

The Rhetoric of the Epistle in Laclos' *The Dangerous Liaisons*

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Abstract

The present paper proposes itself to outline the discursive strategies that enabled the French author, Pierre Choderlos de Laclos to create one of the most remarkable epistolary novels of the 18th century, Les Liaisons dangereuses (The Dangerous Liaisons, 1782). On the whole, the focus of the paper is to foreground the rhetoric of the letter, which in Laclos' case is subtly intended to underscore a manipulative rhetoric of both libertinism and seduction.

Keywords: *rhetoric, double-code, strategy, epistolary, seduction*

The Dangerous Liaisons is the best example of a work of art that is recuperated and reread two centuries years later after its publishing. The stage transposition or the cinematographic projects have helped to keep alive the spirit, the images, partly the metaphors and the atmosphere from Laclos' novel. This noteworthy cultural transgression is mainly sustained by the very intricate and devious rhetoric that gives consistency to its epistolary architecture. The perfect mix of theme and structure, the eroticism and the letter-writing, Laclos' novel was labeled as a highly sardonic text, a novel of terrible sociability - to use Charles Baudelaire's words- since the French novelist's masterpiece is articulated by rich ironies and farcical elements up to the highest black humor that underscore the mores and foibles of the last decades of the 18th century. Undoubtedly, all these elements have granted their unrelenting fame over the last 200 years. Furthermore, as the critics have noticed not only the characters in their godlike or ciphered nature or the society is hinted at through mockery and irony, but also the values of the common readers, which are considered under a critical eye. The inter-textual references of Jean-Jacques Rousseau's *Julie or The New Heloise* from the preface of the novel "I have seen the manners of my society and I published these letters" hint at the decadence of the society, but also circumscribe the novel within a certain convention of writing, that of the epistolary novel, enlisting it in the tradition of other epistolary novels such as the novels of Madame Riccoboni (*Lettres de mistriss Fanni Butlerd*), Madame de Graffigny (*Lettres d'une Péruvienne*) or the more known novels of Samuel Richardson (*Pamela or the Virtue Rewarded*, *Clarissa Harlowe or the History of a Young Lady*) or that of Jean-Jacques Rousseau (*Julie or The New Heloise*).

To quote Baudelaire [6, xxi], this book is one which burns "like ice" and this happens mainly due to its heavily, double-coded rhetoric oriented towards deceit and dominance over the weak, sensitive or virtuous. While Laclos was "identified as one of the most dangerous rakes and revolutionaries who had brought down the "ancient regime" subsequent to Napoleon's decline [6, xxx], his ill-fame - owing mostly to the "systematic licentiousness and the most odious immorality"[6, xxx] - has consecrated him as an authentic libertine. Elaborating on the above mentioned term, the meaning of *libertine* seems to have been fixed in the early century

18th century to denote the radicals, who revolted against the Church and against established morality. Subsequently, the label libertine “was attached to the spectacular rakes of the Regency (1715-17320, circumscribing not only “sexual depravity“, but also scandalous moral conducts [6, xxi]. In this context, the epistolary libertine figures remained memorable due to almost god-like characters such as Valmont, Lovelace or Lord Edouard.

Moreover, relating directly to his most prominent work, Laclos’ contemporaries argued that the novelist intentionally sought to bring forth the possible germs of a society scandal as to disclose not only the manners and the mechanisms of societal, aristocratic conduct, but also to unravel the hidden mechanisms of subduing the weak and the virtuous. *The Dangerous Liaisons* became soon an underground classic due to its being pigeonholed as immoral, deriving from the subject to which the tone greatly adds remarkable intensity. As far as this topic is concerned, when going over Laclos’ text, the reader may hold intuitively the impression of what Denis Hollier sustained, that the “ideal reading of the novel, would be polymorphically perverse” as will not be halted at the either female or male rhetoric or standpoint, but “will find pleasure in the way the scene of writing is itself invested with erotic force” [2, 541]. To a certain extent, one may underline that the core rhetoric of this epistolary corpus is that of a rhetoric of seduction. The pre-romantic novelist, a supporter of the values of sensibility in the detriment of reason, seems to present himself as a 18th century skeptic, placing a question marks over the values of reasons in the making of yourself and the functioning of society, being located by Peter Washington somehow in the crossfire between Voltaire and Rousseau.

The Dangerous Liaisons produced a wide set of divergent opinion concerning the overall message that Laclos intended to send across to its audience as it seems to exist no actual implied authorial attitude [2, 542] except for that issued by the novel’s motto. As mentioned above, in the case of Laclos, the style along with subjectivity can be said to be the subjects of the writing act, as well as the means of attaining the much desired goal. The main characteristics of this text lie in the authorial absence, the combination of discourse analysis, as well as domination of discursive elements. In using these strategies, there is a striking effect of subversion of the conventional dichotomies which allowed Choderlos de Laclos the space to innovate and add intricacy to his text, but also enabled the genre to transgress and transform the tradition of this kind novel. Additionally, letter-writing under the form of a novel puts into light the sensuality of the spirit which represents a foundational element for the act of seduction in itself, but also of the creation of self-consciousness. The letters in themselves represent social and literary instruments, and they issue the kind of discourse which is destined to “effect a change in the schemata of their readers. Sensations of pleasure, escape, profundity, and elevation are conceivably offshoots of this function [Cook, in 8, 87]. This shift, effected over the readers, is plausible in the case of both the extra and intra-diegetic readers since the novel, conceived as one that communicates the story of the characters that exchange letters, marginally questions the act of reading in itself. The derived impression of the lack of control over language through the double-entendre, through a rhetoric of manipulation and double-coding are the sources that draw attention over the processes of writing and reading. Moreover, in this context, the most eloquent letter-writers are said to “always insinuate themselves in the situation of reading”, an inscription process that is both valid for the extra-diegetic reader and for the intra-diegetic one. The same critical voice argues that “whatever bad ends may be meted out to his protagonists, the book offers no alternatives, no worlds elsewhere” [2, 542]. The effects produced by the epistolary form are the most diversified and most opened to various interpretations and perspectives. One must not forget the fact that this kind of novelistic fiction is the product of a particular age of thought whose horizon of expectations is largely and more importantly realistically reflected in this text as well. The letter functions, firstly as a primary source of narration, representing the basic diegetic textual body. The process that lies behind the epistolary technique is a fairly simple one: the exchange of letters ensures the narrative progression and also provides a particular dramatic context, accumulation of tensions between main characters, rhythm and atmosphere up to the unavoidable downfall of the protagonists.

Another function of the letter is that it is a linguistic tool and thus an instrument that gives birth to reality and not necessarily reflects it. For instance, as critics note, the rhetoric of the letter serves to abscond in Laclos' novel the sexual references, although the text compensates this by charging erotically the letter or as Denis Hollier thinks it the "erotics is reinvested in the letter" [2, 540].

It can prove significant to stress another effect of the epistolary narrative; whenever one penetrates the imaginary world composed through a letter-writing process or as Denis Hollier puts it, letter-reading, the reader inescapably becomes a constituent part of "the chain of correspondences" or possibly of "the scene itself". The benefits of this cognitive, quasi-literary process, quoting the creator of the epistolary novel in the English literature, are that the letters give a "nearly instantaneous report of the events and the writer's reactions to them: they are preeminently the device of self-expression and self-analysis", whereas Jean-Jacques Rousseau fixed it for its novel as the very vehicle of "pure subjectivity" [2, 538]. The innovation brought by Laclos was that of complicating these functions, by making the letter itself a real character in his novels and thus by achieving a "major revision of the epistolary fiction" [2, 538]. Additional (meta) references to the letter-writing process tend to cast a new light over the consciousness' at work in the text. The post-scriptum of the Letter CV is an example of this:

Voyez donc a soigner davantage votre style, vous écrivez toujours comme un enfant. Je vois bien d'où cela vient ; c'est que vous dites tout ce que vous pensez, et rien de ce que vous ne pensez pas. Cela peut passer ainsi de vous a moi, qui devons n'avoir rien de caché l'une pour l'autre: mais avec tout le monde! avec votre Amant surtout! vous auriez toujours l'air d'une petite sottise. Vous voyez bien que, quand vous écrivez a quelqu'un, c'est pour lui et non pas pour vous: vous devez donc moins chercher a lui dire ce que vous pensez, que ce qui lui plaît davantage. [5, 356].

Obviously, these critical notes betray not only the self-conscious, lucid personality of Marquise de Merteuil's in relation to the *other* represented by *the addressee*, but also the gender, quasi-political tensions existing in the society of men, as she contends "quand vous écrivez a quelqu'un, c'est pour lui et non pas pour vous". Thus, she patiently teaches her young "victim" the *seduction* as manipulation *through words*: "vous devez donc moins chercher a lui dire ce que vous pensez, que ce qui lui plaît davantage" [5, 356]. Therefore, one can sense here an encouragement towards empathic echoing of male sensual values or as Nancy Armstrong considers it, the rhetoric of this novel is nothing but a projection and manipulation of the "male imagery" [1, 155]. Furthermore, Madame de Merteuil suggests that young girl's skittishness in the style of her writing, as well as her grammatical inaccuracy or clumsiness in the choice of words are indicative of a contemptible transparency of mind, characteristic of all her contemporary women whom she profoundly despises them. As a consequence, Madame de Merteuil contends that the young Cecile de Volanges requires writing and societal exercise and like Valmont, she indulges herself in initiating her. Conversely, Cecile's lover, Chevalier Danceny, as the marquise remarks it, does not require any kind of teachings since his letter-writing style is already a polished, quasi-poetic one, greatly derived from the past, eloquent poets. Still, this remains an imitation, a facsimile that renders an inauthentic, not fully articulated voice and identity. It is barely when disappointment engulfs him (especially the failed relationships with either Cecile de Volanges or Madame de Merteuil) that he does achieve a genuine voice of his own.

Unlike the cases of Richardson and Rousseau, Choderlos de Laclos does not only grant the letter a narrative function, but transforms it in a metaphor of the process of writing and a model of the polished, artful style. In addition, the limits of language are tested here since the letter is turned into a speech act, meant not only to transmit a relevant piece of information or a particular state of mind and heart, but to make and show things happen through the very process of writing and reading. Thus, the letter is no longer a common space of confession, confidence, expression of various honorable feelings between two active participants in an act of

communication, but a space of creating and projecting desires in *the other* through discourse. Moreover, as a consequence, meaning is more than ever context dependent as it is shown in Letter XLVIII, when the cynical viscount Valmont concocts a letter to the woman he openly declared his love from his mistress' arms, investing apparent sincere feelings with lusty connotations. By these strategies, the very activities of reading and writing are erotically charged and inter-textual hints associated with Madame de Merteuil's guide on letter-writing transform this novel in a highly dialogal, polyphonic and quasi-parodic text. One has to take for granted the fact that viscount Valmont, Marquise de Merteuil, Madame de Tourvel have no life outside their letters as the letters themselves compose, structure and give meaning to life and that destinies are shaped and drawn up through letters as well as their reputations. In addition, erotically charging the two processes of writing and reading the reader witnesses an instauration of a "paradise of letter-writing" (as well as letter-reading) which turns out to be infernal as underlines the idea that one is bound to remain captive to the illusions imposed onto them by the two puppeteer-like protagonists. Thus, "writing is never referential, but always performative, intent on creating a reading situation that is itself part of the story, that itself will further the erotic action" [2, 541]. As Denis Hollier notes the "Letters in this novel are carefully contrived, written with a view to their readers: they always attempt to anticipate, to control, to incorporate into themselves the reader's response" [2, 539]. This ability to empathize with the addressee is by no means used towards a positive end, as their writers transform it a tool of manipulation and a weapon. According to Malraux, Laclos managed to devise a "mythology of intelligence" through the "analytic power to know and control others" [2, 540]. One can assert that one of the core mechanisms of the text's rhetoric, as well as of the epistolary novel on the whole, lies in the intentional, but subtly inscribed fundamental set of conflicting ideologies and conducts, which bring the characters together and fatally divide them.

The verbal unfolding of the sexual strategies turns into a rhetoric which is first meant to test resistance and, through this evaluation, the "heavy" strategies of pursuit and seduction, involving intellect and mimed sentiment alike, are selected and led towards a catastrophic end. For the aristocratic protagonists, seduction is meant to supersede boredom as well as to challenge the abilities of either Valmont or Marquise de Merteuil as a professional libertine, irrespective of the gender. In Laclos' novel, the traditional seducer is a gendered Janus-bifrons, doubly hypostasized. The two godlike characters, Valmont and Madame de Merteuil, are the remarkable products of an age that placed knowledge and reason above everything else, as primary means of casting order over the world and nature. In addition, critics have seen in them the "decline of the old aristocratic ideal of honorable conduct "[6, xxix] and thus the fall of an episteme. Either of them is more than often thought as "artists of a perverse kind" [6, xxx] in their performing their route towards obtaining power over men and women altogether. They may be said to exist in a world whose boundaries as well as values they firmly and lucidly establish, where their traps are carefully set and candidly expect for the victims to fall into. Their intelligence does not lack shrewdness, calculation, patience, sense of anticipation, affluence of style and more importantly a keen knowledge of the human soul with all its temptations, wishes, as well as curiosity. In this respect, Peter Washington considers them as bearing *in nuce* the germs of existentialism due to their drive to overcome the absurdity of life through the assertion of individual identity against "a godless universe which appeared to be arbitrary" and meaningless [6, xxx]. In Marquise de Merteuil's words, she conceives of herself as her own remarkable creation. In fact she depicts the moment when she becomes aware of herself as a complex, autonomous individual:

Profondes réflexions; je les ai créés, et je puis dire que je suis mon ouvrage. Entrée dans le monde dans le temps ou, fille encore, j'étais vouée par état au silence et à l'inaction, j'ai su en profiter pour observer et réfléchir [...] Cette utile curiosité, en servant à m'instruire, m'apprit encore à dissimuler: forcée souvent de cacher les objets de mon attention aux yeux de ceux qui m'entouraient, j'essayai de guider les miens à mon gré; j'obtins des lors de prendre à volonté ce regard distrait que vous avez loué si souvent.

Encouragée par ce premier succes, je tâchai de régler de meme les divers mouvements de ma figure. Ressentais-je quelque chagrin, je m'étudiais a prendre l'air de la sérénité, meme celui de la joie; j'ai porté le zele jusqu'a me causer des douleurs volontaires, pour chercher pendant ce temps l'expression du plaisir. Je me suis travaillée avec le meme soin et plus de peine, pour réprimer les symptômes d'une joie inattendue. C'est ainsi que j'ai su prendre sur ma physionomie cette puissance dont je vous ai vu quelquefois si étonné. [5, Lettre LXXXI, 254]

Valmont and Merteuil think of a person as one which is made of expectations which come from the very recesses of his mind, expectations and desires which have to be met. Unlike Richardson's protagonists who write spontaneously to the moment, Laclos' protagonists substitute transparency of mind and writing (characteristic for the sentimental epistolary novels) for strategy in the service of sensual or personal advantages. As she chides the young Cecile de Volanges, she serves her vengeful goals and hands it over to the viscount to act as her destructive intermediary. Letter CV is an instance of this, in which the marquise transcribes Cecile's words and desires under the form of a impelling rebuking by manipulation of the addressee's own words, which subsequently draws the young Cecile closer to the viscount:

Hé bien ! Petite, vous voila donc bien fâchée, bien honteuse, et ce M. de Valmont est un méchant homme, n'est-ce pas ? Comment ! il ose vous traiter comme la femme qu'il aimerait le mieux ! Il vous apprend ce que vous mouriez d'envie de savoir ! En vérité, ces procédés-la sont impardonnables. [5, Letter 105, 352]

From this moment, the young girl's destiny is shaped by the discovery of pleasure in the arms of Valmont, the anti-model of Chevalier Danceny, for which she has no feelings and to whom she constantly compares to. Thus, the self-created woman, Madame de Merteuil is the one who plays the game of seduction expertly, still even if she shows herself liberated by the strains of an over-judgmental society, her game remains a hidden one, veiled by the very dull precepts of virtue. This condemns the superior woman to double rhetoric which ensures her survival and sets her simultaneous in tacit complicity with the men seducers. As a free-thinker, she liberates herself from the inherent condition assigned to women (that of silence and passivity), but fails to understand the very purposes of this freedom and transforms it into an illusory freedom. Constantly, she is bound by the very rules of the game she herself had established to outsmart the male seducers. Her core rhetoric of seduction is basically "quotational" as Denis Hollier observes that Mme de Merteuil finally finds herself entrapped in a vast "network of citations" [2, 540] since the only thing she actually performs masterfully is to send back to her "correspondents their own words, but changed, unmasked" [2, 540] as she encourages her pupil to perform. By indulging herself in this mirroring strategy in which she uses terms from the correspondent's letters as a means of showing she is able to go beyond her own needs, grasp the other's needs and accommodate the other's expectations as well as desires, flaunting in this way her utter malleability, flexibility and devotion. This sterile writing technique, this reduplication is meant to echo exclusively the initial writer's desires, without no actual empathic participation from the second letter writer (Mme. de Merteuil) turning, thus, the text into a mirror of the most intimate thoughts and feelings.

Letter LXXXI is a guide towards self-education and indirectly an anti-mainstream manifest, a guide of the libertine as a free-thinker. One can say that it represents the contentment and pride of the self-made woman for its own creation, an aspect that additionally implies accentuated narcissism. The double-faced nature of Madame de Merteuil is socially and individually motivated as well as stimulated by her survival instincts. Superior to men and women altogether, she cannot let herself constrained in the limiting precepts of a moralizing, but unjust society. She throws in this game a public glory of virtue and resistance, which she dissimulates with the skills of an endowed actress, to which she adds up a more intimate desire and pleasure of unrelenting and deliberate yielding up to seduction in intimacy. This artfully concocted systematized, psychological schemes and social conduct are to ensure unlimited

success and respectability, but when she gives in too much to exaggerated personal pride and ill-oriented possessiveness, as she cannot bear that her sole equal, Valmont, plausibly perceived as the unique audience capable to appreciate her bullying artistry, to be converted to virtue and sincere love. As she asserts her will and skillful strategies of seduction she constitutes an authentic discourse of the libertine opposing simultaneously to men and women altogether, and thus conserving herself as a vengeful, modern Delilah:

Ces Tyrans détrônés devenus mes esclaves; si, au milieu de ces révolutions fréquentes, ma réputation s'est pourtant conservée pure; n'avez-vous pas du en conclure que, née pour venger mon sexe et maîtriser le vôtre, j'avais su me créer des moyens inconnus jusqu'à moi? Ah ! gardez vos conseils et vos craintes pour ces femmes à délire, et qui se disent a sentiment; dont l'imagination exaltée ferait croire que la nature a placé leurs sens dans leur tête; qui, n'ayant jamais réfléchi, confondent sans cesse l'amour et l'Amant; qui, dans leur folle illusion, croient que celui-la seul avec qui elles ont cherché le plaisir en est l'unique dépositaire ; et vraies superstitieuses, ont pour le Prêtre le respect et la foi qui n'est du qu' à la Divinité. [5, Lettre LXXXI, 246].

Distancing herself from the “femmes à délire”, the “femme timide” (with reference to Madame de Tourvel) or the “femme sensible”, she insists on underlining the doubleness of her condition, and thus her superiority in terms of intelligence over the men. In this way, she benefits by both the weapons of conquer over the men and the women as undoubtedly tends to act as a man rather than a woman. In this respect, Nancy Armstrong considers that while men are “predisposed to rule by reasons of greater of physical strength, women reverse the imperium through a manipulation of the male imagery [1, 155]. A new type of a social animal seems to emerge from her discourse, that of the libertine who conserves his status within the society, who mime social obedience, purity and virtue and preys on naivety and aims total control. If Viscount Valmont is a bored aristocrat turned into a cynical, immoral pleasure-seeker, Marquise de Merteuil performs this “game” of power to ensure her own survival as an autonomous individual.

On the other hand, when discussing about Valmont’s rhetoric, one can discover that it lies under the sign of a constant use of parody. He is often described as audacious, intelligent, permanently on watch libertine, but most significantly his competences and brilliance are all-pervasive in the rich affluence of his style. Like Marquise de Merteuil, he too reduces his human contacts and relationships to a set of strategies of subtle impelling, which allude most often to military strategies. His sole weakness, as in the case of Madame de Merteuil too, is that of a very human kind: the recognition of his sophisticated endeavours, artifices and intelligence. His seduction games remain conventionally male: any seduction act he attempts to is conceived metaphorically as an act of besieging, of isolating and submitting to an amorous jargon until total surrender, strategy displayed in his letters sent to the attractive, virtuous and more importantly challenging Madame de Tourvel. In the following fragment from Letter XLVIII there is an example of a double entendre as Valmont declares his passion for Tourvel while still being in the arms of a courtesan. His declaration of love is double-coded and the secondary code, that belonging to a parody register is destined to be never grasped by the addressee. The letter abounds in hints that send to physical intimacy rather than to a platonic kind of love. Professing great torment due to his impossible love, Valmont takes great pleasure in adding a secondary code to the letter sent Tourvel, that is a free act meant for his personal pleasure, that of mocking Madame de Tourvel’s prejudices and scruples:

En effet, la situation où je suis en vous écrivant me fait connaître plus que jamais *la puissance irrésistible de l'amour* ; j'ai peine à conserver assez *d'empire* sur moi pour mettre quelque ordre dans mes idées; et déjà je prévois que je ne finirai pas cette Lettre sans être obligé de l'interrompre. J'ose croire cependant que, si vous le connaissiez bien, vous n'y seriez pas entièrement insensible. Croyez-moi, Madame, la froide tranquillité, le sommeil de l'âme, image de la mort, ne menent point au bonheur; *les passions actives*

peuvent seules y conduire ; et malgré *les tourments* que vous me faites éprouver, je crois pouvoir assurer sans crainte, que, *dans ce moment, je suis plus heureux que vous*. En vain m'accablez-vous de vos rigueurs désolantes, *elles ne m'empêchent point de m'abandonner entièrement à l'amour* et d'oublier, *dans le délire* qu'il me cause, le désespoir auquel vous me livrez. *C'est ainsi que je veux me venger de l'exil auquel vous me condamnez.*"(my highlight). [5, Letter XLVIII, 140]

Madame de Tourvel's resistance leaves room for further elaboration of his professed passion. As he imitates the lover's mental state of disorder to recreate a bereaved amorous spirit he evokes the ambivalent nature of love referring to various postures that have to be faked by the rake to be persuasive. Valmont declares:

Cependant le sentiment du bonheur a fui loin de moi; il a fait place à celui des privations cruelles. À quoi me sert-il de vous parler de mes sentiments, si je cherche en vain les moyens de vous convaincre ? après tant d'efforts réitérés, la confiance et la force m'abandonnent à la fois. Si je me retrace encore les plaisirs de l'amour, c'est pour sentir plus vivement le regret d'en être privé. Je ne me vois de ressource que dans votre indulgence, et je sens trop, dans ce moment, combien j'en ai besoin pour espérer de l'obtenir. Cependant, jamais mon amour ne fut plus respectueux, jamais il ne dut moins vous offenser; il est tel, j'ose le dire, que la vertu la plus sévère ne devrait pas le craindre: mais je crains moi-même de vous entretenir plus longtemps de la peine que j'éprouve. [...] à vous retracer cette douloureuse image. Je ne prends plus que celui de vous supplier de me répondre, et de ne jamais douter de la vérité de mes sentiments. [5, Letter XLVIII, 140].

Thus, through mimetism, a "writing sentimental self" is forged without necessarily being "authentic". In this way, the text itself, which at the time was thought to mirror the human soul contradicted this fundamental supposition and opened the discussion concerning the transparency of language and the possibility to offer a genuine representation of the human soul. Returning to the novel's discourse, the rhetoric of echoing *the other's* words and desires as well as eloquently displaying sentimental postures allow illusioning, creation of desire, empathic rapports, but more importantly enhance seduction and manipulation.

Later on, the libertine Valmont is resolved not to participate to an ordinary love affair and discloses all his libertine whims. By analyzing Madame de Tourvel's letter, he contends that: "Toute sa Lettre annonce le désir d'être trompée. Il est impossible d'en offrir un moyen plus commode et aussi plus usé. Elle veut que je sois son ami." [5, LXX, 200] Deviously, similarly to a military organizer (he uses of the word *project*) he adds in an ironic and self-challenging manner that:

Mais moi, qui aime les méthodes nouvelles et difficiles, je ne prétends pas l'en tenir quitte à si bon marché [...] Mon projet, au contraire, est qu'elle sente, qu'elle sente bien la valeur [...] de chacun des sacrifices qu'elle me fera; de ne pas la conduire si vite que le remords ne puisse la suivre; de faire expirer sa vertu dans une lente agonie; de la fixer sans cesse [...]; et de ne lui accorder le bonheur de m'avoir dans ses bras, qu'après l'avoir forcée à n'en plus dissimuler le désir. Au fait [...] Et puis-je me venger moins d'une femme hautaine, qui semble rougir d'avouer qu'elle adore? [5, LXX, 200]

Therefore, for Valmont, giving in to seduction is the result of desiring and a sign of weakness that leads to sacrifice on the part of the seduced, sacrifice which is necessary to satisfy the pride of the libertine whose efforts have to be acknowledged. To conclude, Laclos' novel can be considered as one of the most modern novels of the 18th century, clearly conceived as a real "epistolary pleasure dome" [2, 541], in which the discourse represents a most remarkable core. Considered by the critics as being the novelist who seems to have "best understood what Richardson was doing artistically in *Clarissa*" [4, 274], Laclos

illustrates through the hyper-lucid, protean rhetoric of his two arch-seducers a most complex representation of seduction and of the act of communication, touching the brink “where their [rhetoric, too] game “turned “dangerous and deadly” [6, xxxiii].

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Retorica scrisorii în *Legăturile primejdioase*

Rezumat

Lucrarea de față își propune să aducă în discuție principalele strategii care alcătuiesc retorica romanului epistolar de la sfârșitul secolului al XVIII-lea, accentul fiind plasat pe retorica epistolei în romanul libertin din 1782 al lui Choderlos de Laclos. Sunt discutate efectele derivate din imitarea psihologiei sentimentaliste și strategiile retorice ale unor personaje memorabile, proteice precum vicontele Valmont sau marchiza de Merteuil.