

Les Liaisons Dangereuses

An essay on the double standards of Cruel Intentions.

The Marquise de Merteuil learns to control her passions and is a model of self-discipline, an anti-Socrates. Through a hyper-masculine sense of self, she crafts her sex and femininity to control anyone she has something to gain from. Merteuil is the obvious antagonist in *Les Liaisons Dangereuses*, but is this because of her actions or because she is a woman? Would a man be deemed evil if he used his genius to manipulate others with sex and mind games? It's less likely that a man would be condemned. Valmont is as close to an equal as Merteuil has, but he still falls short. Forming an alliance was of mutual benefit, but Merteuil has the upper hand, and she knows it. "How your fears excite my pity! How they prove my superiority over you. You want to teach me to be my guide? Ah, my poor Valmont." (Choderlos de Laclos). The proof in superiority Merteuil has over Valmont is his underestimation of her abilities.

Although Merteuil thrives in her intelligence and manipulation, is society not partially to blame for her defiance as a woman? Her wealth doesn't buy freedom of sexual authority, or an escape from how society could potentially perceive her. It is no wonder she must exert power in the way she chooses. I can't help but find sympathy for Merteuil and what she must go through to achieve the same satisfactions as Valmont. Women are at such a disadvantage, Merteuil must work twice as hard at being evil to gain anything close to the reputation and freedoms Valmont has. All of which he was granted simply because he was born a man. "What merit lies therein that is really your own? A handsome face, the pure result of chance...fighting without risk, you are bound to act without precaution." (Choderlos de Laclos). Merteuil can only be so impressed with Valmont, before her intellect reminds her that what gifts he has came to him by chance; undeserving in comparison to herself.

Merteuil unleashes the power of language to create a world around her that is in her total control. A plan for self-improvement- a mirror to the great Socrates. The only problem being the direction of enlightenment. Merteuil becomes a hyper-vigilant individual controlling not only emotions but facial expressions and her physical reactions; specifically toward men through sex and performance. Merteuil invokes theatricality in her life through her unwavering self-control. Merteuil needs her victims to maintain her superiority. Merteuil is a mad lover- the ultimate mad lover. Her villainess overshadows the addiction she is dependent on to maintain the persona she has created. She doesn't have one beloved, she has many. Merteuil's intelligence is her Achilles heel; conquering one man, being the object of desire is not enough. "I desired you before I had ever seen you. Seduced by your reputation, it seemed to me that you were wanting to my glory; I burned with a desire for a hand-to-hand combat with you." (Choderlos de Laclos). It is a lifelong affair Merteuil has convinced herself she enjoys, but in reality, her existence as she knows it is dependent on proving to herself she is more than just a woman.