

“Une fois piquée au jeu... ”: The motif of game and the function  
of chance in Laclos’ *Les Liaisons dangereuses*

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The eighteenth century has been considered a century of play. The fascination for gambling and the general social impact of games in this era are not, however, immediately reflected in the literature of the period. Compared to the numerous publications in other fields—moral treatises, judicial reports, and mathematical analyses for example—it is surprising to what extent games and gambling *do not* constitute a major theme in eighteenth-century French literature. In point of fact, it is rarely the case that “play” or “games” provide the dominant theme of a literary work (as they do, for instance, in literature from the nineteenth century). Far more often, games and playing figure instead as a supplement, as a low-level background activity, almost as if they were nothing but an arbitrary accessory or random reference.

This initially seems to be the case in *Les Liaisons dangereuses* (1782). While there are several gaming-scenes in the novel, they don’t immediately seem to be very decisive for the story. The naivety and innocence of the young Cecile, who has just recently been introduced into “the society,” is manifested when she falls asleep at the table while the other members are playing cards in the evening at her Aunt Rosemonde’s estate. The aunt herself plays solitaire at several occasions to avoid weariness and ennui; the story of Prévan, told by the master-libertine the Marquise de Merteuil, is essentially about gambling. Games and gambling, while present in the novel, do not seem to play any particular role.

On further consideration, however, the game-motif turns out to be far more significant. In fact, it is possible to argue that the entire novel arises from a libertine wager: If the Vicente de Valmont succeeds in seducing the pious Presidente de Tourel, the Marquise de Martial will reward him by spending one more night with him. In this period a wager (such as this one) was first and foremost part of the culture of gambling, related to the fascination for calculating chance and risk. “Une fois piquée au jeu, on ne sait plus où l’on s’arrête,” the Marquise says, as if to anticipate and emphasize the importance of gambling and the extent to which libertine play is related to specific types of games.

The different occurrences of the game-motif in this novel create a certain pattern that makes it more than an accessory motif found at the margins of the epistolary narrative. It becomes crucial not only for the fictive universe (the thematic content of the work), but also for the very form of the fiction. This aspect becomes even more decisive if we consider and analyze how *the game-motif generates a chance-function* in different ways. The culture of games and libertine culture both depend upon an ambivalent and ambiguous attitude towards chance, an attitude reflecting the very conception of chance in this period. As gambling situations, the execution of a libertine project is made of calculation and risk taking, pursuing pleasure in repetitive patterns of seductions.

In my paper I propose to examine the game-motif as it occurs in *Les Liaisons dangereuses* in relation to the function of chance and in opposition to the desire for control. Whereas it has been

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asserted that the Enlightenment-novel is an ally of the theory of probability in its effort to eradicate chance (Cavanaugh), I will argue that the novel, and in this case Laclos’s novel, maintains the fascination with chance at the same time as it puts knowledge from the theory of probability into practice.