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RUSSELL GANIM

# INTERCOURSE AS DISCOURSE: THE CALCULUS OF OBJECTIFICATION AND DESIRE IN THE NOVEL AND FILM VERSIONS OF *LES LIAISONS DANGEREUSES*

The calculus of objectification and desire in both the novel and film versions of Choderlos de Laclos's *Liaisons dangereuses* is derived in two principal ways. The first derivation, that of the Sadean will to objectify the other for erotic and intellectual satisfaction, precedes the second, that of the overarching wish to produce a written object announcing the conquest of the human object. Limited by the medium, the film adaptations of the *Liaisons dangereuses* cannot place as great an emphasis on the composition of letters. Nevertheless, they make allusions to it in such a manner that underscores this type of objectification process. This article examines the film adaptations of Letter XLVIII, where Valmont, after sleeping with a mistress, composes a sardonic but unwittingly revealing missive to the Présidente de Tourvel.

Specifically, it is this *mise à nu* of Valmont as a libertine in Letter XLVIII that commands the attention of filmmakers. I contend that Stephen Frears *(Dangerous Liaisons,* 1988), Milos Forman (*Valmont,* 1989) and Roger Vadim (*Liaisons Dangereuses,* 1960) choose to adapt this scene not only because of its presumable entertainment value, but because its visual exploitation allows for a quick, cogent means of highlighting, if not simplifying, the complex motif of sexual objectification as it relates to issues of power and *libertinage.* From the standpoint of film as it relates to the novel, what adaptations of this scene show is that the necessary representational departures from the novel still ingeniously depict the way in which language and sex conspire to create and destroy Valmont and Merteuil's libertine universe. The scene becomes especially useful when considering questions of cinematic variation because each director's rendition serves as a microcosm of his version of Laclos's text. Consequently, viewing what I will call the "writing table scene," provides a summary of Frears's, Forman's and Vadim's interpretive style.

In addition, the scene, as represented in the films, gives a modern commentary on female *libertinage.* Laclos's novel suggests that female *libertinage* has no chance of validation, let alone survival. By contrast, twentieth-century filmmaking seems to compensate by presenting scenarios which intimate that the will, pleasure, and intellect of female *libertinage*—if they cannot win—can at least live on or manifest themselves in some form beyond that of their creator, Merteuil. All the films emphasize the development of Cécile as a libertine who, with varying degrees of success, will carry on Merteuil's legacy.

The calculus of objectification and desire in both the novel and film versions of Choderlos de Laclos's *Liaisons dangereuses* is derived in two principal ways. The first derivation, that of the Sadean will to objectify the other for erotic and intellectual satisfaction, precedes the second, that of the overarching wish to produce a written ob-

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ject announcing the conquest of the human object.[1] A cause-effect relationship exists whereby the sexual objectification of the other becomes the essential process yielding the essential product: the letter. The act of sexual objectification becomes indispensable to the act of writing because when characters see their lovers as objects, they are more inclined to assume the contemplative, somewhat removed stance that transforms them into observers who relate their experience via the written word. For the purposes of this study, objectification implies the abuse and domination of another as a means of expressing erotic and intellectual desire, and becomes essential to understanding Valmont and Merteuil's libertinage as a code in which the ostensible pleasures of sex and writing degenerate into the annihilation of the other, and, in Valmont's case, of the self. It is thus within the framework of libertinage that I will interpret the act of letter-writing in both the novel and film versions of Laclos's work.

Because of the protagnonists' need to reduce their lovers to something less than human, one can agree with Peter Brooks's opinion that the Vicomte de Valmont's and the Marquise de Merteuil's schemes can be viewed in terms of a mechanistically eroticized universe:

> To regard someone as a purely erotic object is to reduce his psychology to the most mechanical and simplified elements, to make an already rigid code of psychological signs more mechanistic. Indeed, to reduce social relations to erotic relations, human behavior to erotic comportment . . . is to operate an important mechanism of social laws and human existence. (177)

Implicit in Brooks's interpretation is that the perpetrators of erotic objectification are themselves somehow objectified by the mechanizing forces they exact on others. Indeed, one purpose of this study is to discuss the objectification of both prey and predator in Laclos's novel as well as its three cinematic adaptations. Yet, it becomes clear that with the emphasis both Laclos and a succession of filmmakers place on the relationship between erotic activity and letter-writing, one must see Valmont and Merteuil's world as comprised not only of "erotic relations" but of discursive relations as well. In the ever-crucial activity of letter-writing, the love object becomes important only to the extent to which s/he becomes a topic of epistolary correspondence.

Limited by the medium, the film adaptations of the *Liaisons dangereuses* cannot place as great an emphasis on the composition of letters. Nevertheless, they make allusions to it in such a manner that underscores this type of objectification process. What occurs in both the novel and its cinematic adaptations is a kind of double objectification where the other is objectified first at the moment of intercourse, and then again at the moment of written discourse. I include the film versions in this study because they present variations of the plot that extend and deepen the study of erotic and discursive objectification, especially as it pertains to Valmont's and Merteuil's relationship with Cécile de Volanges. Manipulation at the moment of seduction portrays

[1] This study is an extension of a paper entitled, "Objectification, Seduction and Adaptation: Erotic Discourse in Cinematic Versions of *Les Liaisons dangereuses,"* delivered at the 1992 MLA Convention in New York.

Valmont, and in an indirect manner Merteuil, as a subject acting upon an object. However, it is chiefly the post-coital subjective posture of the writer that allows both *meneurs du jeu* to objectify the seduced in order to satisfy their supreme desire, that of writing letters, especially to one another. Commenting on the importance of Letter XLVIII, the discussion of which will comprise significant portions of this essay, Jean Biou emphasizes the "recul" with which the letter is written, as well as the "plaisir" (192) the Vicomte experiences in composing it. Intellectual distance from, and contemplation of, the sex act brings about the sense of libertine gratification which is eminently more cerebral than carnal. Valmont and Merteuil's subjective natures come not so much from their sexual prowess, as from their ability to transform and edit this talent to create the intellectual and affective matter of their writing.

The obsession with objectifying an erotic other is illustrated by the language Valmont and Merteuil use in both the novel and film versions of the work. In Valmont's first letter to Merteuil (IV), he mentions the Présidente de Tourvel by name only once, otherwise referring to her as "le plus grand projet que j'aie jamais formé," and as an "entreprise" (24). Merteuil's response to Valmont's announcement of his intentions to seduce Tourvel (V) includes the Marquise's reduction of the Présidente to an "espèce," and to the sarcastic epithet of a "bel objet" (27). In effect, the two make such frequent use of the term "objet" when discussing either Tourvel, Cécile, or Danceny, that this word virtually becomes a standard designation for those falling victim to their stratagems.[2] This is not to say that the literary use of term "objet" was not unproblematic in early modern French. Definitions from this period are quite varied, with connotations ranging from the benign to the virulent. In the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, according to dictionaries such as the *Trésor* and the *Robert,* the word "objet" suggested, at least in literary contexts, "une femme ou une personne aimée" (*Trésor* 340–341, *Robert* 845). Numerous examples in lyric poetry illustrate, as the *Robert* notes, "un style précieux" (854). Yet, literary quotations given from the eighteenth century evoke the exploitative, abusive characteristics often associated with contemporary meanings of the term "objet." The *Robert* cites Sade's *Justine,* and gives the definition of "[une] personne traitée en objet considérée independamment de sa qualité de sujet humain. Ce sens . . . concerne surtout les femmes" (854). One notes that the appositives listed are those of "La femme objet," and "l'objet érotique, sexuel," that in turn evoke "l'objet . . . d'une pulsion, d'un désir, d'un besoin . . . ce vers quoi tendent la volonté, l'effort, et l'action" (854). By referring to Sade, the *Robert* clearly alludes to subject/object dynamics, and the power relations they entail. As a result, the word "objet" in Laclos, despite its multiple meanings, can plausibly connote

[2] Consult, among others, Letters CX, CXXXVII, CXL, and CXLI. In these missives, the language of objectification ranges from the use of the term "objet" to describe Tourvel (CXXXIII, CXLI) and Danceny (CXV), to the phrase "commune pupille" (CX, CXL), in discussing Cécile. Curiously. Tourvel describes Valmont with similar language, stating in Letter CVIII to Madame de Rosemonde, "Ah! je rougis de mes sentiments et non de l'objet qui les cause" (248). All quotes from the novel are taken from the 1981 Flammarion edition.

the ideas of control and persecution. Given that these notions are central not only to Valmont and Merteuil's manipulation of others, but to the very existence of these characters, the concept of the "objet" as an overpowered being ensnared by the actions of others (or by his own actions in Valmont's case), becomes crucial to understanding libertinage as an act of (self-) destructive will.

The tie between language and objectification of the other also manifests itself in film versions of the novel. During one scene in Milos Forman's *Valmont,* Merteuil, while trying to entice Valmont to sleep with Cécile, asks the Vicomte the question, "Doesn't *that* (emphasis mine) appeal to you?"[3] Seemingly, it is this kind of base objectification that appeals to Valmont and Merteuil as much as, if not more than, an increasingly elevated, almost poetic type of objectification. Although in other scenes throughout the Forman film and the novel Merteuil tries to excite Valmont about Cécile with metaphoric descriptions of the latter's delectability, it is curious that the Marquise views decidedly elemental terminology as a kind of verbal aphrodisiac for Valmont. Appropriating the language of the novel, Stephen Frears's *Dangerous Liaisons* underscores Cécile's objectification by Valmont and Merteuil in a more cerebral manner through the term "pupil" to denote the young Volanges. The idea that both the Vicomte and the Marquise instruct Cécile suggests that the child is acted upon by two much more powerful subjects. As will be shown, Cécile's complicity in her own corruption shows the extent to which she receives and assimilates the action of these subjects. If language, at its most basic level of associating people with things, functions as a means of objectifying the other, then action goes one step further in the objectification process since the characters' deeds suggest that when gratifying passion, the protagonists find outlets that are rarely the targets of their deepest desire. One notes both in the novel and films that with the exception of the brief union between Tourvel and Valmont at the narrative's conclusion, very few of the key figures actually bed those for whom their feelings have been most amorous. Valmont, Cécile, and to a lesser extent Danceny, provide the most apparent cases in point. The Vicomte's motivation for his relationship with Cécile invites several explanations. This rather extended interlude reveals not only Valmont's wish to avenge Madame de Volanges's slander as well as an implicit wish to do Merteuil's bidding, but a frustration resulting from his failure to advance his pursuit of Tourvel. By at first raping and later seducing Cécile, Valmont finds at least momentary release from his stalled attempts to win Tourvel. As a result, Valmont's desire for Tourvel becomes transferred to Cécile, making the latter the object of the Vicomte's redirected erotic longings.

An analogous situation exists with Cécile herself. Unable to see Danceny, let alone consummate her relationship with him, the sexually awakening Cécile finds temporary satisfaction in having Valmont as a substitute. As will be argued later, within this framework of objectification and displaced desire, part of what becomes Cécile's passion for Valmont can also be explained as a nascent lesbian yearning for Merteuil. In turn, Danceny's own adventure with Merteuil evolves equally from his repression

[3] The quote comes from Jean-Claude Carrikre's screenplay.

over Cécile, as much as it does from his own attraction to Merteuil or from the Marquise's thirst to manipulate the chevalier and to humiliate Valmont. Especially for Valmont, language, as manifested in the act of writing letters, becomes central to his objectification of Cécile and other women, because the act of satisfying physical desire carries its highest value in the ability to write about it afterwards. At several moments in the narrative, the desire to write can only be fulfilled if the desire for sex is somehow gratified.

Writing becomes the supreme activity for Valmont, because it is only through his status as a writer that he can maintain his dual personality as a diabolical libertine with Merteuil, and as a smitten, awe-struck lover with Tourvel. In the novel, the fact that Valmont finds outlets through Cécile, the *demi-mondaine* Emilie, or the mistress of Vressac, allows the Vicomte to preserve the double facade. His cavorting, to a certain degree, is at once motivated by what is a sincere, but frustrated love for Tourvel, and by the Don Juanesque behavior that has constructed his principal identity. The literary allusion that Laclos effectively establishes in his portrayal of the divided Valmont is a dichotomy between Don Juan and Rousseau's Saint-Preux. Letter CX begins with a quote from the *Nouvelle Héloïse:*

> Puissances du Ciel, j'avais une âme pour la douleur: donnez-m'en une pour la félicité! (251)

Valmont as much admits that a "Saint-Preux" type of force has taken over his life when, referring to the quote, he states:

> C'est, je crois, le tendre Saint-Preux qui s'exprime ainsi. Mieux partagé que lui, je possède à la fois les deux existences. (251)

Cognizant of his own self-division, Valmont will struggle with this inner polarity until his death. One can assert that the desire to regain his reputation as a Don Juan causes his break from Tourvel, while his presumably deliberate capitulation during the duel with Danceny can be interpreted as a self-sacrifice worthy of the romantic angst of a Saint-Preux.

In the novel, one particular incident highlights the connection between Valmont's effort to reassert his identity as a Casanova (and its attendant objectification of the other), and letter-writing. The scene in question is found in Letter XLVII, where Valmont recounts his libertine escapades to Merteuil after leaving Madame de Rosemonde's chateau at Tourvel's request. Valmont boasts of the seduction of Emilie on a night where her affections had already been procured. The victory, which includes dispensing of Emilie's solicitor through inebriation, is capped by a letter to Tourvel written on Emilie's back. Valmont's objectification of Emilie occurs on several levels, both explicit and implicit. Overtly, in Letters XLVII to Merteuil and XLVIII to Tourvel, Valmont refers to the paramour as an inanimate object. The first missive calls Emilie "un pupitre pour écrire à ma belle dévote" (102), while the second represents "la table . . . [qui], consacrée pour la première fois à cet usage, devient pour moi l'autel sacré de l'amour" (104). Valmont's equation of Emilie with a desk shows the extent to which she literally represents only an object to be exploited for his purpose.

In a dual physical sense, then, Emilie aids Valmont in achieving his main goal, that of writing letters which perpetuate his image in the world of clandestine epistolary discourse. By serving as Valmont's writing table and sexual release, the doubly objectified Emilie has fulfilled the two functions necessary to sustain Valmont's role in his intellectually eroticized universe. On a more subtle psychological level, however, Emilie becomes the object of Valmont's displaced desire for Tourvel, who has patently rejected the Vicomte's advances. Valmont's transfer of passion from Tourvel to Emilie has the effect of rendering the animate inanimate, as Emilie becomes merely a cipher for Valmont's libidinal and discursive urges.

Critics have paid much attention to these letters, especially Letter XLVIII, citing its multiple messages and publics. Biou discusses the "double registre" (193) found in Valmont's language, claiming that in describing his pleasure with Emilie while writing to Tourvel, the Vicomte reduces Tourvel to the same level as the prostitute. Biou points out that by showing Emilie the letter to Tourvel, and thereby evoking her laughter, Valmont enlists Emilie's help in mounting, "une entreprise d'humiliation par le rire qui vise Mme de Tourvel" (193). Indeed, one could argue that Valmont's choice of the courtesan Emilie as a release from his sexual frustration bespeaks a hostility toward Tourvel that underscores his need to demean her. With respect to Biou's argument and the concept of libertinage, the inference drawn is that Letters XLVII and XLVIlI gain importance because they reveal two key aspects of Valmont's brand of libertinage: 1) polysemy in language, and 2) misogyny in behavior. In Valmont's dealings with Tourvel, artful, equivocal language is necessary to create the intellectual and psychological atmosphere in which Tourvel will be seduced and her values destroyed. According to Biou, and other critics such as Anne-Marie Jaton, Valmont's degrading, violent libertinage is representative of the Sadean masculine sexuality portrayed in the novel. Biou mentions "la morale du conquérant," and "le bonheur dans le crime," (194) as typifying Valmont's sexual posture. Jaton speaks of the desire to "séduire sa proie et la perdre socialement" (153), while at the same time enabling the victim to announce and recognize her moral principles before sending her, "lucide et consentante, au fond de l'abîme" (154). Within this logic, Valmont must engage Tourvel in an extended cognitive and sentimental debate so as to enjoy her surrender as much as possible.

The problem for Valmont is that for all his *rouerie* and cruelty, his genuine affection for Tourvel is at constant odds with his libertine code. For the male libertine, love encroaches upon one of the essential elements of libertinage, which Jaton calls the "volonté libre" (155) to exercise sexual and psychological sovereignty over another's moral being. Anne Deneys, in her Cartesian analysis of Laclos's libertinage, stresses the tenets of "self-control" and "control of the other" which are founded upon "methods" and "principles" that paradoxically form an "asceticism" based on "rules . . . provided by Merteuil" (51). Over the course of the novel and films, Valmont's inability to control himself and to adhere to Merteuil's "methods" precipitates his downfall. Ironically, what the reader witnesses in these letters, in which Valmont seems at the pinnacle of his libertine art, are the incipient stages of the death of Valmont's libertinage. At several moments in Letter XLVIII, Valmont speaks of death. In the letter's

first sentence, Valmont describes, "l'entier anéantissement de toutes les facultés de mon âme" (103). He continues to portray the death of his soul by discussing, "la froide tranquilité; le sommeil de l'âme, image de la mort" (103). In effect, the description of the "désordre," the "tourment," and the "ardeur dévorante" (103–104) which accompany these notions of death reveal an impluse which, coupled with Valmont's urges for sexual dominance, culminate in what amounts to his suicide in his duel with Danceny. Valmont, despite the sardonic tone of his language, becomes the object of his own death wish. This wish, to die as a romantic hero, subverts the Vicomte's libertine identity, and consequently his ties to Merteuil. Nancy K. Miller astutely points out that Valmont, unlike his counterpart Captain Wentworth in Jane Austen's *Persuasion*, does not seek to have his "feelings for the other penetrated" (52). Yet, the transparency and the prescience of the letter grow more apparent as Valmont becomes more obsessive in his pursuit of Tourvel. It is especially Merteuil, another reader of the letter, who "penetrates" this level of feeling by Valmont, and eventually punishes him for his emotions by refusing to honor her agreement to spend the night after the Vicomte beds Tourvel. While Merteuil externally dismisses Valmont's pursuit of Tourvel as childish, she no doubt recognizes the esoteric sincerity of Valmont's prose. Merteuil progressively becomes aware of Valmont's immanent ruin, and hastens it because she feels Valmont has violated her code of libertine behavior. Valmont, in spite of himself, is "penetrated" by the inadvertent sincerity of his language. At the end of the letter, while Valmont sarcastically implores Tourvel, "de ne jammais douter la vérité de mes sentiments" (104), the reality is that over time, this letter *will* betray his overwhelming attachment to Tourvel.

Valmont himself becomes objectified in that his passion is now directing and acting upon him in a manner that subverts his usual nonchalance and cynicism. The Vicomte undermines his Machiavellian pose because what he believes are contrived, melodramatically florid declarations of love for Tourvel, belie a sincerity of emotion he has not yet grasped. Letter XLVIII invites the interpretation that Valmont's encounter with Emilie may represent a "first time" in more that one respect. Beyond its superficial meaning that this is the initial occasion on which Emilie's back has been used to transcribe a letter, the quote suggests that the event marks a profound "first time" in Valmont's emotional life. While certainly not the only instance where Valmont has slept with Emilie, the Vicomte's interlude with her does indicate the first time Valmont has made love while being in love. The irony, of course, is that Valmont is not in love with his current bed partner. Rather, he is in love with Tourvel, for whom Emilie, in her role as object, has become a convenient substitute. For Valmont, sex within the context of being in love is indeed the "première fois," in which a woman has been "consacrée . . . à cet usage." The Vicomte's "loss of virginity" extends to the discursive level as well, because the letter born of the encounter, despite its seemingly sarcastic and duplicitous tone, actually conveys the first post-coital missive in which the object of Valmont's desire hears amorous discourse originating more from genuine affection than from indifferent calculation.

Ironically, Valmont fundamentally admits in this letter that Tourvel represents the real object of his passion. Concluding his dispatch, Valmont speaks of

"la peine que j'éprouve." In a slight insult to Tourvel, Valmont hints at the Présidente's insensitivity to his plight, stating:

> Assuré que l'objet qui la [la peine] cause ne la partage pas, il ne faut pas au moins abuser de ses bontés; et ce serait le faire, que d'employer plus de temps à vous retracer cette douleureuse image. (104)

Much of this episode focuses on the "pain" Valmont experiences in the conflict between his Saint-Preux and Don Juan personage. In effect, Valmont's raucous seduction of Emilie constitutes a return to old form, a comfortable resumption of his dissolute ways in order to assuage his anguish over the predicament with Tourvel.

The Vicomte's escape into the more familiar and welcoming arms of Emilie suggests that he increasingly becomes manipulated, if not objectified, by emotions he neither understands nor yet fully accepts. Interestingly, several new emotions act upon Valmont in this situation. With the need for consolation, expressed here not only in the urge to satisfy his libido but to do so in a manner that restores his image as a libertine virtuoso, also comes Valmont's wish to avoid embarrassment cast upon him by Merteuil. Given that Merteuil has been privy to all of Valmont's aspirations, insecurity and frustration in his relationship with Tourvel, the reclaiming of his status as a Don Juan is as much for the judgmental Marquise as it is for Valmont himself.

Jacques Bourgeacq argues along similar lines. Specifically, he contends that Letter XLVIlI constitutes a riposte to Letter XXXIII, where Merteuil criticizes Valmont's efficacy as a libertine seducer and as an epistolary stylist (180). Responding to Merteuil, Valmont seeks to "releve[r] vaillamment le défi . . . et affirmer du même coup sa superiorité" (180). In Bourgeacq's view, Valmont is acutely aware of his desire to "maintenir la pluralité des messages en un seul texte" because these multiple levels of discourse serve to elevate Valmont's status as a libertine writer, thereby attesting to a certain "gloire du vainqueur" (180). Accordingly, the goal of Valmont's letter is for the Vicomte to exhibit his self-mastery and mastery of others by addressing different messages to different readers within a single text. Letter XLVIII represents libertine expertise on a substantive and formal level because it relates the actual, physical seduction of Emilie, while conveying supposedly disingenous descriptions of romantic suffering to Tourvel, as well as erotic and rhetorical prowess to Merteuil. Miller highlights the misogyny of this double discourse, pointing out, "the reciprocities of sexual and scriptorial practices . . . that figure . . . 'woman,' as material support for self-celebration" (50). For Bourgeacq, the risk or "péril" (180) Valmont runs in exposing himself as a rake, or, as Merteuil implies in Letter XXXIII, as an incompetent writer, renders the Vicomte's triumph complete. Indeed, both Bourgeacq's and Miller's comments are convincing, and can be taken further if one argues that the "pluralité des messages" includes a vulnerability or a risk of which Valmont is not yet aware. This additional level of meaning holds that Valmont, unwittingly admits a hopeless love for Tourvel, and in so doing, exposes himself to the danger of succumbing to a passion over which he has no control. From this perspective, what Valmont has to fear is not so much exposing himself as a rogue or an ineffective stylist, but as a man in love, and thus as a fallen libertine who continually alienates himself from Merteuil.

In a sense, the plot of the novel depends as much on the antipathy between Valmont and Merteuil as it does on their complicity. Curiously, Valmont's adventure with Emilie also occurs after a failed attempt to meet Merteuil at the Opera in Paris. While Valmont explains in Letter XLVII that his *rendez-vous manqué* was due to a slight detour to the chateau of a nearby countess, as well as to the unfortunate happenstance that his arrival at the Opera did not coincide with Merteuil's time spent there, he gives the impression that the missed meetings with the Marquise are not accidental.[4] The failure on Valmont's part to connect *face à face* with the Marquise develops one of the major motifs of the work: the delay of an encounter between the two principals.[5] Valmont, who seemingly has time to pursue Tourvel, and engage in other maneuvers, makes little serious effort to see Merteuil. To a considerable degree, the Vicomte appears to be avoiding Merteuil, either out of spite or fear. Valmont's presumable flight from Merteuil seems voluntary, whereas his flight from Tourvel is, for all intents and purposes, forced. The solace Valmont finds in Emilie results from the objectification he experiences not only from strange emotions, but from the two women who have come to dominate his life. The fleeing Valmont has become the victim of Tourvel's moral stringency and Merteuil's mocking disapproval.

Since additional conquests, such as those of Emilie and Cécile, and their subsequent discussion in letters, become the only way Valmont can regain agency in light of his objectified status, the letter becomes an increasingly vital demonstration of erotic activity. The letter, though an intrinsically inanimate object, becomes animate through its constant inspiration and reception of desire. In other words, in a novel where describing and interpreting an event is far more important than the event's actualization, the true sex act becomes that of writing letters.

Cinema, as a mode of aesthetic expression, cannot normally indulge letter-writing to the degree that it becomes the primary focus of fictional representation. It can, however, incorporate certain aspects of epistolary discourse and take advantage of its own narrative techniques to overcome the basic problem of how to inscribe and translate the act of writing letters. On a basic level, while filmmakers cannot, either artistically or practically, spend precious time depicting the composition of letters on screen, they can judiciously exploit the personal nature of this mode of discourse to highlight notions of libertine secrecy and deception. Letters in these films represent the sophisticated, if not literary aspects of libertine thought and action. In so doing, they suggest, in a visually discursive way, a certain elegance in a set of relationships characterized

[4] Valmont opens his letter with an affected apology that suggests little regret over not seeing Merteuil:

> Je ne vous verrai pas encore aujourd'hui, ma belle amie, et voici mes raisons, que je vous prie de recevoir avec indulgence. ( 101)

In view of the glee with which Valmont recounts his escapade with Emilie, Valmont's contrite tone seems especially insincere.

[5] In effect, this meeting never takes place, ultimately symbolizing the enmity that develops between Valmont and Merteuil.

by abuse and domination. From a narrative standpoint, one advantage of film for the reader/spectator is that cinema allows for a more direct, intense portrayal of the characters' private world. Enabling the spectator to witness parts of the writing and reading of the letter, film thus parallels the discursive exchange present in the novel. Yet, film gives the illusion of relating extemporaneous action and reaction which counteracts the often measured, calculating composition of letters. On the surface at least, film lends itself less to subjectivity than does the epistolary genre because the spectator has the impression that the character does not have as much occasion to re-think, edit and revise his/her discourse as in a letter. Film's advantage over the novel is the perception of spontaneity and intrusion. Theoretically, cinema gives the spectator a more accurate portrayal of the characters' experience since the narrative point of view is ostensibly neutral. The characters seem not to relate their own stories, as much as their stories are related by the camera. Consequently, techniques such as the self-portrait become less of a dominant stylistic device in film than in the epistolary novel.

In film, the letter carries a different performative function from that of the novel since the letter acts more as a support to the narrative rather than constituting the narrative itself. What the letter supports, especially in film versions of the *Liaisons dangereuses*, is the clandestine discourse and the duplicity of the characters. Letters in film evoke the work's literary origins and re-create the intimate spaces of the novel, thereby reproducing notions of the private in what is arguably the most public of genres. At the same time, the letters allow the audience more access to the private spaces of the characters, encouraging the public to become even more of a voyeur than in the novel by permitting direct, visual access to the most candid reactions of those involved in the plot. Letters in film allude to the hidden reaches of the libertine world and the human psyche as they are depicted in the novel, but cinema paradoxically violates these spaces by making the observer a seeming eye-witness to what goes on in them. Thus, in its relationship with epistolary fiction, cinema, at least in terms of the *Liaisons dangereuses*, faithfully represents the private, discursive exchange of the novel, but becomes an invasive genre that gives the characters less autonomy to cultivate the images they project to those who enter their universe. By its very nature, film allows for a certain *mise à nu* ofthe libertine milieu that is not always as readily apparent in the novel.

It is this *mise à nu* of Valmont in Letter XLVIII that commands the attention of filmmakers. Why does the scene of Valmont writing a letter on a lover's back receive the attention it does in the three film version of the *Liaisons* daizgereuses? I contend that Stephen Frears, Milos Forman and Roger Vadim choose to adapt this scene not only because of its presumable entertainment value, but because its visual exploitation allows for a quick, cogent means of highlighting, if not simplifying the complex motif of sexual objectification as it relates to issues of power and libertinage. From the standpoint of film as it relates to the novel, what adaptations of this scene show is that the necessary representational departures from the novel still ingeniously depict the way in which language and sex conspire to create and destroy Valmont and Merteuil's libertine universe. The directors succeed in alluding to the act of letter-writing while taking advantage of the "nonverbal experience" (Bluestone 12) of cinema to show

how the process of composing and receiving letters mirrors the subject/object relationships inherent in the sexual and discursive dynamics of the work. In all versions, much of the focus of erotic activity is centered on Valmont, who, from an aesthetic point of view, alternately represents a cruelty and a tenderness that underscores his emergence as both subject and object of his own machinations. The scene becomes especially useful when considering questions of cinematic variation because each director's rendition serves as a microcosm of his version of Laclos's text. Consequently, viewing what I will call the "writing table scene," provides a summary of Frears's, Forman's and Vadim's interpretive style.

Frears's *Dangerous Liaisons* begins the analysis of the film renditions since it constitutes the closest adaptation of the novel. Christopher Hampton's screenplay re-creates much of Laclos's language, substance and tone by depicting Valmont and Merteuil as caustic, draconian *roués* whose self-mastery and the mastery of others give them an air of infallibility. As in the novel, while Merteuil clearly assumes the dominant role in conceiving the tandem's schemes, it is Valmont who primarily executes them. Valmont's sexual desire and activity occupy the greater portion of both the literary and cinematic narrative, with the "writing table scene" in Frears's film providing a key example.

Unlike Forman and Vadim, Frears depicts the scene with Emilie herself, portraying her as a courtesan. Faithful to Laclos's chronology, Frears places the scene directly after Tourvel requests that Valmont leave Madame de Rosemonde's chateau. The director exploits the nonverbal character of cinema to depict sexual objectification on several levels of the narrative. From a technical standpoint, the first shot of the sequence reveals only a thin portion of Emilie's back and buttocks. The flat angle of Emilie's back provides a visual echo to the terms "pupitre" and "table" in Letters XLVIl and XLVIII. Valmont's opening remark that he has "just come to his desk" gives verbal reinforcement to the allusion. Within the frame, Emilie's flesh is dwarfed by a large image of Valmont transcribing his thoughts. Valmont's head, torso and arms take up roughly two-thirds of the shot, establishing his intellectual and physical dominance of the situation. The emphasis on Emilie's nude body, particularly her backside, juxtaposed with the clothed, powerful presence of a male, creates an image in which the female is cast in an entirely submissive role, her humanity overshadowed by her sexuality.

It is only after several moments into the scene, as Valmont makes his pun on the work "come," that the public, in the second shot, sees Emilie's face. She is at the foot of the bed, her body positioned much lower than Valmont's, thus underscoring her subservience. The third shot of the sequence is a variation of the first, only with even less of Emilie shown. Valmont, with his quill and ink, occupies most of the frame. Interestingly, no substantive sexual activity between Valmont and Emilie appears on screen. In this third shot, the chief images are those associated with letters, thus reaffirming the notion that writing is the primary sexual activity of the tale. Frears reinforces Valmont's discursive predominance by only endowing the Vicomte with words. Emilie is denied language. Limited to giggles and sighs, she has become

merely a desk, an object providing material support for the real sex act—writing to Tourvel.

Editing plays a large role in depicting Tourvel as the object of Valmont's desire. The next major frame in the sequence consists of a cross-cut to Tourvel reading the letter in Madame de Rosemonde's garden. As if to emphasize the letter as the courier of Valmont's displaced desire for Tourvel, Frears offers a close-up of the missive. The tone of the letter, as in the novel, is quite ironic, recounting the supposed anguish and ecstasy of Valmont's feelings, while at the same time betraying a sincerity which, as the cuts to an engrossed Tourvel show, reveals that authentic emotion underlies Valmont's prose. Eventually, this sincerity falls into a vulnerability that will in turn transform Valmont into the victim of his own sentiment.

Along these lines, what is perhaps more readily apparent in Frears's objectification of Valmont is a scene later in the film. This scene, in part a Frears/Hamilton addition to the narrative, and in part based on Letter CXVII in the novel, foretells Valmont's demise via his own treachery by reversing the work's traditional roles of subject and object. Frears begins the sequence with a meeting between Merteuil, Danceny, and Valmont in Paris. Danceny thanks Valmont for supervising the correspondence between him and Cécile. The naive knight makes special mention of the most recent letter, describing it as, "not like any of the [others] . . . [with] somehow quite a different tone of voice." In an ironic reflection of the scene with Emilie, the next cut is to Cécile's hand writing a letter on a nude back. The spectator discovers that the back is Valmont's, with Cécile adopting a sardonic, cynically affected tone as she proclaims, "My dearest Danceny."[6]

Frears's depiction raises two main points for discussion. First, it reveals, to a much larger extent than the novel, how much Cécile has learned from Valmont, and indirectly from Merteuil, as the once convent-educated sexual neophyte now shows a depravity worthy of her mentors. Secondly, the scene hints that Valmont has, or will become, the vulnerable, unprotected object of his schemes. The Vicomte lies prone throughout the scene, with Cécile's image dominating the frame, an indication that the creation now dominates the creator. Frears suggests role reversal by having Cécile appear to write her own words as the scene starts. As in the sequence with Emilie, the paper is pressed firmly against naked flesh as if to emphasize the fusion of writing and sex. While Valmont does complete Cécile's first sentence and eventually dictates the rest of the letter, the lasting image is that of a seemingly inverted power relationship. Inversion of the subject/object hierarchy is so pronounced that what emerges is a situation where Cécile, in an attempt to satisfy her still unfeigned longing for Danceny, redirects her desire to Valmont, thereby objectifying him. Clearly, Valmont, as was the case with Emilie, objectifies Cécile by transferring to her his passion for Tourvel. Yet, the scene suggests that Cécile may have at least momentarily become Valmont's equal, if not his master. It is perhaps not a coincidence that Valmont's hair hangs

[6] The quotes are taken from Christopher Hampton's screenplay.

down, representing him as a more exposed, if not feminine, character who now faces a greater possibility of being victimized and objectified.

On a subtler level, Frears's variant of the first "writing table scene" implies the complex web of bonding between the characters that occurs in the novel, but which appears much more palpably in the films. Physically, the scene depicts a union between Cécile and Valmont. Nonetheless, this carnal tie can mainly be interpreted as a substitute for a higher, emotional link Cécile and Valmont seek with Danceny and Tourvel, respectively. In a more oblique and esoteric manner, however, Frears's adaptation represents both Valmont and Cécile's attempt, conscious or otherwise, to form a more solid bond with Merteuil. By corrupting Gercourt's (in the film named "Bastide") fiancée, and giving the Marquise the vicarious delight of fulfilling what at times appears as Merteuil's lesbian desire for Cécile, Valmont acts as the Marquise's surrogate. Of course, the Vicomte has a personal interest in defiling Cécile in order to avenge Madame de Volanges's defamatory letters about him to Tourvel. But given Valmont's willingness to abandon the Présidente in order to sustain his increasingly deteriorating relationship with the Marquise, it is reasonable to assume that much of the motivation for Valmont's actions, especially toward the end of the work, stems from a desire to please Merteuil. Valmont's connection with Merteuil notwithstanding, the most curious bonding implied in the scene is Cécile's evolution into a quasi-Merteuilesque character. Cécile's development in this direction constitutes a departure from the novel where, as Susan Dunn points out, the Marquise's interest in her pupil wanes significantly once she realizes Cécile possesses neither the will nor the demeanor to replicate the Marquise's treachery (129). Frears, perhaps in an effort to extrapolate beyond the possibilities available to an eighteenth-century novelist bound by censorship codes, at least momentarily suggests a mimetic link between student and teacher.

While Alan Singerman persuasively argues that the lesbian subtext of *Dangerous Liaisons* is not nearly as pronounced as that found in the Forman and Vadim films (278), allusions to it nonetheless exist. The most apparent attraction between the two is manifest at the Opera, where Merteuil informs Cécile of the latter's upcoming marriage. Crestfallen over her forced separation from Danceny, as well as over the news that her betrothed is at least thirty-six years of age, Cécile seeks not only emotional, but physical comfort from Merteuil, readily placing her cheek on the Marquise's amply exposed breast. Although the scene unquestionably suggests that the Merteuil–Cécile relationship also carries mother-daughter overtones, Cécile's sexuality is emphasized through her own revealed bosom, as well as by Merteuil's implication that the girl's future husband may prove disappointing in several respects.

Cécile's bisexual tendencies, overlooked by critics who have concentrated on Merteuil's lesbianism, are nonetheless evident in the novel (Letters XXXIX and LV), and take on added importance in the films because they strengthen the affinity between the Marquise and Cécile.[7] In the scene where Cécile

[7] Cécile's language in Letter XXXIX (to her confidante Sophie Carnay) contains subtle lesbian overtones when she speaks of her affection for Merteuil:

drafts the letter to Danceny on Valmont's back, it becomes clear that both Merteuil and Cécile have objectified Valmont to get at least part of what they want. Cécile may not have Danceny, but she does have a release for her desire, either heterosexual or homosexual. Merteuil, assured that Cécile's corruption is complete, can take vicarious erotic pleasure in knowing that her proxy Valmont extends his adventure with Cécile far beyond what is necessary to surprise Gercourt/Bastide on his wedding night. Figuratively speaking, the hand writing the letter on Valmont's back could belong to Merteuil as much as to Cécile, in that it is the Marquise's will, chiefly expressed in her letters, that has set the current chain of events in motion.

Although Frears remains faithful to Laclos in returning Cécile to the convent at the film's end, he nonetheless shows, to a greater degree than the novelist, Cécile's potential to become a Merteuil. The young Volanges's duplicity, as well as her ability to use others in pursuit of her own delights, reveals a kinship with the Marquise surpassing mere adolescent curiosity and imitation. One recalls the scene where the Marquise arrives at Madame de Rosemonde's chateau to offer the traumatized Cécile advice after the latter's first encounter with Valmont. Reproaching Cécile for her despondency over the matter, Merteuil discusses the advantages of a libertine lifestyle. Initially repulsed, Cécile nonetheless cracks a smile when hearing about the pleasures in store for her. Frears's variation suggests that at least in the scene with Valmont, Cécile becomes more aware of the opportunities of libertinage than the pitfalls.

As mentioned, the Merteuil/Cécile link is solidified by Valmont. Since both have shared the Vicomte as a lover, Merteuil and Cécile experience what may be termed a "homosocial bond," if not a "homosocial desire," which inverts the conventional notion of the term.[8] In contrast to Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's idea that men misuse, manipulate, and thereby objectify women to grow closer to one another, what occurs in a *de facto* sense with Frears, and even more so in Forman and Vadim, is a situation where two women share a man, and in so doing, strengthen their own ties—sexual, in

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> Quand elle [Madame de Merteuil] trouve que ce n'est pas bien, elle me gronde quelquefois; mais c'est tout doucement, et puis je l'embrasse de tout mon coeur . . . Au moins celle-là, je peux bien l'aimer tant que je voudrai, sans qu'il y ait du mal, et ça me fait bien du plaisir. (85)

In Letter LV, however, Cécile's same-sex feelings become much more explicit. Speaking once again to Sophie, Cécile remarks:

> Je crois même que quand une fois on a de l'amour, cela se répand jusque sur l'amitié. Celle que j'ai pour toi n'a pourtant pas changé; c'est toujours comme au couvent: mais ce que je te dis, je l'éprouve avec madame de Merteuil. Il me semble que je l'aime plus comme Danceny que comme toi, et quelquefois, je voudrais qu'elle fût lui. (116)

[8] For an explanation of what is meant by "homosocial bond," see especially the first chapter of Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's *Between Men: English Litetnture and Male Homosocial Desire.* Sedgwick, in turn, derives much of her argument about homosocial bonding from Claude Lévi-Strauss, who discusses the "transfer," if not "traffic" of women in Chapter V of *The Elementary Structures of Kinship.* Consult also Lévi-Strauss's writings on the Bororo and Nambikwara, in Chapters 6 and 7, respectively, of *Tristes Tropiques.*

tellectual, or otherwise. At least in this instance, the "libertine economy" of which Deneys speaks is reversed in that a man, specifically Valmont, is "exchanged" among women, in contrast to the norm where, "women are exchanged . . . among a number of men" (40). Thus, while Cécile's letter may be addressed to Danceny and written on Valmont's back, its ultimate inspiration comes from Merteuil, as the young Volanges proves that in this instance, she is able to transform exploitative intercourse into exploitative discourse on a level with her masters.

If Cécile is to become a libertine, one must ask to what type of libertinage she will subscribe. Surely, elements of the Merteuil/Cécile model will reflect what Jaton calls "le libertinage masculin" (153), which, as noted, consists of attacking the virtue of the other, while simultaneously prevailing upon him/her to recognize and then destroy his/her moral identity. But Jaton argues that society forces feminine libertinage to go farther, to become, "plus solitaire, plus audacieux et plus secret" (155). Constrained by their gender and by their erotic preferences, Merteuil and Cécile must maneuver clandestinely, their "volonté libre" (155) fettered not by love, as in Valmont's case, but by hypocritical social mores. Jaton claims that though society may tacitly approve of Merteuil's role as a "prêtresse initiatrice," it is only to the extent that this function serves to "déniaiser les jeunes gens" (155). Specifically, Jaton refers to Merteuil's tutelage of Danceny, which, while deepening the young knight's libertine education, is not in the slightest considered on a par with Valmont's deflowering of Cécile (155). If, to the extent that it were at all known, Merteuil's instruction of Danceny received only tepid appreciation within the libertine milieu, then her guidance of Cécile would border on the perverse, even in libertine circles. Because of its socially transgressive nature, the homosocial bond the women experience over sharing Valmont can only stay between them. They will draw closer, but their exploits stand no chance of being hailed as conquests worthy of a Valmont or a Prévan.[9]

In feminine libertinage, rules may be overturned, and masculine sovereignty questioned (Jaton 159), but only within the microcosm that Merteuil and Cécile have established for themselves. As Jaton contends, society despises the silence and solitude of this world, and it is Merteuil's exclusion from it that precipitates her ruin (155, 161). To a large extent, at least in the novel and the Frears film, the same argument can be made concerning Cécile as her exile to a convent parallels Merteuil's banishment from society. The Merteuil/Cécile relationship must be destroyed because it undermines structures of authority which, within the context of the French eighteenth-century novel, threaten literary and social norms. One also thinks of Diderot's *Religieuse* and a number of Sade's works, whose depiction of female sexuality and libertinage were considered just as dangerous as Laclos's, if not more so. By representing the unmitigated defeat of Merteuil and Cécile, Laclos's novel suggests that female libertinage has no chance of validation, let alone survival. It is here that twentieth-century filmmaking seems to compensate by presenting scenarios which intimate that the will, pleasure, and intellect of female libertinage—if they cannot win—can at least live on

[9] Jaton on makes a similar point with respect to Prévan on p. 159 of her article.

or manifest themselves in some form beyond that of their creator, Merteuil. In the Frears film, the scene that depicts Cécile writing on Valmont's back is a case in point. Forman and Vadim, however, develop this theme more extensively, showing that the Merteuil/Cécile relationship is crucial to developing the existence and persistence of female libertinage.

Like Frears, Forman employs a "writing table scene" between Valmont and Cécile to depict the objectification of seducer and seduced. It should be noted that Forman's film is an original work, inspired by the novel, but not attempting to represent it in direct fashion. Part of Forman's deviation from Laclos is illustrated in the adaptation of this scene, which differs from *Dangerous Liaisons* in that it involves a crucial element of the plot: Valmont's first encounter with Cécile. From a logistical standpoint, collapsing the two elements of the original text into one scene serves a practical goal of adapting the narrative to the time constraints of the big screen. Artistically, the combination better fits Forman's and screenwriter Jean-Claude Carriere's interpretation since the scene in question takes place in Madame de Rosemonde's chateau, with Merteuil, Tourvel, Cécile and Valmont all sleeping in rooms along the same corridor. From a cinematic perspective, having Valmont confront all of his love interests *sur place* in the chateau is effective because it localizes the narrative and highlights the intrigue and duplicity between the characters. In addition, Valmont's passing from one potential lover's room to another intensifies the *Don Juanisme* of his character, though at this particular moment, he manages only to sleep with Cécile.

As in the novel and the Frears film, the scene follows the Présidente's request that Valmont leave. Forman shows Valmont's inner turmoil quite explicitly, as the Vicomte's eyes begin to tear when Tourvel seeks his departure. The emotional content of Valmont taking solace and satisfying his desire in Cécile is increased as Tourvel can be found a mere two doors down the hall. As he enters Cécile's room and begins the dictation of her letter to Danceny, Valmont's sincerity toward Tourvel is reflected in the letter's inadvertant opening of "Chere Madame." While Valmont quickly corrects the salutation to "Monsieur le Chevalier," Cécile's ostensible love note to Danceny becomes, of course, Valmont's *billet doux* to Tourvel.

The choice of Cécile, rather than Emilie, is important because the choice of a virgin again mirrors the theme of Valmont's own chastity at this particular moment. As in the Frears film, Valmont figuratively loses his virginity during the "writing table scene" as this is the first time he has made love while being in love. Costume reinforces Valmont's chasteness, as he is dressed in white and pale blue, with a white lace scarf draped around his neck. More important in underscoring Valmont's loss of chastity is an earlier scene that depicts Cécile and Valmont in a mock sword fight in Madame de Rosemonde's garden. Valmont, dressed in a white shirt, pretends to be killed by Cécile. During his feigned death, which foreshadows his real demise at the hands of Danceny, Valmont holds a wooden staff to his stomach and smears the imaginary wound with strawberries. On a symbolic level, the red juice suggests the blood that a Valmont, who has now been subordinated, if not "feminized" by Tourvel's rejection of him, now loses upon yielding his emotional virginity. More explicitly, the crushed berries represent the *vivas vita* flowing from Valmont's body during his assassination.

In effect, the Vicomte's decline results from his inability to come to terms with his surrender to Tourvel, and consequently, the surrender of his libertine identity.

Although Cécile becomes the object of Valmont's frustration in the dictation scene, the mock duel implies that Valmont will emerge as the tragic victim of his own deceit. Frears and Forman thus see Valmont as both perpetrator and victim of his manipulative designs, but Forman is perhaps even more distinct than Frears in focusing on the letter as the principal instrument of erotic impluse and objectification.

Again, it is Merteuil's hand that directs Valmont's pen(is) at the end of the soiree that directly precedes Valmont's encounter scene with Cécile. The Marquise, seeking to defile Cécile, and well-aware of Valmont's lack of success with Tourvel, asks the Vicomte to assist Cécile in "writing a letter" to Danceny. Knowing Merteuil's intentions, Valmont balks, whereupon the Marquise persists, stating, "All I'm asking is that you help the poor child write a letter." The equation of sex with writing becomes abundantly clear. Valmont accedes to Merteuil's demand, not because of any desire to avenge Madame de Volanges's slander (an aspect of the original narrative absent in Forman's version), but because he needs a vent for his anguish over Tourvel. As in the Frears film, Valmont's objectification of Cécile is emphasized through the frequent obscuring of Cécile's face in favor of her body, particularly her legs and buttocks.

What is singularly intriguing about Forman's adaptation, however, is the manner in which the director is able, literally, to match the caress of a hand with the stroke of a pen in order to depict erotic objectification. As Valmont rubs Cécile, she transcribes his thoughts and emotions on paper, with Valmont's desire physically moving through the conduit of Cécile only to resurface on the page. Displaced passion and writing become a unified action, of which the letter is the final product. In contrast with Frears, Forman's Valmont does not write *on* his substitute but *through* her, as the director stresses Valmont's effort to reach one woman via another.

The notion that the letter represents the most prized object of all is best portrayed in the next sequence, which shows a disheveled and unkempt Valmont leaving Cécile's bedroom, proudly displaying the letter to a servant. Valmont emerges with what was ostensibly Cécile's letter to Danceny. As is logical given his verbal and physical domination of Cécile, Valmont has appropriated the letter, cherishing it like a trophy that celebrates his victory.

Forman's triumphant Valmont stands in marked contrast to the shaken Cécile who seeks comfort in Merteuil's room. Congratulating herself on the project's success, the Marquise, in a disingenuous effort to console Cécile, remarks that "Monsieur de Valmont is quite a writer, isn't he?" Understanding Merteuil's wry equation of intercourse and discourse, Cécile briefly smiles before expressing her regret and humiliation. As in the novel and the Frears version, Merteuil makes an earnest effort to soothe Cécile's anguish by trumpeting the benefits of a libertine lifestyle. Cécile's initiation into this mode of behavior, while begun with Valmont, is more curiously continued with Merteuil. The following sequence begins the next morning with Madame de Volanges's frantic search to locate Cécile after discovering her daughter missing from her room. Madame Volanges eventually finds Cécile in bed with Merteuil, the girl having spent the night with the Marquise. Without question, this scene may be inter-

preted as one in which a child seeks maternal consolation after a traumatic experience. Yet, given Cécile's lesbian tendencies in the novel, as well as Merteuil's strident attraction to Cécile, the idea that Cécile is a sexually ambiguous character, either consciously or unconsciously experimenting with different forms of sexual expression, becomes increasingly plausible.

Forman alludes to a lesbian tie between Merteuil and Cécile earlier in the film. The scene in question involves Merteuil's arranging of a tryst between Cécile and Danceny, and takes place in what the spectator presumes is a sumptuous brothel.[10]

Luring the unsuspecting Madame de Volanges to the Opera so that Cécile can meet with Danceny, Merteuil conveys her desire for Cécile through the actions of her servant Victoire, and to a lesser extent, through Danceny. In an addition to the original narrative, it is Victoire who, after bringing Cécile to a boudoir, prepares the girl for what the Marquise hopes will be Cécile's deflowering. Victoire leads Cécile into the chamber and literally strips the girl of her prudish, pre-pubescent garb. Dressing Cécile with garments Merteuil has chosen for the young Volanges, Victoire, upon finishing her transformation of Cécile, looks back on her work and proudly exclaims that "Madame de Merteuil has excellent taste." The remark, of course, refers as much to Cécile as it does to the clothing. Interestingly, Forman also underscores Cécile's own lesbian impulses in this scene, as the camera shows her glancing at numerous erotic paintings in the boudoir, the majority of them depicting scenes of women in sexual poses with one another.

The idea of Merteuil's dominating presence in Cécile's "sexual awakening," coupled with the fact that her rendez-vous with Danceny goes unconsummated, suggests that subconsciously, Cécile may be as desirous of Merteuil as she is of Danceny. While Cécile's sexual naivete cannot be denied, it is nonetheless intriguing that the "tryst" sequence ends with Cécile in Merteuil's arms rather than Danceny's. The final scene shows Madame de Volanges returning to the opera in another frenzied search for her daughter, only to find Cécile cuddling and crying in Merteuil's embrace. Certainly, Cécile's exclamation, after seeing her mother, that she only wanted to be with "Maman," could lead to the conclusion that Cécile sees Merteuil as a comforting matron. Yet, given the strong erotic content of the sequence, one observes Merteuil becoming as much a sexual mentor to Cécile as a mother figure. To a certain extent, she is both, just as Cécile, only beginning to recognize her sexual identity, is both a potential libertine in need of guidance and an inexperienced adolescent in need of reassurance.

A homosocial bond occurs in the sense that both Cécile and Merteuil, either purposely or inadvertently, experience a link through Valmont and Danceny and therefore become more attached. As in the Frears film, Merteuil and Cécile draw closer after having shared, and to a certain extent, exploited, Valmont. Merteuil's use of Danceny is quite overt, as in both the novel and

[10] The exact location of the meeting between Cécile and Danceny is unknown. Elise Knapp and Robert Glen assume the rendez-vous occurs in a luxurious house of ill-repute. See the third note on p. 48 of their article, "The Energy of Evil Has Diminished: Less Dangerous Liaisons."

Forman's film, she initiates the romance between Cécile and Danceny when she fears Valmont will not fulfill her request. Given Merteuil's desire for Cécile in both works, Danceny can be viewed as a surrogate who, though failing his task, is nonetheless manipulated into conveying the Marquise's passion for the young Volanges. Likewise, Cécile, while harboring genuine sentiment for Danceny, displays enough bisexuality in her erotic make-up that affection for Danceny cannot be disassociated from feelings for Merteuil. As the sequence's final union shows Merteuil and Cécile together rather than Cécile and Danceny, one can assume that while Merteuil is aware of her intentions and Cécile unaware of hers, both women seek and express their drive toward one another through men.

What then, is the role of letter-writing in the portrayal of displaced passion between Cécile and Merteuil in Forman's film? Although neither composes letters to the other in the way Vallnont exploits Cécile to communicate with Tourvel, letters do play a large symbolic role in depicting Merteuil's authorship of the entire series of events. Cécile's and Danceny's rendez-vous in the boudoir begins with an exchange of letters. The content of the pair's missives is unimportant compared to the idea that the Marquise has conceived of, if not "written" the scenario by which Cécile will lose her virginity. Once more, it is Merteuil's hand that has in effect guided the drafting of these epistles. What is significant about these letters is that, on a conceptual level, they convey multi-layered forms of sexual expression. Consequently, in an abstract sense, Danceny's letter expresses as much Merteuil's desire for vengeance and erotic gratification as it does Danceny's comparatively innocent affection for Cécile. Similarly, Cécile's message to Danceny is symbolically punctuated not only with adolescent passion for a peer, but with a sexual inquisitiveness going far beyond puppy love.

Curiously, however, Forman turns the idea of Merteuil's pan-authorship back onto the Marquise later in the film. In a variation constituting a radical departure from the novel, Forman presents a dictation scene that shows Danceny forcing Merteuil to draft a letter to Cécile. Holding the point of his sword to the Marquise's throat, Danceny coerces Merteuil into renouncing his advice that Cécile marry Gercourt and keep Danceny as her lover. Danceny's motivation for his violence against Merteuil is a letter from Cécile, dictated by Valmont, stating Merteuil's proposition. Earlier in the film, she made the same recommendation to Cécile, the only difference being that Cécile did not originally convey these sentiments to Danceny. The enraged chevalier, realizing his own objectification at Merteuil's hands, immediately places her in the subordinate position by drawing his sword and ordering the Marquise to write. Upon hearing Danceny's order that this will be Merteuil's letter to Cécile, the Marquise responds, "My letter?" ". . . Interesting, we never tried that!" Her riposte is a sexual double entendre in the strictest sense of the term in that it not only underscores the link between sex and writing, but it alludes both to homoerotic affection for Cécile, as well as her incipient passion for Danceny himself.

On a more explicit level, the intercourse/discourse affiliation is announced by the mutually reinforcing imagery of the sword and pen. As in the scene with Valmont and Cécile, Forman portrays a continuous sexual movement

from subject to object as Danceny's jealousy and desire run via his sword through Merteuil and onto the parchment in the form of the written word. The physically sexual link between Merteuil and Danceny, while portrayed in a symbolically violent fashion in this scene, is actualized shortly afterward after the two become lovers. While the Danceny/Merteuil pairing can be read in terms of displaced desire on many levels, in this particular sense, Merteuil becomes the point of transfer for Danceny's passion toward Cécile. As a result, Merteuil, like Cécile with Valmont, becomes a conduit for Danceny's emotions, thus reducing her to the status of object, not just of Danceny's angry libido, but of her own treachery. The fact that she has literally become the *porte-parole* for someone else shows the extent to which her authorial agency has been compromised.

Except for the conclusion to his *Liaisons Dangereuses,* Vadim rarely suggests that Merteuil's agency is anything but absolute. As Joseph Brami suggests, Merteuil controls virtually all aspects of Valmont's life (59). From securing her husband's (the two are married in the Vadim film) diplomatic post to personally telegraphing Valmont's *lettre de rupture* with Tourvel, Merteuil seemingly authors Valmont's actions. To a much greater extent than the novel or the Frears and Forman versions, Valmont accedes to Merteuil's project to defile Cécile. The idea of objectification inherent in Valmont's corruption of Cécile is best represented in two scenes, with both presenting substantial variations of the themes in question.

The first scene, which effectively depicts Valmont's rape of Cécile, suggests objectification not only in the brute sense of blackmailed, forced intercourse, but through written, or, more precisely, recorded discourse as well. In a sense going beyond letter XCVI in the novel, where Valmont first comes to Cécile's room under the false pretense of delivering a letter from Danceny, Vadim depicts his Valmont as bearing a taped message from Danceny to Cécile. The intercourse/discourse dynamic becomes apparent as Valmont places the machine in the bed under the covers between him and Cécile. Danceny's message reinforces the link between sex and writing, as his recording speaks of the countless times he has mentally undressed Cécile. The tape recorder thus becomes the object that initiates Valmont and Cécile's union, but more importantly, demonstrates the extent to which Danceny has been objectified by Valmont and Merteuil's machinations. Danceny's presence and influence have been reduced to that of a voice on a plastic reel. His letter will serve to excite Valmont, and to a lesser extent Cécile, who, despite her degradation, later confesses to Merteuil that she did experience moments of pleasure with Valmont. Consequently, Danceny's letter performs the exact opposite of its original intention; diminishing Danceny to a cipher that conveys, and to a certain degree enacts, the desire of others. It is these others, particularly Valmont and Merteuil, who "dictate" how and what Danceny's letter will perform.

Later in the film, Vadim includes a sequence that more resembles the original "writing table scene." As part of the film's contemporary transposition of the drama, the scene in question centers on the telephone as the primary vehicle of sexual expression. Vadim skips the segment in the novel where Valmont goes at Tourvel's behest, passing directly to Tourvel's flight, depicted here as a midnight train to Paris. Valmont, as in the Forman film, physically consoles and gratifies himself with Cécile.

However, as Tourvel remains the psychological and sentimental object of his passions, Valmont places a call to her from Cécile's bed. The objectification of Cécile is underscored as Valmont places the phone on her buttocks as if they were a desk or table. While Vadim establishes his independence from Laclos via the phone, he nonetheless alludes to the novel by having Cécile write in a notebook as Valmont speaks.

The notebook greatly develops Vadim's Valmont, as a moment later the camera reveals Cécile working on geometry problems. Her situation parallels Valmont's in that while she searches for her "ligne de pente," or slope, Valmont looks for an angle from which to approach his problem with Tourvel. Valmont finds his answer by concluding that the shortest distance between two points is a straight line, thus prompting his return to Paris to see Tourvel directly. It is after Valmont's intercourse with Cécile that Valmont seeks discourse with Tourvel, suggesting that Cécile serves merely as a prelude to the real expression of his desire. The mathematical metaphor cultivates Valmont's character by portaying him as a tactician, a calculating instructor able to dupe his pupil/victim. Implicit in the metaphor is the equation of the letter with a math problem. Vadim emphasizes that beneath the letter's artful prose and majestic sentiment lie theories and proofs of how the strong dominate the weak under the rules of libertinage. Indeed, Vadim's portrayal of Danceny as a geometer wittily illustrates the completeness of Valmont's conquest, since Valmont, at least momentarily, beats the mathematician at his own game.

Vadim's depiction of the calculating nature of his characters does not limit itself to Valmont in this scene. While Cécile, nude and prone, undoubtedly appears as an object/victim, the idea that she pores over her own equations and formulae suggests a portrayal beyond that of a naive adolescent corrupted by scheming adults. Vadim highlights Cécile's sexuality from the beginning of the film, as Cécile, in an opening sequence, takes off her shoes, lifts her dress, and climbs into Danceny's bed while proclaiming her desire to live with him. In addition to the episodes with Valmont, Cécile's sexuality, specifically her bisexuality, comprise a large part of Vadim's interpretation of Cécile's relationship with Merteuil.

The scene where Merteuil consoles Cécile after the latter's first night with Valmont merits special attention for its emphasis not only on Merteuil's lesbianism, but Cécile's. What is especially evocative in this segment is the progression from Cécile and Merteuil in a standing position at the beginning of the sequence, to the final frame that shows the two women touching each other in bed. In the emotional dynamic between Merteuil and Cécile, Vadim, like Laclos, Frears, and Forman, obfuscates the distinction between maternal solace and same-sex innuendo and desire. Dress reinforces this ambiguity as Merteuil, in a dark blouse, a long skirt, and hair pulled back, appears more matronly than at any other moment in the film. One remarks, however, a slight hint of sexuality in Merteuil's dress upon noting her stiletto boots. Compared with the rest of her outfit, Merteuil's footwear seems an incongruous accessory unless the erotic subtext is taken into account. The boots allude to a certain power Merteuil carries over Cécile, a power suggesting Merteuil's dominant, "masculine" role in her relationship with the young Volanges.

Vadim plays upon Cécile's sexuality in a much more direct manner. She wears stark white tights that acutely accentuate the contours of her body. The pair's movement from a standing to a prone position is marked by numerous caresses, most notably Merteuil's stroking of Cécile's thighs and hips. In one frame, as the two lie in bed, Merteuil places her mouth near Cécile's lower abdomen in a manner that suggests oral sex. Vadim's filming of the scene involves shots of Merteuil's head and Cécile's body to the point where the director clearly depicts Cécile as the object of Merteuil's calculation and desire.

The dialogue in the sequence more clearly reveals that Cécile has begun to respond to her female tutor's instruction and passion. Discussing her feelings after the initial encounter with Valmont, Cécile states that while Danceny is the object of her real feelings, she at times feels amorous toward Valmont, and, not surprisingly, toward Merteuil. Somewhat puzzled by the plurality of her affection, Ctcile remarks to Merteuil, "Il me semble que je vous aime, vous aussi." Moments later, in a comment that strikingly reveals Cécile's burgeoning lesbianism, she expresses a wish to "se passer des hommes."[11] As in the Frears and Forman films, it is precisely her first night with Valmont that has brought Cécile closer to Merteuil, and has allowed Merteuil to gain greater influence—erotic or otherwise—over Cécile. Her homosocial bond with Merteuil sealed by sharing Valmont with Merteuil, Cécile can now freely "write" or "calculate" in a manner that imitates her master's libertine exploits.

To a considerable degree, the telephone scene between Valmont and Cécile shows the young Volanges's adoption of Merteuil's ways. Though shamelessly carrying on with Valmont, Cécile, like her analogue in the Frears film, still holds Danceny as her primary love interest. The math problem in her copybook signals the extent to which her own character has been affected by the cynicism and depravity of the two *meneurs du jeu.* in a sense, Cécile's search for a "ligne de pente" can be viewed as prefiguring the way in which she will "write" if not formulate her future stratagems. Cécile's appropriation of libertinage is most evident in Vadim's rather sardonic conclusion to the film, where a crowd of reporters and photographers has gathered at the courthouse to await the outcome of what is ostensibly Danceny's trial after killing Valmont. Skirting the journalists, Danceny asks the press to leave Cécile alone. The would-be chevalier defends his "demoiselle" with the plea, "Ce n'est qu'une gosse." The irony of this admonition becomes self-evident as the camera's focus is trained back onto Cécile, who, standing next to Madame de Volanges, smiles and poses for the media, gleefully absorbing her notoriety as a *femme fatale.*

While Cécile's infatuation with the publicity could be dismissed as mere adolescent desire for attention, it is clear from Cécile's extended involvement with Valmont and her confidential relationship with Merteuil that she is now anything but a "gosse" needing protection in the face of a debauched outside world. In effect, one can assume that Cécile has lost all innocence, and is willingly drawn to the potentially enticing aspects of libertinage. Not coincidentally, the next shot is of the disfigured Merteuil emerging from the courtroom into the crowded hallway. The juxtaposition is one of

[11] The quotes come from Roger Vailland's screenplay.

progeny and creator; a link all the more suggested by the fact that Cécile is placed directly between her biological mother at one end of the corridor, and her spiritual mother at the other. While it is Madame de Volanges who publicly moralizes that Merteuil now wears her soul upon her face, there is little to suggest that Cécile will find Merteuil's fate a deterrent.

In a sense, the agency Merteuil has lost has been transferred to Cécile. Once an object of erotic machinations, Vadim's unscathed Cécile, unlike her counterparts in the novel and the Frears film, is now emboldened to subject others to such schemes if she so chooses. Her prolonged affair with Valmont, as well as her rapture before the cameras, implies that if she hasn't already outgrown the cloying Danceny, she will eventually. One could argue that in contrast to the novel and to Frears's version, where a chastened Cécile finds refuge in a convent, Vadim's film seems to vindicate, if not adulate Cécile's debauchery, with the attention she garners serving to encourage, rather than dissuade her sybaritic activity. Buoyed by recognition from a society that perversely glorifies such behavior, Cécile will presumably consign to Danceny the role of cuckolded husband that Merteuil had originally destined for Jerry Court. In Vadim's film, despite the apparent totality of her present defeat, Merteuil, and libertinage, gain a subtle, future victory.

This paradoxical triumph is mirrored in Forman's film which depicts a composed, physically and emotionally intact Merteuil attending the marriage she has largely arranged between an unknowing Gercourt and a Cécile pregnant with Valmont's child. Whereas Vadim's film suggests that Merteuil will live on through Cécile, Forman's implies that Merteuil herself will continue her machinations with Cécile ready to assert her own mastery of the stratagems of libertinage.[12] From the standpoint of discourse, Vadim and Forman intimate that despite the hazards she may have encountered, Merteuil will have the last word, as the texts of her future exploits will write themselves via her own intrigues or, especially in the case of Vadim's film, those of Cécile.[13] In the novel as well as the three film versions, Cécile becomes the object of

[12] Forman underscores Merteuil's solitude at the end of the film. In an interview, he remarks:

> ... she's the only one in the end who was really left alone. She lost everybody. And what is even more important is that she suddenly realizes that she doesn't feel any satisfaction and joy, and the cost of her revenge was exclusion. She doesn't feel anything. That's probably the worst punishment you can get. (105)

While Forman's comments about Merteuil are entirely convincing, Merteuil's "exclusion" does not necessarily bring about her humiliation and ruin, as in Laclos's novel, and in the Frears and Vadim films. Forman's Merteuil, while despondent, is nonetheless free, and presumbably willing, to resume her former lifestyle. Forman's film gives little-to-no indication that she will change. Indeed, it is difficult to imagine a presumably unbroken Merteuil doing anything other than her life's work. The citation originates from Knapp's and Glen's interview in *Eighteenth-Century Life.*

[13] In effect, such an ending could lead, contrary to the title of Knapp's and Glen's article, "The Energy of Evil Has Diminished: *Less* Dangerous Liaisons," to *more* dangerous liaisons (emphasis mine).

Mother-Merteuil's desire to procreate as well as to manipulate.[14] Figuratively, the Forman and Vadim films depict a Merteuil who gives birth, with the aid of Valmont, to the Cécile imagined by the Merteuil of the novel. In the struggle between Valmont and Merteuil, both of whom have become objects of their own schemes, Forman and Vadim nonetheless show Merteuil as regaining the ability to act. The conclusions of the novel and the Frears film present the opposite scenario. Laclos portays a Merteuil whose disfigurement precedes her banishment, while his Valmont is allowed a noble death, as well as revenge on Merteuil. Following Laclos's lead, Frears highlights Valmont's regained agency by having him first admit his objectification at the hand of Merteuil (one recalls his dying remark to Danceny that both he and the chevalier are Merteuil's "creatures"), then by including Valmont's last request that Danceny circulate Merteuil's letters. While Frears's Merteuil is not disfigured, she is, as critics have noted, unmasked. What has not been pointed out is that the Merteuil of *Dangerous Liaisons*, who is made up by servants in the film's opening sequence, removes her own make-up after the public ridicule she receives at the Opera. Now a jeered object of her own vileness, Merteuil literally unmasks herself, as if to erase her most artful and exquisite text, that of her own facade.

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[14] The idea that Merteuil acts as a mother figure, particularly to Valmont and Cécile, constitutes one of the central arguments of Singerman's article, "Merteuil and Mirrors: Stephen Frears's Freudian Reading of *Les Liaisons dangereuses."*

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