Merteuil: A Case of Animus Possession in *Les liaisons dangereuses*

by Gérard Lavatori

This paper represents part of a larger presentation given at the AATF convention in Saguenay, Quebec, on creating an interdisciplinary course using popular literature or film and psychoanalysis. Starting with Bruno Bettelheim's *The Uses of Enchantment*, the presentation showed how "Beauty and the Beast" can be seen as an example of oedipal attachment (Bettelheim 307) or the reconciliation of the superego and the id as Beauty humanizes the Beast (Bettelheim 309). From a Jungian perspective, the tale can be seen as representing a split in the feminine nature between the virtuous and selfish selves represented respectively by Beauty and the stepsisters (Newell Plumb 18). Further, the talk presented how *The Phantom of the Opera* can be seen as a representation of the "demon-lover" complex described by the psychologist Susan Kavaler-Adler, where a narcissistic male dominates the talents of a blossoming creative female (150). For a Freudian analysis of *The Phantom of the Opera*, Jerrold Hogle's *The Undergrounds of The Phantom of the Opera* is a useful and complete guide. The paper which follows represents that part of the talk which concentrated on the Marquise de Merteuil in *Les liaisons dangereuses* showing how the Jungian concept of the animus helps to explain the psychology of that anti-heroine. The discussion will put the novel in its social context in showing why the particular complex of animus possession appears in the patriarchal society of 18th century France. Since this paper is intended to show how a general education interdisciplinary course can be created using contemporary media in English, such as Stephen Frears' 1997 film, all citations from the novel will be from P.W. K. Stone's Penguin Classics English translation of *Les Liaisons dangereuses*.

Pierre Amboise Choderlos de Laclos' (1741-1803) only novel, *Les Liaisons dangereuses*, was published in 1782, but from the author's other writing, it is known that he was interested in women's rights: he wrote "De l'education des femmes" in 1783 calling for improvements in instruction for women. Furthermore, in *Les liaisons dangereuses* "Editor's Preface," Laclos states that the utility of that work is to point out two truths: "one, that any woman who consents to receive an unprincipled man into her circle of friends must end his victim; the other, that any mother is, to say the least, imprudent who allows anyone but herself to win her daughter's confidence" (Laclos 21). Clearly the work is, at least visibly, aimed at illuminating and improving womens' lives. Although the novel was written by a male, the character of Merteuil is supposedly a representation of an actual marquise the author met in Grenoble (Turnell 49) and so the character can be seen as the portrait of a female psyche.

In sum the novel is a portrait of the corrupt noble class at the eve of the French Revolution. From the outset of the novel, Cécile de Volanges is about to be married to a Count Gercourt, who had previously left the Marquise de Merteuil. Merteuil therefore conspires with another former lover of hers, Valmont, to seduce Cécile and ruin the

young woman's reputation before the proposed marriage. Valmont is more interested in a devout wife, Madame de Tourvel, but concedes to seduce Cécile when he learns that Cecile's mother had been warning Tourvel of Valmont's wicked reputation. In the meanwhile, Merteuil has attempted to kindle a romantic relationship between Cécile, her distant cousin, and a music teacher, Danceny. Throughout the epistolary novel, Merteuil and Valmont exchange letters, each trying to outdo the other in demonstrations of power and seduction. Although it can be understood that Valmont and Merteuil would at some level be interested in resuming their relationship, they get caught up in a battle of the wills. Eventually, Merteuil sets Danceny after Valmont, who is killed in their duel. Valmont exposes Merteuil's scandalous personal letters to him in a dying gesture of revenge and Merteuil is forced to leave Paris after a public humiliation of her at the opera where it is obvious that the general public has become aware of the contents of her letters. She becomes afflicted with smallpox, which disfigures her, and she moves to Holland. In the Stephen Frears' film, the audience simply witnesses a final scene in Merteuil's boudoir where Merteuil's hypocritical mask falls.

Much can be understood about the character of Merteuil by looking into the context of womens' lives in the 1780s in France. Rousseau, whom Lucy Moore describes as "the most popular author of the second half of the eighteenth century, and probably the most important ideological inspiration to a generation of revolutionaries from Germaine [de Stael] herself to Robespierre (Moore 17) saw no roles for women outside those of wife and mother" (Moore 18). Although women, like Madame de Stael, had a new influence in society through their discussions in the salons, they had no official role in government. Novelist Restif de la Bretonne wrote in in 1776 that to make women the equals of men "is to denature them" (quoted in Moore 11). Furthermore, in *Corinne*, as summarized by Moore, Germaine de Stael posited of the eponymous character that "Every man of her acquaintance might, as she did, take lovers, neglect his spouse, write books or involve himself in politics; they were not criticized for doing those things at all, but for doing them well or badly while she would always be castigated for her looks or her private life" (Moore 13). Moore quotes an impression of Madame de Stael in regard to the traditional gender roles of her era:

> "The feelings to which she gives rise are different from those that any woman can inspire," observed one, unwittingly providing a list of the feminine qualities her age considered ideal. "Such words as sweetness, gracefulness, modesty, desire to please, deportment, manners, cannot be used when speaking of her; but one is carried away, subjugated by the force of her genius… Wherever she goes, most people are changed into spectators." (Moore 13)

Jungian analyst Sharon Martin, has identified the repressed anger such active and perceptive women might experience in particularly patriarchal societies like pre-revolutionary France. According to Martin, "The feminine principle has been profoundly devalued in our culture, our religion and our world […] feminine rhythms have been discarded. Women naturally feel violated by this system. And anger is a healthy response to being violated. However, most of us have been taught that an angry woman is both unattractive and undesirable" (Martin 5). Martin states in her article, "Anger in Animus

Development," that women's legitimate anger cannot and should not be suppressed as repressed elements of the psyche often return in even more insistent forms. In the case of such a woman repressed by society, "Since no aspect of the psyche can be eliminated, the anger must fall into the unconscious where it activates the animus, her masculine aspect, and takes possession of her […] The animus at this stage is her own *excluded* masculinity" (Martin 5). Martin further points out that "When a woman denies her aggression, she loses a quality that is necessary for psychological development. She is then defenseless in its unconscious power, resulting in the neuroses of repetitive destructive relationships, addictions, depression, disease or even psychosis" (Martin 5). This can result in a case of "animus possession" where the woman's thought become taken over by the negative image of the male.

> Because she does not treat her own feelings with tolerance and compassion, she has little or no compassion for other's weaknesses. The inner masculine standard demands perfection of her and she is therefore intolerant of other's mistakes. At this point she often compensates for her self-doubt by becoming forceful in her opinions, which are generally dogmatic, rigid, undifferentiated, and cold. (Martin 6)

According to Martin, women need to be able to integrate the masculine aspect in order to be whole and effective. Martin states that "women need this power, for, strange as it seems, only when this masculine entity becomes an integrated part of the soul and carries on its proper function there is it possible for a woman to be truly a woman in the higher sense, and, at the same time, also being herself, to fulfill her individual human destiny" (Martin 6). Martin believes that when the masculine animus is integrated, it ceases to be destructive and can work as a creative energy and for that, women need to be able to experience their own anger (Martin 6).

Jung saw the animus and the anima as the unconscious masculine and feminine aspects of the female and male, respectively, with each sex possessing both masculine and feminine traits. The animus can express itself in women in a way of thinking that is insistent and absolute. "When such a conviction is preached with a loud, insistent, masculine voice or imposed on others by means of brutal emotional scenes, the underlying masculinity in a woman is easily recognized" (Jung 198). Jung states that the animus "never believes in exceptions" (198) and can manifest itself in strongly held opinions. In dreams "[T]he animus represents a collective rather than a personal element. Because of this collective-mindedness women habitually refer (when their animus is speaking through them) to "one" or "they" or "everybody," and in such circumstances their speech frequently contains the words "always" and "should" and "ought" (Jung 206).

The aspects of the animus in animus-possessed women can vary according to their individual predisposition and the era in which they live. According to Barbara Hannah, "Women whose animus opinions are based on tradition-and these are surprisingly quite a few even in the younger generation-often shelter themselves behind these opinions as a strategy to attain what they want; or at least what they think they want" (Hannah 4). In

contemporary societies, " Those women whose animus opinions have a more modern nuance usually go too far in the other direction and deny tradition altogether, and they often become downright promiscuous" (Hanna 5). The animus can also be associated with a strong feeling of judgment and absolute resolution. Jung saw a literary representation of the animus in H. G. Well's novel, *Christine Alberta's Father*, where Christine Alberta's animus is portrayed.

According to Jung,

> The animus is rather like an assembly of fathers or dignitaries of some kind who lay down incontestable… judgments. On closer examination these judgments turn out to be largely sayings and opinions scraped together more or less unconsciously from childhood… and compressed into a canon of average truth, justice, and reasonableness, a compendium of preconceptions […] sometimes they appear as principles which are like a travesty of education: "People have always done this," or "Everybody knows that it is like that." (qtd. in Hannah 25)

The animus may also be projected onto a male. Emma Jung wrote that a woman's animus may become attached to a male who represents an ideal male figure for the woman: "This guide, this mediator, then becomes the carrier of the representation of her animus; onto him the animus is projected. There is no conflict as long as this projection succeeds, that is, as long as the projected image is more or less covered by the male who carries it" (quoted Hannah 28). However, when the male onto whom the animus is projected falls short "Often the woman will artfully attempt to make the man into what he should be. Not that we consciously or necessarily exercise force or pressure; rather far more often it occurs fully unconsciously and our partner is insinuated—by our own behavior– into the archetypal conduct characteristic of the animus" (quoted in Hannah 29).

Like Madame de Stael, the Marquise de Merteuil appears to be an exceptionally talented and perceptive figure, yet Merteuil's gender limits her possibilities for self-expression in society. She reveals, "At my entrance to society I was still a girl, condemned by my status to silence and inaction" (Laclos, *Les liaisons dangereuses* 181). [All subsequent references to Laclos are exclusively to *Les liaisons dangereuses.*] Out of necessity, Merteuil splits her inner self from the exterior projection of herself she presents to the world. She confesses, "Since I was often obliged to conceal the objects of my attention from those around me, I tried to be able to turn my own wherever I pleased; from that time I have been able at will to assume the air of detachment you have so often admired […] I went so far as to suffer pain voluntarily so as to achieve a simultaneous expression of pleasure" (Laclos 181-2). In Merteuil's case, her persona is so far removed from her actual feelings, it appears to be at times a complete mirror image of them. The "persona" is the consciously fashioned mask that the individual presents to society as an identity, but it is just a role. Like a mask, the "persona" is used to make impressions on others and hide part of one's psychic reality. The persona is a mediator between the individual and the society. Through therapy or art a person can "individuate" and regain a truer "self" that is not just a deceptive persona or subject to the powers of the repressed

unconscious (Kerrisk). Obviously such therapies were not available to the likes of 18th century women as Merteuil who appears to meld with her own deceptive mask.

In fact, Merteuil takes on what in her society was a more traditionally masculine perspective of the world. “I took exact accounts of my pains and pleasures, regarding my various sensations as simply facts to be collected and meditated upon” (Laclos 183). Merteuil becomes to some extent more intellectual and less emotional than the traditional woman was thought to be. To take the issue out of the purely masculine-feminine binary, Mathew Harwood sees the animus-anima opposition as something like the well-known yin/yang structure. “Yin energy, for example, is about being receptive, the feeling and intuitive values, valuing the journey as much as the goal, developing relationships, the values of love, etc. Yang energy, on the other hand, is about being active, doing, the rational values of life (especially thinking and logic), striving towards an objective, assertiveness, etc.” (Harwood 10). Unlike the preconception of women in her era, Merteuil identifies with a more traditionally yang energy.

In fact, Merteuil separates herself from other women. In a letter she asks Valmont:

> But I, what have I in common with these empty-headed women? When have you known me [to] break the rules I have laid down for myself or betray my principles? I say “my principles” intentionally. They are not, like those of other women, found by chance, accepted unthinkingly, and followed out of habit. They are the fruit of my profound reflection. I have created them: I might say that I have created myself. (Laclos 181).

In separating herself from women, it could be said that Merteuil situates herself by implication in the masculine camp, completely in the realm of her animus.

Merteuil becomes like the animus, a collection of firmly held judgments and opinions on the world. Below are examples of pronouncements of her wisdom. She asks, “Have you not observed that pleasure, which is undeniably the sole motive behind the union of the sexes, is nevertheless not enough to form a bond between them?” (Laclos 313). Elsewhere, she explains to Valmont: “[L]ike the Sultan, you have never been either the lover or the friend of a woman, but always either her tyrant or her slave” (Laclos 334). The entire affair of the writing of a loveletter to prove Valmont’s conquest of Tourvel, rests on Merteuil’s certitude in the value of writing. She states, “Remember, however, that in important affairs of this kind, proof, to be valid, must be in writing” (Laclos 55). Not unlike the pronouncements of a La Bruyère, she elucidates for Valmont’s benefit, “No one willingly yields in a dispute: for the simple reason that it is a dispute. By sheer dint of looking for good arguments, we find them and we state them; and afterwards hold by them, not because they are good ones, but because we do not wish to contradict ourselves” (Laclos 79). In fact, she claims to teach Valmont just how the world is run, revealing her astute observations and conclusions about the unspoken power structures of her society such as: “Old ladies must never be crossed: in their hands lie the

reputations of the young ones" (Laclos 115) and ultimately summarizing her view of the world, "Conquer or perish" (Laclos 188).

Merteuil is absolutely certain about the power imbalance between the sexes in 18th century France. She assures: "Believe me, Vicomte, unnecessary virtues are rarely acquired. Since you risk nothing in your battles, you take no precautions. For you men, defeat means only one victory less. In this unequal contest we are lucky not to lose, you unlucky when you do not win" (Laclos 179). Perhaps in an attempt to tip the scales more on the women's side, Merteuil makes a point of taking on multiple lovers, ostensibly to enhance the scope of her studies and her worldliness: "I took the opportunity to enlarge my field of experience. It was here [at her husband's country house], in particular, that I confirmed the truth that love, which we cry up as the source of our pleasures, is nothing more than an excuse for them" (Laclos 183). In fact, Merteuil invents a formula for securing with impunity as many lovers as she wishes: "My first object was to secure a reputation for being invincible. To succeed in this I contrived that the men who interested me not at all were the only ones whose homage I appeared to accept. I made use of them to win me the honors of successful resistance; meanwhile I could safely yield to the lover of my choice" (Laclos 185). At this point in her early adulthood, Merteuil appears to reap the benefit of her mask, which allows her to carry out a life of licentiousness while appearing to conform to the role accorded to her by society.

At one point, Valmont had been the ideal representation of Merteuil's animus. She confesses to him: "I desired you before I had seen you. Your reputation so impressed me that it seemed that only you could bring me glory. I longed to measure swords with you. This is the only one of my desires that has ever for a moment gained sway over me" (Laclos 186). The phallic metaphor of the sword seems to indicate clearly that Valmont was up to par with Merteuil's inner vision of the ideal masculinity. However, due to his emotionality with Tourvel, Merteuil sees Valmont in a currently degraded state. She laments to Valmont:

> Truly, to accept you for what you now appear to be would be to commit a genuine infidelity. I should not be recovering my old lover, I should be taking a new one, who is very far from being his equal. I have not so forgotten the first as to make such a mistake. The Valmont I loved was charming. I am even willing to admit that I have never met a more charming man. Ah, I beg you, Vicomte, if you find him again, bring him to me: he will always be very well received. (Laclos 356).

Merteuil's judgments of Valmont are harsh ultimatums. She threatens: "I tell you as a friend: you will not need two women of that sort to lose your reputation" (Laclos 30) and "Think, should you not succeed with this woman, of the others who must blush for having succeeded with you" (Laclos 56).

On the need for Danceny in seducing Cecile: "I am sorry as you are- that he should be the hero of this escapade. But what do you expect? What is done is done, and it is your fault" (Laclos 116) and "How shameful if we should fail to do as we liked with two children" (Laclos 117)! Yet Merteuil does not see her own fate dependent on Valmont.

With confidence, she eschews any doubt about her ability to contend with a certain Prevan who, Valmont warns her, is threatening her reputation. “How pitiful your apprehensions are! How perfectly they prove my superiority over you” (Laclos 178)! She adds: “And where, after all, is the achievement of yours that I have not a thousand times surpassed? You have seduced, even ruined a great many women: But what difficulty did you have in doing so?” (Laclos 179) As a man, Valmont faced many fewer obstacles to his success than were presented to Merteuil as a woman. Above all, what Merteuil cannot accept in Valmont is his susceptibility to love. She writes with disgust to him: “I see you are already as timid as a slave: you might as well be in love… I say love because you are in love. To say otherwise would be to deceive you; it would be to hide your malady from you” (Laclos 39- 40). Merteuil cannot accept that Valmont display love, deemed a feminine quality which perhaps she strove to overcome in herself, as a part of the devaluation of perceived femininity in society.

Ultimately Merteuil’s story ends in separation and conflict, not integration and individuation as, in the end, she is unable to integrate her thinking and feeling selves; her own emotions are so deeply buried that she fails to recognize her own love for Valmont. In frustration at their escalating hostility and competitiveness, Valmont writes to Merteuil requesting a concession to love and equality in a potentially brief restoration of their romantic relationship. He states:

> I warn you only that your arguments, good or bad, will not deceive me… The moment of candour has come. I could do no better than set you the example, and I declare with pleasure that I should prefer peace and friendship… I might add that the slightest obstacle put forward by you will be taken by me as a genuine declaration of war. You see: the reply I ask for does not require long and beautiful sentences. A word will suffice. (Laclos 358)

It should be noted that here it is Valmont who writes the longer and more beautiful sentences calling for peace and friendship while it is Merteuil who replies curtly and provokingly: “Very well: war” (Laclos 358). Despite Valmont’s call for a respite, Merteuil remains relentless in her pursuit of the more yang competitive and warlike spirit.

Yet ultimately, Merteuil is unmasked. Valmont is killed in a duel after Merteuil reveals Valmont’s seduction of Cecile to her lover Danceny. However Valmont manages to circulate Merteuil’s letters revealing her true depraved character. Merteuil is hooted at the Comédie Italienne and yet maintains an air of complete control and composure, appearing unaffected until she enters the privacy of her carriage. Yet, before fleeing to Holland, “Merteuil was attacked the following night by a very violent fever, which, it was thought at first, must be the effect of the terrible predicament in which she had found herself” (Laclos 389). The disease causes her to lose an eye and to become horribly disfigured. It was said of her “’that the disease has turned her inside out, and that her soul is now visible on her face’” (Laclos 392). Thus, in the novel, the deformity in Merteuil’s character eventually become apparent in her outward appearance. Appropriately it would seem it is ultimately apparent that her vision is one-sided; she lacks the benefit of both yin and yang, masculine and feminine views. However, the

novel is cuts her no slack and makes no concessions to the one-sided society in which she lived. Merteuil is simply a monster to be exiled to Holland. Similar to what Harry Benshoff states of horror film villains "human beings are ultimately unknowable; the things that make them monstruous are, quite literally, their secrets: the unknown or repressed issues of human sexuality that they keep in dark closets and secret societies. It is the keeping of secrets, not necessarily the secrets themselves, which leads to destruction" (104). Merteuil is unable to integrate the masculine aspects of her personality and possibly of her sexuality into her public persona due to the restrictions society placed on her gender. Instead, she becomes possessed by the unconscious animus which she is forced to repress. She becomes an epitome of the negative animus which rules her relationships.

Given the devaluation of the feminine in her society, Merteuil could not accept her own emotions; she is ashamed of them as is evidenced by her negative judgments of Valmont's love for Tourvel and her disappointment when he seems ruled by his emotions. Thus Valmont appears to her undeserving of her admiration of him as a projection of her negative animus, a representation of the male as an unemotional, pitiless abuser and exploiter of women. The Stephen Frears film appears perhaps more understanding of the Merteuil character than the novel. In the film's end, after a violent and emotional outburst in her boudoir having learned of Valmont's death and betrayal of her (he died for Tourvel), Merteuil returns to the word/the theater in her pasty white mask, only to reveal her reddening cheeks when once again in the privacy of her makeup mirror in a final scene of reckoning with herself. In the film, it is clear that Merteuil had emotions for Valmont, that she felt them when she learned of his loss, and that they are ultimately visible to her in the intimacy of her mirror. According to Hannah, "Jealousy of which a man or woman is not conscious is probably the most dangerous and destructive force in the world. Jung said that jealousy often comes from lack of love or the ability to love" (Hannah 5). Merteuil's own devaluation of the feminine and her desire to identify with the masculine abuser prevents her from feeling her own emotions and causes her to become a facsimile of an unemotional and promiscuous male, the image she believes her society holds up as the epitome of success. Paralleling the 18th Century in its swaying between the poles of intellect and emotion, Laclos' Merteuil presents a case of the destructive possibilities stemming from the polarization of men and women in society as well as the failure to integrate the masculine and feminine (or yin and yang) aspects of the psyche.

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Discussion Questions for "Merteuil: A Case of Animus Possession"

1. How do we know that Laclos was interested in women's rights?
2. Why can it be said that Merteuil is a portrait of a female psyche if the novel was written by a man?
3. In what way did women start to have power in society in 18th-century France?
4. In what ways did women not have power?
5. In Germaine de Stael's novel, *Corinne*, how are men's and women's lives evaluated differently by society?
6. According to Moore, what qualities were considered ideal in women in the 18th century?
7. According to Martin, what can happen to women in patriarchal societies where they are unable to express their anger at their mistreatment in society?
8. Why would a woman who is possessed by the negative animus be intolerant of emotionality in others?
9. What are the animus and the anima in Jungian psychology?
10. How might the animus express itself in women who are possessed by it?
11. What does it mean to say that a woman's animus may become attached to a male who represents the ideal male for her?
12. What would happen if the ideal male disappointed the female for whom he had represented the masculine ideal?
13. What is a Jungian "persona" and how does Merteuil's differ from her true self?
14. What does it say about Merteuil that she sees herself as completely different from other women?
15. How does Merteuil's negative animus manifest itself?
16. How did Valmont disappoint Merteuil's idealization of him as the ideal male?
17. Why can't Merteuil scale back her hostility and competitiveness with Valmont as he requests?
18. Why is it significant that Merteuil loses one eye? What could that symbolize?
19. Is Merteuil a victim of society or her own psyche or both?
20. What other polarizations or imbalances exist in society today or in Merteuil's time? Is it necessary to find a balance between them? Why?

Activity: imagine another letter to the novel which may have been left out or lost. In this letter, you imagine another ending. Is Merteuil able to stop her self-destructive behavior? How? OR is she a victim of Valmont's devious plotting? Try to be creative in imagining how new information could change the path or meaning of the narrative.

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