

THE NATURE OF LIBERTINE PROMISES IN LACLOS'S *LES LIAISONS DANGEREUSES*

Any examination of the libertines in Choderlos de Laclos's *Les Liaisons dangereuses* (1782) might start from the premiss that the Vicomte de Valmont and the Marquise de Merteuil are at once 'êtres de projet' and 'êtres de discours'. By 'êtres de projet' I mean that Merteuil and Valmont constitute themselves through a series of discrete projects of seduction and betrayal.¹ They proceed from one short-term conquest to the next, with the result that the time frame of their activities is self-contained and inexorably futural.² As André Malraux and Georges Poulet, among others, have shown, Laclos's libertines can be defined a little anachronistically as existentialists before the letter, since they assume their being-in-the-world by assuming a series of projects, throwing themselves into the near future in pursuit of goals that have no grounding or justification other than that which the libertines choose to give them.³ But these libertines are also fundamentally 'êtres de discours', i.e. profoundly discursive beings. As Caroline Jacot Grapa writes in her excellent commentary on *Les Liaisons dangereuses*, Merteuil and Valmont 'se définissent eux-mêmes comme des êtres de discours, des conteurs, des auteurs, dont le projet ne prend sens que par le récit qu'on en fait et sa publication'.⁴ In other words, the libertines are realized less in their actions than in the exquisitely varied recounting of them, in the substance and tenor of their letters, in the shifting subject positions that they adopt in them. This is in part due to the epistolary format of Laclos's text, as its letters are necessarily predicated on absent subjects, on absent bodies which the letters thus relay and replace. The written body deputizes for the corporeal one, which consequently becomes sign, is sublimated into discourse, and assumes the physicality of the absent human form. As such, the letters of Laclos's text are a means of transferring power in its material manifestation from the realm of ontology/sociology to that of language/discourse.⁵ This transfer

¹ See e.g. Merteuil's initial request for Valmont to return post-haste to Paris, as 'Je veux donc bien vous instruire de mes projets'; or Valmont's reply, declining her request but offering in compensation: 'je vais vous confier le plus grand projet que j'aie jamais formé'. See Pierre-Ambroise-François Choderlos de Laclos, *Œuvres complètes*, ed. by Laurent Versini (Paris: Gallimard, 1979), pp. 13, 17. All subsequent references to the text, in the main body of the article and in footnotes, are to this edition.

² Georges-Elia Sarfati makes the point that, although Valmont and Merteuil are both engaged on projects to be brought to fruition in the near future, there is a subtle difference in the temporality of their designs. Whereas Valmont seeks to conquer Mme de Tourvel in the future, Merteuil's project to corrupt Cécile de Volanges, and so dishonour Cécile's future husband, the Comte de Gercourt, aims principally to avenge the past, i.e. Merteuil's earlier humiliating abandonment by Gercourt. See 'De la mise en intrigue: étude linguistique des Lettres II et IV des *Liaisons dangereuses*', in *La Lettre entre réel et fiction*, ed. by Jürgen Siess (Paris: SEDES, 1998), pp. 159–76 (p. 166).

³ See André Malraux, 'Préface' to *Les Liaisons dangereuses* (Paris: Gallimard et Librairie Générale Française, 1958), pp. 5–17; Georges Poulet, 'Chamfort et Laclos', in *Études sur le temps humain*, II: *La Distance intérieure* (Paris: Plon, 1952), pp. 57–80.

⁴ Caroline Jacot Grapa, *Choderlos de Laclos: Les Liaisons dangereuses* (Paris: Gallimard, 1997), p. 122.

⁵ See Anne Deneys-Tunney, *Écritures du corps: de Descartes à Laclos* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1992), pp. 265–69. Writing about *La Nouvelle Héloïse*, she notes: 'c'est du côté du corps qu'est ressenti le manque, et du côté de l'écriture que se situe le plein de la présence' (p. 266).

of materiality is intensified in *Les Liaisons dangereuses* by the obsessive way in which the libertines in particular reprise the writings of others (quotations of other works, but especially of each other's letters, cynically or provocatively), so that the matter of the letters is itself cannibalized, recycled, reinforcing the material re-presentation of its speech-acts to the exclusion of other forms of materiality. Hence the projects of the libertines take shape first and foremost in language, are determined discursively.

The result of this investment in the written word is that Valmont and Merteuil's projects have effectively two future points of realization: not just their sexual consummation but also their discursive relation. The invariably private sex-acts only make sense and empower the libertines by their subsequent public disclosure (an eruption into the public sphere as the necessary rupture of the private relationship). As Simon Davies has shown, it is precisely in this interval between private intercourse and public discourse that the libertines realize their self-image; they come to self-possession in the time and space between the sex-act and its telling.⁶ Yet the reliance on the tale to complete the constitution of their subjectivity *qua* libertines relegates the importance of sex and promotes that of the telling. Thus textual *jouissance* replaces sexual *jouissance* as the real climax of any libertine adventure.

The privileging of the textual over the sexual impacts on the nature of the libertine discourse of 'projets'. If these are marked strongly by the anticipation of the moment of sexual conquest, they are marked yet more strongly by that of its recounting. Discursively, therefore, they are dominated by a self-projection in both language and time, or rather in language inflected temporally, by the predominance of future tenses and moods. Yet within the general futural orientation of the discourse of the libertines, there are degrees of conviction, degrees of envisaged realization. Thus, in ascending order of certainty, and as increasing marks of the imposition of the libertine will, Laclos's *roués* use:

- (1) the subjunctive, as in Valmont's 'qu'elle se rende, mais qu'elle combatte' (p. 52); or the subordinate clauses of Merteuil's repeated injunctions ('j'exige' (p. 14) etc.). Here the use of the subjunctive inflects desire more than reality, translating the most virtual realization of the libertine projects;
- (2) the future tense, of which there are innumerable examples in the novel, such as Merteuil's 'Quant à Prévan, je veux l'avoir et je l'aurai; il veut le dire, et il ne le dira pas' (p. 177), or Valmont's 'je jouirai de l'un, je me vengerai de l'autre, je volerai de plaisirs en plaisirs' (p. 89); characteristic expressions of libertinage which suggest something to be accomplished, that will be done, yet the precise means of execution are not yet specified or conceived;
- (3) finally, the future anterior tense, as in Valmont's 'Je serai vraiment le Dieu que [la Présidente] aura préféré' (p. 22); or 'elle n'aura existé que pour moi; et que sa carrière soit plus ou moins longue, j'en aurai seul ouvert et fermé la barrière' (p. 267).

⁶ Simon Davies, *Laclos: 'Les Liaisons dangereuses'* (London: Grant & Cutler, 1987), p. 62.

The future anterior represents the strongest expression of certainty of the libertines in their designs, in their power to bend events and persons to their will; it is the tense that corresponds most accurately to the temporality of their projects. For the future anterior frames conquests to be made in the near future, which are envisaged from the present-time of writing as already successfully accomplished.⁷ Yet this increasing convergence of the time frames of the projects and discourses of Laclos's libertines, both oriented towards realization and relation in the (near) future, leads them also to privilege another specific speech-act: the promise.

In the first instance, promises lend themselves to Valmont and Merteuil's perverse projects because they share their futural orientation. Indeed, many of the promises which the libertines make to themselves operate like the future anterior tense: they express satisfactions to be wrested from their victims in the near future which are envisaged as already won ('je me promets bien de faire usage de cette découverte par la suite' (p. 82); 'le plaisir que je m'en promets' (p. 257); 'le succès que vous vous en promettiez' (p. 346)). But there are other aspects of promises, as speech-acts, which make them ideal vehicles for articulating the desires of the libertines and realizing their projects. Promises imply a strong sense of control of (near) future events, and as such, they coincide with the belief held by the libertines that they possess the power to shape events to their own ends. In other words, promises and libertine projects share a presumption of quasi-omnipotence over the run of affairs; that events can be bent to conform to the libertine's promise just as surely as they must submit to the libertine's will, regardless of adverse circumstances. In this sense, promises border on a sort of secular prophecy—things will turn out just as Valmont and Merteuil say they will—constituting an interesting variation on the widespread travesty of religious terminology elsewhere in the text. Hence promises are made by Laclos's libertines because they reinforce and bear out their self-conception as almost godlike figures, capable of predicting, and dictating in advance, the actions and reactions of their victims.

The most explicit expression of this divine self-creation comes in Merteuil's famous autobiographical letter to Valmont in which she recounts the systematic subjugation first of her own body, and then of the bodies and minds of others, to her imperious will; an account that is at once a parody of the ascetic Cartesian 'méthode' and a libertine self-realization as God, the sole entity that is *ens causa sui*, totally self-fashioned, the singular cause of its own being.⁸ She writes of her self-realized 'principes': 'ils ne sont pas, comme ceux des autres femmes, donnés au hasard, reçus sans examen et suivis par habitude; ils sont le fruit de mes profondes réflexions; je les ai créés, et je puis dire que je suis mon ouvrage' (p. 170). In relation to promises, too, this self-creation represents a further disengagement with the corporeal in favour of an investment in the discursive, since Merteuil inhabits the novel like a pseudo-divine voice manipulating dispassionately—and frequently futurally—the deeds and words of those she corresponds with, not least those of Valmont, her supposed equal.

⁷ See Davies, *Laclos*, p. 70: Merteuil and Valmont 'spend their time in planning, and in savouring in advance, their future exploits'.

⁸ On the parody of Cartesianism here, see Deneys-Tunney, *Écritures du corps*, pp. 305–07.

Two further examples of the self-fashioning of the libertines as deities should suffice to make the point and show how this tendency coincides with their practice of making promises. After deflowering the naïve Cécile de Volanges, Valmont boasts to Merteuil: 'Les ferventes prières, les humbles supplications, tout ce que les mortels, dans leur crainte, offrent à la Divinité, c'est moi qui le reçois de [Cécile]' (p. 209). Yet it is equally significant here that the sexual sacrifice of Cécile to the godlike Vicomte was initiated by a promise—made and then broken by Valmont—that he would leave the young girl unmolested for a single kiss. I will return to this important example later. Valmont's self-portrayal as a god of seduction reproduces the terms used by Merteuil earlier in their correspondence as she relates to Valmont her consummate manipulation of the young lovers, Danceny and Cécile, betraying their faltering sentimental love in order to foster a more carnal desire between them. When the unwitting lovers thank her, she writes mockingly: 'Me voilà comme la Divinité; recevant les vœux opposés des aveugles mortels, et ne changeant rien à mes décrets immuables' (p. 124). Again, the libertine's overweening sense of divine omnipotence is founded on a promise, that having betrayed the couple's blossoming affections for one another, Merteuil will bring them together only as and when she sees fit, literally promising Danceny to Cécile: 'Je lui promets qu'elle l'aura' (p. 124). Apart from the recurrent themes of a contrast between libertine gods and their mortal playthings, with the ingenuous Cécile constituting the victim *par excellence*,⁹ there is, crucially, in both instances the use of promises either to secure (in the case of Valmont) or to reflect (in the case of Merteuil) the self-proclaimed divinity of the libertines and their godlike sway over events. This utter mastery claimed by the libertine correspondents is, of course, not without irony, given the unpredictable, even ungovernable, medium of letters in which it is communicated.¹⁰

But there is another important discursive characteristic of promises which is mercilessly exploited by the pair of *roués* in *Les Liaisons dangereuses*. That is, promises can be broken, betrayed, violated. There are at least two principal reasons why the libertine is more likely to break than to keep his or her word. Firstly, as a speech-act, a promise ostensibly represents a verbal compact, a sort of contract between its parties. It is there to be either affirmed or negated by subsequent discourses and actions. Yet as a form of contract, it is fundamentally alien to the libertine's vision of the world as a place of ceaseless, ruthless competition, of the incessant clash of egos and desires: the promise is contractual, the libertine's world-view conflictual; its model is the murderous duel between Danceny and Valmont (a paradoxical agreement to kill one of its contracting parties, a self-destructive pact whose very basis is its dissolution in the death of one of its 'signatories') and not the harmonious duet represented by the music lessons which Danceny gives to Cécile, let alone the illusory duo of lovers or plotters—of Valmont and Mme de Tourvel, or Valmont and Merteuil.¹¹ For the Vicomte as for the Marquise, society is in a state of more or less open war-

⁹ In the quotation from Merteuil the reference to her control of 'des aveugles mortels' plays on the etymology of Cécile as the 'little blind one'.

¹⁰ See Jacot Grapa, *Choderlos de Laclos*, pp. 19–20.

¹¹ See Jacot Grapa, *Choderlos de Laclos*, p. 156.

fare; only the degree to which this constant hostility is acknowledged varies.¹² For this reason, promises constitute untenable treaties, impossible compacts that will necessarily be broken, as they contravene the fundamental, conflictual dynamic of society.¹³

Secondly, in a more affirmative vein, as a promise is a speech-act which can be broken, it offers the libertine the possibility of transgression, which in the libertine's economy of desire greatly heightens his or her yield of pleasure. Sade was to elevate this to a founding principle of his narrative universe: the greater the transgression, the greater the pleasure. Valmont, however, is more measured in his appreciation of the potential for betrayal inherent in a promise. This is not to say that he does not understand its worth, for he rails indirectly against the scrupulous Danceny: 'Croiriez-vous [Merteuil] que je n'ai jamais pu obtenir de lui qu'il promît à la mère de renoncer à son amour; *comme s'il était bien gênant de promettre, quand on est décidé à ne pas tenir!*' (pp. 132–33, emphasis added). He also puts this lesson into practice in his own seductions of both Cécile (who loses her virginity for the promise of a kiss) and La Présidente, whom he promises to leave in peace—"Hé bien! oui, je vous le promets", lui dis-je' (p. 292)—even as he embarks on a relentless, calculated attack to seduce her. In both instances, broken promises lead directly to the libertine's triumph. Yet Valmont is far from being a Sadean creation; his understanding and use of promises is ultimately much more ambivalent than the systematic betrayals perpetrated by Justine's abusers.

This is manifest in the same letter in which Valmont recounts his conquest of Mme de Tourvel. After violating his word in order to get his wicked way with La Présidente, the Vicomte naively reminds Merteuil of the price and prize of his conquest, namely, renewed sexual relations with the Marquise herself. Out of hubris or vanity perhaps in the wake of his triumph over Mme de Tourvel, Valmont neglects to acknowledge the very same libertine code that he has just put into practice.¹⁴ He breaks a promise for his own ends, but believes Merteuil, who abides by the same treacherous code, will keep her word for him.¹⁵ On the contrary, her renegeing on her promise to Valmont is to

¹² See Laclos's second essay on the education of women (1784), in which he describes the 'guerre perpétuelle' of the sexes that rages constantly beneath the simulacra of contracts holding society together; an unusual essay that combines contractual and conflictual views to the extent that it is itself a hybrid of Rousseauism and sensualism (*Œuvres complètes*, pp. 392–434 (p. 422)). As Shirley Jones notes, it is the Marquise who introduces the topos of war into her correspondence with Valmont. See 'Literary and Philosophical Elements in *Les Liaisons dangereuses*: The Case of Merteuil', *French Studies*, 38 (1984), 159–69.

¹³ It is possible to see the seeds of a potential 'feminism' here, which finds a more earnest echo in Laclos's first essay on the education of women, written in 1783 in response to a question proposed by the Académie de Châlons-sur-Marne. Laclos asserts in this brief, unfinished essay that men's promises were bound to be false, as men had neither the will nor the power to end female subjugation, that it was consequently for women to 'ne [se] laisse[r] plus abuser par de trompeuses promesses [des hommes]' (*Œuvres complètes*, p. 391).

¹⁴ The libertines of *Les Liaisons dangereuses* are makers and breakers of codes, inventing their own rules to which they rigorously adhere, at least as long as it is to their advantage, while breaking—both transgressing and deciphering—the codes (of language, gesture, looks, etc.) of their victims. See Jacot Grapa, *Choderlos de Laclos*, p. 69, for reference to the 'société de sémioticiens' in *Les Liaisons dangereuses*; see also Michel Delon, *Le Savoir-vivre libertin* (Paris: Hachette, 2000).

¹⁵ Violaine Géraud suggests that one of the reasons for Valmont's mistaken belief in the surety of a libertine pact between himself and Merteuil is their complicitous, and ultimately treacherous,

be expected, is even necessary: ultimately it is always too tempting to violate a promise, to transgress and thus increase the pleasure of an affair, especially between two such self-consciously competitive libertines. It is not a question of 'if' the one will betray the other; but 'when' and 'how'. Hence Merteuil will inevitably break her promise to Valmont, not in spite of his having met her conditions, but precisely *because* he fulfils them. This is also in keeping with Merteuil's greater libertine rigour, the thorough systematization of her vaunted 'principes', as well as evidence of a more subtle, but none the less palpable, 'delibertinizing' of Valmont towards the end of the novel. Among other things, Valmont's belated rehabilitation among the 'honnêtes hommes' of polite society is marked precisely by an increasing tendency to keep his promises, as he states to Cécile and to Danceny: '[Cécile] m'a fait promettre de vous [à Danceny] rendre le plus tôt possible la Lettre que je joins ici. [. . .] j'ai promis sur l'honneur et sur l'amitié, que vous auriez la tendre missive dans la journée, et je ne puis ni ne veux manquer à ma parole' (p. 354). It remains true, of course, that Valmont's new-found sense of honour and fidelity in this instance still stems from the libertine's fundamental desire for revenge.

The exploitation of the power of promises by the libertines in *Les Liaisons dangereuses*, as well as Valmont's ambivalent conception of them, point to a revalorization of promises as speech-acts. We need to re-examine exactly how and when they work. A promise might initially be defined as an enunciation which binds its speaker to make the world conform to his or her vow at some point, specified or otherwise, in the future. As such, according to the classic speech-act theories elaborated by J. L. Austin, a promise is first and foremost a 'performative' discourse: that is, unlike 'constative', largely descriptive or factual, statements, a promise realizes the very act it names, it carries out simultaneously the action authorized in and by its enunciation. When I say 'I promise', I effectively accomplish by my utterance the action it designates (giving my word, making a vow). In other words, its saying is at once its doing.¹⁶ Yet, although promises are exemplary performative discourses, this does not automatically mean that they are pro-active speech-acts. In fact, on closer examination, it becomes clear that promises are not made first, are not offered of their own accord. Promises are responses made to implicit or occasionally explicit questions: 'Will you respect me in the morning?' [I promise]; 'The money's in the bank, isn't it?' [I promise]; 'You will write' [I promise]. As in these examples, promises are first and foremost solicited discourses; they are above all responses, reactive forms of speech.

It is then important to determine exactly what sort of implicit or explicit questions call promises forth in the first instance. Here a comparison is helpful. Consider the frequent academic claim 'I intend to write a book'; a simple asser-

practice of copying letters to one another. See 'Discours rapporté et stratégies épistolaires dans *Les Liaisons dangereuses*', in *La Lettre entre réel et fiction*, ed. by Siess, pp. 177–98.

¹⁶ See J. L. Austin, *How to Do Things with Words*, 2nd edn (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1978). Problematizing, and radically extending, his initial distinction between performative and constative speech-acts, Austin was to categorize promises subsequently as 'illocutionary' utterances, effecting acts of felicitous or infelicitous 'force' rather than of referential true-or-false 'sense', claiming that they belong specifically to the subgroup of 'commissive' speech-acts 'committing the speaker to a certain course of action' (p. 157).

tion of intent regarding the future. Now contrast this with the bald statement 'I intend to write to you'. In this case, to all intents and purposes, a promise is being made, that 'I shall write to you', regardless of adverse circumstances, you now have my word on it. As with the other everyday examples given above, what such promises are specifically responding to each time is not just any implicit or explicit question ('What are you working on?', 'Will you write a book?'), but one that quite literally begs an answer in the form of a promise ('Will you write?'), thereby expressing an implicit or explicit *desire* on the part of the interlocutor, of the other, to have the promise made. This is the paradox of promises, so brilliantly elucidated by Franc Schuerewegen and Liliane Tasmowski-De Ryck.¹⁷ If promises are ultimately a form of contract, they are not underwritten by the sincerity of the speaker but by the strength of desire of the other, their addressee, to hear them spoken; promises are predicated on an anterior wish of the other which calls them forth. What a promisor is effectively doing is second-guessing the promisee's need to have his or her wish guaranteed, fulfilled if only verbally, in advance. Needless to say, the libertine is very much alive to the unspoken, or more infrequently spoken, desire invoking his or her promises; that is, the libertine is keenly aware of the fact that promises are ultimately produced more in the taking (by the other's desire) than in the making (by the speaker's honesty). The classic example of this process, used not only by Schuerewegen and Tasmowski-De Ryck but also by Shosana Felman, is Molière's *Dom Juan*.¹⁸ In the play, the seducer's ambiguous replies are consistently seized upon as promises (of marriage) by his enraptured victims; they are thus produced more in the taking by the eager young women than in the making by the libertine himself, which leads Schuerewegen and Tasmowski-De Ryck to conclude that Dom Juan is paradoxically the sincerest character in the play, as he promises no more or no less than what his victims wish to hear.¹⁹

In the donjuanesque tradition, *Les Liaisons dangereuses* contain an excellent example of Valmont's fine understanding of the paradoxical nature of promises. Having compromised the naive Cécile de Volanges by tricking his way into her room in the early hours of the morning, the Vicomte promises to leave only if she will give him a kiss. He writes: 'j'ai tout promis pour un baiser. Il est vrai que, le baiser pris, je n'ai pas tenu ma promesse: mais j'avais de bonnes raisons. Étions-nous convenus qu'il serait pris ou donné?' (p. 212). Over and above the libertine's necessary breaking of his promise, thereby heightening both his sense of godlike power and yield of pleasure, Valmont suggests that this vow in particular might be broken because—just like the kiss itself—his promise was based more on Cécile's desire to receive it than on his desire to give it. In this instance, the promise, as its model of the kiss, depends more on the promisee's willingness to call it forth than on the promisor's integrity in bestowing it. More cynically, of course, this knowing ambivalence allows

¹⁷ See their article 'Paradoxes de la promesse: l'exemple de Dom Juan', in *Le Paradoxe en linguistique et en littérature*, ed. by Ronald Landheer and Paul J. Smith (Geneva: Droz, 1996), pp. 59–73.

¹⁸ See Shosana Felman, *Le Scandale du corps parlant: Don Juan avec Austin, ou La Séduction en deux langues* (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1980).

¹⁹ 'Paradoxes de la promesse', p. 70.

Valmont to invest Cécile with a desire for him that he is subsequently only too happy to satisfy.

Valmont's particular understanding of the nature of promises—that they might originate more in the desire felt by the other than in the truthfulness of the speaker—is further evinced in his more earnest seduction of La Présidente de Tourvel. He writes to her in feigned distress: 'Vous ne croyez ni à mes promesses, ni à mes serments: eh bien! il me reste un garant à vous offrir, qu'au moins vous ne suspecterez pas; c'est vous-même' (p. 108). In a move familiar to readers of Rousseau,²⁰ Valmont urges Mme de Tourvel to ask herself in all honesty whether she could ever doubt the sincerity of his love for her. The subtext, however, relating to the libertine's promises, is that the interlocutor (La Présidente) solicits his promises more than the speaker (Valmont) makes them of his own initiative; thus she is the ultimate guarantor of his vows not because she recognizes his honesty in them but because she longs to hear them. This move is also, of course, a way of obliging Mme de Tourvel to confront the reality of her feelings for Valmont. In addition, therefore, to the *jouissance* to be derived from the act of promising itself (mastery of future events, anticipated betrayal), the libertine is able to infer from his recourse to promises that a desire already exists on the part of Mme de Tourvel to have him utter them to her. The process of seduction is already well under way.

What must then be even more pleasurable for Valmont is to receive proof later in this correspondence that his trembling victim, La Présidente, herself understands the treacherous nature of libertine promises, but that her keen desire to hear them and to believe them blinds her irremediably to the truth of her insight, and so seals her fate. For, in a moment's unwitting lucidity, she spells out the libertine's code to Valmont: 'vous oubliez vos promesses, ou plutôt vous vous faites un jeu de les violer' (p. 158).²¹ Her personal tragedy is that she fails to act on the revelation she makes; an inaction which ultimately expresses more her desire to believe what Valmont tells her than it does the Vicomte's transparent attempts to deceive her.

Yet, despite all Valmont's apparent clearheadedness regarding the paradoxical nature of promises, and his ruthless, cunning use of it in his seductions, this same paradox goes some way to explain his own deception and betrayal at the hands of Merteuil. For the pact he enters into with the Marquise—namely, to dishonour Mme de Tourvel in exchange for Merteuil's sexual favours—is based precisely on a promise: one that is made by Merteuil, but one that, crucially, is demanded in the first instance by Valmont. As part of a series of exchanges to establish the nature of their 'project' regarding Cécile, he asks of Merteuil: 'Promettez-moi que je troublerai [la félicité du Chevalier]' (p. 36); that is, Valmont seeks solemn assurance from the Marquise that, as compen-

²⁰ See *Julie, ou La Nouvelle Héloïse* (Paris: Garnier Frères, 1960), p. 16: 'Rassure-toi donc, je t'en conjure au nom du tendre et pur amour qui nous unit; c'est à lui de t'être garant de ma retenue et de mon respect; c'est à lui de te répondre de lui-même.'

²¹ This is only the most explicit recognition on the part of Mme de Tourvel of Valmont's practice of breaking his promises, noted already by her when he fails to leave his aunt's house on the first pretext, 'comme vous me l'aviez promis' (p. 88). Conversely, it is her own inability to break her word to receive Valmont one final time that ultimately ruins her, despite her worries and remorse at having made the promise: 'Cette visite m'importune; je me repens d'avoir promis' (p. 285).

sation for deflowering Cécile, he will supplant Merteuil's current lover, the Chevalier de Belleruche, or at least secure an infidelity on her part that will demean the status of Belleruche both amorously, and, if they choose to make the liaison public, socially. Moreover, Valmont reiterates his desire to believe in the earnestness of this promise on at least two further occasions. After gaining Danceny's confidence, he writes to Merteuil: 'Cela me fait songer que vous m'avez promis une infidélité en ma faveur; j'en ai votre promesse par écrit, et je ne veux pas en faire *un billet de la Châtre*' (p. 116, emphasis original);²² and again, after seducing Cécile: 'Vous n'avez pas oublié sans doute ce que vous m'avez promis après le succès? cette infidélité à votre Chevalier?' (p. 224). Yet Valmont should have realized that Merteuil's subsequent promise to him would be faithless on two counts: (1) because of the logic of the libertine code, that is, she was bound to break her promise in order to gain greater pleasure from exercising her power to transgress; and (2) because the promise was more taken than given, more a token of Valmont's desire than of the Marquise's sincerity, something which his repeated reminders of the promise serve to illustrate. Valmont seems to have learnt little from his own practice of promising, or believes it can be applied selectively. In either case, the paradox of promising contributes to Valmont's downfall as it does to that of Mme de Tourvel and Cécile; thus promising represents a discursive pitfall that is not reserved for the innocent and ignorant.

So, briefly to recapitulate what we have elicited so far regarding libertine promises in *Les Liaisons dangereuses*: certainly, promises constitute a privileged speech-act for Laclos's libertines. The reasons for this are essentially threefold: they

- (1) share futural orientation with libertine projects;
- (2) reinforce the libertine's quasi-divine self-conception in bending persons and events to their design; and
- (3) offer the possibility of being broken, of betrayals that heighten the libertine's yield of pleasure.

But we have also discovered that promises afford a paradoxical marker of the other's desire, which the libertine is expert in exploiting for his or her own perverse ends. The case of Valmont, however, also proves that the libertine's use of promises is not always straightforward; that promises retain the power to break those who delight in breaking them; that they ultimately master those who believe they have mastered promising; in other words, promises represent a discursive instrument which refuses to submit to the libertine's instrumentalization of speech-acts or to connive unproblematically in the libertine's

²² Alongside the manifest expression of Valmont's desire to believe in Merteuil's promise, his reminder also betrays a fear or even an anticipation that it will not be kept, since Valmont feels the need to ward off his misgivings by two pointed allusions: the first, 'j'en ai votre promesse par écrit', refers to the Marquise's own assertion that 'dans les affaires importantes, on ne reçoit de preuves que par écrit' (p. 43), when she demanded written evidence of any alleged conquest of Mme de Tourvel as the prerequisite for any amorous reconciliation with Valmont; the second alludes to the repeated betrayal by the famous courtesan Ninon de Lenclos of the Marquis de la Châtre, to whom she had given a *billet de fidélité* to console him over their temporary separation. See Louis de Rouvroy, duc de Saint-Simon, *Mémoires*, 20 vols (Paris: Hachette, 1873-77), IV, 314.

objectification, assimilation, and sacrifice of others to his or her sexual self-realization.²³

Yet if promises do form an important medium in the economies of power (sexual, psychological, discursive) in the novel, this is also because their use is not confined exclusively to Valmont and Merteuil. Other characters in the text promise, receive promises, or are promised to others and, in this much, furnish a deeper understanding of the nature of promising in *Les Liaisons dangereuses*. Two points in particular interest us in this regard: the correspondence which constitutes the main body of the text opens with a promise; and the very plot of the novel hinges on an archetypal instance of promising. In the first letter, then, the innocent and enthusiastic Cécile de Volanges writes to her friend from convent days, Sophie Carnay: 'Tu vois, ma bonne amie, que je tiens parole, et que les bonnets et les pompons ne prennent pas tout mon temps; il m'en restera toujours pour toi' (p. 11). This is, however, a vow—'je tiens parole'—that Cécile is destined to break, successively replacing her immature, naive confidante with the services of the Vicomte de Valmont and the counsel of the worldly and solicitous Marquise de Merteuil (pp. 197, 214 respectively). Hence, in setting up the epistolary pact, or 'pacte épistolaire', on which the novel as a whole is founded, the very first letter of this collection of 'edited' correspondence simultaneously sets up the dynamic of promises made then broken. In other words, not only does the first letter make a promise, ultimately to be broken, it establishes the paradigm of the letter-writing contract (I promise to write/reply) which we know will also be broken, as the novel as a whole is framed in advance by a so-called 'rédacteur' (as distinct from the 'éditeur') who deals with completed sets of correspondence.

Yet there is another reason why Cécile's initial vow is made to be broken. In the overall schema of the novel, Cécile is not an empowered subject who promises (her own promises to Danceny, for example, are constantly thwarted by others or overtaken by events), but a disempowered object that is promised to others. The plot itself turns precisely on her promise in marriage to the Comte de Gercourt (pp. 13–14).²⁴ As such, she is also the privileged object via which the libertines, Merteuil and Valmont, attempt to exact their revenge on Gercourt and his erstwhile partner, the enigmatic Intendante. According to the very dynamic of the novel, inscribed in her own first letter, Cécile, as a promised object—not a subject who promises meaningfully—is thus herself destined to be broken. This occurs with the literal breaking of her hymen, constituting a double breaking-in, as forced entry and as domestication; it is subsequently also to result in her physical break-up in the miscarriage of her child by Valmont. Moreover, with the breaking of Cécile's virginity, her marriage, the social pact *par excellence*, is to be broken too. This fulfils a fundamental libertine aim which is not particular to Valmont and Merteuil. For, as Michel Feher rightly claims, it is a central libertine tenet that marriage is a deeply unnatural, social

²³ Sees Deneys-Tunney, *Écritures du corps*, p. 317: 'Le libertinage qui tente de faire du signe linguistique un pur artefact, un pur (et impur) instrument, est finalement pris au piège des mots'.

²⁴ See Felman, *Le Scandale du corps parlant*, p. 44, where the promise of marriage is given as the promise *par excellence*, hence that of Dom Juan, not least because the verb 'épouser' is derived etymologically from the Latin *spondere* meaning to 'promise solemnly'.

constraint placed by a conspiracy of the sexually weak and morally conservative on those stronger desiring subjects who are constituted naturally by the very desires they follow and satisfy.²⁵

All of which raises at least one obvious question: what is it in the narrative universe of *Les Liaisons dangereuses* that allows all these pacts and promises not only to be made and broken, but seemingly made *to be* broken? One possible answer is: a total absence of the law, of the father, of the Law of the Father (an expression used here in a generally symbolic, rather than specifically Lacanian, sense) which might stand as guarantor of the social and sexual order and as dispenser of a certain justice. For the only fathers in Laclos's text are parodic, travesties of the lawgiving patriarchal figure. For instance, we have a 'patriarchal' peasant—'cette figure de Patriarche' (p. 46)—used by Valmont in a disingenuous, staged act of charity in order to deceive La Présidente de Tourvel into believing that the Vicomte regularly performs acts of kindness which his modesty alone forbids him to recount as proof of his innate, though often thwarted, goodness. This instance incidentally reveals the hypocritical, hollow 'paternalism' of the aristocratic Valmont, representative of the disdain shown by his caste towards the indigent classes of the time. There is also the example of Père Anselme, confessor to La Présidente de Tourvel, who is fooled by Valmont into encouraging his spiritual ward to receive the libertine one final, fateful time (pp. 282–83). In relation to contracts and implicit promises made, the subtext here is that the priest effectively breaks his confessional and professional pact with his charge, albeit unintentionally, and so breaks the promise which he holds by virtue of his office. Ironically, then, the paternal figure invested with the task of absolving, or at least suppressing, bodily passions is actually the one responsible for arousing them to new, ultimately life-threatening, heights.

Yet there is also a total absence of patriarchy among the libertines themselves. Merteuil's husband is dead, her lovers emasculated by her will; Valmont waits on his maiden aunt, not his uncle or father, for his inheritance and is to leave no legacy of his own but his scandalous letters. More telling still, the Vicomte's sole hope of 'postérité', of paternity, his unintended child by Cécile, miscarries. Thus any promise of fatherhood is broken, literally 'manqué' or aborted, in keeping with all the other 'promesses manquées' of the text. Hence each promise fails because there is no solid, overarching social or moral authority that might guarantee it in the form of the Law of the Father.²⁶ (Its absence is also the prerequisite for the outrageous and outraged female voices of the text, which would otherwise be silenced in accordance with the patriarchal social order allowing only for the public circulation of male voices). Thus like the libertines themselves, *Les Liaisons dangereuses* realize a world before the Father, before the Law, governed only by the libertine's self-imposed 'rules', which are themselves dictated by the capriciousness of desire; desire which circulates be-

²⁵ Michel Feher, 'Introduction', in *The Libertine Reader*, ed. by Michel Feher (New York: Zone Books, 1997), pp. 10–47. In place of the marriage contract, letters themselves offer an alternative pact, suggesting that an alternative relation between men and women is possible, yet one which ultimately proves to be another simulacrum of a contract covering a more fundamental conflict between the sexes. See Jacot Grapa, *Choderlos de Laclos*, p. 135.

²⁶ For an alternative reading of the role of patriarchy in *Les Liaisons dangereuses*, see Deneys-Tunney, *Écritures du corps*, pp. 283–321.

neath, and quite literally subverts, the surface world of female decency and male honesty, both regulated contractually by the simulacra of law (marriage rights, property deeds, social norms, sexual protocol, etc.). As we have seen, this same all-consuming desire precedes and determines the promises made and broken by the libertines in *Les Liaisons dangereuses*. Such promises are not grounded in the sincerity or truthfulness of the promisor, nor do they correspond to the explicit, often pious, concerns of the promisee, guaranteed in each case by the law constituted in a community of consciously 'honourable' men who police the actions of others in society. On the contrary, the libertine promises in Laclos's text express more often than not the implicit desire of even the most virtuous interlocutor, translating first and foremost the other's unconscious wishes, thereby deceiving without fail those who trust consciously in the integrity of promises as given in trust (rather than as taken in desire). Violaine Géraud makes the useful distinction here between conscious and unconscious forms of manipulation, suggesting that the control of others exercised by Valmont and Merteuil is not a conscious 'maîtrise' but, following Freud, an unconscious 'emprise' of their victim; that libertine promises in particular seduce by articulating not what the speaker vows but what the interlocutor avows, despite himself or herself.²⁷

It is thus only at the end of the novel, when the promise-maker and promise-breaker *par excellence*, Valmont, has himself been betrayed by Merteuil's broken promises, that the Law of the Father returns. Valmont submits to it by respecting the manly pact of the duel with Danceny, which kills him: a posthumous reconciliation with the patriarchal code of honour governing society. As for Merteuil, not only is she publicly rejected by a mixed circle of men and women composing society's élite, in front of the rehabilitated Prévau—the male libertine restored to his rights—but, more crucially, Merteuil also loses her court case, her 'procès' (p. 385). This represents even more explicitly a return of the male Law which she had fully expected to pervert by her feminine wiles and social influence.

Still, one could argue that this was bound to be the case, since Valmont and Merteuil's world of unfettered desire, free of patriarchal constraints, in which promises are so consistently made to be broken, is governed from the start by the intratextual and paratextual figure of the 'rédacteur', a figure of the Father and of the Law who is present throughout the story, who accompanies it, and who ensures its ultimate correctness. It is he, then, who gives licence to licentiousness as a means of reining it in; or who legislates a space for the expression of libertine promises only the better to outlaw them. In his interventions, he represents a paratextual, one might say transcendental, form of authority that above all guarantees the authenticity of the correspondence of the libertines, and thus stands as a marker of sincerity in contradistinction to the ceaseless duplicity exhibited by the libertines themselves. In this way, he offers a different form of contract with the reader, a contract that holds that s/he will find in the text the realization of the moral of the tale, as set out in the

²⁷ See Géraud, 'Discours rapporté', pp. 184–86.

'Préface du Rédacteur', and thus the contract (and its promise) will be kept in the very reading of the story.

If this were all, then it would be well and good. But there is a complication to this corrective to the libertine promises in the text: the 'Avertissement de l'Éditeur'. This slim text states: 'Nous croyons devoir prévenir le Public, que, malgré le titre de cet Ouvrage et ce qu'en dit le Rédacteur dans sa Préface, nous ne garantissons pas l'authenticité de ce Recueil, et que nous avons même de fortes raisons de penser que ce n'est qu'un Roman' (p. 3). Thus even before he can offer his earnest to the reader, the 'rédacteur' is undermined, his contract effectively annulled in advance. As a counterpart to this sapping of the textual, moral, and social authority of the 'rédacteur', the 'éditeur' appends a final note to the text which, among other things, precisely refuses to promise any sequel, however salutary, to the work. He writes: 'nous ne pouvons prendre aucun engagement à ce sujet', and once more throws himself on the tender mercies of 'le goût du Public' (p. 386). So what might this mean? The sincerity of the 'rédacteur', operating as a potential antidote to the libertine practice of making promises only to break them, is itself sandwiched between a double disclaimer of its authenticity, in the form of two interventions by an inscrutable 'éditeur', whose own authority is seemingly drawn on both occasions from that notoriously slippery entity of late eighteenth-century France, 'le Public'. We might discern here *en filigrane*, and in conclusion, the final victory of the public sphere over the closed circuits of desire and power (circulating as promises, among other forms of discourse) in which the desiring individual, Valmont or Merteuil, is succeeded in the first instance by the moralizing 'rédacteur', who is in turn subordinated to an 'éditeur' recommending total deference to a readership ('le Public') who have become the ultimate arbiters of what and who is desirable, and hence of what might be promised to whom.