

Zeitschrift: Colloquium Helveticum : cahiers suisses de littérature générale et comparée = Schweizer Hefte für allgemeine und vergleichende Literaturwissenschaft = quaderni svizzeri di letteratura generale e comparata

Herausgeber: Association suisse de littérature générale et comparée

Band: - (2000)

Heft: 31: Eros & Literatur = Éros & littérature

Artikel: The erotics of innocence : Burney & Laclos

Autor: Hughes, Peter

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5169/seals-1006476>

Nutzungsbedingungen

Die ETH-Bibliothek ist die Anbieterin der digitalisierten Zeitschriften auf E-Periodica. Sie besitzt keine Urheberrechte an den Zeitschriften und ist nicht verantwortlich für deren Inhalte. Die Rechte liegen in der Regel bei den Herausgebern beziehungsweise den externen Rechteinhabern. Das Veröffentlichen von Bildern in Print- und Online-Publikationen sowie auf Social Media-Kanälen oder Webseiten ist nur mit vorheriger Genehmigung der Rechteinhaber erlaubt. [Mehr erfahren](#)

Conditions d'utilisation

L'ETH Library est le fournisseur des revues numérisées. Elle ne détient aucun droit d'auteur sur les revues et n'est pas responsable de leur contenu. En règle générale, les droits sont détenus par les éditeurs ou les détenteurs de droits externes. La reproduction d'images dans des publications imprimées ou en ligne ainsi que sur des canaux de médias sociaux ou des sites web n'est autorisée qu'avec l'accord préalable des détenteurs des droits. [En savoir plus](#)

Terms of use

The ETH Library is the provider of the digitised journals. It does not own any copyrights to the journals and is not responsible for their content. The rights usually lie with the publishers or the external rights holders. Publishing images in print and online publications, as well as on social media channels or websites, is only permitted with the prior consent of the rights holders. [Find out more](#)

Download PDF: 19.01.2026

ETH-Bibliothek Zürich, E-Periodica, <https://www.e-periodica.ch>

Peter Hughes

The Erotics of Innocence: Burney & Laclos

At first glance, the long and admiring study of Frances Burney's novel *Cecilia* published by P. A. F. Choderlos de Laclos in 1784 is one of the stranger bedfellowships in literary history. That the author of *Les Liaisons dangereuses* should find in the virtuous pages of *Cecilia* a model for fiction should make us wonder what he saw in the book and why it so clearly fascinated him. And it is clear it did: Laclos chose and proposed the subject of the study, which appeared in three parts in the *Mercure de France*, and it remains his one substantial piece of literary analysis. Both novels were published two years before in 1782 in for the time large editions of two thousand copies; both had an immediate success, *succès de scandale* on the one hand, *succès d'estime* on the other; and there we might think the resemblances end. But I want to suggest in what follows that their intertextual relations are both intimate and suggestive: they could lead us to a different and disturbing view of the interplay between eroticism and innocence in fiction and in those other fictions we call culture.

Let me begin by pointing out that Laclos first chose for his novel a title that immediately pulls it closer to *Cecilia*. His contract with his publisher Durand, preserved in the Bibliothèque Nationale, identifies him and his book as follows: "Savoir que moi De Laclos, capitaine d'artillerie, etc., auteur du Danger des liaisons." "Le danger des liaisons", which is also what appears on the manuscript, sounds odd as a title for his own novel, but it could stand as a shrewd summing-up of *Cecilia*. The novel's subtitle, *Memoirs of an Heiress*, shows at once that she is a person endangered by liaisons, whether they be acquaintances, contracts, guardianships (and Cecilia has not one but three competing guardians), friendships, love affairs, or offers of marriage. All the more so if, like Burney's Cecilia or Richardson's Clarissa, she is either alone in the world or independently endowed with a fortune that does not

lie within the power of her father as a dowry or legacy. She then becomes the target of swindlers, fortune hunters and seducers, all of whom have designs on her and her fortune.

In the fiction and culture of eighteenth-century England and France an heiress is a disturbing figure, at once precious, vulnerable, and alien; an outsider in an order governed by patriarchy and its henchmen chastity, poverty, and obedience. She is in danger because others strive to force her within their danger – in the root sense of the word, derived from the late Latin *dominiarium* – within their dominion, power, or rule. The danger posed by this power of domineering others, most of them of *la gent masculine* but some of them women, is not only of a fate worse than death but also of death itself. That after all is what is encoded within the law of *patria potestas*, which is the power and legal right of the father or his delegates to kill or destroy his children if they defy or try to escape his power or danger.

This is clearly the danger faced by Cecilia's model, Clarissa Harlowe. Richardson's heroine doubles the risk of an heiress who leaves her father's house by fleeing with her seducer *in spe*, the ominously named Lovelace. Harlowe runs the risk of being renamed "Harlot", an abandoned woman ensnared in the "Love-lace" of her seducer, whose danger and power is increased by the fact that he talks and acts like his avatar, the Cavalier poet Richard Lovelace. Although Burney's novel runs more to the comic or grotesque than to the tragic, Cecilia herself runs many of the risks faced by Clarissa and even figures in a deathbed scene that is a simulacrum of Clarissa's. When Diderot praised the virtue of Clarissa in his *Eloge de Richardson*, he significantly defined that virtue as her readiness to offer herself as a sacrifice. That is an offer that Cecilia at first seems able to resist. She instead seems to perform the role of the comic scapegoat, the *pharmakon* who must be integrated into a renewed society. But there is no social renewal, and her innocence, her role as a scapegoat, becomes that of a menace.

Why an innocent heiress should be at once so erotic and so dangerous (and so fascinating to Laclos) can be best explained by a theory that recognizes the intimate relations in language and culture between purity and pollution. And this

theory, which has far-reaching implications for literary studies, appears in a brilliant book by Mary Douglas, *Purity and Danger*. Douglas, whose larger anthropological argument offers a radical revision of earlier approaches to religion and taboo, begins with linguistic evidence that shows how deeply ambiguous, even ambivalent, are our terms for the sacred, the holy, the pure, and the innocent. Each of these terms bears within itself an apparently opposed meaning of defilement and pollution. She cites first a paradox noticed by Mircea Eliade: "The ambivalence of the sacred is not only in the psychological order (in that it attracts or repels), but also in the order of values; the sacred is at once "sacred" and "defiled"¹. We might see the force and value of this paradox in for example the language of Baudelaire's *Fleurs du mal* or the characters of Melville's *Billy Budd*: in both texts the intertext is one of blasphemy, of the transgressive relation of the erotic and the religious. According to Douglas, this conflicted language reveals that

the universe is divided between things and actions which are subject to restriction and others which are not; among the restrictions some are intended to protect divinity from profanation, and others to protect the profane from the dangerous intrusion of divinity. Sacred rules are thus merely rules hedging divinity off, and uncleanness is the two-way danger of contact with divinity. The problem then resolves into a linguistic one, and the paradox is reduced by changing the vocabulary... For instance, the Latin word *sacer* itself has this meaning of restriction through pertaining to the gods. And in some cases it may apply to desecration as well as to consecration².

Even today, and in several languages, we can trace this ambivalence through the conflicted meanings of words derived from the etymological root of "holy". Because *sacer* is derived from *sancio*, and the word sanction, or "sanction" or Sanktion everywhere means at once approval and condemnation, consecration and desecration, elevation and degradation. What holds this conflict together is the concept of being set apart,

1 Cited in Mary Douglas, *Purity and Danger: An Analysis of the Concepts of Pollution and Taboo*, London, Routledge, 1966/1984, p. 8.

2 *Ibid.*

as the heiress Cecilia is set apart, or the heiress Clarissa; by the erotic dialog of their innocence with the schemes of their seducers.

In a perception that runs through the first volume of his *Histoire de la Sexualité*, Michel Foucault saw that there seems to be no line of demarcation between the young person's excessive innocence, and another person's guiltiest knowledge. The openness to experience, to an unguided life, of a Cecilia or a Cécile de Volanges is echoed by the transgressive experience of Valmont or Monckton. Monckton, the most sinister of Cecilia's suitors, has married an old woman for her money and with great expectations that she will soon die and leave him free to marry Cecilia. Monckton's wife, Lady Margaret, jealously suspects his scheme, snubs Cecilia, and stays alive, which is the best revenge she can take on Monckton and his schemes. Early in her novel, Burney shows that Monckton's guiltiest knowledge is plain to her: "Ten years, he had been married to her, yet her health was good... eagerly he had watched for her dissolution, yet his eagerness had injured no health but his own!"³

Monckton, like Valmont, writes his prey into a story that is utterly different from the narrative they write for themselves. Cecilia, the reader learns, proposes for herself in which she will "become mistress of her own time" and innocently imagines those around her as instruments of her purposes:

Many and various, then, soothing to her spirit and grateful to her sensibility, were the scenes which her fancy delineated; now she supported an orphan, now softened the sorrows of a widow, now snatched from iniquity the feeble trembler at poverty, and now rescued from shame the proud struggler with disgrace. The prospect at once exalted her hopes, and enraptured her imagination. (I:55-56)

Cecilia sees others as objects or even victims of her innocent sensibility, just as Monckton sees her as the object and victim of his guiltiest knowledge: "he had long looked upon her as his future property; as such he had indulged his admiration,

3 Frances Burney, *Cecilia or the Memoirs of an Heiress*, ed. Peter Sabor and Margaret Anne Doody, Oxford, O.U.P., 1988, I,7-8. All subsequent references are to this edition.

and as such he had already appropriated her estate" (I:19). Both Cecilia and Monckton live according to their imaginations and in so doing play out a story that parallels the narrative and mixed motives of Valmont and Cécile. In its imaginings it foretells the later story of Emma Bovary, who embodies in her fate, and in a hermaphrodite way, the dangers of this *mélange néfaste* of innocence and knowledge.

This story, which is rehearsed in the famous masquerade scene of *Cecilia*, narrates what I mean by the erotics of innocence. By eroticism I mean something different from sexuality, though sexual relations and their danger play as we shall see a leading role. By eroticism I mean what Georges Bataille means when he says: "De l'erotisme, il est possible de dire qu'il est l'approbation de la vie jusque dans la mort"⁴. This may seem far from the decorums of *Cecilia*, though not from the strategies of *Liaisons dangereuses*, but it does not seem at all far-fetched when we recognize that Monckton's designs require the death, and may even imply the murder, of his wife Lady Margaret; and that Mortimer Delville has to fight a duel with Monckton to save his marriage to Cecilia. All of that lies ahead when the reader comes upon the masquerade, which with the opera and theatre, creates the first occasion of the *danger moral* that this innocent heroine insistently exposes herself to. The masquerade in *Cecilia* has been interpreted as a form of erotic free-play, a performance of fantasies. But it seems to me to be something very different and even opposed; more like a nightmare in which Cecilia is repeatedly trapped and forced to watch and listen to grotesque proofs that she has been marked out, in Douglas' terms, as at once pure and polluted, as willingly set apart at first and then against her will – turning into a figure that provokes erotic violence by her refusal to join in the play of masks. Cecilia is persuaded not to wear a costume or a mask, which at once sets her apart and exposes her to the disguised attacks of others. The sense of taboo and the breaking of taboos is also evoked by the fact that the masquerade takes place, not in a

⁴ Georges Bataille, *L'Erotisme*, Paris, Editions de Minuit, 1957, p. 17. Subsequent references are to this edition.

public place such as Vauxhall, but in the house of her guardians the Harrels. Here is an early part in the chapter that leads to an attack on her by a figure of the devil:

She had prepared no masquerade habit for this evening, as Mrs Harrel, by whose direction she was guided, informed her it was not necessary for ladies to be masked at home... Soon after nine o'clock, every room was occupied, and the common crowd of regular masqueraders were dispersed through the various apartments. Dominos of no character, and fancy-dresses of no meaning, made, as is usual at such meetings, the general herd of the company: for the rest, the men were Spaniards, chimney-sweepers, Turks, watchmen, conjurers, and old women; and the ladies, shepherdesses, orange girls, Circassians, gipseys, haymakers, and sultanases.

Cecilia had, as yet, escaped any address beyond the customary enquiry of *Do you know me?* and a few passing compliments; but when the rooms filled, and the general crowd gave general courage, she was attacked in a manner more pointed and singular.

The very first mask who approached her, seemed to have nothing less in view than preventing the approach of every other: yet had he little reason to hope favour for himself, as the person he represented, of all others least alluring to the view, was the devil! He was black from head to foot, save that two red horns seemed to issue from his forehead; his face was so completely covered, that the sight only of his eyes was visible, his feet were cloven, and in his right hand he held a wand the colour of fire. (I:106-107)

The devil turns out to be Monckton, who quite literally tries to use the camouflage of the masquerade to abduct Cecilia. The dangers of theatrical disguise and play could hardly be plainer. There may even be an oblique protest on the part of the author: Burney was eager to write for the theatre, but her first play, *The Witlings*, had just been condemned and suppressed by her father.

Just before the masquerade we find an explanation of Laclos' deepest interest in Burney, whose earlier novel *Evelina* he had also read, a suggestion of what kind of novel *Cecilia* really is. Soon after publishing *Les liaisons dangereuses* Laclos took up a topic and question proposed by the Académie de Chalons-sur-Marne, "Quels seraient les meilleurs moyens de

perfectionner l'éducation des femmes"⁵. On this topic he wrote his longest and most revealing piece of discursive prose. The education of women was one of the most contested subjects in this period of enlightenment and revolution. Mary Wollstonecraft put it at the centre of her *Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1792). But unlike Wollstonecraft, who takes a tough-minded and anti-erotic approach that later feminists have often resented, Laclos dwells lovingly on the growth and development of girls and young women. He devotes several pages to puberty and the onset of the menstrual cycle, meditates on the very best form of education, and then concludes by giving his approval to a guided and shared program of reading:

Il ne suffit donc pas de lire beaucoup, ni même de lire avec méthode, il faut encore lire avec fruit; de manière à retenir et à s'approprier, en quelque sorte, ce qu'on a lu. C'est l'ouvrage de la mémoire et du jugement. Le moyen le plus commode, le plus agréable et le plus facile de remplir ce double objet, serait d'avoir quelqu'un d'éclairé et d'adroit qui fit dans le même temps les mêmes lectures, avec qui on pût en causer chaque jour, et qui sût diriger l'opinion sans le dicter. (p. 457)

This is precisely the pattern and mode of self-education that Cecilia undertakes, though on her own, just before she experiences the very different kind of education offered by the masquerade:

Her next solicitude was to furnish herself with a well-chosen collection of books; and this employment, which to a lover of literature, young and ardent in its pursuit, is perhaps the mind's first luxury, proved a source of entertainment so fertile and delightful that it left her nothing to wish.

She confined not her acquisitions to the limits of her present power, but, as she was laying in a stock for future as well as immediate advantage, she was restrained by no expence from gratifying her taste and her inclination. She had now entered the last year of her minority, and therefore had not any doubt that her guardians would permit her to take up whatever sum she should require for such a purpose.

5 P.A.F. Choderlos de Laclos, "De l'éducation des femmes", *Oeuvres complètes*, Paris, Gallimard/Pléiade, 1951, p. 403. All subsequent references are to this edition.

And thus, in the exercise of charity, the search of knowledge, and the enjoyment of quiet, serenely in innocent philosophy passed the hours of Cecilia. (II. 103)

This is very different from the performed and risky self-development offered by theatre, opera, and masquerade. Cecilia's bookish idyll and *thébaïde* disintegrates in the masquerade, and the devil's attack foreshadows her increasingly threatened life.

Georges Bataille points to the extreme and radical version, the dead end as it were of the erotic when he observes "dans ses romans, le marquis de Sade définit dans le meurtre un sommet de l'excitation érotique" (p. 25). And Burney suggests this extreme in the mirror-like narrative of Albany, a character who at various crises in the novel emerges to prophesy the death or defilement of Cecilia. Albany finally confesses to Cecilia that he had come from the West Indies to England, where he fell in love with and then abandoned a girl. When he then returns from Jamaica to find that she has been seduced by another, he beats her and drives her into prostitution. He then kidnaps her and takes her off, as Lovelace had abducted Clarissa, to a house in the country. There she pines away and dies, leaving to Albany a "loved corpse" that he kept till he was driven mad by his sense of guilt. This *mise en abyme* of the novel, in which several other characters are driven to or beyond the bounds of madness, becomes all the more revealing about the larger structure of *Cecilia* when we realize from Burney's manuscripts that Cecilia Beverley was originally called "Albina Wyerley", and when we realize further that her lover was originally called "Egerton" or "Randolph". Burney's final decision to name him "Mortimer" has not only the ring of death in the name itself, but also an historical allusion to one of the bloodiest battles of the Wars of the Roses, the Battle of Mortimer's Cross. Cecilia's desire to experience life, her own and that of others, to the point or danger of death, becomes the larger narrative of this complex novel.

This is also the erotic encounter of innocence and experience that fascinated Laclos about *Cecilia*, in which he saw a rival and alternative to his *Liaisons dangereuses*. His critique

of the novel shows that he saw through the episodic and carnevalesque character of the book to pick out the ability of an innocent heroine to resist even the most appealing kinds of seduction, those of a true lover:

Il ne raconte pas sa passion, il la montre, et, ce qui nous avait paru admirablement observé, de ce moment Cécile rentre dans tous les droits de son sexe. Elle se rappelle avec sévérité la conduite disparate de Mortimer et, tandis qu'elle n'approuve que tendresse et satisfaction, elle ne montre que rigueur et colère. Elle va jusqu'à refuser les soins de Mortimer et l'infortuné jeune homme s'éloigne enfin sans être pardonné. (p. 513)

Cecilia's rigor, her refusal to yield even to love except on her terms, which cannot be realized in the panoramic (dis)order of her world, is what Laclos most admired. Cecilia's innocence becomes a danger to herself and to all who come in contact with her. Even her marriage to Mortimer Delville (and the surname shows how much of him is still part of the urban (dis)order) remains unconsummated when Mortimer apparently kills Monckton in a duel and is forced to flee to France. She herself searches like a madwoman through the night streets and low life of London, and comes to be described as insane: "Whereas a crazy young lady, tall, fair complexioned, with blue eyes and light hair, ran into the Three Blue Balls... on Thursday night" (V:901). This degradation springs directly from her innocence, and leads to an ending of the novel that is hardly a happy end. Although Burney's family, including her father, the great musicologist Charles Burney, tried to dissuade her from writing a tragic or sad ending to the novel, *Cecilia* ends with a shadowed and unillusioned sense of the heroine's happiness:

Yet human it was and as such imperfect! She knew that, at times, the whole family must murmur at her loss of fortune, and times she murmured herself to be thus portionless, tho' an HEIRESS. Rationally, however, she surveyed the world at large, and finding that of the few who had any happiness, there were none without some misery, she checked the rising sigh... and... bore partial evil with cheerfullest resignation. (V:941)

Even in this downbeat conclusion the novelist and her narrative recognize that Cecilia had to lose her innocence to lose her power to attract desire and danger to her protracted, privileged, and liminal person.

If the end of *Cecilia* presents us with an anticlimax that puts an end to eroticism, the last we know of Burney's relations with Laclos puts an even stranger end to this paper. We have no reason to believe that Burney ever knew of or read Laclos' essay on *Cecilia*. But after the outbreak of the French Revolution she became a friend and intimate of the moderate émigré community that centered around Lafayette. She came to know them all; Mme de Staél, Talleyrand, Mme de Genlis. Among them she met and married Alexandre d'Arblay, a fellow-officer and acquaintance of Laclos'. D'Arblay had read (as they all had) *Les liaisons dangereuses*, and he even thought that he was the model for the character of the Chevalier d'Anceny, whose name seemed to echo his own. The Burney family papers show that after their return to France in 1803, someone (perhaps d'Arblay himself) told her how much the author of *Les liaisons dangereuses* admired her novels, *Cecilia* above all, and asked if she would like to make his acquaintance. Laclos was then a general of artillery in Napoleon's army, but the scandal of his novel was uppermost in her mind when Burney said, with a refusal the conclusion of *Cecilia* helps to explain, that she was sensible of the compliment Laclos had paid her, but that any contact with him would be unthinkable.

Abstract

Auf den ersten Blick scheint das Verhältnis von Burneys Roman *Cecilia* zur bewundernden Kritik des Autors der *Les liaisons dangereuses* eine der ungewöhnlicheren Liaisons der Literaturgeschichte zu sein. Der Essay von Laclos, 1784 in drei Teilen im *Mercure de France* erschienen, war dessen einzige literaturkritische Arbeit, und das darin ausgedrückte Lob galt einem Roman, der zur Gänze – und gänzlich unschuldig – Laclos' eigener literarischer Theorie und Praxis widersprach. Doch *Cecilia* zeigt, was hier als eine Erotik der Unschuld analysiert wird, in der die jungfräuliche Heldenin durch die Zweideutigkeit und Verwirrung bedroht wird, die gemäss Mary Douglas und Mircea Eliade die Basis aller kultureller Kodierung von Reinheit und Verschmutzung oder von Heiligem und Entheiligtem bildet. Und wenn sich diese Auflösung, wie sie es in beiden Romanen tut, ausweitet auf den *danger moral* von Tod oder Verdammung, dann können wir schliessen, dass Laclos Burney sehr weise und vielleicht gar zu gut gelesen hat.

