Merteuil and Mirrors: Stephen Frears’s Freudian Reading of Les Liaisons dangereuses

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Choderlos de Laclos’s notorious epistolary novel, Les Liaisons dangereuses (1782), portrays the agonistic relationship between two master libertines, the Vicomte de Valmont and the Marquise de Merteuil, and the catastrophic consequences of their efforts to dominate each other while pursuing their sadistic games of seduction and humiliation against lesser opponents. The libertine character, as mythically incarnated by Don Juan, has been subjected to extensive psychoanalytical study, including well-known analyses by Jean-Pierre Jouve and Otto Rank, as well as the more recent “Oedipal reading” by Peter Gay.¹ Don Juan’s comportement has been cited, for instance, as a striking example of the unconscious workings of a repressed, unresolved “Oedipal

fixation” (Gay, p. 76); that is, his repeated seductions of women are interpreted as phantasmal “repetitions” of the child’s primal wish, buried deep in the psyche, to possess again the Mother from whom he was traumatically separated as a child. In the same Freudian context, Don Juan has been described variously as an impotent, a homosexual, and a narcissist. Surprisingly, very little reflection of this kind has been accorded Laclos’s libertine protagonists, despite the obvious identification of the Don Juan and Valmont characters, widely recognized by readers from Baudelaire to Malraux and, more recently, by Peter Brooks, Henri Blanc, Bernard Bray, and Marina Warner. While occasional passing references to Merteuil’s narcissism and her homosexual tendencies have surfaced, the psychoanalytical perspective has been generally neglected in discussions of the Liaisons dangereuses.

Stephen Frears and Christopher Hampton’s recent screen adaptation of Laclos’s novel, Dangerous Liaisons (1988), seems, however, to bring emphasis to bear precisely on the psychoanalytical dimensions of the Valmont and Merteuil characters in their relations with each other and with their victims. In addition to the preponderance of close-up shots, traditional signifiers of psychological analysis in the cinema, the mode of the film is established from the opening shot, in which we see the Marquise preening self-complacently before her vanity, a smug smile caressing her image in the mirror. Were this the only mirror scene in the film, we might be inclined to dismiss it as incidental. Mirrors are, to the contrary, seemingly omnipresent in the body of the film, whether it be in the intimate discussions between Merteuil and Valmont, the seduction of Tourvel, or the violent rupture scene between the Vicomte and the Présidente, to mention just the major examples. Moreover, the film comes full circle, closing with a final mirror scene in which a defeated, humiliated Marquise rubs off her cosmetic “mask” before the very same vanity at which

2 See, respectively, François-Régis Bastide, “La Peur d’aimer,” Psyché 16 (1948), 188; Jouve, p. 61; and Rank, p. 86.
she sat at the beginning of the film. Such obvious emphasis on the mirror motif prompts the spectator, necessarily, to speculate on its function within the film.

From a purely trans-semiotic viewpoint, the mirror, as a locus of images, can be perceived as a filmic metaphor, or corollary, for the novel’s letters, which also “reflect” the image the sender wishes to convey. Merteuil’s “corridor of mirrors,” with its multiple reflections of the two libertines, is the most striking illustration of this function of the mirror in the film, which alludes to the Protean character they display in their correspondence, changing their image at will according to the addressee of each letter. As Christopher Hampton writes in his screenplay, when we first see Valmont and Merteuil in the gallery: “She and Valmont pass down the corridor, their images shifting and multiplying in the candlelight.”5 By the same token, the multitude of mirrors evokes a central theme of Laclos’s work: the dominance of appearance over reality (underlined by the mirror which, in reality, dissimulates a door to the Marquise’s private chambers), of paraître over être, of image over substance, in the debauched Parisian aristocracy at the end of the Old Regime. But beyond this admittedly facile symbolism, one is struck by Merteuil’s blatantly narcissistic behaviour in the opening shot, as well as by the implications of the final shot, in which a hitherto unsuspected psychological fragility is intimated beneath the consummately composed façade she habitually maintains. In its psychoanalytical acceptation, the narcissism exhibited by Merteuil in Frears’s film may well be a critical key to the understanding of her character as depicted in the novel.

In his “On Narcissism: An Introduction” (1914), Freud hypothesizes that the “primary narcissism” he attributes to every infant—that is, that very early state in which the child takes himself as a love-object before he directs his libido towards the outside—“may in some cases manifest itself in a dominating fashion in his object-choice” as an adult.6 It is perhaps well at this point to recall a basic tenet of psychoanalytical theory, formulated clearly by the British psychoanalyst Melanie Klein when she recalls that “we find in the adult all the stages of his early childish

5 See Christopher Hampton’s screenplay, Dangerous Liaisons: The Film (London: Faber and Faber, 1989), p. 8. References to dialogue in the film are from this edition. The Hampton screenplay is based on both his own play and Laclos’s novel, of which the play is an adaptation. The play itself has been published under the title Les Liaisons dangereuses: A Play (London: Samuel French, 1985).

development. We find them in the unconscious which contains all repressed phantasies and tendencies.’’ When a child undergoes “normal” development, according to Freud’s theory, he or she will, as an adult, unconsciously choose a love-object modelled on the parent of the opposite sex. On the other hand, Freud discovered that in the case of some males, for instance, “whose libidinal development has suffered some disturbance ... they have taken as a model not their mother but their own selves. They are plainly seeking themselves as a love-object, and are exhibiting a type of object-choice which must be termed ‘narcissistic.’”8 While either sex may effect a narcissistic object-choice, Freud finds the tendency particularly prevalent among attractive females. In addition to the normal “intensification of the original narcissism” triggered by the onset of puberty in females, the particularly attractive woman, as she develops, compensates narcissistically for social restrictions on her own choice of object: “Strictly speaking,” Freud continues, “it is only themselves that such women love with an intensity comparable to that of the man’s love for them. Nor does their need lie in the direction of loving, but of being loved.”9 Freud thus establishes an interesting relationship between narcissism and the reaction of certain women to the repressiveness of the society in which they live. It is not difficult to apply Freud’s profile to the Marquise de Merteuil. An exceptionally attractive woman, or so we assume, she is, on the one hand, generally devoid of love for men (with the possible exception of Valmont); she does, however, enjoy attracting and manipulating lovers. In short, in a typically narcissistic fashion, she prefers being loved to loving. On the other hand, her exacerbated narcissism produces a rather violent revolt against the male-dominated society into which she is born. As she declares to Valmont in her celebrated autobiographical letter, her goal in life is to “venger mon sexe et maîtriser le vôtre” in response to the indignity women have always suffered by being subjected to male tyranny.10

Freud further speculates that narcissism is also at the basis of the phenomenon of homosexuality, maintaining that homosexuals are driven by narcissistic tendencies to seek out object-choices which resemble themselves.11 Whether or not we agree with this hypothesis today, Freud’s

analysis seems particularly germane to the narcissistic Merteuil character, whose homosexual proclivities are clearly revealed in her relationship with Cécile de Volanges, in whom she perceives, at first, a budding libertine on her own model (nos. 20, 38, 63). Although Frears curiously skirts this theme in his film, Merteuil’s obvious physical attraction to Cécile may be attributed in large part to her narcissistic perception of the girl as a reflection of her younger self, all the more so since her interest in Cécile rapidly wanes as she realizes how little Cécile resembles her in reality. It is noteworthy, moreover, that Freud, in his essay on “Female Sexuality” (1931), also links the female homosexual object-choice to the so-called “masculinity complex,” which, he theorizes, grows out of the castration complex in girls and is a form of rebellion against the assertion of male superiority. Nothing could be more evocative of the Marquise de Merteuil, whose masculine character is obvious and whose rejection of male superiority resounds throughout Laclos’s novel. It is scarcely an exaggeration to observe, in this context, a distinct intimation in the Merteuil character of the “penis envy” which, Freud tells us, motivates the development of the female castration complex. In relating to Valmont her lesbian games with Cécile, who begs her to teach her more, she comments, tellingly: “En vérité, je suis presque jalouse de celui à qui ce plaisir est réservé” (no. 38). We recall that Merteuil’s principal project is to deflower Cécile in order to humiliate the young virgin’s husband-to-be. To that end, after Valmont’s initial refusal, she tries to enlist the unwitting help of the Chevalier Danceny, Cécile’s music teacher. In Frears’s film, she remarks about the timid Chevalier that it will be necessary to “stiffen his resolve, if that’s the phrase” (p. 25) to achieve the seduction of Cécile. We realize, of course, that that is not precisely the right phrase, and we see that Danceny is only meant to serve as a phallic proxy for the Marquise, a role which Valmont will later, in fact, capably fulfil.

Merteuil’s overt masculinity, combined with her constant denigration of Valmont, her attempts—quite successful attempts—to humiliate him,

12 I say “curiously” because homosexuality plays a prominent role in Frears’s best-known previous films, My Beautiful Laundrette and Sammy and Rosie Get Laid. The theme is featured prominently, moreover, in Charles Brabant’s 1979 television adaptation of the Liaisons and is clearly suggested in Milos Forman’s Valmont (1989).

13 “Je me désintéresse entièrement sur son compte. ... Ces sortes de femmes ne sont absolument que des machines à plaisir” (no. 106). In Milos Forman and Jean-Claude Carrière’s adaptation, Valmont, Merteuil states unequivocally, with regard to Cécile: “She reminds me so much of myself.”

14 Sexuality and the Psychology of Love (New York: Collier, 1963), p. 198
identifies the Merteuil figure with the concept of the “phallic woman,” in both the popular and psychoanalytical senses.¹⁵ In this reference, it is most interesting to note the importance of *le regard*, the act of being seen and of seeing others, for Madame de Merteuil. In letter 81, she describes, in strikingly equivocal terms, how she learned the art of dissimulation to prevent others from violating her thoughts. One would think she was speaking of her virginity when she states: “je n’avais à moi que ma pensée, et je m’indignais qu’on pût me la ravir ou me la surprendre contre ma volonté: ... non contente de ne plus me laisser pénétrer, je m’amusais à me montrer sous des formes différentes.” As a result of her rigorous training, she gains what she refers to as “ce coup d’œil pénétrant” (“this penetrating glance”) which permits her, in effect, to penetrate rapidly the defences of her opponents. In other words, the Marquise has turned the tables on her male counterparts: she is the one who does the “penetrating.” The sexual connotations of Merteuil’s language in relation to the importance of the act of looking evoke Jacques Lacan’s analysis of the *regard*, the gaze, as “objet petit a” in the well-known book 11 of his *Séminaire*.¹⁶ Lacan maintains that the gaze is naturally both deceptive and delusive, since the subject never presents itself as it is, and never sees in the other what it wants to see. Consequently, the function of the eye is related to what Lacan calls, enigmatically, the “object little *a*,” an algebraic representation of the psychical *manque* in whatever form it takes, upon which desire is founded.¹⁷ The symbolic “lack” to which Lacan refers specifically is the absence of the phallus, or the fantasized lack thereof, in the unconscious, stemming from the infantile castration complex. The “look” and the “lack” are further linked psychoanalytically when Lacan contends that “c’est en tant que tout désir humain est basé sur la castration que l’œil prend sa fonction virulente, agressive.”¹⁸ The aggressiveness of Merteuil’s “eye,” her dominating subjectivity which transforms all others into objects,¹⁹ may

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¹⁸ Lacan, pp. 73, 95, 108.  
¹⁹ A facet of the Marquise’s character emphasized by a number of modern readers, such as Anne-Marie Jaton: “Lactos crée une subjectivité féminine lucide qui revendique et exerce son droit de regard et ... fait de l’homme un objet non seulement comme instrument de plaisir, mais comme être humain” (“Libertinage féminin, libertinage dangereux,” in *Lactos et le libertinage. Actes du Colloque du Bicentenaire des Liaisons dangereuses,* p. 160); cf. Susan Dunn: “She will make others be object to her subject; she herself will never be object” (“Education and Seduction in *Les Liaisons dangereuses,*” Symposium 34:1 (1980), 126.
thus be related to the "masculinity complex" discussed above, to the extent that both phenomena are products of the castration complex, that is, the fear of the lack of the phallus, taken symbolically or literally, imbedded in the unconscious mind. Merteuil's "penetrating glance" may be taken as a metaphor for the assertion of her own fantasized virility, expressed in her desire to play an active masculine role in society rather than accept the passive femme-objet role prescribed for women by the society of her time. It is tempting to understand in this context the violent reaction of the Marquise at the end of Frears's film. Unmasked when her letters to Valmont are publicly circulated, she flies into a rage and ransacks her dressing room, destroying literally the artificial means by which she had maintained her personal appearance, her duplicitous public face. Later, after her public humiliation at the theatre, where multiple shots reiterate her reduction to an object—of the spectators' (theatre public's) collective eye—her new status is emphatically asserted in the closing shot of the film in which she is again seated before her vanity mirror. Mercilessly exposed to the spectators' (moviegoers') gaze as the camera relentlessly tracks in closer and closer, cutting out the mirror completely, Merteuil slowly rubs off her make-up as tears well up in her eyes, revealing a shattered, frightened being beneath the social mask. The Marquise's violent reaction to her unmasking, her transformation from subject to object, may be perceived as an example of what Lacan refers to as "la rencontre du réel," the encounter with the real, wherein the adult individual undergoes an experience which momentarily puts him or her in jarring contact, subliminally, with an infantile experience long repressed in the unconscious mind. Merteuil's public chastisement and concomitant reduction to object status may be seen as the psychical equivalent of castration, the loss of the virility identified with her dominance over others. The castration motif is further sustained when we reflect that in Laclos's novel Merteuil's ultimate punishment is the loss of an eye through smallpox. Recalling that her power over others, her virility, was founded to a large extent on her "penetrating glance," her loss of an eye may well be interpreted as a form of symbolic emasculation. Although Frears and Hampton do not retain the smallpox incident in Dangerous Liaisons, their depiction of her

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21 Cf. Didier Masseau, who comments that the Merteuil figure "assimile l'exercice du pouvoir à la manifestation d'un regard omniprésent et invisible" ("Le Narrataire des Liaisons dangereuses," in Laclos et le libertinage. Actes du Colloque du Bicentenaire des "Liaisons dangereuses," p. 126). Merteuil's fate, in the Freudian context, may evoke the blinding of Oedipus, his symbolic castration before entering voluntary exile—an exile which Merteuil will "emulate" as well.
reaction to what may be perceived as a symbolic castration, her transformation from subject to object, is consistent with the implications of her optical diminishment.

At the risk of provoking a collective rise of eyebrows, I would like to point out that the name “Merteuil” is composed of two words: *mère* and *œil*, “mother” and “eye,” joined by the phonetic hyphen, “t.” While this may appear to be a simple play on words, Freud has amply demonstrated that plays on words are often far from simple, and rarely innocent. Moreover, there is ample evidence that Laclos did not coin his characters’ names arbitrarily: Cécile “Volanges” calls to mind the notion of “stolen from the angels,” as “Tourvel” evokes a “tower” (of virtue?); “Danceny” seems to suggest someone “lead around by the nose,” “Valmont” the “ups and downs” of the vicomte, and “Rosemonde” the remarkable indulgence of Valmont’s elderly aunt. We have seen above the undeniable importance of the eye for the Merteuil character, whether or not we accept the psychoanalytical implications of the motif. How may we understand the *mère*, the “mother,” in Merteuil? The maternal position of the Marquise is quite evident in Laclos’s novel: she blatantly supplants Cécile’s own mother, Mme de Volanges, as the young girl’s principal counsellor and confidante. Her relationship with Danceny is scarcely different, creating a somewhat incestuous situation when she finally takes the Chevalier as a lover. In Frears’s film this aspect of Merteuil’s liaison with Danceny is emphasized in the scene in which Valmont intrudes upon their intimacy. Using a mirror, once again, Frears places Merteuil’s reflection between Valmont and the much younger Danceny. While the mirror image may be seen to evoke the contrasting images of the Marquise in the minds of Danceny and Valmont, it is also an obvious reference to the Oedipal triangle in which the father, incarnated here by Valmont, opposes an “incestuous” desire binding “mother” and “son.”

This particular triangular figure is not, however, the main focus of Frears’s film. It is the maternal dimensions of Merteuil’s relationship with Valmont himself which come to the fore—with a decidedly Freudian flavour. Merteuil, as played by Glenn Close, is portrayed as a self-composed, rather matronly personage, while John Malkovitch’s Valmont is boyish and somewhat adolescent in demeanour. As in the novel,
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which the film follows quite closely, Valmont is positioned between the Marquise, with whom he shares the nostalgia of a prior intimate relationship, a prior "union," and Mme de Tourvel, with whom he has fallen in love while plotting her seduction, despite a direct prohibition by the libertine code. At one point in the film, as in the novel (cf. no. 100), Valmont wonders aloud before Merteuil, "Why do you suppose we only feel compelled to chase the ones who run away?" (p. 51), which prompts, in the film (and not in the novel), Merteuil's cryptic rejoinder: "Immaturity?" By relating Valmont's womanizing to emotional immaturity, the film invites a psychoanalytical deciphering of the Vicomte's behaviour much like that accorded the Don Juan figure: the woman that men are always chasing, the one they eternally desire and can never have, is, of course, the absent Mother. If desire, as Lacan suggests, can always be traced back to the castration complex, it is because the child's desire for the mother will remain eternally unsatisfied—that is, it will remain desire—by virtue of the child's acceptance of their definitive separation, his submission to the Law of the Father—which is the sense that Lacan gives to the symbolic, and ultimately positive, notion of "castration." Desire repressed but not eradicated, "original" desire to which all subsequent desire is related.

Immediately following Merteuil's "Immaturity?" barb in the film, Valmont expresses a painful ambivalence about the object of his desire (Tourvel): "I love her, I hate her, my life's a misery" (p. 51), an ambivalence which appears in the novel as well. Both Freud and Melanie Klein emphasize the ambivalence which characterizes the male infant's relationship to the mother, an ambivalence which may resonate in his feelings towards her long into adulthood and which may be displaced onto other love objects. Klein finds the source of this love-hate ambivalence in the oral frustration suffered by the infant when denied the maternal breast, resulting in the infant's division of his perception of the maternal figure into a "good mother" who gives the breast and a "bad mother" who refuses it. It may be significant to recall, in this context, Valmont's obvious obsession with breasts in Frears's film, in all of his relationships with women, whether it be Merteuil, Cécile, the prostitute Emilie, or even Tourvel (albeit discreetly). In a particularly significant early scene, Valmont plants a pair of kisses on Merteuil's prominently exposed bosom.

24 "Il n'est plus pour moi de bonheur, de repos, que par la possession de cette femme que je hais et que j'aime avec une égale fureur" (no. 100).
25 Klein, p. 377.
and solicits an "advance" on the sexual favours she has promised him as a reward for the seduction of Tourvel. Merteuil refuses, clearly frustrating Valmont's desire. The film emphasizes, in fact, up to the very end, the frustration of desire in Valmont's relationship with the Marquise, a frustration which will drive him to commit physical aggression against her—a slap—and to issue the fatal ultimatum. His "amorous desire," at this point, is scarcely distinguishable from hate. The violence of Valmont's reaction may be attributed to his subconscious association of Merteuil and a long-repressed image of the "bad mother," the hated and feared "genital mother" who, according to Klein, is one of the sources of the infant's fear of castration. And Merteuil is, if anything, a castrating mother.

It is most interesting to consider, in this general context, that the reward for Valmont's possession of Mme de Tourvel is the possession of the Marquise herself, a fact that is repeatedly drawn to our attention in the novel (for example, nos. 20, 100, 106, 110, 125, 131, 144). The dominant mother figure is the prize, the ultimate goal of his seductive enterprise—the ultimate goal, so to speak, of his desire. To Valmont's request for sexual favours, she responds, in the film: "Come back when you've succeeded with Mme de Tourvel ... and I will offer you ... a reward" (p. 9; cf. no. 20). This triangulation of desire (in the Girardian sense) involving a maternal character is mirrored, moreover, in the parallel plot to seduce Cécile de Volanges. Who, after all, is the real target of Valmont's rape and subsequent depravation of Cécile? Her mother, who has been a hindrance in the Vicomte's enterprise against Tourvel's virtue. As he tells Merteuil in the novel, when he discovers the role of Cécile's mother: "Ah! sans doute il faut séduire sa fille: mais ce n'est pas assez, il faut la perdre; et puisque l'âge de cette maudite femme la met à l'abri de mes coups, il faut la frapper dans l'objet de ses affections" (no. 44). As part of Cécile's moral corruption, Valmont denigrates Mme de Volanges, telling the girl, as she says, "de drôles de choses" about her mother's conduct (no. 109). Hampton's scenario, however, is much more explicit: Valmont informs Cécile that her mother had been "one of the most notorious young women in Paris" and that he had himself enjoyed her favours, before her daughter's birth (p. 41). In effect, the Frears film again links a prior relationship of sexual desire with a maternal figure to a current female object of desire, adding a suggestion of incest by implying that Valmont could have been her father. But the corruption of Cécile is

26 Klein, pp. 395-96.
primarily a reflection of—and commentary on—Valmont’s seduction of Tourvel, and the inextricably interwoven relationships—between Valmont and Merteuil on the one hand, and between Valmont and Tourvel on the other—may also be explained through reference to the classical Oedipus complex: Valmont’s desire is simultaneously directed towards Tourvel and to a maternal figure, incarnated by Merteuil, which is at the very source of his desire. At the height of his exhilaration, after his seduction of Tourvel, Valmont rushes to Merteuil’s residence and continues his efforts to persuade her to reunite with him, insisting, “We just untied the knot, it was never broken,” and adding, a moment later, “I want to come home” (p. 56; cf. no. 133).27 With this in mind, we recall the earlier scene in Frears’s film—non-existent in the novel—where Valmont sits between Merteuil and Tourvel at Rosemonde’s musical soirée, alternately gazing intently at Tourvel and kissing Merteuil’s hand as a castrato entertains the company with a Handel aria (p. 40). The castration motif, which is underlined in this scene, is doubly important here, evoking both the unresolved Oedipus complex governing the apparent ambivalence of Valmont’s desire and the “castrating” nature of Merteuil’s action as a phallic mother figure.

We remember, with regard to the phallic mother theme, that throughout the film and the novel Merteuil consistently attempts to deflate Valmont’s ego, to humiliate him—to emasculate him, figuratively speaking. But she is particularly antagonistic towards Valmont’s desire to possess Tourvel and regularly taunts him with the accusation that he is in love, the worst possible infraction of the libertine code to which they proudly adhere. The Marquise uses the code to enable her to assume the masculine role of lawgiver, that is, paradoxically, to assume the role of the Father, whose Law is the basis of the castration complex. Merteuil’s censuring of Valmont’s love for Tourvel, perceived as a taboo in the libertine code, thus seems homologous to the Father’s censuring of the Child’s love for the Mother—she acts as the libertine conscience or “superego.”

27 Cf. Laclos: “Ai-je donc jamais cessé d’être constant pour vous? Nos liens ont été dénoués, et non pas rompus; notre prétendue rupture ne fut qu’une erreur de notre imagination” (no. 133).

In a very recent study of Frears’s Dangerous Liaisons in the context of the Don Juan myth (discovered, most gratefully, after the writing of this study), Marina Warner remarks that “in the late 1980s, when the rake asks to come home, he is not talking to a beloved mistress or a forsaken wife, but rather to another woman in his life—his mother” (“Valmont—or the Marquise Unmasked,” in Don Giovanni: Myths of Seduction and Betrayal, pp. 99-100). Warner adds, in further support of the notion of Merteuil’s maternal relationship to Valmont: “Laclos shadows forth another kind of mothering in the famous seducer’s life [Don Juan’s] when he creates his monstrous Marquise, and Hampton caught his drift and rendered visible the invisible mother of Don Juan in the form of Mme de Merteuil” (p. 100).
And when the Vicomte pursues the object of his desire despite her admonitions, the Marquise punishes him, applies the Law, by forcing him to break with Tourvel.  

It is, in fact, the mère-œil, the maternal eye, replacing the paternal eye as the source of the Law, which drives Valmont to his violent rupture with Tourvel, one of the most psychoanalytically significant scenes of the film. Responding to Merteuil’s mocking denigration of his love, the Vicomte brutally and sadistically terminates his relationship with Tourvel, declaring throughout the encounter that “it’s beyond my control” (pp. 65-66). He begins his recitation as he stares at his reflection in a large mirror on the wall, obviously torn between the cynical image he is trying to project and his love for Tourvel. The schizophrenic reference, in conjunction with the repeated assertion that his conduct is “beyond his control,” evokes the psychical origin of the Vicomte’s action, the traumatic event that the “compulsion to repeat” drives him to re-enact. If Valmont is himself so devastated by his rupture with Tourvel, as is apparent in the film, we may conjecture that he too has experienced the shock of contact with “the real” by repeating the long-repressed and very painful separation from the Mother, the symbolic castration which propels the male child towards adulthood. The sadistic nature of Valmont’s action at this point in the film, emphasized explicitly by the physical abuse he adds to his emotional torture of Merteuil, recalls Melanie Klein’s insistence on the sadistic tendencies of the infant during both the narcissistic and Oedipal stages of its development, in reaction to oral frustration by the mother. Valmont’s sadism, which figures prominently in the novel as well, where he titillates himself at the thought of Tourvel’s “lente agonie”—the “slow death” of her virtue (no. 70)—may thus also be perceived as a compulsive repetition of a tendency characteristic of infantile sexuality. The traumatic effect, on himself, of Valmont’s separation from Tourvel will be magnified by the subsequent refusal by Merteuil to grant Valmont the long-hoped-for sexual possession, forcing the Vicomte to relive, once again, the frustration of original desire, the separation from the maternal figure, the “éternelle rupture” against which he so vigorously protested at the beginning of the novel (no. 15).

28 Cf. Warner: “Just as the law is embodied by the Commendatore [in Don Giovanni], so Valmont’s law is laid down by the Marquise” (p. 102).
29 Klein, p. 214.
30 The nostalgia of a happiness irrevocably lost, evocative of the Oedipal stage, is stressed by the Marquise near the end of the novel, after she wistfully recalls the love and happiness she and Valmont once shared: “Mais pourquoi s’occuper encore d’un bonheur qui ne peut revenir? Non, quoi que vous en disiez, c’est un retour impossible” (no. 131). The archetypal “retour impossible” is the adult male’s reunion with the Mother.
Valmont’s Oedipal dilemma, finally, is again thrust into the foreground in the duel scene at the end of Frears’s film. In a sequence informed by Valmont’s flashbacks of lovemaking with Tourvel, “imaginary” scenes evoking sexual desire, the Vicomte symbolically submits to castration, allowing his own sword, an obvious phallic symbol, to drop to the ground as he lets himself be fatally wounded—that is, emasculated—by Danceny’s weapon. Danceny is, here again, only a proxy for Merteuil, however, as we are reminded by Valmont as he warns the Chevalier to beware of the Marquise: “I must tell you: in this affair, we are both her creatures” (p. 73). The son is, literally, the creature of the mother and, in this case, the victim as well. Valmont’s symbolic acceptance of castration, his definitive separation from the Mother, is accompanied, significantly, by a realization of the authenticity of his love for Tourvel, who is dying in the convent: “I’m glad not to have to live without her. Tell her her love was the only real happiness I’ve ever known,” he instructs Danceny as he draws his final breath (p. 73). Valmont’s story ends, as the Oedipus complex ends, when he finally enters manhood and is able to love a woman for herself, and not as a proxy for his mother. Too late, of course, to do him much good.

The purpose of this study has been to re-examine the Merteuil and Valmont characters in the light of psychoanalytical clues provided by the Frears-Hampton film, Dangerous Liaisons, which offers, in this respect, an original and thought-provoking reading of Laclos’s novel. The complexity of the Merteuil character, which has long fascinated and sometimes consternated readers of Laclos, may be attributed, as we have attempted to demonstrate, to her multiple functions as narcissistic female, phallic Mother, and even, in a certain sense, as a symbolic Father figure. As for Valmont, the film encourages us to read the novel, like the Don Juan myth, as a Freudian parable on sexual immaturity, a symbolic discourse portraying the libertine as an infantilized male compulsively repeating the pleasurable and painful stages of the Oedipus complex and its sequels.

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