Lovelace's basic insecurity in the rôle of a rake. To be accepted as a rake is one thing; to feel the need to persuade others, verbally, is quite another. The very loquacity of Lovelace, when set against his comparative lack of activity, justifies a belief that the character of rake does not sit easily upon his personality!

of a puritan nouveau-riche than of a true libertine, if only because it arises from his need, "whenever I have committed a very capital enormity, to do some good by way of atonement" (I, xxxiv, 173). Although he constantly prides himself on being wicked, his evil deeds fill him with guilt and he takes refuge in the thought "that it is not out of my power to reform." (I, xxxiv, 173).

As Lovelace's sensuality, albeit strenuously denied, is a characteristic which prevents him from being classified as a true libertine, so too does his proclivity for good works. This busy conscience, overladened by a distinctive snobbery or class-consciousness, may well reflect Richardson's attempt to achieve psychological reality, but it cannot help but detract from a portrait of libertinage. One senses more the social and moral values of the author (and one doubts the sociological insight of Richardson's narrow, middle-class outlook where nobility is concerned), than the natural motivation of the character.

Where his "honour" is at stake, however, Lovelace does have the libertine pride and code of vengeance. In fact, pride is the mainspring of his behaviour and forces him to act against his inclination; "I am mad with love, fired by revenge, puzzled with my own devices, my invention is my curse, my pride my punishment " (II, cxvii, 460). He will punish Clarissa for not loving him and for preferring her family to him.

He finds satisfaction in plots and contrivances. On the subject of Clarissa, he writes to Belford, "there are so many stimulatives to such a spirit as mine in this affair, besides love: such a field of stratagem and contrivance, which thou knowest to be the delight of my heart." (I, xxxi, 150). Statements such as these are from the true libertine creed and are often found in Lovelace's correspondence: "more truly delightful to me the seduction process than the crowning act," (II, xciv, 337), and, "I love, when I dig a pit, to have my prey tumble in with secure feet and open eyes" (II, xxviii, 102). But, here again, the statements of faith which pepper his letters, are contradicted by the reality of action, that will be considered later.

To establish more forcefully and remarkably his reputation, to give him more glamour, Richardson makes Lovelace the leader of a coterie of libertines. In this capacity he offers advice on seduction and provides his friends with lengthy written reports on his own activities -- for their edification! Yet at the end of the book, while trying to excuse his conduct to Belford, Lovelace accuses the latter of having initiated a great deal of the seduction from which he (Lovelace) benefitted because of his good looks.

In the two thousand pages which constitute Clarissa, the reader has ample opportunity to become acquainted with Lovelace, although it is not until Letter xxxi that one actually

meets him. The early letters contain descriptions of him; reports and anecdotes about him,[9] which lead one to expect a highly intelligent, ruthless young nobleman who would subtly and successfully capitalize on his powers of seduction, and who is exceptionally talented in the art of manipulating human beings. Yet when one finally meets him and sees him in action, one is sadly disappointed. Lovelace, unlike the true libertine, has little control over his emotions and he is easily checked by Clarissa's defensive virtue. His machinations are quickly discovered and despised by her watchful intelligence, as she writes to Miss Howe:

> To threaten as he threatens; yet to pretend, that it is not to intimidate me; and to beg you not to tell me, when he must know how you would, and no doubt intended that you should, is so meanly artful! The man must think he has a frightful fool to deal with. (I, lv, 281)

At the first substantial challenge to him as a seducer, Lovelace's plots remain simply in his mind, for he lacks the ruthless and determined ability to overcome her

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[9]To cite but a few: his clever behaviour in getting rid of Arabella Harlowe (I, ii); his successful fanning of resentment in the Harlowe family; Clarissa's comment on his letters to her, "if he has a design by this conduct (sometimes complaining of my shyness, at others exulting in my imaginary favours) to induce me at one time to acquiesce with his compliments; at another to be more complaisant for his complaints; and if the contradiction be not the effect of his inattention and giddiness; I shall think him as deep and as artful (too probably, as practised) a creature as ever lived." (I, xxvi,124)

outraged protestations. In his final assault, he permits himself to be influenced and even aided by Mrs. Sinclair and her 'nymphs' in the brothel, so that the final crisis is as much of their making as of his own. That he is driven to such straits is due in part to the fact that he has no insight into Clarissa's personality and cannot formulate a psychologically sound plan for attaining her love. Confronted by Clarissa, all of Lovelace's powers fail him. He is at a loss how to act with her. His perplexity is that of a shy admirer, not of a well-seasoned seducer. His juvenile and blustering methods of seduction -- which Richardson considers bold and daring -- are revealed in this candid reflection: "what can a lover say to his mistress if she will neither let him lie nor swear?" (II, iv, 15).

It is not surprising that Lovelace is unable to understand Clarissa. His seduction of Sally Martin and Polly Horton, described in the Conclusion, reveal that, heretofore, he had found 'victims' who were more than ready to be seduced. The confrontation of Lovelace and Clarissa is of an entirely different order. It is a thin version of a battle of the sexes such as that which opposes Valmont and Madame de Merteuil. Both protagonists see themselves as champions of their sexes and it is a war for supremacy which they wage. Lovelace exclaims, "such a triumph over the whole sex,

if I can subdue this lady!" (II, iv, 15). He is fond of making wild generalizations about women, just as Clarissa is about men.

Whatever success Lovelace can claim in this war against Clarissa is not due to the influence he has over her -- not once is her will subservient to his -- but to intimidation. He always endeavours to subdue her physically. When she makes her decision to go off with him he takes hold of her arm and tries to pull her after him. He proceeds with her seduction by physical means only. He hopes that by arousing her senses he will possess her. He continually tries to kiss and fondle her and stages episodes (such as the fire scene), to lead her, preferably in a state of undress, into his arms. He cannot understand that the liberties he tries to take with her serve only to frighten and disgust her.

The discrepancy between the projected image and the reality of Lovelace as a libertine, stems from the struggle which takes place within him between his pride (and his desire for revenge against the Harlowes), and his admiration for Clarissa's virtue, as well as his real love for her.

Richardson has laboured to endow his seducer with some of the abilities necessary to a true libertine. Lovelace is ingenious. He speaks the truth as if it were falsehood and pretends that events caused by him are falsely imputed

to him. Clarissa immediately writes to Miss Howe, "he regrets my indifference to him; which puts all the hope he has in my favour upon the shocking usage I receive from my friends." (I, lxxv, 368). He confesses his actions in order to hide his motives: he tells Clarissa that he has asked a friend to inform the Harlowes that he will not permit them to carry her to her uncle.

However, once Clarissa is in his power, Lovelace, out of sheer delight in playing parts and inventing plots, continues his machinations even though they are quite unnecessary and bound to be discovered, hence achieving a contrary effect to that desired, by making Clarissa despise him the more. He behaves most of the time as if he were compulsively led to act against his own avowed interests. This self-sabotage is difficult to understand from the artistic point of view and can only be attributed to the censorious work of Richardson's puritanism. Because of it Lovelace, who would give his soul to be loved by Clarissa, manages to become insufferable to her (see II, xlvi, 167). Clarissa writes, "he took care, great care, that I should rein in betimes any passion that I might have had for him, had he known how to be but commonly grateful and generous!" (IV, xlviii, 111).

Lovelace's clever device of isolating Clarissa and encouraging her persecution by her relatives achieves his end

and furthers his plot. Clarissa cannot help comparing the attitude and behaviour of her family towards her with those of Lovelace, to his great advantage. (I,xl). As effective as his feigned characteristics and his stratagems, are his natural qualities. He is, for example, generous and shows a largesse with money entirely opposed to the grasping stinginess of her family. Clarissa responds to these natural qualities without any need for Lovelace to invent them. He is at the same time prudent in money matters and repays his debts, a fact which not only further endears him to Clarissa, but which also betokens something of a bourgeois business sense. In fact, apart from his attitude towards "the Sex," Lovelace is a 'respectable' nobleman; "this I may venture to say, that the principal blot in my escutcheon is owing to these girls, these confounded girls. But for <u>them</u> I could go to church with a good conscience: but when I do, there they are. Everywhere does Satan spread his snares for me!" (II, vii, 24).

This one deviation from respectability Richardson attributes to a first unrequited love, which has made Lovelace decide to avenge himself for the unfaithfulness of one woman on all women. (I, xxxi). Having become a libertine through circumstances more than by temperament, he has a longing for true and pure love, envying those who experience it; "what would I give to have so innocent and so good a heart as either

my Rosebud's or Johnny's", (I, xxxiv, 172), and he admits that he hates love, "because 'tis my master."

For all of his boasting Lovelace manages to contravene the libertine code because he is obviously a man of repressed sensuality, who falls in love with 'one woman' and, worst crime of all, when it comes to the ultimate test of his power, he rapes his victim. By raping Clarissa he shows his weakness, not his strength. He reveals a lack of confidence in his powers of contrivance by using brute force and not 'spirit' as the means of physical possession. What set out to be the conquest of Clarissa, ends as the destruction of Lovelace.

The situation is rendered even more pathetic and incongruous in the light of Lovelace's earlier views on the subject; "rapes are unnatural things; and more rare than are imagined, Joseph. I should be loath to be put to such a strait. I never was": (II, xli, 148); "abhorred be <u>force</u>, be the <u>necessity</u> of force, if that can be avoided! There is no triumph in <u>force</u>. No conquest over the will. No prevailing by gentle degrees, over the gentle passions! <u>Force</u> is the devil!" (II, ciii, 398). The reader comes to the realisation that although Lovelace can be generous and manage his estate, he actually has very little control over his repressed senses, while he can display, for a certain period, a child's amazing and unbending opinionatedness when he desires

something. He appears cynical yet, in spite of Richardson's statements to the contrary, he is not sophisticated enough, partly because Richardson himself lacked sophistication. Lovelace is very much a 'stage rake' of Richardson's own imagination, his own puritan repressions, compensation and sadism. He permits himself to be prompted by the very creatures he despises: prostitutes. Lovelace takes Clarissa to Mrs. Sinclair's house because he cannot rely upon his wit alone to master her. He needs other people and a degrading setting to accomplish this: "I am ashamed to tell thee what a poor creature she made me look like! But I could have told her something that would have humbled her pretty pride at the instant, had she been in a proper place, and proper company about her." (II, ix, 32). This is why he feels it necessary to set Clarissa up in Mrs. Sinclair's lodgings. Valmont, by contrast, seduces Madame de Tourvel by an appeal to her emotions in her own living-room!

Not only does Lovelace finally betray the principles by which he professes to live, but also most of his 'positive' characteristics as a libertine are not convincing. In his prefatory chapter to the Works of Richardson, Sir Leslie Stephen writes:

> Lovelace, in spite of the cleverness attributed to him, is really a most imbecile schemer. The first principle of a villain should be to tell as few lies as will serve his purpose; but Lovelace invents such elaborate and complicated plots,

> presenting so many chances of detection and introducing so many persons into his secrets, that it is evident that in real life he would have broken down in a week. [10]

It is not merely the authenticity of Lovelace as a believable person which is in question, but also the accuracy of Richardson's portrait of a libertine.

A wild and exalted imagination seems to be Lovelace's inspiration. It manifests itself in hare-brained schemes and leads him to irrational behaviour and thinking. In this respect he is the exact opposite of the Valmont type of eighteenth-century libertine, who is quintessentially a rational man. Lovelace is really a pre-Romantic character, who lives in a world of day-dreams constantly dashed by reality, although without losing his self-satisfaction or his pride in what he considers to be his superior talents. He is much closer to some of Prévost's heroes than to the libertines of Restoration comedy, to Don Juan, or to Valmont.

In his Postscript to Clarissa, Richardson tells his readers that:

> it has been thought, by some worthy and ingenious persons, that if Lovelace had been drawn an infidel or scoffer, his character, according to the taste of the present worse than sceptical age, would have been more natural. (IV, 559)

but the arguments which he uses to defend his character's religious creed are totally unconvincing. Lovelace's belief

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[10] Sir Leslie Stephen, ed. The Works of Samuel Richardson, I (London, 1883-84), xlix-l.

in God and the afterworld, his disquisitions on the soul (II, xvii, 59; IV lvi; IV cii),are simply another aspect of his muddled personality. Furthermore, he is not only bien-pensant. He has a prolific tendency towards moralization and often can express himself -- quite seriously -- almost as edifyingly as the virtuous Clarissa herself:

> of this I am absolutely convinced, that if a man ever intends to marry, and to enjoy in peace his own reflections; and not be afraid of retribution, or of the consequences of his own example; he should never be a rake. (III, cxiii, 475)

If Lovelace too often expresses views that are out of keeping with his libertine attributes, it is because Richardson, intent on edification above all else, uses his arch-villain no less than the other characters to educate contemporary young ladies in their conduct. He feels that remarks on women and the way in which they should behave would be most appropriate from the pen of one supposed to be so well acquainted with them; he does this at no little cost to aesthetic and psychological propriety as grasped by modern sensibility.

This over-riding high-seriousness of purpose also helps to undermine Richardson's efforts to endow his hero with 'wit'. It is hard for a modern reader to find Lovelace's heavy-handed bantering either witty or amusing. In his letters lightness of style, like that which he adopts with Belford, consists mainly of invective and insults to his correspondents, as well as postured boasting about himself.

Walter Allen says of Lovelace that "he stands out ... with the daemonic magnetism of a figure of myth,"[11] yet he fails to inspire the awe and fear which evil engenders. On the contrary, he is rather pitiful in his bungling libertinage because he is obviously oversexed and thus tormented by passions he cannot control.

The collection of contradictory traits -- often mutually cancelling one another -- which constitute Lovelace's character, far from showing a man who acts according to a firm set of beliefs, reveals a schizophrenic personality. He is constantly torn between a strong sex-drive and a desire to be virtuous on the one hand, and a delight in mischief on the other. This delight in mischief is accompanied by sado-masochistic[12] traits which he shares with other characters in the novel, especially with the contemptible Solmes. He greatly enjoys Clarissa's confusion and tears, "I find a pleasure in playing the tyrant over what I love". (III, vi, 65). Whenever she expresses her contempt for him in scathing terms, he admires and loves her more than ever; "your scorn but augments my love!" (III, xlvi, 261).

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[11] Walter Allen, The English Novel (London, 1958), p.50.

[12] "Sadism is, no doubt, the ultimate form which the eighteenth-century view of the masculine rôle involved: and it makes the female rôle one in which the woman is, and can only be, the prey: to use another of Lovelace's metaphors, man is a spider, and woman is the predestined fly." Watt, p.231.

In the sexual altercation between good and evil, the widow Sinclair and her nymphs personify Lovelace's penchant for evil; they are his satanic alter-ego, while Clarissa is the embodiment of his aspirations towards virtue. Lovelace's soul is according to Richardson, the battlefield between God and Satan. Belief in God and moral retribution, the choice of evil with the full consciousness of doing wrong, relate Lovelace more closely to the seventeenth-century or the romantic notion of a libertine than to Valmont, whose rationalism makes him a true eighteenth-century man. Yet, whereas the rake of the seventeenth-century sets himself in defiance to God, Lovelace is so steeped in Richardson's own imagination that he hopes to reconcile himself to Him.

In the final analysis, Lovelace is nothing more than a young oversexed nobleman spoiled by the facilities obtained by his birth, his good looks and his fortune. He is a privileged young aristocrat who intends to sow his wild oats as gaily as possible (in a pre-romantic fashion) during his youth, yet with the ultimate intention of eventually settling down respectably -- a rather unbalanced young man, endowed with a strong sexual drive, puritan repression, and sado-masochistic fantasies. His only tragedy is the meeting and falling in love with Clarissa too early, before he has grown out of his post-pubertal complexes.

If, very often, insofar as reports and professions of faith are concerned, Lovelace appears to be the prototype of the libertine, in practise he is simply a would-be stage libertine[13] who has failed. Libertines, Richardson style, are frustrated, over-sexed enthusiasts, doomed to wretched lives and ends (like Lovelace), unless they happen to be reclaimed like Belford.

[13]For interesting studies on Richardson's debt to the theater, see H.G. Ward, "Richardson's Character of Lovelace", Modern Langaage Review, VII (1912), 494-98; George Sherburn, "Samuel Richardson's Novels and the Theater: A Theory Sketched", Philological Quarterly, XLI (1962), 325-29; and Leo Hughes, "Theatrical Convention in Richardson: Some Observations on a Novelist's Technique", Restoration and Eighteenth-Century Literature, ed. C.C. Camden (Chicago, 1963).

IV. "LE VICOMTE DE VALMONT, DON JUAN DE METIER, EXPERT ET DIABOLIQUE"
(André Maurois)

In a preface to Les Liaisons Dangereuses, André Gide writes of the Vicomte de Valmont:

> That demoniac hero fosters in himself an inflexible hatred of everything pure ... he gives himself up to it with a fixed and tenacious application which almost takes in him the place of virtue ... He does not abandon himself to evil; he does not weakly consent to it; he strives after it, out of vanity, out of pride.[1]

In contrast to Richardson, Laclos has created in the character of Valmont the true prototype of the libertine: a man who has rationally set for himself a code of behaviour and who lives in accordance with it. This code involves the seduction and manipulation of human beings. It is exacting and does not allow self-indulgence, "la vertu qu'exige le libertinage demande une longue formation et un continuel exercice. Il en est ainsi de toute vertu: n'importe quel manuel de Jésuites nous l'apprend."[2]

The usual end of seduction, the physical possession of another person, is relatively unimportant; what matters are the steps leading to it and the absolute control of the inner life of the victim. The satisfaction of the seducer springs from the feeling of superiority he has over others, whose life and actions he controls at will. In an era where bedroom prowess was rather common, the libertine added interest to his life, as well as a sense of being, by a sophisticated

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[1]André Gide, "Preface," Les Liaisons Dangereuses, transl. Ernest Dowson (London, 1940), p. ix-x.

[2]Vailland, p. 61.

system of destruction of his victims: "séduire, c'est aussi se rendre réel et se rendre nécessaire. Le Séducteur est celui avec qui l'on ne peut pas ne pas compter."[3] Once Valmont knows that the Présidente de Tourvel is in love with him, his main concern is to avoid too easy a seduction,[4] a "séduction ordinaire":

> mon projet au contraire, est qu'elle sente, qu'elle sente bien la valeur et l'étendue de chacun des sacrifices qu'elle me fera; de ne pas la conduire si vite, que le remords ne puisse la suivre; de faire expier sa vertu dans une lente agonie; de la fixer sans cesse sur ce désolant spectacle; et de ne lui accorder le bonheur de m'avoir dans ses bras, qu'après l'avoir forcée à n'en plus dissimuler le désir. (LXX, 143)

A seducer of Valmont's class despises facility; he must prove his daring by confronting obstacles worthy of him. Hence Valmont's deliberate choice of the Présidente: "sa dévotion, son amour conjugal, ses principes austères" (IV, 17), make her an ideal object of a libertine's conquest, "Loin de moi de détruire les préjugés qui l'assiègent! ils ajouteront à mon bonheur et à ma gloire " (VI, 22).

Valmont makes painstaking and deliberate use of his intellect in the seduction of Madame de Tourvel. He knows that in dealing with her he must lie as little as possible,

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[3]Claude Elsen, Homo Eroticus (Paris, 1953), p.47.

[4]Whereas Lovelace, as soon as by means of the ipecacuanha plot realizes that Clarissa loves him, wants immediately to attempt her virtue!

so he tells her, "comme en m'accusant," what sort of man he really is. His letters to her are full of irony. He tells her openly what he will do to her while pretending that this is what he would have done had he not, owing to her influence, given up "ses erreurs." His letters to her are woven through with false sincerity, double-entendre and feigned virtue.

Like any true libertine, Valmont is profane and cynical. In order to touch the Présidente de Tourvel's sense of charity, he saves a poor family from the bailiff and asks them, in return for this gesture of generosity (which he knows will impress the Présidente), "de prier Dieu pour le succès de mes projets" (XXI, 48-49), that is, the Présidente's seduction. He feels that Madame de Tourvel's abdication of her pious principles will make him the rival of God. (VI, 22).

Where Lovelace, in one of his exalted moments, dreams of intruding on Clarissa disguised as a clergyman, Valmont succeeds in convincing a priest of his (Valmont's) good faith in regard to Madame de Tourvel. And thanks in part at least to Père Anselme's genuine plea on his behalf, Valmont succeeds in seducing her.[5]

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[5]Emile Dard, in Le Général Choderlos de Laclos (Paris, 1936), compares Valmont to Lovelace (whom he finds more attractive) and attributes the "voltairien ricanant" aspect of Valmont and his "esprit sec et lucide" to the chronological difference between the novels. "Par là [in the depicting of the effects of vanity in love] son livre d'une originalité si profonde, prend une portée historique considérable" p. 73.

Valmont's cynicism and complete profanation of love is displayed in the Emilie episode; an episode which far surpasses in its incisive wit the double-entendre of Lovelace, or his placing of Clarissa in a bawdy house. Valmont's letter to the Présidente (XLVIII), shows his pure intellectuality, his wit, and his lack of what we like to think of as "human attributes." His méchanceté reaches almost Satanic proportions here.

The seducer has no remorse for his actions and finds it natural to perpetrate the most horrible deeds, but should a Madame de Volanges write to a Madame de Tourvel exposing his misdeeds, thereby harming him, he has no scruple in avenging himself in a most cruel manner.[6] In so doing he experiences an intellectual pleasure equal to that of seduction, since they are both based on a sense of power over others. The life of the libertine is condensed in these lines that Valmont writes to the Marquise after having persuaded the maid to pick Madame de Tourvel's pockets and provide him with her private correspondence; "j'ai dévoilé un double mystère d'amour et d'iniquité: je jouirai de l'un, je me vengerai de l'autre; je volerai de plaisirs en plaisirs." (XLIV, 92).

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[6]Lovelace, incensed by Miss Howe's letters to Clarissa because they expose him, elaborates a fantastic plan to avenge himself, which he never does, never could, put into action.

Madame de Volanges, who has no illusions about Valmont, describes his libertine designs accurately:

> Sa conduite est le résultat de ses principes. Il sait calculer tout ce qu'un homme peut se permettre d'horreurs sans se compromettre; et pour être méchant et cruel sans danger, il a choisi les femmes pour victimes. (IX, 26)

The Présidente's answer to Madame de Volange's cautionary letter, "enfin, si j'avais un frère, je désirerais qu'il fût tel que Monsieur de Valmont se montre ici" (XI, 32), is a tribute to the mastery Valmont has acquired in the art of deception, and to his knowledge of people, which allows him to assume the character most appealing to his chosen victims.

The idea of seducing Cécile does not particularly fascinate Valmont because her inexperience and youth make her an all too easy prey. As a matter of fact, Cécile for him is such an easy victim that he goes on with the scheme for the most part to please Madame de Merteuil. Lovelace, on the other hand, is entranced by the freshness of Rosebud (virginity is a bait for him and an essential prerequisite to attract his attentions). Had he succumbed to his desire, Lovelace would no doubt have been satisfied merely with physical possession. Valmont cannot stop at that. His seduction is more complex: it is much more moral corruption than physical possession. He makes it a point to deprave Cécile and he knows exactly what steps to follow to achieve

this since he has done it before (Letter CX). As he has used Père Anselme to further his seduction of Madame de Tourvel, so he cynically and ironically uses Cécile's young suitor, Danceny, in order to possess her.

It is not so much the need for mutual confidence that prompts Valmont to correspond with Madame de Merteuil. They are both self-sufficient; but each wishes to recall their adventures, and, to describe them in detail is a way of re-enacting them. Thus verbalization plays its part in the erotic enjoyment. It is a mirror which reflects for oneself and for others the crucial actions, and in so doing, multiplies them. Also, the Vicomte and the Marquise have enough appreciation for each other's abilities to know that the events narrated will be justly valued. They like to judge and emulate one another.

The strength of the seducer rests essentially in his avoidance of emotional involvement, or, at least, in his rationally developed technique of control over tender feelings. He arrives at this non-involvement through a discipline to which he submits himself in order to suppress all feelings within himself. When, by accident, Valmont does become involved in sincere emotion with Madame de Tourvel, he feels the need to apologize to Madame de Merteuil for this failure in following his code. Both he and the Marquise believe themselves to be superior beings and they are such in so far

as they are devoid of human sentiments like love and compassion, which require unselfishness. However, Valmont, as we shall see, is not as impervious to these gentle emotions as is his accomplice.

The two chief motives which govern Valmont's behaviour are "gloire" and "plaisir." But of these, glory is the most important and he will unhesitatingly sacrifice his pleasure to it. The glory which the libertine constantly seeks has no resemblance to that after which seventeenth-century men strove (Valmont writes of his intended seduction of Madame de Tourvel, "son succès m'assure autant de gloire que de plaisir" (IV, 17), and the word "gloire" appears constantly under his pen in connection with the Présidente). Corneille's heroes, faced with a choice between their love and their duty, found 'gloire' in choosing duty. For the libertine, however, there is no struggle between the two concepts, since he either negates love or defines it simply as 'volupté', and only recognizes the duty to his sense of power which he owes himself. The psychological conflict of a Cornelian or Racinian drama which arises from contending emotions or duties within an individual is superseded by one in which the conflict is due to an external social situation: a war between the sexes. Each sex strives after domination: men by seducing women and women by permitting themselves to be seduced in order to enslave the men. This situation

renders seduction easy since the woman in such manoeuvres becomes man's accomplice:

> Love is a miniature battle, a sham fight. ...Ostensibly the role of the female is to be "defeated" by the predatory male; she derives her *gloire* from a spirited "defence" which in the nature of things is "hopeless." Yet the defeated woman is not so much a *victim* as an *accomplice*; the success of the performance depends on ... "willing co-operation." The engagement does not end in "victory" for one party and "defeat" for the other. It is a combination of the two, victory -- and -- defeat, which gives both the ambivalent feeling of *gloire - plaisir*.[7]

Naturally the accomplished libertine soon tires of this pre-arranged game and of its *gloire - plaisir*. To enhance the feeling of both he adds the refinement of cruelty to his performance. He attacks unsuspecting and uninitiated women who will be purely victims and not accomplices. Once he has reduced them to complete dependence on him he abandons them, causing their social and psychological ruin. The *gloire* which he thus achieves is simultaneously private -- a self-satisfying confirmation of his abilities -- and public -- the reputation which he derives from his activities.

This will to dominate,. this search for fulfillment in the possession and control of others, prefigure on the psychological level the objectives of the Marquis de Sade. The main difference between Laclos' seducers and de Sade's protagonists is that the former never indulge in physical sadism.

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[7]Martin Turnell, *The Novel in France* (London, 1951), p. 58.

Glory and pleasure are two expressions of the libertine's preoccupation with one thing only: himself as he appears in his own eyes and in those of the world. Valmont is interested in his pleasure, in the effect he has on and over people, in the injuries done to him by others, in the image he builds of himself in his letters and in Madame de Merteuil's appraisal of his exploits. This intense preoccupation with himself, which he shares with the Marquise, has encouraged their sadistic tendencies and developed in him, as definitely as in her, a latent homosexuality (LXXII,148).

The greatest tribute to Valmont's unique abilities lies in Madame de Merteuil's regard for him: he alone was deemed worthy by this remarkable and superior woman of her confidence. She confesses that he is also the only person for whom she had a feeling resembling love, "le Valmont que j'aimais était charmant. Je veux bien convenir même que je n'ai pas rencontré d'homme plus aimable." (CLII, 360). But the Marquise is stronger than her accomplice whom she holds through his greater desire for her -- desire which she shares, but of which she is complete master. In his letters to her Valmont often resorts to a deferential tone which she would never lower herself to use, "faites-moi passer vos sublimes instructions, et aidez-moi de vos sages conseils, dans ce moment décisif" (LXX, 144). and in answer to a particularly

harsh letter from the Marquise, "à présent, ma belle amie, j'en appelle à votre justice, à vos premières bontés pour moi; à la longue et parfaite amitié, à l'entière confiance qui depuis ont resserré nos liens: ai-je mérité le ton rigoureux que vous prenez avec moi?" (CXXIX, 312).

There is in Valmont a latent desire to be Madame de Merteuil's sole, or at least permanent, lover: "souvent même je désire ... de finir par donner, avec vous, un exemple de constance au monde." (IV, 16). He likes to identify with her and enjoys their kinship, "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." (C, 235). But Madame de Merteuil knows very well that the great part of her control over him resides precisely in the non-realisation of this dream (CXXXI).

Another fundamental difference between the two protagonists is the fact that Valmont is jaded by his success and the nature of this success -- the fine edge of ruthless determination has been somewhat blunted by continual victory, and its resultant ennui. He selects Madame de Tourvel as a victim because of the obstacles he knows she will put up and also because he is sensitive to the charm of her modesty -- a rarely found virtue. In all of his adventures he searches for the piquant, the unusual, to goad his interest. He is aware of this and writes, "je ne sais pourquoi, il n'y a plus

que les choses bizarres qui me plaisent " (CX, 264).

Unlike Madame de Merteuil's, the Vicomte's feelings are not absolutely withered.[8] There is still in him a capacity to wonder, however briefly, at the great and pure love of Madame de Tourvel. He feels admiration where the Marquise would experience nothing but scorn. He is aware of the fact that his inability to get deeply involved in love is a limiting factor where happiness is concerned: "soyons de bonne foi, dans nos arrangements, aussi froids que faciles, ce que nous appelons bonheur est à peine un plaisir." (VI, 22). That is why he looks for something new, something different, in each adventure. The fascination he discovers later in his affair with Madame de Tourvel comes from the fact that through her he is able to observe happiness caused by love. In his dissatisfaction and continual search Valmont resembles Don Juan and is, like him, a tragic figure because, "Don Juan, toujours aimé, ne peut jamais aimer en retour. D'où son angoisse et sa course éperdue."[9] Like Don Juan, Valmont stands in opposition

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[8]Martin Turnell accuses Valmont of sentimentality and rather unjustly uses Madame de Merteuil's unkind, ill-motivated remarks to the Vicomte to prove "her immense superiority over him." Not acknowledging the mastery with which Valmont achieves his seduction of the Présidente, he adds, "he can 'lay' the femmes volages of the day like anyone going, but as soon as he is faced with a woman, however ordinary, who is outside his experience he becomes a bungling amateur" (p. 72). If one should accept this point of view, Madame de Merteuil's continued interest in Valmont becomes entirely incomprehensible.

[9]de Rougemont, p. 195.

to Casanova, whose only preoccupation is with the physical act, the easier obtained, the better. For Valmont it is only l'insipide avantage d'avoir eu une femme de plus" (XXIII, 53).

Valmont, like Faust, made a pact with the Devil and because he is almost human, because for a moment he fell in love with Madame de Tourvel, he signed his death warrant.

The pact between Madame de Merteuil and the Vicomte might help one to underline one of the major differences between Laclos' hero and Lovelace. Borrowing from the equestrian vocabulary, one can say that Valmont is always "light" as a result of the training of Madame de Merteuil, that is that he is light to her orders as is a good horse which has been well-trained. Lovelace's code is of his own making but he rarely follows it. He is an untrained horse; he is "heavy". The character of Valmont is rare in literature.[10] He is, in a way, emptied of substance which would give him weight; he is free of all residual matter through the perpetual -- though remote -- influence of the Marquise.

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[10]André Malraux in his Tableau de la littérature française XVIIe - XVIIIe siècles (Paris, 1939), writes, "de tous les romanciers qui ont fait agir des personnages lucides et prémedités, Laclos est celui qui place le plus haut l'idée qu'il se fait de l'intelligence. Idée telle qu'elle le mènera à cette création sans précédent: faire agir des personnages de fiction en fonction de ce qu'ils pensent" (p. 420). See also, A. and Y. Delmas' comparison of Les Liaisons Dangereuses and other novels in A la Recherche des Liaisons Dangereuses (Mayenne, 1964).

V. THE VICTIMS

It is an eternal problem for the creator of character to make a virtuous personality interesting. Human himself, a reader cannot fail to be more gripped by human frailty and weaknesses than by a presentation of personified virtues. Traditionally, virtue can be satisfyingly presented by means of symbol, allegory, dramatic mask or simple homile, but try to portray a genuinely virtuous human character with any degree of psychological verisimilitude and the result is usually unbelievable or unbelievably dull. What comparison can be made between a Wife of Bath and a Poore Parson; an Iago and a Desdemona; a Satan and an Archangel Michael in terms of their interest for or grip upon a reader's imagination? While an allegorised goodness, a personified abstraction, may be acceptable, an attempt to render a psychologically sound character who is "simply good" will seldom move a reader who, in all probability, has seldom met a "simply good" person in real life.

This problem taxed Milton in his rendering of the struggle between Christ and Satan in Paradise Regained, or that between Comus and the lady. Serious character delineation and virtue are practically antithetical. Perhaps the sceptical eighteenth-century solved this dilemma with its return to the 'humour' character. Fielding's Parson Adams or Sterne's Uncle Toby are more entertaining and compelling for the quirks which soften the hard outlines of their virtue.

The problem is compounded when one's artistic endeavour requires that the virtuous character be victimized by a vicious one. W.B. Yeats, criticising the poetry of Wilfred Owen, remarked that, "passive suffering is not a theme for poetry."[1] A similar viewpoint could be expressed with regard to fiction -- not that passive suffering is invalid or unreal, but that it is uninteresting and unrewarding.

This illustrates a crucial difficulty in considering the victims of Laclos' and Richardson's libertines. They must be virtuous. They must not be "easy conquests" (since that would prevent their being proper prey for the seducers and, incidentally, leave no plot for the novelists), yet they cannot retaliate. They can only oppose a barrier of virtue and not adopt offensive weapons in self-defense, as this would make them less than virtuous. On top of this, Richardson and Laclos had to make their women psychologically believable because of the nature of their novels.

Madame de Tourvel, twenty-two years old, beautiful and with an untarnished reputation for virtue (religious and conjugal devotion), is an ideal target for pursuit by a seducer tired of too easy conquests. Despite a remarkable record of success, Valmont needs to achieve an unprecedented seduction in order to re-establish his self-esteem.

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[1] W.B. Yeats, "Introduction," The Oxford Book of Modern Verse (Oxford, 1936), p. xxxiv.

The Présidente possesses all of the goodness which is attributed to her and is quite devoid of that priggishness and self-righteousness which make virtue unbearable. Her modesty is quite unstudied; her character simple. It is her virtue which Valmont paradoxically praises constantly and then finally falls in love with. The seducer is seduced by what he has vowed to destroy.

Martin Turnell calls the Présidente "colourless ... she is faintly drawn, and in spite of their dignity and virtuous sentiments her letters do not contain a single memorable phrase."[2] But the Présidente attains in love an energy and devotedness which are truly remarkable and which make her the "admirable création" of which Baudelaire wrote. Her letter to Madame de Rosemonde (CXXXII), after she becomes Valmont's mistress, is a most beautiful hymn of love. It expresses her fulfillment and makes Valmont's victorious cries sound empty and pointless in comparison. Through love (which in the public eye is adultery) she becomes more fully human, thus transcending the mere rôle of 'Virtuous Woman.'

When she is horribly humiliated by Valmont, she demonstrates true dignity, and no trace of the tearfulness for which some critics reproach her. She never blames Valmont or even recriminates against him. When compared with Clarissa's

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[2]Turnell, p. 68.

or Julie's sentimental recriminations, she seems to be almost astringent in her suffering.

If Madame de Merteuil is a monster created and fostered by an unnatural order of things, Madame de Tourvel, on the other hand, is, as nearly as is possible in society, a representative of the "femme naturelle" depicted by Laclos in De l'Education des Femmes:[3]

> le caractère de sa figure est ordinairement la tranquille sérénité; cependant, lorsqu'elle s'anime, elle a de la physionomie ... elle ne sait pas minauder, mais elle sait encore moins se contraindre; son âme se peint sur son visage. (pp. 416-417).[4]

Madame de Tourvel:

> n'a point, comme nos femmes coquettes, ce regard menteur qui séduit quelquefois et nous trompe toujours. Elle ne sait pas couvrir le vide d'une phrase par un sourire étudié; et quoiqu'elle ait les plus belles dents du monde, elle ne rit que de ce qui l'amuse. Mais il faut voir comme, dans les folâtres jeux, elle offre l'image d'une gaité naïve et franche! ... Il faut voir surtout au moindre mot d'éloge ou de cajolerie, se peindre, sur sa céleste figure, ce touchant embarras d'une modestie qui n'est point jouée! (VI, 21)

The parallels are manifold. Madame de Tourvel's beauty, like that of the "femme naturelle", is her only adornment. Nothing about her is artificial. She is by nature kind,

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[3]It is difficult to see why Claude Elsen, in his otherwise very perceptive study, says that the portrait of the femme naturelle "laisse entrevoir, en filigrane, celui de ce Don Juan femelle: Madame de Merteuil" (p. 64).

[4]Madame de Tourvel writes to Valmont, "je ne sais ni dissimuler ni combattre les impressions que j'éprouve" (XXVI, 58).

gentle, charitable and fully spontaneous; quite incapable of evil or of imputing it to others. Like the natural woman, she blushes "non de pudeur, mais de trouble" (L'Ed. 414), when Valmont carries her in his arms across the ditch, or arrives unexpectedly at the Château.

The Présidente is close to nature because she prefers to lead a secluded life in the country and because of her own character and upbringing which is not altogether aristocratic. Her modest nature has not allowed for much contact with the corrupt aristocracy. However, she cannot act in love quite as the "femme naturelle" described in l'Education would do, simply because society has established the institution of marriage. Weighing just as heavily on her mind as the moral and social constrictions imposed upon her by society's conventions, is the deterrent of her fear of love as a passion;[5] of the tempest which it provokes in a human being. These influences make her determined to resist Valmont. Indeed, "tranquillité" and "repos" recur over and over again in her letters, in her objections to his exhortations.

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[5]"Qui peut vouloir d'un bonheur acheté au prix de la raison, et dont les plaisirs peu durables sont au moins suivis des regrets, quand ils ne sont pas des remords?" (L,105), and she asks pathetically, "quel ravage effrayant l'amour ne ferait-il pas sur un coeur neuf et sensible, qui ajouterait encore à son empire par la grandeur des sacrifices qu'il serait obligé de lui faire?" (L, 105)

It is a measure of her ability to love, and of Valmont's powers of seduction, that the Présidente is able to surmount her feelings of self-preservation and fear. She sacrifices her own happiness and peace of mind in order to procure these for her lover. In love, she has the complete devotion, self-abnegation and humility of a Catherine Barkley -- Hemingway's heroine in A Farewell to Arms. Making no demands nor recriminations, she appears to illustrate that Laclos, like Hemingway, depicted woman as man would like her to be.

To the Marquise, Madame de Tourvel presents a real danger, because she does not fit into any of her categories of women. She calls her a "prude" and warns Valmont not to expect sexual enjoyment with her, "n'en espérez aucun plaisir. En est-il avec les prudes? J'entends celles de bonne foi: réservées au sein même du plaisir, elles ne vous offrent que des demi-jouissances" (V, 19). But she forbears telling him what Kierkegaard's Johannes knows so well, "that the highest conceivable enjoyment lies in being loved."[6] Valmont does not listen to his accomplice and discovers for the first time this enjoyment. He writes rapturously, "l'ivresse fut complète et réciproque; et, pour la première fois, la mienne survécut au plaisir" (CXXV, 304).

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[6]Søren Kierkegaard, "Diary of the Seducer," Either/Or: A Fragment of Life, I (Princeton, 1949), 305.

That Madame de Merteuil's psychological insight fails her where the Présidente is concerned is not surprising, since her principles are based on the negation of love as an unselfish passion. It is this form of love, no longer acknowledged by the eighteenth-century aristocracy but re-instated by bourgeois sentimentalism and individualism which fascinates Valmont when he finds it in Madame de Tourvel.

If the Présidente lacks the intellectual stature of Madame de Merteuil, she does attain, if only temporarily through her love for Valmont, the happiness which the Marquise has always denied herself by preferring intellectual pleasure. P.M.W. Thody points out the recurrent contrast between Madame de Merteuil's use of the word "humeur" and Madame de Tourvel's "bonheur", as an indication of what the Marquise lacks.

Clarissa Harlowe, like the Présidente de Tourvel, is virtuous, beautiful, devout and charitable, but where Laclos strives to portray a woman, Richardson depicts "an exemplar to her sex"; an "angel". Ironically, Clarissa has, in common with the most beautiful angel, the sin of pride. Yet, in her case, pride causes not only her undoing, but also her victory.

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[7] P.M.W. Thody, Laclos: Les Liaisons Dangereuses, Studies in French Literature, 14 (London, 1970), 39.

Richardson always presents his heroine as a model of virtue. She is obedient to her parents; a perfect housekeeper; she is thrifty; ponderous in giving useful advice to others (that most irritating of qualities, which the Présidente does not share), and she is renowned for her "improving conversation". She loves to moralize, philosophise and indulge in psychological explanations. She is Richardson's most frequently used mouthpiece for his "useful" reflections.

Not only does she expatiate about marriage, religion and the duty owed by children to their parents, but she also meditates on education and the social necessity of "low and illiterate people" for the good of the commonwealth! Her propensity for moralising on every subject is so great that her elders often refer to her judgement and ask her advice: she has "a wit and penetration beyond her years". Lovelace does not know of a "subject on which she does not talk with admirable distinction " (II, cxix, 470).

But Clarissa's excellence and manifold virtues, extolled endlessly throughout the novel and minutely detailed in Miss Howe's letter to Belford (IV, clxviii), take so much of her time and are so much a part of her condition that they limit her as a human being. Not only does she fail to edify a modern reader, she is also often quite unsympathetic to him:

> She has no sympathy with anything that is not perfectly proper according to the conventions of her age ... her attitude to the poor is one of lofty patronage; her consciousness of class is too plainly evident. She moves in an atmosphere of convention -- social, moral and religious.[8]

This paragon of feminine virtue is allowed just one shortcoming -- she does not excel in the "executive part" of painting!

That this creature of sweetness and light could appear unrealistic even to his contemporaries must have occurred to Richardson, for he anticipated criticism by having Anna Howe write:

> Were <u>your</u> character and <u>my</u> character to be duly drawn, mine would be allowed to be the most natural. Shades and lights are equally necessary in a fine picture. Yours would be surrounded with such a flood of brightness, with such a glory, that it would dazzle; but leave one heartless to imitate it. (II, xxxvii, 131)

Yet still, Richardson's persistent tone of unrestrained eulogy in regard to Clarissa, deprive his timid reservations of any real impact on the modern reader.

Clarissa's behaviour is guided not only by the dictates of her conscience; she is very responsive to all social pressures. However, the nurturing of a spotless reputation is not enough for her. She is convinced that she is exceptional, and that things happening to her are unusual simply because they involve her. Hence she owes

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[8]Clara L. Thomson, <u>Samuel Richardson: A Biographical and Critical Study</u> (London, 1900), p. 196-7.

it to herself to serve as an example to her sex; "il y a en Clarissa la certitude, étrangère à la réserve de la Présidente, que son destin est d'édifier le monde entier."[9] She cannot forgive Lovelace for tricking her into running away with him and, by so doing, foiling her of her goal. Despite the loss of her "honour", she still does not want to abandon all sense of her usefulness to society; "glad if I may be a warning, since I cannot be an example: which once (very vain, and very conceited as I was) I proposed to myself to be " (III, lxxviii, 336).

After her final escape from Mrs. Sinclair's house, she writes several letters -- some quite unnecessary for her avowed purpose -- trying to find out the true identity of the "Tomlinson", "Lady Betty Lawrence" and "Miss Montague" whom she had met. It is in these letters that she announces her rape. Her compulsion to find out the whole truth stems not from any desire to find Lovelace less villainous, but rather from a wish that, by these proofs of his perfidy, she might exonerate herself in other people's eyes of all guilt and responsibility. Thus she hopes to salvage some measure of her social utility.

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[9]Laurent Versini, Laclos et la tradition (Paris, 1968), p. 492.

She refuses to prosecute Lovelace as he has already cleared her reputation by his testimony and his offer of amends. She prefers to forgive him and thereby enhance her own merit; "shall not charity complete my triumph? And shall I not enjoy it? And where would be my triumph if he deserved my forgiveness?" (IV, lxvii, 186).

This continual regard for public opinion and preoccupation with a model destiny, imposes a strict rôle upon Clarissa, which she plays willingly until the end. This theatricality -- with society being both scene and audience -- helps, in part, to blunt the fine edge of her victimization. For example, she does not want to remove to the country before her death, "for here have I meditated the spot, the manner, and everything, as well as the minutest as of the highest consequence, that can attend the solemn moments" (II, lxxx,216). Are the histrionics Richardson's, or are they naturally an intrinsic part of Clarissa's character? Either way they considerably detract from an otherwise moving experience.

Clarissa's attitudes and judgements are not merely self-conscious; they are pervaded also by a very pronounced class-consciousness. She apportions her generosity according to the quality of life of the recipient. She is flattered by Lovelace's address and by the regard which his titled family professes for her. Mrs. Sinclair and her 'nieces' become acceptable to her when she hears of their aristocratic connections, "I am more pleased with the people of the house,

because of the persons of rank they are acquainted with, and who visit them." (II, lxi, 224).

Clarissa's innate sense of superiority extends to Lovelace ("I have the vanity to think my soul his soul's superior" II, xlvi, 168), and to men in general:

> les héroïnes de Richardson ont l'orgueil de leur sexe et supportent malaisément la tyrannie de l'autre: Miss Howe, Clarissa, Miss Byron à un moindre degré ont en commun le goût de l'indépendance et une incompréhension à l'égard des hommes qui va jusqu'à l'incapacité d'aimer vraiment ... Leur orgueil se révolte de devoir l'obéissance à un homme ... Ainsi se dessine un véritable féminisme, une défense des droits de la femme, de leur liberté.[10]

This strong "féminisme" makes Clarissa akin to Madame de Merteuil. Clarissa and Miss Howe both speak contemptuously of men, as if they belonged to another species. Clarissa, like the Marquise, considers herself a champion of her sex, and as such refuses to let any man gain an advantage over her. Her feeling of superiority and her disdain for Lovelace help to bring about his violence towards her, since she inflames his pride and his sense of masculine superiority. "why, why will the dear creature take such pains to appear all ice to me? Why will she, by her pride, awaken mine?" (II, iv, 15). While in Les Liaisons Dangereuses the battle of the sexes is waged between Valmont and Madame de Merteuil, in Richardson's novel it is fought out between Lovelace and Clarissa. In the

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[10]Versini, p. 496.

constant, tense struggle of wills[11] which constitutes their relationship, Clarissa is always victorious. Her attachment to virtue and honour is single-minded. She is all will, while Lovelace is continually torn between his conscience, his love for her and his appetites. Clarissa never belongs to Lovelace; neither morally nor physically.

Much has been written about Clarissa's real feelings for Lovelace. Ian Watt, using a basically Freudian critical approach to the novel, sees in Clarissa's funeral device -- a "crowned serpent, with its tail in its mouth" -- "the emblem of an endlessly self-consuming sexual desire."[12] However ingenious the interpretation, it is difficult to conceive of repressed sexual feeling in Clarissa's love for Lovelace. It is pride which first causes her interest in him. She feels that she can be the instrument of his reformation.

His birth, generosity and culture are no small inducements to her, and she is not indifferent to his charm and good looks. These latter, however, do not awaken her senses and Lovelace's attempts at physical contact are met with feelings of repulsion on her part. Her sexual fears, far from being morbid, are quite natural in a young girl

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[11]Morris Golden, in his Richardson's Characters (University of Michigan, 1963), remarks that, "Richardson's novels are concerned with the battle of wills caused by strong urges towards dominance, urges which are the only initiators of action." (p. 92).

[12]Watt, p. 234.

brought up to set a high store on virginity and decorum, and whose love remains at all times under the control of her reason; a "conditional liking", as she calls it. Belford cannot -- and with reason -- "have the least thought of sex" in Clarissa's presence (IV, lxxxv, 248), and he finds it difficult to understand how Lovelace could, for "she is in my eye all mind." (II, lxx, 243).

Clarissa's virtue -- always underlined by Richardson, as when he explains her over-nice behaviour to Lovelace by the fact that she "is proposed as an example" -- makes of this heroine an idol rather than a credible character. To create in the person of Clarissa a match for what he considered to be an arch-villain, a satanic man, Richardson chose to delineate an angel. In spite of the fact that the feminine qualities ("gentleness," "sweetness of temper" and "delicacy"), with which he endows her make her the target of sadistic tendencies in the men (her father, brother, uncles, Solmes, Lovelace and the "masculine mind" of her sister, all of which might well be aspects of Richardson's own "creative unconscious"), Clarissa fails to arouse pity in our century. Her sense of superiority and her self-righteousness envelop her. Richardson's angel resembles her creator's moral conscience; she is humourless, narrow and full of high sentence.

Although the writer believed that the plot of his

novel was a fit subject for tragedy, in fact there is little of the tragic in Clarissa's fate. Her persecution at the hands of Lovelace and her family is the Calvary which is supposed to bring her to a better knowledge of herself and hence to perfection and sainthood. David Daiches' remark about Richardson's novels being "more closely related to medieval saints' lives than to the novel as we know it",[13] applies perfectly well to Clarissa. In it, seduction plays the rôle of temptation which the heroine surmounts in order to reach beatification. Thus libertinage is subordinated to the glorification of Clarissa's virtue and exists only to enhance it. Richardson's creative imagination, controlled by his religious conscience, was unable to distinguish between a martyr and a victim. In such a scheme of values, the real victim is not Clarissa, but Lovelace.

The three main feminine characters of the novels present some interesting points of similarity and contrast. Madame de Tourvel, temperamentally unused to dissimulation, is all quiet spontaneity and calm sincerity. She expects the same truthfulness and probity in those she meets and thus is totally defenceless before people well-versed in deceit. Her only 'weapon' is her uncalculating love, which,

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[13]David Daiches, Literary Essays (Edinburgh, 1956), p. 27.

although it destroys her, finally vanquishes her foe. Clarissa is not spontaneous in this sense. Although artifice is alien to her nature, she is much more socially aware of herself as an example than Madame de Tourvel and so expects evil and deceit in others, especially men. Consequently, she is never off her guard. She prides herself on her sincerity, but Dr. Johnson observes shrewdly that "there is always something which she prefers to truth."[14] Clarissa's watchfulness anticipates injuries and her coldness provokes them. Apart from youth, beauty, devotedness and a superficial similarity resulting from the rôles they are cast in by plot, Clarissa and Madame de Tourvel have little in common. Their very virtues are of a different nature. The Présidente acts virtuously because of her inner beliefs; her only guides are her own conscience and convictions. When her heart speaks she listens to it and acts according to its directions, to the detriment of her happiness. Clarissa tends to equate her conscience with that of the world that requires moral edification. Her only really individualistic act, and not a very deliberate one at that, is her elopement with Lovelace. To be a champion of her sex for Clarissa implies being superior to Lovelace, since she despises men and blames women's shortcomings on the masculine domination of society.

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[14]Quoted in Watt, p. 228.

Clarissa could easily claim with Madame de Merteuil that she is "née pour venger mon sexe et maîtriser le vôtre." Whereas Merteuil has done this by beating men with their own evil weapons, Clarissa achieves a similar victory through being better than men. Laclos and Richardson, both ardent feminists, have shown the two directions which could be followed by women who are conscious of their superiority over men, and who, because of this realization, will not accept the position of a consort. The demonic Madame de Merteuil is the creation of Laclos' sense of horror at such superiority: Saint Clarissa is an object of Richardson's idolatry.

Paradoxically, the two opposite poles of womanhood share much in common. They are proud, have unbending wills and keep their feelings under the firm control of misdirected reason. Neither of them is capable of the abandonment required by genuine love. To achieve supremacy they have both sacrificed a great part of their womanhood. Of the three, the closest to the real woman is Madame de Tourvel, who is the 'natural woman' as defined by Laclos in his treatise <u>De l'Education des Femmes</u>.

VI. CONCLUSION

In his recent study of Laclos, Laurent Versini makes the best and most complete general comparison between Clarissa and Les Liaisons Dangereuses to date, and his analysis concludes that the affinity between the two books is a false one.[1] Our consideration of the concept of libertinage in these novels fully supports Versini's judgement. Although there are resemblances in details, these are for the most part superficial. Richardson and Laclos treat this concept in fundamentally different ways. There are basic differences in the respective intelligence of the two writers, in their sensibilities as well as in their different artistic intentions.

Libertinage is only one of the many themes that Richardson treats in his long and prolix novel; in Laclos it is the central theme. Richardson's primarily didactic bent makes him use libertinage as a warning to young girls against wicked seducers and admonishment to dictatorial and unreasonable parents. Naturally this predisposes his characterization towards primary black-and-white coloration. When the moral purpose of the book is uppermost in the novelist's mind, he stresses purity (in Clarissa) and depravity

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[1] Versini, p. 481.

(in Lovelace) at the expense of psychological realism.[2] On the other hand, in order to make believable Clarissa's interest in Lovelace, he has to endow the latter with some 'admirable' qualities of character that would attract a paragon of virtue. The stress on the aesthetic unity of the characters which these divergent aims impose, is chiefly responsible for the many apparent anomalies in Richardson's novel. Under these circumstances, it is hardly surprising to find that no clear picture of libertinage does emerge in Clarissa.

Laclos' creative imagination is not distracted by a need to theorize, nor by any obtrusive pedagogic compulsion. He exposes situations; he does not try to make didactic comments on them. He writes for the mature, sophisticated adult in order to confront him with an image of his time. This image is frightening in its objective realism and, as Giraudoux says:

Même aujourd'hui, Les Liaisons demeurent le seul

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[2]Richardson's forte, the uncovering of the workings of the human heart, his psychological insight gained him the admiration of Rousseau, Diderot and Laclos. But his insight is as much unconscious and instinctive as it is conscious and it certainly is not intellectual. He was also quite skilful in the delineation of bourgeois characters. The Harlowe family, Mrs. Howe ... are instances of this talent. Where moral consciousness did not conflict with subconscious desires, Richardson was able through his descriptive talents and imaginative powers to attain Hogarthian realism as in the case of the death bed scene of Mrs Sinclair.

> roman français qui vous donne l'impression du danger, sur la couverture duquel semble nécessaire l'étiquette le réservant à l'usage externe.[3]

In Les Liaisons Dangereuses everything is subordinated to the action and the delineation of the characters. These characters reveal themselves through their actions, and the protagonists always act according to their ideology: libertinage.

It should also be noted, in this connection, that Laclos was more familiar with the society he exposes, than was Richardson. That is, libertinage being primarily an aristocratic occupation, Laclos was better equipped with first-hand knowledge than was Richardson with his intuitive guesswork. Hence, there is greater verisimilitude in the sophisticated attitudes and conversations of his characters than in the attitudinising of the "noble" protagonists in Clarissa.

The disparity between material, its treatment and structuring, and the tone of these two novels clearly affects the pictures of libertinage which eventually emerge. A consideration of the game of seduction, if actually not incidental to Richardson's ultimate purpose, is certainly not the centre of his book. Furthermore, in examining the relationship between libertine and victim (although it has been demonstrated that Clarissa is hardly a "victim" in the conventional sense as discussed in Chapter V), it is clear

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[3]Jean Giraudoux, Littérature (Paris, 1941), p. 52.

that Richardson's interest is more centered on the victim. If Lovelace has captured the attention of later critics it is because his type so rarely appears in English prose fiction.[4] In Les Liaisons Dangereuses, on the other hand, the centre of gravity of the book lies in the portrait of the libertine (Merteuil and Valmont), while the victims here are necessary corollaries in the game rather than intrinsically important.

Just as there is a difference in emphasis on the respective rôles which the characters play in these works, so too is there a difference in the structural use each author makes of the concept of libertinage. For Laclos, seduction provides a skeletal framework for his novel. It contains the keystone of the relationships between characters, and also the plot structure on which the action is based. Through libertinage, he could critically delineate and expose his society -- it is almost a metaphor for that society in Laclos' hands. Richardson, however, does not really begin with libertinage as either a social pattern or an idea. Concentrating in part on the psychology of Clarissa and in part on pure homily, he does not achieve a clear, sharply-defined structure in his novel. His novel tends to ramble. There are, in fact, too many other ideas and elements in the book

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[4]Although there were numerous, sometimes more convincing portrayals of the libertine in Restoration drama, reflecting the mores of contemporary society. For a discussion of these, see Norman N. Holland, The First Modern Comedies (Harvard University Press, 1959).

to permit the concept of libertinage -- however Richardson conceived of it -- to give central direction to the work. Merteuil and Valmont control the action in Les Liaisons Dangereuses and since they act always in accordance with their libertine ideology, the entire plot is infused with this doctrine. Even if Lovelace and Clarissa fulfil the necessary rôles in the seduction game, their story is too dispersed and their personalities too much dictated by Richardson's intrusive imagination, for a similar effect to be obtained.

According to Martin Turnell, the theme of libertinage is, "the tragedy of the Rational Man, the man who was carefully conditioned through the removal of all moral scruples and the sense of guilt, but inevitably condemned to action in a very limited field."[5] To treat such a subject adequately requires an intellectual approach. John Angus Burrell writes:

> André Gide tells us that there are two kinds of novelists, the cerebral and the visceral, and though Richardson might blush at the word, he is clearly the visceral type.[6]

In fact, Richardson is not primarily an intellectual man -- his lack of wit and irony alone would suggest this.

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[5]Turnell, p. 76.

[6]John Angus Burrell, "Introduction," Clarissa (New York, Random House, 1950), p. v.

He is incapable of anatomizing concepts, of analysing them rationally, for the sake of their dispassionate demonstration. His tendency towards moralizing and his sentimentality connect him more closely with the emerging 'Age of Sensibility' than with Classicism -- each of which is a reflection of personal temperament rather than a historical period. Hence Laclos' concept of libertinage is alien to Richardson's kind of understanding.

Laclos' mind, on the contrary, was perfectly equipped to deal with such an artificial code. Lucid and reflective, he could examine with cold intelligence social patterns of behaviour and the human philosophy which animated them. His personal reaction to such conduct and its results, never impedes his imagination in its creative rendering of them. His moral point of view remains a source of speculation for his critics. His aesthetic conception of his material and the result he achieved make Laclos a classicist of the Racinian type -- perhaps the last of this kind in the eighteenth-century.

The most refined, subtle and cerebral of drawing-room games, and that intellectual function known as eroticism, require special qualities of the novelist if a reader is to appreciate them. Richardson's psychological intuition and his powerful moral sentiments were not the necessary tools

for this particular task, whatever other achievement may be claimed for Clarissa. It is from the pen of a mathematician and strategist that we get the incomparable Madame de Merteuil, and the full essence of libertinage. The English novelist impresses more as a middle-class voyeur, subjectively interpreting through his repressed masculine sensibility what he sees, or thinks he sees. Hence the muddled personalities of his characters, their self-contradictory actions and the rather unhealthy, even somewhat prurient, atmosphere pervading some parts of Clarissa. If Laclos' novel burns "à la manière de la glace,"[7] Richardson's is heavy with the bated breath of expectation of Clarissa's rape.

Although Richardson's avowed intention is to be a moralist, his reader is not struck so forcefully by an essential human truth, or gripped by a great, universal human character (of the order of a Shakesperian or Dostoevskyan hero), which is the touchstone of an aesthetic moral experience. His characters do not inspire pity or terror; his attempt to create tragedy is a failure. Ironically it is a book, long considered immoral, which does succeed where Richardson failed, and which deserves the comment of Baudelaire, "livre

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[7]Baudelaire, p. 639.

de moraliste aussi haut que les plus élevés, aussi profond que les plus profonds."[8] Maurois has observed that, "le grand moraliste effraie toujours, parce qu'il est vrai, et que la vérité sur l'homme est effrayante."[9] It is to Les Liaisons Dangereuses rather than to Clarissa that we turn to find the accuracy of this remark.

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[8]Baudelaire, p. 640.

[9]André Maurois, Sur Les Liaisons Dangereuses de Choderlos de Laclos (Paris, 1946), p. 23.

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