

MÉMOIRE

DE

MADAME DE VALMONT.

Sur l'ingratitude et la cruauté de la famille des FLAUCOURT envers la sienne, dont les sieurs de FLAUCOURT ont reçu tant de services.

The Memoirs of Madame de Valmont.

With regard to the ingratitude and the cruelty of the Flaucourt family towards her own, despite the many services they rendered to the Sires of Flaucourt.¹

IT is a terrible thing to complain of those one loves, cherishes and respects. I would wish to stifle within me a resentment that, alas!, is only too legitimate. But an excess of cruelty, fanaticism and hypocrisy makes that impossible and although, for my own part, I am bound by decency to eternal silence, the sufferings of an infirm mother, her age, the appalling poverty in which she is thrown, mean that I can no longer hold back with regard to the people that Nature obliges me to inculcate. The only one that I could spare, due to the contempt that I would have to use to portray him, is that vile and rampant Lafontaine, whose advice, as pernicious as it was lethal, poisoned the heart of a young man destined for glory. This young man, alas!, is my brother, now the Marquis de Flaucourt, since the death of his too unhappy father. No doubt I should blush at the error that gave me life, but Nature, who knows neither law nor prejudice, never loses its rights over a sensitive soul.²

1 Olympe de Gouges often explored and explained her own life in seemingly non-autobiographical writings; references to personal experiences enliven many of her works. This text is quite clearly autobiographical despite its title, and would have been understood as such by contemporary readers. Written in 1784 following the death of de Gouges's supposed father, Jean-Jacques Le Franc de Pompignan, the work was eventually published in 1788. It was a response to the harsh treatment the author received at the hands of her natural family, reflecting, within its fictional world, the reality of de Gouges's situation. *Mémoires* in French literature can be autobiographical recollections or memoranda and legal briefs. In *Reading Olympe de Gouges* (Palgrave Macmillan: New York, 2013) Carol Sherman makes clear that in creating her own form of judicial memoir de Gouges was hoping to 'persuade the public of her just cause' whilst also persuading her readers that 'the family of man is first of all the family of woman.', thus the rights of mothers and children must be recognised both by families and by society irrespective of their marital or legitimate statuses. Sarah Maza in her *Private Lives and Public Affairs: the Causes Célèbres of Prerevolutionary France* (Berkeley: University of California, 1993) points out that in the late eighteenth century the boundaries between the realms of the political and the literary were more fluid than in our own time. The *Mémoire de Madame de Valmont* should be read with these ideas in mind for it is far from being a poorly written epistolary novel as has been suggested in the past. With its multiple voices and satirical flair it creates a hall of mirrors, each reflection giving another view of the central narrative that attacks aristocratic privileges and religious bigotry, challenges assumptions of truth and fiction, highlights the lack of faith shown by men when they make promises to women and deplores society's unwillingness to allow women to voice their concerns or take part in political debate. The eponymous heroine is seen to take charge of her life despite prejudicial attitudes towards illegitimacy; she is assisted by a female author whose own history is remarkably similar. These multiple projections of Olympe de Gouges's own situation, as artful as they are, express the frankness and courage with which she attempts to break down the constraints imposed on her, and others, by society's guardians.

It cannot be a coincidence that de Gouges chose Valmont as her protagonist's name but why she chose the surname used by Choderlos de Laclos in his *Liaisons Dangereuses*, published in 1782, is a matter for conjecture.

2 The French word *sensible* would have been translated as 'sensible' in the eighteenth century and is equivalent to the modern English 'sensitive'. I have chosen to use 'sensitive' in some instances in this text, despite this particular meaning only coming into use in the mid-nineteenth, in places where I feel the eighteenth century usage is too removed from our own to make the sense clear to modern readers.

Hardly had I made the acquaintance of my brother in society, than the vile seducer who overwhelmed him a few years ago, who subjugated his tastes and his reason, took him away from me. All my hopes were pinned on him for I had no reason to fear that he would have stifled the call of Nature in his heart. Not being the only object of my *Memoir*, I leave him in order to turn my attention to more essential characters. Time and the principled education that he received may return him to me, and offer me proof of his fraternal love.

Let Gods and men pass judgement on me in the awful position I find myself in due to the injustice of those who have excited within me grievance, indignation and revolt. All the facts that I will advance are authentic truths. It is an indelible stain on the memory of the Marquis de Flaucourt, and those who should have erased it merely extended it, by increasing his wrongs.

My father abandoned me in my cradle, such is my fate; I have yet to bemoan my mother's. I was quite entitled to make a claim on the rights of Nature for my worldly existence yet I sacrificed it, as will be seen in my correspondence with the Flaucourt family, in favour of the one who gave me life. The blood ties and common interests that existed between this family and my own, were well enough established to engage these devout souls to distribute some of their wealth to the the Marquis de Flaucourt's unfortunate god-daughter, who, in her old age, endures the most miserable poverty. Until now I have not abandoned her, but my means are now so diminished that I can see myself being forced to withdraw. It is not my fate that afflicts me, but my poor mother's cruel situation. The scene makes my heart break. What would I not do to procure the help that is necessary to her in her old age? How harsh and unbearable must the weight of poverty be to one who was raised with wealth! And how bitter it must be for her to suffer her sad and cruel situation under the gaze of this ungrateful family! Everything I advance serves to make known that we are not strangers to the Flaucourt family, and that my family were not the scum of the earth, to take back any of the tributes they had proffered to help the House of Flaucourt. But, had mine been poor mercenaries, would the House of Flaucourt not be responsible for a salary that their gratitude should, on their behalf, have lavished on my unfortunate mother since necessity forces her to claim on their largesse and, were she to be given it, this would merely be discharging a liability on their part. Their pretext for not coming to her aid would be a splendid example that would convince all those who share their way of thinking, fitting for those truly considered to be men. I do not expect charity on their part, I only demand an alimony for my mother of seven or eight hundred *livres*. Their appalling ingratitude, and their inexpressible harshness, have pushed my discretion beyond all bounds and, whilst it may be wrong of me to unmask them, my fault is most excusable. Only those to whom Nature refused a sensitive heart could fail to be moved by my account. All cannot be ferocious souls, hardened by fanaticism, such as Madame la Marquise de Flaucourt, and the most enlightened Prelate, who is as weak as she is, who make it a Religious act to be so utterly cruel. Alas! What is this Religion? Either I have misunderstood its dogma or it would appear to teach clemency and decency. This worthy Prelate, who holds the priesthood in his hands, and this respectable Widow, both beside the death bed of the author of my days, instructed him in decency and the repentance of his sins. It is to expiate them, they told him, that they induced him to make annuities of two thousand *écus* to his servants to be devised to their children. And she who had the most legitimate rights, rights that Religion itself imposes, received not even the smallest mark of humanity. This pious Prelate, this milk-brother of the unfortunate woman, far from encouraging or entreating his sister-in-law to remind his dying brother of his duties towards a woman who used to be so dear to both of them, he had the barbarity to close the dying man's eyes and let him descend to his grave, shrouded in the cruellest error.³ This is how

3 I have used the phrase 'milk-brother' because it is a literal translation from the French. The OED gives 1897 as the first date for a usage in English meaning an unrelated person with whom one shared a wet nurse. Given the prevalence of wet nurses prior to the 1890s it seems unlikely that the term would not have been used and understood in earlier times; on that basis I have allowed myself to put it in this text.

the great man ended his career, surrounded by the disregard in which they had no doubt held him for many a year. Despite his being indifferent to me since religiosity had taken over his soul, I nonetheless esteemed him. He cherished me in my childhood. I will never forget his tender caresses and every time a fond memory reminds me of him I weep, I cry for his loss, and my tears are sincere. They are the tears of Nature, can one condemn them? I have always respected his piety and, concerned that I might cause it alarm, I sacrificed my interests for its own good. Some Courtiers, famed for their titles as well as their wit, wished to persuade me that M. le Marquis de Flaucourt's conduct towards me was quite reprehensible, and that I should charge his Antagonist with his chastisement. They even wanted to introduce me to him, and find me the means to make the journey.⁴ My answer is well known; here it is in a few words. I came into the world under the cover of marriage: if le Marquis de Flaucourt is my father then I must not obtain an identity or his favours through the means of his enemy; if he is not my father then I have no claim on him. Although everything attests to my being his daughter, I would rather cast doubt on it than to cause him sorrow for one instant. These people who approached me, indignant at his behaviour towards me, could not prevent themselves from bemoaning my fate and commending me; they are all living and willing to attest to the justice of my case. What value could I find in such a fame that would bring sorrow and torment to the one for whom I would have sacrificed my days to make his own happy and peaceful. But since death has now taken him from me without my having troubled his days, I need no longer curb myself regarding those who have survived him, who aggravated his wrongs, and who heightened my misery.

What a triumph for his adversary if I had interested him in my fate, he who had never been able to strike a blow against either his [her father's] probity or his sensibility; these sallies and epigrams simply allowed his wit to shine without dishonouring the one who was the object of these railleries. His means were worn out, and although the ones I would have brought to him could have tempted any woman other than myself, my love and my respect allowed me to prefer my outlandishness to an empty celebrity. Nature does not lose her rights but those that I accuse have no ear for it. Yes, I will boldly state.....a wealthy family indiscriminately dispenses its largesse and only refuses it to the one woman who was the most entitled to receive it. Deaf to the cries of blood and humanity, they believe they will reach Heaven through a cruel piety; they reproach me for my existence with which they were familiar, as was all the Province, before I knew myself. In my childhood I was cherished by all the family, and I was ignorant of laws and opinion. I was brought up to cherish them, and I would do so still if they were harsh only towards me. Let them overwhelm me with their animosity, let them make me the victim of the Marquis de Flaucourt's mistake, and that of my mother, but let them not

The circumstances and family ties described in this part of the text, and revisited in different forms throughout the work, are identical to those that existed between de Gouges, her mother and Le Franc de Pompignan who married, late in life, a devout woman and whose younger brother (who was breast fed by de Gouges's grandmother) became an archbishop. After her father's death de Gouges met her half-brother and believed she had been accepted by him as his natural sister.

⁴ De Gouges's father Jean-Jacques Le Franc, marquis de Pompignan, was offered the seat at the Académie française vacated by the death of the mathematician, biologist and cosmologist Pierre Louis Moreau de Maupertuis (1698 - 1759). De Pompignan's conceited and pompous acceptance speech of 10 March 1760 brought him into direct conflict with Voltaire and other Philosophes, some of whom had voted him in. He suggested that true men of letters should allow Christianity to guide them in order to counter the vanity and falsehoods of men claiming to be the philosophers of the modern world. Voltaire counter-attacked with his customary wit and vitriol. De Pompignan was so successfully ridiculed by the exchanges that he no longer dared appear at the Académie and subsequently retired to his country estate. Ironically Maupertuis had himself been the butt of Voltaire's ridicule at an earlier time.

De Pompignan turned to writing devout poetry and translating religious texts in his retirement. De Gouges could have made a name for herself, and perhaps made useful literary connections, if she had accepted the offer to use Voltaire to expose her paternity, during her natural father's lifetime. However, nothing could persuade her that this was a reasonable way to behave.

abandon her. Let the Prelate, her milk-brother, recognise true decency and offer her the same as he owed the one who gave him her breast. Regarding Madame la Marquise, she is indifferent to my demands; nonetheless she has imposed upon herself duties that derive from religious laws. She promised her dying Husband that she would repay the debts that weighed on his mind; the one he had promised to his god-daughter was the first that this respectable widow should have acquitted with no thought of the past.⁵ All sins deserve mercy. This is what God commands, and the righteous follow. Who can one trust in society when those that teach religion and clemency abandon us. Is there then no probity left on earth? In what class, in what state, in what society of men can one henceforth find this sensitive piety, this tender humanity? We cry out every day,.....[four lines of dots].

FIRST LETTER.

[From the Author to Madame de Valmont.]

YOUR *Memoir*, and what you have revealed to me, Madame, regarding the Marquis de Flaucourt's family, has furnished me with a theatrical subject that I have treated, with your consent. I am convinced that this subject is of great interest to the Public, but it will be more so if you, yourself, would be prepared to trace the events that caused your sorrows. This tableau could eliminate the defects that have stolen in to my work. I must warn you, Madame, that the Comte de*** will enthusiastically entreat you to accord me this favour; your secret is mine and you can be confident that I will never betray you. Casting light on the way an ungrateful family has provoked indignation in your soul will afford you salutary relief from the ills they have inflicted upon you; the goodwill of the public will suffice as your revenge.

Why would you refuse, Madame? What consideration do you owe these people who have denied the claims of Nature and of blood regarding yourself? Time is pressing: the first Volume of my *Works* is already at the printers and I would like to add to it your Novel, convinced that the public will thank me for it, I only ask of you a simple sketch of the facts; I absolve you from all deliberation. When one has risked all by presenting a Dramatic piece written in twenty-four hours, I imagine that it is wholly acceptable to offer up a simple account, divested of all ornament, but depicted with the colours of truth. Please occupy yourself with a subject that interests you as profoundly as it does me and, you may count on my unreserved gratitude.

I am, etc.

LETTER II.

*Madame de Valmont to the Comte de ***.*

MONSIEUR,

I am not surprised by the eagerness of the Author but you, a prudent man, would you approve of an enthusiasm that is fuelled by nothing other than a passion for writing and publication? Could you, M. le Comte, engage me in such a lunatic enterprise? If it were only a question of a few facts, would she not find those in the *Memoir* that I have allowed her to print. My life has been too eventful for me to trace the details of it in such a

⁵ Anne-Olympe Gouze née Mouisset (1714 - 1784), de Gouges's mother, was Le Franc de Pompignan's god-daughter; he was five when she was baptised.

short work. Stripped of its embellishments it would be of no interest, and would conceal from the Reader all the most fascinating elements. Nonetheless I do not wish to distress her: the Comedy that I effected, four years ago, with my brother the Marquis de Flaucourt, could satisfy both of us. By exposing to the Public's view this kind of correspondence it will be seen that, through sisterly friendship, I suggested an unusual way of rendering a young man dutiful again who had been led astray by the passions and pernicious advice of the perfidious la Fontaine. This is all I can do for the Author who finds the way, on my behalf, to take revenge on a thankless family, one I have never failed to treat with esteem and respect. But, now that all the affection I felt for it has been extinguished, I break the silence that I have held for far too long out of consideration for the celebrity of the one who gave me life, and whose shade I respect. I pray you, M. le Comte, see the Author, and if she finds the offer satisfactory, I will immediately make available to her the account of the Ball adventure, as the facts determined, with letters from all the other characters, too heart-breaking to square with this entertainment.

I am, etc.

LETTER III.

From the Comte to Madame de VALMONT.

YOUR letter, Madame, affected the mind of the Author more than anything I could have said; far from being angry at the truths held within it, she is enchanted by them: you may judge by her reply. You ask me for advice regarding the wishes of our female Author; do not expect, Madame, to find me more reasonable on the matter. As curious as a woman, and loving them more than I love myself, judge, Madame how fascinated I would be by the experiences of a sensitive person. As a Judge you are too severe, and if, according to you, the members of your sex acquire significance and depth in their works, what will become of us men, those of us who are today so superficial and so inconsequential? Adieu to the superiority of which we were so proud. Ladies will become our lawmakers and the weakest party will become the strongest. This revolution would be dangerous. Therefore I must hope that Ladies do not acquire a Doctor's cap and gown but rather maintain their frivolity, even in their Writings. They will be adorable as long as they have no common-sense. Molière's Blue-stockings are objects of ridicule. Those who follow in their tracks bring ruin to societies and seem, by the distortion of their minds, to contribute to the disintegration of nature itself.⁶

Women may write, but, for the sake of universal wellbeing, it is forbidden that they should aspire to anything. If these principles are adhered to then you could risk offering a passage from your life, its acceptance is guaranteed, and it would be true to say, what signifies the occasion if the narrative is good, of which I have little doubt. Therefore, Madame, support the Author's wishes, even if you were only to offer the period when you met the Marquis de Flaucourt. I personally would be most indebted to you for your compliance.

I have the honour, etc.

LETTER IV.

⁶ The writer and journalist Louis-Sébastien Mercier (1740 - 1814) was a close friend of Olympe de Gouges: in these words regarding female authors she virtually paraphrases the opinions he voiced about men's fears of being eclipsed by women if they entered the literary fray. Mercier, in the chapter on Women Authors in his *Tableau de Paris* (published in 12 volumes between 1781 and 1788) praised de Gouges for her ability, calling it a gift from nature.

*From the AUTHOR to the COMTE de **.*

MONSIEUR LE COMTE,

Madame de Valmont, who does not flatter me, and who tells me frankly what I have already told myself a hundred times, pleases me greatly; my self-esteem may not allow me to accept that I am decidedly unbalanced, but my reasoning obliges me to approve of those who find me a little unreasonable. I do not aim to upset the opinions of others; I know that I am petulant when I write, that I loathe to revisit my ideas but, be they good or bad, I want them to be judged, in their entirety, if they contain some merit: in this way a feeble triumph will offer me more satisfaction than a greater glory, one I would have earned through painful laboriousness or owed to the efforts of a third person more enlightened than myself who would have denatured my works to such an extent that I would not dare appropriate them for myself. Thus, I can only write according to my lights because it would be too easy to spot work that is not mine. Those who only write naturally often vary their diction, eloquent in certain places, feeble in others, but true Connoisseurs never mistake that which flows from the same source. This, M. le Comte, is how I perceive those who judge as reasonably as yourself. I accept Madame de Valmont's offer though it is not, in many ways, in my view, as interesting as the one you desired. It is true that one cannot expect a logical narrative in so few words. But, as it is indispensable for me to put myself back in the Public eye and to beg the indulgence that it has already accorded me in favour of my printed works, and agreeably surprised to find that the *Comédie Française* has offered me a turn in advance, I have had to change my approach and in place of the Drama that I was going to print, I have been obliged to take one of my manuscripts at random, or to put it better, of my choice, and maybe it will be my worst Play that I present to the Public. Only Madame de Valmont's Novel could counterbalance its opinion. At least such is my hope. Good Day M. le Comte, find me some hard workers for, I can assure you, I will need them.⁷

I am, etc.

LETTER V.

From Madame de VALMONT to the AUTHOR.

MADAME, you must do just as you wish. M. le Comte has persuaded me so I will no longer question sending you the precise extract of my life. The circumstances of my birth are so bizarre that I can only tremble as I place them under the gaze of the Public: it will only be in happier times, quieter ones for me, when, above all suspicion, I might courageously tell humanity about the events that are the warp and weft of my life. Sincere avowals, free from any imposture, will no doubt assure me of the esteem that may be withheld from my feeble writings. A woman who is truthful and sincere is as rare a sight as an ignorant woman who becomes an Author, and it is by such singularity that, like yourself Madame, I can make myself known. There is so much similarity between us that I have no doubt that we will be mistaken for each other. A day will come when this enigma will be

⁷ The hard workers are probably scribes or secretaries; de Gouges, like many others in her time, paid others to write to her dictation, this was common in the highest circles irrespective of education and literacy and is not a sign, as some have suggested, that de Gouges was illiterate. Her literary references and the books in her possession point to her being a good reader. It is true that penmanship was for her an effort (as can be seen when reading the letters she wrote from prison) and as she often stated, writing large texts at speed would have sapped her energy and dimmed her talent.

explained by you, or by me.

I am from a rich and estimable family, one whose fortunes were changed by events. My mother was the daughter of a Lawyer, very closely connected to the grand-father of the Marquis de Flaucourt, blessed by Heaven with several children. The education of the Marquis, the eldest of these children, was entrusted to my grand-father who took it on for friendship's sake. The youngest, who is still alive and whose merit has allowed him to rise to an Archbishopric, was breastfed by my grandmother thereby becoming the milk-brother of the one who gave me life and was held over the Baptismal Font by the Marquis, his older brother. All this, one way or the other, was done in the name of a friendship that had endured for a long time between these two families: my mother was therefore dear to all the Flaucourts. The Marquis, her Godfather, did not view her with indifference. Age and partiality created a gentle tender-heartedness between them the development of which was dangerous. The Marquis, carried away by the most violent love, had planned to abduct her and marry her in a foreign clime.

The Marquis's family, and my mother's, having noticed this reciprocal passion, soon found a means of separating them, but is love not able to overcome all obstacles? Neither time nor distance could change their feelings. My mother, in the mean time, was married. The Marquis was sent to Paris where he made his debut as a dramatic author with a Tragedy that rendered his name immortal, as did his Odes, his travels and several other works no less commendable. It was in the prime of his youth that he developed his talent but fanaticism put a stop to it in the middle of his career and eclipsed half of his glory. His famous Antagonist, jealous of his talents, tried to obfuscate them through ridicule but he could not succeed and was obliged, himself, to grant that the Marquis had a distinguished excellence. Indeed, he may have only had one true failing in his life: that of having been insensible and deaf to the cries of nature. He returned to his province where he found the one he had loved, and of whom he was still enamoured, married and a mother of several children whose father was absent. What terms can I use when proclaiming the truth to avoid wounding decency, opinion or the law? I was born the very day of his [the absent father's] return and all the town believed that my birth was the result of the Marquis's amours. Far from protesting the new Amphitryon took it in his stride like a true Courtier.⁸ By calling me his daughter, in public, the Marquis's tender heartedness towards me broke all bounds of decorum. In fact it would have been very difficult to disguise the truth: a striking resemblance was too clear a proof. It would be very conceited of me to accept that I resemble him, even in virtue, if it were not for the fact that I have been told so a hundred times. He tried every means available to persuade my mother to hand me over to his paternal care; doubtless my education would have been of a higher order but, she always rejected this proposal, thus causing the rift between them of which I was the victim. I was only six years old when the Marquis returned to his seat where the widow of a Financier came to marry him. It was in the tranquility of this wedded bliss that my father forgot about me and only concerned himself with the son whose story you ask of me. I make no mention of the events of my life from the age of six to thirty, the time when I met this younger brother aged twenty-two. Having learnt in his youth that he had a sister he made several enquiries in order to meet her. This is how he found me.

Finding himself in one of those houses where good and bad company meet, a man of my acquaintance spoke to him without knowing who he was and asked him his name. This question astonished the Marquis who in turn asked the reason for it. It is, he said, because there is an astonishing resemblance between you and Madame de Valmont. At the name alone the Marquis embraced him, looked upon him as a tutelary God, and

⁸ An ancient Greek myth tells that Zeus, attracted to Amphitryon's new wife Alcmene, disguised himself as the absent husband in order to deceive her into welcoming his embraces. Amphitryon returned to find that his wife was pregnant with twins, one his own and one Zeus's. The latter was the demi-god Hercules. Molière's play based on the myth was first performed in 1668.

begged him to bring him to me: this he did. As the person was announced, and I saw him accompanied by a young man, a most extraordinary emotion agitated me; tears flowed from my eyes; I cried out: it is my brother; it is the son of the Marquis de Flaucourt. We confirmed the blood ties that united us with the most tender embraces. Not a day passed without my having the satisfaction of seeing him two or three times. Soon he entrusted me with his innermost thoughts and I discovered that a monster, a vile agent, had subjugated his reason. I wished to distance him from this dangerous cheat but, soon, he became wary of me too. Indeed he seemed to regret all that he had told me in confidence. However, as friendship and nature still triumphed over him, he continued to tell me of those adventures that he thought tasteful, such as the Opera Ball one that nearly turned his head.

One of his cousins, a woman of wit, who desired his happiness as much as I, sought to fascinate him under cover of a mask: she made him fall in love to such a point that he was about to give up a little creature that he was mad about, whose warped plots, connived at with the perfidious La Fontaine, I would blush to expose. His cousin's courage ran out as soon as the carnival was over. She had given him permission to write to her: I was apprised of everything; I took charge of the correspondence, and you will discover, according to my method, whether I knew how to deliver the task, and to what extent my friendship exerted itself on behalf of my brother's happiness.

I am, etc.

FIRST LETTER

From Madame de VALMONT, addressed to the Marquis de FLAUCOURT, assuming the name of the UNKNOWN ONE.

HOW hard it is for a sensitive heart to resist its inclination! The more I consider that chance is shaping our liaison, the more it appears to me to be imprudent to continue with it. It is true that I made you a promise to do so, but can one rely on love's sermons. Those who give in to all the transports of this passion, do they not, at every moment, violate their promises? A more refined person, who loves for the first time, trembles at the thought of surrendering to their own feelings: I do not fear being unfaithful to the one to whom I would give my heart, rather I fear his fickleness; I will bestow this gift only after I have established the strength of his feelings. Can you blame my wariness, you, who only knows me hidden by a mask? When you see me with an uncovered face, will you be sure to love me as I am? If that were true, God! How happy I should be! Then I could be convinced that this is not a simple fantasy but a mutual affinity based on the sensibility and the esteem of two well-bred souls. These, Monsieur, are the thoughts of the little mask; they may appear somewhat severe and very different from the madness that possessed her at the Ball. The cool manner that permeates her letter is ill-suited to the transports of two young Lovers, but she is not in your presence. Meanwhile it is in your power to obtain an interview, which will only take place after the sacrifice that you have offered her. It is beneath her, and if she is insistent it is in order to pull you from the abyss into which she sees you plunge. Adieu: your reply will dictate her conduct, and, above all, no questioning of the Porter charged with the correspondence; your queries would be in vain; you would gain nothing, and you would lose much of the confidence that you have inspired in the one who wishes still to remain unknown.

LETTER II.

From the Marquis de FLAUCOURT to Madame de VALMONT, believed to be the UNKNOWN ONE from the Ball.

IS this a mistake? Is this the truth? I am in an emotional turmoil. Hope makes me mad with delight, and the pain of fear torments me. Could it be that an amiable person loves me? Would my happiness no longer be an imaginary entity? I await the moment that will tear me from an uncertainty that is such a blend of joy and sadness. If it is as I desire it to be, I lack the soul to feel all of my felicity; if it is not as I wish, I will enter the void. I was sick before your letter arrived; I passed the time by talking to you, with no expectation that you were thinking of me. Your Epistle cured me, and I am now merely mad: my hand shakes, my head is troubled, my heart is in an inconceivable agitation. I will get everything ready to obey your orders; I will even charge you with the dismissal of the person in question. You may make it come to pass after seeing if it suits you. Fortunate! If all my anxieties can be soothed by a denouement that is still much in doubt. I will end for I no longer know what I am saying and my reason forbids me to write any more until my heart is quite reassured.

I have the honour of being, etc.,

LETTER III.

From the Marquis de FLAUCOURT to the UNKNOWN ONE.

HERE it is, little mask, the letter that you have demanded of me as proof of my conversion.⁹ Will you remain incredulous, and will you doubt the gratitude and feelings of the one who considers that the price that you place on happiness, for which you give him room to hope, is a truly slight sacrifice? No, dear little mask, it is no such thing: I owed it to myself, before I knew that I owed it to you, and I blush to compare an inclination that dishonours me and a pure and tender attachment, that my heart yearns for, and that will fulfil me entirely. Yes, little mask, all I wish is to please you, and my joy is to love you. I congratulate myself on my sensibility which allows me to know true happiness. Nonetheless, you should not obstinately maintain your incognito. Adieu, dear little mask, adieu. Bring closer to you, soon, he who cries at being distanced from you, and let this evening, in the bosom of delights, be the one when he recognises the woman who makes him the happiest of men. Adieu, once again, my pen cannot stop, it knows that it is driven by a heart that is entirely yours.

LETTER IV.

From the Marquis de FLAUCOURT to his former MISTRESS.

MADemoiselle, the time has come to give you some bad news that I have deferred as long as was possible. My parents have discovered our liaison: they have made me promise to break it and I cede to their power as well as to the respect that I owe to them. I prefer to alert you to what you must now undertake, rather than to see you exposed to the danger of their authority. I have charged la Fontaine to give you the funds necessary for your departure. Though you have given me causes for complaint, I would not seek to overwhelm you with these in this circumstance. Go back to your Fatherland, and do not oblige me to behave violently. *My happiness* depends on your remoteness. You will return all my letters to la Fontaine, so that there is no trace left of our intimacy. Your conduct in

⁹ Throughout the letters to 'little mask' the writer uses the informal 'tu' as a form of address.

this instance will appease my parents, and my gratitude will be reflected in the rewards I offer your complaisance. I exhort you, Mademoiselle, to follow the prudent advice that I am offering. If you resist, I no longer wish to hear you mentioned.

I am, etc.

LETTER V.

From Madame de VALMONT, assuming the name of the UNKNOWN ONE, to the Marquis de FLAUCOURT.

I am satisfied by your conduct. Your letter is wise although I found it somewhat harsh. The use of your parents as a pretext is a good invention but, in order to stop loving, is such cruelty necessary? Nonetheless, I will not espouse the defence of this creature, I hate her too much to vindicate her: she deceived you with impunity, and I am, on this subject, better informed than you. I have been assured, again, that there is a man you trust who cheats you ignominiously and who even had relations with this girl who duped you; no doubt you will put him off as you did the Demoiselle of Metz. Now let us only concern ourselves with what interests us. You love me, so you say, and I choose to believe it but I am not yet overcome. I will not put on paper all that I feel for you. Let it be enough for you that my suffering is increased, restrained by fear I consult my reason and cry out.....Without having caught sight of me can he really feel an enduring love? No. Common sense tells me: it is impossible and you are mistaken; he is a young man with an elated mind and a romantic disposition; he will promise as much to the first amiable object that his eyes light upon, since you have piqued his interest without his ever having seen you. Never mind, I reply, reason, keep quiet. Despite you I will follow my inclination, but, by following it, I will be on my guard, yes, my head will protect my heart and I will keep my defeat at arm's length. If the one I love becomes worthy of my love with what rapture I will be to fly into his arms. If I am lucky enough to captivate him, if he honours the mystery and if he does nothing to compromise me, what happiness could be more perfect than my own! But what is this illusion of mine? You treat me falsely; I have learnt that you have a new intrigue, one to which I gave no credence at first, but, tell me, who is this woman whose house you visit every day? I have heard nothing bad of her, but your assiduity appears suspect in my eyes. Her name is Madame de Valmont: you see, I am well instructed. Who is this woman? What is your connection to her? Explain to me, pray, what motives oblige you to see her. I flatter myself that you will not refuse me this avowal; my happiness depends upon it. Perhaps this is just idle curiosity on my part, or perhaps I was deluded about my own feelings. Finally, is this jealousy? Is it generosity trying to deflect you from a dangerous liaison...Can I know myself? Must I believe you? Must I surrender? Following on from what I ask of you, I will understand my feelings more clearly. Adieu, you whom I love at my peril.

LETTER VI.

From the Marquis de FLAUCOURT to the UNKNOWN ONE.

HOW agreeable and unkind you [2ps throughout] are, at one and the same time, little mask! How your letter consoles and afflicts me in equal measure. My suspicions and fears were thus only too well founded, and despite all the protestations of the most tender love, it appears that you were still to decide whether to abandon the one whom you promised to

make so happy?....Was I then wrong to seem incredulous at all that you were saying to me, and, in the midst of my gladness, was it not reasonable that I should float in an indecision that you meanwhile sought to put right in accordance with my desires. How the last phrases of your letter saddened me! I trembled as I read them, and shuddered at the dangerous risk I had taken of being so cruelly abandoned by the one on whom my current felicity depends. To dissipate my alarms it took, at the very least, the sight of your first Epistle in its entirety. I would be at the zenith of my joy, if you had not added very unkind things: you say, little mask, that you do not know if it is curiosity, or an inclination, that you flee from. Is that what you said to me during the several hours we spent together? Is this the outcome of your promise to the most tender lover? Does this resemble the very affectionate language that pierced my heart? And when one has repeated a thousand times to someone that one loves him, and will only love him, is it not perjury to then allow him to believe that one was merely moved by curiosity? Unkind little mask, if you believed what you told me for two entire nights, would it cost you so much more to write it to me, and would you not have done so if you had acted on the first impulse of your soul. Ah! little mask, how afflicted I am by this vicissitude! I, who believed I was loved; I, who gave myself up to you with all the sincerity of my heart; I, who congratulated myself on a moment that seemed to guarantee my happiness, now I only perceive a beautiful dream which nonetheless retains some aspects of reality, but how feeble those are compared to that which I have been shown. Yes, dear little mask, I admit that this pains me. I cannot prevent myself from believing that the hope that had engaged me so vividly may have been, perhaps, but a chimera. Alas! I did not seek to deceive you; it is you who introduced yourself to me, it is you who offered me happiness and, in offering it, you imagined taking it away from me. This idea lacerates me; it forces copious tears from me which I can only dry on your bosom. If you knew my sensibility, you would not have varied your style: if you read my heart, you would find that I am only expressing what it inspires; I can see, meanwhile, that you still have doubts about my good faith. You are concerned about a woman that I visit often; when you know her history you will forgive me with ease. She is a natural daughter of my father; she is my sister. I am very attached to her: she lives nearby and I make the most of our being neighbours to show her that I love her, as a sister, despite the prejudice. You must not fear that nature will make love unfaithful. You can make your own enquiries, you will see that I have acted with honour: she is no stranger to me, and I owe her to you particularly. I am attaching to this letter, little mask, all that will prove to you that, before your reply, I was preoccupied by you. The letter that was meant for you was written in advance, and my muse had begun to celebrate the one my heart cherishes most tenderly; you will see from it that the test you are putting me to is very cruel, and that entire days passed far from you are not worth two nights at the Opera Ball.

I had a mad idea to suggest to you, since what I am dismissing most gladly must be sent far away from me before I can appear at your side: listen to me, and read my proposition. You would chose a third party's house; you would go there in the costume that so strikingly caught my attention; I would respect the veil that would cover you. I would not see you, but I would speak to you and I would be near you: I love you for yourself, not for your face, although as far as I know it is pretty. You regretted that the Opera Ball was over, well, here is something that would resemble it closely: in truth only the two of us would be there, but, among all that crowd, did we not behave as though there had been no one else there but us. In this way you would accord love and fantasy and all the world would be content. I am also sending you the poetry that you asked of me. You may judge from my Writings that my *Memoirs* have been devoted, in the main, to the little mask. I have not [felt] a single moment of boredom for my spirit has not ceased thinking of the one who fills my heart. Adieu, dear little mask. How I wish I could follow my letter! I would present to you the man of the world who loves you the most. Pray, write to me: that will be my only consolation so long as you keep me in exile.

I came back from the Ball with a sore throat that will keep me indoors all day today, I am alone, quite alone and you, perhaps you are in brilliant and very agreeable company. Many adoring admirers, more amiable than I, are paying court to you. Ah! I cannot bear this idea. I love an unknown one, who says that I am dear to her, and I am alone, all alone. Ah! It is awful. What is the point of loving if we cannot see each other.

Can you blame my valid wariness
I, who only know the shade of felicity.
Save my soul from wavering dismissiveness
By delivering it from such duplicity.
Often a heart only becomes unfaithful
To extricate itself from a dangerous snare;
Jealous Love does not wish to hear a call
That insults his passions without a care.
I saw in you the birth of tenderness,
And the band with which you covered your eyes,
Made you look like the child of the goddess
Aphrodite. With all your tricks and winning smiles,
By shattering the dream, the apparition
That, in the night, doubly enchanted me,
You resemble more the God of illumination,
And thus I adore your true sincerity. ---
Still you refuse to believe that my devotion
Would freely recognise your countenance;
Let me be tested, for my satisfaction,
Allow me, please, to see your comeliness.
Then, without fear of a threat unfair,
So close that my mouth may dare to trace
Anew the path that is to be found, there
Under your mask, where a kiss brushed your face

LETTER VII.

From Madame de VALMONT, still the UNKNOWN ONE, to the Marquis de FLAUCOURT.

WHAT a chimera! This sister is a good find; never mind, I am willing to believe you for every day one hears of more extraordinary things. But, if you wish to convince me of the truth, here is the last test. I have learnt that this sister has an apartment that is empty: ask to borrow it from her for a rendezvous with a woman you love; if she agrees, I will believe that she really is your sister, but, I warn you, I will know everything for she is the intimate friend of a woman of my acquaintance who keeps nothing from me.

Your poetry is charming and expresses clearly the wariness of your heart, but it does not give me proof of its soundness. The lover who accuses his beloved of inconstancy due to a simple suspicion, is highly likely to be inconstant himself. You have no reason to be wary of me, and I have a hundred to fear you. So, cease being unjust, if you do not wish to be accused of triviality: Love without trust is worth very little, it becomes the torment of a sensitive heart, without giving it any delight: that is what I endure. I could give myself up to the one who, without knowing me, distresses me but what would I become, if, one day, exulting in my weakness, he abandoned me to pointless regrets? I would see, at one and the same time, the most tender love outraged, my self-esteem humiliated and I might even be dishonoured. This is what often results from a momentary

weakness. If true tenderness made you as I would wish you to be, our happiness would be without equal. I take pleasure in conversing with you, do you find the same pleasure in reading my words? Can a lover who preaches, seduce a man who has always been bored by principles? Love finds it a sad language! Ah! you say, this is how people expressed themselves in the time of Charlemagne, and your timid and fearful lover did not realise you had this foible. You are of an age to have all the facility and ease of our Court butterflies, so would you not also share their sentiments? The men of today find it a game to seduce a woman who is naive and sensitive. Cruel entertainment! Ah! If I were destined to be your victim how I would blush at having allowed you to penetrate the secrets of my soul. Have the generosity to renounce me if you mean to deceive me. Adieu; I will fall asleep with your idea in mind: I will write to you on awakening. No doubt I will receive one of your letters, or the reply to this one. Adieu, once more, adieu, you, whom I love, you, whom I fear.

THE UNKNOWN ONE.

LETTER VIII.

From the Marquis de FLAUCOURT to Madame de VALMONT, under the name of the UNKNOWN ONE.

YOUR [2pp throughout] letter surprised me, Madame, but does not convince me, and my heart is still enveloped in a cloud that your presence alone can dissipate. What! She who consents to make me happy is the little mask who so powerfully affected me at the ball, who knew how to employ expressions and tender caresses in a manner so adroit, so naive, as to deceive me; who congratulates herself on taking advantage of a young man's affection submitted in good faith. You exalted my mind, inflamed my heart, and you find fault with me when your wishes alone form my own. Forgive, Madame, my caution but I still dare not believe it. Yet your letter has all the characteristics of truth. I refuse to be convinced that such a lengthy ploy could have such a cruel denouement. If only my happiness was not its concern! A rendezvous, such as the one you propose, is more than I dare hope for, is intolerable if it is a mere chimera, for then this pleasantry would become brutal. But, cruel unknown one, if it is you, ye Gods! If it is you, I am overwhelmed with joy, but need I make these declarations to you, for are you not aware of how I treat those who show me affection.

It would be easy to guarantee the apartment that you desire, but allow me to observe that it is unfurnished and most impractical, the house being occupied by Madame la Marquise de Niolly: her staff know me very well. If it is true that you have resolved to offer me a rendezvous, I would prefer a place that I unfortunately employed for meetings that I would wish to forget for ever. The apartment belongs to a man of my circle whom I have not seen since the Opera Ball, and who knows nothing at all about this situation. He lives in the small *Écuries du Roi* on the *Carousel*. As this house is a passage, it has two entrances; one opposite the *Thuilleries* [sic], and the other behind the *Hôtel des Fermes*: one enters without being seen by the doorman, and one meets not a soul. My friend only has one servant and I will take pains to keep him at a distance so no one will see you. I can repeat, once more, my word of honour that the secret will be kept from everyone. I will arrive first. I can certify that in all of Paris there is no place as practical as this one: in the *rue de Condé*, you cannot prevent the doorman or the owner, who is in truth my sister, and not a lover, from knowing about our rendezvous. My sister has a good heart but she is curious and indiscreet: our adventure would make her laugh a lot and she would ridicule it. I will allow your prudence to decide on all of this: I promise you fidelity, submission and discretion.

LETTER IX.

From Madame de VALMONT, still assuming the name of the UNKNOWN ONE, to the Marquis de FLAUCOURT.

WHAT a night! What an awakening! And I have no letter from you. You are still in the arms of Morpheus, and I, I am utterly captivated by dreams of love. Are you taking care of your supposed sister's apartment? Has your little creature departed? Have you dismissed that man whom I have been assured is always with you and who dishonours you? Do you love me, as you swore to me at the Opera ball and protested in all your letters? All these questions are repeated, I know, but they are vital. I will see you only after you have completely satisfied me on all that I ask. It is only nine by the clock; I am told I have visitors; what importunate pests! I will finish my letter when I have got rid of them. Certainly, I would have been quite irritated, my dear Marquis, to have been invisible to these people who are leaving my house. It is the woman who spoke to me of Madame de Valmont. She has assured me that she is your sister: there, you are justified. Let her, Madame de Valmont, be cherished by me, since I know that she only wishes for our happiness!...But, who is this young person from Toulouse, whom you placed in a Convent in Lyons. Madame de Valmont confided to my friend that you had stolen her from the bosom of her family. This passion seems to me to be more to be feared than the liaison with that little girl. My mind is discomfited, my heart is troubled; the more I seek to challenge you, the more I challenge myself. I have prepared for myself many sorrows; if you are attached in a way worthy of a man of honour, you must not seek to seduce me: you would make two women unhappy at the same time, and you could not be happy yourself. A letter from you has been brought to me. I leave you on the one hand to receive you with the other.

LETTER X.

From the Marquis de FLAUCOURT to Madame de VALMONT, under the name of the UNKNOWN ONE.

AMIABLE and dear Unknown One, still I dare not hope in what seems most flattering; I am in a labyrinth, and the more I try to get out the more lost I become. Truth does not enlighten my heart; the memory of your marks of kindness does not, I find, provide reassuring evidence, rather it is a charming tableau that recreates my vision but does not anchor my hope. Why consult your reason on the likelihood of my attachment? Does it instruct you better than the open-heartedness with which I spoke, and wrote to you, and which depicted my soul clearly? You attribute the suddenness of the effect you had on me to romantic ideas, but consider, dear and charming Unknown One, that you began by appealing to my gratitude; a quite amiable fiction, that you suggested was the truth, made you seem to me to be not a mistress, that fate offered, but a friend who had long desired my happiness; my heart only capitulated to the qualities that it believed you enshrined. Friendship, wit, wise advice, all seduced me; I concluded that all augured well for my happiness; I thought I had found the phoenix in finding a woman who could be my lover and my friend. If, until now, inconstancy has led me from attachment to attachment, you are right to have doubts, but, for five years, I have been in a worldly whirlwind; caution has preserved my liberty and at last I hoped to fill the void that has been the cause of my misery. Yes, amiable Unknown One, I was as seduced by thoughtfulness as I was by an

intoxicating moment, and if I discover that your love is but an illusion, an imaginary ghost, I will return to the abyss from which you pulled me: cease, then, to challenge me and do not compare me to those Court butterflies who only find pleasure in inconstancy. So your curiosity has unearthed new discoveries; you have been made aware of things that you would like elucidated. Dear Unknown One I am hiding nothing from you but, I beg you, do not insist upon revelations that I would not entrust to paper; if you are fair, you will approve of my conduct, and you will admit that there are secrets that can only be shared with someone one knows is trustworthy. My candidness has shown you that I have nothing to hide yet my probity dictates that I do not tell you that which I must keep silent until I know you thoroughly. I can assure you that if I have known love; today, I only have feelings for you and if you did not receive my heart's first inclinations, it is very nearly so. Have the goodness to no longer demand a confession that will only be made at your feet. Once more, I love you even though I do not know you. I do not love you as a chimera, but as an object that deserves it the most; love founded on esteem and gratitude is more solid than the one which is inspired by a pretty face. I would very much like you to follow my advice regarding our meeting. It would be a lot easier. How impatiently I await your response! I declare to you that you alone can inspire so much trust and love. Adieu, dear and adorable Unknown One: I burn with a fire that only the tomb can extinguish.

LETTER XI.

From Madame de VALMONT, assuming the name of the UNKNOWN ONE, to the Marquis de FLAUCOURT.

SO, I must surrender, I must hear you and believe you, but I proclaim to you that I will take advantage of the method you yourself invented, by still remaining concealed from your sight. I will be accompanied by a Woman of my acquaintance who knows of our liaison. It is the same person who was at the Ball with me. Far from distancing me from you with wise counsels, she cruelly, and ceaselessly, vaunted your looks, your wit, that sweet goodness that once distinguished the Frenchman from all other men and which subjugated the most savage Peoples. What times and what ideals! Now these amiable men are mere gewgaws, puffed up Adonises, masked harlequins, conceited jeering jokers, passing their days in the streets booted and furred, belabouring their grooms for not having fulfilled that which they had not been ordered to do, climbing into their cabriolets swearing and fulminating against everyone, and with no vexation, because it is the done thing to be cross for no reason, trampling everything that crosses their paths, going everywhere, never entering anywhere, unsatisfied by their days, learning everything and understanding nothing, speaking on every subject like Parrots, judging this way and that on subjects they do not comprehend, and never deepening their understanding: this is the intriguing portrait of our young men. You are quite different from this portrait but if your wit has formed your character, perhaps your principles are no better established. Forgive me, excuse, the word, it is painful to offend when one loves, but I fear you. The vital object that I had spoken to you about, in several letters, is precisely the one you affect not to address. I fear this man more than a rival, but I nonetheless do not wish to offer you new delays. Tomorrow at seven in the evening, I will come to the *Carouse!*; I will appear in a domino as you saw me at the Opera but, remember all the sacrifices that I can demand of you; you must admit all to me unreservedly, and I will be able to judge from your discourse the state of your soul. Adieu, dear Marquis, make the mask fall from the one who loves only you in the world. What a constraint for a sensitive heart, for a pure soul, to be forced to confront the eyes of her lover in disguise. Adieu; I will not blush at my defeat; adieu once more, my happiness will be perfect if you can convince me of your sincerity.

LETTER XII.

From the Marquis de FLAUCOURT to Madame de VALMONT, still under the name of the UNKNOWN ONE.

IS it quite true, my adorable Unknown One, that you are putting an end to my torments. Is this not a dream that tricks me; should I succumb to its charms. Is it not just another error? I dare not believe that you are according me such perfect happiness. Tithonus rejuvenated by Aurora did not feel as much pleasure near his lover as I do already just from the sweet emotion hope brings of being at the feet of mine tomorrow.¹⁰ Oh my sweetheart! How shocked I would be if an unfortunate contretemps happened to alter our arrangements! A icy sweat succeeds my rapture: I know not where I am. A cruel night to undergo, an eternal day to endure. Oh my adorable Unknown One, you make me feel so many different sensations! Only your presence can bring calm back to my soul. I will do everything that you ask of me. But a man to whom I attach little value, a flatterer who could be useful to us, and whom I employ only as a valet, allowing him to believe that I feel for him a certain kindness; can a man, as I say, of this sort alarm you? He is, by the way, a decent man and he feels an inviolable attachment for me; I can assure you of that. Adieu, my sweetheart: I will feel time pass very slowly! My love makes twenty-four hours feel like a century at least. I add to this disordered letter some Poetry that is no better; please forgive the wit on behalf of the sentiment.

It is not, then, mere deception
Whose spectre has seduced me.
The truth, then, follows the vision
That at night seemed to flee.
It is not, then, a chimera
Hidden by this mask inhuman;
It is not, then, a penumbra
That I clasped unto my bosom;
It is a Beauty unaffected,
That Love propelled along my course;
Whose resolve so hardhearted
Still robs me of my force.
Caught between fear and confidence,
My heart in a permanent fracture,
I dare not believe in the existence
Of a being created for my rapture.
A memory that beguiles
Offered me nothing for the future;
Tears overflowed my eyes,
And, nothing but those desires
Could overcome my terror.
Is it really true? I see arise
The day of my felicity.
Without any duplicity,

¹⁰ Tithonus, a Trojan prince, was abducted by the dawn goddess Aurora (Eos in Greek mythology) to be her lover; one version of the myth tells that Eos made Tithonus immortal, another that she had to ask Zeus to give him eternal life and forgot to ask for his eternal youth. Tithonus is generally represented as someone obliged to live forever, but as a bitter old man desperately waiting for death to relieve him, he is the symbol of decrepitude.

Love formed the one I prize,
And still must my heart surmise
The truth of renewed intimacy.
If this letter that I gourmandize
Be not the voice of treacherous art,
If it be the organ of your heart,
Amiable and charming Unknown One,
Cease your delaying of the day
When my eyes will see the one
Object that holds my heart in its sway:
Oh, let me see this face
Hidden by veils regarded,
That hid, to my eyes discarded,
Charming traits of Nature's trace
Not made to be enshrouded.
Consider mistress mine
By deferring this favour
That alone makes my life fine
The felicity I cannot savour.
Determine the happy event
That will halt the melancholy ways
Of this miserable moment,
And strew flowers upon my days.
As soon as the voice of tenderness
Calls me to be by your side,
To the bosom of my Mistress
My heart will instantly glide.
From a soul too long criminal,
at your feet forswearing error,
I will offer, full of ardour,
Lover's sermons that are faithful.
By choosing its own fate, may your mouth
Reassure a heart that is still in doubt;
From now, in appearances I'll believe,
From now, forgetting my afflictions
I'll judge, by your affections,
My pleasures and my joie de vivre.
Surely, I'll redouble the transport,
Every day, of my fondness,
It will cost me little effort
To prove to you my elatedness.
My soul, created by frankness,
Is unused to any disguise,
And wishes my mouth to express
Vows dictated by my soft-heartedness
Ceaselessly aiming to please you,
Absorbed by you alone,
Other tormenting thoughts unknown
I'll banish forever from view.
Assiduous by your side all day,
Grateful for the least caress,
I'll not oblige love to display

More than the sighs of my Mistress.
At night, a dream that I borrow
From Morpheus, in sleep serene,
Will offer me till the morrow
Both the day's pleasures so keen,
And the pleasures of tomorrow.
That will be my life's own view;
Thus will flow my every instant:
My indulgent friend, this is for you,
For you my every moment.
Cease, then, your harsh rejection
That fills me with such desperation,
Or, if the cruelty of your rigour
Wishes to prolong my error,
Listen, I'll consent once more.
On this head that I adore,
Keep the mask made to deceive,
But through its fabric dreadful
See, in my eyes, my ardour cleave
And only allow the veil to fall
When my inner heart you can perceive.
Hear the sermons that my soul's ardour
Can reveal through my expression;
When love imbues it with its fervour,
Its signs are surely above suspicion.
So then, for my just reward,
Uncover those beloved traits
Which in my heart, no wayward
Thought debilitates.
Your pretty countenance liberate
From this ghost so detested,
And of a joy so long awaited,
May I shatter the imagined portrait
And grasp reality untainted.

LETTER XIII.

From Madame de VALMONT to her brother.

DEAR brother, what has become of you? Are you aware that for three weeks we hardly ever hear of you? What sudden accident deprives me of the pleasure of seeing you? If you have suffered a fall, it seems to me to be a very serious one, and I will not be able to prevent myself from coming to your aid. Does my compassionate cry not touch you? Do you know that I laugh open-heartedly at what has happened to you. Really, you are a second Don Quixote: people are laughing at your expense and you refuse to believe it. I told you so during the Carnival but you treat your sister with suspicion. She loves you and that suffices for you to find what she has to impart to you unbearable. I no longer wish to tell you how to behave, my dear brother; you are a spoilt Child. My efforts to render you more considered are in vain: age and experience alone can allow you to see reason. But, let us speak of the Ball adventure; are you following it up? Have you been written to? I was beginning to find it amusing and I was quite annoyed to see it end so soon. I was planning

to have a hand in it; you no longer tell me anything; I see it, you are happy....one can be discreet....when the object is worthy.

Perhaps I have betrayed you, inadvertently. But could I have guessed? Your behaviour gives me cause for suspicion, I have been told many things: the ties that unite us have seemingly had doubt cast upon them, and since that time I have not seen you any more. I am far from distrusting my friend who holds my secret and yours, but her imprudence will have deprived me of your friendship; either that or the madness of your love has rendered you invisible to your family and friends; your lackey, the good Saint-Jean, made me laugh this morning: his devotion is very rare. He weeps, he upsets himself because you have not slept in three weeks; you no longer go out, and you have a beard like a Capuchin monk. The good man is somewhat ignorant in the ways of love; it is the form he adopted to seduce an artless girl. But between ourselves the one from the Ball is not a novice: you must admit that they are not found in such a place. Adieu, my dear brother, come and dine with me, and above all, get yourself shaved.

LETTER XIV.

From Monsieur the Marquis De FLAUCOURT to Madame de VALMONT his sister.

MY dear sister, I had just written to you when I was given your letter. You will see that I had cause to complain of you. What you speak of does not surprise me at all and changes nothing. I am participating in a secret correspondence. You are spoken of; questions are asked regarding a woman whom I visit frequently. I have no doubt that it is you and, in order to avoid all suspicion, I told the Unknown One your history: she must find this liaison quite straightforward. I think that, in a few words, this keeps you informed.

I cannot, as I would wish, come and dine with you. Love keeps me confined. I will not leave my room until tomorrow, and I will not see you until the following day; despite your indiscretion, I could not help myself from sharing my joy with you. Adieu, my dear sister: nothing can weaken the tie that attaches me to you. Do not blame me for this morning's letter; it was the fruit of momentary ill-humour.

LETTER XV.

From an irritated Marquis de FLAUCOURT to his sister, Madame de VALMONT, preceding the one above.

I SEE, my dearest sister, that one should never confide in people even if they appear to be utterly discreet. You have revealed the only secret that I confided to you, and that I wished to keep. I would never have believed that you could have enjoyed being so disagreeable. Had I wished to divulge it, at one time or another, it should have been left to me to do so. I was most surprised when the Unknown One disclosed, in a letter, that she knew something that is absolutely unknown. Perhaps I am indiscreet about myself, but should I have been imitated in order to compromise a young person who hides away from her parents' authority. I have not abused the faith she placed in me: she is enclosed in a Convent, we are separated by a hundred leagues; I am taking charge of finding a way to return her to her family. No doubt, I owe this ray of light to the adorable Unknown One: like her, you have given me good advice, but love is stronger than reason, yet when reason is guided by love it can do wondrous things. I am now on the right path as you desired, but, in future, I will be more circumspect. Adieu, my Sister.

LETTER XVI.

From Madame de VALMONT to her brother, the Marquis de FLAUCOURT.

SIR, I am obliged to reply to your first letter alone. I will not be pacified; I am stung to the quick, despite all the apparent friendship that you offer me in the second. Should you be in a fury at my expense, I would always reply that you have no common sense, that despite your intelligence you are behaving with the silliness of a first year college boy and that all Paris is laughing at your Ball adventure. I am convinced that a most affectionate friend is leading you into this correspondence in order to save you from committing an absurdity. Your Unknown One is a chimera; I know this to be so. You are following love's advice, listen rather to that of friendship, it will save you from behaving imprudently. I believe in the good intentions of the Unknown One but if you are not rewarded by her for all your pains, you will hate her. Adieu; I have said too much; it will be injudicious of you not to profit from my advice.

LETTER XVII.

From the Marquis de FLAUCOURT to his sister, Madame DE VALMONT.

YOU must admit, my sister, that you are unbearable. I will not address the disobliging points that you make in your letter, even though they are misplaced. I have not had a mentor in a long while and I am annoyed on your behalf that you should wish to take on this inconvenience. I am misled, I am made a fool of. Well! I assure you, none of that concerns me. It pleases me to be duped, but we shall see, in the end, which of us has been duped the most. I am ill. And if the rendezvous was missed, you alone are responsible: you may be the judge of my resentment.

LETTER XVIII.

*From Madame de VALMONT to Monsieur le COMTE de ***.*

MY novel would be finished, Sir and I would have ceased this mischief, believing that my brother had found me out, but his immoderation obliged me to continue by changing my role. You will find it surprising that, despite his intelligence, he was taken in by this new trap. You may judge from this the idiocy that a man without character is capable of when he surrenders himself to a rogue.

I had to warn you, Monsieur le Comte, as well as the reader, of this change of scene.

I have the honour of being, etc.

LETTER XIX.

From Madame de VALMONT to the Marquis de FLAUCOURT, under the assumed name of a new UNKNOWN ONE.

HOW am I going to enlighten you, Sir? For the sake of my own happiness, should I leave you in ignorance of events? Witnessing all your amorous transports for my friend, I am the only victim of the traps she laid for you. I have a sensitive heart, a delicate soul: I could not see such a trusting young man tricked with indifference. The first emotion that you filled me with was compassion. My friend chose me as her secretary, I became her confidant; I was free to write to you as I saw fit. My feelings dictated everything that you have found touching in her letters. My friend was most amused by this: I could read into her heart but she never penetrated mine. The flow that was but a sign of my purest sentiments, perfectly suited the lapses of her mind. She never had any sensibility. She believes that all women should think as she does. Alas! If only I could imitate her. I sense that I am exposing myself to disdain, and opprobrium; I am ashamed of myself; I have betrayed friendship; I was supposed to respect the pleasure that she took in tormenting you. Perhaps you would prefer that than to learn that the Unknown One from the Ball has cheated you, that she acted in bad faith and that her confidant alone was aware of your worth. By keeping utterly silent she was avenging the perfidies of her friend. I know you better than she does; we are often in the same circles: one word would suffice for you to recognise me straightaway. But, what am I saying? Unhappy one! Let him be forever unaware of my weakness. Do I have the charm, the grace of my friend, so that he would repent of having been mistaken, of not recognising the true one and not feeling for her this sweet emotion, this sympathy, indicative of two hearts who seek to be as one: no, you will never know me; alone, I will swallow my sorrow and my tears; with your image in my soul, I will find the means to nourish my passion in my solitude. Ceaselessly rereading your letters and your verses, that were not written for me but are my consolation, I have, for your sake, crushed all honourable principles and decency: love betrays you, love avenges you. After this confession, do not attempt to find me out; contemptible in your eyes, I could only appear to you as a woman familiar with such forceful advances. I seem to be trying to find an excuse, when you are the one who is being cheated. If it were only a case of convincing you, I would not hesitate to make myself known. I tried my best to engage my friend to go to the rendezvous: it would have been easy for you to see which one was in good faith. The cruel one preferred to go to the Opera. Pitiless, she made you wait; this made me very ill-humoured with her and, to console me, she said that this comedy must cease, because anyway she was beginning to find it boring: I must admit that I was not indifferent to seeing her renounce the pleasure of deceiving you. What! I would say to myself, he believed he was opening his soul to the bosom of his lover; he loves her though he has never seen her; am I not, like her, unknown to his eyes. It is true that he did not converse with me at the Ball, that the tone of my voice did not seduce his senses, but all that he said, which was totally wasted on my friend, fell into the depth of my heart: I cannot express the confusion of my senses, after my friend left for the Opera, where I could not accompany her; I almost came on my own to the chosen apartment. What a frightful, or rather what a happy mishap! My father did not wish to go out during the afternoon; one of my aunts came to spend the evening, and I was obliged to keep them company. I did not survive for long in this sad situation: an attack of nerves, so sudden and violent, took hold of me and I was taken for dead for three hours; they were obliged to carry me to my bed. My Chambermaid stayed beside me all night long. She said that, every minute, I ceaselessly repeated your name. She is the one that I sent to you this morning, not having had the strength to write to you. My ills have been soothed since then by putting all my innermost thoughts directly on paper. This is the true chronicle of my story. Use it ill, if you wish; you are its master and I have given you my permission. But I love you, I am to be pitied and am even more unhappy than before: the unfortunate confidant of the Unknown One can assure you of this, I will never burn for anyone but you, and I will never love anyone but you.

I have just had an idea. I not only want to avenge you but also punish my friend by

showing her to you despite her. Send me the ticket to your box at the *Italiens*; I'll offer it to my Aunt and Uncle: you are not to question us in any particular way.¹¹ I only wish to know if your heart will again deceive you, and if the prettiest one will seem to have the most sincerity, or the ugliest one the most sensibility.

LETTER XX.

From the Marquis de FLAUCOURT to the latest UNKNOWN ONE.

I AM, Madame, in an inexplicable labyrinth and the entire thread of my reasoning cannot help me to find my way out. I have long known that the Ball adventure, and what followed, was merely a joke but its weave is so complicated that although I can see its numerous contradictions and differing ruses my curiosity is not penetrating enough to discover its authors. They are, anyway, most amiable, and their correspondence is infinitely amusing and does not irritate my heart, which has not often been duped. Here is a well imagined change of scene; it is a very good coup de théâtre but it seems to me that it would be wise not to trust it. Is it believed that by presenting me with novel, ostensible, truths my head and my heart will be excited anew, and that by taking up, straight away, a languorous tone, I will again deliver up my affability to the lines of the epigram: one is mistaken, and I wish to wait before I succumb to a new passion that this new object offers to my imagination. This Secretary who immediately takes the place of her friend, who, by enlightening me regarding a misdemeanour, that I was aware of a few days ago, wants to offer me another, is very adroit, and the trap is most ingenious, but I do not fall into it, all the more because, if I am well informed this Secretary, who is indeed most witty, has not received from nature traits that are visibly seductive, for, after all, the pleasures of wit must be covered by a layer that is pleasing to the eyes. She may also be deceiving me, and it is possible that the Double is as attractive as the first Actress, therefore, I advise her to not get too agitated and to recover that tranquility whose loss would endanger her health and her charms. If my presence is vital to her recovery, if until now her nerves have been in a state of tension, if the patient is young and pretty, then, I will bring her the medicine, and I will happily employ the magnetism of love.¹² No doubt this means being prompt in my resolve to be unfaithful but I must for the little mask is a perfidious traitor, a perjurer, or what you will. I loved her: love itself survived my mistake, but my reasoning overwhelms it. My self esteem is wounded to the quick and unless, through the continuation of this game, she herself was the Secretary, I would forget her entirely and her features, that you think so deeply engraved in my heart, would be wiped away painlessly and she who would console me of this perfidy would take her place entirely in my memory. I thank you for the goodness you have shown in taking an interest in my rhapsodies: it is very generous to applaud what had been created for your rival; I will love you for it fourfold when I am sure of your existence. I accept with pleasure the means that you suggest to convince me. I will send you my ticket to the box at the theatre. I believe I will find it most amusing to find there such familiar figures: I even think that I can more or less guess who they are, and as I am expecting them, they will not have the pleasure of seeing my awkwardness or my surprise. If for some unprecedented reason Love were, in such a place, to offer me a charming Unknown

¹¹ The *Comédie Italienne* was a Parisian theatre that from 1780 was allowed to perform plays in French as well as its customary comic operas and Italian works, this put it in direct competition with the *Comédie Française* and gave French playwrights a less restrictive platform for their works.

¹² Franz Anton Mesmer (1734 – 1815) the Austrian physician, remembered for his theories on animal magnetism, worked in Paris during the 1780s and became a celebrity for a time, courted by the fashionable world who believed his 'mesmeric' sessions could cure any amount of ills. Magnetism was thus all the rage when de Gouges wrote this text: always keen to investigate the latest discoveries, she would have been well-acquainted with his work.

One and thereby realise the dreams that are becoming tedious, I would congratulate myself on my triumph and on the denouement marking the end of such a bizarre adventure. From duped lover I would become a happy lover. But until this chimeric moment I will maintain the repose that my heart is beginning to enjoy and I will be, Madame, with all due respect,

Your most humble, etc.

P.S. When I arrive in the box, if I know neither this uncle, nor this aunt, nor this niece, who should I say I am enquiring after, so that your chaperone is not surprised to see me? This superfluous question is rather pointless but in order to catch me out more easily I might find quite singular people there and it seems to me that I must not appear intrusive so, if you could give me the name of the person to whom I am lending my box, your most honoured aunt, so that I may enquire after her.

LETTER XXI.

From the Marquis de FLAUCOURT to the second UNKNOWN ONE, who remains Madame de VALMONT.

WHATEVER you are, Madame, the joke is becoming tedious, especially once it becomes dishonest. When one is blessed with wit it is easy to trick someone whose simplicity amuses, therefore there is never any need for that bad behaviour that suits women even less, for their souls are still more delicate than those of men. I cannot see that it requires much ingeniousness to ask for a ticket to a theatre box to stop the owner bringing his family or his friends, and to deprive him of company that would be more pleasing than the boredom of awaiting an unknown person who teases in a rather vulgar way. If you are the one whose tone and airs you have been adopting, you would have such good reasons that you would have offered them earlier, but you are apparently just a very poor joker who ferments his mind in order to very clumsily add a colourful veracity to a very dull game. I would offer you a full and deserved apology if you could, face to face, prove to me that you are a pretty and amiable woman. But usually the grace of wit is accompanied by a sound education and this Unknown One is, without doubt, a very ridiculous man. I can see nothing exaggerated in my letter, because if you were who you announced yourself to be, you would see that none of this falls upon you, and if you are not, you would feel that, at the time of my writing, you are deserving of it. I have no idea if a letter will come from you; I will be out when it comes, and it would have to be very clear, and the masks appropriately named, for me to see that you had good reasons to miss the rendezvous that was so perfectly envisaged. I humbly beg your pardon for the impertinence with which I have spoken to you but I believe that I will not have reason to retract my words. Adieu, Madame: until we meet again.

If, while I am out, I am brought a letter, I will reply to it on my return, and it will be ready tomorrow at the time appointed for its collection.

LETTER XXII.

From Madame de VALMONT, assuming the name of the last UNKNOWN ONE, to the Marquis de FLAUCOURT.

WHAT have I read! Is it from you that I received such a harsh epistle, that adds the deepest disdain to the epigram. I know perfectly well that, with wit, it is easy to exploit a

sensitive, and even an adroit, man but I have almost none. A tender heart is my only merit. Women usually have more delicate souls; they are also of more consequence, as long as they allow themselves to be so. But these women are not loved: one flees from them, their good tenets go unheard, a sound education does not always accompany, as you suggest, grace and wit; what is often referred to as good company, in rural parts, is frequently of the worst, and the rudest. Let us return to the pardon that I owe you. *One has teased in a vulgar way*, the game appeared to you *very dull*. If it is a *poor joker who ferments his mind in order to very clumsily add colourful veracity*, then you have been even more clumsily ensnared and even more vulgarly caught in his traps. Since you condemn him, I blame him. But we are two women: two quite different intentions drive our actions; if you could grasp the right one you would act graciously towards the wrong one. I do not love you for my own sake; only for yours, for your glory. You will not believe me, if I tell you again, that powerful reasons of propriety prevented me from coming to the Theatre. I reflected seriously; I feared your indiscretion; I trembled at the thought of losing you: you want a pretty, beautiful and amiable woman; deprived of some of these gifts you would find me horrible. Another might boast to you of her feeble appeal, a pure and sensitive soul. But are these enough to captivate a heart such as yours. Ah! My friend is quite right: if I loved him, says she, the little ingrate would make fun of my tenderness and would boast of my torments to everyone. Ah! Perhaps she is wiser than I to think thus. Your despondency, your anger, are not the results of love; it is your own humiliated self-esteem that fills you with despair; you think that you love seriously, because you have discovered new sensations in being resisted, I would also seek to stifle new sentiments at their birth. Besides, you have never sighed for me; all your intentions were for another, and not for the Secretary of whom you speak with such disdain, who no longer has the charms of youth or a pretty face besides. I could, without undue pride, triumph over such a gross error, but I believe myself to be ugly, sullen and aged, since that is how you wish me to be: if you judge it appropriate, I will add that I am a hypochondriacal, hunchbacked, rheumy woman: is this portrait seductive? Who knows? There is certainly something bizarre in your conduct; such a model might pique the self-esteem of a dandy. That is the only way to take them. What would have become of me without your letter, which has shown me the depth of your soul and presented your character to me. There is no longer that amiability, that sweetness of spirit, that once reigned in your words: now there is fury, misplaced irritation and, even though I blame my friend for not having any feelings for you, I blame you even more than her now that I know you better. You have always drawn upon yourself all that befalls you: why then protest so grumpily? Let us view all of this as though it has been a dream, and for my part, I congratulate myself on only making one mistake; I saved myself from the edge of the precipice; you showed me the danger and I appreciate it. How painfully hard it is for my reason to triumph over my heart! Love, even without respect, is a necessary sentiment and you will learn, one day, that true love is born of trust. It does not exist in an ideal fancy, but in mutual regard and feelings. You have seen neither myself nor my friend; I have no fear that you love one more than the other. I have been corresponding with you for too long since it has been decided that you must be renounced. Adieu, most amiable, but most dangerous, man. The one who will love you for many a while.

LETTER XXIII.

From the Marquis de FLAUCOURT to Madame de VALMONT, under the name of the latest UNKNOWN ONE.

HOW your letter seems to speak the truth in all its ways, unless it is a game. How could one, in such an authentic way, give one's style such shades of sentiment. Yes, without a

doubt, my heart is being targeted in its weak spot, the better to abuse its credulity. I have never believed in happiness. If this new scene was not a new trap, I would be so happy: it is agreeable since it intrigues me. If it is but another illusion, it enchants my heart and I find the pleasure of believing myself to be loved so sweet, that even the shadow of it seems to me to enhance reality a little; whoever you are, prolong my error, if it is one; I would lose too much if it all became clear to me. Let the chimera of happiness still flatter my hopes! Leave me to enjoy a Ghost whose fading away would plunge me into misery and indifference. Until now my self-esteem has hardly been touched by the ridicule that has been shown me; one cannot be despised for being sensitive, and the woman who set herself up to artfully deceive me is no doubt more so than I. Even though I believed that I loved her I soon learnt otherwise, on reflection, and now I blush at my love. I thought that I knew her secretary; I even thought that I had seen her features close up, I am almost certain that she came, disguised as a maid, to bring a Letter to my door, and that it is to her that I addressed the epigrammatic tone that reigned in my last Letters. You must have noticed that my last Epistle was not a response to yours. I was absent when your representative came, and he was given a Packet that had been sealed two days ago, it gave me pleasure to ridicule Madame de V... who it was said was the transcriber, and it seemed to me that revenge was permissible.

Perhaps I am still being tricked: this amiable Secretary who is no longer this Madame de V... may not be any more reliable, in truth, but there is such a display of apparent frankness that I react towards her as though I believed in it. If she is what she declares, then let her be convinced that she will be loved. Gratitude attached me to her as much as love, and it inspired in me, straightaway, sentiments that were previously non-existent, since I did not know her. To find a mistress is such a rare joy that I would spare nothing to preserve it; adieu, very unusual Unknown One. Whoever you are, you are very kind, and if you have youth and beauty, I congratulate the one you will have, or already has, the joy of pleasing you. I do not have enough self-esteem yet to believe that I could be this happy mortal but I am most impatient to untangle an adventure that, whether it be a joke or something serious, is becoming too drawn out. Adieu, mysterious Unknown One. I await your news with intense desire. It would be inconceivable that we could have argued before knowing each other.

LETTER XXIV.

From Madame de VALMONT, to the Marquis de FLAUCOURT, her brother.

YOU are very sad, my dear brother; much more so than usual. I have often been able to make you laugh, but at the moment my efforts are pointless. You sadden me, I who am so naturally cheerful. You are therefore very in love? What! Because your last letter has not been replied to, you are now in despair. Such conduct should clearly show you that this was all a game: you say you cannot believe it. If you promise that you will not hold me responsible, and take this jest in good part like an intelligent man, I will convince you on every count. You must believe that I have the proof at hand, and that those who misled you did so with the best intentions. You have been rid of that little creature; can you similarly dispose of *la Fontaine*, and recognise your true friends. Further more I will tell you that I would have wished the Ball adventure to have been genuine and that a delicate and sensitive woman could have secured you; that she could have obtained from you the dismissal of your horrible confidant. I did not commit any indiscretion, as you believed, regarding the young person who retired to a Convent on your behalf. I pity her if she is honest; I will only blush for you, if you seek to corrupt her. I have been assured that in order to take revenge for the Ball adventure you have brought her to these parts, and that

you have placed at her side that pernicious *la Fontaine*: I pray that this may not be so. But let us abandon this conversation. I only mention it for your own good. The ties of blood that unite us, regardless of prejudice, permit our attachment that nothing can break. My father abandoned me from infancy but you have promised me an inviolable friendship; I must therefore wish for your wellbeing as though it were mine.

I followed your advice, my dear brother, concerning the author of my day. Here is the letter that I am writing to him; it was engraved in my heart long ago. If anything in it should displease you, you must tell me: adieu, my brother; come and dine with me tomorrow, we will speak of things more vital than your adventure.

LETTER XXV.

From Madame de VALMONT to the Marquis de FLAUCOURT her father, in the Languedoc.

IN picking up my pen to write to you, I am agitated by so many diverse sentiments that I do not know where to start. I wish, I fear, I dare not explain myself to you. But my unreasonable shame and my natural timidity have forced me to keep a silence of which my heart disapproves. Enough of fighting myself: now feelings dominate and I cannot prevent myself from telling you that you are said to be my father, according to public opinion. No one can be better placed than yourself, Sir, to know the truth of a fact that everyone knew and recognised in the past. Due to the respect and warmth that I feel for you, I cannot doubt it but I have other reasons to be certain: my mother's avowal. I bear little resemblance to her other children, either in appearance, or in my observations and thoughts; the assurances of all your family; the signs of fondness with which you favoured me in my infancy; the sweet name of daughter that you gave me then; the pleasure you took in acknowledging it to all your friends. If I dare believe those who wish to encourage my inclinations, my appearance and character share several of your traits and make it impossible to doubt who I am, but, as ever, it is my heart's affinity that offers me the strongest evidence. I am not speaking of intellect, to wish to resemble, in this area, the author of D....a great author of so many beautiful texts that are the glory of the nation and will render you immortal, would demand an excessive vanity.¹³ Nonetheless it is suggested that there is in my method a turn of phrase that is not so different from your own, and which could have been polished by education, and a grace that would not have been totally unworthy of its source. But alas! You know that my early years were too neglected, and that is not your fault. An excessive tenderness was my undoing. My poor mother...it is the only thing I can reproach you for! Forgive me, Sir, for incriminating someone that was dear to you and who is infinitely so to me too, despite the wrongs she did me. Since my earliest childhood, thousands of bizarre events, and my unhappy fate, have not made it possible for you to take an interest in my existence: suffer, Sir, that I enter into a few details on that subject with you.

I was barely fourteen, you may remember, when I was married to a man I did not love, and who was neither rich nor well born. I was sacrificed without any justification that could outweigh the repugnance I felt for this man. It was even decided, I know not why, to refuse to offer me to a man of quality who wished to marry me: from then on I felt that my condition was beneath me and, had I been able to follow my inclination, my life would have been less varied and only my birth would have been romanesque. But you know what follows, Sir. Forced to flee a spouse I found odious, and encouraged by the advice of a sister and a brother-in-law to come and live in the Capital, it was in this abyss of good and

¹³ Jean-Jacques Le Franc de Pompignan, de Gouges's presumed natural father, was famed for having written a play entitled *Didon*. This obvious clue would not have gone unnoticed amongst the readers of the time. De Gouges must have hoped to gain literary recognition by reminding the public, allusively, that the father's talents could have passed to his daughter.

bad that, without rank, I lived in a respectable way.¹⁴ Enclosed within a small circle of friends, with all the decency that a self-respecting woman owes to herself, it goes without saying that I did not allow sentiment to rule; my heart, at least, is akin to yours. I have often prided myself on my discretion; this has frequently been harmful to my own interests. Sentiment is respectable, but in Paris Sir, as you know, it is not a route to good fortune. I have no regrets; everyday I make new sacrifices and, at an age when women are best able to enjoy pleasure, I am becoming philosophic.

A few reasonably powerful protectors have considered taking an interest in my fate and in that of my son. I rarely impose on their good reputation. I dislike cliques, panache or high society. I am satisfied to live with the little that I have, and I am pleased if my son is happy.

What, then, is the aim of my letter? I had the honour of telling you, Sir, at the beginning. It is not your fortune that lures me. My only intention in writing to you is to lift a weight from my heart that has been burdening it for a long time: I have a need to show you the affection I feel for you. I blame myself for having put off for so long such a sweet duty. Ah! Sir!...Father!...May it be granted that I call you by this name, do not refuse a heart which is yours on so many counts. May yours deign to open itself to nature's feelings that must speak in my favour. See me as your daughter; I have all the affection of one; bear witness to it and my happiness will be complete...Complete...I am mistaken...Ah! Yes, doubtless there would be one way to add to my felicity, and that method, Sir, is in your hands: it would be to do something for my poor mother and to shelter her from the horrors of destitution in her old age. Until now she has wanted for nothing; I love her too much to allow it, but my means are so limited that the last sacrifice that I made on her behalf has reduced me to dire straits. Deign, Sir, to remember her. She is attached to you through so many ties that link your family to ours thus, even if there were no natural bonds, her rights are powerful enough to weigh on your soul so that you would not abandon her. You and M.....were brought up by her mother and her father; one of your nieces held me over the Baptismal Font and you presented my mother there. If these rights are not sacred to a pious man then I cannot imagine what could make an impression upon him. I have faith in you, in your probity, in the soundness of your mind and, even more, in the goodness of your heart. Your piety may be alarmed by the memories that I offer but it cannot stifle the cries of blood; it cannot prevent you from fulfilling the duty (forgive the term) that nature imposes upon you. May I be permitted, in addition, to represent to you, that which religion prescribes to you in this instance: consider the engagement you made when you presented my mother at the Baptismal Font: you took responsibility for her physical and spiritual existence. How far we were from realising that one day necessity would remind you of this duty! Eh! Is such consideration not due at her age? If I ask for nothing on my behalf, at least pass to the mother a share of the benefits that the daughter had a right to expect from you. If I am your child, I should not be less dear to you because the Law does not admit it, and your obligations are no less sacred towards me than towards my mother.

Yes, Sir, I flatter myself that you will be sensitive to the affectionate supplications that I dare address to you on behalf of an unhappy mother. If the sensibility of your conscience could be fearful of the motive that could allow you to comply, I will request, in her favour, your charity. I know how generously you distribute, among the poor, the wealth that Heaven has granted you. Well! My mother is poor, very poor. She is therefore entitled to your munificence, and she only asks, through me, the same favours that you grant to indifferent beings, for whom you feel only the sentiments of Christian charity. How could you refuse to demonstrate towards her the gentle sensibility that is evident in all your work,

¹⁴ This is one of the rare moments in this text where de Gouges chooses to materially alter a fact about her own life for dramatic effect: the writer was married in church to a man she disliked on 24 October 1765 when she was seventeen and a half though she had in fact been affianced and signed a pre-marital contract in 1764 when she was sixteen. She did indeed go to Paris, where her half-sister lived, but as a widow with a young child since her husband died less than a year after their marriage.

and that religion has purified by determining its origin. No, the Author of D..., cannot have ceased being sensitive and kind, for pity can only have enhanced the virtues for which he is admired.

Having pleaded on behalf of my mother, may I be allowed to plead on my own? You are my Divinity on this earth and I beg that, like the supreme intelligence, you be not insensible towards me.

LETTER XXVI.

From the Marquis de FLAUCOURT, to Madame de VALMONT, his sister.

I CANNOT come to dine with you, dear sister, until the day after tomorrow. I return to you your letter for our father. It is very good, one can see in it your sensibility and that of the Author of our days. If his years and his suffering have extinguished it then the voice of nature will revive it within his heart. I have just written to my Uncles on your behalf. I have spared nothing vis-a-vis M...., and in as much as I could allow myself, I indicated to him the rights that your family has over ours. You will see by this, my dear sister, that nothing can alter the friendship that I feel for you, now and forever. I am beginning to console myself concerning my Unknown Ones, and you would be most kind if you could make known to me those that have amused themselves so much at my expense. First I was to be persuaded that it was you, yourself, but this proposal seemed to me to be so absurd that I could not contemplate it. The Vicomte de L***, a great Connoisseur, claims to recognise your style; on the contrary, I believe that not one phrase could give rise to this suspicion; I know more about it than he does and he will not sway me on this point. Were you to assure me of this yourself I would not believe you. I would willingly have been mystified by you alone, then I would not be teased throughout Paris. The Vicomte still claims that I divulged this adventure and that, without my imprudence, it would have been totally unknown. Finally, my dear sister, you seem to be very well instructed on all that concerns me. Let me therefore know the Authors; I promise to keep it secret. Adieu, my dear sister, we will see each other the day after tomorrow.

LETTER XXVII.

From the Marquis de FLAUCOURT, to Madame de VALMONT, his daughter.

YOUR Letter, Madame, has awakened my suffering and my anxieties about the past. How long you have taken to recall them to my mind! My age, my infirmities and Religion had forced me to distance from my eyes the objects that would remind me of the errors of a too guilty youth. I believe, quite easily, and too unhappily for me, that you are no stranger to me. But you have no right to claim from me the title of paternity. You were born legitimate and within the faith of marriage. If it is true, nonetheless, that Nature speaks within you and that my imprudent caresses in your infancy, and your mother's avowal, assure you that I am your father, imitate me, and lament the fate of those who gave you life. God will not abandon you if you pray to him sincerely. I forget all that the unfortunate Olinde meant to me, and only remember the sacred duties that Religion demands of me. You can reassure yourself about her fate. I will take care of her existence and if the death that I await as a favoured gift, came to put an end to my torments, and suspended my intentions, my worthy Spouse, in the bosom of whom I fear placing them, would execute my final wishes. Her exceptional virtues, her exemplary piety, will acquit, better than I, the debts that, while discharging my conscience, will wound it nonetheless. You can be sure of her equity and decency. If the unfortunate have any rights to her charity then your mother and you will not

be forgotten. There, Madame, is all that I can promise, and I would like to do more for you but how could I in the state of suffering I find myself in? My greatest consolation is actually my worthy and respectable wife, who consoles me in my troubles, and who does not leave me for an instant. She has taught me to think only through her, and, with her good principles, the grace of God will not abandon me. I bear my suffering with patience. It is to this worthy Spouse that my fortune, my Works, my effects will be left. She will make good use of it all, I am sure. Adieu, Madame. Olinde, my goddaughter, will be taken care of. If my brother, whose visit I await in my lands, comes soon, I will commend her to him as his milk-sister.

I have the honour of being,

The Marquis de FLAUCOURT.

LETTER XXVIII.

*From the Comte de***, to Madame de VALMONT.*

WHAT have I learnt, Madame? What have I read? I am not referring to the pleasure you have taken in recalling a brother, who had just strayed, to the heart of good Company and to the good principles he had received. Nothing that concerns him, until now, has affronted me on his behalf. But your father, your father, Madame, who has written to you in a Religious style and with a decent tone, is deaf to the power of Nature! His heart is closed; he seems to have a soul devoted only to his God...That God, can he inspire such cruelty? And the barbarous Spouse who takes advantage of his weakness and keeps him in error in his last moments, should she not seem most guilty to this just God, whose true creed has never prescribed cruelty towards ones own? What are these books and laws that pious people follow. Will fanaticism always provoke the most odious abuse, inhumanity, barbarity, the blackest and most atrocious ingratitude, finally, the division of nature entirely? Forgive me, Madame, if, despite myself, a feeling of horror revolts me and makes me angry with the one who should have congratulated himself on having you as his daughter. I know his son only through the letters and verses that bear his name. He is as much of his blood and his belly as you but I can guarantee that he will never equal you in virtue or merit. Nonetheless his station is vastly superior to yours; he has a name, a fortune, the benefit of a lavish education: despite this you, and not he, will obtain the Public's esteem, and the goodwill of all the powers on the earth. Yes, no doubt, Madame, I judge the actual manner of thinking of mankind by my own principles. You must interest all the Universe in your fate.

You conceal their wrongs, and disguise what would make them recognisable; why continue to spare monsters who ought to be stifled. I cannot guarantee that the candidness and the sensibility of the Author will not reveal to you, despite this misguided decorum, that you have been too well intentioned towards this ungrateful family. I will not arrive in Paris until the day after tomorrow. I shuddered at being delayed in Versailles any longer, as I told my friends. My first task will be to visit the Author, where I hope to meet you. We will discuss all that concerns you. I flatter myself that you will follow my advice. It is founded on friendship, esteem and on the solicitude that your misfortunes inspire in all those who know them as I do. With the most everlasting attachment, I have the honour of being, Madame,

LE COMTE ***.

LETTER XXIX.

*From Madame de VALMONT, to the Comte de ***.*

THIS is what I had anticipated, Monsieur le Comte, and you fully justify my fears. If the Public thinks as you do regarding those whose cruelty has forced me to reveal their actions, what will they think of me, and will they not believe that I have courted celebrity rather than sought means to reach souls devoted to God and mercy? Ah! If I had not employed all means, if I had not, in my hand, the proof of the greatest compliance on my part, I would believe that I have been as misguided in my avowals as I had been induced in error when I hoped that nature had power over a father and a brother; when I could count on the word, on the probity of a pious woman, and when I trusted in the support, the goodwill of a Father of the Church. No doubt, I told myself, he is a father to all the poor, but my mother, his milk-sister, will be preferred to this christian charity. He will not besmirch the one who was not born to beg for public charity. Could considerable losses and unfortunate events make her despicable in their eyes? Would they not keenly hasten to alleviate her misery. Every day they are charitable and make gifts without number. Their goodness is a sanctuary for all unfortunates. There, M. le Comte, is how I coloured my false hope: I enraptured myself with these sweet reveries, until the moment when they had to be realised. Two years of constancy and prayers only succeeded in obtaining false promises from them. I will let the Public know the height of their bad actions, their abuse of the faith I had in them, their cruelty, their odious hypocrisy. Finally revolted, affronted by their inhumanity, I have only the pride or virtue of silencing the essential word to the Public, and this consideration on my part is only due to the respect I have for their ashes. Oh father, the guiltiest but the most deserving of pity! He was great, generous and sympathetic. Excessive fanaticism poisoned all his virtues and, as you have made clear, his Spouse was responsible for all that was harmful. Unable to make amends, attempting to believe that the unfortunates who should interest her are culpable, she makes false promises and aggravates the pain of poverty with false hopes. This is how this pious woman, covered by a veil, actually spreads the fortune that blind Providence has given her, and how she acquits the debts that weighed on the conscience of her Husband. According to the letter that she wrote to M. l'Abbé P**, an intelligent man who adds to his enlightenment the sweet virtues of a true man of the Church, you will see how she uses her wealth. He can confirm my claims according to the numerous requests I have made to him, and he assures me that he did not fail to pass these on to the Marquise de Flaucourt. He has never been able to obtain from her any promise that she would assist the one who brought me into the world and you will soon see, M. le Comte, how these supposed favours have borne fruit.

LETTER XXX.

*From Madame de VALMONT, to M. the Abbot de P**.*

THEREFORE, it is resolved, M. l'Abbé, that Madame la Marquise will not keep the promises that she made so long ago. Is it possible to believe that a virtuous woman, who devotes herself entirely to her God, should make a play of reducing unfortunates to the worst suffering, increasing their torments with false hope? Everything runs its course, M. l'Abbé, and I would fear, in the end, being inconsiderate if I importuned you any further. Madame la Marquise has never thought, irrespective of her promises, to benefit the person rendered so unhappy by her Spouse. I do not [mention] myself; I have too much pride and too much dignity, to reclaim my rights and it is already a great misfortune that I am obliged

to assert those of my mother.

Who, M. l'Abbé, can render justice to my perseverance and my compliance better than you? If M. le Marquis de Flaucourt did not give my mother her due before his death, if he did not soften her misery in her old age, the fault lies with his cruel wife, to whom he devolved the task. If I had been base enough to colour my expression and my conversation with the hues of hypocrisy, I would no doubt have intrigued this fanatical woman. The truly devout are good and pity those who sin, or who have been sinful, they do good indiscriminately, taking pleasure in it, and my mother is the only one not to have elicited her compassion. When she prepared her husband to appear before the Eternal Being, she only thought to see to her household and their legacies. The slightest Servant received a 600 *livres* pension and when he [her husband] wanted to acquit the debts that weighed on his conscience, she closed his mouth and prevented him from speaking further by persuading him that it was no longer his concern, that she would keep an eye on it and would pray to God on his behalf. Monsieur le Marquis, or, to put it better, my father, admitted this to me, in a reply to one of my letters in which he was obliged to accept the truth; such is manner in which his widow executed the intentions of the spouse who had such confidence in her virtue. Permit me, Monsieur l'Abbé, to share with you the letter that I wrote to her on the day before she took to the veil, and the reply that I received from her: a reply that was cruel to me, but satisfying for my mother...what am I saying? Yes, it was a thousand times more cruel to the one who gave me life to announce the happy news that Madame la Marquise, before she withdrew, had given orders for all her needs to be met....what was the result!I myself, having confidence in Madame la Marquise's letter, rejoiced in the sweet satisfaction of knowing that my poor mother was happy, when I learnt, from an unknown hand, that she had just suffered an apoplectic fit that had reduced her to a state of desperate affliction, and that her most urgent needs were greatly aggravated; that she was without help; that my feelings were known and that I was to be given this terrible news as soon as possible. No, M. l'Abbé, no, I shall never be able to describe to you my despair in reading this letter, and the horror I felt, at this time, for all devout people; even God seemed to me to be an imaginary being, or one created to torture humankind and invented by ambitious adulation. This generous God must forgive me if I offend him; those who have carried me to this excessive delirium are guiltier than I. Why did this pious and charitable woman herself promise, to my mother, to take care of her to the end of her days? Why did she reiterate this promise to me, in writing, on the eve of taking the veil? And why, on leaving the world, did she give three hundred thousand *livres* to the Convent, or to those who knew how to cheat her, without considering acquitting her Spouse's debts, or his pledges? My reproaches concern her alone. I want to reveal her hypocrisy, her cruelty and her fanaticism to the world, and if I have protected her until now, it is only through respect for the one who was so dear to me, and whose ashes I honour. I fear that she may be recognised by the Portrait that I paint of her. For everyone knows the extravagance and the meanness of the woman who almost made the man, the most worthy of his century, lose his head, and who, without this Wife, would have ended his career with even more splendour than he had begun it, leaving us precious works worthy of his genius and his great enlightenment....Can you believe that she was callous enough to toss into the flames, two hours after his death, all the Works of this great man....This thought revolts me....I must no longer protect her, and austere truth rather than revenge, leads me to reveal all her darkness. Thus, M. l'Abbé, it is pointless to give me hope. Old age, in its infirmity and its most urgent needs is not relieved by false promises; it requires the most vigorous assistance.

I am sending you all the letters that obliged me to publicise so much bad behaviour and although my difficulties are already set out in a Dramatic work I would have preferred not to have been obliged to divulge the actual truth. Such is the result of cruelty and injustice.

In gratitude for all your good intentions, I have the honour of being, M. l'Abbé,
Your very humble servant,

DE VALMONT.

LETTER

From Madame de Valmont, to M....her Uncle.

I HAD the honour, Monsignor, of calling on you with all the good faith that a man of your character should inspire. Two powerful motives determined my action: the first was to remind you of my too unfortunate mother, your erstwhile milk-sister; the second was to rejoice in your august presence. My heart, moved by diverse feelings, prevented me from expressing myself as I would have wished. I felt as though I had never had the honour of meeting you, but hardly had I observed your traits than they reminded me perfectly of those of the author of my days, whose face had remained etched in my soul since childhood. I could not hold back my tears as I approached you, which meant, Monsignor, that you took me for one of those unfortunate people that fate had directed towards your christian charity. No doubt I would have obtained from you this gentle goodness, if I had been a mere stranger in your eyes. But, no sooner had I told you who I was, than you changed your tone and inclination, and seemed to make my relation to you criminal. Alas! It is not my fault, Monsignor, nor that of the authors of my days: they were young; their parents negligent; love was powerful; Nature's inclination, that renders man so guilty, and whose assaults can barely be resisted have made of me one of their victims. Only I am allowed to lament and to inculcate your honoured brother, but I find so much satisfaction in justifying him that you, yourself Monsignor, without consideration or condemnation of the ties that bind me to you, are entitled to take the place of the father I have lost: are you not father to all unfortunates? How cruel it is for a sensitive heart to be rebuffed by those who are close to us through rank and friendship. But let us not speak of me, Monsignor; if your piety is alarmed when I remind you of your obligations towards me then the subject will be dropped. Sacrifice the girl in favour of the mother for whom I request your goodness and your charity; can she be the only unfortunate who has no rights to your goodwill, and could all the bonds that unite her to you be so many forfeits that make her, in your eyes, the most guilty woman on the earth? Ah! Monsignor, this appalling fanaticism could not have poisoned your soul, it is too great and too pure, and you are too enlightened a man who deserves the commendable name you have only too rightly obtained of Father of the Church, so you cannot, by an absurd whim, distance a ewe from your flock. If she happened to go astray then a gentle clemency is the way to bring her back. Eh! Who better than you, Monsignor, knows the importance of this wise precept that God himself taught us with his words, as well as by his conduct! And the unfortunate woman that I commend to you is the one who suckled the same breast as you, who was brought up with you, in your early years, who was therefore your equal, your milk-sister, the goddaughter of your brother, the Marquis. The comfort in which her family lived previously, the estimable state of her father, which meant that your family did not disdain him, so much so that they considered him a friend. Your Niece, the Marquise de C***. brought up by one of my Aunts, the Niece who named me on the Baptismal Font; my family, bound to yours for two hundred years, I ask you, Monsignor, if there can be any considerations that are more powerful than those that I place before you for you cannot cast doubt upon them. The poor have a share of your alms; my mother finds herself in dire poverty, and your brother promised, before his death, to meet all her needs; I weep a torrent of tears as I remind you of this recollection, and whatever wrong he did me, I must cherish and respect his

memory. But you, Monsignor, who survive him, who arranged for the execution of his last wishes, only those concerning my poor mother have had no effect. Madame la Marquise, his Spouse, repeated his promise verbally, reconfirmed it with me in writing, but the only benefits that we received, my poor mother and I, were limited to empty promises. That, Monsignor, is how this widow has fulfilled the intentions of the most virtuous and sensitive man, who was rendered weak and unjustly credulous by cruel fanaticism. If, Monsignor, after having shown you all that is most human, most sensitive and the truest in Nature, I cannot manage to obtain from you the effect that I could expect from your goodness, then there is no more good faith, no more probity, no more humanity on the earth. Eh, from what men can one expect anything in this world, if those of your rank and dignity have hearts inaccessible to the cries of the wretched. Despite finding myself in a cruelly awkward situation Monsignor, I have nonetheless all the respect and attachment for you that I owe to a person of your character, and to whom I am so closely related. I feel, in my heart, all the power of Nature, and it is an effort for me to prevent its flow.

With the deepest respect, Monsignor, I have the honour of being your very humble and most obedient servant,

DE VALMONT.

FIRST LETTER

From OLINDE, to her daughter, Madame de VALMONT.

MY dearest daughter, I have received your two cherished letters dated 19 February last and 11 of this March; they gave me great pleasure; please keep writing to me as that is the only way that you can ease the pain I feel at always finding myself distanced from you, my dear daughter, despite the fact that you have long promised to come and see me. No doubt you do not have a clear idea of my existence in this County. I must give it to you by describing my position, but without mentioning every thing: I know your sensibility and I wish to spare you many of the details that would no doubt excite it too much. Remember then, at every moment, my dear girl, a mother who thinks only of you, who values her life only for your sake, and who, despite all the care she may take of it on your behalf, does not imagine rejoicing in it much longer without you. For some time you have offered help that was most necessary; you acted as your heart dictated and it fully confirmed the fair opinion I have always had of the love you feel for me: I need it now more than ever, for I am of too advanced an age to do the work I would need to do in order to subsist on what I could earn and also support the little Orphan girl that lives with me and whom I cannot bear to abandon. You cannot possibly forget that I was not born to this state, that I am forced to run from morn till night, whatever the weather, with my parcel under my arm. And what a parcel, great God! Nonetheless it must feed me, house me, clothe me, keep me warm, keep me in light, &c. &c. &c. But let us stop there, my dear daughter, my heart, as sensitive as yours, cannot bear anymore and I can feel my tears flow. I will limit myself therefore to exhorting you to keep yours for my memory. I am vexed by the manner in which your sister has behaved, and continues to behave; I could not have believed when I gave birth to my eldest daughter that she would, one day, totally forget her mother. Where did she come by her feelings? It is certainly not where you were formed, since I have constant proof that she sought to make you adopt them. Ah! You are not of that blood, and I do not blush to admit it. Soon maybe Heaven will thunder at her and she will be left with only remorse that will not fail to gnaw at her in the cruellest fashion, whilst you, my dear daughter, will spend your days in serenity and tranquility, rejoicing in the pleasure you

must constantly feel, at having done all the good it was possible to do, in the knowledge that all good people must certainly be aware of it. Adieu, my dear daughter; everyday I pray to Heaven that I may see you once again before I die.

LETTER TWO.

From OLINDE to Madame de VALMONT.

MY dear daughter, I have received your dear letter, which was much appreciated, in which you reproach me greatly for my long silence that you attribute to Monsignor..... or to Madame la Marquise de Flaucourt, but they are not the cause. I did not fail to give to Madame la Marquise the four letters that I received from you, so that she would peruse them; they are in her care. But the truth is that she charged the Capuchin to ask me what I assumed my pension to be, and I replied, verbally, through the same Capuchin, her Director, that I would accept whatever she would gladly accord me; since her departure I have heard no more of her. These are all the alms that I received from her, other than her assurance that, on leaving this City, she would leave funds to satisfy all my needs. I do not know if they have been placed in untrustworthy hands, or if Madame la Marquise forgot to effect her promises, but I have received nothing from her; without you, my dear daughter, what would become of me in the awful poverty to which I am reduced. Adieu my only daughter, for I am free to say that I have only you in the world. May my needs not reduce you also to misery. Your children are as dear to you as I am, and I have little time left to live.

FIRST LETTER

From an INDIVIDUAL in the Languedoc, to Madame de VALMONT.

MADAME,

Aware of your sensibility and your love for your unfortunate mother, I hasten to impart sad news; last night, at about nine of the clock, she suffered a fit of apoplexy that threatened to send her to her tomb, but, be reassured, Madame she is now out of danger. Nonetheless, I must depict to you, in a few words, her miserable and unhappy situation. In the season that we are in, one of the harshest winters, your mother, without fire, without protection, and maybe short of victuals, is in her bed without any help from anyone, apart from a young Orphan girl, whose feeble services are barely adequate to offer her broth. This woman, aged and infirm, thinks only of you; she cries ceaselessly: oh my daughter, my dear daughter, if you knew the situation I am reduced to, what would be your fate? She wanted to prevent me letting you know, but being aware, Madame, of your rare virtues, and persuaded that the extreme misery into which your mother is plunged is unknown to you, I hasten to tell you, convinced that you will be grateful to me for informing you.

I have the honour of being, respectfully,

Madame,

Your very humble and most obedient servant***.

LETTER II.

From the same INDIVIDUAL from the City of...., in the Languedoc, to Madame de VALMONT, and who wrote the preceding letter.

MADAME,

Following your orders, I have seen the Capuchin who corresponds with Madame la Marquise de Flaucourt. It is a falsehood that he has been charged with any alms for your mother. You will find enclosed here the reply I received from M***, to those of M..... You will find no aid other than a gold *louis*, given in November. I leave it to you to imagine what succour she can expect from it, or what she could expect from it.

Madame your sister has no doubt forgotten her promise. She wrote to Madame*** that she would forward some assistance to her mother in the first days of October, there is still no sign of life there.

Your mother received, by the Courier who brought your letter, 120 *livres*, of the assistance coming from you. They arrived just in time. No one could be more aware of your goodness, and you have also attracted praise from all the Town, and you are cited by mothers as an exemplary daughter.

I am, Madame, with deepest respect,

Your very humble servant ***.

LETTER

From Madame de VALMONT, to her MOTHER.

MY DEAR MOTHER,

I can see now that we can no longer count on anyone according to the word of Madame la Marquise and that of M. the Arch....I should have been unconcerned about your fate. So it is clear that they tricked me and that the entirety of their alms amounted to 24 *liv.*; this help is so mediocre that it degrades those who gave it and debases she who received it. If by my own efforts, and by depriving myself of everything, I can prevent you lacking the necessities of life, I could also make the effort to return to Monsignor.....your milk-brother, the gold *louis* that he deigned to bestow upon you, this memorable action of his never ceasing to be cited among the number of his alms. It is not for me to condemn this respectable Prelate, I deliver the conduct of the Monsignor, with regard to you, to the consideration of all men; I will add that I have met this crossed and mitred man who originally inspired respect from me, the veneration that our ancestors gave to our most virtuous Patriarchs; I anticipated a different welcome from him; I thought I saw the candour of his soul etched on his features, yet the sounds emanating from his mouth were complaisant and hard; such extremes were unknown to me until now. I said to myself, as I left him, is this the devout soul, this the heart that is touched by the fate of the poor? This pious mortal who teaches christianity, or at least uses it in his dealings. But no, on the contrary, this is a vindictive man who listens to calumny; his words have convinced me of this. According to the letters that you addressed to my Abbey, he told me, I had decided, when passing through the Languedoc, to help your mother, but what I have learnt concerning her prevents me from interfering in your affairs, or hers. It is not for me, Monsignor, I replied, that I made this approach, even though I felt in my heart that I was

not unknown to you, and that it would have been very pleasing for me to have had the honour of seeing you for an altogether different reason. I do not know if Religion, or God himself, commanded that the cries of illegitimate blood should be stifled, but the voice of Nature speaks through me and tells me that her law is the one that God himself prescribed for mankind. It is due to this, Monsignor, that I present myself to you, it is with these rights, though reprehensible in your eyes, that I implore your aid for a mother who sucked at the same breast that nursed you, who was named on the Baptismal Fonts, and was led astray, by Monsieur your brother. He replied that he doubted the veracity of all these facts. I respectfully saluted him as I left and told him that nothing was easier than to doubt; that, however much I might wish to convince him, I could never move him. That is how I was inspired with respect for his character. I did not leave it at that: I had been told that Madame la Marquise would not leave you in need; following the distressing news that I received concerning your situation, I wrote to Madame la Marquise on the day before she took to the veil. Here are the exact words which I have in the original: Madame de Flaucourt has retired to take the habit, she helps the mother of the person in the Languedoc, her daughter has no need of any; that is all she can do: this Sunday....THE MARQUISE DE FLAUCOURT. That, my dear mother, is why I was so relieved and believed you to be happy, and I thought that, following these religious word, you were testing my filial love by letting me know of your needs and ills, which are only too real according to the unhappy accounts from several people: I am beside myself, I will never be able to conquer anymore the indignation that I feel towards these people who have for so long filled me with love and respect. If such deeds were known in the World, they would be condemned as the acts of the most abject fanaticism. So, what can I tell you? All my ideas and my indignation cannot pull you from the difficulties that engulf you. You will receive with this post another one hundred and twenty *livres* and in the next post you will discover the depth of my tender feelings for you, as I sacrifice the little revenue I have in order to ensure your existence; my cruel sister is far from imitating me despite her being much wealthier than I. Well, maybe one day remorse will affect her but I fear that it will come too late for her own beatitude, so I cannot count on her, and therefore I will have to depend on myself for your comfort; it delights me to do it alone but I would rather that she shared the task for her own sake. My dear mother, please believe that the only reason I am not coming to nurse you is to save, for you, the money that would be lost if I travelled, and that my unfortunate position does not allow me to send you all the succour that you need. This is how my heart tears itself apart between reason and my tender feelings for you, which ceaselessly urge me to come and hold you in my arms and fulfil all your needs, for a stranger never does it so well. I suffer terribly to know that you are overwhelmed with pain and troubles and that I cannot offer you all the comfort that I am capable of, but I hope that Heaven will be touched by my torments, that it will return you to health and that it will offer me the joy of letting me tend to all your cares. It is with this hope that I am, my dear and respectable mother, the most obedient and the most tender of daughters.

DE VALMONT.

LETTER

From OLINDE to Madame de VALMONT, her daughter.

WHO feels more than I, my dearest daughter, the troubles and afflictions that I bring you, and who could wish for more opportunities to compensate you for them. These are lost to me: my age, the loss of my fortune and my infirmities have destroyed all such hope. If gratitude can take their place, then no mother has been as touched as I by the assistance

that I receive from my dear daughter. I was assured that the Marquis de Flaucourt had left a sum in the hands of his spouse to be given to you after his death but it is clear that this widow has not honoured the promises your father made on your behalf, nor her own on my behalf. I thought I glimpsed in her words, when I saw her on her journey, that she took pleasure in inflaming and increasing the pains of the unfortunate; she told me that God only burdened me in order to test my repentance, that her husband had suffered terrible pains in the last ten years of his life, that he placed his all at the foot of the Cross, and that I should imitate this most virtuous of men in his last moments. But alas! I replied, he was rich, Madame, and the surplus of his fortune would allow me to bear my ills with a lot more patience. Born in comfort, infirm in my old age, with no one to help me, I would die without aid, if the most respectable of all daughters did not offer the promptest solution to my misery, despite her being at two hundred leagues distance from me. She had the audacity to say to me (oh my dear daughter, I tremble at repeating it) that I must forget you, and forgo writing to you. I, I replied, forget my daughter, my blood, the only Being on this earth who takes an interest in me! Death would seem a hundred times less cruel than being deprived of her beloved tidings even once. If that is your price, Madame, for taking care of me in my old age, you can keep your good deeds, and leave me in poverty. I left her convinced that I had displeased her, and if I am not mistaken, that is reason for the harshness of her dealings. I owed you this avowal, and if you had not insisted on asking me the reasons that lay behind my not receiving aid from Madame la Marquise, you would still be in the dark. Adieu, my most estimable of daughters, and realise that your mother has only one wish left, that is to embrace you before the end of her painful existence.

LETTER

From Madame de VALMONT, to la FONTAINE.

THE Marquis de Flaucourt returned from his estate three weeks ago and still I have not seen him. I have been assured that you surpassed the heights of seduction in persuading him not to visit me. As I cannot spoil his pleasures or his interests, and as no one can follow your lead in such projects, why do you deprive me of his presence and prevent him from fulfilling the duties towards me that good manners, at the very least, would seem to demand of him? Only a man as vile, as base, as you would be able to pervert a young man to this degree; he even abandons his duties towards his family, and you alone are the Cause. A mean man can succeed for a while but his underhand plots do not always reach a safe harbour; a sudden gust of wind throws him into such peril that nothing can save him. I am willing to demean myself enough to offer you these observations, and show you that the Marquis will punish you one day for leading him astray, and that one might believe you capable of repentance were one to see the Marquis more particular with regard to his own self-esteem. I make no mention of that which you professed to pledge to me on his behalf, when the Marquis would become his own master. An honest pension would have fulfilled my wishes but if obtaining it meant I had to apply to you, ah, could poverty have reduced me to such a miserable state, I would rather perish in wretchedness than be beholden to my brother for help negotiated through you. I do not address myself to you on my behalf but on my brother's, for his honour and glory; if you should wish, in future, to make a better use of the ascendancy you have over him, then I could believe that base men are capable of change, and can destroy, by a noble change of heart, the bad disposition of their characters. Farewell, Monsieur. For you, and for Society, I hope that my observation will influence your thoughts and lead you towards honourableness.

LETTER

From Madame de VALMONT, to the Marquis DE FLAUCOURT, coming back from his Estate, three months after the death of his Father.

IT has been observed, Monsieur le Marquis, that fortune can at times change men, but usually these are ordinary souls, or coarse spirits. The man of noble birth never dishonours himself irrespective of the situation in which he finds himself. It seemed that you held me in some esteem before the event that rendered you master of your own fortune. Would a base metal have changed your heart? It would upset me more on your behalf than on my own. I have never set my sights on your treasures: I loved you with all the sisterly tenderness I am capable of and this did not arise from self-interest. It would seem, however, that this self-interest exists on your side and distances you from me, you who seemed to challenge everything, and pronounce philosophy in an age when it is rarely professed: on what principle are you basing it? I am no longer your sister because you have become a rich man; pretend that you are not and come and see me, or give me the reason that could justify your estrangement. No one could be more indulgent than I, if the motives are stronger than my reasoning, for I assure you that I am confused by the reflections that you oblige me to make. Adieu, Monsieur le Marquis, I will become you sister when you are, for me, Monsieur le Comte.

LETTER

From Madame de VALMONT, to the Marquis DE FLAUCOURT, her brother, on his return from the Languedoc, some time after the death of his father.

I do not know, Monsieur, what sentence to use to begin this letter that I consider appropriate to form a part of our correspondence. I am no longer, in your eyes, that sister so sought after that you spent five years making many enquiries about her in vain. It is therefore true that a fortune can totally change the heart of man; I never feared at all that you would be extreme in this way. You will consider perhaps how much your new behaviour must surprise me. Are you able to forget your kindnesses, your friendship, your pledges, our altercations on the character of man, and above all, those concerning your attachment to that young Josephine who ran away on your behalf, to the despair of her parents, and who knew to cloister herself away constantly to await the day that the sincerity of your promises would manifest itself. I said to you then, my brother, you are young, time and circumstances will alter your feelings. No, my sister, no never. The man who changes the way he sees and feels is a man of no character, Heaven has bestowed one upon me that is too decided to fear that I could one day change my ways or my principles. Josephine will be my wife, or I give you my word of honour, my sister, that wedlock will never tie me to another spouse. Those were your actual expressions. Barely master of your fate, of your fortune, you lead another to the Altar. I do not criticise this alliance, no doubt it is a better match than the one you wanted to make with a Young Lady of a rank inferior to your own. You could not join yourself to her without in general displeasing your family and, without fearing criticism, you have no doubt been able to perjure yourself for a young man's Lover's pledges are so disregarded that even the proverbs seem to exempt them from the solidity of their engagements. But recognition, the rights of blood, fraternal friendship, the virtue that is really inseparable from the true man and that since time began has distinguished him from the herd, that point of honour, which dominates all throughout the ages, which supports his principles in all the stages of his life, it is here that I attack you, yes my brother, I have no other arms, and I still believe that your

soul is too pure to be invincible to my charges which are those of nature: will you be able to overcome them? The laws and precedent make you master of everything, but honour does not spare you from bestowing a slight portion of the superfluity of your fortune on a natural sister: you had promised it and offered it, and you reiterated this to me in a letter, in a moment when the heart full of deep distress surrenders itself to all the outpourings that are pure and beneficent. I restore it to your eyes.

You will learn from my letter, my dearest sister, the sad events that afflict us. Yesterday we lost my father, he succumbed to the cruel suffering that he had endured for eight months: in fact it spared him the last days of his life, and the end was very peaceful. My mother talks of retiring to a Convent, there to take the veil, she even wanted to leave from tomorrow, but my uncle....held her back. I myself plan to stay here another three months, and then go to Paris. Good day, my dearest sister, I leave you for I am overwhelmed by letters, and I beg you to believe in the very tender feelings that I have devoted to you, and in the inviolable promise of repairing the wrongs that my father imposed on you for too long.

The Marquis de FLAUCOURT.

THERE, my brother, is the letter; can you cast doubt on it. I sent you the one I wrote to the author of our days, you approved it, you saw its reply. In truth its promises were limited to taking care of my mother. His worthy spouse, he said, would take charge of everything. You even allowed me to understand that I would be at the head of your household, if this proposition suited me. Your agent, that vile Lafontaine assured me on your behalf, before several people, that master of your fortune, you would give me an honest pension, that those were your intentions, and that you had said so to anyone who cared to listen. I am far from insisting on the execution of these promises, but I can at least claim an allowance for my poor mother; under your very eyes she is overwhelmed by troubles and in the most abject poverty, that I feebly alleviate with my modest help but, in reliving the appalling picture, I feel my heart break, my tears flow copiously; the hope that I may touch you cannot dry them. Meanwhile I still count on you, I expect nothing more from your cruel mother nor M.....May all your promises made to me be reduced to giving the one who gave me life, the sum of eight hundred *livres*, and I will still maintain, for her, that which I deprive myself of on her behalf. Oh my brother! Remember what you were, what you should be, and what you will be one day, if you have the delight of being a father: then you will feel that there is nothing more precious in the world than those we have given birth to, and those to whom we owe ours. If you are deaf to my prayer, if your heart is closed to all the torments that devour mine, and if the same blood that runs in our veins does not speak to you in favour of the unfortunate one for whom I implore your humanity, then you are not the worthy son of the celebrated man who gave both of us our existence. Nature has so much power over my soul; it cannot have refused you the precious gift that it lavished upon me. It is to this very sensibility that I am appealing, the one you proved to me through your searching and your behaviour towards me for some time. If you have changed, you cannot have stifled the cry of nature, surrender to its impulses expressed by my voice. Oh my brother, my dear brother, do not reject such a legitimate demand, and do not rebuff a heart that humanity and the cruelty of men have so lacerated and whose wounds your change of mind alone can heal by bringing the swiftest relief to the pressing needs of the most affecting, the most unfortunate, of women, and that at last I may one day be able to say: for too long bad advice led him astray, but it only took a moment to return him to virtue and humanity. It is by this happy transformation that one will recognise the son of such a virtuous father. This hope will allow me to bear the weight of all my sorrows with greater calm.

LETTER

FROM THE AUTHOR.

I have fulfilled your wishes and your intentions, Monsieur le Comte: here is the correspondence from our times that will be viewed, in all probability, as a Novel. I hope so for the sake of those against whom Madame de Valmont has a quite justifiable complaint. I have been told that you were involved in a lively altercation concerning her: it is imprudent, Monsieur le Comte, to take the part of the oppressed sex; in the past, this celebrated past, it was a virtue, today it is ridiculed. Those centuries that blessed women may return but we will no longer be there and this era of disregard will be viewed, by our descendants, as incredible. Let my sad thoughts cease, they will not stop the course that men have taken: I must only address myself to my own task, which feels increasingly painful and thorny. What a disagreeable work it is to put together a Correspondence! If it had not interested me so much I would have abandoned it halfway, despite having already announced it in my *Homme généreux*.¹⁵ The Reader must surely be in no doubt that these letters are not the product of my imagination, that they are so many originals that I have merely painstakingly had to place in order. Besides, my incapacity for writing verse is well known, and he who composed them was far from foreseeing that they would one day be published. If the Public believed in this truth, as you do Monsieur le Comte, this Correspondence would excite their curiosity a great deal more, and these verses, such as they are, that were merely the work of an instant for the one who made them, would have demanded more effort from anyone else. Should the Marquis de Flaucourt wish to devote himself to study, his pen will create works that will not derogate the immortal writings of his illustrious father. Madame de Valmont was born to walk in their footsteps but her star is as strange as my own: she was, as you know, Monsieur le Comte, as neglected in her infancy as I was but she was always blessed with anonymity whilst I am making myself known on her behalf, happy if I can succeed, and if I can move her brother to the point where he will accord her the only consolation that she demands of him, and is entitled to expect. I found among all her paperwork verses composed by Madame de Valmont herself at the moment she received the sad news of the death of the Marquis de Flaucourt, and I am also printing those. You will see, Monsieur le Comte, that nature made of her a Poet in an instant. I will send to your estate the first Volume of my Work to be bound, if you are not returned to Paris before it is printed.

With the most inviolable attachment and the most distinguished sentiments, Monsieur le Comte, I have the honour of being your very humble and very obedient servant.

Madame de Valmont's Verses on receiving the sad news of the death of her Father.

I was indeed given life by a man of virtue,
 But fanaticism stifled his love, adieu.
 Death stole him from me, before of Nature
 His heart, frozen by age, felt the slightest murmur.

¹⁵ *L'Homme généreux* was published in 1786 to reasonable critical acclaim but never performed as far as is known. Madame de Valmont appears in the play and, in the preface, Olympe de Gouges confirms the autobiographical nature of this character.

However when my own eyes began to open,
On my unfortunate fate he appeared to soften.
He died without a thought that one he left behind,
half of himself, had a heart made to please his mind.
I remember, alas! that in my earliest years
I was the cherished object of his pleasing cares.
A cruel prejudice his soul affected
And error's thick band his sight obstructed.
Despite this I am pleased to be the sad part
Of a love that overwhelmed my mother's heart.
I owe to this great man, admired throughout France,
For his innate wit, a lively intelligence;
No doubt this mind given enlightenment,
Would have been fired with greater refinement,
Yet one will always recognise the same source,
Of a renown Writer halted in his course.
He had enemies; given his reverence,
He treated the insults with indifference.
The brother left to me, worthy of his race,
Already follows his august father's trace;
Soon he will offer the Public the treasure,
That his father kept out of sight for good measure,
His immortal texts, offspring of his talent great,
Will forever heap honour upon his nation state.

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