

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE  
*Frederic Will, Ph.D.*

## LACLOS CHODERLOS DE

**Choderlos de Laclos and his fame.** Choderlos de Laclos (1741-1803) a French novelist, official, military man and general, and novelist, was best known for his *Les Liaisons Dangereuses* (1782), *Dangerous Liaisons*, which has enjoyed two centuries of censure and ultimately fame, having entered today's ordinary life in cinema, television, and even as a tweet novel.

**Life of Choderlos de Laclos.** Laclos was born to a bourgeois family in the northern French city of Amiens. He was trained from youth for a military career, and sent for his education to the *Ecole Royale d'Artillerie*. He served in action in the last year of the Seven Years War, and until 1776 was regularly posted to different garrisons. In 1771 he was promoted to captain, and somewhat later saw sporadic battle action during the early stages of the Napoleonic Wars. (He was ultimately, after a promotion to general, able to make the acquaintance of Napoleon, with whose Republican ideas he sympathized, and whom he served.) The reason we know these details is that, during an extensive career in the military, the cynical and experienced Laclos managed to find time for writing, which increasingly took over his interest and attention. Though he began by writing poetry, and even an opéra comique, it was not until he started to work on *Les Liaisons Dangereuses*, ultimately published in 1782, that he found his true artistic voice. He was by no means through with his active military and public career, when this novel was published. In 1786 he was busy, as a military official, with the job of numbering the streets of Paris. In 1788 he left the army, and entered the service of Louis Philippe, duc d'Orleans, then went off, as we have noted, to fight with the Republican armies in the Napoleonic Wars. (He found time, in this latter capacity, to invent the modern artillery shell). It was however the novel, *Les Liaisons*, on which he had been working for years, which was the burning concern of Choderlos de Laclos. At its publication this novel enjoyed overnight success, speaking as it did to the self-awareness of the sophisticated reading public of late eighteenth-century France.

***Les Liaisons Dangereuses.*** was the subject of much moral reprobation during its time, for the text, highlighting as it did the last corrupt years of an ancien régime which was soon to give way to the Napoleonic era, and after that to a new 19th century world in which the intricacies of court corruption were no longer fashionable, was offensive to many. (Highlighting, at the same time, some fascinating strategies of depravity among privileged nobility, for whom the game between the sexes took on the ever interesting charms of humiliation and oppression.) The novel itself involves two separate but intertwined themes in which figures of aristocratic background, the Viscomte de Valmont and the Marquise de Merteuil, who were formerly lovers, conspire to seduce and corrupt two relative innocents at court. (The Marquise assigns Valmont the job of seducing a young lovely destined for marriage with the Marquise's ex lover—out of revenge. Valmont refuses, finding the challenge too easy, and prefers to attempt the seduction of a certain high born lady at court—beautiful because 'inaccessible.' The drama plays on forward from this wily seduction plot, with eventual tragic results, expected to be sure, and in the end less fascinating than the machinations of the super sophisticated aristocrats. The novel continues to fascinate, and begs juxtaposition with the other earliest and most brilliant of French novels, Mme. de Lafayette's *La Princesse de Cleves*, written roughly a century earlier.

### Reading

#### **Primary source reading**

*Dangerous Liaisons*, tr. Constantine, 2007.

#### **Secondary source reading**

Brooks, Peter, *The Novel of Worldliness*, 1969.

### Further reading

Davis, N.Z. *Society and Culture in Early modern France*, 1975.

### Original language reading

Bertaud Jean-Paul, *Choderlos de Laclos, l'auteur des Liaisons dangereuses*, 2003.

### Suggested paper topics

Does the cynicism of Laclos reflect a basic respect for humanity, for which he feels compassion? Does he is that sense resemble, say, de la Rochefoucauld? Or is he more deeply hostile to the human project?

Do the *Liaisons Dangereuses* seem to you a new departure in the development of the French novel? Does de Laclos seem to have taken the novel form farther than it went in the work of his brilliant predecessor, Mme. de Lafayette, in *La Princesse de Cleves*.

**Excerpt** [http://en.wikiquote.org/wiki/Pierre\\_Choderlos\\_de\\_Laclos](http://en.wikiquote.org/wiki/Pierre_Choderlos_de_Laclos)

*Le succès, qui ne prouve pas toujours le mérite, tient souvent davantage au choix du sujet qu'à son exécution.*

Success, which is not always a proof of merit, depends more often on the choice of a subject than on its execution.

*On peut citer de mauvais vers, quand ils sont d'un grand poète.*

One may quote bad poetry if it is by a great poet.

*L'amour est, comme la médecine, seulement l'art d'aider à la nature.*

Love, like medicine, is only the art of encouraging nature.

*J'ai été étonné du plaisir qu'on éprouve en faisant le bien.*

I was astonished at the pleasure to be derived from doing good.

- *Le scélérat a ses vertus, comme l'honnête homme a ses faiblesses.*

The scoundrel has his good qualities, and the good man his weaknesses.

*Une occasion manquée se retrouve, tandis qu'on ne revient jamais d'une démarche précipitée.*

An opportunity missed once will present itself again, whereas a too hasty action can never be recalled.

*On a toujours assez vécu, quand on a eu le temps d'acquérir l'amour des femmes et l'estime des hommes.*

One has lived long enough if one has had time to win the love of women and the esteem of men.

*Une main occupée pour la force, l'autre pour l'amour, quel orateur pourrait prétendre à la grâce en pareille situation?*

One hand was needed for power, the other for love: where is the orator that could aspire to grace in such a position?

*Le luxe absorbe tout: on le blâme, mais il faut l'imiter; et le superflu finit par priver du nécessaire.*

Luxury, nowadays, is ruinous. We criticize, but must conform, and superfluities in the end deprive us of necessities.