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## Choderlos de Laclos's *Les liaisons dangereuses* and Jane Austen's *Lady Susan*: The Art of Manipulation

The discussion about the possible sources Jane Austen might have drawn on when she wrote *Lady Susan* seems as lively today as when it was initiated. To some Austen scholars, *Lady Susan* is a portrait from life, inspired by the author's flirtatious cousin Eliza de Feuillide (1761-1813) or by a certain Mrs Craven, the grandmother of Austen's friend Martha Lloyd.<sup>1</sup> According to other critics, *Lady Susan*'s origins are in fact literary. These researchers have mainly focussed on her presumed predecessors in English literature. Since no definitive answers have yet been found, the question remains open.

The aim of this essay is to examine the supposition that one of the principal characters in Choderlos de Laclos's (1741-1803) *Les liaisons dangereuses*, the Marquise de Merteuil, might have been a source of inspiration to Jane Austen when writing her own novel. The similarities between the two characters have already been touched upon by several critics. However, no closer studies of these analogies seem to have been made up to now, a gap that the present article will endeavour to fill. Frank W. Bradbrook was among the first to point out the kinship between Merteuil and *Lady Susan*,<sup>2</sup> followed by among others Warren Roberts,<sup>3</sup> Simon Davies,<sup>4</sup> Roger Gard<sup>5</sup> and Mary A. Favret.<sup>6</sup> Like the other critics, Gard draws attention to certain points in common between Laclos's work and Austen's, both of them presenting "[...] the schemes and deeds of brave idle unscrupulous plotters through their own letters and letters from those upon whom they work", these plotters sharing the same desire for vengeance.<sup>7</sup> He also notes that they make similar use of metaphors associating military terms with love matters. Gard does, however, put the stress on the differences that speak against a comparison between *Les liaisons dangereuses* and *Lady Susan*. The latter has according to Gard nothing of the French novel's subversive, radical nature, or its "drastic

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<sup>1</sup> On this subject, see for example Christine Alexander, "Introduction", in Jane Austen's *Lady Susan* (Sydney: The Juvenilia Press, 2005), pp. xviii-xx; and Janet Todd and Linda Bree, "Introduction", in *The Cambridge Edition of the Works of Jane Austen. Later Manuscripts* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), pp. l-liii.

<sup>2</sup> "Jane Austen and Choderlos de Laclos", in *Notes and Queries* 199 (1954): 75.

<sup>3</sup> *Jane Austen and the French Revolution* (London and Basingstoke: The MacMillan Press Ltd, 1979), pp. 127-129.

<sup>4</sup> "Laclos dans la littérature anglaise du XIXe siècle", in *Laclos et le libertinage, 1782-1982. Actes du colloque du bicentenaire des « Liaisons dangereuses »* (Paris : Presses universitaires de France, 1983), pp. 255-264.

<sup>5</sup> *Jane Austen's Novels. The Art of Clarity* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1992), pp. 40-44.

<sup>6</sup> *Romantic Correspondence. Women, Politics and the Fiction of Letters* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), p. 140.

<sup>7</sup> 1992:40-41.

refined debauchery”.<sup>8</sup> Lady Susan’s plans are indeed less diabolical than those of the main characters in *Les liaisons dangereuses*, but her conduct still presents enough similarities to the Marquise de Merteuil’s manipulative skills to justify a comparison between the two of them.

Gard’s view differs considerably from Roberts’ stand. According to Roberts, Eliza de Feuillide might have furnished her cousin with a copy of Laclos’s novel, in the original or a translation, on her return from France. In their introduction to the most recent edition of *Lady Susan*, Janet Todd and Linda Bree observe that such a scenario remains hypothetical.<sup>9</sup> Roberts also ventures to suggest that *Les liaisons dangereuses* was in fact “[t]he literary model that Austen followed” and that she “[...] patterned Lady Susan Vernon after Laclos’s heroine [...]”.<sup>10</sup> Roberts’ statement will serve as a point of departure for this article, its purpose being among other things to qualify his opinion on the matter. The similitude between the Marquise de Merteuil and Lady Susan is quite obvious, but the differences between their personalities cannot be denied. For this reason, I will discuss not only the characteristics they have in common, but also those that differentiate them. My main focus will be on the values they share and the similarities in their conduct, which is entirely based on the manipulation of others, as well as of reality itself.

Published in 1782 and translated into English two years later, *Les liaisons dangereuses* was a great success. It also caused a scandal because of its erotic plot and immoral characters. In England, the publication of *Dangerous Connections* “[...] led the *Monthly Review* to exclaim against the corrupting potential of the ‘scenes of seduction and intrigue’ while admiring the ‘great art and address’ of the execution”.<sup>11</sup> The two libertines and accomplices, the Vicomte de Valmont and the Marquise de Merteuil, intrigue for the ruin of others and their own gratification. The rake Valmont can be considered as a French Lovelace – Laclos regarded *Clarissa* (1747-1748) as a masterpiece, and there are several intertextual allusions to Richardson in his novel.<sup>12</sup> The Présidente de Tourvel, Valmont’s virtuous and pious victim, reads *Clarissa* while trying to resist his assaults, and Valmont himself refers to the novel. As to the Vicomte’s female counterpart, the deceitful Marquise de Merteuil, she seduces men in order to prove her superiority over them. Laclos has compared her to Tartuffe, the hypocrite Molière created, and a character whose duplicity is rather legendary. In his novel, Laclos shows very clearly that seduction is not in the first place about the possession of another person’s body; it is about dominating that person’s mind. The triumph of the libertines is not essentially sexual; it derives from their success in managing to bend their victim’s will to their own. Thus they take control of other people’s

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<sup>8</sup> 1992:42.

<sup>9</sup> 2008: liii.

<sup>10</sup> 1979:129.

<sup>11</sup> Janet Todd and Linda Bree, “Introduction” (2008:liii), quoting the *Monthly Review* of August 1784.

<sup>12</sup> For more on Samuel Richardson’s influence on Laclos, see Laurent Versini in *Laclos et la tradition, essai sur les sources et la technique des « Liaisons dangereuses »* (Paris : Klincksieck, 1968).

thoughts and feelings.<sup>13</sup> Lady Susan, though not such a great libertine as Valmont or Merteuil, also seeks power through her hold on other people's minds.

The fact that one of the more conspicuous similarities between the Marquise and Lady Susan is related to the use they make of their situation justifies a quick look at it. They are both widows; neither had any particular regard for her husband, and they cannot be accused of grieving over their loss. In one of the most famous letters in *Les Liaisons dangereuses*, addressed to her accomplice, Merteuil offers a stunning self-portrait, as well as a detailed list of her principles. With regard to her husband, she coldly observes that his death was quite convenient for herself: "He died, as you know [...]. And although, all in all, I had no reason to complain about him, I appreciated just as keenly the value of the freedom my widowhood was about to afford me, and I promised myself I would make the most of it".<sup>14</sup> The marital bonds did not stop her from experimenting on her own, but she does evidently feel that the prison gates are opened once she is rid of her husband. Marriage provided her with a situation and a title, as well as secure ground for discreet exploration of her abilities. Widowhood gives her the liberty she needs to develop her skills, and for this reason, remarriage obviously never enters her mind. Rebuking Valmont for the "marital" tone of one of his last letters to her, she asks him: "Do you know, Vicomte, why I never remarried? It was certainly not for lack of any advantageous matches. It was purely so that no one should have the right to criticize my actions".<sup>15</sup> Merteuil does not want to expose herself to matrimonial reproach, based on values for which she only feels contempt, such as conjugal fidelity. Lady Susan shares this opinion of widowhood and remarriage. In a letter to her friend Alicia Johnson, from whom she has no secrets, she reveals her opinion on the subject when describing how matters stand between herself and Reginald De Courcy: "I am still doubtful at times, as to Marriage. —If the old Man would die, I might not hesitate; but a state of dependence on the caprice of Sir Reginald, will not suit the freedom of my spirit [...]".<sup>16</sup> She acknowledges the material benefit of marriage, the only one it has in her eyes, but her independent mind rebels against its limitations of her liberty of action. Widowed women like herself and the Marquise de Merteuil profit from the position they married into, without the inconveniences a husband implies. Being in control of their own lives, they can indulge their inclinations freely.

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<sup>13</sup> Peter V. Conroy makes the same observation in *Intimate, Intrusive, and Triumphant. Readers in the "Liaisons dangereuses"* (Amsterdam/Philadelphia: John Benjamin's Publishing Company, 1987): "[...] the libertine code is not merely one of sexual gratification. More important, it is also an effort to dominate and control others, to overpower their will, and to possess them spiritually as well as sexually" (99).

<sup>14</sup> Letter 81, Choderlos de Laclos, *Dangerous Liaisons* (London: Penguin Classics, 2007), 183. Original text: "Il mourut, comme vous savez [...]; et quoique, à tout prendre, je n'eusse pas à me plaindre de lui, je n'en sentis pas moins vivement le prix de la liberté qu'allait me donner mon veuvage, et je me promis bien d'en profiter", *Les liaisons dangereuses* (Paris: Le Livre de Poche, 1970), 206. References are to these editions.

<sup>15</sup> Letter 152, 366. "Savez-vous, Vicomte, pourquoi je ne me suis jamais remariée? ce n'est assurément pas faute d'avoir trouvé assez de partis avantageux; c'est uniquement pour que personne n'ait le droit de trouver à redire de mes actions", 400-401.

<sup>16</sup> Letter 29, *Lady Susan*, in *The Cambridge Edition of the Works of Jane Austen. Later Manuscripts*, ed. Janet Todd and Linda Bree (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 63. References are to this edition.

Widowhood enables them to act as they please. In the following part of this essay, the values that underlie their conduct, more specifically the view they have of their own person and of others, will be more closely examined. In their eyes, these two women have absolutely nothing in common with their fellow beings; they are far above them. Merteuil writes her autobiographic letter because she is violently provoked by a warning from her accomplice. He tells her to look out for a certain Prévau, who seems determined to seduce her. In her reply to Valmont, she makes very clear that she needs no warnings, simply because she cannot be defeated. She exclaims disdainfully: “How pitiful your fears are, and how thoroughly they prove my superiority over you! And you want to teach me, to guide me? Oh my poor Valmont, what a distance there still is between us! [...] What have you ever done that I have not outdone a thousand times?”<sup>17</sup> Merteuil’s libertine activities are great achievements; Valmont’s are not. A man can seduce a woman and ruin her reputation afterwards without exerting himself too much, and his social situation is never threatened. Inversely, a woman who acts like a man in this particular context needs a keen intelligence to be able to do so and remain spotless in the eyes of society. For Merteuil, it is an intellectual challenge to let a man believe that he is master of the situation, when she is in fact directing his movements. She disposes of men as she wishes; having first secured a hold on them that excludes every possibility of retaliation. In this famous letter to Valmont, the Marquise reminds him of her power: “[...] you have seen me [...] making these formidable men the playthings of my caprices or fantasies; depriving some of the will, others of the power to harm me [...]”<sup>18</sup> Her conduct has already been described as subversive, since it is a threat to the dominant, male order, which she reverses, and a revolt against authority.<sup>19</sup> As to Lady Susan, she has the same high opinion of herself and her own cleverness. If she takes an interest in the young Reginald De Courcy, it is partly because she sees it as an intellectual challenge to charm and dupe a person who is prejudiced against her. The realization of this project stimulates her mind and tickles her vanity. In a letter to Mrs Johnson, she declares that “[t]here is exquisite pleasure in subduing an insolent spirit, in making a person pre-determined to dislike, acknowledge one’s superiority”<sup>20</sup> Just like Merteuil, she derives this self-appointed superiority from her ability to make others do exactly what she wants without even noticing that they are being duped. Lady Susan writes to Alicia Johnson that she wishes to “[...] humble the Pride of these self-important De Courcies still lower [...]”<sup>21</sup>

<sup>17</sup> Letter 81, 177-178. “Que vos craintes me causent de pitié ! Combien elles me prouvent ma supériorité sur vous ! et vous voulez m’enseigner, me conduire ? Ah ! mon pauvre Valmont, quelle distance il y a encore de vous à moi ! [...] Et qu’avez-vous donc fait que je n’aie surpassé mille fois ?”, 200.

<sup>18</sup> Letter 81, 179. “[...] vous m’avez vue [...] faire de ces hommes si redoutables le jouet de mes caprices ou de mes fantaisies; ôter aux uns la volonté, aux autres la puissance de me nuire [...]”, 202.

<sup>19</sup> See for example Anne-Marie Jaton, “Libertinage féminin libertinage dangereux”, in *Laclos et le libertinage, 1782-1982. Actes du colloque du bicentenaire des « Liaisons dangereuses »* (Paris : Presses universitaires de France, 1983), pp. 151-162, and Patrick W. Byrne, “*Les liaisons dangereuses*”: A Study of Motive and Moral (Glasgow: University of Glasgow French and German Publications, 1989), 129.

<sup>20</sup> Letter 7, 14.

<sup>21</sup> Letter 7, 14-15.

Humiliation of her victims is equally gratifying to Merteuil in her dealings with men, even if she has to be careful not to go too far. Her trademark is, after all, prudence. When she plays with her lovers, she reduces them to nothing. They are at her mercy, inextricably caught in the trap she has laid for them, and she makes the most of their degrading situation: “How many modern Samsons have had their hair held to my scissors! They are the ones I have stopped being afraid of. They are the only ones I have sometimes allowed myself to humiliate”.<sup>22</sup> Vulnerability in others stimulates the Marquise’s sadistic inclinations.

The Marquise de Merteuil and Lady Susan both look down on others. Merteuil declares proudly, addressing herself to Valmont, that she is born to avenge her sex and conquer his,<sup>23</sup> but this statement does not necessarily make her a feminist. She shows no solidarity whatsoever with other women and does not hesitate a moment to destroy them. She considers not only men, but also women, as inferior to herself. Her contempt for the weaker sex is quite explicit. For this reason, Valmont’s warning is nothing else than an insult to her. According to Merteuil, the methods she has developed raises her above other women, and for this reason, he must not treat her like one of them. “Listen to me, and do not confuse me with other women”, is her exhortation to him.<sup>24</sup> He can keep his advice for the women who need it, that is, in her eyes, “[...] those silly women who say they are women ‘of feeling’ [...]” or, even worse, “‘sensitive’”.<sup>25</sup> She makes very clear that she plays on a higher level, and asks her accomplice: “But I, what have I in common with these empty-headed women?”<sup>26</sup> For the Marquise de Merteuil, feeling in a woman amounts to weakness. In a man, feeling is more than a weakness - it is a disgrace. That is the strongest argument in her efforts to separate Valmont from the Présidente de Tourvel, whom he has eventually fallen in love with. Merteuil considers herself as superior to others also because she does not possess their weaknesses; she is all intellect and no feeling. Free from emotion, she can develop calculation.

Lady Susan shares Merteuil’s disdain for weakness in those around her. The all but brilliant future husband she has chosen for her daughter, Sir James Martin, is one example. She writes to Mrs Johnson: “I have more than once repented that I did not marry him myself, & were he but one degree less contemptibly weak I certainly should [...]”.<sup>27</sup> However, it is her own daughter who is the principal victim of her scorn. According to her mother, she is everything a woman should not be, emotional and unaffected as she is: “I never saw a girl of her age, bid fairer to be the sport of Mankind. Her feelings are tolerably lively, & she is so charmingly artless in their display, as to afford the most reasonable hope of her

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<sup>22</sup> Letter 81, 185-186. “De combien de nos Samsons modernes, ne tiens-je pas la chevelure sous le ciseau! et ceux-là, j’ai cessé de les craindre ; ce sont les seuls que je me sois permis d’humilier quelquefois”, 209.

<sup>23</sup> Letter 81, 203.

<sup>24</sup> Letter 85, 195. “Écoutez, et ne me confondez plus avec les autres femmes”, 218.

<sup>25</sup> Letter 81, 180. “[...] ces femmes à délire, et qui se disent à *sentiment* [...]”, “*sensibles*”, 203.

<sup>26</sup> Letter 81, *ibid.* “Mais moi, qu’ai-je de commun avec ces femmes inconsidérées ?”, *ibid.*

<sup>27</sup> Letter 2, 5.

being ridiculed & despised by every Man who sees her”.<sup>28</sup> Just like the Marquise de Merteuil, she considers true feeling as weakness. To her, emotion is a sort of handicap in the world of society. She never lets it get in her way herself; she has acquired a complete knowledge of other people’s feelings, without actually having them herself. Reconciling herself with young Reginald after their quarrel, she observes him hesitate between his love for her and his anger at her cruelty to her daughter. She declares to Mrs Johnson: “There is something agreeable in feelings so easily worked on. Not that I would envy him their possession, nor would for the world have such myself, but they are very convenient when one wishes to influence the passions of another”.<sup>29</sup> In fact, she uses other people’s emotions as weapons; she identifies them and plays on them when striving to influence their minds. Her own want of feeling gives her an essential advantage.

The Marquise de Merteuil’s and Lady Susan’s view of these matters is at the bottom of their behaviour towards others. The two women unscrupulously use other persons in order to achieve their aims. Their strategies are entirely based on their talent for manipulation, which will now be examined more carefully. First of all, they both master language completely. Their control of the word has often been pointed out.<sup>30</sup> The two women’s most important asset is evidently their eloquence, and they handle the word as something malleable and elastic. Lady Susan’s clear-sighted sister-in-law, Mrs Vernon, is well aware of her unwelcome guest’s “[...] happy command of Language, which is too often used [...] to make Black appear White”.<sup>31</sup> Merteuil and Susan both make lying to a sophisticated science. Their lies are not really distorting reality; they are recreating it. To these women, reality is a fiction that they are writing themselves, in words and deeds. They transform reality into a story, and if they are to succeed in their plans, they have to make others believe this story. Merteuil actually uses literary works to find inspiration. Waiting for the Chevalier Belleruche, her lover, she prepares the meeting by a close reading of the texts she has chosen for the occasion: “[...] I read a chapter of *Le Sopha*, a letter of *Héloïse* and two tales of La Fontaine, to establish in my mind the various tones I wished to adopt”.<sup>32</sup> She reads in order to improve her acting, but equally to see how you build up a plot in the most efficient manner. The Marquise is an actress, but also an artist and her scheming is creation. She refers to one of her more reprehensible deeds, the exposure of the young girl Cécile’s secret correspondence, as her “chef-d’œuvre”<sup>33</sup> (this is before

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<sup>28</sup> Letter 19, 36.

<sup>29</sup> Letter 25, 57.

<sup>30</sup> See for example Conroy (1987), Jean-Luc Seylaz, *Les liaisons dangereuses et la création romanesque chez Laclos* (Genève/Paris: Droz/Minard, 1965), Barbara Horwitz, “The Wicked Mother in Jane Austen’s Work”, in *Jane Austen’s Beginnings. The Juvenilia and Lady Susan*, edited by J. David Grey (Ann Arbor/London: UMI Research Press, 1989), pp. 181-191, or Mary Poovey, *The Proper Lady and the Woman Writer* (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1984), pp. 174-175.

<sup>31</sup> Letter 6, 11-12.

<sup>32</sup> Letter 10, 30. “[...] je lis un chapitre du *Sopha*, une Lettre d’*Héloïse* et deux contes de La Fontaine, pour recorder les différents tons que je voulais prendre”, 46.

<sup>33</sup> Letter 63, *Les liaisons dangereuses*, 149.

she makes Valmont abandon the Présidente de Tourvel). Merteuil considers all her malicious plans to be works of art, inspired by her superior mind.

To Merteuil, the world is a stage, a “grand Théâtre”,<sup>34</sup> and she distributes the roles. When she carefully plans the ruin of Cécile de Volanges, used as a tool in her efforts to take revenge on a man who has deserted her, she calls her in her first letter to Valmont “[...] the heroine of this new romance [...]”,<sup>35</sup> and she uses the same terminology when talking about Danceny, the young man in love with Cécile and eventually seduced by Merteuil.<sup>36</sup> Involving Valmont in her plot as well, she says to him: “The dénouement of this intrigue depends on you. You must judge when the moment arrives for the reunion scene [...]”.<sup>37</sup> Merteuil is the director of the play, the puppet master who looks upon her victims as marionettes. In order to corrupt Cécile, she gives her a very dismal picture of her future marriage, insisting on fidelity to her husband. This vision makes debauch sound like a thing not to be missed, and Cécile does not lose much time, which was exactly what the Marquise wanted. She describes her strategy in another letter to her accomplice: “[...] I hope that by my convincing her it is only permissible to fall in love during the short time she has left before her marriage, she will decide more quickly not to waste a moment of it”.<sup>38</sup> She makes her victims do what she wants them to do by offering them an alternative, fictional version of reality, that is often more attractive to them because she makes it so. On one occasion, Cécile discovers a discrepancy in her words, concerning precisely the conjugal fidelity Merteuil had initially presented as a necessary evil. The young woman, seduced by Valmont, turns to her older friend for advice, only to hear that there is no harm done, and that she can have all the lovers she likes once she is married. Cécile does wonder, but refuses to believe that she has been deceived. In her reply to the Marquise, she writes: “It seems to me that one day at the Opera you were telling me something quite different, that once married I would only be able to love my husband and have to forget all about Danceny. But perhaps I did not quite understand you and I would much prefer it to be different [...]”.<sup>39</sup> In spite of this obvious inconsistency in Merteuil’s advice, Cécile cannot bring herself to doubt her. Besides, the new version Merteuil now puts forward is indeed much more appealing to her, which makes it easier to accept the contradiction. The reasoning of Austen’s heroine is not always conforming to logic either, and its flaws are quickly discovered by her watchful sister-in-law. Mrs Vernon ascribes these

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<sup>34</sup> Letter 81, *Les liaisons dangereuses*, 208.

<sup>35</sup> Letter 2, 14. “[...] l’Héroïne de ce nouveau roman [...]”, 29.

<sup>36</sup> Davies has already pointed out that Jane Austen’s novel has its own Danceny in Reginald De Courcy: “Actrice consommée, Susan n’a pas de peine à tromper ce nouveau Danceny qui se révèle vraiment contrit de l’avoir jamais doutée” (1983:257).

<sup>37</sup> Letter 63, 135. “C’est de vos soins que va dépendre le dénouement de cette intrigue. Jugez du moment où il faudra réunir les Acteurs”, 155.

<sup>38</sup> Letter 38, 83. “[...] j’espère qu’en lui faisant accroire qu’il ne lui est permis de se livrer à l’amour que pendant le peu de temps qu’elle a à rester fille, elle se décidera plus vite à n’en rien perdre”, 102.

<sup>39</sup> Letter 109, 267-268. “Il me semble qu’un jour à l’Opéra vous me disiez au contraire qu’une fois mariée, je ne pourrais plus aimer que mon mari, et qu’il me faudrait même oublier Danceny : au reste, peut-être avais-je mal entendu, et j’aime bien mieux que cela soit autrement [...]”, 294.

imperfections to the difficulties intrinsic to constant lying: “In short when a person is always to deceive, it is impossible to be consistent”,<sup>40</sup> she writes to her mother.

Lady Susan equally handles reality as something rather relative, that she shapes into the form she chooses. To her, the fiction she proposes and the truth she contradicts are nothing but slightly different versions of reality – she makes no difference between their values. When her daughter runs away from a boarding school to escape the marriage her mother tries to impose on her, Lady Susan has no choice but to take her to Churchill. She does not fear exposure, although Frederica could reveal some very interesting things to their family: “Frederica is too shy I think, & too much in awe of me, to tell tales; but if the mildness of her Uncle should get anything from her, I am not afraid. I trust I shall be able to make my story as good as her’s”.<sup>41</sup> Frederica would tell the truth and her mother would lie, but Lady Susan considers both versions as stories. It is a word she often uses when referring to her lies. After Sir James Martin’s unexpected arrival at Churchill, she must give a plausible explication of the situation to her sister-in-law, in order to keep up appearances. In a letter to Mrs Johnson, she relates the scene: “[...] I made the best of it however, & told my story with great success to Mrs Vernon [...]”.<sup>42</sup> To Lady Susan, human communication is mostly about performance. The actress she is must convince the audience. Even when her falsehood and double-dealing are exposed, and Reginald De Courcy’s eyes finally opened, the show must go on. She still believes that her command of the word will save her, and writes to her accomplice: “Do not torment yourself with fears on my account.—Depend upon it, I can make my own story good with Reginald”.<sup>43</sup> Both the Marquise de Merteuil and Lady Susan offer their victims a fictional version of reality, a story. Merteuil goes so far as to write the story of others, while Lady Susan contents herself with rewriting her own story. The two women work on reality as if it was made of clay and waiting for the touch of the artist.

If the word is their weapon, reputation is their shield. There is however a rather striking difference between them. The Marquise de Merteuil has seen to it that she is irreproachable. She has constructed an image of herself as a highly virtuous woman. There is no flaw in her perfect appearance. According to Mme de Volanges, Cécile’s mother, their mutual friend is indeed “très estimable”,<sup>44</sup> and her principles cannot be questioned. Cécile herself describes her as “bien respectable”.<sup>45</sup> Therefore, the girl firmly believes that if she follows the Marquise’s advice, she really can do nothing wrong. When writing to her young friend Sophie Carnay, she describes her trust in Merteuil’s counsel as follows: “If

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<sup>40</sup> Letter 17, 33.

<sup>41</sup> Letter 16, 30.

<sup>42</sup> Letter 22, 42.

<sup>43</sup> Letter 33, 67.

<sup>44</sup> Letter 32, 86.

<sup>45</sup> Letter 29, 81.



I do exactly what she says, I shall have nothing to be ashamed of".<sup>46</sup> She thinks she is being guided by a model of excellence, when she is in fact brought to ruin. The Marquise is simply above suspicion, and that enables her to do everything she wants. She uses her good reputation as a personal protection, but it equally makes it easier for her to manipulate her victims. In their distress, they turn to her for instructions and accept everything she says as words of true wisdom, which gives her the perfect opportunity to destroy them.

As to Lady Susan, she is well aware of the importance of reputation and appearance, but she is not as discreet as Merteuil. When her admirer Manwaring wants to come and stay in the vicinity of Churchill, she expressly forbids him to do so, and writes to Mrs Johnson: "Those women are inexcusable who forget what is due to themselves & the opinion of the World".<sup>47</sup> She does not, however, practice what she preaches. In fact, Lady Susan has quite a bad reputation. She is enjoying herself too much to be able to stop herself from flirting openly with men, and the result is of course notoriety. Especially women see right through her, since they are indifferent to her charms and therefore not blind to her falsehood. Her sister-in-law does not hesitate to call her a "Mistress of Deceit" in a letter to her mother.<sup>48</sup> Since her true character is not entirely unknown, Lady Susan cannot hide her actions behind a good reputation the same way Merteuil does. Her strength derives from her ability to charm and manipulate others, particularly men, in spite of her reputation. Reginald knows very well what she is like before he meets her, but that does not prevent him from falling in love with her. When he first hears of her visit to Churchill, he congratulates the Vernons "[...] on being about to receive into [their] family, the most accomplished Coquette in England".<sup>49</sup> He has not spent many hours in her company before he is convinced that she is "[...] a very injured Woman".<sup>50</sup> Lady Susan uses even her bad reputation as a weapon against others (whereas Merteuil uses her good one), by making Reginald believe that all rumours he might have heard are false and that she has been calumniated. Having won his heart, she writes to Alicia: "[...] I never behaved less like a Coquette in the whole course of my Life, tho' perhaps my desire of dominion was never more decided".<sup>51</sup> She gives the impression that she is a victim of slander, and thus manages to awaken Reginald's sympathy.

Another strategy of manipulation is to victimise oneself, and both women know how to use it. The Marquise de Merteuil decides to teach Prévau, the man determined to defeat her, a lesson, and her method is based on the complete reversal of the victim-perpetrator relation. She lets the man seduce her as a part of her plan. He is imprisoned when she accuses him of rape. Prévau, far from innocent himself, is the victim of Merteuil's scheme, but in the eyes of the world,

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<sup>46</sup> Letter 16, 40. "En ne faisant que ce qu'elle me dira, je n'aurai rien à me reprocher", 56.

<sup>47</sup> Letter 16, 31.

<sup>48</sup> Letter 23, 47.

<sup>49</sup> Letter 4, 8.

<sup>50</sup> Letter 14, 26.

<sup>51</sup> Letter 10, 18-19.

she is his victim. By representing herself as the hunted prey, she conceals that she is in fact the hunter. Lady Susan uses the same technique. Confronted with her deeds, she immediately accuses “[...] the illnature of the World [...]”,<sup>52</sup> prejudiced against her poor innocent self. When it comes to her daughter, Lady Susan is a concerned mother who does not know what to do with her unmanageable child. She constantly shifts the blame on to her victims, a reversal that enables her to claim her perfect innocence. Nevertheless, there is one important difference between Merteuil and Lady Susan: they both victimize themselves, but Austen’s heroine actually seems convinced that she has been unfairly treated. Before the beginning of the story, she causes the misery of the Manwarings, but acknowledges no responsibility in the matter. She has indeed “[...] no consciousness of Guilt [...]”<sup>53</sup>, in the words of the narrator in the Conclusion, referring to her relationship with Reginald, but they seem to apply to all her actions. In Lady Susan’s description of the trouble she has caused when staying with the Manwarings, her plaintive tone clearly reveals that she considers herself as its principal victim: “At present nothing goes smoothly.—The Females of the Family are united against me. [...] We are now in a sad state; no house was ever more altered; the whole family are at war, & Manwaring scarcely dares speak to me”.<sup>54</sup> Obviously, nothing of this is her fault. After the thwarting of her plans for Frederica’s marriage, she writes to Mrs Johnson: “[...] I must make myself amends for the humiliations to which I have stooped within these few days”.<sup>55</sup> In her eyes, she is always the injured party. She continues, in another letter, to the same correspondent: “I have given up too much—have been too easily worked on [...]”,<sup>56</sup> when she has evidently done nothing but working on those around her. This could also be another falsehood, since she does cultivate appearance even in the letters to her accomplice, but she still seems to resent the injustice of the world. Merteuil would never look upon herself as a victim – she is only too proud to be the perpetrator. Besides, before her final exposure, the Marquise never has to assume the consequences of her actions the way Lady Susan does, since no one is able to guess that she is behind them.

As to their real victims, they never stand a chance against the strategies of two women who know exactly how to proceed more or less undisturbed. In order to take complete control of their minds, they both isolate their victims. When Merteuil decides to ruin Cécile de Volanges, the first step is to win her friendship and trust, which poses no problem, Cécile being young and naïve, and Merteuil a paragon of good conduct. Once this is achieved, it is easy to take advantage of the distance between Cécile and her mother, in order to replace the latter. Since the girl is in love, Merteuil promises to guide her in love matters, and emphasizes that nothing of this must be revealed to Mme de Volanges. In a letter to Sophie

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<sup>52</sup> Letter 35, 69.

<sup>53</sup> Conclusion, 75.

<sup>54</sup> Letter 2, 4-5.

<sup>55</sup> Letter 25, 58.

<sup>56</sup> Letter 39, 72.

Carnay, Cécile praises the generosity of her benefactress. Her candid description of the Marquise's instructions leaves little doubt of the older woman's intentions:

Madame de Merteuil has also told me that she will lend me books about all this [...]. Only she has suggested to me that I say nothing to Mamma about those books, because that would seem as if we thought that she had neglected my education, and she might be annoyed. Oh, I shan't breathe a word!<sup>57</sup>

Merteuil sees to it that she becomes the only confidante of Cécile, as well as of her mother. Using very subtle arguments, she tells Cécile that her mother must not know how close they are and Mme de Volanges that her daughter must be kept out of their intimacy, in order to avoid that the young girl's suspicions are aroused. Merteuil's efforts are considerable, and the result most gratifying to her: "[...] in so doing, I shall have increased the mother's respect for me, the daughter's friendship and the confidence of both".<sup>58</sup> By making them both believe that she is the only one they can turn to, she isolates them completely and can easily play them off against each other. Lady Susan uses the same method, but it is less sophisticated. She simply forbids her daughter to talk to their family about the marriage to Sir James Martin. To Mrs Vernon, it is quite obvious what her sister-in-law is trying to do. In a letter to her mother, she announces Frederica's safe arrival, and describes certain difficulties in their communication: "[...] I think I can see that some pains are taken to prevent her being much with me".<sup>59</sup> Lady Susan isolates her daughter in order to keep her quiet; Merteuil isolates her victims to keep them from talking to each other about herself. Lady Susan gives a direct order; Merteuil lets them believe that it is in their own interest to do as she says. The result is the same, until their machinations are revealed.

The examples cited above illustrate the affinity between the Marquise de Merteuil and Lady Susan. The two characters share the same view of their own person as well as of other people. Merteuil is certainly much more destructive than Lady Susan, who thinks more of her own benefit than of the means to ruin others, but they both want to dominate other minds and they use the same methods to attain their goals. Recreating reality as if was a novel to be written, they offer alternative, more attractive versions of it to their victims, and that is only one of their many strategies of manipulation. The list includes, among other things, the skilful use they make of appearance and reputation, the victimization of the self and the isolation of their victims. Even if it is very difficult, if not impossible, to prove that Jane Austen had read and was influenced by Choderlos de Laclos when writing *Lady Susan*, it does seem like a plausible hypothesis. Still,

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<sup>57</sup> Letter 29, 64. "Madame de Merteuil m'a dit aussi qu'elle me prêterait des Livres qui parlaient de tout cela, [...] elle m'a recommandé seulement de ne rien dire à Maman de ces Livres-là, parce que ça aurait l'air de trouver qu'elle a trop négligé mon éducation, et ça pourrait la fâcher. Oh ! je ne lui en dirai rien", 82.

<sup>58</sup> Letter 63, 132. "[...] chemin faisant j'aurai augmenté pour moi l'estime de la mère, l'amitié de la fille, et la confiance de toutes deux", 152.

<sup>59</sup> Letter 17, 32.

it must be emphasized that Lady Susan could never be considered as a mere copy of the Marquise de Merteuil. Austen might have read Laclos, but she has created an independent character, which has certainly many things in common with Merteuil, but remains after all unique.

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