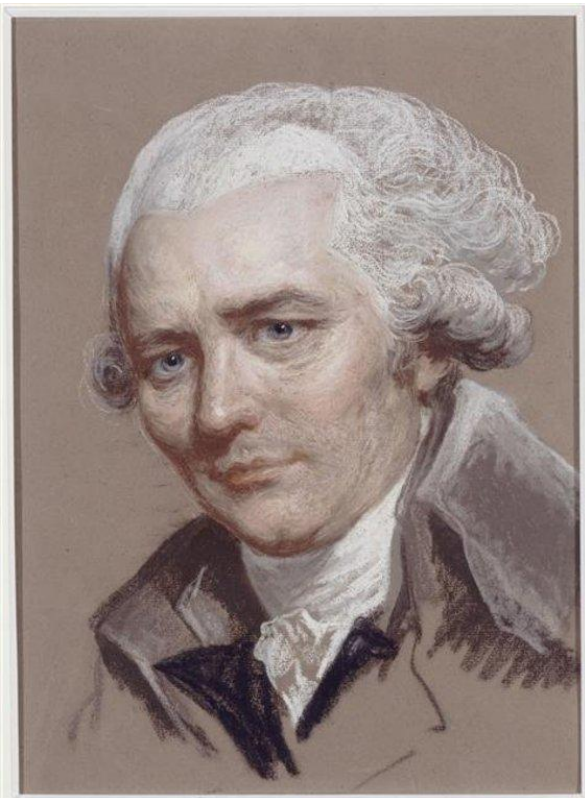


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The Digital Encyclopedia of British Sociability in the Long Eighteenth Century

## Pierre-Ambroise François Choderlos de Laclos

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### Keywords

Correspondence

Cosmopolitanism

Fiction

France

Freemasonry

Republic Of Letters

### Abstract

Laclos embodied all forms of eighteenth-century sociability. He was a Freemason and regular visitor to the clubs and salons of the revolutionary period. Finding his military career unrewarding, he became politically active alongside Philippe d'Orléans and participated in the debates of his time through his writing. His epistolary *Les liaisons dangereuses*, which was based on Richardson's *Clarissa*, was his 'unique book'. More radical than its English model, it called into question a whole sociability that had descended into libertinism. The work simultaneously marked the pinnacle and dissolution of the epistolary novel, the symbol of sociable exchange.

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Born on 18 October 1741 in Amiens to a recently ennobled family, Pierre-Ambroise François Choderlos de Laclos embodied all forms of eighteenth-century sociability. He frequented the [salons](#) of the garrison towns where he was posted as an artilleryman and was a member of the societies and clubs of the revolutionary period. He was also a [Freemason](#). His political activity alongside Louis Philippe II, Duc d'Orléans, who was to appoint him as his private secretary (for many, Laclos was the *éminence grise*), led him to England on a diplomatic mission. Finding that his military career did not fulfil his ambitions for glory, he took up writing as an indispensable complement to it. His eclectic body of work paints the picture of a reformer, an educationalist in the [Rousseauian](#) tradition, a spare-time literary critic and an author of courtly poems, inspired by his visits to the salons. This work was all eclipsed, however, by his epistolary novel, which ensured his name would be preserved for posterity as the author of a book that just happened to be a masterpiece. Described by Baudelaire as a 'terrifying book of sociability',<sup>1</sup> *Les Liaisons dangereuses* (published in English as *Dangerous Liaisons* or *Dangerous Connections*) was indebted to Rousseau's *La Nouvelle Héloïse* and Richardson's *Clarissa* and simultaneously marked the pinnacle and decline of a genre that was inextricably linked to the eighteenth-century sociability that it called into question.

Laclos was initiated into Freemasonry in 1765 by *L'Union*, his *Toul-Artillerie* unit's military lodge. He went on to become a member of the *Henri IV* lodge in Besançon, where he was the worshipful master in 1786, and then of *L'Égalité* lodge in Grenoble, but it was his membership of the prestigious cosmopolitan *La Candeur* lodge that brought him into contact with the Duc d'Orléans. The Duc was grand master of the *Grand Orient de France*, and Laclos served him from January 1789 to May 1792. In the 18th century, the lodge was 'an incubation chamber for forms, networks and spaces of sociability'<sup>2</sup> where protection systems were formed, and freemasonry was a widespread custom among the military. The Duc took the name Philippe-Égalité during the French Revolution, and the Palais-Royal became not just his headquarters but also a leading social space. Freemasons with reformist ideas inspired by the Revolution would use the Palais-Royal as their meeting place. It is also where Laclos met the Duc's English mistress, Grace Elliott, whose memoirs attributed most of the Duc's faux pas to his secretary.<sup>3</sup> When Laclos was arrested twice during the Terror, he was probably saved from the guillotine by the links he had forged in the salons of Madame d'Angiviller, Mademoiselle Contat, Madame Buffon and Madame Necker. In June 1785, he was elected to the Académie de la Rochelle, which counted Voltaire among its associate members. Above all, Laclos made his mark during the revolutionary period at the popular societies, called 'clubs' due to a certain Anglomania at the time, which proliferated in the second half of the century. He was welcomed into the Club des Patriotes, the Club National, the Club des Constitutionnels and the Club des Valois, most of which were based in the Palais-Royal. He also played a particularly active role in the Club des Jacobins (which he joined on his return from England in October 1790) as founder and editor of the *Journal des Amis de la Constitution*. Following the Champs-de-Mars massacre, however, he withdrew his membership from the club without resigning.

Laclos accompanied the Duc on his diplomatic mission to London, where they stayed from October 1789 to July 1790 in accommodation in Chapel Street. He became acquainted here with Charles James Fox and the Whigs, who supported the Revolution and also possibly the Duc's ascension to the throne. He also met General Elliott, the Earl of Tilly, who listened to his ideas for *Les liaisons dangereuses*,<sup>4</sup> developed his diplomatic qualities and prophetically defended the opportunity of a Franco-British political alliance, which was not to come to fruition until the following century. In England, Laclos developed the idea of a constitutional monarchy to replace French absolutism.

Laclos's interest in English culture was primarily literary. In 1784, two years after the succès de scandale of *Les liaisons dangereuses*, he published a review of [Frances Burney's](#) *Cecilia or Memoirs of an Heiress* in the *Mercure de France* in which he made a plea for the novel as a portrait of 'private morals' that was charged with '[o]bserving, feeling and portraying' in order to provide insight into 'human manners, characters, feelings and passions'.<sup>5</sup> The English novelist's work took up one of the major themes explored in Laclos's work, namely the pitfalls that await a young woman entering society without an education and without adequate knowledge of the dangers that she might be exposed to. Implicitly revisiting the criticisms that [Madame Riccoboni](#) had levelled at him in a letter about *Les liaisons dangereuses*, Laclos drew attention to the instructive nature of novels and established a filiation between [Richardson](#), [Rousseau](#) and himself. Above all he highlighted the importance of *Cecilia* for the model of sociability that he stigmatised:

we must also say that her Work [...] has eminently the merit of portraying manners and customs; that it is full of fine and profound observations; that in general, the characters and feelings are true and well supported; that the morals are appealing and pure. Finally, we think that this Novel must be included among the best works of its kind, excepting however *Clarisse*, the most genius of all Novels; *Tom Jones*, the best-made Novel; and *La Nouvelle Héloïse*, the most beautiful of all works produced under the title of Novel. (Laclos 469)

Laclos invited [Miss Burney](#) to continue her condemnation of corrupt morals but to use ridicule as a weapon to expose those who undermined sociability by masquerading as honest people. His in-depth knowledge of French and English sensibilities prompted him to express some reservation on this point. The following comment reveals the differences between the two: 'truth be told, we do not know what merit they will find in it in England, but we believe we can assure her that her efforts will not be in vain in France' (Laclos 459) – an allusion to the irony that runs through *Les liaisons dangereuses* as a reflection of the French style of the period.<sup>6</sup>

Published in 1782, *Les liaisons dangereuses* pertained to the climate of an entire era that stressed the importance of sociable exchange while remaining mindful of its perils. The novel's succès de scandale, which was fuelled by indignation at the potential models

represented by the two libertines at the plot's centre (the Vicomte de Valmont and the Marquise de Merteuil), was based above all on the novelist's unapologetic exposé of late-eighteenth-century sociability,<sup>7</sup> of this ideal of honesty and of the proprieties that the libertines worked to their advantage, confusing their victims with their hypocrisy, their seductive words and their lies that were condoned by the very precepts that regulated social interaction.

While *Les liaisons dangereuses* embraced the rule of conduct and novelistic model presented by [Rousseau](#) and Crébillon, Laclos was aware of the popularity of the translations of [Richardson](#)'s and Fielding's novels in eighteenth-century France. For him, *Clarissa* was 'the masterpiece of novels' (Laclos 440). Abbé Prévost's 1751 translation of the novel had attempted to adapt the language and behaviour of Lovelace, the prototype libertine seducer, to the French spirit of finesse.<sup>8</sup> Laclos went a step further by making libertinism no longer an individual characteristic that was openly condemned by everything in the novel but the parlour game of an idle aristocracy in crisis. He portrayed it as a system that hijacked the mind and reached its pinnacle in the art of deception. Merteuil and Valmont successfully reveal all the contradictions and flaws in the contemporary social codes and behaviour. The young Cécile becomes a pleasure machine in Valmont's arms, a victim of a poor convent education and the blindness of a mother confined to reproducing outdated educational models. The Presidente de Tourvel, who like Clarisse believes she can save the libertine Valmont, allows herself to be seduced by him and dies as a result. The seductive virtue portrayed by Richardson is transformed into a fascination with evil, because the two libertines are the heroes of a plot whose intelligence ends up conquering even the readers themselves. Through a particular use of the epistolary exchange, Laclos constructed a closed system, a societal microcosm that contrasts with the complexity and depth of the world represented in *Clarissa*. Inheriting the French classical tradition, which spans from Madame de La Fayette to Crébillon, he confined a small number of characters to a reduced space-time, internalised the story, forged a close interrelationship between a limited number of significant episodes and orchestrated a social universe that was deprived of dynamism and a future and that seemed to have lost its connection with reality.

The generalised shift in the novelistic universe is also reflected in the novel's form. Prepared by the long tradition of French epistolary art as a counterpart to the art of conversation, *Les liaisons dangereuses* was the perfect meeting of subject and form.<sup>9</sup> The epistolary novel no longer aspired to provide authenticity and instruction to a genre that was to consolidate its status. Its aim above all was to provide a window onto a society that was being corroded from within. The epistolary exchange, a symbol of sociability, became the libertines' weapon of choice to carry out their deeds. *Les Liaisons dangereuses ou Lettres recueillies dans une société, et publiées pour l'instruction de quelques autres* (*Dangerous Connections: A Series of Letters, selected from the Correspondence of a Private Circle; and Published for the Instruction of Society*), which used its form to advantage more than any other work, appears to be the tool that disintegrated the society that underpinned it, the 'sentimental legacy of an entire society'.<sup>10</sup> It testifies that sociability as France knew it in 1782 was corruptible and corrupted. The novel's epigraph (which was drawn from *La Nouvelle Héloïse* (*Julie, or the New Heloise*)) – 'I have observed the Manners of the Times, and have wrote these Letters'<sup>11</sup> – and the juxtaposition of the publisher's notice and the preface set an edifying tone, but



Laclos's radicalism would have impressed on the reader that this model of sociability was now outdated. Unlike the English libertinism portrayed by [Richardson](#), the French libertinism of manners modelled in Laclos's novel was expressed in a closed place and was vivified in the sociable exchange. By the same token, it also sounded its death knell. The novel had a rather timid start in English, with no explicit references appearing until the 19th century.<sup>12</sup>

Some of Laclos's lesser-known writings, his revolutionary activity, his correspondence with his wife, Marie-Soulange Duperré, and his image as a virtuous husband and father, which counterbalanced his alter ego Valmont's image as the dark conspirator, nevertheless present the portrait of a moralist who believes the new order can only come from a society that has been transformed through freedom, equality, intelligence and a rehabilitation of the senses. While *Les Liaisons dangereuses* may appear to be an arraignment, this 'feminist' novel,<sup>13</sup> demands gender equality, advocates divorce and a rediscovered sensuality and aims at social usefulness. In a letter dated 8 April 1801, written after he was sent to Milan as a brigadier general by the First Consul, Laclos mentally elaborated a novel that was to form a kind of diptych with *Les Liaisons dangereuses*:

The rationale for the work is to popularise this truth that *there is no happiness except within the family*. I can certainly prove this, and I am not at a loss to know where I will take the subject of my scenes from. But the events will be difficult to arrange, and the almost insurmountable difficulty will be to interest readers without any romance. It would require the style of the first volumes of J.-J. Rousseau's *Confessions*, and this idea is discouraging (Laclos 1064).

His unexpected death in Taranto on 5 September 1803 put a stop to his plans to write a work visibly inspired by the bourgeois family model.

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3. Grace Dalrymple Elliott, Sous la Terreur. Journal d'une amie de Philippe-Égalité, trad. Théodor de Wyzewa (Paris: Arthème Fayard, 1906).
4. Mémoires du comte Alexandre de Tilly pour servir à l'histoire des mœurs de la fin du XVIIIe siècle, Christian Melchior-Bonnet (ed.) (Paris: Mercure de France, 1965), p. 174-178.
5. Laclos, Œuvres complètes, Laurent Versini (ed.) (Paris: nrf-Gallimard, 1979), p. 448-449.
6. Jean Fabre, 'Les Liaisons dangereuses, roman de l'ironie', Idées sur le roman de Madame de Lafayette au Marquis de Sade (Paris: Klincksieck, 1979), p. 143-165.
7. Didier Masseau, 'Le dévoiement des Lumières', Europe (81e année, no. 885-886, Janvier-Février 2003), p. 18-33.
8. Michel Delon, P.-A.- Choderlos de Laclos. Les Liaisons dangereuses (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1986), p. 38.
9. Jean-Luc Seylaz, Les Liaisons dangereuses et la création romanesque chez Laclos (Genève-Paris: Droz-Minard, 1965).

10. Paul Bourget, *Sensations d'Italie* (Paris: Alphonse Lemerre, 1891), p. 296.
  11. Epigraph to Laclos, *Dangerous Connections: A Series of Letters, selected from the Correspondence of a Private Circle; and Published for the Instruction of Society*, 2nd ed., trans. Thomas Moore (London: J. Ebers, 1812). Released as an ebook by The Project Gutenberg on 27 April 2014. Available at: <https://www.gutenberg.org/cache/epub/45512/pg45512-images.html>
  12. Cf. Simon Davies, 'Laclos dans la littérature anglaise du XIXe siècle' dans *Laclos et le libertinage 1782-1982* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1983), p. 255-264; Ceri Crossley, 'Laclos et l'image du XVIIIe siècle français en Angleterre (1870-1930)', *ibid.*, p. 275-287.
  13. Laclos, 'Des femmes et de leur éducation', *Œuvres complètes*, p. 389-443.
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## Cite this article

D'ASCENZO Federica, "Pierre-Ambroise François Choderlos de Laclos", *The Digital Encyclopedia of British Sociability in the Long Eighteenth Century* [online], ISSN 2803-2845, Accessed on 06/09/2024, URL: <https://www.digitens.org/en/notices/pierre-ambroise-francois-choderlos-de-laclos.html>

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[Liaisons dangereuses \(1779\)](#)

[Journal des Amis de la Constitution, 1791](#)