

DANGEROUS WOMEN: ROXANE AND THE MARQUISE DE MERTEUIL IN  
MONTESQUIEU'S *LES LETTRES PERSANES* AND LACLOS' *LES LIAISONS  
DANGEREUSES*

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A thesis submitted to the faculty of the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Masters in the Department of Romance Languages (French).

Chapel Hill  
2007

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Abstract

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(Under the Direction of Philippe Barr)

In eighteenth century France, both Montesquieu and Choderlos de Laclos tackled the question of women's place in society and the notion of female liberation in their epistolary novels, *Les Lettres Persanes* and *Les Liaisons Dangereuses*. In creating two strong female protagonists who launch personal attacks on the men who surround them, both authors demonstrate the potential threat that women posed to the male hierarchy if females were to recognize their power and unleash it. Though neither heroine fully succeeds in launching her battle against the society that enslaved them, each makes a case for female freedom and embodies their author's views on the French regime of absolute monarchy, as is the case with Montesquieu, and the state of women in general, as is the case with Laclos.

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## INTRODUCTION

In eighteenth century France, the principles of absolutism that had dominated and formed French government and society for centuries saw opposition, as liberal thinkers began to question the monarchy and the ideology this form of government represents. No longer content to blindly accept the absolutist dogma that had been promulgated through the ages, both men of politics and of letters searched for a form of government that would include the views of the people it intended to govern, not just the views of the king. Ideas for reforms abounded. Philosophers like Newton and Locke were ready to shake off the shackles of despotism, and the term “l’esprit des lumières” took root in the writings of Diderot and D’Alembert and in the salons of Madame de Geoffrin and Julie de Lespinasse. The public sphere emerged as a milieu in which scholars could discuss new ideas and question authority and the status quo. Absolutist government was at the forefront of the debate, as the death of Louis XIV left the country in political turmoil, but so were the issues of religion, education, morality, and gender relations. Upon the death of the King, French society felt a new freedom in which it could explore the possibilities of ways of life inhibited by the repressive hand of monarchy, and as a result, a spirit of exploration and change permeated the country and led many great authors and *philosophes* to write some of the century’s greatest works.

It was in this spirit of change that two such authors, Charles-Louis Montesquieu and Choderlos de Laclos, took to writing two revolutionary novels, *Les Lettres Persanes*

and *Les Liaisons Dangereuses*, each of which questioned the French way of life and commented on the patriarchal society of the time. Both works examine the role of women in French society in the seventeenth century, and they hint at the need for women's liberation from male repression.

In creating strong female characters, like Roxane in Montesquieu's epistolary masterpiece and the Marquise de Merteuil in Laclos' novel, both authors demonstrate the potential for women to be powerful and to enact change, albeit their subordinate position in society. Though both female protagonists come to tragic ends, their revolutionary actions, which bring about the destruction of their male counterparts, illustrate that women, though repressed, knew how to take advantage of their societal positions to act, in spite of their circumstances.

Both Roxane and the Marquise use the female imperative to be virtuous and pure as a veil behind which they can mask their true character and fully dupe those around them. Using feminine guile and manipulation to hide their true motives, they wage war against the male dominated society in which they are forced to live suppressed and obedient. They use writing as a means of launching their attacks and pens as weapons. They take full advantage of the fact that they are supposed to behave in certain ways in order to enact the changes they seek, and they do it all without ever leaving the prescriptions of their societal roles.

Because they are ultimately successful in wreaking havoc on the lives of men, even though they come to tragic ends, both women suggest that females are not in fact naturally weak. Though forced into a position of submissiveness within their society, their active minds, which remain free despite of their shackles, make them powerful and

ultimately, threatening to the male hierarchy. Roxane and Madame de Merteuil demonstrate the potential danger to the perpetuation of unchecked masculine authority if women were to be given more freedom. Their actions, which bring about the downfall of the men who surround and oppress them, depict women as strong in spite of their societal shackles. Each stands in opposition to the idea (found in both criticism and the novels themselves) that women are naturally inferior to their male counterparts. In examining these two characters in depth and the authors who created them, my goal will be to demonstrate that both female protagonists present a case for female liberation, even though the men who wrote them may not have intended to do so.

## CHAPTER 1

### *Les Lettres Persanes*

The women's question was clearly one of significance for eighteenth century France, as authors addressed it directly in their writing. Montesquieu was no exception, as he too thought it worth debate, and as a result, he chose to present his views on women's condition and their possible liberation. He created two Oriental characters, Usbek and Rica, who leave their native Persia, travel to France and comment on the state of both societies. Through the lens of cultural comparison, Montesquieu is able to offer significant commentary on the current French regime and its male hierarchy and to suggest that it is perhaps not the best way to run a country. Tied into his presentation of Republicanism, women's rights emerges as a topic in need of consideration. Through the characters involved in the so-called "harem plot," female power and threat manifest themselves and show, like Laclos' work, that women were in fact capable of domination, despite the limitations imposed upon their sex in a man's world.

Like Laclos, Montesquieu wrote in reaction to women's condition in noble society at the time. Women were defined based on their "physiologie qui détermin[ait] [leur] vocation: [leur] existence se déroul[ait] dans une entière dépendance à l'égard de la maternité" (Geffriaud Rosso 484). They were expected to "être bonne[s] épouse[s] et bonne[s] mère[s] et de repeupler l'univers" (Geffriaud Rosso 484). Living under the imperatives of "la modestie et la vertu," women had to be "timide," a quality "sans

laquell[e]... elle finirait par s'abandonner à des excès capables de compromettre même l'existence du genre humain," at least, this was the fear of their male counterparts (Geffriaud Rosso 486). Viewed as a "dependent and weak creature, incapable of rational choices and requiring control from outside herself," eighteenth century woman was subject to particular "attention de la part de l'homme" (Thomas 39; Geffriaud Rosso 487). Men strove to maintain the social hierarchy that was in their favor by promoting female virtue, "le garant de la tranquillité entre les sexes," and they did this by subjugating women, confining them to roles within the home, and denying them a voice in matters both public and private (Geffriaud Rosso 487). Montesquieu highlights their position and suggests it be improved by depicting harem life in Persia in which one male rules his many wives through despotism and violence. He then illustrates the dangers of such a lifestyle by examining the potential social consequences of female repression through the female revolt at the end of the novel and the character of Roxane.

In order to suggest female liberation, Montesquieu first carefully describes the world of the Persian "seraglio" and shows its master, Usbek, to be a despotic ruler. Believing firmly in the "divine right of the husband," Usbek embodies male power and domination by defending cruel laws and turning the harem into "a fortified prison for wives" (Altman 345; 329). Life within the seraglio is "highly regimented and very rigid" (Thomas 37). The women are forbidden to remain alone with a white eunuch or a female slave," and they are "reserved for the exclusive possession of a single master" (Thomas 37; 39). The purpose of the harem then, "with its rules, walls, veils, threats, [and] punishments, is clearly to close off one group from another, to deny any overlap between gender groups or social castes, to differentiate between masters and slaves"

(Trumpener 182). In this scenario, Usbek is the master and his wives the slaves subject to his authority and desires. To his wife, Zachi, he avows, “vous devez me rendre grâce de la gêne où je vous fais vivre,” as it ensures women’s purity, supposed happiness, and of course, their subjugation (Montesquieu 50). For him, masculinity and power coincide, and he only feels the extent of his manhood when he is suppressing his wives. He “sets himself up as a crusader bent on preserving women’s chastity in a prison vacuum” and claims that “it is only because of the holy law of imprisonment and surveillance that wives [even] deserve to live” (Altman 334). He expects them all to be virtuous and submissive in his presence, and furthermore, he demands this same comportment from them in his absence.

Even after he has left them for France, he is unwilling to relinquish his control over the harem and the women it contains. He thus gives the Chief Eunuch “‘un pouvoir sans bornes sur tout le sérail’ to overwhelm and destroy his wives” (Altman 331). Though “physically absent,” Usbek “is nevertheless very much a presence. His authority is delegated to those whom he has chosen and who thereby become extensions of the master himself” (Thomas 38). Feeling the need to submit his wives to further subjugation at the hands of males other than himself even when he is away, Usbek typifies the extent of control men held over women and the lengths to which they would go to maintain it. The eunuchs thus play a vital role in women’s subordination. They “represent the absent master” and become “by their simple presence more formidable and more feared than the master himself” (Thomas 38). As a result, the women’s revolt “is directed against them” because it is through them that “male values permeate... the harem,” and the women’s lack of freedom is enforced (Thomas 38).

Furthermore, the eunuchs serve as the absent master's eyes and ears, as they write to Usbek keeping him apprised of his wives' behavior and requesting instructions for how to handle them. For example, in letter CXLVII, the Chief Eunuch writes to Usbek to inform him that Zachi, one of his wives, had been "trouvé[e]... couchée avec une de ses esclaves: chose si défendue par les lois du sérail" (Montesquieu 323). He continues, "sûrement tu es trahi. J'attends tes ordres... si tu ne mets toutes ces femmes à ma discrétion, je ne te réponds d'aucune d'elles" (Montesquieu 324). Usbek, trembling at the thought of disorder within the harem, writes back, "Commandez avec autant d'autorité que moi-même. Que la crainte et la terreur marchent avec vous" (Montesquieu 324). With Usbek unable to ensure obedience himself, he must entrust his slaves to do it for him. Because "the harem can exist only in a male-dominated Oriental state," for the social hierarchy that insists that men rule women to endure, the wives must continue to be subject to masculine authority (Thomas 37). In this way, though slaves themselves, the eunuchs attempt to keep the women in a state of slavery as well. Reacting against the master and his minions, the women will prove they are not as easy to keep down as Usbek had expected, and they will succeed in making a case for women's liberation.

Throughout the novel, women "are instrumental in breaking the chains of despotism" (Schaub 147). Through the letters they write to Usbek, they "raise potentially revolutionary questions about... social institutions... and about philosophical and moral principles" (Altman 326). Interestingly, Usbek's wives write only eleven of the one hundred sixty one letters in the novel,... constitut[ing] a decidedly 'minority' voice" (Altman 328). However, because their voices manage to be heard, in spite of the limited number of opportunities they have to express themselves, Montesquieu illustrates the

power of female agency within a repressive system. By attributing “to the wives an epistolary style that is in the tradition of republican friendship,” “Montesquieu carefully establishes the wives as intelligent... and observant psychologists” (Altman 332; 331). They comment on “the education given to women before marriage, a woman’s right to choose to marry or not, to choose a partner, to remain married or not, and to pursue meaningful activity within marriage” (Altman 331).

For example, in letter VII, Fatmé discusses these issues, though they are couched in the jargon of love. In discussing her sadness at being abandoned by Usbek, she states when a woman “n’a pas même l’avantage de servir à la félicité d’un autre,” she becomes an “ornement inutile d’un sérail, gardée pour l’honneur, et non pas pour le bonheur de son époux!” (Montesquieu 20). In lamenting her separation from Usbek, she also laments women’s condition in general. To her, “claustration without purposeful activity after marriage” is absurd, and the “perpetuation of such a marriage after desertion is even more absurd” (Altman 331). Her language emphasizes “happiness and freedom of choice,” both of which are denied her, the former because the one man she is allowed to love has left her, and the latter because she was not allowed the choice of who to love in the first place (Altman 331). As a result, her current condition is a wretched one which comments on the ridiculousness of arranged marriages and the lack of freedom women have within them. Fatmé’s letter receives no response from Usbek, perhaps because he does not wish to address the questions that she raises, and in her own act of defiance, she never writes him again.

Another wife who questions woman’s condition by lamenting her abandonment in her letters to Usbek is Zachi. In letter III, she illustrates women’s status as objects

“reserved for the possession of a single master” by recounting happily a beauty contest among the wives, which she won (Thomas 39). She describes this memory to her husband in order to remind him of past pleasures and to perhaps entice him to return. In doing so, however, she manages to depict women as ornamental displays “with a decorative function: they embellish the masculine social setting” (Thomas 39). She writes, “tu portas tes curieux regards dans les lieux les plus secrets; tu nous fis passer en un instant dans mille situations différentes: toujours de nouveaux commandements et une obéissance toujours nouvelle” (Montesquieu 15).

In this scenario the wives are beautiful objects for their male master to judge and enjoy. Even though Zachi wins the contest, she realizes that her triumph is fruitless, as she has still been abandoned, and now has no one to admire her beauty. Like Fatmé, her disappointment at being deserted reveals the ridiculousness of her condition. A play thing whose existence lacks meaning now that the one person who is able to enjoy it has left, Zachi suggests that women’s roles within marriage should perhaps be redefined and that women be given freedom to live beyond harem walls.

Zachi continues to voice a critique of female subjugation by their male counterparts in another letter. Letter XLV from Zachi responds to letter XX from Usbek, in which he defends “a husband’s right to kill anyone perceived as a threat to his wife’s virtue, including her wife and any men seen near her” (Altman 340). Describing a women’s outing to the country, Zachi “shows Usbek the questionable consequences of these laws in a report on how meticulously they are being obeyed” (Altman 340). She describes how on their way to the country home, “since the Chief Eunuch did not have time to warn innocent men in the women’s path, he simply killed them” (Altman 340).

Furthermore, he “threatened eunuchs and female slaves who tried to save the women from drowning ... during a storm” by letting them out of the boxes they were being carried in (Altman 340). In the incident, several “eunuchs try to persuade the Chief that women’s lives are more important than a husband’s honour” (Altman 340). As Zachi explains:

“Je me souviens que j’entendis la voix et la dispute de nos eunuques, dont les uns disaient qu’il fallait nous avertir du péril et nous tirer de nos prisons; mais leur chef soutient toujours qu’il mourrait plutôt que de souffrir que son maître fût ainsi déshonoré, et qu’il enfoncerait un poignard dans le sein de celui qui ferait des propositions si hardies.” (Montesquieu 98)

Zachi’s letter clearly demonstrates the absurdity of female oppression, as within the male hierarchy, their lives are less important than their husband’s pride. Women are thus tools used to ensure man’s reputation and status among other males, a fact which is reinforced by Usbek when he discusses female purity in a letter he writes to his wife, Zélis.

In letter LXXI, Usbek responds to a letter he received from his wife in which she told him about his friend Soliman, who has been shamed by an incident involving his daughter’s marriage. On the day of the wedding, the fiancé refused to marry the girl unless her dowry was increased, saying that she was not in fact a virgin. Upon hearing this news, Usbek writes, “Je plains Soliman, d’autant plus que le mal est sans remède, et que son gendre n’a fait que se servir de la liberté de la Loi,” and there is no way of either confirming or denying the accusation (Montesquieu 154). He continues, “Je trouve cette loi bien dure d’exposer ainsi l’honneur d’une famille aux caprices d’un fou” (Montesquieu 154). Clearly, a woman who is not a virgin at marriage is a disgrace to her family- female modesty and purity being their two most important attributes. In a man’s world, women are expected to remain pure so as not to disgrace their fathers and

husbands, and they are sheltered from a life of temptation through imprisonment. Zélis recognizes this fact and writes against it in a series of letters she exchanges with her husband, all questioning women's rights and their place in society.

In 1713, "Zélis makes her first appearance and assumes the role of spokesperson for the wives" (Altman 341). Writing "more letters than any other wife" throughout the work, she quickly establishes herself as one of the main female liberating voices in the text (Altman 346). Her letters reveal the wives' deepening basis for questioning harem law" because "chacune de ses lettres pose un problème précis [et] ... poursuit un raisonnement" (Altman 341; Geffriaud Rosso 322). In her writings, she "argues that marriage should be based on the willing consent of both partners, and on their reciprocal commitment to assure each other's well-being," and she bemoans women's education and the imperative for them to be pure (Altman 342). The Soliman incident she describes to Usbek speaks to the difficulties women experience both in remaining modest and in convincing others that they are; and she addresses education and marriage in other letters, chiefly in those that discuss her own daughter's education.

In letter LXII, she tells Usbek that "she has decided to send their seven year old daughter to the harem's inner enclosure for 'une éducation sainte' sooner than is customary, so that the daughter will be properly conditioned for harem life before puberty and adulthood encourages a woman's 'indépendance'" (Altman 342). In doing so, she "makes it clear that when men insist on marriage laws and education that imprison women and cut them off from civil life, neither men nor women benefit" (Altman 343). She is bitter that she has to condition her daughter to a life that denies her freedom and happiness, but at the same time, she displays the liberty she has found within her

confinement when she asserts, “Dans la prison même où tu me retiens, je suis plus libre que toi... ta jalousie, tes chagrins sont autant de marques de ta dépendance”

(Montesquieu 130).

In her mind, men are not as free as they believe themselves to be. Constantly concerned with his wives’ purity and behavior in his absence, Usbek is in fact imprisoned by the very laws he uses to imprison others. She “nargue Usbek en lui laissant entendre qu’elle a trouvé pour son compte, malgré l’étroite clôture, un bonheur qui est refusé à son maître. Et ce bonheur, propre à accroître l’inquiétude d’Usbek, transforme le maître en esclave” (Rosso 325). As a result of this way of thinking, she is able to instigate acts of revolt against Usbek and his hierarchy, using her mind to manipulate her circumstances. For example, she is instrumental in organizing a trip to the country for the women. The sojourn, “paraîtrait innocent si nous n’avions pas appris d’avance par la lettre précédente, que deux hommes s’étaient cachés dans un réduit de cette maison, pour en sortir le soir, après le départ des eunuques” (Rosso 326). Using the system that restrains her, she finds an “indépendance de l’âme” and a “liberté d’esprit” with which she arranges a clandestine rendez-vous (Rosso 325). She achieves mental liberation and is able to take action despite physical suppression, which as will be discussed later, makes her reminiscent of Laclos’ Marquise de Merteuil. Zélis differs from Laclos’ heroine however, in that though they are both aware of their mental freedom and choose to launch personal and private assaults against men, Zélis takes it one step further in that she publicly defies her male oppressor.

In Persia, a physical sign of women’s repression is the veil they are forced to wear in public to shield them from the view of anyone other than their husband and his slaves.

The veil keeps the women the soul possession of their husbands, as only he has full access to her, and Zélis chooses to remove her veil in public in an act of defiance.

Throughout the novel, Zélis is the wife with whom Usbek exchanges the most letters, and it is Zélis who “porte sur lui un regard qui juge d’égal à égal” (Rosso 325). Unlike the other wives who complain of Usbek’s absence and lost love, she speaks openly with her husband of more pressing issues like their daughter’s education and female purity. Though she seems to accept Usbek’s responses, her passivity actually “n’est donc qu’une façade” (Rosso 325). In letter CXLVII, the Chief Eunuch writes Usbek recounting the various affronts to his honor the wives are currently committing. In his shocking and revealing account, he exclaims, “Zélis, allant il y a quelques jours à la Mosquée, laissa tomber son voile et parut presque à visage découvert devant tout le peuple” (Montesquieu 323). In a society where male honor and female virtue are imperative, Zélis knows that this “geste de défi” will strike at Usbek’s very core and at the repressive system he upholds (Rosso 326). She “denounces Usbek’s tyranny” through this “measured [and]... potentially far-reaching act,” and launches the first public attack in the private war the wives have launched against their husband (Schaub 53; 147).

From the beginning of the novel, Usbek describes the harem as “le séjour de l’innocence,” “les sacrés murs où la pudeur habite,” a place where harem wives “consacrent” their daughters” (Thomas 39). It aims to ensure “female purity and to make them sentir leur extreme dépendance” (Thomas 40). The wives are “maintained in a state of ignorance” (Thomas 40). The wisdom their husband acquires while traveling is denied them, reading, “another source of wisdom, does not seem to figure prominently among

the occupations or distractions of the institutional life” (Thomas 40). They are “conditioned to believe that life outside the harem walls is fraught with danger,” a point Zachi emphasizes when she writes, “Que les voyages sont embarrassants pour les femmes... Nous sommes, à tous les instants, dans la crainte de perdre notre vie ou notre vertu” (Thomas 40; Montesquieu 98). In this repressed condition, “les femmes sont vouées aux désirs insatisfaits, aux compensations furtives, aux dérèglements hypocrites, à moins qu’elles ne choisissent finalement la révolte” (Rosso 327-328). Reacting against the despotism that confines them, the women illustrate that their internment, no matter how severe, “does not negate their influence; instead, it produces a noxious concentration of it” which the women use to their advantage when their enslaver departs (Schaub 121).

When Usbek was present in the harem, the wives were less able to communicate with one another and to solidify. He “encouraged quarrels by making his wives compete for favors,” like the beauty contest Zélis describes in letter XXX (Altman 339). By pinning his wives against one another, Usbek made it impossible for them to unite, as they would be becoming one with their enemies. However, after he abandons the seraglio, the wives become “able to resolve disputes and build community” (Altman 339). For example, towards the beginning of the novel, it is revealed that two of the wives, Zachi and Zéphiss, have been quarreling over a slave girl, both claiming possession. However, by letter XLVII, after Usbek’s departure, Zachi writes to him saying, “Je me suis réconciliée avec Zéphiss; le sérail, partagé entre nous, s’est réuni” (Montesquieu 96). No longer competing for Usbek’s attention, the wives are no longer opponents, and they are thus able to find common ground.

Furthermore, with Usbek away, it is left to the wives to make important decisions,

and in making decisions, they exercise power and begin to experience a small amount of freedom. For instance, at one point, Zélis writes to Usbek, asking whether or not to permit a marriage between a eunuch and a female slave, Zélide. Typically, eunuchs were not allowed to marry because they are castrated males who are thus unable to reproduce. If the purpose of marriage is in fact reproduction and the two are allowed to marry with no hope of producing children, their union would represent a deviation from the norm. A deviation that might prove threatening to the male hierarchy since the only “désire légitime et permis d’une femme est d’avoir des enfants” (Altman 341). Zélis tells Usbek however that she is unable to refuse and asks, “pourquoi ferais-je de la résistance?” (Montesquieu 112). In discussing the eunuch’s inability to give sexual pleasure, she continues, “Quel mépris ne doit-on pas avoir pour un homme de cette espèce, fait uniquement pour garder, et jamais pour posséder!” cloaking her own contempt for Usbek’s inability to possess her mind and heart (Montesquieu 112). Receiving no response from Usbek on the matter, she must forge ahead on her own, and the marriage is permitted.

In his absence, the women begin to develop female solidarity and to enjoy small amounts of freedom, both of which serve as motivating forces in their revolt against masculine absolutism. Their revolt is fully realized by the end of the text, however it “was in preparation from the beginning” (Schaub 45). In letter XLVII, Zachi writes to Usbek of one of the wives’ “continued trips to the country” (Schaub 45). Their journeys, though carried out within the limits of harem life, with eunuchs accompanying them and covered boxes transporting them, are actually motivated by a desire for freedom and adventure. As Zachi states, “Le lendemain, nous partîmes pour la campagne, où nous

espérons être plus libres” (Montesquieu 96). Though certainly not radical, her letter does hint at the women’s wish to escape the confines of harem life, a wish that gradually snowballs as Usbek’s voyage continues to keep him away. As time passes, his wives begin to resent the poor treatment they receive from the eunuchs. Usbek has given his slaves the freedom to rule his wives with violence and authority, and the women begin in turn to “resent [Usbek] as the ‘auteur’ of the indignities they are suffering” (Trumpener 185). As a result, they act out. They begin “to carry on their own correspondences with the outside world” (Trumpener 185). They ignore Usbek’s “letters of instruction and command,” leaving them “unopened and unheeded for months at a time” while “no one writes back to him” (Trumpener 185). Furthermore, the wives “disobey the harem law” in several ways (Thomas 42-43). Zachi, for example, “is caught on two occasions taking liberties with her slave-girl. Another time, a white eunuch is found in her apartments, a forbidden liaison also” (Schaub 47). In letter CXLVII, the Chief Eunuch describes the chaos to his master as follows: “Les choses sont venues à un état qui ne se peut plus soutenir: tes femmes se sont imaginées que ton départ leur laissait une impunité entière” (Montesquieu 323). Usbek clearly has lost control, a troublesome fact of which he is made most aware by the treachery of his favorite wife, Roxane.

Like Zélis and the Marquise de Merteuil, Roxane too manipulates reality in order to hide her true self from her masculine counterpart. Thought to be “a heroine of virtue,” she is idolized by Usbek, and he sets her apart as the standard of feminine purity his other wives should strive to achieve (Altman 339). Though he believes her to be modest and obedient, she will prove to be the most radical of all the wives in her rebellion because of the extent to which she dupes her husband and the severity of her

final act. Realizing that “the only way for women to remain free in a world that wishes to enslave them,” Roxane employs “duplicity and subversion” to hide her “secret and subversive life... beneath a pretense of domestic felicity” (Trumpener 180). She is so convincing in fact, that Usbek favors her above the others. So much that he writes to her “without any prompting; he is not responding to word of her misdeeds or to an explicit inquiry from her, as he is in all the other letters written to his wives” (Schaub 45). Far from it, he “writes because the license of French women appalls him and makes him think fondly of Roxane, the exemplar he sees in Persian modesty” because of her feigned loyalty and obedience (Schaub 45).

In his letter, he praises her for resisting his sexual advances at the beginning of their marriage. He writes:

“Vous souvient-il, lorsque toutes les ressources vous manquèrent, de celles que vous trouvâtes dans votre courage? Vous prîtes un poignard et menaçâtes d’immoler un époux qui vous aimait, s’il continuait à exiger de vous ce que vous chérissiez plus que votre époux même. Deux mois se passèrent dans ce combat de l’Amour et de la Vertu... Vous défendîtes jusques à la dernière extrémité une virginité mourante.” (Montesquieu 59-60)

He admires Roxane all the more for resisting him, but he fails to realize that “his only love letter recounts the rape” of his beloved (Schaub 47). As a result, he is easily betrayed by her, his faulty perception of reality contributing to his complete misunderstanding of her actions and her desires. Because he is a product of his society, he sees only what he wants to see. Similarly, because she knows how to work within the system that suppresses her, she uses societal expectations to her advantage. She assumes “modesty as her shield,” which in turn “provides cover for her” betrayal (Schaub 47).

She is easily able to deceive both Usbek and the eunuchs who guard her because she works behind the scenes and is “punctilious in her observance of all external

duties” (Schaub 47). So convinced are they of her purity that they can write to Usbek, “tes femmes ne gardent aucune retenue... La seule Roxane est restée dans le devoir et conserve de la modestie” (Montesquieu 326). Unsuspecting, they fail to notice that like the other wives, she too is acting out against tyranny, despotism, and her “specific dissatisfaction as a woman,” and that she has been driven to commit adultery (Schaub 54). In maintaining control of her mind, she “n’a jamais cessé d’être libre malgré l’étroite clôture qui la retenait prisonnière, et malgré la surveillance des eunuques” (Rosso 331). In choosing to be free despite her chains, “elle se fa[ît] l’avocat de la femme en général” (Rosso 331). She manipulates her situation and those enforcing it in order to feign virtue and remain unquestioned in her behavior. As a result, she is able to have an extramarital affair and to “romp[re] le pacte de soumission qui l’asservissait” without ever being suspected (Rosso 330).

Employing ruse and manipulation, Roxane frees herself from Usbek and is able to achieve at least intermittent happiness. She liberates herself by rejecting “the imprisonment and the sexual dues which go with her position as one wife among many” (Trumpener 187). Furthermore, her actions suggest “the measure of women’s freedom lies in their ability to ... live out a sexuality as unlicensed and unrestrained as that of men” (Trumpener 189). Duping Usbek, she exercises the male prerogative to choose a lover by taking her own. Her power is fleeting however, as the reality of her position as subservient female is reinforced when her adultery is discovered.

When Solim catches her in the arms of her lover, he must inform his deceived master that Roxane’s “vertu farouche était une cruelle imposture; c’était le voile de sa perfidie” (Montesquieu 332-333). Knowing that the jig is up, Roxane “publie aggressive,

arrogamment, son forfait” (Rosso 330). She admits readily to Usbek, “Oui, je t’ai trompé; j’ai séduit tes eunuques. Je me suis jouée de ta jalousie, et j’ai su, de ton affreux sérail, faire un lieu de délices et de plaisirs” (Montesquieu 353). She appears ready to accept defeat and to relinquish her control. However, though the power she had obtained in hiding her secret life from her husband has dissolved, she is not yet through avenging her sex.

At the end of the novel, instead of returning gracefully to the life she wished to escape and which would now have even harsher limitations as a result of her treachery, Roxane chooses to end her life in one last act of defiance. In her final letter she tells Usbek:

“Comment as-tu pensé que je fusse assez crédule pour m’imaginer que je ne fusse dans le Monde que pour adorer tes caprices? que, pendant que tu te permets tout, tu eusses le droit d’affliger tous mes désirs? Non! J’ai pu vivre dans la servitude, mais j’ai toujours été libre.” (Montesquieu 354)

She reaffirms her freedom in taking her own life, and she even goes as far as to criticize herself for “ce que j’ai lâchement gardé dans mon coeur ce que j’aurais dû faire paraître à toute la Terre; enfin, de ce que j’ai profané la vertu, en souffrant qu’on appelât de ce nom ma soumission à tes fantaisies” (Montesquieu 354). Through her suicide, she “pose un acte d’indépendance à ses propres yeux et aux yeux d’autrui” (Rosso 334). In giving Roxane this ending, Montesquieu “reconnaît à la femme le même courage qu’à l’homme, les mêmes droits, et fonde l’égalité des sexes sur la reconnaissance du droit à se détruire soi-même” (Rosso 332).

It is also worth noting that Roxane’s suicide note is the final letter in the novel. Montesquieu thus ends his work with a voice of female liberation echoing in the minds of

his readers, and not the voice of the tyrannous oppressor. At the end of the work, “la femme surclasse l’homme par son courage, mais elle l’a d’abord surclassé par l’intelligence et la ruse” (Rosso 337). When Usbek was deceiving Roxane, “il ne se savait pas payé de retour ; Roxane au contraire se savait trompée et trompait à son tour... Usbek n’était que dupe” (Rosso 337). As a result, though Roxane’s war is ending, Usbek’s is just beginning, and though the issue of female liberation is not resolved, it is still a strong cause that men will be forced to address.

With Roxane’s final words, the reader is left with what could result from the “pent-up violence of pent-up women” (Trumpener 185). In her closing letter, “what we are finally able to hear is Roxane’s true voice, ‘ce langage nouveau’” to Usbek (Trumpener 185). With it, “comes a glimpse of another ‘lieu’ within the seraglio, an internal realm of ‘délices et plaisirs,’ a freedom that continues to exist within the imagination even in the captivity of the seraglio” (Trumpener 185). Whether or not Usbek will prove sensitive to Roxane’s message is yet to be determined. However, through her voice and radical actions, “the case for emancipation from ‘domestic servitude’ was brought to the public eye in *Les Lettres Persanes*” (Altman 348).

Interestingly though, in establishing Roxane’s as the final voice in the novel, Montesquieu closes his work with the reader questioning what exactly his female protagonist represents. What message was he trying to communicate through her fatal action and what then did he think about women in general? Was he in fact making an argument for women’s liberation or was he instead commenting upon the issue of despotism in France at the time in which he was writing? Though to this point I have projected a modern interpretation upon the novel and the symbolism of the women

portrayed throughout it, it is important to consider the objective of the author himself.

As a male noble in the eighteenth century, though Montesquieu might in fact have recognized the inequalities that existed between men and women, his argument was more likely one that attacked the French monarchy. Roxane becomes a crusader who fights against absolute authority. She wants a degree of autonomy and to share in the decisions that directly affect her life. In this way, she comes to represent the people of France who also desired freedom from monarchy and the ability to share in their governance. Could Roxane then represent the men of France who sought to usurp monarchical authority and not just other women who wished to be free from male dominance? In ending the novel with Roxane and not Usbek, Montesquieu permits his reader to continue to question despotic rule, and through her suicide, he affirms the ideas of selfhood and autonomy he wished for himself and his fellow Frenchmen- ideas he would in fact later outline in his famous treatise *De l'esprit des lois* (1748).

In her article, “Frames of Female Suicide,” Margaret Higonnet recognizes the political implication of Roxane’s final act of defiance and discusses the symbolism behind it. Higonnet argues that Montesquieu, and others, “employ the motif of female suicide as a way of interrogating the processes of social construction” (237). Pre-established notions of gender have dictated that in terms of suicide, men who commit the act do so heroically, whereas, women who end their own lives do so in “surrender rather than [as] a choice” (Higonnet 229). In her closing letter, Roxane asks, “que ferais-je ici, puisque le seul homme qui me retenait à la vie n’est plus?” (Montesquieu 334) – indicating her reliance on her lover and embodying the “classic stereotype of female dependency” (Higonnet 230). However, “Roxane goes on... to assert that she has gained

her personal liberty from Usbek by killing her guardians” (Higonnet 230). As a result, “Her suicide note insults her husband and forces us to reread Usbek's earlier letters about her initial ‘chaste’ resistance to him with a dagger” (Higonnet 230). She proves herself to be both powerful and heroic, even though these traits are typically masculine.

Her voice thus “overthrows [Usbek’s]. A heroic thirst for systematic autonomy, inscribed in ‘nature,’ is her true motive” (Higonnet 230). She realizes the power that lies within death, which becomes her “ultimate form of self-legitimation and self-understanding” (Higonnet 230). In taking her life, she makes the ultimate decision to no longer allow Usbek to control her. She thus “transforms herself from the object of Usbek's desire and nostalgia into a subject with ambitions and a voice of her own” (Montesquieu 230). Death becomes the vehicle through which she attains freedom from tyranny, and by hiding the desire for liberation from absolutism in the body of a female character, Montesquieu enables himself to argue for freedom from despotism because he disguises a threatening desire in a non-threatening and non-traditional protagonist. Roxane wants liberation from Usbek in the same way that Montesquieu wanted freedom from absolute monarchy, and his fictitious heroine becomes the safe way through which he could voice his opinions.

Though some move collectively while others act alone, the wives in Montesquieu’s epistolary novel, take matters into their own hands when their husband is no longer their to enforce his misogynistic rules. In writing, they express themselves to Usbek, often concealing their rebellion in the language of modesty and proper conduct. When examined more closely however, their words imply their desire for freedom from male control, which they set about to attain through both clandestine manipulation and

overt disobedience. However they choose to launch their war, they succeed in turning the male-controlled harem into an institution of feminine chaos and in bringing the issue of female liberation to the forefront. With it, they also bring the French nobility's desire for the usurpation of power from an absolute monarch to the reading public's attention. Modern interpretation does suggest that the wives represent the danger that lies within unchecked female power. But for the eighteenth century, they also symbolized the threat that lay within the unchecked desires of French noblemen.

## CHAPTER 2

### *Les Liaisons Dangereuses*

Another novel which addresses the issue of female liberation is *Les Liaisons Dangereuses*. Written roughly sixty years after *Les Lettres Persanes*, Laclos' work shows that the women's question was one of lasting significance for its time. Before discussing the novel itself and its implications, however, one must first examine the general condition of French women in society, and the ideas about women that the novel's author himself held. Before writing *Les Liaisons Dangereuses*, Choderlos de Laclos wrote several essays, each treating the question of women's education and revealing his notions about women's role in society. At the time in which Laclos wrote, French women were generally considered to be "l'esclave de l'homme," a fact earlier established by Montesquieu's work (Nojgaard 405). Thought to be naturally weaker than men and "controlled by an immutable social contract" established by males to ensure their dependence, women had little freedom and virtually no access to the public sphere (Diaconoff 395). They were bound by the imperatives of virtue and purity and were considered the gentler sex, whose faculties were both "underdevelop[ed] and underuse[d]" (Diaconoff 393).

Women lived under the assumption that "a wife will be subject to her husband," and they were expected to "passive[ly]" accept "the patriarchal system that oppresse[d] them" by being obedient and sexually submissive (Roussel 98; Brinsmead 33). Women

were not in control of their destinies, but rather, they adhered to the expectations of men, which they themselves reinforced by their compliance. Seeking change for the condition of women, Laclos turned to writing, and in his essays on education, he discusses the need for improvement and the difficulties women would face in ameliorating their situation.

According to Laclos, “the problem in improving women’s lot is ... men, as arbiters of women’s fate, they will not or cannot accept women’s accession to full and equal rights” (Diaconoff 395). Therefore, if change is to be enacted, it is up to women to do so. His essays on education thus seek to “reveal to woman herself that the essence of the problem is her lack of freedom, as established by the social contract to which she has merely acceded and not consented” (Diaconoff 394). He “cannot imagine that women agreed to the social contract which rendered them unequal to men” and “believes that inequality between the sexes is the result of human institutions, not of nature” (Bloch 152).

Furthermore, because he doubts society’s ability to change but believes women capable of creating “an internal freedom for themselves in the private sphere,” he champions women acting on their own behalf, “exhorting them to bring about the radical change themselves” (Diaconoff 395; Bloch 146). He “vise à ... les faire s’engager sur le chemin de la révolte” because he is fully aware that “on ne doit rien attendre des hommes” (Nojgaard 405). He sees gender relations as the battleground for a war between the sexes, each vying for power- men to keep it, women to gain it; and it is these views that influenced his epistolary novel, *Les Liaisons Dangereuses*, in which he creates a character who actually launches the revolt he encourages in his essays, the infamous Marquise de Merteuil.

Through the marquise, Laclos not only suggests that women take power into their own hands should they wish to change their circumstances, but he also presents the danger this female empowerment would pose to the reigning patriarchy. Within the established system of male dominance, should a woman in fact obtain the internal freedom outlined by Laclos “through an effort of will,” she would immediately become a threat (Diaconoff 396). Education would provide women with the means of equaling men in knowledge, an opportunity they had always been denied. Thus endowed with reason, women, who could already exert power over men through their sexuality, would represent a real danger to men, who would no longer be able to dominate and oppress them.

Laclos “se rend parfaitement compte que les hommes auraient peur... face à la femme libre et autonome” because “elle ferait sans doute son propre malheur avec celui des hommes” (Nojgaard 405-406). Liberty of mind, coupled with sexual prowess would make women commanding forces who could easily diminish the power so long held by men and shift its locus of control, and as a result, men sought to keep them repressed. They feared female liberation “empoisonn[er]ait tous les rapports naturels de la famille,” an institution which relied upon virtuous women fulfilling their duties as dedicated wives and mothers (Nojgaard 415). The belief that “émanciper les femmes, c’est les corrompre” dominated the ideology of the time, and in depicting the Marquise, a woman who embodies the desire for change and the means of self-liberation, Laclos confirms that these fears are well founded, and that free women would in fact transform established society, all while intimating that female liberation was worth the risk (Nojgaard 412).

In the novel, Laclos “describes the perverse machinations of two extraordinary libertines, the Marquise de Merteuil and the Vicomte de Valmont” (Pacini 1). Through correspondences between his characters, he tells the tale of the two villains, who together set out to quietly destroy the lives of those around them, both male and female, in order to achieve their own personal goals. In Valmont, one finds the need to control and the desire to dominate the weaker sex and to ruin their reputations- a matter of significant importance for women in the eighteenth century. In Merteuil, however, though one still finds a wish to master the fate of others, there is also the need for self-liberation and the goal of avenging her sex.

For the marquise, “l’objectif ... est justement de s’élever au-dessus de la condition féminine ou de briser les chaînes qu’elle lui impose” (Nojgaard 403). She knows well that “la femme qui se résigne à rester dans sa condition opprimée est condamnée au malheur,” and as a result, she decides to be proactive, launching a deliberate assault against those men who have wronged her or those like her (Nojgaard 405). She “makes fools of men, tricking them, deliberately deceiving them, and [she does] this according to a calculated plan which has been designed especially to display the self-acknowledged superiority of [the] female protagonist” (Marlan 26).

Fully aware of her place in society, the Marquise uses her supposed inferiority to her advantage, duping her contemporaries and hiding behind the veil of proper comportment. Cognizant that the only means of liberation are found within a woman’s personal desire for knowledge and her ability to skillfully employ it, the Marquise not only educates herself, but she manipulates the constrictive system in which she lives in order to achieve her ends of self-realization and female dominance. From the very

beginning of the novel, she makes clear her ultimate goal in one of many letters she writes to Valmont. She asserts, “Je m’en vengerai. Je le promets,” and with these words, she establishes her trajectory and sets out on her path of destruction (Laclos 54).

Essential to Merteuil’s goal of sexual vengeance is knowledge of her society and an ability to use this knowledge as she deems necessary. The Marquise recognizes the importance of becoming educated if she wishes to control her circumstances, and as a result, she enacts a program of self-instruction in order to free herself from male domination mentally, even if she must feign submission publicly. Believing that “study can free us from those forces which act to determine our lives,” as a child, she had already “grasped the social and moral limits imposed on her personal freedom” (Roussel 103; Pacini 8). She asserts that “je n’avais à moi que ma pensée,” when describing her self-education to Valmont in letter LXXXI, and then develops this idea by explaining how she “s’est forgée ses propres principes” (Laclos 222; Nojgaard 421). In seeking knowledge, she “a eu pour but de la rendre maîtresse de ses instincts” (Nojgaard 424). Having achieved this goal, she can claim that she is in fact “her own creation, deliberately moulded and shaped by the principles which she has created beyond the bounds of society’s expectations” (Burrell 22).

Having nothing but “mépris pour la prétendue éducation dispensée aux autres femmes,” the Marquise deliberately distinguishes herself from her compliant peers (Nojgaard 420). In this same letter, she highlights her singularity by contrasting herself “against the two most common classes of women, those ‘who call themselves women of feeling’ and those whom [Valmont] call[s] sensitive” (Roussel 99). In both types, she finds feminine weakness. The first “‘imagine that the man with whom they have found

pleasure is pleasure's only source," and the second "suppress their susceptibility to pleasure but do so only to give themselves to emotion with an equivalent recklessness" (Roussel 99). Because both surrender to either pleasure or emotion, they embody "woman's innate dependence on man, who as the source of her pleasure and love, has the authority to define her as he chooses" (Roussel 99). Masculine control is the exact force she aims to oppose, and because she chooses to combat it by liberating her mind from the chains of female sentiment, she finds herself superior to other women and alone in successfully guiding her own destiny.

Her aim then is to equip herself with the tools necessary to launch a successful war against men and in doing so, gain personal autonomy. Education plays a vital role in this endeavor because she thinks that "c'est dans les livres qu'il faut apprendre les mœurs du monde, les opinions des gens, et les règles morales réagissant le jeu social" (Nojgaard 422). She artfully uses her knowledge of "this harem world," working within its limitations to manipulate the men and women she chooses as targets (Brinsmead 35). In educating herself in the discipline of social deception, she is able to create an artificial appearance of conformity, which she uses to hide her true intentions. False appearances become strategic arms she employs in the battle of the sexes, as they do for Roxane in Montesquieu's novel, and her education thus becomes the foundation upon which she ultimately transforms herself into "an independent, invulnerable, highly proficient... war machine." (Brinsmead 34). She breaks with "les chaînes de la formation servile en se donnant à elle-même une vraie éducation de femme libre" and declares herself commander-in-chief of the "guerre perpétuelle" between women and men (Nojgaard 406; 421).

To achieve victory, the marquise strategically uses her supposed feminine weakness to dupe and dominate her opponents. Recognizing the power that lies within female sexuality, she writes her own rules on how to play the game of love, turning courtship into a theatrical production, men into puppets, and seduction into the main tool of the puppeteer. Nowhere is she more skilled than in the art of performance, and she makes this abundantly clear in her manipulation of all characters with whom she interacts in the novel- not just the masculine ones. Her immense talent for ruse will be discussed later, but first, I would like to examine Laclos' own conception of female sexuality.

The Marquise clearly sees the potential for using sexuality as a weapon, and so did the author of the novel. Laclos recognized that "woman's power arises directly out of her sexuality and is totally dependent upon her ability to create in man a continually new desire for her" (Diaconoff 399). He "considers that female sexuality has become a tool used by women to redress the unequal balance of power between the sexes in this, a man's world, ruled by a social contract that condemned the sexes to live in a state of ongoing war just as it condemned women to the role of 'esclaves malheureuses'" (Diaconoff 398). The only way for women to break out of their restrictive mold would be for them to recognize the power they could exert over men by seducing them. They could become threats to their masculine superiors "on whom they were dependent economically and in terms of physical strength, depend on them for physical pleasure," and they thus "learned to appeal and manipulate man's imagination" by arousing their sexual appetites (Diaconoff 398).

In his writings on education, Laclos addresses this issue as well. Because he viewed women as slaves, he also assumed them to be unhappy. He "supposes that

because they were unhappy, women thought and reflected more than men, and thereby learnt to use their imagination to inflame men's desires" (Bloch 153). Relying on "la beauté de la figure, les vêtements et les parures, la femme a réussi à adoucir sa condition en allumant ...les hommes" (Nojgaard 406). In this way, women "became able to control" men by ruling over their desires, and beauty, or at least the appearance of it, emerged as the new "basis of all contracts between the sexes" (Bloch 153). Through the process of seduction, "women [could] enjoy the prerogatives of power," because it enabled them "to speak and act with the defining force of the masculine" (Roussel 95). Dependent on women for pleasure, men became the weaker sex, and a woman who recognized man's potential weakness and decided to use it to her advantage, "[could] become an enemy to be feared" (Brinsmead 34). Such is the case of the Marquise de Merteuil.

In launching her assault on men, Merteuil "se borne aux ruses de la séduction" (Nojgaard 421). In order to "faire de ces hommes... les jouets de mes caprices," she turns to manipulation and performance, working behind the scenes to render men her inferior playthings (Laclos 220). Her self-education allows her to study societal expectations of female comportment, and in learning to "maîtriser complètement les réactions de son corps," she distinguishes "ce qu'on pouvait faire, de ce qu'on devait penser, et de ce qu'il fallait paraître" (Nojgaard 422 ; Laclos 225). Once she deems herself ready "à déployer sur le grand Théâtre les talents que je m'étais donnés," she becomes a formidable opponent in the struggle for power (Laclos 226).

Because public opinion was the most important judge of a woman's character, in *Les Liaisons Dangereuses*, Merteuil knows that in order to succeed, she must keep her

reputation in tact. She consciously decides to show society only what “il m’*était* utile de laisser voir,” using “theatrical illusion to control and manipulate the other character[s]” (Laclos 222; Marlan 25). To “earn the blind trust of those who surround her,” she hides “her actions and feelings under an appearance of modest virtue,” establishing herself as a “paragon of propriety” (Pacini 8). However, this façade could not be farther from her true identity. Men could behave as they liked without social consequences, but in order for women to avoid downfall, even the most corrupt woman had to portray feminine virtue. Merteuil succeeds in keeping secret her clandestine projects of ruin precisely because “she gives strategic performances of gender and sociability,” which society does not feel the need to question (Pacini 8).

In fact, “pretending to be sociable actually furthers the Marquise’s” objectives because it “allows her to become close to whomever she needs for the fulfillment of her goals” (Pacini 9). In creating a “public image by presenting people with the appropriate external data and letting them fashion her themselves,” she is able to dupe them to such a degree that they constantly avow the “firmness of Merteuil’s principles” (Brinsmead 39; Burrell 18). For example, in letter XXXII, Madame de Volanges writes to the Présidente de Tourvel, stating that “Madame de Merteuil, [*est*] en effet, très estimable” and that “il est juste de la louer,” reassuring her friend of the Marquise’s good intentions and unaware of her true aims (Laclos 95). Valmont’s feminine equivalent, in her manipulation of society and desire for power, is both smart and convincing in her performance, and she thus persuades the French elite that she is in fact the virtuous icon she appears to be.

In choosing the role she will play in society, Merteuil “assumes disguises”

(Burrell 23). Like a chameleon, she has an “ability to play different roles according to the circumstances,” and in her dealings with her lover, le chevalier, and the womanizer Prévan, she showcases her flair for impersonation (Burrell 24).

In letter X, the Marquise takes the opportunity to outline the details of her deception of her current lover to Valmont. She happily recounts her seduction of the young man, not because of the sexual pleasure she finds in seducing him, but rather because her manipulation of him is so complete, that she is in total control of the situation and acquires power usually reserved for men. In “achieving a variety of scenes, starring herself,” she “enact[s] with perfect control the basic female fear of domination and destruction by the male” (Brinsmead 36). She therefore reverses the gender roles, becoming the active partner, though allowing the chevalier to think her passive. She “sees these positions- male/female, powerful/weak- as relative ones which can be assumed by any two individuals rather than the expression of inherent characteristics” (Roussel 99). As a result, women, from her perspective, are capable of “actively dominat[ing] as men do,” which she demonstrates through her manipulation of the chevalier (Brinsmead 34).

To achieve her ends, she “entertains the chevalier by playing out a series of small roles,” each of which she has carefully prepared (Burrell 24). She boasts, “pour recorder les différents tons que je voulais prendre,” “je lis un chapitre du *Sophia*, une Lettre d’*Héloïse*, et deux Contes de La Fontaine,” literature being a large part of her self-education, as she learns various comportments by reading about the behavior of fictional characters (Laclos 53). She then goes on to describe the various attitudes she wished to portray:

“Après le souper, tour à tour enfant et raisonnable, folâtre et sensible, quelquefois même libertine, je me plaisais à le considérer comme un Sultan au milieu de son Sérail, dont j’étais tour à tour les Favorites différentes. En effet, ses hommages réitérés, quoique toujours reçus par la même femme, le furent toujours par une Maîtresse nouvelle.” (Laclos 54)

On the stage she makes of her *petite maison*, she artfully dupes the chevalier. He believes her to be docile and suppliant and himself to be the *meneur du jeu*. However, his mistress makes it clear in revealing her true intentions to Valmont, that in this scenario, she is in the one in control.

Unlike her female counterparts who lose themselves in love and emotion, Merteuil instead uses “the devaluation of woman’s pleasure” as “the vehicle for a rigorous suppression of sensation and emotion,” remaining unmoved by her chevalier (Roussel 101). In mastering her feelings, she “breaks the ‘natural’ relationship between feelings of pleasure and love... and the expression of these feelings,... which binds women to their traditional role. The forms and signs of expression become merely conventions which... can be manipulated and made to serve a different meaning” (Roussel 101). What the chevalier assumes to be expressions of her affection for him are actually signs of her conquest. Fawning a desire to please, Merteuil “enacts traditional roles ironically so that the apparently passive and determined female becomes a center of power” (Roussel 101). She tells Valmont, “Je passai mes bras autour de lui, et me laissai tomber à ses genoux” (Laclos 53). The chevalier thinks her to be sincere in sentiment, when in reality this gesture is all part of the show she is putting on for her puppet to convince him of his importance and of her love.

Unaware of being her toy, the chevalier is also ignorant of the fact that the Marquise “veut [le] quitter bientôt” (Laclos 54). Accepting blindly society’s definition of

gender roles, Merteuil's lover never questions her sincerity or his role as the dominant partner. As a result, he perceives the Marquise as he wants her to be, servile and aiming to please, instead of how she truly is, contriving and deceitful. Merteuil uses women's traditional roles to her advantage, fawning female virtue and submission, and does so so well, that her plaything never suspects he is being duped, and she is able to "schem[e], beguil[e], and conqu[er]" (Diaconoff 399).

Another episode in the novel in which the Marquise uses false appearances to control her relationships with men and bring about their demise is in her interactions with Prévau and the story of the "inseparables." Merteuil, and the reader, learn of the inseparables in a letter Valmont writes to the Marquise in which he describes the downfall of three female friends at the hand of Prévau. This small group of women, known in French society as "les inséparables" because of "an unusual degree of loyalty among these three beautiful women," falls prey to the caprices of a manipulative male, who seduces each one and ruins her reputation (Marlan 319). Prévau and the public view the women's relationships as dangerous because they embody "the threat of female autonomy" (Marlan 319). They "provoke public anxiety because within their friendships, they find the means for "the displacement of lovers and thus of men" (Marlan 319).

In a patriarchal society, women who publicly show themselves to be less than completely dependent on males strike a blow at the traditional gender roles that society encourages. The problem lies not within the friendships themselves, but rather, within the "women's devotion to their men," which Prévau deems "insufficient" (Marlan 320). In order to put the women back in their place and to reestablish the social hierarchy that champions male domination of women, Prévau launches his attack, by convincing each

woman separately of his love and so fully, that all three, unbeknownst to each other, write letters to their husbands saying that they wish to leave them for Prévau. The embittered husbands then each challenge Prévau to a duel, and the calculating man sets it up so that all three arrive to fight him at the same time. He then convinces the men to join him for breakfast, and by the end of it, the four had agreed that “pareilles femmes ne méritaient pas que d’honnêtes gens se battissent pour elles” (Laclos 213). They then hatched a plan in which that night, Prévau would invite all three women to dine with him, at different times, only for the women to discover their outraged lovers waiting for them. In this way, each surprised woman was easily “livrée à son ancien maître” and “fut trop heureuse de pouvoir espérer son pardon, en reprenant sa première chaîne” (Laclos 214). To further the embarrassment, Prévau and his accomplices decided it would also be necessary to reveal to the women that they were not in fact alone in being duped by Prévau, and “au moment du souper, les trois couples se réunirent;” and Prévau, “en livrant leur secret, leur apprenait entièrement jusqu’à quel point elles avaient été jouées” (Laclos 215). Finally, to ensure their complete revenge, the men not only “firent dès le lendemain une rupture qui n’eut point de retour,” but “achevèrent leur vengeance, en publiant leur aventure” (Laclos 215). Publicly scorned, the women then either entered “au Couvent” or “languissent exilées dans leurs Terres” (Laclos 215). The women were “thus debased, whereas the libertine’s involvement in their triple infidelity was treated as an honorable act serving ... men’s best interest” (Pacini 3).

The hypocritical nature of this event which suggested that “in contemporary society, women [were] not allowed to pursue their interests” without punishment, while men could do as they pleased, provokes Merteuil in its unjust treatment of females.

Reacting against “men’s facile power” and condemning “the gendered conventions of a patriarchal society,” she thus decides to enact revenge on Prévau by turning to theatrics, where nothing is as it seems (Pacini 6; 3). Though seeming to act on behalf of the scorned women, she is actually using the opportunity to gain further control over men by launching a personal attack on the unsuspecting male, which she does by manipulating appearances.

In letter LXXXV, the Marquise recounts her defeat of Prévau to Valmont with particular zeal. In describing “the details of the role she set out to play,” Merteuil once again demonstrates her mastery of appearances (Burrell 24). Feigning a desire for an illicit affair with Prévau, Merteuil succeeds initially in gaining his interest. She controls her every action to ensure that he believes her false affections to be true. She tells Valmont that when going into dinner one night with Prévau who offered her his hand, “J’eus la malice, en l’acceptant, de mettre dans la mienne un léger frémissement, et d’avoir, pendant ma marche, les yeux baissés et la respiration haute. J’avais l’air de pressentir ma défaite, et de redouter mon vainqueur” (Laclos 241). She knows that for her plan to be successful, her victim must be completely surprised when she reveals her real intentions; and to guarantee that Prévau is duped, she also initially refuses his advances, resistance symbolizing a virtuous woman struggling to retain her purity in the face of temptation. If she were to give into him too readily, her performance would not be quite as convincing, and she is too intent on his ruin to not flawlessly carry out her plan.

Once she has Prévau believing in her pretend amorous feelings, she has him right where she wants him. Thinking he is the one in control, Prévau easily falls victim to the

Marquise because she is actually the one with the power. He thinks himself free of danger when in her bedroom, adding her to his list of conquests, believing that yet another virtuous woman has succumbed to his charm. However, his delusions are quickly destroyed when Merteuil launches her attack.

When the Marquise and Prévau are alone in her room and Prévau thinks himself strong, he is actually at his most vulnerable because he has bought into her portrayal of a conquered mistress. Knowing him to be weak, the Marquise chooses this moment to ring for her servant, Victoire, who “accourir, et appeler les Gens qu’elle avait gardés chez elle” as her mistress had commanded (Laclos 246). Her servants, she explains, “s’indignaient qu’on eût osé manquer à leur vertueuse Maîtresse. Tous accompagnèrent le malheureux Chevalier, avec bruit et scandale, comme je le souhaitais” (Laclos 247). Furthermore, she asks her servants to send for a doctor, “un moyen sûr de donner du cours et de la célébrité à cette nouvelle” (Laclos 247). Finally, she instructs Victoire “d’aller le matin de bonne heure bavarder dans le voisinage” (Laclos 247). By midday, her success is complete because Prévau is taken “en prison” for his sexual misconduct (Laclos 247).

In the Prévau affair, Merteuil “plays her role to perfection and has coached her household in theirs. She not only sets the stage and directs the minor players but also takes the leading role in what to her is a vicious little comedy... [and] in what is to the outside society a drama of violence and... rape. The contrast between illusion and reality therefore provides the major means of manipulation” (Burrell 24). Working within the confines of her society, the Marquise’s knowledge of the patriarchal system that defines her as a woman proves an invaluable weapon. Prévau “is made vulnerable by his literal

acceptance of the clichés of his world... because he accepts without question the belief that the vulnerability of women and the power of men are fixed by their natures, and he operates within these limits” (Roussel 101-102). Like Usbek who believes Roxane incapable of treachery, Prévau’s beliefs about women’s nature blind him to the possibility that Merteuil could be anything but sincere, and he thus “interprets Merteuil’s glances and the pressure of her hands as signs that she has been possessed by feelings for him that will eventually overpower her” (Roussel 102). Because he is ignorant that the Marquise’s gestures are merely part of her plan, Prévau allows her to “assume the role of the man and dispose of [him] as if he were a woman” (Roussel 102). In staging her intended rape, the Marquise successfully brings about Prévau’s downfall by playing on society’s conception of her as a virtuous woman who is incapable of such manipulation and deceit. By way of her “masculinely aggressive ‘coup’ she has rendered Prévau impotent as a sexual menace to society” (Brinsmead 57). She thus proves once again that women too are capable of deviations and of achieving the power usually allotted to men; and therefore, that they are potentially dangerous.

Interestingly, men are not the only victims of Merteuil’s deception. The feminine characters in the novel are also duped by the Machiavellian protagonist. But her deception of other women serves only to further her project of usurping male power—suggesting perhaps that her aims are more selfish than they originally seem and not geared towards liberating her sex as a whole. This is most evident in her manipulation of Cécile Volanges and her mother, Madame de Volanges. At the beginning of the novel, Cécile appears as the embodiment of female purity and innocence. A girl of fifteen who has just left the convent, Cécile is to be married to the Comte de Gercourt, “a former

lover of Merteuil who had the effrontery to tire of her before she had quite finished with him” (Burrell 19). Her corruption of Cécile “is of course not intended as a measure of vengeance against the Volanges family, but instead to humiliate” Gercourt for having wronged her in the first place (Burrell 19). She sets out to give Cécile an “éducation libertine” in an effort to coerce her into adopting “la religion du plaisir,” ultimately leading her to sleep with men other than her betrothed, ensuring his humiliation when Cécile’s infidelity is revealed (Nojgaard 420).

In order to succeed with Cécile, the Marquise must first attain both the young girl and her mother’s full confidence, which again, she achieves through manipulation and false appearances. In the letters she writes to both Cécile and Mme. de Volanges, she caches her true character behind proper and endearing language. With expressions of affection, she makes the mother and daughter believe that she has their best interests at heart, though in reality, the only thing she is interested in is her own revenge. Writing to Cécile de Volanges she says, “Je suis très fâchée, ma belle, et d’être privée du plaisir de vous voir... Mes compliments à ma chère Madame de Volanges. Je vous embrasse bien tendrement” (Laclos 58). Through language, the Marquise manages to convince the mother and daughter that she is a respectable woman and loyal friend, and as a result, she becomes privy to both Madame de Volanges’ worries and concerns for her daughter and Cécile’s own feelings, which the Marquise can then use to manipulate the young woman. Though the Marquise claims to want to help Cécile in her correspondence with the young girl and her *Maman*, in her communication with Valmont, the only character to whom she voluntarily reveals her true intentions, she displays her project:

“Quant à la petite, je suis souvent tentée d’en faire mon élève; c’est un service que j’ai envie de rendre à Gercourt. Il me laisse du temps, puisque le voilà en Corse

jusqu'au mois d'Octobre. J'ai dans l'idée que j'emploierai ce temps-là, et que nous lui donnerons une femme toute formée, au lieu de son innocente Pensionnaire." (Laclos 70)

Behind her veil of friendship, the Marquise successfully gains access to Cécile, Madame de Volanges encouraging their interaction as she believes Merteuil to be virtuous and helpful. Once Cécile is introduced to the Marquise, she readily believes anything her mentor says because she is so duped by the mastermind. She is easily convinced to allow herself to love Danceny, her music teacher, and to be seduced by Valmont, despite of the fact that she is engaged and that French society would have her remain chaste until marriage. She tells her friend Sophie, who had advised her not to encourage the chevalier Danceny's advances:

"Madame de Merteuil, qui est une femme qui sûrement le sait bien, a fini par penser comme moi ... elle exige seulement que je lui fasse voir toutes mes Lettres et toutes celles du Chevalier Danceny, afin d'être sûre que je ne dirai que ce qu'il faudra... Mon Dieu, que je l'aime Madame de Merteuil! elle est si bonne! et c'est une femme bien respectable. Ainsi, il n'y a rien à dire." (Laclos 90)

Cécile readily accepts that Merteuil's advice is good-natured and that she would never lead her in the wrong direction because the Marquise hides herself so well. Cécile is ignorant of the fact that Merteuil wishes to incite her relationship with Danceny and dictate her letters in order to ruin Cécile's reputation, and thus, that of Gercourt. As a result, Merteuil easily succeeds in carrying out this mission, exercising her power over a man, ironically, through bringing about the downfall of another woman. At the end of the novel, after all is revealed and it is known (at least to a select few) that Cécile has entertained liaisons with both Danceny and Valmont, she chooses to enter into a convent, recognizing her wrongdoings and her victimization. Gercourt loses his bride, and the Marquise sees her project realized.

An interesting interpretation of the relationship between Merteuil and the other female characters in the novel lies in the Marquise's desire to act alone. As an independent fighting unit, she succeeds in manipulating others and reaching her short-term goals, proving dangerous to those around her. However, like Montesquieu's heroine, she fails to take advantage of the other women in that she is unable to recognize their potential as weapons of male destruction. In acting alone, she launches a war against an entire sex without the cavalry necessary to achieve full victory. Her "desire for independence prevents her from appreciating the power of a social coalition," and if she had united with the other women and gained access to their knowledge, instead of setting them up as other victims to conquer, perhaps she would have gotten father with her revolt (Pacini 2). If the women were to unite, their combined power could be enough to actually change their social situation. However, societal expectations dictate their correspondences and inhibit them from exchanging the information necessary to their rebellion. In examining some of the letters exchanged between Merteuil and her peers, this flaw in her plan of attack becomes apparent.

Throughout the novel, the women participate in "epistolary correspondences," providing them with some means of communication (Pacini 7). However, "social conventions... work to isolate these women... as internalized discipline contributes to the ineffectiveness of their communicative and rhetorical methods" (Pacini 7). Instead of exchanging important information, they "critique each other's actions, express support, relay gossip, but overall refuse to give each other the details that would have ensured, or at least enhanced, the success of their recommendations" (Pacini 7). Denying each other "the strength they might have had,... they censor their words in an attempt to preserve the

presumed innocence of their friend or correspondent: les bienséances and arbitrary notions of female modesty curtail their freedom of expression” (Pacini 7).

Interestingly, Merteuil clearly recognizes the potential power that lies within “controlling the transmission of information” (Pacini 9). She “scripts Cécile and Danceny’s relationship by regulating... the relay of messages between them” (Pacini 9). Furthermore, she “uses her own letters as instruments of epistemological and psychological control,” instead of “conceiving of epistolarity as an expression of well-meaning sociability” as the other women do (Pacini 9). Using letters to subjugate her rivals, she tends to get what she wants. However, in making women her opponents instead of her accomplices, she ultimately sets herself up for failure because, like Roxane, she is simply not strong enough on her own to vanquish the male sex as a whole.

Doomed ultimately to fail, what then is her role in the novel? Is she merely a monster unleashing her wrath on society or is she a victim of subjugation attempting to fight back? Turning her back on other women, her fatal flaw is in entrusting a man, Valmont, with her secrets. In choosing a male as her confidant, she is ultimately doomed because on the battlefield of the war between the sexes, she and Valmont are on opposite sides and have different goals. Both want to dominate the other, and as a result, Valmont ultimately uses her confessions against her, whereas a fellow woman could have used them to their mutual advantage. Her relationship with Valmont is thus one worthy of examination.

From the opening of the novel, it is clear that Merteuil and Valmont are partners in the manipulation of French society. The candor and honesty with which they relate their conquests to one another suggest their friendship and mutual trust. The way

Merteuil expresses herself when writing to him is unlike her communication with the other characters because this is the only relationship in which she can use honest language. No longer coded in societal nicety, Merteuil's written exchange with Valmont is indicative of her nature. In discussing her plans for Cécile and Gercourt, she writes, "l'espoir de me venger rassérène mon âme" (Laclos 34). She hopes to convince Valmont to take part in enacting her revenge, a revelation of self she would share with no one else. She turns to him for both advice and complicity, the sharing of confidences marking their friendship. However, she asserts to others that they are in fact her true friends, hiding behind a façade of camaraderie. In a letter she writes to Madame de Volanges, she asserts, "C'est toujours de vous que j'ai reçu les consolations les plus douces et les avis les plus sages; c'est de vous aussi que j'aime le mieux à en recevoir" (Laclos 251). Her avowal is false, as Valmont is the "one person who knows her true character" and the one person in the novel with whom Merteuil is at times sincere (Burrell 21). In her correspondences with Valmont, she candidly recounts her conquests, and she even reveals her project of self-education to him in the infamous letter LXXXI, showing her true self to him and no one else.

Meeting her on equal ground, Valmont is the natural choice for Merteuil's confidant because she does not think herself superior to him. She wants to prove herself dominant in their relationship, however, he provides her with a challenge because he too is skilled in the art of deception. A true opponent worthy of combat, Valmont serves as Merteuil's male equivalent and proves himself difficult to defeat, unlike the other characters upon whom Merteuil easily unleashes her wrath. As a result, he is her ultimate conquest, as she is his.

Within each other, “they find... the reflection of their own feeling of self-sufficiency,” particularly important to the Marquise, since as a woman, she is conditioned to be dependent (Roussel 106). Together, they decide to “sacrifice any continuing sexual or emotional relationship” (Roussel 103). In so doing, “Valmont suspends the prerogative of the man over the woman, and in suspending them, he acknowledges to her that he realizes these prerogatives are artificial rather than a function of natural difference between male and female” (Roussel 103). This recognition allows them the “freedom to create themselves outside of conventional relationships where men and women... can only define themselves in terms of their difference” (Roussel 103). As long as the two villains maintain mutual respect and equanimity, their relationship can flourish and be destructive to their peers. However, once they discover they have different goals and that each harbors the desire to exert power over the other, their amity is ruined.

In Valmont’s relationship with the Présidente de Tourvel, and in Merteuil’s with Danceny, the Vicomte and the Marquise find themselves struggling to gain control over the other, as jealousy enters into their rapport and they find themselves with rivals for each other’s attention. When Valmont discovers that Merteuil has started an affair with Danceny, he acts as a jealous husband, invoking the traditional roles of controlling men and obedient wives. He treats her as “less than equal” by approaching her as “a representative of conventional relations between the sexes” (Roussel 110). He gives her only two choices: “je serai ou votre Amant ou votre ennemi,” asking her “to choose between the two alternatives traditionally open to women, namely, enslavement or ruin” (Laclos 434; Roussel 111). The Marquise, unwilling to return to a state of dependence,

rejects Valmont, and the two thus embark upon a course of mutual ruin.

To defeat Valmont, Merteuil again turns to manipulation. She transforms Danceny into a weapon of war by exposing Valmont to him as Cécile's lover and inciting his desire for revenge. Knowing Danceny will be angered by the Vicomte's seduction of his mistress, Merteuil succeeds in using Danceny "as a means of murdering Valmont. That she conquers him is marked by a most traditional and most certain sign: death" (Marlan 324). Upon learning of his involvement with Cécile, Danceny challenges Valmont to a duel, which the young chevalier wins. However, Valmont does not die without one last attack on Merteuil. In his final act of war, Valmont gives Danceny the whole of his correspondence with the Marquise, revealing their true natures and their attempts at deception. He "uses his male authority to gain a heroic death in combat... freeing his image from the sordid facts" soon to be revealed (Brinsmead 74). He will be "purified in the public's imaginative interpretation" because he appeals to his patriarchal society by dying with honor (Brinsmead 74).

Though equally guilty, Valmont can escape public punishment because he is a man and is therefore free from the imperative to be virtuous and pure. Merteuil, however, is a woman, and as a result, all the blame is placed on her. Because she is a female who "out-maneuvers men on their own terms,... [she] is an abomination to mankind" (Brinsmead 75). The "véritable scandale est dans l'initiative" (Claude 106). Society is less concerned with Valmont and Merteuil's social deviance than they are with the fact that a woman has succeeded in being the enactor of gallantry. The end of the novel "dit... comment la société de l'époque... décrétait infâme pour une femme, ce qu'elle tolérait parfaitement pour un homme" (Claude 108). Publicly shunned and

diseased at the novel's close, Merteuil suffers too for her misdoings with Valmont. However, unlike Valmont, whose life the Marquise ended conclusively, Merteuil "escapes the novel maimed but whole" because she "depends only upon herself for definition" (Brinsmead 75). The ending Laclos writes for her as "punishment is absurdly irrelevant- only surface deep. The small-pox only ruins her mask for the public; the ridicule and censure do not cause her to blink an eye" (Brinsmead 75-76). At the end, she is still able to "prove the validity of her whole life/ouvrage with the statement, 'surtout le succès me justifie'" (Brinsmead 76). Though cast off, she has still lived to see her objectives achieved and her enemies fallen. She succeeds in obtaining power reserved for men and in transcending her sex role and its imperatives. The public may not have been ready to recognize female power, as the acknowledgement of her success "would reveal that the assignment of qualities of masculine power and feminine sensitivity to the male and female respectively is only conventional" (Roussel 113). However, because she is successful, in spite of her tragic end, she suggests that a society in which women and men could enjoy power more equitably was not as much of an impossibility as originally thought. Her genius is summed as follows:

"Born into a condition of womanhood with no right to participate in a man's world, she concentrated her genius on creating a self that would function with perfect control on the social surfaces of reality- a self so independent from the inner truth, that when the hull of vraisemblances was finally destroyed she could still escape intact." (Brinsmead 77)

Laclos' *protagoniste* embodies the danger women would pose to a patriarchal society if given access to knowledge and freedom from convention. The Marquise's personal revolution against the dominant sex hints at the larger revolt that would surely ensue if women were to become conscious of their repression in society.

Like his predecessor, Laclos presented an attack on the state of women within the social order. Sixty years after Montesquieu's initial argument was made, women's condition was apparently still in need of reform. What conclusions then can be drawn from the novels and the female characters they portray? Were Roxane and the Marquise truly aiming to avenge their sex or simply to avenge their own personal subjugation? Furthermore, what do the two protagonists become at the end of their stories- victims of a repressive and close-minded society or monsters who threatened the status quo? I now turn to the legacy of the two novels and of the two women who control their respective story lines.

## CONCLUSION

Throughout both epistolary novels, Laclos and Montesquieu depict their female characters as powerful and deviant. Though each woman hides behind a veil of conformity, they both work behind the scenes to enact the changes they seek. However, neither succeeds in changing society at large. At the end of *Les Lettres Persanes*, Roxane is dead, and though the harem is in disorder, she has done nothing to change the condition of Persian women in general. Similarly, in *Les Liaisons Dangereuses*, the Marquise ends her reign of destruction with the death of Valmont, attaining her own personal revenge on the man who ultimately defeats her, but not on men at large. Though she dominates males at various points in the novel and humiliates many of them, her ultimate banishment simply expels the devious woman from Parisian society without changing French women's status within the male hierarchal order. Society proves then to be too set in its ways to allow a female personal freedom and the ability to live outside of the confines of the misogynistic regime.

Roxane and Merteuil are similar in that they both manage to gain personal victories but lose the ultimate battle. Perhaps then both novels strive to demonstrate the continued need for widespread change. Each illustrates female power and woman's ability to equal men in reason and in dominating the opposite sex. However, neither work ends with the realization of the societal change they seemingly champion. Roxane and Merteuil embody feminine initiative, but neither has enough power on her own to

achieve its full potential. In this way, both women seem to be victims of the society that oppresses them- each struggling for liberation from societal shackles.

Interestingly though, neither woman seems to want liberation for the female sex in general. Each seems preoccupied with her own personal vengeance and neither realizes the power she could have had if she were to unite with other females in launching her assault. Each works on her own to bring about the downfall of their “masters”- Usbek in the case of Roxane and Valmont, among others, in the case of Merteuil. Their tragic ends come with both women less interested in the women who will continue to be oppressed after their downfalls than in their own personal projects. Roxane dies content knowing that she has brought chaos upon Usbek’s perfectly controlled world, and the Marquise leaves Paris, but only after she has ended Valmont’s life. Neither worries for the women they are leaving behind who will either have to fight back or continue to accept their repression. How then can these women’s actions be interpreted? If they are not avengers of their sex, what purpose do they serve? Are they monsters leashed upon society in order to ruin specific men’s lives with no greater purpose? At the end of both works, the women emerge not as solely victims or monsters, but as a combination of the two.

From the point of view of a man in the eighteenth century, women like Roxane and Merteuil do appear as fiends. They threaten a man’s comfortable position as superior and masterful. In keeping women uneducated and confined to the home, men perpetuate their dominance and are able to enjoy their privileged positions. Women who sought to upset these societal roles by freeing themselves from male supremacy were threatening because they jeopardized men’s authoritative status. Roxane and the Marquise clearly

sought to usurp male authority, and as a result, they established themselves as enemies to society. However, because they can also be viewed as slaves who sought freedom from their enslavement they also epitomize a victim's struggle to no longer be victimized. In creating two female characters who simultaneously embody both monster and victim, Montesquieu and Laclos successfully point to the real position of women in their time. The authors clearly recognized the fact that women were more capable than society allowed them to be- as the characters they create suggest- and saw it as unjust that they were not able to realize their full potential. However, as men, they also realize that female empowerment would threaten the male privileges they experienced in their own time, so perhaps the authors themselves were ambivalent in terms of the changes they sought for women. Neither novel resolves the female question, and the fact that it was still being debated at the time Laclos wrote, demonstrates that French society itself was uncertain as to how to address it. Furthermore, because neither woman fully succeeds in her aims, one wonders to what extent Montesquieu and Laclos really wanted them to?

Neither author successfully handles the question of female liberation. Modern interpretation suggests that both men make a case for feminine freedom through the strong women they depict in their novels. However, both men either found it impossible or chose not to create endings for their heroines that would hand them ultimate victory. It seems then that the reader is left with a paradox, or only a half-wish for the liberty that Roxane and Madame de Merteuil want for themselves. Though female, Merteuil and Roxane are described through a masculine lens. Their actions and their outcomes are determined by masculine authors who ultimately succeed in pointing out female subordination, but not in remedying it. The novels prove then to be ambiguous on their

stance for female power, as the men who wrote them could neither understand a woman's position or successfully argue for it since neither of them were in fact female. It was to their best interest as men in their societies to keep women repressed, and though they may have noted women's potential, because neither creates a female character who achieves complete success, they present women's liberation as an unsolvable problem. Do either really believe in women's education or in women's empowerment? Are they actually afraid of what would happen should women gain a greater degree of autonomy?

Contemporary critics, as I have done, may interpret the novel as one that does make a case for feminine freedom while continuing to portray the dangers to men that lay within this struggle. However, to our two authors, women may have been the means through which they argued against absolute monarchy, as is the case with Montesquieu, or their attempt to discuss women's liberation, though not to fully champion it, as is the case with Laclos.

However one chooses to ultimately interpret the novels, one cannot deny that both the works of Montesquieu and Choderlos de Laclos were innovative in their time in that they addressed the issues of women's place in a male-dominated society. In creating female characters that actively pursued freedom from the limitations of their traditional roles of virtuous wives and mothers, both authors targeted the feminine question that was being debated in the salons of the eighteenth century. The power that both the wives of the seraglio, particularly Roxane, and the Marquise de Merteuil are able to attain despite the chains which restrain them, suggest that women are in fact more capable than their societal positions allow them to be. If not kept under control, women (and in fact the

noble man as Montesquieu suggests) can in fact become threatening to the men who suppress them. Both Roxane and Merteuil come to tragic ends, but not without wreaking havoc on the men who surround them. The novels thus demonstrate women's ability to rival their male counterparts on the mental battlefield, but because neither is fully successful, they represent women's limitations within a misogynistic society that both authors ultimately did not want to see destroyed. Roxane and the Marquise each launch a war without achieving full victory, but in spite of their failure, they show themselves to be strong and capable; and though neither Montesquieu nor Laclos may have wanted to argue for female liberation, in creating two forceful female characters, they make the argument in spite of themselves.

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