

LACLOS' DANGEROUS LIAISONS

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Part 1 – An ongoing success

CD: Good morning Alain Sandrier. A few years ago, you published an edition of Laclos' *Dangerous Liaisons*, which we are going to talk about now. It is a novel that immediately received a remarkable welcome.

AS: Good morning Colas, what a success indeed! It has been an uninterrupted success since the novel's publication in 1782. It must be said that from this point of view, Laclos was more successful than Rousseau, whose *Julie* nevertheless was a phenomenal success. But nowadays, except for specialists and hardcore fans, it is no longer for *Julie* that Rousseau is known. On the other hand, one may well know nothing of Laclos and ignore his other works; the novel immediately imposed itself as the literary quintessence of a specific world, the world of libertinism, which has come to be identified with the century itself, or at least to represent one of its characteristic features. Today I will only talk about the book and its incredible epistolary virtuosity.

Before reflecting upon the epistolary art of the novel, it is difficult not to mention one of the obvious aspects of its success, its privileged relationship to images. We can easily think of its many adaptations to the screen, big or small. It is undoubtedly what led it towards a broader public, a little like in the 18th and 19th centuries, successful novels systematically ended up as operas. *Dangerous Liaisons* has inspired good, and even great, filmed versions. In addition to Stephen Frears', the best known and perhaps the most successful, there are three main adaptations.

The first one is Roger Vadim's in 1960, now forgotten, it marked its time by clearly updating the action; then Milos Forman's in 88 and finally Josée Dayan's TV movie in 2003. Each obviously had its share of stars. But to tell you the truth, this privileged treatment does not date from the time of motion picture. *Dangerous Liaisons* soon had, as did libertine production in general, a special affinity with illustration. In 1787 already an illustrated edition came out, and three other editions, at least, were published during the Revolution. Then, regularly in the nineteenth, then 20th century, black and white or coloured engravings also highlighted the erotic potential of the text.

Part 2 – Anatomy of libertinism

CD: You talk about eroticism. Does this mean it's an indecent novel?

AS: It's not so simple. Laclos, as a disciple and admirer of Rousseau, did not try to circumvent the moral obligation of novels. If the picture of vice may have seemed like an instructive spectacle to the *Liaisons*' author, it is because he believed in the pedagogical virtue of his work. From this point of view Laclos truly was an Enlightenment man, who thought that education and the fight against prejudice were the only remedy to society ills. To understand, to heal the sickness represented by a couple of top-flight libertines such as Merteuil and Valmont, implied knowing the symptoms. Laclos turned into a clinician, the only way to be a good moralist. That is what the epigram borrowed from Rousseau and

which appeared as subtitle of the novel meant: "I have seen the mores of my time, and I have published these letters".

Yet we are far from a model education. We must recognise a certain irony in showing us the pitfalls of an education that flips and overturns morality's basic principles. Lies, in the novel, are no longer just the opposite of truth. They are weapons, allowing people to act with specific purposes in mind. And the purpose here clearly is pleasure. Thus, happiness becomes a matter of adapting means to ends.

It is not surprising that this education, which teaches the exact opposite of commonly accepted precepts, is expressed, first, by means of antiphrasis, that is, a way of saying the opposite of what is said explicitly. For example, in Letter 105, which is one of the best known, the Marquise de Merteuil gives Cecile a lesson on sentimental Machiavellianism, which is like a parody of motherly counsels.

Part 3 – Letter's pitfalls

CD: In these circumstances, did readers understand Laclos' moral project? I think I remember that Madame Riccoboni, a prominent novelist and friend of the Laclos family, showed some incomprehension. She wrote him in a letter: "You will always be criticised, Sir, for presenting to your readers a vile creature".

AS: Indeed, the ambiguity of Laclos' approach shocked as much as it seduced. It shocked even more because it was a female character that dispensed this perverse education. The novel, which is the genre for women par excellence, is thus the canvas for the worst moral deformities. Would this novel reflect women in a distorted and unflattering way? Obviously Laclos, who was a model husband, could easily exonerate himself from such an accusation. It belonged with Beaumarchais and Condorcet for example, to these men of letters anxious to grant the "weaker sex" as they said, a more important place.

Women's cause was a personal mission for Laclos from his first literary successes, and he wrote essays on the subject, which will then be gathered under the title *On Women and Their Education*. But nothing is to be done, Laclos' "Rousseauism" may have been true, his feminism unsuspected, the reader will always be puzzled by the book's moral purpose. What should be incriminated then is the interpretive dynamic that the novel insinuates. Because there is a form of suspension of judgement orchestrated by the epistolary device.

The plurality of narrators makes it possible to simultaneously grasp the reasoning behind the protagonists' actions and the ones they want to strategically give each other. Several points of view, as allowed by the polyphony, lead to a complexity that encourages perplexity. You only have to read the beautiful and well-known opera sequence that stretches from 135 to 138 to be convinced of it. However, by multiplying the points of view there is always a reason likely to explain, or even to forgive, all vices. As such, Letter 81, which is autobiographical, functions as a real tool for reassessment.

After finishing the book, we can no longer look at the character of Madame de Merteuil with the same severity, if we can believe her, obviously. When there is no longer any instance to fix the judgement as an omniscient narrator can do, we find ourselves in front of the rather disturbing spectacle of a world where, to quote Pirandello, everyone has their truth.

CD: But does this difficulty in accessing the truth affect every character? Is it a game of generalised make-believe?

AS: Without a doubt, the most denigrated and the most ingenuous are not free of opacity in this novel, and it is its great skill and one reason for its undeniable success. To conclude, Laclos has brought to an unequalled point of incandescence the art of innuendo. This is why the novel still provides an intense reading pleasure. The reader feels as though they are part of this game of fools and tries to be up to it.

CD: Alain Sandrier, thank you very much.

AS: Thank you Colas.