

DANGEROUS LIAISONS OR READER/VIEWER INDISCRETIONS

Les liaisons dangereuses ou les indiscretions du lecteur/spectateur

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Résumé

Notre lecture comparative du roman épistolaire *Les Liaisons Dangereuses* de Laclos et des deux adaptations filmiques choisies, celle de Frears (*Dangerous Liaisons*, 1988) et celle de Forman (*Valmont*, 1989) sera axée sur l'étude du lecteur/spectateur indiscret. Pour ce faire, nous avons balisé notre réflexion en trois volets complémentaires : La lecture, la lettre et le *lecteur/spectateur Indiscret*. Lire ou voir une œuvre implique toujours une appropriation interprétative. La lettre, au cœur du roman et des films, devient un vecteur de manipulation et un miroir du monde social. Chez Laclos comme chez Frears, elle permet au lecteur/spectateur d'accéder à une vérité masquée, nourrissant une posture voyeuriste. La mise en scène, les regards caméra, les miroirs ou les scènes de lecture à l'écran renforcent cette complicité avec le lecteur/spectateur. Forman, quant à lui, propose une lecture bucolique. L'indiscrétion, fil rouge de l'analyse, révèle ainsi la richesse du dialogue entre Littérature et Cinéma mais aussi entre lecture, vision et interprétation.

Abstract

Our comparative reading of Laclos's epistolary novel *Les Liaisons Dangereuses* and the two film adaptations chosen, Frears's *Dangerous Liaisons* (1988) and Forman's *Valmont* (1989), will focus on the study of the indiscreet reader/spectator. To this end, we have divided our thinking into three complementary strands: reading, the letter and the indiscreet reader/spectator. Reading or seeing a work always involves an interpretative appropriation. The letter, at the heart of the novel and the films, becomes a vehicle for manipulation and a mirror of the social world. In both Laclos and Frears, it allows the reader/spectator access to a hidden truth, nurturing a voyeuristic posture. The staging, camera glances, mirrors and on-screen reading scenes reinforce this complicity with the reader/spectator. Forman, for his part, offers a bucolic reading. Indiscretion, the common thread running through the analysis, reveals the richness of the dialogue between Literature and Cinema, but also between reading, vision and interpretation.

Mots clés : *Littérature Comparée ; Le Lecteur/Spectateur indiscret ; Laclos ; Frears ; Forman.*

Key-words: *Comparative Literature; The Indiscreet Reader/Spectator; Laclos; Frears; Forman.*

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Never in my lifetime will I be illustrated, because the most beautiful literary description is devoured by the poorest drawing [...] a woman drawn looks like a woman, that's all. The idea is already completely closed and all the sentences are useless, whereas a woman written about makes a thousand women dream. Gustave Flaubert

For a novel to become a very good film, the film must be something else. It is a question of finding a kind of equivalent that is not limited to a simple visual transposition. Julien Gracq

INTRODUCTION

In *All Said and Done*, Simone de Beauvoir emphasizes that “one of the clichés repeated ad nauseam in certain circles is that literature will now only play a secondary role; the future belongs to cinema and television: I don't believe it” (Beauvoir, 1972, p. 263). Like Beauvoir, we are convinced that literature retains its fundamental relevance and vitality, and that far from being opposed to one another, literature, cinema, television, and now digital technologies can engage in dialogue, challenge each other, and enrich each other. From this point of view, the film adaptation of a literary work appears not only as an autonomous creative act, but also as an interpretative reading, capable of projecting a work from the past into new cultural and aesthetic frameworks, while encouraging its (re)reading.

It is with this in mind that we turn our attention to *Les Liaisons dangereuses* by Choderlos de Laclos, an epistolary novel published in 1782 and considered one of the pinnacles of literary libertinism in 18th-century France. Set in an aristocratic society on the brink of collapse, Laclos depicts a struggle for power through seduction, manipulation, and writing itself. The novel, constructed as a game of masks between the Marquise de Merteuil and the Vicomte de Valmont, also presents itself as a reading device in which the reader is at once accomplice, voyeur, and judge (Lefevere, 1992).

Libertinism, in this context, goes beyond simple sexual transgression: it becomes discourse, strategy, social theater. It reveals the tensions between individual freedom and collective norms, between desire and morality, between truth and illusion. As Michel Delon writes, “libertinism plays out in writing as it does in bodies: it is strategy, mask, and theater”. (Delon 2000, p. 211). *Les Liaisons dangereuses* thus reveals a world where letter become weapons, and where reading itself is an act of unveiling—indiscreet, curious, sometimes voyeuristic—as much as an exercise of power.

This subtle interplay between text, gaze, and power finds a unique extension in two almost contemporary film adaptations: Stephen Frears' *Dangerous Liaisons* (1988) and Miloš Forman's *Valmont* (1989). Made at the same time but with very different sensibilities, these two films each offer a unique interpretation of Laclos' novel, using the expressive codes of cinema. Each in its own way, they highlight the indiscreet nature of the cinematic gaze, which mirrors that of the original reader. For cinema, too, writes with images, gestures, and silences, placing us in the position of an indiscreet reader/spectator, as defined by Jean Rousset (Rousset, 1983; Rousset, 1986).

It is precisely this stance that we propose to examine in this study, through a comparative analysis of the novel and the two adaptations mentioned above. We will pay particular attention to the figure of the indiscreet reader/viewer, organizing our reflection into three complementary sections: *reading, the letter, and the indiscreet reader-viewer*. In order to narrow down our analysis, we have deliberately restricted our corpus to a set of significant excerpts, which we will comment on based on the first axis proposed: reading.

In *Tout Compte Fait*, Simone de Beauvoir emphasizes that “One of the clichés repeated in certain circles is that literature will now only have a secondary role to play; the future belongs to cinema and television: I don't believe it” (Beauvoir, 1972, p. 263). Like Simone de Beauvoir, we believe that literature will always have a role to play, alongside other means of expression such as cinema, television and, currently, digital technologies and artificial intelligence. In truth, literature and cinema enrich each other. Isn't the adaptation of a book for the screen above all one of these possible readings and therefore a means of disseminating literary heritage? Isn't cinema also a means of encouraging the desire to read in order to (re)discover the universal library?

It is precisely their reading of Laclos' epistolary novel *Les Liaisons Dangereuses* that Stephen Frears (1988) in *Dangerous Liaisons* and Milos Forman (1989) in *Valmont* offer the reader/viewer through the medium of cinema. It is worth noting that the two films were edited at the same time, although the first was released in the United States in 1988 and the second in 1989. Nevertheless, these two parallel edits, produced simultaneously, offer two divergent filmic readings centered on the indiscreet reader/viewer.

Our comparative reading of the book and the two selected films will focus on the study of the indiscreet reader/viewer (Rousset, 1983). To do this, we have divided our analysis into three complementary sections: Reading, the letter, and the indiscreet reader-viewer, and we have selected a limited corpus. To begin, we will briefly focus our analysis on the first section: reading.

1. Reading

The following reflections are inspired by the desire to introduce the issue of the indiscreet reader/viewer at the very heart of a brief reflection on reading (Chartier, 1993). However, reading is not simply a reconstruction of meaning but also a creative act. According to Jean-Marie Goulemot, it is up to the reader to produce meaning by articulating the different sequences of the text into a coherent whole:

Reading is giving an overall meaning, a globalization and articulation of the meanings produced by the sequences. **It is not finding the meaning intended by an author**, which would imply that the pleasure of the text originates in the coincidence between the intended meaning and the perceived meaning, in a kind of cultural agreement [...]. **Reading is constructing meaning**, not reconstructing it. (Goulemot, 1993, p. 116).

So, if, like Goulemot, we accept that “[...] reading is the momentary revelation of the *polysemy* of the literary text”, then the reader's analysis is undoubtedly fundamental: “[...] because it is one of the essential terms of the process of appropriation and exchange that is reading” (Goulemot, 1993, p. 116). However, Roland Barthes had already extended the notion of polysemy of the work to a “plurality of the text”:

The Text is plural. This does not mean only that it has several meanings, but that it has accomplished the very plurality of meaning: **an irreducible** (and not merely acceptable) **plurality**. The Text is not a coexistence of meanings, but a passage, a crossing; it cannot therefore be the subject of an interpretation, even a liberal one, but of an explosion, a dissemination. (Barthes, 1984, p. 75).

Therefore, whether reading an epistolary novel or watching its film adaptations, both the reader and the viewer attempt to “construct meaning”. To achieve this, all reading draws on the cultural, literary, and cinematic library of the reader and viewer, insofar as there is dialogism and intertextuality in the practice of reading, as Mikhail Bakhtin (1970) asserted. This dialogic polysemy implies that the work is constructed jointly by the receiver, whether reader or viewer, in a complex interpretative back-and-forth.

According to Goulemot, “Reading, then, is bringing out the lived library, that is, the memory of previous readings and cultural data” (Goulemot, 1993, p. 122). In fact, just as a literary work only exists through the relationship it establishes with the reader, a cinematographic work only exists through the viewer. The receiver therefore plays a fundamental role in both these fields, whether read or seen, since, as Umberto Eco (1993) asserts, all reading involves “interpretative cooperation” on the part of the reader. The latter thus actualizes “the gaps in the text” according to his or her competence, just as the viewer actualizes those on the screen.

According to Robert Scholes, interpretation varies and differs depending on the object being read (which may belong to a verbal or non-verbal register), since it is governed by different codes. However, we are witnessing a popularization of the term “reading” in everyday conversation as “[...] a form of everyday expression” and its use being extended to several fields. (Scholes, 1991, p. 17)

Our second section will focus on letters and their significance, as the choice, order, and arrangement of letters are never random, since it is through them that the reader/viewer reconstructs the sequence of events, both in the epistolary novel and in the two film adaptations chosen.

2. The Letter

In his epistolary novel, *Les Liaisons Dangereuses*, subtitled *Lettres recueillies dans une société et publiées pour l'instruction de quelques autres* (Letters collected in a society and published for the instruction of a few others), Laclos pretends to present the reader with real correspondence (Versini, 1998). To make the letters and their authors seem real, he uses several elements of the paratext, such as the title, subtitle, publisher's warning, and editor's preface, to create an effect of plausibility, thereby employing a strategy of doubt that was widely used by epistolary authors in the 18th century:

We feel obliged to warn the public that, despite the title of this work and what the editor says in his preface, **we cannot guarantee the authenticity of this collection** and that we even have strong reasons to believe that **it is nothing more than a novel** (Laclos, 1981, p. 14).

Nevertheless, in the preface, the editor emphasizes the authenticity of these letters, stating that: “[...] this collection [...] contains only a small number of the letters that made up the entire correspondence from which it was extracted” (Laclos, 1981, p. 14). The editor was thus tasked with organizing, “putting in order”, guaranteeing the anonymity of the letter writers, and selecting the letters: “[...] necessary either for understanding the events or for developing the characters” (Laclos, 1981, p. 15). This concept is based on a kind of implicit agreement between the author and the reader, a reading pact that was very popular in the 18th century and relied in particular on the effect of reality.

Throughout the novel, the writer repeatedly justifies the deletion of several letters to the reader in footnotes marked with an asterisk. This deletion is explained as follows: “[...] not to abuse the reader's patience” (Laclos, 1981, p. 30). This is the case, for example, with the letters from Sophie Carnay and “other actors in these adventures” (Laclos, 1981, p. 30), as reported in the note to Letter VII. In Letter XXXIX, the deletion of the letters exchanged between Cécile de Volanges and Chevalier Danceny is justified by the fact that they are: “of little interest and do not foreshadow any events” (Laclos, 1981, p. 86). Similarly, in Letter LXXV (Laclos, 1981, p. 150), the omission is justified at the beginning of the letter by a *note* to avoid repetition.

In Laclos' work, letters actually function as a means of concealment and manipulation, as evidenced by letter XXXIII from Mme de Merteuil to Valmont: "[...] there is nothing so difficult in love as to write what one does not feel. I mean **writing in a plausible way**: it is not that one does not use the same words, but one does not arrange them in the same way, or rather one arranges them, and that is enough [...]" (Laclos, 1981, p. 73). This dissimulation is also evident in the advice given by Mme de Merteuil to Cécile de Volanges (Laclos, 1981, p. 237) in Letter CV.

[...] Take more care with your style. You always write like a child [...] **because you say everything you think and nothing you don't think** [...]. You can see that when you write to someone, it is for them and not for yourself: you should therefore seek less to tell them what you think, and more to tell them what they would like to hear (Laclos, 1981, p. 240).

This excerpt clearly reveals the importance of the mask and the role of the reader/viewer, who, from a privileged position, gains access to the multiple points of view provided by reading all of the letters. It is precisely thanks to this overview that the indiscreet reader/viewer forms an opinion about each character. Thus, unlike Cécile, the letter is not meant to reveal "the transparency of the soul"; Mme de Merteuil and Valmont excel in the art of manipulation and concealment (Singerman, 1993, pp. 269-281). In the CV letter, Mme de Merteuil teaches Cécile the importance of pleasing rather than being sincere. However, the reader only learns the truth through the secret letters of these two libertines, indiscreet readers who wear masks. As René Pomeau asserts, it is only when "[...] the masks are lifted, the impostures revealed [...]" [that] the novelist allows his reader to access the truth" (Pomeau, 1975, p. 23). But behind their intrigues, the two libertines reveal the workings of a society based on lies and conventions. As such, the letter plays a central role, beyond its narrative function; it influences events and is performative.

It should also be noted that the word "liaison", which today evokes a romantic relationship, did not have this meaning in the 18th century. The title of Laclos' novel refers rather to the social ties formed in public spaces, such as salons, theaters, or operas, without necessarily implying an intimate or emotional relationship. This excerpt from letter XXII from Mme de Tourvel to Mme de Volanges highlights this meaning of the title: "M. de Valmont is perhaps just another example of the danger of liaisons" (Laclos, 1981, p. 55). Valmont would therefore be a victim of his acquaintances, who have

corrupted him. However, Mme de Volanges refuses to believe this theory, as shown in letter XXXII: “Even if he were, as you say, merely an example of the danger of liaisons, would he not still be a dangerous liaison himself?” (Laclos, 1981, p. 71). In this codified world, as Mme de Volanges points out, simply associating with a man like Valmont is enough to compromise one's reputation.

However, only Frears' film takes its title from the book, while Forman's focuses on one character: the libertine Valmont. Frears' adaptation remains faithful to Laclos, and the motif of the letter, preserving the dynamic of the psychological duel. The letter is a weapon, proof, a bargaining chip, and a key. Frears recovers the motif of the letter, constructing a few particular scenes, such as Valmont handing Danceny's letter to Cécile, taking advantage of the opportunity to enter her room; similarly, he uses the pretext of returning the letters to Mme de Tourvel as an excuse to see her again and seduce her. To these examples we can add the opening of the letterbox with Azolan, when Valmont observes the letters addressed to Mme de Tourvel, trying to read them through the window. This observation of the letters will later materialize in the access to Mme de Tourvel's private correspondence through Julie (Letter XLIV).

Like the letter, the images have a dual function: to show and to hide. Thus, Mme de Merteuil hides Danceny's note in her bath to keep it from Valmont's view in the scene where he demands his reward. The reader/viewer gradually forms their own opinion of each character, having access to all the letters and scenes. They can thus perceive the candor of the prey, the duplicity or hypocrisy of the libertines, and appreciate the irony that emanates from certain situations.

In Frears' film, this irony is evident in the scene where Valmont saves Mr. Armand's family from eviction. Frears adds a few ironic touches to this image of Valmont as a kind and charitable man. For example, when Valmont asks Mr. Armand not to get up, the latter replies that the bailiff is about to take away the bed on which he is sitting. Later, when Valmont boasts of having saved a family from ruin for only £56, Azolan ironically points out that he could make a dozen similar “good deals” in every village. In her article entitled “Valmont, Actor and Spectator”, Susan Dunn highlights Valmont's charity scene (Letter XXI) as a mirror image in which he becomes the spectator of his own manipulations: “Valmont, no longer a performer, has become a spectator [...] Valmont is also seen as a masterful spectator at his own performance” (Dunn, 1984, p. 41).

Just as the novel begins *in medias res*, the opening credits of Frears' film immediately set the scene, showing a close-up of a letter sealed with red wax bearing the title of the film, thus reminding the reader/intrusive viewer of the epistolary source of this faithful adaptation, unlike Forman's free adaptation. The reader/viewer is thus transported to a world where people still write with pens, seal letters, and where appearances are more important than substance.

Mme de Merteuil and Valmont appear in Frears' film like two actors preparing to go on stage, as evidenced by the alternating montage of the theatrical scene of their dressing, which opens the film. Valmont is hidden behind a mask, while Mme de Merteuil appears in broad daylight, ready to face the *theatrum mundi*, defying the reader/viewer with her gaze. The indiscreet reader-viewer thus witnesses an intimate moment as these two libertines prepare to play their roles. From the opening scene, the Marquise de Merteuil stares at the camera, giving us a knowing look via the mirror, which multiplies the gazes. Stephen Frears uses half-open doors, mirrors, tight framing, and camera angles to invite the reader/viewer to see what the characters are hiding. Mirrors serve as a cinematic metaphor for letters: multiplied reflections, games of appearance, and duplicity.

Unlike Frears' opening, Forman's offers the reader/viewer a *locus amoenus* through the creation of a calm and peaceful bucolic world associated with the convent. The scene takes place in the convent where one of the nuns is leading a singing class attended by Cecile and other young girls. They sing "the song of the moon" and Cecile leaves the class to see her mother. The reader/viewer thus sees Cecile leaving the convent, ironically, hand in hand with Madame de Merteuil.

In our third and final installment, we will analyze a few examples of the indiscreet reader/viewer.

3. The indiscreet reader/viewer

It should be noted that indiscretion is, therefore, the order of the day in Laclos' epistolary novel, since the entire collection seems to have been published without the knowledge, or even against the will, of the protagonists who wrote it, as shown in letter CLXXI from Mme de Rosemonde to Danceny. This is why, from the outset, we are all transformed, a priori, into indiscreet and clandestine readers accessing private

correspondence. This technique invites a voyeuristic reading (Altman, 1998) by both the internal and external reader, insofar as we read what we should not read. Indeed, both the book and the two films sketch the image of an indiscreet reader/viewer, not only internal (Madame de Merteuil and Valmont), but also external: the reader of the epistolary novel *Les Liaisons Dangereuses* and the viewer of the films. However, everything hinges on this romantic and cinematic indiscretion of the complicit reader/viewer who reads the epistolary novel and watches the films, savoring the intimacy of the characters/actors and the complex of human relationships. The reader is fascinated by libertinism but is also led to judge.

In Laclos's work, as in Frears's and Forman's, certain characters are portrayed as indiscreet readers. For example, Madame de Merteuil and Valmont read, control, and respond to letters that are not intended for them. These include letters from Cécile and Danceny, as well as, in Valmont's case, letters from Mme de Tourvel. This indiscretion is reflected on screen when the camera sometimes takes on a subjective perspective, lingering on glances, silences, and open letters. The camera transports the reader/viewer to Valmont as he reads Mme de Tourvel's correspondence, but also when Valmont *peeps* through the keyhole of her bedroom door, breaking in and inviting the reader/viewer to do the same, like an intruder. Both Glenn Close (Madame de Merteuil) and John Malkovich (Valmont) challenge or include the reader/viewer in their manipulative games through their glances at the camera.

This indiscretion is also evident in the harp lesson (Letters XVI to XVIII) through the reading of Danceny's note. The six shots that Frears devotes to the harp lesson clearly demonstrate the complexity of the relationships that are developing. The note is reduced to a simple "I Love You", which the reader/viewer reads in a counter-shot in an indiscreet act reinforced by an intimate setting and the music³, which support and comment on the action.

Unlike Frears' scene, where Mme de Volanges watches Cécile, Forman's harp lesson scene opens with an intimate tête-à-tête between Danceny and Cécile playing the harp alone. The lesson is interrupted by Mme de Merteuil, whom Cécile asks to find out who her fiancé is. As in Frears' version, the harp is a vehicle for the secret exchange of

³ The sequence from an opera scene in Italian, *Paride e Helena* by Glück, where Paris sings of his love for Helena with a lyre in his hand, allows us to draw a parallel between the love sung in opera and the love blossoming between Cécile and Danceny.

letters between Cécile and Danceny. Their letters are thus reread, rewritten, and dictated by Mme de Merteuil and Valmont, indiscreet readers of correspondence not intended for them. While the novel relies on narration, analysis, and suggestion, the film focuses on bodies and actions, abolishing the reflective distance of the epistolary text through the actors' face-to-face performances.

The indiscreet reader/viewer listens to the dictated letters and observes the reactions they elicit in Cécile and Danceny through Valmont and Mme de Merteuil. Forman adopts a less theatrical style, with the reader/viewer acting as a tender witness and sometimes accomplice to a sincere love. Valmont is more sentimental and less cruel; this is a more romantic version, and the camera is more distant, observing rather than denouncing.

Let us now focus on Valmont's letter XLVIII to Mme de Tourvel, with Émilie's back as a lectern (Letter XLVII Valmont to Mme de Merteuil). Frears uses parallel editing to convey the double meaning of Valmont's letter, where the reader/viewer simultaneously accesses the processes and conditions of writing and reading the letter. Thus, while Valmont writes the letter on Émilie's back in a stormy setting accompanied by piano music, Mme de Tourvel reads the letter sitting on a bench in Mme Rosemonde's castle, accompanied by birdsong. In an indiscreet act, the reader/viewer witnesses an intimate scene in which Valmont reads aloud what he is writing to Mme de Tourvel. She reads his letter and Valmont's voice can be heard *off-screen* as he continues reading. The setting and music of this scene help to create a specific context for reading that allows the reader/viewer to understand the double meaning of Valmont's letter.

The parallel editing in *Dangerous Liaisons* (letter XLVIII) highlights this dual perspective: Valmont writes on Émilie's back, Mme de Tourvel reads in the park, and Valmont's *voiceover* overlaps the different time frames. This interweaving of narratives encourages the reader/viewer to develop reading strategies: the *voiceover* juxtaposes events and places, allowing for simultaneous visual and auditory reading, similar to the polyphony of Laclos' novel.

The epistolary novel does not follow a linear chronology, as shown, for example, by Cécile's request for seduction (letter IV), which develops gradually over several letters (V, XLIV, XCVI, XCVII, XCVIII). In letter XCVI, Valmont becomes the reader/viewer of his own maneuvers, enjoying Madame de Tourvel's moral downfall:

Yes, I like to see, to consider this prudent woman, committed, without realizing it, on a path from which there is no return [...]. Ah! At least let me have time to observe these touching struggles between love and virtue [...]. Yet there they are, there are the delightful pleasures that this heavenly woman offers me every day. (Laclos, 1981, p. 209)

The letter transforms his thoughts into a voyeuristic confession. The reader takes on the same role: that of a morally complicit witness.

In Frears' film, the reader/viewer constructs reading strategies and interpretive hypotheses based on the *voiceover* that Frears uses to highlight the link between two events or two characters. The reader/viewer thus sees the recipient reading a letter that is heard, in parallel, being spoken by the sender, which allows them to situate and comment on the action, but also to analyze it. Sometimes, the image even shows us what *the voiceover* is saying through a superimposition of moments and places (Valmont introducing Mme de Tourvel to Mme de Merteuil).

As Philippe Sollers points out: “[...] Les *Liaisons* are a multitude of novels in one; we should not make three or four films out of them, but a hundred” (Sollers, 1996, p. 325).

Like the book, the two films chosen construct a polyphonic world with events and characters without revealing everything about that world, thus soliciting the cooperation of the reader/viewer. This is true whether the reader/viewer has read the book and seen the film or, conversely, has first seen the film and then read the book.

In his famous confession made in London in 1790, Laclos declared: “[...] I was stationed on the island of Ré... I resolved to write a work that would break with convention, cause a stir, and still be talked about long after I was gone” (Sollers, 1996, p. 327). With his *Liaisons Dangereuses*, Laclos achieved his goal, as evidenced by the longevity and relevance of this emblematic novel of 18th-century France, which is not only included in school curricula in France and abroad, but has also been adapted many times for the cinema (Roger Vadim, Stephen Frears, Milos Forman, Roger Kumble, E J-Yong and Jin-Ho Hur); on television (TV movie, sketch, TV series); in the theater (from 1834 to 2012); and in music (epistolary opera, song, musical). These adaptations are a testament to the fascination that *Les Liaisons Dangereuses* continues to hold for readers and viewers today.

In fact, the indiscreet reader/viewer remains at the heart of the literary and cinematic device. Laclos, Frears, Forman, and their audiences weave a polyphonical, univocal universe made up of secrets, masks, and inner voices, a universe in which interpretive cooperation is essential. This complicit indiscretion gives *Les Liaisons Dangereuses* its enduring vitality, confirming the undiminished appeal that this epistolary novel still exerts today.

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