



5-2000

Les Liaisons amicales : desexualizing women in the Riccoboni-Laclos exchange

Alistaire Tallent

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Master's Thesis, University of Tennessee, 2000.
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To the Graduate Council:

I am submitting herewith a thesis written by Alistaire Tallent entitled "Les Liaisons amicales : desexualizing women in the Riccoboni-Laclos exchange." I have examined the final electronic copy of this thesis for form and content and recommend that it be accepted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts, with a major in French.

Mary McAlpin, Major Professor

We have read this thesis and recommend its acceptance:

Edmund J. Campos

Accepted for the Council:

Carolyn R. Hodges

Vice Provost and Dean of the Graduate School

(Original signatures are on file with official student records.)

To the Graduate Council

I am submitting herewith a thesis written by Alistaire Tallent entitled "Les Liaisons amicales Desexualizing Women in the Riccoboni-Laclos Exchange" I have examined the final copy of this thesis for form and content and recommend that it be accepted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Art, with a major in French

Mary McAlpin
Mary McAlpin, Major Professor

John B. Romin JBR,
Graduate
Director

We have read this thesis
and recommend its acceptance

Edmund J. Campion

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Associate Vice Chancellor and
Dean of The Graduate School

Les Liaisons amicales:

Desexualizing Women in the Riccoboni-Laclos Exchange

A thesis presented for Master of Art Degree
The University of Tennessee, Knoxville

Alistaire Tallent

May 2000

Abstract

The 1782 correspondence between Marie-Jeanne Riccoboni and Choderlos Laclos is primarily a discussion of the Marquise de Merteuil, a character in Laclos' recently published novel, Les Liaisons dangereuses. Riccoboni, a well-known author of the time, writes to Laclos to express her objections to his presentation of such an evil female character, and Laclos responds with a defense of his choice of such a character. Yet through the course of the eight letters, another dispute appears. As Laclos describes Merteuil's crimes, his desire to continue this exchange with Riccoboni, and the attractive qualities of virtuous female characters, his tone and word choice indicate a sexual manner of perceiving women. Riccoboni responds to this with her own version of Merteuil's crimes and a refusal to allow Laclos to treat her or other women in terms of their sexuality. In my thesis, I analyze this subtler debate and describe the presence of this same conflict in examples of Riccoboni and Laclos' fictional works.

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I. Introduction

Les Liaisons dangereuses by Pierre Choderlos de Laclos was published from April 7 through 10, 1782. Although Laclos wrote no other novels, this one work was enough of a success to earn him a place among France's greatest writers. And this success was immediate; his work was widely read, and perhaps even more widely discussed. Everyone had an opinion on this popular yet controversial book. One of these opinions has been preserved for us in the form of a correspondence between the woman writer Marie Jeanne Riccoboni and Laclos.

Riccoboni wrote her first letter to Laclos on April 14, 1782 after reading Les Liaisons dangereuses. She wrote primarily to criticize Laclos for having presented such a vile female character as the Marquise de Merteuil. Riccoboni's letter provoked eight letters back and forth in an exchange that lasted two months and was published with the next edition of the novel. In this thesis, I first synthesize briefly the ideas presented in this correspondence, then examine how Riccoboni argues over the course of the exchange, that women should be judged as entities independent of their sexuality. (By sexuality I do not mean gender, for Riccoboni was not that type

of feminist, I mean rather a woman's ability to arouse sexual desire in, or to develop a sexual relationship with, a man) Riccoboni accomplishes this reevaluation by reinterpreting the crimes of Merteuil. Riccoboni subtly and carefully points out in her letters that in his novel and in his letters to her Laclos focuses on the erotic aspects of the relations between men and women. Riccoboni issues a plea for Laclos and all men to explore platonic friendships with women. In this way Riccoboni reasserts the value of women as human individuals and implores Laclos to see women as beings independent of their sexuality.

In conclusion, I argue that understanding the difference between Laclos and Riccoboni's visions of male-female relationships as presented in the correspondence is the key to decoding the depiction of such relationships in their fictional works, namely Les Liaisons dangereuses and Riccoboni's Lettres d'Adélaïde de Dammartin, Comtesse de Sancerre (1766.) In Les Liaisons dangereuses, Laclos creates a powerful friendship between Merteuil and Valmont, but the force of this friendship is primarily the sexual tension that exists between the two. In Riccoboni's novel there is no such tension between the Comtesse de Sancerre and her friend the Comte de Nancé, yet their friendship is just as strong. Riccoboni shows men and women relating to one another without the complications born of sexual desire, whereas sexuality is integral to the world created by Laclos. In fact it is after reading about the sexually tense friendship in Laclos' novel that Riccoboni decides to write Laclos with her opinion and critique.

The influence of public opinion on the writing process in the eighteenth century was far greater and more direct than that of today. Writers such as Samuel Richardson would publish books in installments and wait to see what public reaction brought before writing the next chapter; Jean-Jacques Rousseau commented as follows on the many letters from the public concerning his Nouvelle Héloïse:

J'ai rassemblé la plupart des lettres qui me furent écrites sur cet ouvrage dans une liasse qui est entre les mains de Mme de Nadaillac. Si jamais ce recueil paraît, on y verra des choses bien singulières, et une opposition de jugement qui montre ce que c'est d'avoir à faire au public. (Confessions, 331)

Given the popularity and controversy of Les Liaisons dangereuses Laclos must have also seen what it is to have to answer to the public. Certainly, the criticism raised by Riccoboni was not the only negative reaction he received. So why did Laclos respond to her remarks and build a correspondence with this one particular reader? And why was he so interested in her opinion as to prolong the correspondence as much as possible and later publish it?

The answer to these questions lies in the person of Marie Jeanne Riccoboni herself. Although rather obscure today, Riccoboni was one of the most widely read authors of the eighteenth century. Her best-selling epistolary novels usually recount the story of an extremely virtuous woman who is hopelessly in love and who is also disappointed and hurt by the uncaring and unfaithful object of her devotion. Similar themes can be found in the events of her personal life: the daughter of a bigamist and a jealous mother, Marie Jeanne quickly accepted a proposal of marriage from a neighbor, the actor Antoine François Riccoboni in 1734. Ruth Thomas describes her

husband as a “hot-headed and violent-tempered” (358) man who squandered money.

The two were legally separated in 1755, and Riccoboni moved in with a friend and fellow actress, Marie-Thérèse Biancolelli, who would remain her close friend until Riccoboni’s death. This long-lasting relationship resembles the warm and unconditional friendships that exist between the women characters in her novels.

Another real-life reflection of her writing can be found in the rumor that she was rejected by a young and ambitious soldier, the Comte de Maillebois, with whom she fell in love as a young woman, and who left her for a more advantageous marriage.

Although her marriage was unsuccessful, it did introduce Marie Jeanne to the Comédie Italienne, where her father-in-law was director and where she performed for twenty-six years. Riccoboni was a famous actress in her time, despite the opinion of many that she had very little talent. Riccoboni herself agreed with Diderot, who named her in his Paradoxe sur le comédien as an example of a sensitive person who is an unsuccessful actress because she cannot distance herself from her art.

Such hyper-sensitivity perhaps contributed to the success she saw as an author. Her career began when someone remarked that the style of Marivaux could not be imitated. Riccoboni sat down and wrote a continuation of La Vie de Marianne that was so convincing Marivaux had it published. Her original novels were even more successful. The first three, Lettres de Mistriss Fanni Butlerd, Histoire du Marquis de Cressy, and Lettres de Milady Juliette Catesby, are all epistolary and deal with the pain of women rejected by unfaithful lovers. Although she worked in several genres -- essays, letters, tales, and translations of English works-- her epistolary novels were

her most popular. As Thomas reports: "Lettres de Milady Juliette Catesby was second only to La Nouvelle Héloïse in the number of editions and printings during a three-year period [...] between 1780 and 1790 there were seven editions of her complete works" (357).

In 1772 Riccoboni was awarded a pension by Louis XV, and her writing career slowed down. Among her last works are several short stories with medieval settings and a tone that foreshadows the works of the Romantic movement. By the time she wrote to Laclos in 1782, she had more or less stopped publishing. Her last work would be published in 1786 and she would die in 1792.

Considering Riccoboni's very public career as an actress and as a writer, it is possible that Laclos cultivated the exchange with Riccoboni in order to use Riccoboni's letters to publicize his own novel. It is very likely that Laclos intended from the start to include the correspondence in the next edition of Les Liaisons dangereuses. Riccoboni's motivations are less clear. Her first letters are short and to the point, which seems to indicate that she meant only to send a simple literary critique. However, as the publication of personal correspondences was common practice at the time, it is also likely that Riccoboni was aware of Laclos' intentions as the correspondence developed. I shall therefore argue here that as the correspondence developed, Riccoboni wrote to Laclos out of more than just the desire to give a private literary critique to a newly successful author. The potentially large public for this correspondence furnished her with a forum to present her own

brand of feminism as she extended her criticism to the treatment of women in her society as a whole, not just in Les Liaisons dangereuses.

In general, critics up until now have focused on other aspects of the correspondence. Janie Vanpée discusses what it means to read as a woman in “Dangerous Liaisons 2: The Riccoboni-Laclos Sequel.” She begins the article looking at the “Préface” and the “Avertissement” of the novel, both of which imply in Vanpée’s opinion a female reader. She concludes that Riccoboni’s reaction to the novel is typical of women readers of the time. Riccoboni objects to Merteuil because she cannot identify with nor would she want to emulate such a character. Vanpée suggests that Laclos’ express intention was to create a character who would repel and repulse; finally, Vanpée proposes that Merteuil herself presents the example of a woman who, unlike Riccoboni, does not read mimetically or narcissistically.

While Vanpée examines how Riccoboni reads the novel, Antionette Sol looks at how Riccoboni writes in the correspondence. Sol asks what it means to write as a woman, and why Riccoboni chose to write as a woman. Why not voice her objections to the novel as an author rather than a woman? Sol reminds us that women in the eighteenth century were often seen as moral authorities, especially when they were able to shed their own “dangerous” sexuality. By writing as a woman, and an older woman, Riccoboni asserts this culturally authorized moral authority. However, Sol points out that writing as a woman placed restrictions on Riccoboni’s speech, in a manner representative of the dilemma all women writers of this century faced.

Although both critics touch upon the moments in the correspondence when Laclos attempts to flirt with Riccoboni and thus reduces her to a sexual being-- in response to which Riccoboni refuses this sexual treatment-- neither critic devotes much energy to this analysis. Vanpée mentions flirtation as one of the similarities between the novel and the correspondence, along with seduction, desire, military metaphors, and the practice of letter writers' quoting each other. Sol, when looking at the letter in which Laclos seems to be flirting with Riccoboni, focuses on Riccoboni's reaction to this flirtation only briefly before discussing further the concept of silence among women writers of the time.

In sharp contrast to Vanpée and Sol, I believe that the heart of Riccoboni's criticisms and therefore of the correspondence as a whole lies in her reaction to Laclos' abortive attempts to engage her in a flirtation. The question of women's sexuality is the central issue in this correspondence, and I intend to demonstrate that Riccoboni's opinion of and ideas about the book and about Merteuil are far less important than her ideas about the overall status of women in eighteenth-century France. These ideas are presented more subtly in the correspondence than the superficial literary debate, yet they are worthy of close inspection. When Riccoboni points out the instances in which Laclos considers women in terms of their sexuality and when she proposes platonic friendship as an alternative relationship for men and women, she is reiterating ideas she has already depicted in one of her own fictional works, Lettres d'Adélaïde de Dammartin, Comtesse de Sancerre. The potential publication value of these private letters to Laclos provided Riccoboni with another

occasion to present these ideas to the public. Thus, the topic of women's sexuality turns this correspondence into a vehicle for Riccoboni to present her style of feminism and transforms her letters from a literary critique into a social commentary.

II. Summary of the Correspondence and of Laclos' Tactics

Throughout the correspondence Laclos and Riccoboni discuss primarily the character Mme de Merteuil. At issue is whether Laclos, by presenting such an attractive yet dangerously evil character, fulfilled or neglected his moral obligations as a writer. Does Merteuil show readers an example of behavior to avoid, and if so, is that a sufficient message? As Riccoboni states in her first letter, a writer has two responsibilities to his public: "celui de plaire, et celui d'être utile." She feels that Laclos' depiction of Merteuil, an entertaining but immoral character, fulfills the first responsibility but neglects the second, and "en remplir un, ce n'est pas assez pour un homme honnête" (757). Laclos rebuts this first critique of Riccoboni, asserting that a character like Merteuil can serve a purpose as being the example of what not to do.

This subject provides the superficial disagreement of the correspondence, but there is another subtler conflict that takes place in these letters, involving Laclos' markedly sexual manner of viewing Merteuil, Riccoboni, and all women. When describing Merteuil, he names her crimes and almost every time the crime is sexual. He expresses the same inability to control his near-physical urge to communicate with Riccoboni, an established author several years his elder, that his Vicomte de Valmont expressed when trying to seduce La Présidente de Tourvel. Even Laclos' efforts to justify his love of women seem to show that this love is based more on the pleasure he receives from the beauty and charm of women than the respect women deserve as equal human beings. Thus, throughout the correspondence, through his choice of examples and the tone of his letters, Laclos presents and refers to women

in terms of their sexuality. I intend to show first how he does this, and then how Riccoboni tactfully and carefully points this out and also refuses to allow this treatment.

In her very first letter Riccoboni immediately addresses the character Mme de Merteuil, claiming she is an unjust and dangerous example of womanhood. She criticizes the image of French women Laclos presents to foreigners who read his book. While all the while maintaining a polite tone, Riccoboni claims that Mme de Merteuil is not true-to-life (such a woman does not exist) and not useful, in that she was not a good example to imitate. She says that it is not enough simply to entertain; a good writer should also provide a useful moral guide to his or her public. The letter is very brief, to the point and polite.

Laclos responds to Riccoboni's twelve lines with a letter of sixty-four lines, beginning the pattern of extremely long responses on the part of Laclos to the very brief comments of Riccoboni. The first paragraph of Laclos' response is very polite and flattering. Laclos thanks Riccoboni for having the goodness to share her opinion of his work, he then defends the possibility of the existence of such a woman as Merteuil by hinting at some personal experience with such a woman. In the next paragraph he begins a practice that will recur throughout the correspondence, he quotes Riccoboni in italics to respond to something she has said. This is the same tactic used by Merteuil and Valmont in the novel. He claims that even if Merteuil is a bad example of French women, other authors have presented such images anytime there has been a villainous character, such as Lovelace. Laclos then returns to his

own work, reminding Riccoboni that there were also positive examples of womanhood in the book, namely la Présidente de Tourvel and Mme de Rosemonde. He reminds Riccoboni of Letter CXXX, in which Mme de Rosemonde cautions the lovesick Présidente that love in a man is not the same thing as love in a woman.

It is possible that Laclos makes reference to this letter of his novel in order to emphasize his admiration for women. Here is a strong and virtuous female character he created who expresses a feminine perspective on love. Yet closer inspection of this perspective shows an interpretation of male-female relationships based on the male's pleasure, for Mme de Rosemonde is bemoaning the unfortunate status of women in these relationships, and her "realistic" view of love places women in the role of creators of masculine pleasure. Rosemonde describes the difference between a man in love and a woman in love:

L'homme jouit du bonheur qu'il ressent, et la femme de celui qu'elle procure. Cette différence, si essentielle et si peu remarquée, influe pourtant, d'une manière bien sensible, sur la totalité de leur conduite respective. Le plaisir de l'un est de satisfaire des désirs, celui de l'autre est surtout de les faire naître. Plaire n'est pour lui qu'un moyen de succès; tandis que pour elle, c'est le succès lui-même. (304)¹

Thus, the man in love enjoys the pleasures he receives from his love, and the woman enjoys the pleasures she gives. According to Mme de Rosemonde, the woman obtains her fulfillment in the relationship by being the source and object of desire.

Laclos then addresses Riccoboni's criticism that it is dangerous to give such an evil character as Merteuil attractive qualities by saying that such qualities do not

¹ All passages cited here from *Les Liaisons dangereuses* and from the Correspondence are taken from the 1979 Pléiade edition of *Laclos Œuvres complètes*

necessarily hide the evil within, as in the statue of a skeleton wearing a soft and flowing robe by Pigalle. But it is the terms he chooses to describe Merteuil's good qualities, which we might assume to be grace, charm and beauty, that first indicate his interpretation of the crimes of Merteuil. Laclos calls these qualities "cette parure dangereuse et séduisante." Although in the eighteenth century the word "séduisante" lacks the sexual connotation of today, in this particular example the modern interpretation holds true. Laclos may be describing Merteuil's qualities as simply charming and attractive, but these qualities are dangerous because they give her sexual power over men. In fact, it is the word "dangereuse" which recalls the readers' knowledge of Merteuil's actions and thus forms the first indication that the crimes of Merteuil are sexual in nature.

Laclos denies Riccoboni's claim that his sole intention in writing the novel was to please and entertain his public. He did in fact intend to give a moral lesson, through an example of what not to do. He advises any readers who may wish to have examples of virtue and to read about women worthy of emulation to read some of the works of Riccoboni or other women. He claims that women are the only ones capable of presenting the world and people as they should be; men can only present them as they are. They must be realistic. He then closes his first letter by offering Riccoboni a free copy of his book and hopes she will appreciate the sentiment behind his novel more than she appreciated the work itself.

Riccoboni responds to Laclos' letter with two paragraphs. She begins by acknowledging the flattery used by Laclos, demonstrating that she will not accept

this sort of attention without comment. She then attests that it is as a Frenchwoman and not as a fellow writer that she protests against Merteuil. Riccoboni denies the existence of such a real-life woman, stating that she at least has had the good fortune never to meet anyone like that. In her closing paragraph she thanks Laclos for the book and congratulates him on his success.

Although Riccoboni made no further criticisms in her reply to Laclos, he responds to this letter with another. This alacrity seems to indicate a desire on the part of Laclos to continue the correspondence rather than simply to defend himself. His first paragraph explains his unsolicited response as part of a need he cannot control, almost a physical urge to write:

Mais le moyen de ne pas répondre à votre obligeante lettre! De ne pas vous remercier de vos remerciements! Enfin que dirai-je? Cette correspondance peut cesser, et même je m'y attends [...] mais sans doute vous ne vous attendez pas que ce soit moi qui en donne l'exemple; ce sera bien assez de m'y conformer. J'ai appris depuis longtemps à supporter des privations, mais non à m'en imposer. (760)

Laclos' tone is reminiscent of the means of seduction used by Valmont in the early letters to La Présidente de Tourvel. In letter XXIV Valmont also refers to his inability to stop himself from communicating with her. He says:

Pourquoi vous ai-je parlé? Que n'ai-je pu résister au charme impérieux qui vous livrait mes pensées? Content de vous adorer en silence, je jouissais au moins de mon amour, [...] mais cette source de bonheur en est devenue une de désespoir. (53)

Valmont then justifies having spoken to Tourvel by again referring to his inability to stop himself: "qu' ai-je donc fait? Que céder à un sentiment involontaire, inspiré par la beauté et justifié par la vertu; toujours connu par le respect et dont l'innocent

aveu fut l'effet de la confiance et non de l'espoir" (54). Tourvel's response begins with the attestation that she does not wish to create a correspondence with Valmont, similar to Riccoboni's seeming reluctance to continue her correspondence with Laclos. Tourvel states: "Sûrement, Monsieur, vous n'auriez eu aucune lettre de moi, si ma sottise conduite hier au soir ne me forçait d'entrer aujourd'hui en explication avec vous" (Lettre XXVI, 56). In Valmont's next letter to Tourvel he again considers not writing or speaking to Tourvel as a sacrifice when he says: "Il faut vous obéir, Madame, il faut vous prouver qu'au milieu des torts que vous vous plaisez à me croire, il me reste [. .] assez de courage pour m'ordonner le silence et l'oubli! et bien! je forcerai mon amour à se taire" (Lettre XXXV, 72).

Vanpée also mentions the similarity between the novel and the correspondence. She compares the first few letters to Valmont's early letters to la Présidente de Tourvel. She describes Laclos as wanting to "persuade, if not seduce, Riccoboni into believing that his portrayal of the Marquise de Merteuil is founded on his observations and experience of real behavior" (56). Vanpée sees Laclos as expressing a desire similar to that expressed by Valmont: "As he defends his authority by claiming to love and desire women, he saturates the correspondence with his desire, metonymically transferred onto his correspondent, and thus confuses the issue" (57). But this observation is almost out of place in her article, other than as a tool to demonstrate the importance of the correspondence in studying the novel. She does not expand on these ideas

After expressing his inability to refrain from writing to Riccoboni, Laclos addresses her comment that it is as a Frenchwoman and not as a writer that she has protested against Merteuil. He first flatters her talent as a writer, and only then turns to a discussion of women. He says he loves women, the proof being the fact that he wrote about them. In his book he only wanted to expose the bad behavior exhibited by some of them, who bring shame to the many virtuous women. Further, if such evil women do not exist as Riccoboni states, why be offended and threatened? He compares her reaction to that of Don Quichotte, who attacks with full force an enemy who does not exist. Laclos then contradicts his earlier hints of some personal experience that formed the basis for the character and says he does not know if a Merteuil exists. He compares himself to Molière who made Tartuffe of a compilation of vices that exist separately in many men. He says that a woman with all of Merteuil's vices could perhaps not exist, but that there are women who have committed a few of her crimes individually.

The only point upon which the two seem to agree in the correspondence is in the belief that Merteuil was bad. Yet even here, the two authors have contrasting opinions of her crimes. Riccoboni's references to the evil done by Merteuil are less specific, but seem to point to being *false* as the root of her evil. Laclos is more direct as he specifically names these crimes. He lists five, the first four of which are sexual in nature. He begins by describing debauchery disguised as love; he will admit authorial wrongdoing only if no woman has ever given herself "à la débauche en feignant de se rendre à l'amour." In reference to Cécile, Laclos barely mentions

Merteuil's deceit and manipulation of the young girl, referring instead to her having facilitated and even provoked "la séduction de sa compagne, de *son amie*." Again the eighteenth century interpretation of "séduction" implies simply a leading astray, yet Riccoboni and all other readers know that Cécile is led astray sexually. Merteuil's crimes towards her lovers are mentioned, but again Laclos will admit his character is an unjust portrayal only if it can be said of all women that: "il ne s'en trouve point qui ait voulu perdre en effet son amant, devenu trop infidèle" (761). In the fourth crime mentioned he points to her "passions viles" as motivation for her misdeeds. As with "amour" and "infidèle" the word "passion" does not necessarily connote a sexual passion. However, given the context, the logical inference is sexual.

The fifth and final crime listed by Laclos deals with Merteuil's libertine habits. Keeping the same structure as the previous crimes, Laclos admits to committing an error with Merteuil only if "ce mot de *gaieté* n'a pas été profané, indistinctement par les hommes et par les femmes, pour exprimer des horreurs qui doivent révolter toute âme honnête" (761). Laurent Versini, editor of the Pléiade edition of Laclos' complete works, tells us that words such as "gaieté" signified the thoughtless pursuit of pleasure when used by libertines: "Ce vocabulaire reflète à la fois le style de vie des libertins blasés, pour lesquels le seul remède à l'ennui est une activité ludique, et une attitude à l'égard des valeurs et du bonheur" (1174). Merteuil's crime is that of being a libertine, evidenced by her use of libertine vocabulary.

Versini reminds us that Merteuil in Letter XX uses this word *gaieté*, when she responds to Valmont's proposal that if he succeeds in seducing the Présidente de

Tourvel, as a reward, he and Merteuil will resume their sexual relationship. She begins by describing how his proposal made her laugh, and eventually agrees to this plan, as long as Valmont can furnish written proof of his success. This acceptance comes only after a titillating description of her amusement: "J'en ai pourtant bien ri, et j'étais vraiment fâchée d'être obligée d'en rire toute seule. Si vous eussiez été là, je ne sais où m'aurait menée cette gaieté" (43). The word "gaieté," cited by Laclos in his correspondence, is used by Merteuil to insinuate a possible sexual desire. Therefore even this crime of devaluing the French language with libertine connotations, has as its root a scene in which Merteuil creates desire in a man.

The next paragraph of the correspondence seems to indicate Laclos' possible desire someday to publish this correspondence as a means to justify himself. Laclos says that he is exposing to Riccoboni some of the reasons behind his work, reasons that he may someday be forced to share with the world. He closes by discussing Merteuil's French nationality. Riccoboni should not be offended as a French woman because Merteuil could have been of any nationality. He uses the image of clothing to represent the nationality of a character and the person underneath as being otherwise naked. He refers to nationality as a "costume," as "l'habit français;" Merteuil is called "le nu." This metaphor is striking in its physicality.

All this seems to have been too much for Riccoboni, for she responds with her longest letter of the correspondence. I will look at this letter in greater detail in the next part of my study, but to summarize here, she begins by drawing attention to the subtle tricks used by Laclos. He began his last letter by stating that he could not

deprive himself of this correspondence; Riccoboni points out the absurdity of this idea and refutes Laclos' attempts to flirt with her in this or any way by referring to her age: "Un militaire, mettre au rang de ses *privations* la négligence d'une femme dont il a pu entendre parler à sa grand-mère!" (762).

Riccoboni then addresses Laclos' hint that his image of Merteuil was based on reality. Assuming this is true, Laclos could have chosen to describe the more pleasant images of women he has surely also encountered. The immoral women combined into the character Merteuil are already being punished by the law and do not need to be presented in literature. The lesson has already been taught by their punishment.

Riccoboni denies the comparisons with Molière's *Tartuffe* and Richardson's *Lovelace*. *Tartuffe* can be excused for being a compilation of vices because the theatre has certain constraints of time and space that must be observed. She then does an extraordinary thing, something Laclos ignores throughout the correspondence, and that critics have ignored as well. Riccoboni compares *Lovelace* to *Valmont*, not *Merteuil*. She briefly turns the focus of the discussion from *Merteuil* to *Valmont*, from the feminine villain to the masculine one. Riccoboni states that unlike *Lovelace*, whose behavior was based on a selfish love for *Clarissa*, *Valmont* is cold and indifferent: "Il trompe, il trahit de sang-froid, ce qu'un homme amoureux ne saurait faire" (763).

In the last paragraph of her letter Riccoboni launches her most effective attack. She begins by giving her own interpretation of the crimes of *Merteuil*, transferring

the focus away from Merteuil's sexual behavior and onto her intentional deceptiveness. Her description of Merteuil shows a conscious effort by the marquise to conceal her true self and her true intentions. Her sexuality is only mentioned in a negative comparison with prostitutes, as Merteuil has intentionally taken up the behavior that prostitutes have been forced into for survival.

The idea that Laclos wanted Merteuil to serve as a moral lesson to his readers seems ridiculous to Riccoboni, who feels that the most effective way to teach a lesson is by presenting "les vérités douces et simples qui s'insinuent aisément dans le coeur; on ne peut se défendre d'en être touché parce qu'elles parlent à l'âme et l'ouvrent au sentiment dont on veut la pénétrer" (763).

Riccoboni attacks Merteuil's lack of verisimilitude, saying that Laclos went too far and that this exaggeration prevents the reader from drawing any moral lesson from such a character. Riccoboni also denies the usefulness of a negative example when she says that a character such as Merteuil is unnecessary, for there are enough examples of what not to do in life; we need positive examples to follow in our literature. "On n'a pas besoin de prévenir contre les crimes; tout le monde en conçoit de l'horreur. Mais des règles de conduite seront toujours nécessaires, et ce sera toujours un mérite d'en donner" (763). Finally she invites Laclos and all men to see women as beings independent of their sexuality. She describes the attributes of a friendship between a man and a woman that is free of sexual tension. She closes by warning Laclos to adopt her view of women, or else face the "malediction" of the feminine half of the world.

Far from heeding Riccoboni's pleas, Laclos immediately begins flirting with her in the next letter. He mentions his desire to hear from Riccoboni in the first paragraph of this letter: "il est si difficile de s'arrêter dans ses désirs, que je souhaite actuellement mériter qu'au moins par la suite, votre politesse ne soit plus le seul motif de votre correspondance" (764). What does he want her motivation to be? Does he hope she shares his desire? Using such terminology with a woman who has just asked to be viewed as a human individual and not as a sexual being seems to indicate an inability on the part of Laclos to see women as people, rather than potential lovers. The entire paragraph is again reminiscent of letters written by Valmont while trying to seduce La Présidente de Tourvel. Again Laclos cannot help but see Riccoboni's silence as a "privation." "Je ne peux pas même gagner sur moi de ne pas trouver *une privation* dans votre silence" (764). He turns Riccoboni's comment that she is old enough to be his grandmother into flattery:

Je me rappelle fort bien d'avoir entendu, comme vous dites, Madame, parler de vous à ma grand-mère; j'en parle même encore tous les jours avec mon père, qui n'est plus jeune; et pour tout dire, je ne le suis plus moi-même. Mais nos petits-neveux parleront aussi de vous à leur tour; et si après vous avoir lue, ils ne regardaient pas comme une privation de ne plus vous avoir à lire, j'estimerais bien peu le goût de la postérité. (764)

Does Laclos really expect Riccoboni to believe he speaks with his father about her *every day*? This is an obvious and exaggerated attempt at flattery, after Riccoboni has twice indicated that she does not wish to be the object of flattery or flirtation.

Finally Laclos returns to the subject at hand. He again quotes Riccoboni in order to refute her point that he could have chosen a more pleasant image of women to

paint. Laclos insists that, just as a painting of a storm can be as beautiful as a painting of calm seas, his choice of Merteuil is valid. In fact, as a man, he had no choice but to depict an immoral woman instead of a virtuous one, for no man can describe accurately the virtues of women. As he states that he would never be able to describe all the virtues of the average woman, he intermingles the typical faults assigned to women in his day with their virtues. He considers women to have attractive weaknesses such as “la raison sans raisonnements, l’esprit sans prétention! l’abandon de la tendresse et la réserve de la modestie; la solidité de l’âge mûr et l’enjouement folâtre de l’enfance!” These are described as “défauts devenus séduisants” (765). Again the ambiguity associated with the word “séduisante” as used by Laclos allows for a possible sexual connotation of the male examination of female strengths and weaknesses.

He then claims that only women are capable of accurately describing the virtues of women, for some of their own natural charm and virtue rubs off on the work, whereas a man would become too excited by his model to succeed in describing how wonderful she is:

mais quel homme assez froid peut faire une étude tranquille de ce modèle enchanteur? Quelle main ne sera pas tremblante? Quels yeux ne seront point troublés?.. Et si cet homme impassible existe, par là même il ne fera qu’une image imparfaite. Dans son tableau sans vie et sans chaleur, je ne retrouverai plus la femme qu’il faut aimer. Celle-là ne peut se reconnaître qu’aux transports qu’elle excite; et celui qui les ressent s’occupe-t-il à les peindre? (765)

The fact that he mentions male hands and eyes shows his physical and masculine approach to the interpretation of women. Any description of a woman that does not

elicit physical pleasure in its male author is not sufficient. Laclos seems to clarify that an insufficient description of a woman is one that does not begin in love (aimer); not admiration nor respect, but physical love. The description of women is given over totally to the sexual responses that the woman induces in the man describing her. Laclos' focus here is on the male creator and not the female model, indicating again that Laclos sees women only in terms of the sexual pleasure they bring to men.

Laclos' focus here is reminiscent of the letter of Mme de Rosemonde he cited earlier, in which a woman in love is described as deriving her pleasure from arousing desire and pleasure in a man. Just as the woman's role in a relationship is to inspire desire in her lover, the role of the ideal fictional female character is to inspire desire in the man describing her. Again Laclos' efforts to justify himself and his respect for women reveal his inability to remove women from the objective role.

Laclos then mentions that he has many women friends who like his book. He starts to ask Riccoboni to show similar indulgence towards him and his work, but then mysteriously claims the need to stop himself before he falls back into "une petite contradiction," a reference to an earlier comment by Riccoboni in which she pointed out Laclos' contradictory behavior as being ridiculous flirtation. He ends the letter by stating that he has more to say, and that if she wants him to stop the correspondence she must write him and tell him so. This technique is again that of Valmont, who tells La Présidente that he will end his pursuit of her only if she tells him to do this herself: "je ne trouve le courage de m'éloigner qu'en en recevant l'ordre de votre bouche" (Letter XLII, 85)

The next letter is from Laclos, who took Riccoboni's silence as permission to continue. In this letter Laclos concerns himself primarily with the morality of his work. He again refers to Molière's *Tartuffe* as a precedent for what he wants to do, claiming that writers and society in general are charged with punishing those crimes the law does not. For example, people ridicule faults and show indignation for vices. He says that by giving Merteuil and Valmont the vices present in his society he hoped to bring attention and indignation to them. Of Merteuil he claims that her behavior is not that of a prostitute, but rather much more calculating. He says that her morals are "celles de ces femmes, plus viles encore, qui savent calculer ce que le rang ou la fortune leur permettent d'ajouter à ces vices infâmes; et qui en redoublent le danger par la profanation de l'esprit et des graces" (767). This time his description begins to come closer to Riccoboni's; Merteuil's crimes are more about manipulation than sexuality. He finishes this paragraph by saying that these vices are terrible, but still useful as an example of that against which we must defend ourselves. He finishes his letter by again thanking Riccoboni for her honest opinion of his work. He is glad of the attention his book has brought him, if for no other reason than that he has had the chance to correspond with someone he has always admired.

The final letter of the correspondence is a very brief one by Riccoboni, in which she states that neither she nor Laclos will change his or her mind and that continuing the debate is futile. She wisely predicts that the debate over Merteuil will never be resolved ("une dispute dont nos derniers neveux ne verraient pas la fin.") She

reminds Laclos of the brilliant success of his work, and points out that one critical opinion should not detract from his confidence

Throughout the correspondence, while justifying his depiction of an evil character such as Merteuil in his novel, Laclos incriminates himself. He demonstrates an inability to view Merteuil, Riccoboni, and women in general separately from their sexuality. He uses words such as "séduisante," "séduction," "infidèle," and "passions" to describe Merteuil and her crimes. He flirts with Riccoboni the same way that he has his character Valmont flirt with la Présidente de Tourvel: he uses the same flattery, he expresses the same inability to refrain from writing her, and he makes the same request that she write him if she decides she wants to stop the correspondence. Finally, he describes his admiration for women as being based on their seductive attributes and faults and on the fact that they are so attractive, that no man can even adequately describe their virtues without becoming physically excited. Riccoboni does not let these comments go unnoticed. In the next part of my study, I examine in greater detail Riccoboni's response to these tactics and her own ideas presented in her third letter.

III Riccoboni's Stance

I have already shown how several of Laclos' comments reflect a sexual interpretation of women: Laclos believes Merteuil is evil and dangerous because she is seductive, he cannot control his near-physical desire to write to Riccoboni, and he feels that male authors cannot adequately describe virtuous female characters because they become too aroused by them. I intend to show here how Riccoboni refutes this interpretation of Merteuil, herself, and women in general by reinterpreting the crimes of Merteuil, by bringing to Laclos and the readers' attention that many men, including Laclos, do not see women as beings, but rather as agents of sexual pleasure, before finally imploring Laclos and all men to pursue the platonic friendship of women. The brand of feminism presented here shows women (albeit softer and kinder than men) as valuable creatures apart from their sexual role.

In her third and longest letter of the correspondence Riccoboni responds to Laclos' depiction of the crimes of Merteuil and presents a description meant as a correction and rebuttal. Riccoboni proposes another interpretation of this evil character, which emphasizes her deceptiveness and immoral intentions rather than her sexual powers. This change of emphasis shows that just being sexually active, even promiscuous, does not necessarily make a woman dangerous or evil. It is rather the fact that Merteuil was deliberately misleading and manipulative that renders her a "vile creature." Riccoboni presents most of her arguments in this third letter, in which she describes Merteuil as:

une vile créature, appliquée dès sa première jeunesse à se former au vice, à se faire des principes de noirceur, à se composer un masque pour cacher à tous regards le dessein d'adopter les moeurs d'une de ces malheureuses que la misère réduit à vivre de leur infamie. (763)

Thus the main evil of Merteuil's crimes according to Riccoboni is the fact that she manipulated and misled people. She made herself appear to be something she was not. Merteuil's lack of fidelity and her sexual immorality are nowhere mentioned in Riccoboni's list of her crimes.

In this description of Merteuil's crimes, each verb describing Merteuil's actions is reflexive: "*se former au vice [...] se faire des principes de noirceur, [et] se composer un masque.*" The use of the reflexive places the emphasis of the sentence and the accusation on Merteuil. She is not a victim of her society or of fate; she did this herself. As Merteuil says herself in Lettre LXXXI of Les Liaisons dangereuses to the Vicomte de Valmont:

quand m'avez vous vue m'écarter des règles que je me suis prescrites, et manquer à mes principes? je dis mes principes, et je le dis à dessein: car ils ne sont pas, comme ceux des autres femmes, donnés au hazard, reçus sans examen et suivis par habitude, ils sont le fruit de mes profondes réflexions, je les ai créés, et je puis dire que je suis mon ouvrage. (170)

It is Merteuil's role as creator of her evil as much as her evil actions that Riccoboni admonishes.

Riccoboni considers Merteuil's deceptiveness as being much more dangerous than her sexuality. She condemns Merteuil for denying her natural humanity, making herself a monster, and hiding all this with a mask-- an interesting commentary from a former actress. Riccoboni herself spent many years on the stage pretending to be

someone she was not, hiding her true self behind the mask of her character. Her feelings about Merteuil are clearer if we consider Diderot's semi-compliment of her in his Paradoxe sur le comédien. He says that Riccoboni was too sensitive to be able to distance herself from her art. She was a less effective actress because she could not be untrue. One can assume then that Riccoboni was a bad but honest actress, who therefore had no respect for a character like Merteuil who is very convincing at hiding her true self.

Riccoboni also takes offense at the fact that Merteuil behaved immorally intentionally, forming a contrast with other women who perhaps exhibit the same sexual promiscuity but cause no intentional harm. Merteuil has sex with men she does not love. Riccoboni is quick to point out the difference between her and other women who also do this, namely prostitutes. Merteuil is evil because she chooses promiscuity. According to Riccoboni's word choice, prostitutes are "malheureuses" who are forced into this lifestyle by necessity. Thus, the fact that Merteuil has sex is not enough to make her a monster and Laclos' definition of her crimes is not accurate. By creating the image of a sad prostitute Riccoboni shows the potential humanity behind a sexually active woman, and reinforces that Merteuil's sexuality was not the problem.

Riccoboni's argument is effective; as seen above, Laclos revises his view of Merteuil in his final letter. This time he considers her dangerous tools of manipulation to be her "rang" her "graces" and her "esprit." Descriptions of her sexual accomplishments and powers are conspicuously absent. It thus appears that

Riccoboni managed to turn the author's focus away from the sexual aspect of his own character's evil in a correspondence based on this character

Riccoboni refuses to allow Laclos to reduce the evil of Merteuil to simply her sexuality. She also refuses to allow Laclos to reduce her, Riccoboni, to an object of flirtation and desire by drawing attention to Laclos' flirtations in the correspondence. A part of this flirtation is a manipulative use of effusive flattery. Riccoboni herself begins by employing such flattery, as this was the typical, polite manner of writing for the time. But Riccoboni stops when Laclos goes too far and turns this convention into open flirtation. She brings to his attention the instances when he behaves illogically and even exaggerates her own use of flattery to show how ridiculous Laclos sounds. In so doing she refuses to allow Laclos to manipulate her with flattery. She insists on being treated as an equal human being.

As early as her second letter, her first reply to a letter by Laclos, she responds with near sarcastic gratitude for the compliments Laclos paid her: "Vous êtes bien généreux, Monsieur, de répondre par des compliments si polis, si flatteurs, si spirituellement exprimés, à la liberté que j'ai osé prendre d'attaquer le fond d'un ouvrage dont le style et les détails méritent tant de louanges" (759). Her exaggerated tone and her choice of the word "flatteur" bring to Laclos and the potential readers' attention the point at which Laclos' use of polite flattery becomes absurd.

Riccoboni begins her next letter by again pointing out an instance in which Laclos abuses the conventions of polite behavior. Laclos has given her leave to end the correspondence, and yet enclosed his address, such contradictory behavior is

suspicious to Riccoboni: "Me croire dispensée de vous répondre, Monsieur, et me donner votre adresse, c'est au moins une petite contradiction" (762). She admits that some people may consider her uncivilized, but she certainly understands the rules of polite society that require her to respond in this situation. Laclos of course knew this, and must have enclosed his address to force her to respond. Riccoboni shows here that she will not allow Laclos to manipulate her without comment.

In this same letter Riccoboni again refuses to play the standard epistolary game by stepping outside the correspondence and commenting on it. This time Riccoboni comments on a statement by Laclos that his correspondence with Riccoboni is a pleasure of which he cannot deprive himself, a statement dripping with flattery and hinting at flirtation. Riccoboni acknowledges this attempt and ridicules Laclos by reminding him that she is old enough to be his grandmother. She states, "Une de vos expressions me semble assez singulière" (762). She immediately puts the spotlight on a flirtatious statement, that will seem all the more ridiculous in this light: "Un militaire, mettre au rang de ses *privations* la négligence d'une femme dont il a pu entendre parler à sa grand-mère! Cela ne vous fait-il pas rire, Monsieur?" Obviously Riccoboni finds Laclos' behavior laughable and therefore denies Laclos his opportunity and power to flirt with her.

The reference to her age is perhaps not only a means to show how ridiculous Laclos' statement is, it is also a means for Riccoboni to render herself asexual. Antoinette Sol looks at this part of Riccoboni's writing in her article, "Why Write as a Woman?: The Riccoboni-Laclos Correspondence." She feels that Riccoboni

reminds Laclos of her age in order to refuse “the sexuality that comes with a *biological* female identification” (37; Sol’s italics.) Sol also gives another example of Riccoboni avoiding the associations that come with her sex. In L’Abeille, a collection of narratives written by Riccoboni, she purposely kept her sex a secret, in order to remain “asexual” and therefore credible.

Throughout the correspondence, Laclos displayed a sexual manner of relating to women in general, not just Merteuil and Riccoboni. He describes all women as exhibiting seductive strengths and weaknesses and as creating physical pleasure in any man attempting to describe their virtues. Until the end of her third letter Riccoboni seems to stay away from generalizations. There is, however, in her description of Merteuil the statement concerning prostitutes, whom she considers to be sad victims of society, forced to behave promiscuously for economic reasons. Other than this, her arguments are directed primarily at the character Merteuil and herself.

Then Riccoboni turns the attention away from Merteuil and herself in the last paragraph of her third letter, as she makes her most significant point. Riccoboni widens the scope of her arguments and proposes a de-sexualized, platonic friendship as a better means for all men to relate to women and advises Laclos and his fellow men to appreciate further the friendship of women. Too often men see women only in terms of a possible sexual relationship. Riccoboni describes what can be gained when a man forgets this and sees the person and the intellect behind the body of a woman, and she warns Laclos that someday he will regret the friendship he is

neglecting to cultivate with women: “Vous ne savez pas, Monsieur, combien vous regretterez un jour leur amitié. Elle est si douce, elle devient si agréable à votre sexe, quand ses passions amorties lui permettent de ne plus les regarder comme l’objet de son amusement.” She explains what women can offer as friends that other men cannot: “Les hommes s’estiment, se servent, s’obligent même, mais sont-ils capables de ces attentions délicates, de ces petits soins, de ces complaisances continuelles et consolantes dont l’amitié des femmes fait seule goûter les charmes?” Riccoboni agrees that women are different from men, and have different attributes. However she believes that these differences do not arise from their sexuality and can be advantageous to a man. She concludes by again warning Laclos to create friendships with women: “Changez de système, Monsieur, ou vous vivrez chargé de la malédiction de la moitié du monde, excepté de la mienne pourtant” (764).

This is not the only way Riccoboni denies Laclos’ sexual interpretation of women in general. She also is able to transfer the points she makes about how Laclos should view Merteuil and herself onto all women, by reminding Laclos that she herself is woman like any other.

Riccoboni is very conscious of how she is presented in the correspondence. In a footnote to the first letter in the Pléiade edition of the correspondance, Laurent Versini remarks that the sentences, “Je ne suis pas surprise qu’un fils de M. de Choderlos écrive bien. L’esprit est héréditaire dans sa famille,” seem to indicate a previous relationship between Riccoboni and Laclos’ family. Versini confirms this suspicion by verifying that Choderlos de Laclos participated in the theatrical

adaptation of Riccoboni's book, Ernestine. Yet neither Laclos nor Riccoboni makes reference to this fact, as Versini states: "Laclos s'adresse uniquement à la romancière, en se gardant de lui rappeler son passé de comédienne" (1588). However Riccoboni corrects Laclos when he addresses her as a writer:

Vous me feriez un tort véritable en m'attribuant la partialité *d'un auteur* [...] C'est en qualité de femme, Monsieur, de Française, de patriote zélée pour l'honneur de ma nation, que j'ai senti mon coeur blessé du caractère de Madame de Merteuil. (759)

Thus we see Riccoboni defined three ways: as an actress, as a writer, and as a woman. It is therefore very significant that, of the three, she herself chose to present herself as a woman.

Riccoboni also associates herself with women in general at the end of her third letter. After urging Laclos to change his manner of viewing women, she warns him that if he persists in this thinking he will be forced to live with the ill will of the female half of the world. She finishes this sentence with: "excepté la mienne pourtant," reassuring Laclos that she will maintain her respect for him despite his mistakes. What is significant here is that she makes certain to include herself in this "moitié du monde." She reminds Laclos that she is a part of this group, which he has been treating sexually.

As mentioned above, Sol feels Riccoboni insists on being identified as a woman in order to present herself as a stronger moral authority. Following the writings of the philosophes such as Rousseau, women were seen in the eighteenth century as naturally more virtuous. In this sense, by reminding Laclos of her gender Riccoboni is also reminding him of her natural ability to better judge the morality of his work.

However, I think Riccoboni chooses to write as a woman to remind Laclos that she is a woman just like Merteuil and all other women; when she refuses to allow Laclos to treat her in terms of her sexuality, it is for all women. She is a woman, but an older, sexually unavailable woman. What was a ridiculous and inappropriate way to address her is a ridiculous and inappropriate way to address all women. Since it has already been established through the compliments made by Laclos himself that he has great respect for her opinion, and since now all sexual desire for Riccoboni has been shown to be blatantly impossible, Riccoboni is able to make herself a woman independent of her sexuality -- as she wants to happen for all women.

In her last letter Riccoboni states that the two will never reach an agreement and that it would be fruitless to continue. She is obviously referring to the literary disagreements concerning verisimilitude, the moral responsibility of a writer and the moral issues of presenting a character such as Merteuil; less obviously she implies by extension that the two will never agree on how to regard women. After all, the two begin the correspondence on opposite ends of the spectrum, Laclos viewing Merteuil and women in terms of their sexuality and Riccoboni refusing to allow that. Even after Riccoboni's long letter explaining in detail her feelings on this subject come two letters in which Laclos continues to describe women erotically. On the general subject on the nature of women, Riccoboni seems to be correct when she claims that neither she nor Laclos has changed his or her opinion, nor will they ever

In contrast to the impasse on the more general issue of sexual politics, the portion of the exchange involving the nature of Merteuil's crimes is much more dynamic.

Although by the end Laclos still flirts with Riccoboni and refuses to heed her advice on how to regard women, he does change his explanation of Merteuil's crimes from being sexual in nature to being manipulative. Gone are the sexual overtones, and instead we see a manipulative woman hiding behind her intellect and grace. He seems to have changed his interpretation of Merteuil's vices the better to reflect Riccoboni's opinion. Some common ground is found. Could it be that Riccoboni felt this small victory was enough? In any case, the fact that she stops the correspondence here seems to indicate that she feels her point has been made.

IV. Male-Female Friendship in Les Liaisons dangereuses andLettres d'Adélaïde de Dammartin, Csse de Sancerre

Riccoboni's request that Laclos and all men see women as friends and not lovers was all the more radical in that there were so few examples of such a relationship in the literature of the time. The representation of a relationship between a man and a woman that did not involve sex was practically unheard of in eighteenth-century novels. In almost every work of the period that presents the relationship between a man and a sexually available or active woman (one not too young nor too old, neither the man's mother nor his sister, etc), their relationship revolves around their love and a potential sexual relationship. Even when there is no sexual relationship, the lack of this sexuality is the focal point. The woman is an amazingly chaste woman, we witness unrequited love, etc. Almost always, the female characters fulfill a sexual function. Riccoboni's proposal was therefore revolutionary for the time, especially with regard to the literature of the period.

The different points of view of Riccoboni and Laclos in the correspondence can also be seen in their fictional works. Riccoboni, the proponent for platonic friendships between men and women, had provided the reading public with an example of such a relationship in 1766 in her novel, Lettres d'Adélaïde de Dammartin, Csse de Sancerre. In this novel we see brought to life all the benefits of a relationship such as that described in her letter to Laclos. Laclos also presents an

important friendship between a man and a woman in his novel, Les Liaisons dangereuses, yet in this case the friendship is filled with sexual tension. In his fictional work as well as his letters, Laclos is unable to separate women from their sexuality.

The friendship between Merteuil and Valmont is central to Les Liaisons dangereuses. Mme de Merteuil and the Vicomte de Valmont are the two most powerful, intelligent, and manipulative characters of the novel. Throughout most of the novel they are friends who are honest (or relatively honest) only with each other. Valmont discusses the importance and advantages of this friendship in Letter C:

J'ai éprouvé plus d'une fois combien votre amitié pouvait être utile; je l'éprouve encore en ce moment; car je me sens plus calme depuis que je vous écris; au moins, je parle à quelqu'un qui m'entend, et non aux automates près de qui je végète depuis ce matin. En vérité, plus je vais, et plus je suis tenté de croire qu'il n'y a que vous et moi dans le monde, qui valions quelque chose. (228)

The two are connected through more than just their schemes; they share a sentiment of superiority and comradeship. They are intelligent and manipulative individuals who as a team are yet more intelligent and manipulative. In fact it is only when this friendship falls apart and Merteuil declares war that all their manipulations are exposed. As long as they remain friends and work together they are unstoppable -- this friendship between a man and a woman is that strong.

But their friendship is replete with sexual tension that will cause its disintegration. There are hints of a former sexual relationship as early as the second letter of the novel, the first exchanged by the two. When Merteuil implores Valmont to return from his aunt's home to help her with her latest scheme she seems to express doubt

that he will obey and writes the mysterious phrase: “vous devriez venir, avec empressement, prendre mes ordres à genoux: mais vous abusez de mes bontés, même depuis que vous n’en usez plus” (13) Later in a footnote the editor tells us that the ex-lovers of Merteuil and Valmont broke off these liaisons to form one together. This mutual rejection is how “la marquise et le vicomte s’attachèrent l’un à l’autre.” One wonders exactly what this attachment to each other implies. Throughout the subsequent letters evidence of this potential relationship and this subtle tension remains. Each tries too hard to make the other jealous. They give titillating details of their exploits, and they protest too vehemently that the conquests of the other are not of interest.

In Letter XV these hints of a former relationship are confirmed. Valmont is replying to a letter from Merteuil in which she describes her current affair and her decision not to break it off. He responds with open jealousy:

En lisant votre lettre et le détail de votre charmante journée, j’ai été tenté vingt fois de prétexter une affaire, de voler à vos pieds, et de vous y demander, en ma faveur, une infidélité à votre chevalier, qui, après tout, ne mérite pas son bonheur. Savez-vous que vous m’avez rendu jaloux de lui? Que me parlez-vous d’éternelle rupture? J’abjure ce serment, prononcé dans le délire: nous n’aurions pas été digne de le faire, si nous eussions dû le garder! Ah! que je puisse un jour me venger dans vos bras, du dépit involontaire que m’a causé le bonheur du chevalier! Je suis indigné, je l’avoue, quand je songe que cet homme sans raisonner, sans se donner la moindre peine, en suivant tout bêtement l’instinct de son coeur, trouve une félicité à laquelle je ne puis atteindre. Oh! je la troublerai... Promettez-moi que je la troublerai. (36)

All this seems to indicate that Merteuil has succeeded in manipulating Valmont into leaving his aunt’s home to come back and participate in her scheme. Although they

are friends, the sexual tension between them allows for such manipulation. However Valmont then turns this desire and jealousy he has admitted into a criticism of Merteuil. He wonders why she is not ashamed to allow this other lover, who does not deserve her affection, to receive it. He continues:

Vous-même n'êtes-vous pas humiliée? Vous vous donner la peine de le tromper, et il est plus heureux que vous. Vous le croyez dans vos chaînes! C'est bien que vous êtes dans les siennes. Il dort tranquillement, tandis que vous veillez pour ses plaisirs. Que ferait de plus son esclave? (36)

In the next letter Merteuil regains the advantage by exploiting the sexual desire Valmont has for her. She gives Valmont a glimpse of her own desire and hints at a probable inability to resist him when she describes her reaction to his proposal: "J'en ai pourtant bien ri, et j'étais vraiment fâchée d'être obligée d'en rire toute seule. Si vous eussiez été là, je ne sais où m'aurait menée cette gaieté" (43). But then she dashes the hopes raised by this titillating detail with a refusal: "mais j'ai eu le temps de la réflexion et je me suis armée de sévérité. Ce n'est pas que je refuse pour toujours; mais je diffère, et j'ai raison." This last part keeps Valmont interested by keeping his hope and thus the sexual tension alive.

In addition to all this flirtation and tension there is the concrete agreement that the two friends will, if Valmont is able to seduce la Présidente and prove it, become sexually involved again. Merteuil promises in letter XVI:

Aussitôt que vous aurez eu votre belle dévote, que vous pourrez m'en fournir une preuve, venez, et je suis à vous. Mais vous n'ignorez pas que dans les affaires importantes, on ne reçoit de preuves que par écrit. Par cet arrangement, d'une part, je deviendrai une récompense au lieu d'être une consolation; et cette idée me plaît davantage: de

l'autre votre succès en sera plus piquant, en devenant lui-même un moyen d'infidélité. (43-44)

There are references to this agreement throughout the ensuing letters, especially those from Valmont, who frequently closes his letters with a reminder of his intentions and desires, such as the following from Letter LVII. "Adieu, ma belle amie; je vous embrasse comme je vous désire; je défie tous les baisers du chevalier d'avoir autant d'ardeur" (116). Valmont gives Merteuil a longer, more direct reminder in Letter XCIX:

Enfin, ma belle amie, incessamment j'arriverai chez vous, pour vous sommer de votre parole. Vous n'avez pas oublié sans doute ce que vous m'avez promis après le succès; cette infidélité à votre Chevalier? êtes-vous prête? pour moi je le désire comme si nous ne nous étions jamais connus. Au reste, vous connaître est peut-être une raison pour le désirer davantage: 'Je suis juste, et je ne suis pas gallant.' (Voltaire) Aussi ce sera la première infidélité que je ferai à ma grave conquête; et je vous promis de profiter du premier prétexte pour m'absenter vingt-quatre heures d'auprès d'elle. Ce sera sa punition de m'avoir tenu si longtemps éloigné de vous. (224-5)

Merteuil does not write with the same sense of expectation. Her jealousy caused by the adoration Valmont expresses for La Présidente has already led her to hint at hesitation in renewing the relationship with Valmont; after she reads Letter XCIX she realizes that Valmont intends to stay with La Présidente, and that she herself will only be a minor diversion for him. Merteuil decides to refuse to honor their bet:

J'ai pu avoir quelquefois la prétention de remplacer à moi seule tout un sérail; mais il ne m'a jamais convenu d'en faire partie. [. . .] Qui, moi! je sacrifierais un goût, et encore un goût nouveau, pour m'occuper de vous? Et pour m'en occuper comment? en attendant à mon tour, et en esclave soumise, les sublimes faveurs de votre *Hautesse*. (298)

Even when Valmont assures her that it is in fact Merteuil whom he prefers, she still makes him wait. She reminds Valmont that he needs to provide her with written proof, and she expresses doubt that they will be able to find happiness when they are together.

But Valmont is insistent that their liaison would be a natural continuation of their friendship and of benefit to them both

Nos liens ont été dénoués, et non pas rompus; notre prétendue rupture ne fut qu'une erreur de notre imagination: nos sentiments, nos intérêts, n'en sont pas restés unis. [...] Ne combattez donc plus l'idée ou plutôt le sentiment qui vous ramène à moi; et après avoir essayé de tous les plaisirs dans nos courses différentes, jouissons du bonheur de sentir qu'aucun d'eux n'est comparable à celui que nous avons éprouvé, et que nous retrouverons plus délicieux encore! (311)

When Merteuil later again refuses to rekindle their former relationship, Valmont issues an ultimatum:

De longs discours n'étaient pas nécessaires pour établir que chacun de nous ayant en main tout ce qu'il faut pour perdre l'autre, nous avons un égal intérêt à nous ménager mutuellement: aussi ce n'est pas de cela dont il s'agit. Mais encore entre le parti violent de se perdre, et celui, sans doute meilleur, de rester unis comme nous l'avons été, de le devenir davantage encore en reprenant notre première liaison, entre ces deux parties, dis-je, il y en a mille autres à prendre [. .] de ce jour même, je serai ou votre Amant ou votre ennemi. (350-1)

Merteuil refuses a final time by declaring "Hé bien, la guerre!" and the friendship is over. Each puts in motion a plan to destroy the other, preparing a war that results in the death of Valmont and the social ostracism of Merteuil.

Thus, theirs is a friendship that functions only because of sexual tension. The moment Merteuil refuses to be a sexual object for Valmont the friendship falls apart. The nature of the choice between "amant" and "ennemi" could not be clearer. There

are obviously many other unhealthy aspects to this relationship, but here I just want to focus on the sexual aspect, and emphasize that it is the sexual desire that exists between the two that drives the events of the novel. Without this sexual tension, there is no friendship; without the friendship, the two have no power; without their power over others, there is no plot, no novel.

A worthy comparison to the Merteuil-Valmont friendship can be found in Riccoboni's novel, Lettres d'Adélaïde de Dammartin, Csse de Sancerre. Although published sixteen years earlier, it is the embodiment of the principles Riccoboni later espoused in her correspondence with Laclos. This work is similar to most of Riccoboni's works in that it is an epistolary novel describing the love, disappointment, and courage of a woman faced with the infidelities and whims of men. What most separates this novel from Riccoboni's others, however, is that the recipient of the heroine's letters is not a female friend or even the man she loves, but a man who plays no other role in her life than that of friend and confidant. What most distinguishes this novel from Les Liaisons dangereuses is the totally platonic nature of this friendship.

The Lettres de la Comtesse de Sancerre is worthy of comparison to Les Liaisons dangereuses for other similarities as well. Both novels are epistolary and the main character of each is a widow who does not want to remarry. Just as Mme de Merteuil speaks of "le prix de la liberté qu'allait me donner mon veuvage" (Letter LXXXI, 173), Mme de Sancerre also relishes her freedom. She states as early as Letter II that she has no intention of giving up her freedom by remarrying: "mais reprendre de

nouveaux liens, moi! Mon ami, je suis plus éloignée que jamais d'y penser" (157).

The plot of each novel is set in motion with a letter written by the main female character to her friend asking him to come back, and each contains a long letter in which the main character recounts her life story as a means of justifying and explaining her behavior.

The Lettres de la Comtesse de Sancerre revolves around the blossoming love and eventual remarriage of three young widows who are close friends. Mme de Sancerre seems to be the least willing to remarry after the disappointment of her first experience with a deceitful man who maintained an affair throughout their marriage. Although she found out about his infidelity early in their marriage, she kept her knowledge a secret to save those involved from embarrassment. Therefore no one knew why she was so unhappy while her seemingly adoring husband complained of her capriciousness. After a few years of this misery her husband died in battle and she entered into a happy widowhood surrounded by her friends. At the beginning of the novel, the reader finds the Comtesse de Sancerre in this contented state, maintaining a warm correspondence with an old friend of her husband, the Comte de Nancé.

Then one day the Comtesse learns that the much loved and admired Marquis de Montalais is in love with her. The ensuing letters deal with her range of emotions. First she is elated at the thought that the love she finally admits feeling for him is returned. This momentary joy is quickly calmed by the reminder that he is married and inaccessible. After the convenient death of Montalais' wife, Sancerre describes

her fear that he will remarry someone else, a fear that is soon relieved when Montalais proposes to her. Their plans for happiness appear to be dashed yet again when a relative of the Comtesse returns to France and threatens to sue for her inheritance if she does not marry him. In the end, the relative withdraws the threats when he sees how genuine Sancerre's love for Montalais is, and the novel ends with Sancerre blissfully remarried.

The details of this somewhat contrived and relatively unimaginative plot are not what make this work worthy of examination. Rather, it is Riccoboni's ideas about the many virtues and benefits of friendship and the realistic and feminist view of eighteenth-century aristocratic marriages that make this work noteworthy. Riccoboni depicts well the shattered idealism of a young bride disillusioned by an unhappy marriage. Both Mme de Sancerre and her close friend Mme de Martignes are reluctant to reenter that state of dependence on a husband. But above all, this is a novel about friendship: in addition to the Comte de Nancé, the friendship between Mme de Sancerre and her two fellow widows is central to the plot. These friends were there for her, accepted her and understood her even when everyone else thought she was ungrateful for the seemingly wonderful husband she had. The same strong ties exist between Mme de Sancerre and the Comte de Nancé; after recovering from a serious illness, Sancerre expresses her gratitude for her friends and her belief that it was friendship that saved her life (I follow the eighteenth-century spelling):

L'amitié n'est point un vain nom, ce sentiment existe, il est la gloire et le bonheur de l'humanité! Ma vie, importe-t-elle à la félicité de tant d'êtres, indépendants de moi? Quel intérêt me les attaché, les fait craindre de me perdre? Mon ami, j'ai désiré de vivre. (278)

Among these friends who are so dear to her, the Comte de Nancé is perhaps the most important. Every letter of this novel is written to the Comte, which shows already the importance Mme de Sancerre places on his friendship. Although Mme de Sancerre sees her other, female friends on an almost daily basis, this one male friend, who is away tending his sister in Bretagne, is much more her confidant. While she admits in letter fifteen that she is really incapable of confiding in others: "J'éprouve encore cette bizarrerie de mon destin; entourée d'amis tendres et sincères, je n'ai point de confident; des motifs cachés ne m'ont jamais permis de goûter les charmes d'une douce confiance" (193), two letters later she confides to the Count the whole story of her unhappy marriage, something she has never told anyone else. Obviously, this friend occupies a privileged place in her trust.

There are other examples of the importance she places on this friendship, and of the role this friend plays in her life. In letter ten she laments his absence. She needs someone to advise her in her actions and she feels like he would do a better job if he were there:

Que votre absence m'afflige! Quoi, vous ne reviendrez pas? Je voudrais vous voir, j'aurois besoin de vous entretenir. On n'écrit pas tout ce qu'on pense [...] j'attends vos lettres avec impatience; les paroles d'un véritable ami, dit un sage, sont un baume adoucissant pour les blessures de l'âme; j'aimerais à vous ouvrir la mienne. Vous avez ma confiance, vous êtes prudent; votre amitié éclairerait mes démarches, elle me sauveroit. (174-5)

She feels like she would be better able to handle her problems if she had the firsthand advice of this one true friend.

At one point in the novel Mme de Sancerre falls seriously ill. Although the reader never sees the letters written by the Count, we are assured that he shows genuine concern for her health during this illness. Madame de Martigues writes the count to tell him of Sancerre's recovery and compliments him on the kindness of his letter of concern: "Le Comte De Piennes m'a montré votre lettre; il est charmé de votre amitié et de vos félicitations. Eh mais, rien n'est plus singulier!" (276).

Once Sancerre is well she writes to him, thanking him herself:

Je ne doutois pas de votre amitié, mon cher comte; mais ces preuves indirectes d'un attachement si vif, si tendre, m'ont pénétrée, elles ont excité mes larmes, j'ai senti de la tristesse et du plaisir en me répétant vos expressions. (278)

We again see evidence of Mme de Sancerre's genuine respect for her friend in letter VII. She is doubtful that the Marquis de Montalais is really as perfect as everyone says, having been disappointed by such seemingly wonderful men before. She offers the Count as a contrast to such men: "j'ai examiné des hommes admirés, peu se sont trouvés dignes de mon estime: vous êtes le seul peut-être dont les sentiments conformes à la conduite ne démentent point l'opinion qu'on m'avoit donnée de votre caractère" (167).

Throughout the novel, through all the mutual flattery and the longing for one another's presence, there is no hint of sexual tension, nor any hint of a former sexual relationship. The Count is simply an old friend of her husband who, upon getting to know his friend's widow, found her to be a worthy friend herself. As Mme de Sancerre discusses her feelings for M de Montalais, there is no suggestion that she

wishes to make her Count jealous; indeed, the details are rather boringly asexual and focused solely on her own fluctuating sentiments.

There are enormous differences between the two couples formed by Merteuil and Valmont and Sancerre and Nancé. The former are among the arch villains of French literature; the latter are (equally unbelievably) among the most virtuous. However, lack of verisimilitude should not detract from the point Riccoboni makes with this novel. She is showing that men and women can put their sexual desires aside and form friendships, and that such friendships, based on mutual respect rather than mutual gratification, are all the more rewarding for the lack of sexual attraction. This novel exemplifies what Riccoboni tries later to explain to Laclos in the correspondence: the friendship of a woman can be so sweet, so agreeable to a man, "quand ses passions amorties lui permettent de ne plus les regarder comme l'objet de son amusement."

V. Conclusion

In the Lettres d'Adélaïde de Dammartin, Csse de Sancerre Riccoboni's proto-feminist ideas about the institution of marriage and the virtues of platonic friendships are more significant than the now-forgotten novel that expresses them. Similarly, one can say that the ideas presented in her correspondence with Laclos about how men should view and treat women are more important than the debate concerning Merteuil and the moral issues of depicting this character. In this light, their correspondence can be seen as simply another medium for Riccoboni to voice her ideas about women.

However, it would be incorrect to assume that Riccoboni wrote to Laclos with the intention of creating a published correspondence in which to broadcast her feminist ideas. In fact, throughout the exchange she seems to be corresponding almost grudgingly. Her first two letters are very brief and seem to indicate a hesitation in developing the correspondence, and her fourth and final letter ends it. It is only in her third letter, after Laclos shows his inability to appreciate women in any way other than for their sexuality, that Riccoboni feels compelled to develop a counterargument.

When Laclos presents his arguments in a way that reveals his sexual manner of dealing with women, Riccoboni responds with proposals of alternative ways to perceive women. When Laclos describes Merteuil as being evil because she is attractive and promiscuous, Riccoboni replies that her deceptiveness and her criminal

intent are her true crimes. When Laclos treats Riccoboni with the same flattery he had Valmont use to seduce la Présidente de Tourvel, Riccoboni points out the absurdity of this treatment and reminds Laclos of her age. When Laclos describes virtuous women in terms of the physical pleasure that a man can feel simply by describing their virtues, Riccoboni pleads for a male-female relationship independent of sexuality and based solely on friendship.

Although she is addressing Laclos and responding to his remarks, the feminist ideas she presents in the letters are not limited to the issues of the correspondence. The moment she moves from the discussion of Merteuil to an endorsement of platonic friendship between men and women, she changes the scope of the correspondence. By urging Laclos to seek out the friendship of women, Riccoboni is in fact urging Laclos and the potential readers of this exchange to adopt her way of thinking as presented in her novels. This plea is more a call for social change than a personal critique of Les Liaisons dangereuses or of Merteuil.

Another way Riccoboni turns her literary critique into a social commentary is through her choice of voice. Riccoboni insists that she is not writing as an author, but as a woman. By refusing to be identified as a writer in the correspondence, Riccoboni affirms that she is not a novelist with a preconceived agenda to present, but rather an articulate woman who simply refuses to allow Laclos' sexual misrepresentations to be published without comment.

Riccoboni therefore seems to simply seize the opportunity that her correspondence with Laclos provides to reiterate her ideas concerning women – ideas which had

already been formed twenty years ago as she was writing her novels. The sexual language of Laclos' descriptions of Merteuil and women in his letters provokes Riccoboni to once again express her vision of strong male-female relationships benefiting from a lack of sexual tension. What begins as a moral objection to a dangerously evil character becomes an effort to desexualize women for Laclos and all men. What begins as an intriguing literary critique becomes an effort to transform Les Liaisons dangereuses into "les liaisons amicales."

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Vita

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