

“La solitude ajoute à l’attrait du désir.”  
Dangerous isolation in *Les Liaisons dangereuses*

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## “La solitude ajoute à l’ardeur du désir”

### Dangerous isolation in *Les Liaisons dangereuses*

Keywords :

- Solitude in the eighteenth century
- Retreat in French literature
- Libertine fiction and the self
- Epistolarity in *Les Liaisons dangereuses*

Abstract :

This paper argues that solitude—from conventual seclusion through to virtuous retreats and libertine isolation—is a crucial motif in Laclos’s *Les Liaisons dangereuses* and is as important for the characters’ downfall as the dangerous liaisons advertised in the novel’s title.

Looking at the eighteenth century’s discourse on solitude, I explain that *Les Liaisons dangereuses* illustrates the period’s redefinition of the private and public spheres, the Enlightenment’s secularisation of the notion of retreat, and its understanding of the Self as the real source of one’s temptation. Solitude is thus reconfigured as a space where inner desires can surface. However, in *Les Liaisons dangereuses*, such revelations often menace one’s happiness. Analysing the representation of the characters’ physical seclusion, of their strategic retreats, and of their psychological isolation, allows me to explain that Laclos’s representation of solitude as perilous stems from the fact that, in a period still intent on frustrating an individual’s natural drives, the most dangerous liaison one can have is with oneself.

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“La solitude ajoute à l’ardeur du désir,”<sup>1</sup> remarks the libertine Vicomte de Valmont early in Choderlos de Laclos’s 1782 novel *Les Liaisons dangereuses*. Could solitude—the ambivalent, all-encompassing term used by Laclos to capture both wholesome seclusion and dismal isolation—be as dangerous as the liaisons advertised on the title page? Of course, Laclos’s *Les Liaisons dangereuses* is first and foremost a novel about connections. Initially entitled “Le Danger des liaisons,” the emphasis is definitely meant to be on contacts gone wrong, on a sociability threatening virtue, peace, and happiness. Even the epistolary genre of Laclos’s novel stresses the central importance of correspondences, of communication. Still, a close analysis of the text reveals that, for a novel warning against the danger of bad frequentations, a big part of its characters’ downfall is brought about by their isolation, that is, by their being willingly or unwillingly, physically or psychologically, separated from society and thereby left to their own devices. Epistolary itself, whilst it does rely on liaisons, also alludes to such isolation, letter-writing often being less a dialogue with an actual recipient than an introspection addressed, if not to oneself, then to an imagined version of the intended correspondent. Mirroring the ambiguity of the novel’s genre regarding liaisons and isolation, its plot also supports the idea that it heavily revolves around dangerous forms of solitude. The young ingénue Cécile makes for easy prey because of her conventual upbringing which has left her unprepared for the real world and its villains, and of her isolation in her mother’s home which makes her crave human contact. Similarly, the object of Valmont’s seductive tactics, the virtuous Mme de Tourvel, opts for a perilous resistance strategy when she isolates herself not only from him but also, at the same time, from her friends and protectors: in the void she creates around her, the temptation sparked by Valmont is able to ignite and, eventually, to consume her. As for Valmont, he too succumbs to the danger of isolation. For, curiously, his remark

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<sup>1</sup> Choderlos de Laclos, *Les Liaisons dangereuses*, ed. Catriona Seth (1782; Paris: Gallimard, 2011), 23. References are to this edition.

about the erotic effect of solitude is not made regarding Mme de Tourvel but himself. Buried away from Parisian distractions in the dull country house of his aunt, the expert seducer experiences first-hand the power of solitude to transform a simple idea into an obsession.

In this article, I choose the term “solitude” to capture the ambivalence with which Laclos conceptualises it throughout *Les Liaisons dangereuses*. Its meaning can range from seclusion through to isolation. Whereas seclusion suggests a safe retreat from the crowd, isolation rather signals an individual’s unhappy lack of connection with others: “un homme isolé” was said to be “un être malheureux” in late eighteenth-century France.<sup>2</sup> For some, solitude is a pitiful condition, a synonym of loneliness; for others, it is a priceless haven, a synonym rather of solitariness. Solitude can refer to physical circumstances (being in effect away) as well as to a psychological state (keeping one’s mind apart); solitude can even be shared in communal retreats. Thus, the concept—like the experience—of solitude can easily shift from being positive to being negative, whilst also extending to any shade of grey in between.

I argue that this ambivalence nested in the notion of solitude is at the core of the libertine games played by the Vicomte de Valmont and the Marquise de Merteuil. They are driven not simply by lust but also, and more importantly, by an ambition to expose the weakness of virtue when left to one’s own devices. To seduce Mme de Tourvel and Cécile de Volanges, the two libertines endeavour to subvert what was at first meant to be a safe seclusion (such as the Rousseauvian country retreat of Mme de Tourvel or the Christian upbringing of Cécile) into a dangerous isolation which nurtures frustration. Laclos’s rakish duo therefore make real their initial interpretation of these two women’s virtuous retreat away from the whirlpool of the world as a military retreat that signals their vulnerability and heralds their defeat. As the various forms of solitude in *Les Liaisons dangereuses* morph from peaceful seclusion to hazardous isolation,

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<sup>2</sup> *Dictionnaire universel françois et latin ou Dictionnaire de Trévoux*, 6e édition (Paris: Compagnie des Libraires Associés, 1771), s.v. “Isolé.”

Laclos's libertines reveal that the allegedly safe refuge from others can, in fact, also represent a risky confrontation with the self.

The libertines' efforts to demonstrate that isolation may make people vulnerable to dangerous liaisons must be placed within the wider context of the eighteenth century's debates on solitude.<sup>3</sup> Against those who, like Voltaire, argued that men and women were social animals, many thinkers of the time agreed instead, with Rousseau, that happiness was threatened by worldliness. 1780s-fashionable society may spawn vices, as Laclos's novel clearly suggests, but humans might nonetheless very well be social animals longing for contact. So, what is in question is not so much either sociability or solitude, but human nature itself. Like scientists and *philosophes*, eighteenth-century novelists were also seeking to understand the workings of the human machine underneath its worldly masks, the restraint of decency and the control of reason. Hence their intent examination at what happens when the mask is off and one is all alone.

In the century that sees the rise of intimacy and privacy, solitude is more than ever regarded as an occasion for the inner self to resurface, free from the constraint of the public sphere.<sup>4</sup> Retreats, once mostly religious, often revolving around a mortification of the senses, and permitting a contact with God, have become profane, even sensuous. The confessional has been replaced by the boudoir, prayers by introspection.<sup>5</sup> At the same time, while authors warn their readers against rigid isolation that can engender obsessive passions, doctors likewise advise their patients against prolonged and idle solitude which might lead to boredom which—in turn—could lead to melancholy. This is one of *Candide*'s final lessons and I argue that this is

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<sup>3</sup> Georges Minois has synthesised these disputes in his *Histoire de la solitude et des solitaires* (Paris: Fayard, 2013).

<sup>4</sup> See Philippe Ariès and Georges Duby, *Histoire de la vie privée* (Paris: Seuil, 1999).

<sup>5</sup> This shift has been studied by Bernard Beugnot in *Le Discours de la retraite au XVII<sup>e</sup> siècle: loin du monde et du bruit* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1996) and by Hélène Cussac and Odile Richard-Pauchet in *Se retirer du monde*, special issue *Dix-huitième siècle* 48 (2016).

also one of the key lessons we can derive—if we must derive any—from *Les Liaisons dangereuses*. All those warnings reprise the old religious admonitions against idleness which leaves the mind dangerously free to wander. But the gradual secularisation of the West has transferred the source of temptations from the once-external, satanic cause to one's own internal desires. The devil is now within. The situation in the late eighteenth century is thus somewhat paradoxical. It is with and within oneself that one can find both wisdom and temptation, reassurance and worry, fortitude and weakness.

The sum of all these new eighteenth-century conceptions of the self, society and solitude pervades Laclos's ambiguous treatment of solitude; it also orients an interpretation of seduction in *Les Liaisons dangereuses* as an answer to the seduced characters' unknown and guilty desires, rather than as a corruption of their true nature. At first, the would-be chaste seclusion of the Présidente de Tourvel in the country and of Cécile de Volanges in a convent then at home, seems simply to be a variation on the topos of wise retreats best exemplified by Mme de La Fayette's *La Princesse de Clèves* (1678) or Rousseau's *Julie, ou La Nouvelle Héloïse* (1761). However, Laclos complicates this motif by introducing two disruptive elements who challenge the alleged righteousness and safety of solitude, thereby suggesting that the tempted character bears the responsibility of his or her seduction, whilst the seducer merely plays a maieutic role, acting as the *accoucheur* (rather than the creator) of unsuspected desires. For, finally, the characters' isolation—just as much as, if not more than, liaisons—appears to prompt self-discoveries: the libertine might be vulnerable to love; the convent girl might not be content with the rules imposed on her by others (be they her mother, the Church, her seducers, her lovers or her future husband); and the “austère dévote” (263) learns that she is not a fleshless angel. Libertine fiction usually celebrates such discoveries by casting them as enlightening and emancipating. In *Les Liaisons dangereuses*, on the contrary, we are reminded

that such introspections could have distressing consequences, especially for women, in eighteenth-century France.

The objective of this article therefore is not only to demonstrate that solitude does play a crucial part in the various plots of seduction and falling in love that compose the fabric of *Les Liaisons dangereuses*. I also propose to examine what is truly at stake when Laclos conceptualises different forms of solitude (from physical seclusion through to strategic retreat and psychological isolation) as potentially dangerous for the happiness of his characters. I will argue that Laclos's association of solitude with vulnerability suggests that the most dangerous liaison of all might well be the one we have with ourselves. In an age when society was still actively preventing the discovery, expression and fulfilment of one's desires, "know thyself" could be a risky principle to live by.

As a polyphonic correspondence, the text of *Les Liaisons dangereuses, ou lettres recueillies dans une société, et publiées pour l'instruction de quelques autres* is indisputably the result of its characters' dialogues with one another, of their existence within a social network. The connectivity that forms the core of any correspondence is particularly crucial to Laclos's novel, a (if not *the*) masterpiece in the epistolary genre. Here, the correspondence is not just text, it is also plot. How these missives are written, sent, read, hidden and eventually found, makes the intrigue<sup>6</sup> to the point of their being—perhaps—those dangerous links advertised in the title. Letters incarnate the correspondent's body, as Anne-Marie Jaton observes,<sup>7</sup> whilst Henri Lafon

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<sup>6</sup> See Jean-Luc Seylaz, "*Les Liaisons dangereuses*" et la création romanesque chez Laclos (Paris: Minard, 1965), 10. See also Tzvetan Todorov, "The discovery of language: *Les Liaisons dangereuses* and *Adolphe*", trans. Frances Chew, *Yale French Studies* 45 (1970), 113-126 (118).

<sup>7</sup> Anne-Marie Jaton, *Le Corps de la liberté: lecture de Laclos* (Wien: Age d'Or-Karolinger, 1983), 85.

and Peter V. Conroy equate the intimacy between sender and recipient to the privacy they would experience alone together behind closed doors.<sup>8</sup> So there is no denying that a letter is a liaison, an “I” addressing a “you”. It is a contact. And yet, a letter is also the marker of an absence, the sign of an isolation that the writer aims to overcome through the power of the written word to bridge the gap between themselves and an absent addressee.<sup>9</sup>

Moreover, the ideal of an immediate communication is limited by two mechanisms inherent to an epistolary relationship and amplified in *Les Liaisons dangereuses*: first, a correspondent is an imaginary projection, second, a letter is often an egocentric monologue. The former mechanism is made particularly relevant in the novel through the two libertines’ professed creation of their own personae in their letters. Regina Bochenek-Franczakowa explains how this lacuna is part and parcel of their seduction strategy: “La victime repeuplera donc le vide de l’absence par une présence inauthentique, une représentation illusoire, l’image d’un absent qui est un ‘non-moi’ ou plutôt, un ‘moi-tel-que-tu-désires-me-voir’. La victime converse avec une ombre fantasmagorique ... Le ‘séducteur inconnu’ n’a pas besoin de créer un masque; il laisse à la destinataire le soin d’imaginer une persona romanesque.”<sup>10</sup> *Les Liaisons dangereuses* illustrates that, because a letter may connect its reader less with its author than with his or her own fantasies about its author, the real dialogue in a correspondence is sometimes only the one to be had with oneself. Letters can indeed form an “illusory dialogue,” a “soliloque of

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<sup>8</sup> Henri Lafon, *Les Décors et les choses dans le roman français du dix-huitième siècle de Prévost à Sade* (Oxford: Voltaire Foundation, 1992), 26; Peter V. Conroy, *Intimate, Intrusive and Triumphant: The Reader in the “Liaisons dangereuses”* (Amsterdam: Benjamin, 1987), 34.

<sup>9</sup> On the importance of absence in epistolary language, see Janet Gurkin Altman, *Epistolarity: Approaches to a Form* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1982), 135.

<sup>10</sup> Regina Bochenek-Franczakowa, “La lettre de séduction et les pouvoirs de l’absence”, in *Littérature et séduction: mélange en l’honneur de Laurent Versini*, ed. Roger Marchal (Paris: Klincksieck, 1997), 367-75 (368-69). This notion is also supported by Roseann Runte in “Authors and actors: the characters in *Les Liaisons dangereuses*,” in *Critical Approaches to “Les Liaisons dangereuses”*, ed. Lloyd R. Free (Madrid: Studia Humanitatis, 1978), 123-36 (127).



passion”<sup>11</sup> for Carrell, or an “epistolary monody” for Jean Rousset.<sup>12</sup> That ambiguity is the essence of the epistolary novel<sup>13</sup> and it is part and parcel of the correspondence of *Les Liaisons dangereuses*. Valmont, Cécile, Tourvel, Merteuil and Danceny all, at some point, get self-absorbed as they write. We see them using letter-writing either to dream up their own ideal persona (devout lady, heartless seducer or sentimental lover) or to put their thoughts in order, as one could by writing a diary or through introspection. Mme de Tourvel breaks her vow of silence first by accepting to start a correspondence with Valmont and second by confessing her passion to Mme de Rosemonde, but it is possible to read those letters as the corollary of an interior monologue bursting out on paper, a torment in need less of an audience than, quite simply, of expression: “Ah! madame, pardon; mais mon cœur est oppressé, il a besoin d’épancher sa douleur dans le sein d’une amie” (letter 275). Earlier, Cécile too had felt the irresistible need to let out her forbidden feelings: “je ne devrais peut-être pas te les dire: mais il faut bien que j’en parle à quelqu’un; c’est plus fort que moi.” (46) In *Les Liaisons dangereuses*, not only are epistolary relations haunted by the characters’ physical isolation from one another; what offers itself as a series of dialogues is in fact often but a collection of monologues in disguise.

Like the epistolary genre of Laclos’s novel, which implies connections as much as it alludes to isolation, its intrigue too oscillates between a loudly proclaimed focus on liaisons and a subtler yet unfaltering attention to different experiences of solitude. This is palpable in the very first letter of *Les Liaisons dangereuses*. It is written by Cécile de Volanges who has just been

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<sup>11</sup> Susan Lee Carrell, *Le Soliloque de la passion féminine ou le dialogue illusoire: étude d’une formule monographique de la littérature épistolaire* (Tübingen: Narr, 1982), 55.

<sup>12</sup> Jean Rousset, “La monodie épistolaire: Crébillon fils,” *Études littéraires* 1, no. 2 (1968), 167-74.

<sup>13</sup> On the introspective dimension of the epistolary novel, see Dorothy Thelander, *Laclos and the Epistolary Novel* (Geneva: Droz, 1963) and Laurent Versini, *Le Roman épistolaire* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1979). See also François Jost, “Le roman épistolaire et la technique narrative au dix-huitième siècle,” *Comparative Literature Studies* 3, no. 4 (1966), 397-427.

taken out of her convent to be married and is starting to feel rather lonely in her mother's home. She now has her own room, her own cabinet, her own maid,<sup>14</sup> her own *secrétaire*. Yet this new privacy also underscores that she is now on her own, as she remarks to her convent friend Sophie: “Maman m’a dit que je la verrais tous les jours à son lever; (...) que nous serions toujours seules (...) Je n’ai plus ma Sophie pour causer et pour rire.” (letter I) A few letters later, Cécile’s complaint intensifies—“quand on est si longtemps toute seule, c’est bien ennuyeux” (43)—and betrays that, after years of communal living, she is starting to experience her privacy as a vexing isolation from her friends.

Like Cécile, the Présidente de Tourvel is explicitly and from the start characterised by her solitude. We meet “la belle recluse” (345) during her summer retreat in the country at Mme de Rosemonde’s castle. Despite the social nature of such retreats in eighteenth-century France (these are no ascetic hermitages but rather shared solitudes, as friends visit friends in their rural castles), they nevertheless allude to a distance taken from urbane crowds and their busy entertainments. Mme de Tourvel’s country retreat with the good and pious Mme de Rosemonde and an old priest is reminiscent of *La Nouvelle Héloïse*’s Clarens, where like-minded virtuous protagonists shelter themselves from the rumpus of Paris’s fashionable society the better to relish a peaceful, quiet and fulfilling harmony. Still, it is through the lens of very worldly and sociable Vicomte de Valmont that we discover both the Présidente and her retreat. From his perspective, there seem to be cracks in her Rousseauvian solitude: her husband is far away (Valmont talks of a “veuvage” [letter IV]); she has no children, no confidant, no friend of her

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<sup>14</sup> The fact that the presence of servants does not hinder solitude throughout *Les Liaisons dangereuses* (despite the roles played by Valmont’s Azolan, Merteuil’s Victoire or Tourvel’s Julie) illustrates that “imbued with the values of a rigidly hierarchical society, [masters] saw their servants as creatures of another species, as half-witted children, animals, or objects. They could afford to let domestics share their intimacy for they felt totally shameless and guiltless in their presence.” Sarah C. Maza, *Servants and Masters in 18th-Century France: The Uses of Loyalty* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1984), 193.

own age either; her days are spent in pious undertakings or “promenades solitaires,”<sup>15</sup> her nights in lonesome prayers (“des prières du soir au matin” [22]). For such a sociable being as Valmont, the Présidente appears to be isolated and bored: “de pieux entretiens avec ma vieille tante, et quelquefois un triste Wisk, devaient être ses seules distractions.” (letter IV) In itself, her quiet existence is neither worrying nor incriminating, quite the contrary. Nevertheless, the structure of Laclos’s novel implies that it may become so. Descriptions of the would-be virtuous retreat of Mme de Tourvel are framed not only by letters depicting Cécile’s mounting frustration at being kept away from friendly company in her mother’s home, but also by letters referring to the Marquise de Merteuil’s voluptuous “espèce de retraite” (313) in her boudoir or *petite maison*. From the expert perspective of the libertines who discuss the fate of Cécile and the Présidente, what one expects to be a safe and chaste space for the “belle dévote” and the naïve adolescent is instead interpreted as a signal of vulnerability.

It is also highly significant that the male seducers in this novel should be bachelors. Valmont is not a wayward husband, nor is he presented as being hindered in his lifestyle by any parent, sibling, or responsibility. As for Danceny, on the path to becoming a Chevalier de Malte, his celibate status is more extreme than Valmont’s bachelorhood, and his isolation is about to become quite literal on the Maltese island. Cécile notes: “C’est bien dommage qu’il soit chevalier de Malte! Il me semble que s’il se mariait, sa femme serait bien heureuse...” (29). As Georges Minois reminds us in his history of solitude: “le célibataire est une sorte de parasite dangereux caractérisé par l’imprudence, la misanthropie, la légèreté, le libertinage.”<sup>16</sup> The first readers of *Les Liaisons dangereuses* would have intuited the menace to society’s order inherent to the unmarried state of Laclos’s two male protagonists. A bachelor’s isolation, far from being

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<sup>15</sup> This must be a fortuitous coincidence showing how much Laclos shared Rousseau’s ideals, the *Rêveries du promeneur solitaire* being published posthumously in 1782, and Laclos bringing the final corrections to his manuscript in late 1781-early 1782 for a publication in April of that year.

<sup>16</sup> Minois, 341.

associated with any form of male honesty, is equated with being alarmingly free to act as one pleases, while being at the same time presented as fomenting perversions of the all too natural human desire for contact.

The suspicion attached to bachelors in Laclos's novel and, more widely, in the eighteenth century, is exacerbated when it concerns their female counterpart, the widowed libertine Marquise de Merteuil. Whereas Valmont, as an *homme à bonnes fortunes*, can boast publicly about his liaisons, Mme de Merteuil, highly social by day, must isolate herself to live out her libertinage by night: "il s'agit d'une solitude, d'un isolement volontaire, puisque, pour maintenir l'image publique d'une femme chaste et dévote, elle doit garder absolument secrète sa vie de libertine."<sup>17</sup> Furthermore, despite her affair with her "heureux Chevalier" (letter X), she jokes to Valmont about the boredom of her Parisian solitude: "l'automne ne laisse à Paris presque point d'hommes qui aient figure humaine: aussi je suis depuis un mois d'une sagesse à périr" (94). Beyond the quip, she is presenting herself as needing a pastime to absorb her completely between two social calls. The marquise happens to have found one in the revenge she plots on her former lover Gercourt by debauching his bride-to-be Cécile. He is literally isolated (insulated) on the island of Corsica, she has been kept isolated from the world in her convent and now in her mother's home; yet isolation, as the Marquise shall soon demonstrate, is no guarantee against the danger of liaisons.

The bad-company paradigm around which the plot of *Les Liaisons dangereuses* revolves comprises a set of received ideas on the alleged safety of retreat from a world seen as corrupt

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<sup>17</sup> Yae-Jin Yoo, "Le libertinage féminin de Mme de Merteuil dans *Les Liaisons dangereuses*: une 'révolution manquée'?", *French Forum* 39, no. 2-3 (2014), 33-48 (37).

and corrupting.<sup>18</sup> If Paris is but an eighteenth-century Babylon, good wives such as the Présidente de Tourvel are wise to abscond from it in the country, and caring mothers like Mme de Volanges should keep their unmarried daughters away. Such retreats belong to an early modern Catholic conception of sin and human frailty. They evoke prayers for help (“keep me away from temptation”) and a saintly rejection of profane pleasures in favour of a more essential access to the plenitude supposed to come from devotion, self-control, and a clear conscience. Thanks to retreat, if one is plagued by vice in thoughts, one can at least safeguard virtue in deeds.

Such a protection from vice—at least until marriage—is the grand plan of Mme de Volanges for her daughter Cécile, hence her keeping her first literally cloistered in a convent until she is about to be married, then metaphorically cloistered in the ignorance, silence, and solitude of her Parisian home. Cécile’s first few letters are laments about her frustration at being thus kept alone: “on ne m’a encore parlé de rien” (16); “je me suis fort ennuyée” (19). Yet her next letters express how she rejoices about the irruption in her life of people who, at long last, notice her and talk with her. They are, first, in her mother’s tedious home, Danceny and Merteuil: “quand il (Danceny) n’y est pas, personne ne me parle, et je m’ennuie ... Lui et Mme de Merteuil sont les deux seules personnes que je trouve aimables” (30), and, eventually, on the old Mme de Rosemonde’s country estate, Valmont: “J’ai peur qu’il ne s’ennuie bientôt de la vie qu’on mène ici, et qu’il ne s’en retourne à Paris; cela serait bien fâcheux” (180); in other words, those who will be Cécile’s dangerous liaisons. Merteuil and Valmont augur well from her secluded upbringing: “elle ne sait rien, absolument rien, de ce qu’elle désire tant de savoir. Il lui en prend des impatiences tout à fait drôles” (94); “Que me proposez-vous? de séduire une jeune fille qui n’a rien vu, ne connaît rien; qui, pour ainsi dire, me serait livrée sans défense” (21-22). On the

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<sup>18</sup> On this conception of retreat in the eighteenth century, see Martial Poirson, “Partie de campagne: la retraite rurale dans l’œuvre de Louis-Sébastien Mercier,” in *Se retirer du monde*, 197-214 (especially 202).

night of her rape, Valmont's intuition that a secluded education does not protect girls against libertines is confirmed: "sans doute on ne lui a pas bien appris dans son couvent à combien de périls divers est exposée la timide innocence" (254). Naivety is no match for vice in the merciless universe of *Les Liaisons dangereuses*.

Although Merteuil and Valmont's project to debauch Cécile before her marriage is driven first and foremost by a desire for revenge on her future husband Gercourt and her mother Mme de Volanges, it is also inscribed within a libertine ambition to mock the "ridicules préventions pour les éducations cloîtrées" (18). The failings of Cécile's secluded upbringing to safeguard her virtue corroborates Merteuil's casting the notion as a "sotte présomption (18), and joins forces with the enlightened thinkers of his era who, like Diderot in *La Religieuse* (publ. 1796), would also denounce the non-vocational confinement of women (and men) in convents and monasteries as "des violences contre-nature," to reprise Audrey Mirlo's expression.<sup>19</sup> The most virulent of those attacks on the alleged goodness of conventual seclusion belong to the "philosophical" (or pornographic) trend of libertine fiction. From *Vénus dans le cloître, ou La Religieuse en chemise* (1683) to *Dom Bougre, portier des Chartreux* (1741) and *Thérèse philosophe* (1748) through to Sade's infamous *Justine* (1791), nunneries and monasteries are invariably cast as spaces of utmost debauchery. There, novices meet as many (if not more) bad frequentations as one would out and free in the profane world. However, this is not the model chosen by Laclos to suggest the fundamental limitation of religious seclusion. Cécile's contacts in the convent are cast as perfectly wholesome (we hear of her good friend Sophie—a name that evokes wisdom—and of Mère Perpétue—a name that recalls the boredom and unprogressiveness of conventual lives, but not their vices). Danceny concludes the novel with a dark observation on the shortcomings of Cécile's education: "Quelle autre jeune personne,

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<sup>19</sup> Audrey Mirlo, "L'idéal de retraite partagée dans quelques fictions françaises du dix-huitième siècle," in *Se retirer du monde*, 229-43 (236).

sortant de même du couvent, sans expérience et presque sans idées, [...] aurait pu résister davantage à de si coupables artifices?" (456). When the last page of *Les Liaisons dangereuses* is turned, Cécile's secluded upbringing indeed seems to share the responsibility for her downfall almost in equal parts with the evil libertines bent on ruining her.

The objects symbolising her character reprise this notion: first, in her mother's home, when she falls in love with Danceny, the writing desk where she locks her letters evokes at once her confinement (under lock and key) and how it harbours the liaisons she should avoid.<sup>20</sup> Later, in Mme de Rosemonde's country-house, her bedroom key, far from keeping intruders away, becomes a sexual metaphor in the hands of Valmont as the very thing that opens the door to libertinage.<sup>21</sup> What was supposed to protect Cécile by physically isolating her from others turns out to be the very thing that ruins her. In a sombre echo of the ill effects of isolation, the success of Mme de Merteuil's revenge plot relies on the young girl's withdrawing from all other contacts (especially mother and confessor) but the ones she has with her corruptors. And caustically, it is by encouraging another virtuous retreat ("je l'ai décidée à éloigner sa fille pour quelque temps, à la mener à la campagne" [154]) where Valmont will be able to prey on the young girl, that the Marquise's projects will succeed.

The parallel structure between the Présidente's and Cécile's gradual downfall reinforces the impression that *Les Liaisons dangereuses* discloses the shortcomings of the retreat ideal by presenting solitude as sparking and fuelling temptations. At first, when we meet the Présidente

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<sup>20</sup> As Anne-Marie Brindsmead remarks about Mme de Volanges, "by keeping up the barriers of politesse and official visiting hours, and implicitly condoning the use of a *secrétaire à clef*, she encourages Cécile to keep her selfhood to herself." *Strategies of Resistance in "Les Liaisons dangereuses"* (Lewinston: Edwin Mellen Press, 1989), 89.

<sup>21</sup> On this penetration metaphor, see Diana Berrett Brown, "The Female *Philosophe* in the Closet: The Cabinet and the Senses in French Erotic Novels, 1740–1800", *Journal for Early Modern Cultural Studies* 9, no. 2 (2009), 96-123 (98).

de Tourvel on Rosemonde's estate, her seclusion is but a righteous retreat from the world during her husband's absence. Her "promenades solitaires," her prayers, her charitable duties, her quiet days and peaceful nights far from the madding crowd of Paris make her a typically Rousseauvian heroine reaping plenitude from such a calm existence: "S'il existe des plaisirs plus vifs, je ne les désire pas; je ne veux point les connaître. En est-il de plus doux que d'être en paix avec soi-même, de n'avoir que des jours sereins, de s'endormir sans trouble, et de s'éveiller sans remords?" (letter LVI) Yet Valmont's ambition is to make her perceive such peace as a dull void: "Je lui en prépare [des distractions] de plus efficaces." (22) As she herself remarks, her quiet life makes his presence a welcome entertainment: "notre retraite est égayée par son neveu" (31). In the next letter, Mme de Volanges (a more sagacious mother-figure for the Présidente than for her own daughter Cécile) adds that it also makes her unprepared: "dans la vie sage et retirée que vous menez, ces scandaleuses aventures (of Valmont's) ne parviennent pas jusqu'à vous" (33). It seems at times as if the austere Présidente de Tourvel might have fared better in front of Valmont had she been a bit more dissipated. While idle isolation in the early modern period is seen as unhealthy for everyone ("Ne soyez pas solitaires, ne soyez pas oisifs," summarises Jean Starobinski in an echo of Robert Burton's *Anatomy of melancholy*),<sup>22</sup> for women it is altogether hazardous. Both their sanity and their virtue are in perils, as Huguette Krieff explains:<sup>23</sup> texts such as Germaine de Staël's *De l'influence des passions sur le bonheur des individus et des nations* (1796) or Mme Thiroux d'Arconville's *Traité des passions* (1764) do advise against the whirlpool of the world, its wicked seducers and its foolish entertainments. Yet these wise authoresses also warn their readers against the perils rooted in the potential boredom of solitude. An otherwise insignificant romantic interest might swell to fill the void of their lives into a passion that might, in turn, become an obsession.

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<sup>22</sup> Jean Starobinski, *L'Encre de la mélancolie* (Paris: Seuil, 2012), 56.

<sup>23</sup> Huguette Krieff, "Retraite féminine et femmes moralistes au siècle des Lumières," in *Se retirer du monde*, 89-101.



Fatefully, Valmont too puts his self-control at risk by subjecting himself to a retreat which only the idea of the Présidente will animate: “La vie que je mène ici est réellement fatigante, par l’excès de son repos et son insipide uniformité” (44). His libertine pastime leads to an “inquiétante dépossession” (23) of himself: “ce que vous ignorez, c’est combien la solitude ajoute à l’ardeur du désir. Je n’ai plus qu’une idée; j’y pense le jour, et j’y rêve la nuit. J’ai bien besoin d’avoir cette femme, pour me sauver du ridicule d’en être amoureux.” (23) Mme de Tourvel herself warns him about the risk of such a quiet rural retreat: “De retour à Paris, vous y trouverez assez d’occasions d’oublier un sentiment, qui peut-être n’a dû sa naissance qu’à l’habitude où vous êtes de vous occuper de semblables objets, et sa force qu’au désœuvrement de la campagne.” (123) Naïve as she may seem at times, the Présidente here displays a shrewd perception of the imprudence potentially nested in idle solitude.

Gradually, the notion of retreat evolves around her character. At first, it only evoked a wholesome rural seclusion from Paris and its vices. Little by little though, this innocent idea is overshadowed by images of virtue’s military retreat from the battlefield of seduction. The first time is when the Présidente boldly declares to Valmont that she has nothing to fear from his presence: “Non, Monsieur, je n’ai pas cette crainte; si je l’avais, je fuirais à cent lieues de vous; j’irais pleurer dans un désert le malheur de vous avoir connu.” (69) Soon afterwards, no longer able to trust her own invincibility like another Princesse de Clèves, she begs Valmont to leave her alone: “C’est peu pour mon inhumaine de ne pas répondre à mes lettres, de refuser de les recevoir; elle veut même me priver de sa vue, elle exige que je m’éloigne.” (97) Her retreat strategy, for an expert libertine such as Valmont, proclaims her weakness and heralds her surrender, as he roguishly teases her: “D’où peut venir, Madame, le soin cruel que vous mettez à me fuir?” (187) From this moment in the Présidente’s seduction plot, Laclos departs from the

canonical model of the *Princesse de Clèves*.<sup>24</sup> Although initially Mme de Lafayette's heroine had also opted for a retreat from her seducer Nemours, she had quickly seen the danger of isolating herself with her secret torment and opened up to her husband, begging him to help her resist temptation. Laclos's Présidente de Tourvel, in contrast, keeps herself walled up in complete silence after Valmont has declared his love to her. What is risky—if not downright incriminating—in her behaviour is not solely her accepting to be in Valmont's company or having a correspondence with him; it is her isolating herself from the support of her husband (unlike Lafayette's Princesse), her confessor, Mme de Volanges, or Mme de Rosemonde.

Since any of them could have put a swift end to what was becoming a dangerous liaison, the topos of virtuous retreat gives way to the delectable solitude of an *inamoramento* which Roland Barthes identified in *Le Discours amoureux*: "l'extériorité devient ennuyeuse (le divertissement), l'intériorité est recherchée."<sup>25</sup> Confirming Valmont's intuition that there was life and fire in the devout's icy demeanour ("Elle est prude et dévote, et de là vous la jugez froide et inanimée. Je pense bien différemment" [27]), Mme de Tourvel no longer appears as the flat cliché figure of the "prude" repelling her seducer's affronts. Her character now incorporates elements of the woman-in-love lost in an amorous reverie.

Valmont gleefully notices this change in Mme de Tourvel's taste for solitude:

son embarras et son plaisir devenant plus forts qu'elle, elle n'imagina rien de mieux que de demander permission de sortir de table, et elle se sauva dans le parc, sous le prétexte d'avoir besoin de prendre l'air. Madame de Volanges voulut l'accompagner; la tendre prude ne le

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<sup>24</sup> *La Princesse de Clèves* inspired many rewritings of the heroine's retreat and opening to her husband, notably La Morlière's story "Motifs de retraite" from his book *Le Fatalisme* (1769), as Paul Pelckmans explains in *La Sociabilité des cœurs. Pour une anthropologie du roman sentimental* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2013).

<sup>25</sup> Roland Barthes, *Le Discours amoureux* (Paris: Seuil, 2007), 116.

permet pas; trop heureuse, sans doute, de trouver un prétexte pour être seule, et se livrer sans contrainte à la douce émotion de son cœur! (184)

For Valmont and Merteuil, Mme de Tourvel's new reasons for seeking solitude shows an amusing resemblance not with Cécile's conventual seclusion anymore, but instead with the Marquise's voluptuous intimacy. Like the Marquise behind closed doors, the Présidente alone in the park or in her bedroom enjoys a form of erotic freedom: "La retraite convie Mme de Tourvel à goûter en imagination les plaisirs qu'elle se défend dans la vie réelle. Elle la pousse à une sorte d'abandon moral," writes Christine Belcikowski.<sup>26</sup> Both women, the prude and the libertine, find in solitude a compromise between "les plaisirs du vice et l'honneur de la vertu" (303). By keeping her solitude undisturbed by Mmes de Volanges and de Rosemonde, by keeping her new emotions secret from her husband and confessor, Mme de Tourvel is indulging herself in the bitter-sweet thrill of falling in love. "Le 'trouble' est ici un trouble de plaisir," remarks Philip Stewart about the eighteenth-century novel's revalorisation of the experience and representation of sentiments.<sup>27</sup> For the tempted heroine like the Présidente, solitude is no longer just a tactic to avoid her downfall, it is also a way to relish each stage and emotion of her seduction.

Laclos's blending of the motif of chaste retreat into a libertine one is not necessarily mischievous. Rather, it mirrors the paradigmatic shift undergone by the notion of privacy in the long eighteenth century. Up until the dawn of the Age of Enlightenment, solitude was inscribed within a dichotomy that opposed worldly entertainments and contacts (*vanitas*) versus solitary religious contemplations. In the late seventeenth century, however, enlightened thinking was shaking the relationship between individuals and God, while the intensification

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<sup>26</sup> Christine Belcikowski, *Poétique des "Liaisons dangereuses"* (Paris: Corti, 1972), 34.

<sup>27</sup> Philip Stewart, *L'Invention du sentiment: roman et économie affective au dix-huitième siècle* (Oxford: Voltaire Foundation, 2010), 122.

of the “civilisation process” led to an escalation of the control individuals had to impose on their natural selves in public. Retreat was no longer a direct synonym of spirituality, on the contrary, it was acquiring an ever stronger corporeal dimension since private spaces were becoming more and more experienced as spaces of relief and freedom for the body’s natural urges, sex being one of them.<sup>28</sup> Michel Delon sums up the deep changes happening to the idea of solitude in the eighteenth century: “L’espace aristocratique ne devrait connaître que deux modèles: le monde et la retraite, les échanges sociaux et le dialogue avec Dieu. En fait, il se répartit entre un espace public pour les devoirs mondains et un espace privé pour la séduction.”<sup>29</sup> Yet, the righteous Mme de Tourvel exemplifies that the eroticisation of solitude is not exclusively due to its harbouring transgressive behaviours; solitude in post-Tridentine Europe also acquires some erotic potential because, through the self-scrutiny it permits, it is now seen as leading towards one’s own forbidden, ignored desires, to discover “l’être véritable ... l’être des profondeurs.”<sup>30</sup>

The most poignant drama of *Les Liaisons dangereuses* may well be that of the Présidente de Tourvel whose attempts to isolate herself from danger only brings her closer to her real enemy: herself. Her seducer is but a mirror image of her desires: “l’être croit chercher en dehors de lui un objet de désir; en réalité, l’image de l’aimé ne répond qu’à l’intériorité du désir,” explains Anne-Marie Jaton.<sup>31</sup> Christine Belcikowski likewise notes that: “Si Mme de Tourvel a tenté de fuir quelqu’un au fond du parc de Rosemonde, c’est elle-même, plus que Valmont;

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<sup>28</sup> See Roger Chartier, “Formes de la privatisation,” in *Histoire de la vie privée*, ed. Ariès and Duby, 3:161-65.

<sup>29</sup> Michel Delon, “L’espace de la séduction dans le roman français du dix-huitième siècle,” in *Littérature et séduction*, ed. Roger Marchal (Paris: Klincksieck, 1997), 377-86 (378).

<sup>30</sup> Beugnot, 141-42.

<sup>31</sup> Jaton, 22.

mais en se fuyant, elle s'est trouvée, ou plutôt retrouvée."<sup>32</sup> The gradual revelation of the Présidente's interior life is indeed what is at stake in the plot of her seduction by Valmont. Interestingly though, her letters map an evolution brought not just by contacts with him but also by her physical withdrawal from him: "Vous m'entourez de votre idée, plus que vous ne le faisiez de votre personne. Ecarté sous une forme, vous vous reproduisez sous une autre." (139) It is when he is away, when she is on her own, that she realises that temptation looms within and haunts her, and that isolating herself from her seducer might not suffice to vanquish that desire.

When, one fateful evening, she finds herself on the point of surrendering to Valmont, her reflex is to run away from Rosemonde's castle and to lock herself in her Parisian home instead, in a desperate attempt to chastise—or at least to frustrate—her desires. At first, Valmont's victory looks jeopardised by the Présidente's new retreat from him: "je suis joué, trahi, perdu; je suis au désespoir: Mme de Tourvel est partie. A quoi me sert de m'être établi dans son cœur, de l'avoir embrasé de tous les feux de l'amour, d'avoir porté jusqu'au délire le trouble de ses sens, si, tranquille dans sa retraite, elle peut aujourd'hui s'enorgueillir de sa fuite plus que moi de mes victoires?" (269). However, her retreat is far from being tranquil. Once again, it will be the libertine's best accomplice in leading her to surrender. Back in Paris and all alone, unable to break the silence of her torments ("Elle a voulu se confesser; mais son confesseur était absent" [295]), the Présidente is trapped more than ever with her own desires. She opens her heart to Mme de Rosemonde, albeit visibly more to obsess about Valmont and her feelings than to get either advice or chastisement from the good old lady:

Quand j'ai pris ce parti si pénible de m'éloigner de lui, j'espérais que l'absence augmenterait mon courage et mes forces: combien je me suis trompée! il semble au contraire qu'elle ait

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<sup>32</sup> Belcikowski, 51.

achevé de les détruire. ... A présent, dans ma pénible solitude, isolée de tout ce qui m'est cher, *tête-à-tête avec mon infortune*, tous les moments de ma triste existence sont marqués par mes larmes, et rien n'en adoucit l'amertume. (297, emphasis added)

Her Parisian retreat aims at being a reforming penitence (she reads a volume of *Pensées chrétiennes* and another of Richardson's *Clarissa* to bolster her good resolution), but the result is an ever-deepening fixation: "elle n'a fait que lire cette lettre, rêver et être appuyée sur sa main" (294). By the time Valmont arrives to surprise "la belle recluse" (345), "sa retraite" (350) has become a fearful siege, and her surrender, imminent. Unable to run away from herself any longer, she surrenders less to him than to her own long-repressed, long-ignored desires. Their "jouissance complète et réciproque" (351) appears as the predicted (and painful) culmination of the Présidente's self-discovery that she was not the fleshless angel she wanted to be.

Traditionally, libertine fiction casts such discoveries of one's erotic appetites as an epiphanic moment setting the protagonist on the path to intellectual and behavioural freedom. In *Les Liaisons dangereuses* on the contrary, *know thyself* appears to be an unwise counsel for each of the protagonists. Far from the breaking-free image one expects from the erotic self-enlightenment of libertine fiction, *Les Liaisons dangereuses* closes on the darkest forms of isolation from society, with communication between protagonists cut short by exile (Merteuil), conventual confinement (Cécile) and celibate insulations (Danceny), madness (Tourvel) and death (Tourvel and Valmont): "Qu'on me laisse seule, qu'on me laisse dans les ténèbres; ce sont les ténèbres qui me conviennent," the Présidente begs in the delirium of her deathbed (402). Interestingly, after the libertines corrupted their victims' once wholesome seclusions by turning them into frustrating isolations, we see Cécile and Tourvel regaining some control over their own fate by seeking again the safety of seclusion. Both women withdraw behind the veils and walls of a convent that reproduce the silence in which they are now determined to shut

themselves. Still, despite the fact that Cécile's and Tourvel's ultimate retreats indicate their regained agency, these also constitute, if not quite a punitive ending, at least an allusion to the fact that there is no possible going back to society after what these women have either done or learnt when they were on their own. The woman in love and the naïve girl end up marginalised from society just like the criminal libertine marquise.

Perhaps *Les Liaisons dangereuses*'s sombre conclusion owes to the fact that, although the eighteenth century was rehabilitating passions, its last decades were haunted by a suspicion that these passions come from a place very dark and deep—witness the rise of Gothicism and the proliferation of Fuselian nightmares and of Sadean or Goyan monsters; or perhaps, rather, this owes to Laclos's own notion that, sometimes, ignorance of one's own true self is safer—especially for women.<sup>33</sup> As he would later deplore in his reflections on the education of women,<sup>34</sup> knowing too much, like wanting too much, is bound to make them either miserable or dangerous:<sup>35</sup> either victims like Tourvel and Cécile, or threats like Merteuil. In this respect, Laclos brings a twist to his century's take on the self-knowledge nurtured by solitude: Christians had sought the solitude of retreats to examine their weaknesses and work towards salvation; that paragon of solitude, Defoe's Robinson Crusoe (whose adventure was the sole book Rousseau would recommend to the young child Emile as a model of independence), had turned his "island of despair" into an opportunity to know himself, revise his relationship with

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<sup>33</sup> On Laclos's proto-feminism, see Barbara Guetti, "The Old Régime and the Feminist Revolution: Laclos' *De l'éducation des femmes*," *Yale French Studies* 63 (1982), 139–162.

<sup>34</sup> Laclos wrote three essays on female education. The first is an unfinished draft "Discours sur la question proposée par l'Académie de Châlons-sur-Marne: Quels seraient les meilleurs moyens de perfectionner l'éducation des femmes" (March 1783). Laclos answers that given the lack of freedom given to women in the current state of society, educating them sadly amounts to showing them what they are barred from. In the second manuscript entitled "Des femmes et de leur éducation," Laclos compares the liberty of the "femme naturelle" with the frustration of the "femme sociale." The third essay (between 1795 and 1802) deals with female reading. See Laurent Versini's presentation of these three texts under the title "Des femmes et de leur éducation," in Laclos: *Œuvres complètes*, 1411-17 (for Laclos's texts themselves, see 385-443).

<sup>35</sup> Laclos argues—in a willingly provocative manner—that educating women without expanding their freedom is bound to frustrate them, in his attempted answer to the Académie's question. He reflects about the miserable/dangerous outcome in his second essay, "Des femmes et de leur éducation", 390.

the world, and emerge all the wiser from this experience;<sup>36</sup> closer to Laclos, Rousseau was singing the praise of solitary strolls in which, blissfully, one can “fuir pour se retrouver.”<sup>37</sup> Following those models of enlightening solitude, *Les Liaisons dangereuses* shows that its heroines may indeed derive self-knowledge and even wisdom from their solitude. Yet the ending of Laclos’s novel also posits that there is no room in eighteenth-century France for such discoveries.

We have seen that Laclos’s *Les Liaisons dangereuses* offers a twist to the traditional plot of characters safeguarding their virtue by isolating themselves from the corruption of a seducer or of worldliness. Cécile’s secluded upbringing is shown to contribute to her quick downfall almost as much as her friendship with Valmont and Mme de Merteuil. Likewise, Mme de Tourvel’s efforts to find a refuge against Valmont’s advances turn out to be futile to protect her from the real enemy: herself. Her isolation from husband, friends, confidants, and any distraction has made her ripe for an erotic obsession which prompts a self-knowledge unwelcomed for a “dévoté.” Thus, the problem tackled by Laclos is not so much that some frequentations can be bad; this was as obvious and uncontentious then as it is now. The novelty and psychological acumen of his novel lies rather in its rebuke of a state of affairs that makes one’s deep-seated, natural desires something better left ignored and repressed.

Focusing on solitude in *Les Liaisons dangereuses* casts a light on the fact that, in the late eighteenth century, at a time when individualism was dawning over the Western world, society was still limiting the actions and expression of the individual even in the private sphere.

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<sup>36</sup> On Crusoe’s formative experience of solitude, see Richard O’Mara, “The Romance of Solitude,” *The Sewanee Review* 109, no. 3 (2001), 418-23.

<sup>37</sup> Alain Montandon, “Fuir pour se retrouver,” in *Sociopoétique de la promenade* (Clermont-Ferrand: Presses Universitaires Blaise Pascal, 2000), 89-123.



Solitude could be dangerous too because of the deep-seated frustrations it might lay bare, especially for women. Therefore, if there is anything rebellious in *Les Liaisons dangereuses* in 1782 as some have believed,<sup>38</sup> the study of its characters' solitude suggests that it is not so much its portrayal of aristocracy as decadent but rather, on a far more essential level, its denunciation of the *ancien régime* as stifling to the individual. Who one *is* deep inside is represented as being fiercely at odds with who one *must be* in the public realm. The danger of solitude in *Les Liaisons dangereuses* stems from the fact that the introspections it harbours disclose a painful chiasm between the ideal, social persona and one's real, natural self. After such self-discoveries, Valmont, Tourvel, Cécile and Merteuil are not to be welcome back in society. Death, silence, madness, conventual confinement and exile make for a dire ending to the dangerous liaisons which Laclos's characters had with one another and, more perilously, with themselves.

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<sup>38</sup> For instance, Roger Vailland in *Laclos par lui-même* (Paris: Seuil, 1959) or Peter Nagy in *Libertinage et révolution*, trans. Christiane Grémillon (Paris: Gallimard, 1975), 157.