

Picturing *Les Liaisons dangereuses*. 18th-century illustrations of Laclos' novel
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Whilst many 18th century French novels were illustrated as a matter of course—and often to make them more desirable—Choderlos de Laclos chose not to include engraved frontispieces or plates with *Les Liaisons dangereuses* in the editions he is known to have overseen or authorised. Indeed, in a letter to his son in 1802, he alleges spurious textual reasons to denounce an “édition à estampes” of his famous book.¹ This attitude did not stop publishers issuing illustrated copies during his lifetime in what were, in a couple of cases at least, clearly lucrative operations. A number of major studies, from Philip Stewart’s pioneering *Engraven Desire: Eros, Image, and Text in the French Eighteenth Century* (1992)² to the collective volume on *Book Illustration in the Long Eighteenth Century. Reconfiguring the Visual Periphery of the Text* (2011)³ directed by Christina Ionescu have shown the importance of iconography to literary historians. *Les Liaisons dangereuses* has fared rather better than most French novels of the period in that several studies have dealt with some of the numerous illustrated editions published over the years in different countries, from the 18th to the 20th century.⁴

I should like to take a look at the illustrations of Laclos’ novel printed before his death in 1803 in order to try and determine what they can tell us about the way in which contemporaries reacted to the adventures of the marquise de Merteuil, the vicomte de Valmont and their victims. This will allow me to consider aspects of the reception of the novel in the 18th century: different choices of scenes put a varying emphasis on core elements of *Les Liaisons dangereuses* and thus suggest the manner in which a reader might approach the text. I will attempt to sketch out elements which extend beyond the boundaries of the 18th century to give a sense of the iconographic legacy of these illustrations: motifs are reused, certain pictures echo others and have led in some cases to particular scenes becoming iconic.

I will examine the first known illustrations of the novel—four large prints in the English manner, engraved by Romain Girard between 1785 and 1788 (three after Lavreince and one after Touzé).⁵ Further I will take into account all the known 18th-century illustrated editions, from the anonymous “Geneva, 1786” edition with its four scenes, to the fine set of eight engravings (first issued in 1792) after Le Barbier,⁶ the anonymous and very coarsely delineated “Geneva, 1793” engravings⁷ and finally the fifteen well-known Fragonard, Gérard and Monnet illustrations prepared for the “London, 1796” edition.⁸

Size matters. Four illustrations engraved by Girard (1785-1788)

As far as we are aware, the initial illustrations of the novel were not designed to be included in editions, but as prints to hang on walls and therefore to circulate independently from the text.⁹ They were issued as 40.5 x 32 cm engravings with different price-tags according to whether you chose to buy the coloured or the black-and-white version, and could be purchased singly or in pairs. The first two came out in 1785, the work of an enterprising engraver, Romain Girard, who had worked from pictures¹⁰ by the Swedish painter Niklas Lafrensen (1737-1807)—“Lavrince” to his French clients. They pay lip-service to the fashion for English prints by boasting English (or “franglais”) captions: *Mrs Merteuil and Miss Cécile Volanges* and *Valmont and Présid^e de Tourvel*. The other inscriptions are in the traditional Latin (*pinxit* and *sculp.*) with the artists’ names and the indication of where the pictures could be acquired (“*A Paris, chez Girard, rue de Savoie derriere le Quay de la Vallée N°21*”). There are also French addenda: the first plate indicates “*Tiré des Liaisons dangereuses Tome II Lettre LXIII*”. In the copies I have seen, the second does not give the number of the letter to which it refers, but quotes an extract: “*Vous ne voulez pas ma mort, laissez-moi, sauvez-moi; laissez-moi; au nom de dieu, laissez-moi.*”¹¹ The picture of Cécile Volanges and the marquise appears to have been the first one actually issued: it was advertised in the *Journal de Paris* on January 12 1785. An announcement regarding the second print was included in the *Mercur de France* on December 27 1785. Both were also mentioned as available two years later.¹²

The four main characters from the novel appear—in pairs—in these engravings: Merteuil and Cécile, Valmont and Tourvel. The two pictures form a diptych which sets out the two main tendencies followed by the novel’s illustrators over the years: to suggest eroticism or even pornography on the one hand, and to select sentimental scenes on the other. Each image presents a couple. The pairing of Merteuil and a bare-breasted somewhat bedraggled Cécile, demurely looking down, suggests a lesbian subtext and traditional male fantasies. Like paintings of Susanna and the elders it presents a full-frontal Cécile for the spectator to see whilst the marquise, elegantly dressed and wearing an elaborate hat, is silhouetted, seated to her right, her eyes raised towards her young friend’s chest. This is the stuff of erotic novels as executed by a fine draughtsman. It is similar in tone to contemporary paintings by Fragonard or Boucher which

hang in major art galleries the world over, and characteristic of Lavreince's inspiration in many a work. By contrast, the second engraving looks like the sort of scene which might be found in sentimental novels where overblown feelings are the norm and decency prevails. Half-kneeling to the left, arms outstretched, Tourvel appears to be resisting Valmont feebly. As in the previous engraving, the décor is that of a luxurious modern dwelling. Cécile's harp can be made out in front of a tallboy in the first picture. The armchairs and bow-fronted chest-of-drawers in the second are fashionable. Over the door, a painting shows an angel apparently sheltering a couple—she with bare breasts—as though giving some form of discreet indication of how things will evolve for Tourvel and Valmont. Over the years, there are frequent allusions to affairs of the heart or mythological amours in pictures or objects included in the décor of the different illustrations inspired by the novel. They help create an atmosphere.

I should now like to look at the other two plates by Romain Girard, briefly passing over the first illustrated edition which I will deal with in the next section. We do not know whether the engraver initiated the collaboration with Lavreince or why it only concerned three of the four illustrations of *Les Liaisons dangereuses* he prepared. The third and fourth pictures are announced as a pair in the *Journal de Paris* on December 8 1788. They came out together, once again in black and white or in colour (4 and 9 livres apiece respectively). Both are bed-scenes but whilst one is erotic, the other shows a dying Présidente. Two of the characters we have already seen figure on them: Valmont on the first, Tourvel on the second. The first, *Valmont and Emilie*, shows what has probably become the most iconic scene in the novel, though it has been interpreted in various ways over the centuries.¹³ As indicated in the small print, it shows what happens in letters XLVII-XLVIII. Valmont explains to Merteuil that he has promised to stay with Emilie, a prostitute, whose rich Dutch lover has been made to drink to excess and then packed off home in the vicomte's carriage. Valmont is repaying a debt: "Cette complaisance de ma part est le prix de celle qu'elle vient d'avoir, de me servir de pupitre pour écrire à ma belle dévote, à qui j'ai trouvé plaisant d'envoyer une Lettre écrite du lit et presque d'entre les bras d'une fille, interrompue même pour une infidélité complète, et dans laquelle je lui rends un compte exact de ma situation et de ma conduite."¹⁴ On the engraving, framed by bed-curtains, Valmont and the young woman appear to be gazing adoringly into each other's eyes. Her right shoulder and left forearm are draped in white by a sheet. Her breasts are bare. Her legs are slightly bent and she is holding an inkwell in a suggestive manner as Valmont leans on her right thigh and knee to write his missive to the présidente. In a society in which the representation of erotic female nudity was tolerated, in modern as well as in mythical settings, contemporary male figures are generally at least partially clothed. This is true here and characteristic of many subsequent illustrations of *Les Liaisons dangereuses*. As in the earlier picture in which he figures, Valmont is fully dressed in a grey jacket, white hose and stockings, with elegant pointed shoes. There is not a hair of his powdered wig out of place. His hat and riding crop are to the left of the scene. The picture hints at sexual congress without showing it. There is nothing to mirror the embraces of couples in contemporary illustrations of Sade for instance. It is a moderately risqué scene, but one which could hang in a bedroom or study without seeming out of place.

Touzé's illustration, which serves as the basis for Girard's fourth engraving—*La Présidente Tourvel*, the title remains in French—is currently in the Louvre.¹⁵ It introduces a new element compared with the three earlier plates and represents a scene which artists have neglected since: there are four people, all women. Cleverly enough, the centre shows emptiness. Tourvel, who is lying down, and all in white, her covers looking like a winding sheet, her waxen face almost that of a cadaver, is at once hiding behind a curtain on the right-hand side of the picture, where an austere Mme de Volanges looks on uncompromisingly, and, on the left, apparently, thrusting a note, with her right hand, towards an uncomprehending servant. A nun, in the background, reminds us that this is taking place in a convent. There is, as in the scene showing the présidente and Valmont, a caption, which is a direct quotation from the novel: "de lui... Grand Dieu... Reprenez-la".¹⁶ It is a shortened version of lines taken from letter CXLIX in which Cécile's mother narrates to Valmont's aunt, Mme de Rosemonde, how a note was brought to Tourvel whilst she lay on her sickbed.

Par malheur, on apporta alors une lettre pour elle. Quand on voulut la lui remettre, elle répondit d'abord n'en vouloir recevoir aucune, et personne n'insista. Mais de ce moment, elle parut plus agitée. Bientôt après, elle demanda d'où venait cette lettre; elle n'était pas timbrée: qui l'avait apportée? on l'ignorait: de quelle part on l'avait remise? on ne l'avait pas dit aux Tourières. Ensuite elle garda quelque temps le silence; après quoi, elle recommença à parler, mais ses propos sans suite nous apprirent seulement que le délire était revenu.

Cependant, il y eut encore un intervalle tranquille, jusqu'à ce qu'enfin elle demanda qu'on lui remît la lettre qu'on avait apportée pour elle. Dès qu'elle eut jeté les yeux dessus, elle s'écria: "De lui,

grand Dieu!” Et puis d’une voix forte, mais oppressée: “Reprenez-la, reprenez-la.” Elle fit sur-le-champ fermer les rideaux de son lit, et défendit que personne approchât.¹⁷

We have no idea what contemporaries thought of these prints or of how successful they were, nor whether they were familiar to subsequent illustrators. The two mildly erotic scenes (Cécile and Merteuil on the one hand, Valmont and Emilie on the other) were chosen as subject matter by other artists over the years. The présidente imploring the vicomte’s clemency is also sometimes shown in plates. Whilst several subsequent engravings depict Tourvel on her deathbed, they generally choose a later part of the story: when she is repentant or actually dying (as Mme de Volanges recounts to Mme de Rosemonde in letter CLXV) as we shall see in Le Barbier’s version, and not in distress over the letter apparently sent by Valmont. The second of the four pictures by Girard, the one which it is most difficult, as a casual reader, to assign to a particular exchange in *Les Liaisons dangereuses*, may seem less striking to a modern viewer as it appears interchangeable with passages in other novels. However it balances out the more libertine representations by showing a sentimental encounter whose outcome is not immediately obvious to the viewer. All four scenes betray careful reading of the novel. Girard had obviously set out to publish a luxurious set of pictures. One only has to assume that the first two were not unsuccessful, otherwise, presumably, the idea of engraving two more—and of finding another painter to stand in for Lavreince—would have been abandoned.

Picture book: the 1786 Illustrated Edition

The first illustrated edition of Laclos’ novel appears to have been a purely financial enterprise. The original book (without illustrations) was a bestseller from the start—the initial print-run of 2000 copies was rapidly exhausted so author and publisher signed additional clauses to their contract.¹⁸ Several counterfeit editions came out in 1782 and in subsequent years as unscrupulous printers and booksellers strove to take advantage of *Les Liaisons dangereuses*’ commercial success. None of the illustrated editions was published with Laclos’ consent. They are all pirated versions of the novel. The inclusion of pictures was almost certainly a way for unscrupulous publishers to try and make that little bit more out of the enterprise. Within Laclos’ lifetime, several illustrated editions appeared. The quality of the plates they boast varies greatly.

What immediately strikes the reader faced with the four engravings of the 1786 edition—the first we have managed to locate—is the poor quality of the draughtsmanship, compared with Girard, Lavreince and Touzé’s elegant plates. The anonymous artist was probably commissioned to deliver four pictures so that there was one per volume. As in the prints destined to be framed, the three first are close-ups of couples whilst the fourth shows more figures. What is particular here is that we move from a relatively demure scene which one has to believe, from the page reference given in the corner of the print, depicts Merteuil and Cécile, to two views of bedrooms with couples (Valmont and the vicomtesse de M***; Valmont and Cécile) to an injured and dying Valmont being brought in to a vestibule to give up the ghost as the men around him display their grief. This final plate illustrates a passage which was to become a classic in later editions—Valmont’s death in an all-male world. To the reader of the novel, Tourvel’s absence from all the pictures is striking. Is she absent because she is considered negligible or because she might be thought to be a bad example? Or is it a way of shielding the character whose virtue has suffered enough without her shame being broadcast? As I have pointed out in an article on this series,¹⁹ were one to read the four plates as a comic-strip, one would have to conclude that men and women meet only in the bedroom (the two central scenes) and that the consequences are disastrous.

There is little sophistication in the manner of depicting of the figures. It is impossible to recognise the faces of the recurring characters—we have Cécile before the cancelled trip to the opera and then as Valmont is about to rape her. The dying Valmont appears again at the end. The details are sketchy and poorly drawn—like Cécile’s cast-off dress for instance in the rape scene. The only actual element in this third print which demonstrates circumstantially that the pictures really are intended to illustrate Laclos’ novel rather than being lifted from stock engravings is the presence of the “lanterne sourde”—a “dark lantern” with a shutter allowing the light to be hidden without extinguishing the flame. Cécile, it must be added, contrary to the indications in the text, appears to be welcoming her nocturnal intruder.

We can but guess at the success of the edition by the few extant copies and the poor quality of the craftsmanship. They suggest someone was out to make a quick profit. The next illustrated version of *Les Liaisons dangereuses*—long thought to have been the first—could not be more different.

A Neoclassical Vision: Le Barbier's Illustrations

In the 1792 edition, which bears the false indication “Geneva” on its title-page, there are eight plates: two for each of four tiny (in-18) volumes.²⁰ In spite of their size, they are very minutely drawn. A renowned illustrator, Jean-Jacques-François Le Barbier (1738-1826), who trained in Rouen with Descamps before working with Lebas and Pierre, drew the originals, which were engraved by Dambrun, Delignon, Halbou, Simonet and Thomas. In some versions the pictures have captions (drawn from passages of the novel), in others there are none. As in the earlier illustrated editions, the number of people represented on the prints is limited—generally two or three here. A noteworthy aspect is the presence of a rare outdoor daylight scene in this novel which happens almost exclusively behind closed doors—mirroring the novel’s intimate nature as opposed to that of plays, which were acted and watched publicly. Against a mountainous backdrop, Valmont’s old aunt watches him help Tourvel cross a ditch—the play on words with “sauter le fossé” meaning crossing other metaphorical Rubicons would have been immediately clear to Laclos’ contemporaries (letter VI²¹). Mme de Rosemonde is in some ways an image of the spectator or reader who will witness Tourvel’s fall.

In the other plates, Danceny sets Cécile’s harp in place (letter XVIII)—it is a picture close, in terms of ambiance, to cabinet paintings by artists like Bouilly, and suggests the young peoples’ complicity as Mme de Volanges seems an ineffectual chaperone in the corner of the picture. Further along, the marquise raises her arms as if to defend herself whilst her servants overcome Prévau who is uselessly brandishing his sword (letter LXXXV). Another illustration, which could have figured in many a sentimental novel, depicts old Mme de Rosemonde standing before an unkempt Valmont (letter CXXII). Its subtle details hint at the décor—a landscape painting hangs on the back wall. Two scenes function as a diptych. In the first (letter XXIII), Mme de Tourvel, on one knee, appears to be attempting to defend herself from Valmont, both characters have their arms outstretched and the présidente’s position shows her to be almost crucified, an interesting allusion to her future suffering; on the other, the vicomte kneels at the foot of the daybed on which Tourvel sits as they gaze into each other’s eyes (letter CXXV). The final scene shows the présidente on her deathbed, her eyes raised to the heavens, her hands joined as if in prayer. Standing behind her, Mme de Volanges offers support (letter CLXV).

One print, in a new take on an episode Lavreince had already shown and which other illustrators would choose to represent, depicts Mme de Merteuil holding a weeping Cécile and attempting to console her (letter LXIII). It is in many ways the reverse of the dying Tourvel supported by Mme de Volanges in the final plate. Here, the younger of the two figures, in tears as the caption reminds us²²—her mother, forewarned by the marquise, has put an end to her correspondence with Danceny—, is semi-recumbent in the marquise’s arms and her left breast is bare. The two women are positioned in a manner similar to some depictions of the pietà and the pyramid composition of their bodies is mirrored by the drapery, which frames them in a suggestive manner. In much the same way as paintings of scenes like Susanna and the elders, an analogy I mentioned *supra* for the first representation of the marquise and her young friend, it allowed for a risqué element to be introduced via a cultural alibi. The iconographic choices show Le Barbier’s artistic learning and talent.²³ On the whole, regardless of the artist, all the illustrations of intimate scenes between Cécile and Merteuil are more explicit than Laclos’ prose. They add a new dimension and would have appealed to those who hoped to be buying a pornographic text, rather than a libertine novel.²⁴

In the 1792 series, small elements hint at luxurious interiors. The figures stand out against a deliberately muted background. Le Barbier makes much use of curtains and swags of material draped around sofas or beds. One can often discern paintings and frames or mouldings on the walls. The furniture is generally just partly visible but gives depth to the scenes and suggests that we only have an incomplete view—which could serve as a metaphor for the letter-writers’ lack of impartiality in the book as a whole. Tourvel’s work-table, for instance, which is cut off by the edge of the print’s frame, or the stoup on the wall of her room at the convent, serve as metonymical details in the décor. In aesthetic terms, there is often a strong geometric element characteristic of the emergence of neoclassicism. Like in David’s *Serment des Horaces* (*The Oath of the Horatii*, 1784), with which it has compositional similarities, the picture accompanying the text of letter LXXXV has a raised sword at its centre. There is no heroism here, though: Le Barbier is playing with references, teasing the cultured reader. To the left, arms outstretched, Merteuil appears to be resisting but, significantly, betrays no fear. The brandished sword—a clearly phallic symbol—is Prévau’s. He has been wrestled to the floor by one of the marquise’s servants as a couple of others crowd around, with a woman—possibly the faithful Victoire—looking particularly worried, her hands clenched as if in prayer. The scene is quite theatrical, but it is almost frozen, static in its approach, unlike the representation of the same episode by Monnet in the 1796 edition.²⁵

Le Barbier's eight pictures show the main characters: Valmont, Tourvel, Merteuil, Cécile, but also Mmes de Rosemonde and de Volanges and chevalier Danceny, as well as Prévan. It is a valiant attempt to cover the different threads of the story in the illustrations. It is worth noting that Valmont's benevolent aunt, Mme de Rosemonde, who is rarely pictured (and never elsewhere in the illustrations published during Laclos' lifetime) actually figures on two of the eight plates. Clearly Le Barbier and/or whoever commissioned the prints had read the novel carefully and thought was given, in the choice of scenes, at once to editorial questions (there are two pictures per volume) and to overall interest both in terms of the plot and of what could be shown.

Le Barbier's exquisite drawings are the works of a professional who also illustrated Ovid, Rousseau, Graffigny²⁶ and Marmontel. They were copied in various editions—some of which were probably not printed from the original set of plates—and circulated extensively.²⁷

Rough pictures: the 1793 edition

The next series, in terms of quality, is closer to the first illustrated edition: the plates are anonymous, which tends to suggest they were produced by a jobbing artisan, rather than an artist whose name would be recognised or whose work might be sought after. There are four plates, as in the first set, though the choices are not identical. The first engraving accompanies the opening letter in which Cécile writes to her convent friend Sophie of her embarrassment: sent for by her mother, she takes the unknown man she sees for her future husband whilst he is simply the cobbler, come to measure her feet. There was a “nudge-nudge wink-wink” dimension to the scene, with the joke on naïve young Cécile. She expects the man to ask for her hand, but is invited to give him her foot, which he looks at in the same way as horse-dealer would to assess a filly. In addition, the measure of the foot was considered to be indicative of sexual pleasures to come. The lack of refinement of the draughtsmanship is on a par with the aspect of the novel which it underlines. Whilst the opening passage is rarely illustrated, this is not the only example. In 1908, Van Maele pictured a buxom Mme de Volanges overseeing the shoemaker's intervention, though the play on words which would have been obvious to Laclos' contemporaries would probably no longer have come to mind automatically.

In the second 1793 picture, Mme de Volanges reads letters at a desk by candlelight. In the background, Cécile looks desolate as she leans her head on her hand. The caption makes clear what has happened. The words are those of the daughter, speaking about her mother: “Elle me demanda la clef de mon secrétaire.”²⁸ Like certain others, the scene could have been included in many a sentimental novel. The subsequent plate²⁹ shows Cécile, in bed, her nightcap on her head, wrestling against a fully clothed Valmont. It hints at the violence of the passage—something artists rarely show when they choose to depict part of the scene recounted in a letter in which the vicomte boasts of his night-time exploits. The illustrator's final picture shows a servant leaving after having let Prévan in. He has doffed his hat to Merteuil who sits rather regally on a small sofa. Like in the 1786 prints, Tourvel is not represented in any of the scenes and there is no way one could reconstruct the story from these four pictures. They do, however, give an indication of different tonalities at play, from the suggestive, with the implicit lewd reference in letter I, to the pathetic and sentimental when Danceny's letters to Cécile are discovered; from the violence preceding Cécile's rape to the apparently socially refined engagement between the marquise and Prévan. The quotations, which serve as captions, underline this.³⁰

Triple Vision: the 1796 edition

With the false indication of “Londres” as the place it was printed, the richest illustrated edition published in Laclos' lifetime came out in two volumes, probably in Paris, in 1796. It has often been studied³¹ and reproduced³²—the current “Livre de poche classique” version, like the Gallimard “Pléiade”, includes all fifteen plates. Whilst in 1792 Le Barbier was the sole draughtsman for a team of talented engravers, three artists and twelve line engravers prepared the 1796 illustrations.³³ The artists were Charles Monnet (for the two frontispieces and all but one of the plates of volume I—so a total of 8 pictures), Fragonard's pupil Marguerite Gérard (for the whole of volume II except for its frontispiece—6 plates), and, for a single plate, Fragonard's own son Alexandre-Evariste. Three different styles and perceptions are clearly visible in the series whose creators belong to three different generations—Monnet was born in 1732, Gérard in 1761 and Fragonard in 1780. It is obvious that, if only in terms of the number of etchings and the choice of a larger than usual format for a novel (in-8°), this two-volume set was intended to be special. We have no idea why a single artist was not commissioned to do the whole or how the scenes were shared out. It looks as though Marguerite Gérard may have taken over from Monnet at some stage

since all the scenes she illustrates figure in the third and fourth part of the novel. It is also possible, considering that Fragonard's plate means volume I contains an illustration more than volume II, that his engraving was added as an afterthought.

The 1796 edition is the first with an allegorical frontispiece—or rather two, one per volume.³⁴ Because there are two of them, they function as an opening and closing scene, showing the cast at the start and at the end of play. They suggest that if you pare down the story to the essentials, there are only three important characters: Merteuil, Valmont, Tourvel. Their presence also leads one to believe that the story is not purely anecdotal and has implications beyond those of a traditional work of fiction. Not merely a sentimental tale, it apparently deals with major questions in an edifying manner. This implicitly sets it apart from most novels of the time. In addition, the absence of any form of “Explication des figures” detailing the meaning of the scenes or even the identity of the characters represented, tantalisingly leads to the conclusion that part of the interpretation is still left to the reader.

The single illustration by the young and gifted Alexandre-Evariste Fragonard, which accompanies letter XXI, offers an original choice of episode. He depicts Valmont's good deed. An essentially virile scene, the plate has both a Greuze-like atmosphere and a David-like quality.³⁵ The only woman is in the background.³⁶ The elderly man is represented in an anatomically soigné fashion, as though he were the product of a life-study or based on one of Houdon's “écorchés”—his sculptures of flayed male bodies—come to life. Both through the influences at work and through the quality of his draughtsmanship, Alexandre-Evariste Fragonard clearly shows that he has been trained as an artist—something which cannot be said for the illustrators of the 1786 and 1793 editions!

As well as the frontispieces, Monnet was responsible for a series of sometimes risqué pictures illustrating early scenes in the novel. Compared with Fragonard's sinewy old man, his figures often seem somewhat ungainly. Several are nude rubenesque women like Julie who faces the reader as she vainly clutches at a sheet whilst Valmont, in his nightshirt, dressing gown and nightcap, sits on the end of the bed, or Emilie on whose backside the vicomte is leaning as he writes the famous letter XLVIII to the présidente de Tourvel—the caption reminds us of the circumstances.³⁷ Cécile, being seduced by the marquise, and the vicomtesse de **, a former mistress with whom Valmont spends the night in a country house, are shown in somewhat compromising situations in the next two engravings—the latter with naked breasts, her legs uncovered up to her knees (letter LXXI). The décor and literary context turn these representations into socially acceptable versions of page 3 girls and, implicitly, make the reader/spectator into a voyeur. Clearly, the artist is explicitly giving us much that is only alluded to in the novel. There is no *double entendre* at work in the illustration of letter XLVIII, for instance—the caption alone gives the key.

Monnet excels at suggestive details like the cupid holding torches aloft to cast light over Merteuil and Belleruche as they prepare to embrace (letter X),³⁸ which recurs, at the side of the picture this time, as Merteuil appears to seduce Cécile whose discarded fire-screen in the lower left-hand corner serves as a metaphor for passion. Like Le Barbier, he outlines luxurious interiors by draped curtains and by hinting at decorative elements, for instance with outlines of columns or pictures. His vision of the marquise's servants wrestling with a sword-wielding Prévan is much less striking than the earlier one. The lines and masses are less clearly drawn. In its style, the picture is like many of those one would find in gothic novels of the time.

Marguerite Gérard, who took up the task of illustrating the second volume—except for the frontispiece as already mentioned—and was also commissioned to draw plates for Louvet de Couvray's *Faublas*, appears to have been more talented than Monnet at representing human bodies. This is all the more surprising as his academic training was probably more intense than hers. In addition, as a woman, she would have been expected to be more discreet in her representation of erotic scenes than her predecessor. If, as is likely, the anonymous artists responsible for the 1786 and 1793 editions were men, Gérard's 1796 contributions are the first female illustrations of the novel.³⁹ This is all the more interesting as written comments on the book were also on the whole by men. Gérard takes what is often an ambiguous approach, suggesting more than she actually reveals, which makes her close to Laclos with his use of “langage gaze”.⁴⁰ Her first picture depicts a sleeping Cécile who manages to appear chaste and innocent in spite of a bare breast, arms and legs—we are a far cry from Monnet's Julie and Emilie. The vicomte is marginalised. He is in the top left-hand corner of the plate with a lamp in hand, looking out at us, as if to suggest that evil lurks in unexpected places and that nobody is totally safe. Here, as in Monnet's scenes of the naked servant girl and prostitute, the reader is, in a sense, inside the room, within a graphic fourth wall, like a reflection of Valmont. Gérard's strength is to make us, as the novelist does, an accomplice, or at least a silent witness of what is going on by choosing the moment before Cécile wakes.⁴¹

When Gérard draws couples—Valmont and Tourvel or the vicomte and Cécile—, she stresses their physical closeness which can appear tender (letter XCIX), relaxed (letter CXV) or tense (letter CXXV).⁴² Valmont's two-timing with Cécile and the présidente is cleverly indicated by alternating pictures which show him alone with Cécile, then with Tourvel, with Cécile again, and once more with Tourvel, before the tragic dénouement. The illustrations are finely drawn and, as with Le Barbier and Monnet, include elements of décor like the desk at which Cécile writes, a clock and bookshelves etc. There are also hints of the modern 'troubadour' style.⁴³ Such prints could grace a sentimental novel but suggest changes of pace in the plot and, as in the original illustrated edition, culminate in untimely death. Gérard gives us both Valmont and Tourvel's final moments, turning their story into the pivotal one of the novel, editing Merteuil out of the picture literally by never showing her, but also splitting up her central couple with an all-male and then an all-female final scene. Valmont is shown clutching a cloth to his wound and shaking Danceny's hand, having passed on the letters which compromise the marquise to one of the four men who crowd around him (letter CLXV). Tourvel is slumped in Volanges' arms on her deathbed, possibly already dead, another interpretation of a pietà, her whiteness and draped clothes turning her into a timeless figure of a secular martyr. Unlike in Le Barbier's vision, there is no religious element in the décor. The final scenes, acting as a diptych, could suggest to the casual reader that Valmont's was a noble end and that Tourvel died tragically young. There is no moral condemnation of the vicomte's manipulation of his lovers, or of the présidente's adultery. Redemption seems to be at hand. The interpretation is, in many ways, a melodramatic and sentimental one. It glosses over the masculine codes of desire, which informed many of Monnet's (and both previous and subsequent illustrators') choices, and though ending with two characters, paradoxically leaves out any direct indication of violence. It is arguably a gendered reading of the novel. Rousseau, Laclos' literary master, and the author of the most successful French novel to date when *Les Liaisons dangereuses* was published, had indicated that fiction's seductions could rely on a depiction of vice to lead to virtue. Gérard's pictures seem to propose an analogous interpretation of the 1782 novel. We do not know to what extent the artists discussed the scenes they were going to depict or their take on the story, but in their different approaches to the text, their plates for the 1796 edition give precious contemporary reactions to a multi-faceted work.

The quality of many of Laclos' descriptions means that they could be translated into stage-directions—think of Valmont's instructions to Cécile about oiling the lock in her room or handing him her key. He is however very discreet regarding the appearance of his characters—all we know about Cécile, for instance, is that she is 15 years-old, blonde and, according to Merteuil, quite pretty. Tourvel dresses unfashionably. Rosemonde is 80. Apart from that, practically everything is left to the reader's or the draughtsman's imagination. From the start, in the scenes they selected, Lavreince and Touzé give us both the voluptuous and the sentimental as major threads of the novel. In the same way, the illustrators of the four editions discussed here, though often dissimilar in their talents and approaches, were sensitive to the book's ambiguous nature and sought to highlight it in their choice of scenes—some of which were to become iconic over the years—and the details of their engravings, navigating between vice and virtue, love and lust. They each offer their own vision of the characters and their adventures.

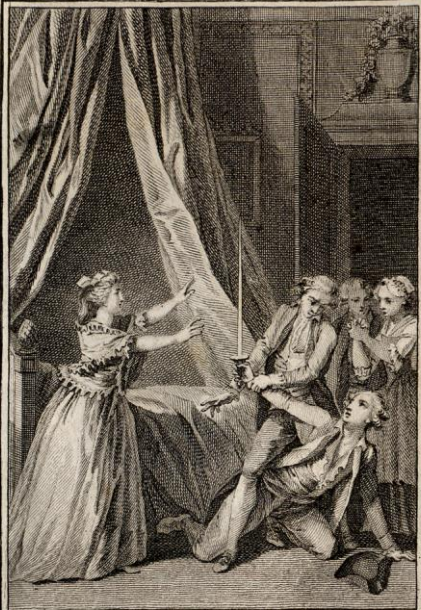
In subsequent editions, artists, like the talented George Barbier in a deluxe 1934 limited print-run of *Les Liaisons dangereuses*, imagine scenes which are only alluded to in the letters.⁴⁴ On the whole, the early illustrators show they have read the text, and read it well. They do not always choose the same episodes as each other. Clearly some are struck by particular passages or specific characters. The Lavreince and Touzé drawings suggest Tourvel is the love-interest, but that there is plenty in the novel for those interested in a tale of sensuality. The 1786 edition puts sex and seduction at the heart of the plot but shows an untimely ending for Valmont—the apparent hero of the tale since he figures in three of the four plates. Le Barbier attempts to give a wider angle, including peripheral characters who play important parts in the plot, and makes Tourvel into the heroine: her death and not Valmont's (which is not depicted) ends the story. The anonymous 1793 edition shows violence and refinement. Cécile is in three of the four plates—resisting Valmont's advances in the last of the three. Tourvel, as we mentioned, does not figure in this set or in the 1786 plates. One can only wonder whether the character of the virtuous adulteress was one which certain contemporaries found hard to handle. In the 1796 edition, the allegorical frontispieces, which tend to elevate the tone and suggest that book illustrations could borrow the codes of the prestigious genre of history painting—and indeed the luxurious quality of the work as a whole—, indicate that this publication was marketing itself as a desirable commodity⁴⁵. Whilst Monnet's actual illustrations of scenes are close to soft-porn for the top end of the market and show Valmont with Julie, Emilie and the vicomtesse on the

one hand, and Merteuil with Belleruche, Cécile and Prévan on the other, Gérard's redress the balance by setting out the sentimental side of the novel and suggesting—in line with the frontispieces—, that there is a final redemption or, at the very least, a moral side to this tale of passion.

Illustrations affect the reader's relationship with a text, draw his or her attention to specific scenes, limits the extent to which he or she can imagine characters and passages. Let me briefly return to Laclos' dismissal of an unnamed illustrated version which is likely to have been one of the two most highly polished of the ones referred to here: Le Barbier's or Fragonard, Gérard and Monnet's. I think the author, in a posture diametrically opposed to Rousseau's when he prepared *La Nouvelle Héloïse*, did not want illustrations for his text, possibly to avoid his own disappointment at not recognising what he had imagined or at seeing the story trivialised in pictures, but also because he did not want to impose his vision on the reader. The latter is allowed total freedom within the well-sprung trap that is the novel. It is partly on account of this freedom that adaptors and illustrators have been able to give free rein to their imagination and, amongst other things, to entertain us with theatrical and cinematographic versions which have been widely circulated and mean that, paradoxically, the world over, there are people who know *Les Liaisons dangereuses* without ever having read a line by Laclos⁴⁶.

N.B. This version does not contain the final illustrations. The Le Barbier and Barbier ones included here are from a private collection. All rights reserved.





*Mon valet de Chambre, brave et vigoureux,
le saisit au corps et le terrassa.*

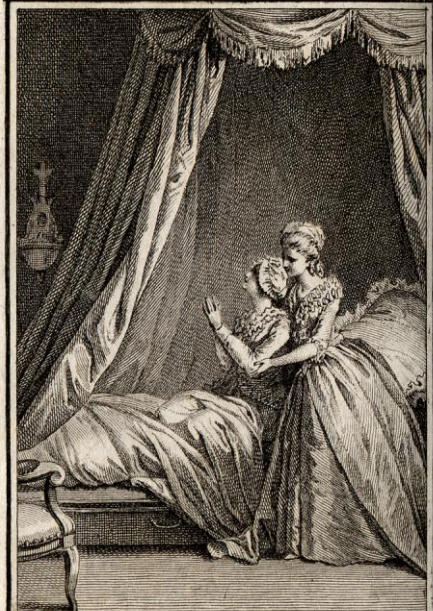
Le Barbier même del.

N. Thomas sculp.

Le

Barbier

(1792)



*Elle m'a priée de l'aider à se mettre à genoux
sur son lit, et de l'y soutenir.*

Le Barbier del.

Dalmeida sculp.



*Je ne sortis de ses bras que pour tomber à
ses genoux, pour lui jurer un amour éternel;*

Le Barbier même del.

Dalmeida sculp.





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Abstract: Laclos never commissioned illustrations for *Les Liaisons dangereuses* (1782). In spite of this, a series of prints to be framed and four for editions of the book came out during his lifetime. The artists—not all of whom can be identified—vary in the choice of scenes they represent. There are also two allegorical frontispieces which show the text can be interpreted as a tragic moral tale. The engravings range from the libertine to the demure, from crudely sketched small plates to exquisitely delineated large prints. They offer precious insights into the contemporary reception of the novel.

Keywords: *Les Liaisons dangereuses*, Choderlos de Laclos, book illustration, engravings, French novel, Le Barbier, Marguerite Gérard.

¹ Letter from Lados to his son Étienne, Paris, 30 Messidor an X (19 July 1802), Lados, *Œuvres complètes*, ed. Laurent Versini (Paris: Gallimard, Bibliothèque de la Pléiade, 1979), 1079: “De toutes les commissions que tu donnes, il n’y a qu’une qui soit un peu de ma compétence, c’est celle des exemplaires des *Liaisons dangereuses*. Je te dirai, à ce sujet, que l’édition à estampes dont tu me parles, est la plus fautive des mille et une contrefaçons qu’on a faites de ce roman.” (“Of all the errands you mention, there is only one for which I am more or less competent, it is the one regarding copies of *Les Liaisons dangereuses*. On the matter, let me say to you that the illustrated edition to which you refer is the least accurate of all the thousand and one counterfeits which have been produced of the novel.”)

² Duke University Press:1992.

³ Newcastle-upon-Tyne: Cambridge Scholars, 2011.

⁴ To the articles dealing specifically with the 1786 (by C. Seth) and 1796 editions (by F. Zanelli Quarantini and M. Ganofsky), quoted infra when the illustrations are being discussed, one can add Marie-Luce Colatrella’s thesis “*Ce bideux chef-d’œuvre*”: *Lectures, traductions, illustrations des Liaisons dangereuses. France, Allemagne, Angleterre, 1860-1914* (Université Paris IV-Sorbonne, 2005) and an article by Christina Ionescu, “L’édition des *Liaisons dangereuses* publiée par la Black Sun Press: une page dans l’histoire du livre franco-américain”, *Le Livre et l’estampe*, vol. LIX, n°180, 2014.

⁵ For copies of many of the pictures mentioned, see Michel Delon and Michèle Sajous D’Oria, *Laclos en images*, Bari, Mario Adda & Paris, PUPS, 2003 and Lados, *Les Liaisons dangereuses*, ed. Catriona Seth (Paris, Gallimard: Bibliothèque de la Pléiade, 2011). Several illustrations are on utpicatura18.univ-montp3.fr. To make things simpler, I include references to the illustrations in the 2011 Pléiade edition of *Les Liaisons dangereuses* with the abbreviated reference *Ld* followed by the page number. Here *Ld*, 557-8 and 567-8.

⁶ V. *Ld*, 569-72.

⁷ V. *Ld*, 573-4 and 600-1.

⁸ V. *Ld*, 575-589.

⁹ Whilst there are many cases of scenes from novels being engraved, such stand-alone prints were not generally produced before an illustrated edition.

¹⁰ The current whereabouts of Lavreince’s originals are unknown. A china ink drawing, tinted in gouache, corresponding to the first print, was sold at auction in 1883, 1886 and 1899.

¹¹ It is an extract from letter XCIX, *Ld* 267. “Leave me, leave me, Sir, said she; for the love of God, leave me!” *Dangerous Connections*, 2nd edition, London, J. Ebers, 1812, 228-9. All the English translations from the novel are given in this edition, freely available online at <http://www.gutenberg.org/files/45512/45512-h/45512-h.htm> (accessed on August 10th 2015).

¹² The first print was also advertised in the *Journal de la librairie* on 13 January 1787. An announcement regarding the second was included on June 23 1787 in the *Journal de la librairie* and on August 27 1787 in the *Journal de Paris*. V. Emmanuel Bocher, *Les Graveurs français du XVIII^e siècle, ou Catalogue raisonné des estampes, eaux-fortes, pièces en couleurs, au bistre et au lavis de 1700 à 1800. Premier fascicule. Nicolas Lavreince* (Paris: Librairie des bibliophiles, et Rapilly, 1875).

¹³ There are illustrations of the scene by Monnet in 1796, Dévéria in 1820, Testa and Besson in 1894, Van Maele in 1908, Lubin de Beauvais also in 1908, Barbier in 1934, Hérouard in 1946, Bécât in 1949, Lederc in 1956 and Pointeau in 1981—the dates are those of the editions, rather than the creation of the pictures.

¹⁴ “This condescension is a return for that she has just had for me, in submitting to serve me as as a desk to write to my lovely devotee, to whom it struck me as a pleasant thought, to write in bed with, and almost in the arms of, a girl, where I was interrupted by a complete infidelity. In this letter I give her an exact account of my conduct and situation.” *Dangerous Connections*, 240-1.

¹⁵ *Jeune femme couchée remet avec un geste d’effroi une lettre à une soubrette*, gouache and brown ink, 33 x 26.7 cm. See *Ld*, 568.

¹⁶ We have used the standard number of dots: there are several more on the engraving!

¹⁷ *Ld*, 407. “unfortunately a letter was then brought for her; when it was offered to her, she replied at first she would not receive any, and no one pressed it; but from that time she seemed more disturbed. Soon after she asked from whom the letter came?—It had no post-mark—Who brought it?—No one knew—From what place did the messenger say it came?—The portress was not informed. She remained silent some time after; then again began to speak; but her discourse was so incoherent, we were soon convinced the frenzy was returned./ However there was a quiet interval afterwards, until at last she desired the letter should be given to her. The moment she cast her eyes on

it, she exclaimed, ‘Good God! from him!’ and then in a strong and oppressed tone of voice, ‘Take it, take it.’ She instantly ordered the curtains of her bed to be dosed, and desired no one should come near her”.

¹⁸ V. *Ld*, 809-10.

¹⁹ C. Seth, “La première édition illustrée des *Liaisons dangereuses*?”, *Le Livre du monde et le monde des livres. Mélanges en l’honneur de François Moureau* (Paris: PUPS, 2012).

²⁰ The scenes are also included in editions which bear other indications of place and date of printing. One, which could be accurate, is “Maradan, l’an II de la république”. It may well be that Paris was where the 1792 edition was also published. There is no record of any edition of *Les Liaisons dangereuses* being printed in Geneva during the 18th century.

²¹ Delon and Sajous, *Op. cit.*, 24. The scene was popular amongst 20th century illustrators including Barbier.

²² “Je l’embrassai, elle se laissa aller dans mes bras, et ses larmes recommencerent a couler sans effort”—(*sic* for the lack of accents) in the caption which corresponds to *Ld*, 152-153. “I embraced her, she fell back in my arms, and her tears flowed again.”

²³ On profane and religious elements which eighteenth-century readers understood, see Philip Stewart, *Engraven Desire: Eros, Image and Text in the French Eighteenth Century*, *op. cit.*

²⁴ See for instance Van Maele’s 1908 illustration, Sauvage’s 1930 one and Barbier’s 1934 plate (Delon and Sajous, *Op. cit.*, 55-6).

²⁵ *Ld*, 582. Like other plates from the 1796 edition, it was copied (and signed) by Canu in his illustration for the 1811 Duprat-Duverger edition. There are many other versions of this scene like the ones by Devéria in 1823, Testa et Besson in 1894, Lubin de Beauvais in 1908, Van Maele in 1908, Jeannot in 1914, Barbier in 1934, Bécât in 1949.

²⁶ V. Christina Ionescu, “La série illustrative dessinée par Le Barbier l’aîné pour les *Lettres d’une Péruvienne* de Mme de Graffigny”, *Françoise de Graffigny, femme de lettres. Ecriture et réception*, Jonathan Mallinson (ed.), Oxford: Voltaire Foundation, 2004 (SVEC 2004:12), 229-245.

²⁷ There are, as mentioned, copies which indicate “Maradan, l’an second de la République” and also an edition claiming to have been printed in Geneva in 1801. The pictures were later included in a 1946 edition (Paris: Aux Horizons de France).

²⁸ “she demanded the key of my escritoire”.

²⁹ I surmise that the two anonymous illustrations included in a copy of an 1811 Duprat-Duverger Parisian edition (v. *Ld*, 600-1) are in fact part of the 1793 series. As there are only rare copies of the editions concerned, and engravings were printed separately before being inserted into volumes of text, it is difficult to date them precisely.

³⁰ The captions are: “Eh bien! qu’avez-vous? Asseyez-vous et donnez votre pied à Monsieur” (“Well, what’s the matter? Sit down, and give Mr. — your foot.”), “Elle me demanda la def de mon secrétaire”. (“she demanded the key of my escritoire”), “Cependant que je me défendois, comme c’est naturel, il a si bien fait que...” (“while I was struggling, he contrived to do what I would not have suffered for the whole world.”) and “Enfin nous restâmes seuls, et j’entraî en matiere” (“At last we were alone, and I entered on the business.”)

³¹ See Franca Zanelli Quarantini “Roman, iconographie, négociation: le cas des *Liaisons dangereuses*”, *Cahiers de l’Association internationale des études francaises*, 2005, N°57, 133-152 and Marine Ganofsky, “Illustrating Narrative Seduction: The Example of Choderlos de Lados’s *Les Liaisons Dangereuses* in the Illustrated Edition of 1796”, *Journal for Eighteenth-Century Studies*, Vol. 38 No. 1 (2015), 1-27.

³² As Christina Ionescu’s article, “Un *curiosa* anglais fin-de-siècle : la traduction des *Liaisons dangereuses* d’Ernest Dowson, publiée par Leonard Smithers en 1898” indicates, Smithers chose the 1796 prints for his 1898 edition of *Les Liaisons dangereuses* when Beardsley failed to produce a set of engravings. V. Catriona Seth, ed., *Laclos après Laclos*, (Paris: Hermann, 2016).

³³ Bacquoy, Duplessis-Bertaux, Duppréel, Godefroy, Langlois, Le Mire, Lingée, Masquelier, Patas, Pauquet, Simonet and Trière.

³⁴ See Christophe Martin, “*Dangereux suppléments*”: *l’illustration du roman en France au dix-huitième siècle* (Louvain: Peeters, 2005).

³⁵ One of Alexandre-Evariste Fragonard’s pictures, probably painted around the same time as he drew the scene for *Les Liaisons dangereuses*, *Le Serment de Junius Brutus ou La Mort de Lucrece*, currently located in the Villa-Musée Jean-Honoré Fragonard in Grasse, clearly shows the influence of *The Oath of the Horatii* by David under whom the talented young artist studied.

³⁶ Valmont had made sure, so his motives would appear pure, that there was no nubile daughter whom he could have been accused of seducing.

³⁷ It is a rearranged version of a passage from the novel quoted supra (letter XLVII): “J’ai trouvé plaisant d’envoyer à ma belle dévote une Lettre écrite du lit d’une fille.” (“it struck me as a pleasant thought to write to my lovely devotee, [whilst] with, and almost in the arms of, a girl”.

³⁸ This is a scene often illustrated subsequently—and with particular sensuality by Barbier in the 1934 edition: anthropomorphic columns frame a flowing phallic fountain which serves as a backdrop for a recumbent and naked Merteuil to welcome Belleruche into her arms.—Letter X is one of those which shocked Lados’ contemporaries. Monnet’s version bears an edited quotation from the text as a caption: “*Ô mon ami!* lui dis-je, pour vouloir te ménager la surprise de ce moment, je me reproche de t’avoir affligé par l’apparence de l’humeur; d’avoir pu un instant voiler

mon cœur à tes regards. *Pardonne-moi mes torts: je veux les expier à force d'amour.*" I have italicised the words included in the caption. ("Alas! my dear friend," said I, "what reproaches do I not deserve, for having, for a moment, given you uneasiness by an affected ill-humour, in order to enhance the pleasure and surprise of this moment, for having concealed my heart from your tenderness! *Forgive me; I will expiate my crime with the most ardent love.*")

³⁹ Illustrations of the novel by women are rare. The only other case I can think of is Hilde Schlotterbeck (1912-1995) who provided drawings for the 1962 German edition published by Fackelverlag.

⁴⁰ Literally "gauze-covered language", that is the use of socially acceptable terms to refer to things which could not otherwise be mentioned in polite conversation.

⁴¹ V. also Deveria 1823, Van Maele 1908, Sauvage 1930, Lederc 1956, Hérouard 1946 Barbier 1934.

⁴² There are numerous subsequent interpretations: Van Maele 1908, Cosyns 1925, Jeannot 1914, Hérouard 1946, Sauvage 1930, Bécat 1949 etc.

⁴³ She painted a series of mediaeval scenes ca 1785-90, which were subsequently engraved by Henri Gérard, *L'Art de l'Amour* (1792).

⁴⁴ Barbier's 1929 colourful and fascinating pictures came out in 1934. For instance, there is a scene representing Danceny chatting to Merteuil and Cécile under Mme de Volanges' watchful eye at the opera or another of Merteuil undressing as Cécile lies naked in bed.

⁴⁵ Whilst Rousseau chose the scenes (by Gravelot) for the original edition of *Julie ou La Nouvelle Héloïse*, subsequent illustrators and/or editors made their own selections for the plates and Cochin, in 1764, added allegorical frontispieces. Another contemporary work with an allegorical frontispiece is Chéry's plate for Sade's 1791 edition of *Justine* published anonymously "En Hollande, Chez les Libraires Associés".

⁴⁶ My thanks to Susan Seth and to the two editors of this special issue for their helpful comments on the initial draft of this article.