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*The Death of the Virtuous Heroine as Social Criticism in  
Clarissa and Les Liaisons Dangereuses*

*By*

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*Honors Thesis*

*In*

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The Death of the Virtuous Heroine as Social Criticism in *Clarissa* and *Les Liaisons Dangereuses*

Although Samuel Richardson meticulously documents his heroine's slow decline and devotes over a third of his novel to this process, the characters in *Clarissa* struggle to understand a death that for them has no rational explanation. Additionally, Tom Keymer and other critics have written about the very real indignation Richardson faced from the eighteenth-century reading public that, like Lovelace and the Harlowes, could not make sense of *Clarissa's* tragic ending.<sup>1</sup> Lovelace's blunt question that he poses to his family after Clarissa has died, "Is death the *natural* consequence of a rape?—Did you ever hear, my lord, or did you, ladies, that it was?" (Richardson's emphasis, 1439)—expresses the confusion that nearly all of the characters experience in the latter portions of the novel. Many scholars have explained Clarissa's inexplicable death as the only means by which she can preserve her inviolable will.<sup>2</sup> However, while dying is a necessary action Clarissa must take in order to maintain her inner spirit, we can also read it as a result of various social problems that will not permit a virtuous woman to survive in eighteenth-century society.<sup>3</sup> The novel *Les Liaisons Dangereuses* by Choderlos de Laclos, also epistolary and published thirty-five years after *Clarissa*, allows for a similar interpretation. Contemporary French reactions to Madame de Tourvel's death cannot compare to the English response elicited by Clarissa's, but, like Richardson, Laclos also introduces certain social forces that seal his heroine's fate from without while her own psychological experience of virtue works to destroy her from within.

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<sup>1</sup> See also Adam Budd, "Why Clarissa Must Die" and Mark Kinkead-Weekes, *Samuel Richardson: Dramatic Novelist*, chapter seven.

<sup>2</sup> See chapter seven of *A Natural Passion* by Margaret Anne Doody, "The Voyage Out" in *Clarissa's Ciphers* by Terry Castle, and Kinkead-Weekes, chapter seven.

<sup>3</sup> For an explanation of the patterns surrounding the death of virtuous women in eighteenth-century literature, see Nancy K. Miller, *The Heroine's Text*.

While any number of factors contribute to the two women's deaths in these lengthy novels, this analysis will focus strictly on those elements that function as commentary against societies that cannot sustain their virtuous members. One problem that Richardson and Laclos develop early on in both of their novels is the difficulty virtuous women experience in trying to find an adequate place in society; the equally unstable natures of Clarissa's position as a single woman and Tourvel's position as a married woman—resulting in the rejection of their virtue among their friends and neighbors—provides an early indication that they do not belong in their environments. A second societal problem treated in different ways by the two novelists is the role the family plays in the deaths of the virtuous heroines. Richardson and Laclos indicate that, for very different reasons, Clarissa and Tourvel cannot survive in societies that organize family relationships around wealth and status. Related to flawed family values is the problem of the power of appearances to govern society in the novels, a power that the two heroines fail to understand. Both their inability to see through false appearances in moments that are critical for success in their worlds and others' reliance on false appearances to form judgments about true character contribute significantly to their shared fate. Richardson and Laclos use these perilous circumstances and the voluntary manner of both deaths to highlight the serious problems present in societies that work to expel virtue.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Although throughout this analysis I am going to focus on the similarities between eighteenth-century English and French society and their effects on these women, it is important to remember that Richardson and Laclos consciously portray two very different worlds in order to comment upon problems that are specific to their separate societies. While, according to Kinkead-Weekes, “[Clarissa's tragedy] is a revelation of the tensions, within the bourgeois world to which Richardson himself belonged, between its twin inheritances from the seventeenth century: capitalism, and individualism,” Christine Roulston remarks that “written on the cusp of the French Revolution, [*Les Liaisons Dangereuses*] points as much to the impossibility of the bourgeois ideal of transparency as to the decadence of the Ancien Regime's aristocracy” (Kinkead-Weekes 124, Roulston 143). The difference between the bourgeois and aristocratic ideologies that, respectively, Richardson and Laclos address does, in fact, have a bearing on the treatment of virtue in both works; however, the similar pressures on Clarissa and Tourvel that exist in both environments, such as the commodification of women, determine that it is useful to compare these representations of English and French society though Richardson writes about an emerging, ascendant middle class and Laclos an antique nobility faced with extinction.

Richardson writes a novel in which the heroine finds it impossible to fit in and find a suitable place for herself in her environment, and this, at a basic level, is one of the main social problems that cause her death. The dispute between Clarissa and her parents that occurs throughout the first several hundred pages illustrates that, although Clarissa is not against marriage in abstract terms, when faced with the proposals of multiple suitors (not just the horrible Solmes), nobody quite seems to meet her criteria for a good husband. Even Lovelace points out Clarissa's unfitness for matrimony when he writes to Belford, "Sacrilige but to touch the hem of her garment!—Excess of delicacy!—Oh, the consecrated beauty!—How can she think to be a wife!" (646). Lovelace's comment suggests that Clarissa's "delicacy" and virtue are the very qualities that make her incompatible with matrimony. Belford voices the same opinion when he writes to Lovelace, "I am ready to regret that such an angel of a lady should ever marry. She is, in my eye, all mind [...]. For why, in short, should not the work of bodies be left to *mere* bodies?" (Richardson's emphasis, 555). But if marriage is not a suitable end for the paragon, it soon becomes clear that her world offers her limited alternatives. Clarissa often writes to Anna Howe about her preference for a single life, but while nominally it would appear that Clarissa is one of the very few women in this period for whom remaining single would be a viable possibility, thanks to her grandfather's will, it is still out of her reach because of social prescriptions and expectations. Clarissa reinforces the sense that no place exists for the virtuous woman in her society when she writes to Anna, "Were ours a Roman Catholic family, how much happier for me, that they thought a nunnery would answer all their views!" (83). No equivalent of a convent in the Protestant religion means no escape for Clarissa, and this is one facet of a larger problem, the rejection of virtue by society, that Richardson develops throughout the work.

Laclos also makes it difficult for the virtuous woman to find a place in society, but a major difference between Richardson's and Laclos's heroines is that Madame de Tourvel is already married when *Les Liaisons* begins. While this appears to indicate that Tourvel has already found a place for herself in society and that her marriage delivers her from any of the struggles that Clarissa undergoes, in truth Tourvel is similarly displaced and alienated from her eighteenth-century French surroundings. No place exists for her in her own home, and she therefore prefers to spend her time at the estate of Valmont's aunt, Madame de Rosemonde. Although it might not have been irregular for an aristocratic woman to stay at a friend's estate for an extended period of time, Tourvel takes a considerable risk as a result of her reluctance to reside at her own estate when she asks Valmont for a favor, which comes back to haunt her in the form of love letters that she must receive in exchange. She writes to Valmont when his advances become too much for her, "I have decided to leave myself if you persist in staying: I do not, on the other hand, mean to belittle the obligation I shall owe you if you consent; I am, in fact, quite willing to tell you that in compelling me to leave here you would be upsetting my plans" (95). That Tourvel is unwilling to return to the house in which she has little function as a wife, because of her husband's long absences, puts her in a vulnerable position when Valmont decides to seduce her. The only time we witness Tourvel living at her own estate is when she is under extreme duress and no other alternative presents itself, and even in this one instance she does not stay there for long. After Valmont betrays her, she returns to the convent where she was educated and, as Madame de Volanges recounts to Madame de Rosemonde, "She announced that she was returning to live in this room, which, she said, she ought never to have left" (344).

While Clarissa regrets that no safe haven like a convent is available to her, the predominance of Catholicism in France clearly made this a possible option for Tourvel in her

girlhood (although it is interesting to point out that ultimately Tourvel is not welcome in the religious sanctuary either, because “her status as a married woman would not allow of her being received into the convent without special permission,” giving us another indication that there is no place for her [344]). While officially Tourvel may have had an easier time taking the veil than Clarissa, Madame de Volanges’s reaction when she learns that her daughter has entered a convent suggests that becoming a nun would not have been a socially acceptable course of action for aristocratic young girls like Cecile and Tourvel. Volanges writes to Rosemonde, “Much as I respect the religious vocation, it is not without pain and even fear that I could see my daughter embrace that condition” (383). Cecile is too terrified that her mother will oppose her decision and flees to the convent without her knowledge. While Tourvel realizes when it is too late that she might have thrived under religious asceticism, presumably she, like Cecile, would not have had that choice if she wanted to remain in the good graces of her family and society. The primary function of a single aristocratic woman in Laclos’s representation of eighteenth-century French society is to marry to the advantage of her family. Both Cecile and Tourvel are treated as property and their arranged marriages serve to protect the foundation of the aristocracy. If socially valuable women like Cecile and Tourvel were routinely permitted to enter a convent, society would collapse, and ultimately Tourvel is no more likely to find a permanent place outside the marriage market than Clarissa is. It is not easy work to join a nunnery in the aristocratic environment Laclos describes, and, as in *Clarissa, Les Liaisons Dangereuses* begins its expulsion of the virtuous heroine with instances of spatial alienation.

The alienation that marks these two women as fated to die manifests itself not only in their inability to find an appropriate space that accords with both their own inclinations and the demands of society, but also in their inability as virtuous women to thrive in their environments.

Margaret Anne Doody writes of Clarissa, “Excellence is in itself a kind of mortal illness, as it is not native to the world, nor can it flourish there” (Doody 172). The original conflict in the novel arises when Clarissa’s idea of virtue and her parents’ idea of virtue no longer correspond to one another. For Clarissa, being virtuous means maintaining her individual integrity above all else, and this in turn involves maintaining a purity of body that is necessary for preserving her purity of spirit. The Harlowes decide that the chief manifestation of virtue is filial obedience, and while Clarissa makes it clear that honoring her parents is very important to her, she cannot allow it to supersede the importance of her sense of self, which would be destroyed if she submitted to their commands and marred her physical and spiritual purity by marrying Solmes. Differing views on what constitutes virtue lead many, including the Harlowes, to doubt the genuineness of Clarissa’s virtue, and this is where her alienation from society begins.

Various characters alienate Clarissa’s virtue by insisting that it is feigned, one of the most persistent of these being Arabella Harlowe, who writes to Clarissa at the beginning of the novel, “And as to your cant of living single, nobody will believe you. This is one of your fetches to avoid complying with your duty,” and again at the end, “If, Clary, there be anything but jingle and affecting period in what proceeds from your *full mind*” (139, 1256, Richardson’s emphasis). Lovelace justifies his whole scheme by the assumption that Clarissa’s virtue is not genuine, an effect of upbringing rather than nature. Sally Martin demonstrates how easy it is to feign virtue when she pretends to be Clarissa for the benefit of Lovelace, who writes to Belford, “I never saw my lovely girl so well aped; and I was almost taken in; for I could have fancied I had her before me once more” (1217). The Harlowes’ and Lovelace’s inability to believe that Clarissa’s interior matches her presentation of herself is a misunderstanding that proves fatal. Because it is impossible to distinguish virtue from vice that pretends to be virtuous, true virtue will always be



persecuted as false in Clarissa's environment, another criticism of society that the novel dramatizes.

Related to the constant suspicion of virtue among her friends that sets Clarissa's tragic path in motion is the suggestion that being virtuous is dangerous and that one would do well not to cultivate that trait if avoidable. Mark Kinkead-Weekes writes: "Clarissa's moral nature unfits her to cope with situations that less admirable characters would have made short work of" (Kinkead-Weekes 222). This is why on several occasions Anna Howe writes that it is not a good idea to imitate Clarissa: "The treatment that you meet with is very little encouragement to me to endeavour to imitate you in your dutiful meekness," and "You were always so ready to accuse yourself for other people's faults, and to suspect your own conduct, rather than the judgement of your relations, that I have often told you I cannot imitate you in this" (1133, 1151). Anna's statements render useless Clarissa's function as an example of good moral behavior because the path to virtue turns out to be the wrong path for a girl who wants to survive in eighteenth-century England.

The total alienation of virtue is even more apparent in *Les Liaisons Dangereuses*. While the Harlowes and Lovelace make a vain show of revering the idea of virtue as they persecute the embodiment of it, Merteuil, Valmont, and the majority of the minor characters in Laclos's novel scorn both the idea and the embodiment of virtue.<sup>5</sup> Tourvel's idea of virtue is slightly different from Clarissa's because, as I have already pointed out, Tourvel is married when the novel begins. The struggle for Tourvel is less about maintaining a pure body and a pure spirit than it is about marital fidelity, though both Clarissa and Tourvel are concerned about their individual integrity.

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<sup>5</sup> Discussing *Les Liaisons's* debt to seventeenth-century France, Martin Turnell remarks that in the novel, "the Court is replaced by the salon, the battlefield by the boudoir" (Turnell 62). The dominant scornful reaction to virtue in Laclos's novel that does not appear as forcefully in Richardson's harks back to French court society and provides an important indication that the novelists approach the concept of virtue from two very different standpoints.

Writing about Tourvel, Nancy Miller points out that “adultery, obviously, constitutes a violation of the female social contract just as a loss of virginity does. But the stakes of infidelity play themselves out less in relation to the husband—who is an absent signifier—than in relation to a private definition of self” (Miller 120). Tourvel’s conflict with society, then, is comparable to Clarissa’s because, while Clarissa’s and her society’s differing ideas about virtue lead to her alienation, Tourvel’s understanding of virtue as requiring marital fidelity above all else goes completely against what the rest of her society stands for and predetermines that she will encounter difficulties because of it.

Varying descriptions of the two heroines serve to illustrate the heightened alienation of virtue in *Les Liaisons Dangereuses*. Sent by the Harlowes to investigate matters after they hear of Clarissa’s illness, the officious clergyman Mr. Brand recounts Clarissa’s reception in her community before her life had taken its unfortunate turn. Belford repeats the conversation to Lovelace: “He told Mrs. Smith [...] that she gave the fashion to the fashionable, without seeming herself to intend it, or to know she did: that, however, it was pleasant to see ladies imitate her in dress and behaviour who, being unable to come up to her in grace and ease, exposed but their own affectation and awkwardness” (1190). In contrast, Merteuil describes Madame de Tourvel thus in her first letter to Valmont: “Come, what is there to this woman? Regular features, if you like, but so inexpressive; a passable figure, but no grace and always to ludicrously ill-dressed, with those bundles of kerchiefs on a bodice that reaches to her chin!” (30). It is not only the ladies in her limited circle who are struck by Clarissa’s appearance, for everyone, right down to the devious highwayman Captain Tomlinson and the minion of the brothel Dorcas, is arrested by her beautiful imperiousness at one time or another, proving that a reverence for virtue can still catch the characters of *Clarissa* unawares in spite of their best efforts to subdue it. This is not

the case in *Les Liaisons Dangereuses*. Admittedly, it comes as no surprise that Merteuil, a licentious character, would have a negative opinion of Tourvel. However, Dorcas and Tomlinson are also licentious characters and they are both awed by Clarissa. Virtue tends to attract even more hostility in *Les Liaisons* than it does in *Clarissa* because of the same element of suspicion among the French aristocracy that the Harlowes and Lovelace exhibit.<sup>6</sup> In *The Heroine's Text*, Nancy K. Miller writes, “Valmont’s choice of the Presidente as the ideal type for his new project of seduction and betrayal, [...] like Lovelace’s, is based on the assumption that she is also *other* than her reputation, and that the truth of the prude is double” (Miller 117). However, Tourvel’s is not a virtue that Valmont tests in order to exalt it should it turn out to be genuine because, as several instances illustrate, his society does not allow him to entertain the notion that it *could* be genuine.

Valmont’s charity stunt at the beginning of the novel demonstrates his aristocratic milieu’s attitude toward virtue. After Valmont saves a poor family from ruin by offering them money—an episode that he has planned and staged for Tourvel’s benefit—he writes to Merteuil, “I was astonished at the pleasure to be derived from doing good, and I am now tempted to think that what we call virtuous people have less claim to merit than we are led to believe” (58). As far as Valmont and Merteuil are concerned, it is impossible for virtue to exist as such because it is always a disguise for some ulterior motive. They know that Tourvel herself believes in the reality of her own virtue, but they can do nothing but hold her in contempt for what they understand to be a veil for her own vanity. By capitulating to Valmont’s seduction Tourvel joins

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<sup>6</sup> Another explanation for the distinct responses to Clarissa’s and Tourvel’s appearances lies in the difference between the English (bourgeois) and French (aristocratic) societies presented in the two novels. As I mentioned before, Roulston claims that *Les Liaisons* points “to the impossibility of the bourgeois ideal of transparency” (Roulston 143). Merteuil’s indication that Tourvel’s manner of dress does not transparently convey her essential self, contrasted to Brand’s precisely opposite description of Clarissa’s appearance, denotes a characteristically eighteenth-century French perspective from which Merteuil views virtue in an ironic rather than a sentimental mode.

the ranks of the other women in her society and momentarily validates what the novel has been suggesting all along, that virtue does not exist and is merely another name for deceit. As Richardson creates an equation between Clarissa and Sally Martin in which the latter imitates Clarissa “to the life,” so Laclos does the same between Tourvel and an aristocratic flirt when, shortly before his successful seduction, Valmont writes to Merteuil, “Do you know that this affair has kept me occupied now for more than two months? [...] Which reminds me that Madame de B— resisted for three whole months. I should be delighted to discover that open coquetry can maintain a defence for longer than the most ascetic virtue” (235). At the end of the novel it becomes apparent that dying is the only way that Tourvel can restore virtue to her society. Although Tourvel’s death may appear to be of nothing more than the all too typical brokenhearted, jilted lover variety, Marie Wellington explains, “A Madame de Tourvel who continued to live would have lost her authenticity in her acceptance of the love for Valmont as a mere physical lust the libertine nature of which is in diametrical opposition to her unity of being” (Wellington 16). Her death proves once and for all that her virtue is authentic, although it is unable to survive in a society that not only suspects its genuineness but is completely convinced that it is merely a hypocritical sort of libertinism.

So far I have explained two basic reasons why Clarissa and Madame de Tourvel are fated to die. The lack of an adequate place for them in society, and both the distrust and misunderstanding of virtue among their friends, predetermine that, at the end of the novels, they will be glad to depart from the environments in which they are not welcome. Another force that plays a significant role in both deaths is the family. Because the family constitutes the most basic organized unit of any society, it is useful to regard it as a reflection of the social order as a whole. In *Clarissa*, Richardson creates a hyperbolically bad family that most characters believe

to be at least half-responsible for Clarissa's death. However, while the portrayal of the Harlowes may appear to be too extreme to serve as an effective representation of a social problem, Richardson links their behavior to class and economic issues in order to illustrate what can result from a family that maintains stiflingly close relationships for mercenary reasons. Laclos turns this situation around and portrays equally problematic family situations among the aristocratic French, whose loose, superficial connections between family members are just as much to blame for Tourvel's death as the Harlowes are for Clarissa's.

The problem of money and the corresponding problem of family that both contribute to Clarissa's death are two threads that Richardson develops at length throughout his novel. Discussing Clarissa's flight to Hampstead shortly after the fire incident in the brothel, Kinkead-Weekes writes, "She seems to have escaped from Lovelace's power, yet it is not so. For we are made aware once more of the capitulation Richardson saw everywhere in his society to rank, influence, and wealth" (Kinkead-Weekes 220). Indeed, Lovelace's influence over the working-class merchants with whom Clarissa harbors herself allows him to sneak back into her presence and turn them against her, only one of a multitude of instances where Lovelace uses his social status to advantage. Lovelace's manipulation of Mrs. Moore and her husband, though ultimately contributing to Clarissa's fate, is a relatively benign example of the power of money in *Clarissa*. Money and influence prove to be far more damaging for the virtuous heroine in the hands of her own family members. After Clarissa dies, Lovelace writes to Belford about the part he feels her family played in her fate: "Whose was she living? Whose is she dead, but mine?—Her cursed parents, whose barbarity to her no doubt was the true cause of her death, have long since renounced her. She left *them* for *me*" (Richardson's emphasis, 1384). Although any claim he makes on Clarissa at this point is definitely delusional, Lovelace's sentiments about her parents

are justified, and Morden, too, recognizes her abandonment by her family when he tells the Harlowes upon his return to England, “I will instantly make my will, and in me shall the dear creature have the father, uncle, brother, she has lost” (1324). Morden’s generosity would not have done Clarissa any good even if she had lived, since a will is the very thing that starts her troubles in the first place. *Clarissa* is filled with talk and texts of wills, and the Harlowes, an exceptionally tight-knit family concerned with social status and further aggrandizement, are obsessed with them and with money matters in general. Relating Clarissa’s family to the particular social world of eighteenth-century England that Richardson portrays, Kinkead-Weekes writes, “The Harlowe family has become a byword for cruelty, gloomy hypocrisy, and greed. Nowhere in the eighteenth century is there such a penetrating analysis of the worst tendencies of bourgeois ambition” (Kinkead-Weekes 126). Early on Anna Howe points this out to Clarissa: “You are all too rich to be happy, child. For must not each of you by the constitutions of your family marry to be still richer? [...] Is true happiness any part of your family-view? So far from it, that none of your family but yourself could be happy were they not rich” (68). The Harlowe family pride, compounded by their over-zealous interest in accumulating money, leads them to attempt a forced marriage between Clarissa and Solmes, a man much like them in temperament and attitude. Since Clarissa frequently says how she would rather die than marry this man, we can see that the Harlowes insistence on her submission is largely at fault for her death. It is obvious that the Harlowes are avaricious and play a major role in their shining star’s descent; however, Richardson develops the theme of family and money still further when Lovelace introduces Clarissa, unawares, to the brothel.

It is entirely possible that Clarissa would have made it to the end of the book alive if it were not for Mrs. Sinclair and the women who assist her in her London establishment. Christine

Roulston writes of the connection between the Harlowes and these women: “The ‘house of harlots,’ a phrase first coined by Janet Todd, is both a contrast to, and an oblique reinscription of, Clarissa’s original domestic space. [...] Todd has pointed out how the space of the brothel not only duplicates Clarissa’s domestic context but also creates a family structure around Lovelace” (Roulston 46). Late in the novel Belford writes of the “cursed daughters” in reference to the prostitutes surrounding the sickbed of Mrs. Sinclair, whom Lovelace names as their “mother” on countless occasions (1387). Not only does the “domestic space” of the brothel resemble Clarissa’s own abandoned and now lamented home (again the heroine is confined to her bedroom, for instance), but in a macabre reflection of the mercenary Harlowes, Richardson creates a “family” out of the prostitutes who, like Clarissa’s own family, turn a woman and her body into a source of profit. If our understanding of the Harlowes as a main contributor to Clarissa’s death was in any doubt before, here we have a clear indication that a family bound by money spells doom for a virtuous woman in Richardson’s portrayal of the eighteenth-century because the Harlowes, like Mrs. Sinclair, are more than willing to turn Clarissa into a prostitute to satisfy their own base motives. In *Les Liaisons Dangereuses*, wealth does not disappear from the problem of family structure as it relates to the death of the virtuous heroine, but it has the opposite effect in Tourvel’s family from its effect among the Harlowes, who have demonstrated that they must stick close together to continue their ascent in society.

Laclos portrays an altogether different sort of family life in his novel, although the fragmentary nature of Tourvel’s marriage and the disconnected relationships between other blood relatives, such as Cecile and Madame de Volanges, are by no means offered as a solution to the detrimental proximity that characterizes the Harlowes. While Richardson depicts the ill-effects of a family that makes a high position in society an all-consuming priority, Laclos focuses

instead on what comes of families that are already members of an established aristocracy and that function according to corrupt codes of behavior. Christine Roulston explains the difference between public and private realms in the two novels: “[The private realm in Richardson], is often presented as dangerous, but it contains within it the possibility of an ideal world. [...]. In Laclos, the concept of space is an aristocratic one, with the private realm always receding and beyond reach; the family, in turn, is presented first as a public rather than a private institution” (Roulston 149). Situating the family in the public realm is a significant problem for Laclos, who demonstrates the consequences of this social circumstance in his characterization of Tourvel. While Tourvel undeniably commits adultery when she capitulates to Valmont’s advances, she does not commit adultery in the same way that the other members of her society commit adultery, and her affair carries with it a wholly different set of meanings from those that mark, for instance, Merteuil’s affair with Prevan, or Valmont’s affair with Emilie. Laclos contrasts the unique nature of Tourvel’s affair to the others taking place throughout the novel in order to delineate the serious problems that exist within the aristocratic French social milieu.

By having an affair Tourvel attempts to cultivate a close family relationship removed from the public realm that Laclos shows us is nonexistent within the society he creates. Although she is married, her husband, the President de Tourvel (a magistrate), spends his time in a foreign land on business throughout the length of the novel and never once appears. Though the characters never discuss it, the precedent set by the other marriages in the novel suggests that they married for convenience’s sake only, and have relationships that we can imagine would have been something like that between Cecile and Gercourt, had this farce of a marriage ever come to pass. Valmont cites her happy marriage as one of his reasons for targeting Tourvel, which would secure him a greater victory, and she, too, prides herself on her marriage’s



constancy when all the people around her regard wedding vows as what they truly are in their society: official permission to do as one likes at long last. However, Tourvel's reluctance to spend time at her own house and, above all, the President's perpetual absence indicate that she is mistaken if she really believes that their relationship is any different from her neighbors'. Laclos uses Tourvel to explore the consequences of the superficial relationships of the aristocracy by intimating that a virtuous woman cannot survive when no close family network exists.

Early on in the novel Laclos starts replacing the President with Valmont as a realization of the virtuous Tourvel's need for a true husband, not a tenuous and absent one. In the first stages of his pursuit of Tourvel, Valmont writes to Merteuil of a strategy he employs to attract her attention: "Meanwhile I wrote my letter, addressed it in an assumed handwriting and—not without success—counterfeited a Dijon postmark on the envelope. I chose Dijon because I thought it would be more jolly if, demanding the same rights as the husband, I should write from the same place" (82). Moving ahead to mere moments before Valmont finally gains his victory and seduces Tourvel, he again writes to Merteuil, "I carefully examined the locale, and there and then marked down the theatre of my victory. I couldn't have chosen a more convenient one, for there was an ottoman in the room. But I observed that, facing it, hung a portrait of the husband, and I was afraid, I admit, that with so extraordinary a woman, a single look directed by chance in his direction might in a moment destroy the work of so much time and trouble" (298). Finally, Laclos brings Valmont and the President together in Tourvel's last letter, composed as she dies in a scattered style reminiscent of the incoherent thoughts Clarissa puts on paper when she temporarily loses her mind. The letter is addressed to no one, and it begins by referring to Valmont, "Cruel and malignant man, will you never cease to persecute me?" In the second half of the letter Tourvel writes, "And you that I have insulted. You whose esteem adds to my agony.

You, who alone would have the right to be revenged upon me, why are you so far away? Return and punish an unfaithful wife,” clearly referring to the President. But she soon turns back to Valmont again, “But look! It is he...There is no mistaking him: it is he I see again. Oh, my beloved!” It then ends as it began, “Leave me alone, cruel man!” (367-69). These three episodes all increase the intensity of the replacement of the President by Valmont in Tourvel’s mind. First she opens a letter, supposedly from her husband but in actuality written by Valmont. Then in her own house (and it is important that the seduction does not occur at Madame de Rosemonde’s) Valmont’s presence overpowers the image of the absent husband and means that he, in turn, becomes more of the true husband she seeks. Finally, her dying letter proves that she can barely distinguish the two anymore.

If Clarissa dies because her family looks upon her as an object that can be sold for profit, Tourvel dies because Valmont snatches away the newfound family connection that she thought was genuine but that turns out to be just another spectacle enacted for the benefit of society. As she herself writes to Rosemonde, “As long as my life is necessary to his happiness, my life shall be precious to me,” and when it ceases to be necessary, she dies (308). But Valmont’s usurpation of the position of the husband is not the only indication that Laclos provides to show the sad state of family ties in his novel. Characters continually switch allegiances and confidants. Tourvel ceases to confide in Madame de Volanges and replaces her with Madame de Rosemonde, in whom she looks for a mother figure when she writes, “I understand perfectly that your letters cannot be long; but you will not refuse your child two words” (261). Cecile and Madame de Volanges do not communicate well at all, and the young girl first confides in her school friend but soon switches to Merteuil. It is important to notice that the same kind of switching goes on in *Clarissa*. Although Tourvel for all practical purposes lives alone, with no

husband or immediate family appearing in the novel, and although Clarissa comes from a household in which all the family members are frighteningly involved in one another's lives, both seek substitutes when they discover, whether unconsciously or consciously, that their families are structured around little or nothing beyond wealth and status. Although Clarissa's situation at the end of the novel leads her to say, "God Almighty would not let me depend for comfort upon any but himself," the new relationships she develops at Mrs. Smith's are described in familial terms (1356). Belford writes of the "*paternal* attendance she had had from Dr. H. and Mr. Goddard," and Clarissa tells Mrs. Lovick that "she had been a mother to her, and she would delight herself in thinking she was in her mamma's arms" (Richardson's emphasis, 1351). Clarissa may distance herself from all earthly connections in her quest for sainthood before she dies, but Richardson and Laclos both use the death of the virtuous heroine to point out what is wrong with the family in their societies. Discussing religion in *Les Liaisons Dangereuses*, Patrick Byrne writes that:

[Laclos] was more preoccupied with the social critique for which his novel was a vehicle. One aspect of that is the critique of the institution of marriage, as it was accepted among the aristocracy in the eighteenth century. By constructing a denouement which brings to the fore the failed relationships and destroyed reputations of all his active characters, Laclos may be making a simple point: a worthier alternative would surely be a form of marriage, devised not primarily for dynastic reasons, but to fulfill the emotional needs of those who wed. (*Attitudes to Religion* 50)

Madame de Volanges touches upon this problem in Letter 98 before Merteuil tricks her into retracting her opinion. She writes, "Are not the marriages which are the result of calculation and not of choice, marriages of convenience as they are called, where everything is mutually

agreeable except the tastes and characters of the couple concerned, are they not the most common source of these outbreaks of scandal that become daily more and more frequent?" In the same letter she also writes, "To what end was my daughter born rich, if she is, none the less, to be a slave to fortune" (228-229). Richardson and Laclos take Madame de Volanges's concern very seriously and demonstrate the consequences of destructive and unfulfilling family dynamics at the end of their narratives. Family life, as we can see, is largely governed by a concern with appearances in the novels, and this leads to another social criticism the two authors develop through the deaths of Clarissa and Tourvel.

One of a number of Clarissa's attributes that continually puzzle Lovelace is her strange indifference to public opinion, and Richardson makes it clear that a society that relies almost entirely on superficiality as an organizing principle cannot accept her, nor can she accept it. During one of the several episodes in which Clarissa tries to escape from the brothel, she manages to open a window and, as Lovelace recounts, calls out to strangers on the street, "For the love of God, good honest man!—For the love of God, mistress—to two passers-by—a poor, poor creature, said she, ruined!" (905). Discussing her plight in the next letter, Lovelace says to her, "Ruined you, madam—The world need not—" and she replies, "Ruined me in my *own* eyes, and that is the same to me, as if *all the world* knew it" (Richardson's emphasis, 909). The result of her attitude is that she is not interested in concealing the reality of her ruin from the public. In a society that depends on maintaining appearances above all else, Clarissa's dismissal of public opinion predetermines that she is not a fit member of society. The women of the brothel, after all, worry a great deal about public appearances and "the reputation of their house," which is why, though Belford describes them as "Virgil's obscene Harpies squirting their ordure upon the Trojan trenchers" when he catches them "unprepared for being seen," they have no trouble

surviving in their London environment (906, 1388). By maintaining an interior and exterior that are in perfect alignment with one another no matter what the circumstances, Clarissa places herself in direct opposition to the foundation of her society. Lovelace points this out when he observes her interactions with her fellow lodgers at Hampstead. He writes, “The dear silly soul! thought I, at the time, to depend upon the goodness of her own heart, when the heart cannot be seen into but by its actions; and she, to appearance, a runaway, an eloper, from a tender, a most indulgent husband!—to neglect to cultivate the opinion of individuals, when the whole world is governed by appearance!” (789). The resulting alienation, like the alienation she experiences because there is no way for her neighbors to know for sure if her virtue is genuine or feigned, is not the only problem that a world ruled by appearances poses for Clarissa. She suffers lasting consequences because others take appearances extremely seriously and she, unaware of this, does not realize she is in danger until it is too late.

Oblivious to the importance of appearance, Clarissa is frequently deceived by appearances. Although, as I will explain shortly, Clarissa has a much more discerning eye for artifice than Tourvel and is sometimes able, against all odds, to see through Lovelace’s ruses and maintain a strong defense, she still has difficulty living in a world where such a marked divide exists between appearance and reality. The problem of a society ruled by appearances is, then, twofold. Clarissa can neither understand the need to conceal her own mistakes for purposes of self-preservation (because the society will not tolerate visible flaws), nor can she see through the false guises of others. Because Clarissa’s idea of individual integrity is completely at odds with that of her assailant, it does not occur to her that Lovelace will go to devastating lengths to maintain his public appearance. Lovelace, it turns out, is far more determined to preserve his public image as a libertine than Clarissa is to preserve her public image as a virtuous woman.

James Grantham Turner explains the “libertine character” as “the oscillation [...] between two extreme positions – a fierce individualism that underestimates the power of social forces, and a compliance to social conventions which, though intended to be ironic and self-liberating, eventually traps the self within the mask” (Turner 74). Lovelace’s devotion to “social conventions” and to the way he appears in relation to them causes him to consider victory over Clarissa to be of paramount importance, just as his fear of the prostitutes’ ridicule propels him down his path of destruction. He writes to Belford directly before the rape, “And how, having proceeded thus far, could I stop, were I *not* to have had the women to goad me on, and to make light of circumstances which they pretended to be better judges of than me” (881). Thus the pressure in the society to maintain a certain image, even, or perhaps especially, among its supposed champions of freedom, the libertines, is largely to blame for Clarissa’s tragic fate.

We can see the power of appearances working against Clarissa in another instance when the Harlowes send Mr. Brand to interview the neighbors around Mrs. Smith’s lodgings. After he discovers that Brand has written a letter to the Harlowes in which he casts aspersions on Clarissa’s character, Belford investigates the matter. Directed by Mrs. Smith to a local milliner and her husband, Belford interrogates them and writes to Lovelace:

They said that indeed they knew very little of the young lady; but that (curse upon their censoriousness!) it was but too natural to think that where a lady had given way to a delusion, and taken so wrong a step, she would not stop there: that the most sacred places and things were but too often made a cloak for bad actions. [...] And that their cousin Barker, a mantua-maker who lodged up one pair of stairs [...], had often from her window seen me with the lady in her chamber talking very earnestly together. (1296)

Brand and his report, going entirely by appearances, are directly responsible for Clarissa's family neglecting, distrusting, and insulting her during her final illness, which, the text suggests, may not have been her final illness had her family looked beyond the surface of things and offered her their full forgiveness. Clarissa realizes too late that Lovelace's identity rests on his appearance in society, and the Harlowes realize too late that they credited unsubstantiated hearsay too readily—a flood of apologetic letters from them to Clarissa pours in right after she dies—and Richardson makes it clear that a virtuous woman will not last long in an environment that relies almost exclusively on appearances.

Laclos also emphasizes the discrepancy between appearance and reality in his novel, and Tourvel, like Clarissa, is a victim of her society's false displays. When Tourvel first asks Valmont to leave Madame de Rosemonde's, she writes to him, "A longer stay on your part could only further expose me to the criticism of a society which is always prepared to think ill of others, and which, thanks to you, is only too ready to fix its attention upon the women who count you among their acquaintance" (95). Here she both points out the society's eagerness to attribute meaning to appearances and suggests that she herself must be careful to maintain a certain appearance, unassociated with Valmont, to keep her place in the society. How unlike Clarissa's statement, "That is the same to me, as if *all the world* knew it." However, it turns out that Tourvel's attitude is more comparable to Clarissa's than it first appears, for she writes in the same letter cited above, "As long as your behaviour towards me gave me reason to believe that you would distinguish between me and that multitude of women who have had cause to revile you, I disregarded and even disputed my friends' advice." Tourvel is willing to ignore the opinion of society as long as Valmont's behavior does not conflict with her own inner understanding of what is right and proper. Her cavalier approach to the importance of her

society's views evinces itself in a much later letter to Madame de Rosemonde. After Valmont has betrayed Tourvel with Emilie, but convinced her otherwise, she writes to Rosemonde, "With men, you say yourself, infidelity is not inconstancy. Not that I feel that this distinction, sanctioned or not by public opinion, is any the less wounding to the pride" (330). Tourvel detaches herself from the opinions and judgments of her society and, like Clarissa, will not attempt to appear other than she is for its benefit. The resonance of Clarissa's "That is the same to me, as if *all the world* knew it" manifests itself most prominently in Tourvel's letter to Rosemonde directly after Valmont's successful seduction. She confesses the whole episode to the old aunt, even though it has shattered her entire image of herself as a virtuous and faithful woman. She writes, "I conceal nothing from you, you see. Though you should find me no longer worthy of your friendship, I am still less afraid of losing it than betraying it," and "I have preferred, by being honest, the misfortune of losing your respect to that of making myself unworthy of it by stooping to lies" (308). Even entering the convent at the end of the novel, though it seems like a self-conscious flight from the watchful eye of society, cannot be misconstrued as concern for appearances, as perhaps Cecile's similar action can be. Patrick Byrne explains: "For a married woman scandalously flouting the requirement that the permission of her husband or of a higher authority has to be obtained if she is to stay in a convent, retreat there can provide no protection for her public reputation. Tourvel is not, strictly speaking, burying herself away from the public gaze; she is simply finding a place of safety and repose in which to die" (*Second Thoughts* 964). All these instances indicate that Tourvel ignores her society's mandate to maintain a proper outward appearance even if it conflicts with her interior self. Like Clarissa, Tourvel is unwilling to make this compromise, and the result is her clear



unsuitability as a member of society. Consider in contrast Valmont's obsession with his reputation, which, like Lovelace's, works to destroy Laclos's virtuous heroine.

Valmont considers his appearance in society to be of primary importance, and his desire for mastery over Tourvel rests on the belief that she will be his crowning triumph among his libertine friends if he is successful. His fear of public humiliation as a result of failure in this regard appears on many occasions, and the danger his fixation on public image creates for Tourvel is doubly dangerous because she is unaware of it. Before the affair, Valmont's main concern is that Tourvel will elude his advances and he will be forced to return to society, where he will be subjected to ridicule. His attitude then is best expressed in Letter 100, where, after Tourvel secretly leaves Madame de Rosemonde's to get away from Valmont, he writes to Merteuil, "What pleasure shall I take in my revenge! I shall find the traitress: I shall recover my dominion over her" (235). However dangerous his fear of public ridicule is for Tourvel in the early parts of the novel, it only gets worse after his success. Merteuil warns Valmont of gossip circulating about him in Paris, "It was positively affirmed that you were imprisoned in the country by a romantic and unhappy love," and she adds, "If you take my advice, you will not allow these dangerous rumours to acquire further substance" (269). He replies, "Thank you, first, for your advice concerning the rumours current about me. [...] Rest assured: I shall reappear in society more famous than ever before and worthier still of you" (276). Merteuil certainly knows how to provoke Valmont and, when she tires of having Tourvel as a rival, threatens him under the veil of a story of two aristocrats in their similar situation. She writes, "A woman, a friend of this man's, was tempted at one time to throw him to the public in his infatuated state, so as to make him permanently ridiculous" (335). After he receives this letter, Valmont, desperate to preserve his image of callous libertinism, wastes no time in casting off

Tourvel. He wishes to “reappear in society blazing with new glories”—the glory of having seduced the notably virtuous Tourvel and then abandoning her so as to prove that, as he proclaims earlier, “debased by her fall” she has become “no more to me than any other woman” (338, 220). After her “fall,” Tourvel makes it clear that she has no interest in living unless she is able to make Valmont happy. Valmont’s obsession with his own appearance in society, therefore, the strength of which forces him to cast her off (and Laclos’s criticism of a society ruled by appearances is heightened here because there is the suggestion that Valmont actually does care about her, reinforcing the senselessness of tragedies that result from conforming to society), adds to our understanding of why the virtuous heroine cannot survive in this environment.

In addition to the libertine’s mania for preserving his public appearance, a quality that both Lovelace and Valmont have proven is dangerous for a virtuous woman, Tourvel’s inability to distinguish between appearance and reality in her society leads her into a series of fatal errors in judgment. Occasionally Clarissa makes similar mistakes, but more often than not her careful analysis of Lovelace’s exterior presentation in relation to his interior motivation is surprisingly impressive, considering that her adversary is a mastermind of disguise and intrigue. The difference between Clarissa and Tourvel is that Clarissa never succumbs to her seducer. Tourvel, on the other hand, is wholly taken in by appearances. Merteuil describes a common problem, taking a lover at face value, to Madame de Volanges: “I have, as you may suppose, met several women who suffered from this dangerous malady. Some of them received me into their confidence, and not one but made her lover out to be a perfect being. But this chimerical perfection exists only in their imaginations. Out of their heated fancies they produce charms and virtues, with which they adorn the man of their choice” (247). Tourvel perfectly exemplifies

Merteuil's description. Unlike Clarissa, who early on makes the mistake of thinking that she can reform Lovelace by her good example, Tourvel, thanks to the virtuous appearance that Valmont engineers for himself, eventually comes to the conclusion that *she* is the one who needs to be reformed by *him*. His staged act of charity at the beginning of the novel and his declaration of religious conversion, made via Father Anselme, are two incidents that serve to convince Tourvel that he is more virtuous than he actually is, and, eventually, that he is more virtuous than she. Pretending that Tourvel has converted him from his life of libertinism, Valmont writes to Father Anselme, "You have my permission, Monsieur, supposing you consider it proper, to communicate this letter in its entirety to Madame de Tourvel, [...] in whom I shall never cease to honour the woman sent from Heaven to recall my soul to virtue by her own inspiring example" (287). As a woman oblivious to false appearances, Tourvel does not look at this letter with a discriminating eye and is completely convinced of its validity. Her reaction is not only to believe wholeheartedly in Valmont's virtuousness, but to believe that he has surpassed her on this front because she now recognizes her own weakness and potential for error, which he, apparently, has overcome. She writes to Rosemonde, "Could I boast of the virtue I owe only to Valmont? He has saved me" (293). Patrick Byrne describes this as Valmont's "ingenious use of role reversal," and writes that "Tourvel is brought down by a combination of factors," the first of which being, "her wish to convert Valmont and her belief in his essential virtue and in the reality of his suffering" (*Seduction and Death* 312, 325). Tourvel's easy credulity makes the power of appearances all the more devastating when Valmont finally unveils his true self. "I was so far from suspecting anything!" she writes after seeing Valmont flirt with Emilie the courtesan in a carriage (323). Although the power of persuasion sways Valmont once more into Tourvel's favor after this incident, her statement could be a catch phrase to encapsulate her whole life.

Tourvel cannot see through false appearances, and the disappointing fact that Valmont is not who he says he is proves to be far more than mere disappointment. She writes to Rosemonde after he abandons her, “The veil is rent, Madame, on which was pictured the illusion of my happiness. I see by the light of a terrible truth that my path lies between shame and remorse to a none too distant death” (337). Clarissa and Tourvel pay little attention to appearances while Lovelace, Valmont, and their entire societies pay attention to little else, and the consequent conflict of interest between these two ways of viewing the world predetermines that a virtuous woman has little hope of survival.

While Richardson and Laclos, through the deaths of their virtuous heroines, develop strong criticisms of societies that have no place for virtue, structure families around wealth and superficial relationships, and use false appearances to judge and deceive, it turns out that no social commentary is more effective than that offered by the manner of the deaths themselves. It is important to remember that Clarissa and Tourvel are not the only characters to die in their narratives. Richardson especially spends a significant amount of time chronicling the deaths of other characters, particularly those of Belton and Mrs. Sinclair, as foils to Clarissa’s. Thomas Beebee explains the purpose of this narrative strategy when he writes, “The long and detailed description of each of these deaths precludes the possibility that any of them could be a mere excrescence of plot. Here death is not a plot device; rather plot serves as an excuse for the observation and description of death” (Beebee 83). Although Valmont’s is the only other death that occurs in *Les Liaisons Dangereuses*, it is markedly different from Tourvel’s, just as Lovelace’s, Belton’s, and Mrs. Sinclair’s are markedly different from Clarissa’s, and these strange deaths undergone by virtuous women are meant to serve a specific purpose beyond conveniently ending the narratives. Adam Budd points out that Richardson “deliberately

clouded the possibility that natural causes led to Clarissa's death, even in his personal letters" and contrasts this to his "offering a clear diagnosis for every *other* character's death" (Budd 12). The significance of cloaking the cause of Clarissa's death in mystery is that Richardson intends to draw attention instead to the non-physical explanations for her death. The question he wants his readers to answer is "If she does not die of any bodily disease, what, then, does she die of?" One of the many answers to this question involves the failure of society to meet a virtuous woman's standards.

A major indication that the two deaths function as social commentary is that both women want to die, but rather than reflecting negatively on themselves as mentally unsound or suicidal, their attitude towards death reflects poorly on the societies that have driven them to such a desperate remedy. Clarissa writes to Judith Norton after the rape, "I can make but *one* atonement for my fault. May *that* be accepted! And may it soon be forgotten by *every* dear relation, that there was such an unhappy daughter, sister or niece, as Clarissa Harlowe!" (Richardson's emphasis, 1159). And in her posthumous letter to her father she writes, "With exulting confidence now does your emboldened daughter come into your awful presence by these lines, who dared not but upon this occasion to look up to you with hopes of favour and forgiveness" (1371). While here it appears that Clarissa's main motivation for dying is to make amends for her "fatal step," the consequences of which she blames entirely on herself, her death has other, less self-referential meanings attached to it as well. Katherine Binhammer explains Clarissa's altered attitude to the world between the early and latter parts of the novel:

After leaving her father's house, Clarissa begins to acknowledge her mistakes and sees them as the mistakes of inexperience, but, importantly, she resists change because that would mean conforming to a cynical view of the world. She chides herself for being

tricked into leaving Harlowe Place and realizes too late that she should have suspected Lovelace. Yet she resists accepting this model of knowledge because in order to know in advance she would have had to assume that the world unfolds as a libertine seduction plot defined by male power and female objectification. (Binhammer 873)

Binhammer adds that after the rape, “Clarissa’s struggle to maintain hope in the face of a limiting world ends, and she develops a misandry to match Lovelace’s misogyny” (873).

Clarissa writes to Anna Howe not long before she dies, “Oh, my dear, ‘tis a sad, a very sad world!—While under our parents’ protecting wings, we know nothing at all of it. Book-learned and a scribbler, and looking at people as I saw them as visitors or visiting, I thought I knew a great deal of it. Pitiably ignorant!—Alas! I knew nothing at all!” (1194). Clarissa dies because the world has wronged and disappointed her, and her death is a huge indictment of a society that persecutes those whom it should cherish most. Her death is also tightly bound to Christian doctrine, and while responses to Richardson’s ending have not always been favorable, we can understand his intention of victory for Clarissa as she casts off the horrors of this world for the relief of the next. Laclos also uses the process of Tourvel’s death to reflect negatively on a vicious society, but in a slightly different fashion.

Tourvel, like Clarissa, wants to die because the world has disappointed her, but she dies quickly and without the comfort of knowing that she will be welcomed into heaven. While Clarissa ever so carefully follows her doctor’s orders so that her friends and her God “may be satisfied that I omitted nothing which so worthy and so skilful a physician prescribed,” Tourvel “obstinately refuses every remedy, so that she had to be held down by force while she was bled” (Richardson 1276, Laclos 344). While Clarissa looks forward to the blessings of the afterlife, Tourvel, as Katharine Rogers explains, “dies with the realization that she has thrown herself

away upon an unworthy man and probably with the belief that she is damned” (Rogers 37). The result of these comparisons is that Tourvel’s death is more perplexing than Clarissa’s because, while Tourvel knows that she will not experience Clarissa’s beatific end, she is equally eager to die. If anything, this indicates a heightened emphasis on the world’s failings in *Les Liaisons Dangereuses* because Tourvel willingly dies, not only without any of Clarissa’s extensive preparations or reassurance about her welcome reception in heaven, but with the knowledge that she is an adulteress who “obstinately refuses every remedy” (it is thus easier to attribute suicide to Tourvel than Clarissa) and “probably with the belief that she is damned.” Patrick Byrne describes Tourvel’s death as mainly an act of Christian sacrifice and writes that she dies “taking on the burden of guilt for the relationship which has broken her, asking God to forgive Valmont for victimizing her” (*Seduction and Death* 328). However, Tourvel’s statement to Madame de Volanges on her deathbed, “I am dying because I did not believe you,” refers significantly to the early portions of the novel and suggests a different motivation for Tourvel’s decision to die (346). Earlier in this analysis I mentioned Tourvel’s willingness to ignore society and rely on her own judgment when she writes to Valmont, “As long as your behaviour towards me gave me reason to believe that you would distinguish between me and that multitude of women who have had cause to revile you, I disregarded and even disputed my friends’ advice” (95). The “friends’ advice” specifically means Madame de Volanges’s warnings against Valmont that Tourvel makes the mistake of ignoring. When Tourvel says that she is dying because she did not believe Madame de Volanges, she means, on the one hand, that Volanges was right about Valmont all along and Tourvel should have listened to her. However, Tourvel also means that she is dying because she tried, like Clarissa, to maintain an optimistic attitude about her society’s potential to prove people like Madame de Volanges wrong—that is, to prove that society had redeeming

features, that men like Valmont were not all bad, and that it was still possible for virtuous women like Tourvel to flourish. Both women die of disappointment, but both women also die because the alternative course of action, living, or at least living in the manner that the society demands, is not a valid alternative at all as far as Clarissa and Tourvel are concerned.

Two options other than death present themselves to Clarissa as possible solutions to her disgrace in society after the rape. One is marrying Lovelace; the other is the ludicrous plan her family concocts to exile her to Pennsylvania. Clarissa indicates that the latter would not be much different from her chosen course because, as she writes to Arabella, “If nothing happens within a month which may full as effectually rid my parents and friends of that world of cares, and fears, and scandals, which you mention, and if I am *then* able to be carried on board of ship, I will cheerfully obey my father and mother, although I were sure to die in the passage” (1257). The former, however, is the more interesting option because it emphasizes the great divide between Clarissa’s and her societies’ mindsets, effectively convincing her that she does not belong on the earth anymore if marrying Lovelace is the only avenue to acceptance among her neighbors. Everyone, including Anna Howe and Morden, advocates marriage as Clarissa’s only option. Dr. Lewen is the one character who provides a variation on this theme and says that if she does not marry him, she much publicly prosecute him, against which suggestion Clarissa offers extensive arguments (1252). In a letter to Anna Howe, Clarissa explains why she absolutely cannot marry Lovelace, even though the opinion of society indicates that she is lucky that he is still willing to marry her after she has lost her honor. She writes, “I cannot consent to *sanctify*, as I may say, Mr. Lovelace’s repeated breaches of all moral sanctions, and hazard my *future* happiness by a union with a man, through whose premeditated injuries, in a long train of the basest contrivances, I have forfeited my *temporal* hopes” (Richardson’s emphasis, 1141). Not only would Clarissa



betray her own inclinations and her understanding of right and wrong by following her society's fervent advice, but marrying Lovelace would indeed be a sin, and she believes that she would be punished in the afterlife for it. Society and Clarissa rarely exist on the same plane, as we have seen throughout this analysis, and once again her neighbors' understanding of the world and her own understanding are so completely at odds with one another that Clarissa makes the only available decision that she could live with, one that, unfortunately, does not allow her to live at all. Tourvel's death, like Clarissa's, can be partly explained by limited alternatives.

To understand the alternative to death that Tourvel denies, we must first understand that she does not lose her virtue by capitulating to Valmont. Revisiting the seduction scene for a moment, Tourvel says to Valmont, "I can no longer endure my existence unless it is of use in making you happy. I devote myself entirely to that," and Valmont comments on this statement to Merteuil, "With such candour—naïve or sublime—did she give up her person and her charms, increasing my happiness by sharing it" (303). Byrne explains this moment in terms of Tourvel's enduring virtue when he writes, "It is possible to argue that Valmont's emotional response to her words is not attributable to the self-congratulation that, rather than being passively possessed, she is giving herself in the desired way envisaged in L. 110, but is a tacit recognition of the paradoxically virtuous nature, the nobility, even, of her loss of virtue in the act of self-sacrifice" (*Seduction and Death* 326). And Marie Wellington offers a compelling interpretation of this same scene when she writes, "Faced with the ultimatum made by Valmont to sleep with him or be the reason he kills himself, to be an adulterer or to be a murderer, she chooses the lesser of two sins on the religious level. She offers her body in adultery, an atonable sin in her religious terms, in place of his soul which would be lost to eternal damnation in the case of suicide" (Wellington 14). As I noted earlier, Tourvel does not have affairs in the way that other members

of her society have affairs, and these two interpretations of the seduction scene and, above all, her death indicate that she never loses her virtue though she adopts the behavior of her neighbors for a short time. If Tourvel had chosen to live, it would no longer have been possible to defend her virtue because she truly would have become like “any other woman” in her aristocratic environment. The only way to survive in Tourvel’s society is to have lax morals, and although there may have been some doubt as to whether or not this would bother her after she starts behaving more like a typical woman (Valmont, for instance, clearly does not expect her to die but cruelly tells her to “take another lover” in the letter he receives from Merteuil and subsequently sends to her), her death decisively proves that it *would* bother her, and that she is incapable of espousing the bad behavior of society merely for survival’s sake (335).

Tom Keymer calls the eighteenth-century response to the early editions of *Clarissa* a “collective lament” against the tragic loss of such a worthy, though fictional, woman, a lament that was made manifest by the influx of letters Richardson received upon publication of the final volumes, decrying his chosen ending (Keymer 203). At the end of *Les Liaisons Dangereuses*, Madame de Volanges mourns over the lately dead Tourvel to Madame de Rosemonde: “So many virtues, graces, so many praiseworthy qualities; so sweet, so gentle a disposition; a husband whom she loved and who adored her; a circle of friends she enjoyed and whose whole delight she was; beauty, youth, fortune: a combination of so many advantages lost through a single imprudence!” (375). Whether real readers or imagined characters, the witnesses to Clarissa’s and Madame de Tourvel’s deaths often find it incomprehensible that the world should be so soon, in Mrs. Harlowe’s words, “stripped of [its] ornament” (584). However, the steady criticisms of society that the novelists develop throughout the works prove that, for Richardson and Laclos, the real tragedy would have occurred only if the two women had lived. In order to

live, Clarissa and Tourvel would have had to lose their virtue irrevocably before finding a place for themselves in a vicious society. They would have had to compromise their ideal version of the family and willingly form the shallow relationships that characterize their societies. They would have had to embrace a society ruled by appearances in which all truth is obscured by deceit. Virtue may be lost from the world when Clarissa and Tourvel die, but that is better than virtue being lost *to* the world, and while Richardson and Laclos may not provide much hope for the future of their societies, they do preserve faith in the existence of a true and enduring virtue, which assists them in their quest to delineate the social problems that dominate their narratives.

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