TOWARDS A THEORY OF LIBERTINE TEMPORALITY:
TIME, LEGACY, AND FAILURE IN CLARISSA,
LES LIAISONS DANGEREUSES, AND JULIETTE

A thesis submitted to the University of Manchester for the degree of
Doctor of Philosophy
in the Faculty of Humanities

2017

Thomas G. Froh

School of Arts, Languages and Cultures
List of Contents

Abstract 4
Declaration 5
Copyright Statement 6
Acknowledgements 7
The Author 8
1 Introduction 9
   1.1 Methodology 10
      1.1.1 Significance 13
      1.1.2 Terms 14
      1.1.3 The Four Themes 15
2 Libertine Time in the Eighteenth Century 18
   2.1 Pressures of the Moment 18
   2.2 Legacy 23
   2.3 Pressures of Narration 24
      2.3.1 The Libertine Novel 27
   2.4 Temporal Articulation 32
      2.4.1 Rousseau and Monasticism 35
   2.5 Failure 39
3 Moment as Breath: Contextualizing the Eighteenth-Century Libertine 44
   3.1 A New Focus on the Present 46
   3.2 Changes from the Seventeenth Century 50
   3.3 Libertine Literature in the Mid-Eighteenth Century 54
   3.4 Shifts in Class 58
   3.5 The Evolution of Libertine Temporality 61
      3.5.1 Poetry 62
      3.5.2 Pornography 68
      3.5.3 Theatre 72
4 “This charming clock that runs low”: Lovelace and the Arrival of Death 77
   4.1 Note on Editions 77
   4.2 Context 79
   4.3 Dominance and Submission as Temporal Articulation 85
   4.4 Plotting, Legacy, and Futurity 94
   4.5 Failure 103
5 “Remember that in your position time is precious”: Temporality in Les Liaisons Dangereuses 115
   5.1 Valmont & Lovelace: Parallels 121
   5.2 Distinctions between Valmont & Lovelace 134
   5.3 Marquise de Merteuil 138
6 All Pleasures Fade: Juliette and the Denial of Narrative 149
   6.1 Narrative by Numbers 151
   6.2 Juliette’s Failure 159
   6.3 Non-Reading 169
Abstract

This thesis is a series of textual studies which posits that key libertine characters in the latter half of the eighteenth century possess a cohesive and unique attitude towards time. The works I review are *Clarissa* (1748) by Samuel Richardson, *Les Liaisons Dangereuses* (1782) by Choderlos de Laclos, and *Juliette* (1797) by the Marquis de Sade. The shared sense of temporality across the libertine characters of these works manifest in four key thematic parallels.

The first theme is a conflict between the libertine character’s role as the creator of a transgressive narrative and libertinism’s emphasis on the hedonistic moment of pleasure. Each demands a different attitude towards time and this creates an underlying tension which the libertine must attempt to resolve. Second is a desire to create a legacy, which manifests as a desire to narrate. This is often seen in their comparison to other libertine figures both immediate and historical, and informs the libertine character’s consideration of past and future.

Third, the libertine character attempts to reconcile the tension between narration and moment, and still establish a legacy, through a concept I term ‘articulated time’: the careful moderation of one’s actions in order to establish a degree of control over temporality. Yet the fourth and final theme I identify is failure, as the libertine character is unable to maintain this articulated time, and by extension sees a general failure of his or her respective libertine projects.

While the individual aspects of the libertine understanding of time in these works might be seen in other literature, taken as a whole they produce a cohesive sense of libertine temporality unique to fiction from latter half of the eighteenth century. This study sheds new light and meanings on the most significant libertine characters from this period, and reveals the way in which their sense of time, and the history of libertine writing and thinking before them, frames and informs each of their actions. This analysis does not purport to be applicable to all libertine writing, but rather presents a critical insight that reinforces the literary and cultural significance of major works of libertine fiction from the eighteenth century.
Declaration

No portion of the work referred to in this thesis has been submitted in support of an application for another degree or qualification of this or any other university or other institute of learning.
Copyright Statement

The author of this thesis owns certain copyright or related rights in it (the “Copyright”) and he has given The University of Manchester certain right to use such Copyright, including for administrative purposes.

Copies of this thesis, either in full or in extracts and whether in hard or electronic copy, may be made only in accordance with the Copyright, Designs and Patents Act 1988 (as amended) and regulations issued under it or, where appropriate, in accordance with licensing agreements which the University has from time to time. This page must form part of any such copies made.

The ownership of certain Copyright, patents, designs, trademarks and other intellectual property (the “Intellectual Property”) and any reproductions of copyright works in the thesis, for example graphs and tables (“Reproductions”), which may be described in this thesis, may not be owned by the author and may be owned by third parties. Such Intellectual Property and Reproductions cannot and must not be made available for use without the prior written permission of the owner(s) of the relevant intellectual property and/or Reproductions.

Further information on the conditions under which disclosure, publication and commercialisation of this thesis, the Copyright, and any Intellectual Property and/or described in it may take place is available in the University IP Policy (see http://documents.manchester.ac.uk/DocuInfo.aspx?DocID=24420), in any relevant Thesis restriction declarations deposited in the University Library, The University Library’s regulations (see http://www.library.manchester.ac.uk/about/regulations/) and in The University’s policy on Presentation of Theses.
Acknowledgements

I am extremely grateful to my supervisors Hal Gladfelder and Jérôme Brillaud, who have been a tremendous help throughout my time in Manchester. I feel privileged to have worked alongside you both.

Additional thanks are owed to Naomi Baker, who was a supportive and incisive reader throughout the thesis-writing process. I am also grateful to the University of Manchester for providing the funding that allowed this dissertation to be written.

The staff of Carleton University, particularly Julie Murray and Lana Keon, are responsible for my being willing and able to pursue this doctorate. Thank you all.

My parents, Michael and Diana, have given me unceasing support and love throughout this process. I will never be able to express how much I owe to you both. My relatives Jackie, Martin, and Vaughan have provided me with a sanctuary in Wales that I will never forget, and becoming closer to them has been the greatest gift I’ve been given during my time in the UK.

Thank you to Andrew, Ji, Gwynne, and Nick, for always being willing to hear me out and telling me to shut up and get back to work when I needed it.

Finally to Chelsea, thank you for more than everything.
The Author

Tom Froh is currently a doctoral candidate at the University of Manchester. During his time at Manchester, Tom has published a peer-review journal article in Porn Studies, a book review in the Journal for Eighteenth-Century Studies, and contributed reference entries to the forthcoming The Cambridge Guide to the Eighteenth-Century Novel, 1660-1820.

Tom has presented papers at numerous conferences, most notably the 2016 annual meeting of the American Society for Eighteenth-Century Studies in Pittsburgh, the 2017 postgraduate and early-career researcher conference of the British Society for Eighteenth-Century Studies (BSECS) in Swansea, and the 2018 annual BSECS conference at St. Hugh’s College, Oxford. In 2016 he delivered an invited talk to members of the Centre for Eighteenth-Century Studies at the University of York.

Tom completed his Master of Arts in English at Carleton University, graduating in 2013. He also completed his undergraduate degree at Carleton in English and History, graduating in 2012.
1 Introduction

In 1675 John Wilmot, the second Earl of Rochester, destroyed a glass chronometer which stood in the middle of the Westminster Privy Garden. According to the dial’s designer, Father Francis Hall, it was an extremely elaborate construction that showed not only the hours of the day but “many things also belonging to geography, astrology, and astronomy, by the sun’s shadow made visible to the eye” (Hall 19). Before he destroyed it Rochester is reported to have declared: “What… doest thou stand here to fuck time?” (Ellis, ODNB). Rochester’s intentions here are open to interpretation. The dial of the clock might be a phallic pointer, one which penetrates time in the act of quantifying it, with the clock’s decorations mimicking the beautified appearance of a suitor and Rochester playing the role of the jealous lover. Alternatively the act of destroying the clock can be seen as a symbolic attempt to reject the measurement of time, and perhaps even the concept of its passage as a whole. The libertine champions the hedonistic moment, and wishes to exist in time without the rigid structure of days, minutes, and seconds that demarcate its passage. Rochester’s actions highlights the way in which libertinism transgresses temporal boundaries in the same manner as it does sexual ones. Under this reading his destruction of the chronometer is a purposeful disordering or derangement of time which expresses the libertine desire to live more fully within the unstructured moment.

Yet only three quarters of a century after Rochester’s actions, the libertine novels of the eighteenth century demonstrate a profoundly different attitude towards time than a straightforward attempt to live within the present. Rather, they present a method of living within the moment via an extremely ordered structuring of time that contains strong patterns of repetition. This ordered temporal form seeks to reconcile a libertine emphasis on the moment with new contexts of narration and transgression. In doing so, it establishes these novels as innovative within the libertine writing tradition. Instead of rejecting the quantification of time, the libertine patterns his or her behaviour after the precise rhythm of the clock.

The present study seeks to examine this phenomenon through a textual exploration of attitudes towards time exhibited by libertine characters within late eighteenth-century novels. It argues that, viewed together, they reveal a unique definition of libertine temporality endemic to the late eighteenth century.
1.1 Methodology

The aim of this thesis is to take significant texts from the mid-to-late eighteenth century that depict libertine characters and demonstrate these characters’ paralleled relationship to time to produce a clear thematic construction of ‘libertine temporality’ specific to this period. The body of this analysis is built around the study of three texts: *Clarissa*, written by Samuel Richardson and published in 1747-1748, *Les Liaisons Dangereuses*, written by Pierre Choderlos de Laclos and published in 1782, and finally *L’Histoire de Juliette*, written by the Marquis de Sade and published in 1797. Libertinism is a core focus of each of these texts, both in their content and the critical commentary that exists around each. This study draws out and analyses the parallels between these works through a particular focus on the issue of libertine temporality. Close reading and textual analysis will establish several recurrent themes in the libertine attitude to time that demonstrate this cohesion.

Text is the core focus of this study. Any attempt to reconcile the differences in personal history and authorship exhibited by Richardson, Laclos, and Sade would detract from what this examination will establish as undeniable textual parallels that exist across their depictions of libertine characters. Direct historical connections between these authors are tenuous at best. It is clear that both Laclos and Sade thought very highly of *Clarissa*, but beyond this these authors have little direct connection outside of their attempt to express a libertine ethos, and by extension a libertine temporal structure. Consequently for the sake of focus, clarity, and coherence, little time will be spent on questions of authorial intentions or commentary relating to these works. However it should be noted that this decision to largely exclude these authorial voices is not made out of any concern that their commentary would contradict the analysis presented here. Indeed, Laclos and Sade note their regard for Richardson in their personal and professional writing, and Richardson clearly draws on

---

2 Laclos’ and Sade’s respect for *Clarissa* are established in the direct citation of it within *Les Liaisons Dangereuses* in letters 107 and 110, as well as Sade’s praise for Richardson’s text in his *Reflections on the Novel* (106).

3 This methodological choice to de-emphasize the role of the author in interpreting his or her text partially adheres to several prominent twentieth-century bodies of literary theory. Perhaps the most extreme of these is the new criticism of the 1940’s and 50’s. Influenced by T.S. Elliot’s essay “Tradition and the Individual Talent”, new criticism avers that no meaning can be found outside of the text itself and therefore exclude any authorial role in producing meaning. Later reader-response theories of the 1960’s and 70’s locate the meaning of text in the active experience of the reader himself or herself as they “re-create” the text through the act of reading. In the 1967 essay *Death of the Author* Roland Barthes argues explicitly against the priority of a text’s author in its interpretation and resists any notion of a singular interpretative power. Instead Barthes argues that texts are a collection of various interwoven meanings.

However, the analysis presented here cannot be said to adhere neatly to any of these positions, as it introduces historical contexts of genre and form in previous libertine writing to frame its analysis of late eighteenth-century libertine characters. Additionally the project of defining a libertine temporality contained in these texts is not contradicted by any of their respective authorial commentary. Rather the temporal positions of Lovelace, Valmont, Merteuil, and Juliette, are largely unaffected by authorial statements.
earlier libertine works, particularly theatre, to inform his depiction of Lovelace. Rather it is that analysing the libertine writing tradition, and the advent of the novel form, provide a far more comprehensive and informative means of contextualizing the unique attitude towards temporality presented by the libertine characters of these texts. This is particularly true given the epistolary and oratorical form of the novels under review, which do not present a strong authorial voice.

The multiple-corrrespondent epistolary form, unlike other modes of narration, has no built-in authorial rhetoric. We hear no authorial voice in the text. For in order to create the fiction of the letter itself, the epistolary novelist must forfeit the storyteller persona and abdicate responsibility for the fiction. (Castle 167)

This assessment applies to the various first-person oral histories contained within Juliette, namely the implication that it is the character, and not the author, who undertakes the interpretation of action, self-representation, and structuring of narrative. Therefore the primary means of contextualizing Clarissa, Liaisons, and Juliette will be located within the libertine writing that precedes them, rather than their respective authors.

Further refinement of this study’s methodology is evident in the choice to examine only three texts. The works studied here are selected on the basis of two primary criteria, the first is that they devote considerable time and space to a libertine narrative voice. It is through self-representation that these libertine characters are able to present the detailed and nuanced attitude towards time that is unique to this period and the subject of this study. The second major criterion is that these works all employ the novel form. Adaptation of libertine characters to the novel are a crucial aspect of changes to previously established notions of libertine time from the mid-century onwards. Novelistic form establishes the potential for greatly expanded narrative space, plotting, and psychological depth that these texts, and their libertine characters, all attempt to make full use of.

This study is not an attempt to make a sweeping claim across all of libertine writing, novelistic or otherwise, within the mid-to-late eighteenth century. Not every libertine character from within this period exhibits all of the temporal themes discussed here. Rather this study establishes that within this context there is the potential for texts concerned with libertinism to present a very particular sense of temporality, a temporality that is highly distinct from previous forms of libertine writing. Furthermore, that this sense of libertine temporality has a significant impact on some of the most prominent works of fiction produced within the eighteenth century.
Part of the reason these texts are selected instead of others is because of the way in which this unique libertine temporality is so clearly crystallized within their pages. The themes explored here are not absent from other works, so much as not presented as clearly. Consequently the choice to refine the study to three texts is made for the sake of clarity and issues of space. Casanova’s *Histoire de ma vie*, for example, certainly embodies many of the complications in libertine temporality that are discussed here. This is particularly true when one considers Casanova’s preface, and the fact it frames the whole work as the reminiscences of an elderly man. “I beg them[the readers] to forgive me if, in my old age, my soul is reduced to feeling no joys but those of memory” (23). These words speak to melancholy rooted in the fleeting nature of time’s passage that similarly confronts the libertine characters analysed here. However, for all of its applicability the autobiographical nature of *Histoire de ma vie* introduces complications of form and genre that would detract from the focus of the analysis presented here. Similarly *Memoirs of a Woman of Pleasure* and *Thérèse Philosophe* also demonstrate some of principles that will be discussed. However they hew far more closely to earlier forms of libertine narrative and do not innovate at the level of plot in the same fashion that the works selected here do, being focussed primarily with the pornographic education plot that had existed since the writings of Aretino.4

Despite the choice to exclude works and critical approaches which would require significant analytic discussions, it should be noted that this does not make the conclusions presented by this study self-evident or obvious. There is little critical commentary that places these three texts directly alongside each other despite their shared concern with libertinism, and establishing the parallels between Lovelace’s drawn-out seduction of Clarissa with Juliette’s brutal sexualized murder of thousands is not a simplistic critical process. Rather it is precisely because these temporal themes are nuanced that they require the clarity provided by the choice to present only three texts.

The methodology of this thesis owes a debt to James Fowler’s 2011 work *The Libertine’s Nemesis*. Fowler offers textual studies of a limited collection of libertine works that include both *Clarissa* and *Liaisons*, as well as other works by Sade. Like this thesis, *The Libertine’s Nemesis* aims to establish a clear thematic connection between these works. Fowler’s concern is the thematic conflict between prude and libertine characters that appears in each of these texts, and the content of his study is therefore almost entirely different from my own. Yet the excellence of Fowler’s argument, presentation, and

---

4 For a clearer breakdown of the distinction between the three works that are the focus of this study and this earlier style of libertine writing see the analysis of *School of Venus* in section 3.5.2.
methodology establish a strong critical precedent for examining the thematic parallels between late eighteenth-century libertine works.

1.1.1 Significance

Establishing a structured sense of libertine temporality that is unique to late eighteenth-century fiction creates several critical contributions. The first of which is that it brings new meanings to these texts through their libertine characters. It outlines the way in which the actions of these characters are informed by the tradition of libertine writing, and establishes what makes them unique against this earlier literature. Through a focused analysis of their attitudes towards time, we gain new insight into the character of Lovelace, Valmont, Merteuil, and Juliette. A cohesive sense of temporality that frames each of these characters actions, and an understanding of what makes it unique, reinforces the literary and cultural significance of these major works of fiction from the eighteenth century. Studying the libertine attitude towards time allow us to better understand what animates these characters, and how they impact the texts they inhabit.

A second key takeaway of this study is its challenge to any critical position that suggests libertinism fails to develop beyond the seventeenth century. The characters explored here are all, to some extent, retrospective towards earlier forms of libertinism, they all voice a desire to avoid being anachronistic. However, critics have sometimes misconstrued this inability to move beyond the past as a lack of meaningful development of libertine form or action. Yet it is precisely this awareness of the past that definitively challenges the idea that libertinism somehow entropies during the eighteenth century. It is their newfound temporal awareness that marks out these characters as highly unique within the libertine writing tradition. The struggle to innovate, a struggle that infuses the transgressions of these characters with melancholy and seriousness, is itself an innovation. While libertinism as historical practice has its strongest roots in the courts of Louis XIV and Charles II, its depiction in the eighteenth-century novel demonstrates its continued relevance beyond its portrayal in seventeenth-century works of poetry, pornography, and theatre. The shared thematic struggle with issues of temporality across the texts explored here is unprecedented within the libertine writing tradition and demonstrates a continued evolution in portrayals of libertinism, and by extension its theoretical frameworks.

The third significant aspect of this analysis is the way in which it underlines the need for further comparative textual studies that recognize the fluidity of literary networks throughout the eighteenth century. It demonstrates a need to bridge the critical gap between English and French literary studies. This is particularly true for texts that depict
libertinism given the cultural relevance of libertine characters within both contemporary eighteenth-century discourse and modern critical studies surrounding these texts. In this regard, the connections established here in relation to temporality continue the work of James Fowler’s 2011 text *The Libertine’s Nemesis* to demonstrate clear thematic parallels across English and French libertine texts.

Fourth and finally the unique sense of libertine temporality that these characters engage with highlights how new attitudes to time were being developed, discussed, and discarded within the eighteenth century. Lovelace, Valmont, Merteuil, and Juliette conceptualize temporality in a way that is distinct not only from previous libertine works, but other ideologies of time that are contemporary to them. This study’s focus is on constructing a sense of libertine temporality directly from text, and therefore it does not define it in opposition to other attitudes to time. However, the implication of a cohesive sense of libertine time unique to the writing of this period is significant to any discussion of western culture’s relationship with time. Chapter Three gestures to this significance when it provides some context for libertinism’s divergence from earlier Christian conceptions of time. Similar divergences also apply to capitalistic and scientific conceptions of time being developed during this period as well.

### 1.1.2 Terms

In referring to a libertine ethos I use the term “libertinism” as opposed to the more typical “libertinage” of French eighteenth-century scholarship. Jean-Pierre Dubost indicates the distinction between these terms when he states: “It is noticeable that we do not speak in French of libertinisme (as we do of cartésianisme or spinozisme) but only of libertinage, thus indirectly indicating that we cannot refer to a genuine libertine discourse. Libertinage has no strictly philosophical core” (56). *Libertinage* is certainly more applicable if we consider not only the multiplicity of libertine forms and behaviors that exist in fiction and historical practice but also the complex intersections of gender, geography, social class, and historical period. If we take the libertine in the word’s broadest sense, as an individual who actively transgresses social and moral boundaries via an emphasis on sensory pleasure as expressed through debauched or criminal behavior, then ‘libertinism’ is indeed a hugely nebulous term. Yet my study is specific to the fictional aristocratic libertine character of the eighteenth-century novel, and is indeed premised on the claim that within this context there *is* a cohesive understanding and set of principles such characters exhibit towards temporality. The thematic link I draw between these texts is clear enough that, at least within the purview of temporality, the term *libertinism* might be used.
“Time” and “Temporality” will be used somewhat interchangeably throughout this piece. Both are intended to refer to the passage or movement of time, and the awareness of past, present, and future that this movement imbues in the individual. This connotation of movement is implicit in the definition of “temporality” in its use to describe the state of existing within time. Use of the word “time” is made in reference to a generalized concept of its existence and passage, rather than a specific extent or duration.

Time, 34.a - Indefinite continuous duration regarded as that in which existence, and the sequence of events, takes place; the abstract entity which passes, goes by, or is consumed as events succeed one another, esp. in regard to the bringing about of anticipated developments, change, etc. (OED)

Time as the “abstract entity which passes” is its primary usage within this study, with temporality being the state of existing within said passage. Any alternative use of the word will be noted and appropriately framed within its given context,

In using the term transgression I refer to its standard definition as “the action of transgressing or passing beyond the bounds of legality or right; a violation of law, duty, or command; disobedience, trespass, sin” (OED). According to George Bataille, pleasure and meaning can stem from this act of infraction: “Transgression is associated with the sacred, the moment of rupture when the excluded element that is forbidden by the taboo, is brought into focus” (51). Transgression is “sacred” in its ability to instil wonder and affirm the power of the transgressor. It is therefore the means by which freedom of thought and action overlap with the pleasure of the moment for the libertine. Accordingly the enactment of transgression is a crucial goal for the libertine character.

1.1.3 The Four Themes

There are marked similarities in the portrayal of Robert Lovelace, the Vicomte de Valmont, the Marquise de Merteuil, and Juliette. Each of these characters is an aristocratic libertine figure and a principal narrator of his or her respective text. The focus of this study centres upon the profound similarities in the attitude to time expressed by their libertine characters. Textual study will align these texts in a way that biographical studies of their authors cannot, and demonstrate the clear thematic proximity between their libertine characters.

This proximity centres on four key themes pertaining to the libertine’s behaviour in relation to time. The individual textual studies of Clarissa, Liaisons, and Juliette presented in Chapter Four through Six will aim to establish how all four of these themes manifest in each of the major libertine characters under review.
The first theme is a tension between a sense of narrative temporality and the traditional libertine attitude towards time, each of which frequently contradicts the other. Firstly, the libertine must focus on a hedonism and pleasure available only within the present that, up until the eighteenth century, had entirely defined libertine temporality. Secondly, the libertine must confront the narrative requirement to consider the “plot” of his actions in their temporal entirety given his or her role as a structuring narrator. This act of narration is intrinsically linked to an awareness of past and future and consequently frustrates a desire to live within the present moment. Novelistic libertine characters must strike a balance between these two temporal positions.

The second theme is a preoccupation with legacy. All of the characters in these texts are fixated on the idea of defining themselves against other libertine transgressors who are either their contemporaries or part of a perceived libertine heritage. In order to set themselves apart from others the characters analysed here aim to produce transgressions which are, above all, unique. A desire for remembrance is the primary motivation behind their attempt to craft narration; it is the means by which they hope to create a legacy. Thus legacy introduces a concern with futurity, and a focus on narration; which further informs the tension discussed in the first theme.

The third theme concerns the way in which these characters reconcile the tension between narrative temporality and libertine temporality. They attempt to focus on the measured repetition of action on a small timescale, a practice I term “temporal articulation”. Each character plots a significant transgression and then tries to orient himself or herself entirely towards the present phase of their plot. In this manner they can focus on the present while still serving the goals of a larger narrative. Yet to maintain this orientation demands an enormous amount of effort, as it requires a ceaseless evaluation of the moment so that one’s immediate actions do not contradict a preordained plot. One of the ways in which these libertines try to circumvent this difficulty is through a sort of narrative rhythm, in which their plots necessitate a measured repetition of seductive or sexual action. In this way their decision to heighten or subdue their transgressions in the moment remains relatively straightforward. In fact the attempt to maintain a constant temporal pace, so that one’s plot moves neither too quickly nor too slowly, results in something like a constant inhabiting of the present moment.

The fourth and final aspect of late-eighteenth-century libertine temporality within these novels is the libertine’s ultimate failure to maintain this constant temporal pace. Regardless of how each of the libertine characters I examine calibrates his or her particular
admixture of narration and hedonism, or what sort of conclusion they plot for themselves, each of them is ultimately unable to maintain a balance between the pleasures of the present and demands of narration. The result is a general failure to reach their desired conclusion, so that the seductions of Lovelace and Valmont or the sexual orgies of Juliette become associated with a lack of satisfaction. This breakdown of control over temporality compromises the constant focus on moment and sensation, and without sensation there is no selfhood for the libertine. The carefully constructed temporal rhythm of their plots cannot be maintained, and the realities of the world, often those of human frailty, inevitably impose themselves on the libertine character. This study will argue that the late eighteenth-century libertine character’s sense of time is defined by these four aspects: tension, legacy, rhythm, and failure. These are the threads which bind Clarissa, Liaisons, and Juliette together. While individually each theme is not exclusive to these works, when taken as a whole these four aspects produce a temporal mode that is extremely distinct to the libertine character.

Libertine temporality points towards the unique nature of late eighteenth-century libertine fiction. It is a critically neglected link that clearly aligns the characters of Lovelace, Valmont, Merteuil, and Juliette across their diffuse contexts and authors. This analysis will establish a model of the eighteenth-century libertine characters’ attitudes towards time that will clearly distinguish them from the transgressive characters or practices which come before and after them.
2 Libertine Time in the Eighteenth Century

This chapter aims to establish how the four temporal themes that are the focus of this study’s textual analysis come to inform depictions of the eighteenth-century libertine character. It provides theoretical context by exploring developments in philosophy and narrative form that impact the depiction of time within these works. Chapter Three will offer further context, grounded less in theory but rather the history and literature of libertine writing that leads up to the mid eighteenth century. Chapters Four and onwards will provide textual studies of *Clarissa*, *Liaisons*, and *Juliette* respectively.

2.1 Pressures of the Moment

The first and most obvious stance the libertine adopts towards time is his or her orientation towards the present moment. Libertinism draws from epicurean and hedonistic literature to establish a model of self that is oriented entirely around pleasure. What it adds to this is a notion of freedom that leads the libertine to break laws and social norms as a means to achieve pleasure. Epicurus conceived of pleasure as a product of modesty and contentment, yet under libertinism pleasure stems from the purposeful transgression of social, religious, and sexual norms. Yet pleasure, from transgression or otherwise, can take place only within the present moment, and while we may anticipate or reminisce on our pleasures they cannot be experienced save in the present.

Accordingly, libertinism’s orientation towards pleasure means that it is also of necessity oriented towards the present. Catherine Cusset supports this assessment when she characterizes libertine writing as fundamentally interested in the contrast between mind and bodily sensation that occurs in the present moment: “The psychological model they [libertines] valorize is based on ‘moment’: they are struck by the contradiction between our moral being, which defines itself in terms of duration, consequence, and continuity, and this other being, at once physical, moral, and imaginary, which compels us, in the ‘moment’, to commit acts incompatible with all our moral values” (*No Tomorrow* 7).

Rochester’s destruction of the glass chronometer gestures to the way in which the libertine transgresses understandings of time as a linear entity in which the present moment is only a portion of the overall continuum of past, present, and future. Libertinism’s prioritization of pleasure leads the libertine to transgress notions of linear time by refusing to dwell on the

---

6 Catherine Wilson notes that Epicurus’s insistence on frugality and the rationing of pleasures did not correspond to the lesson internalized by many of his followers in the late Roman era. Authors of the early Christian era therefore depicted Epicureanism as a moral philosophy of decadence and self-interest that served to align it with later developments of libertine and hedonistic ethics (15).
past or anticipate the future, but rather pursue pleasure within the present and nowhere else. Such an alignment towards the present moment has a strong precedent within not only libertine fiction, a genre that stretches back to the sixteenth century, but also within the Christian philosophical tradition, especially the *Confessions* of St Augustine. Augustine describes the eternal as transcending linear time: “In the eternal, nothing is transient but the whole is present” (228). Time according to Augustine’s God is therefore a single state of existence, of presence, and any impression of “pastness” or futurity we experience is only an illusion, with both past and future being embedded at all times within a single present moment of being (235). Augustine’s call for Christians to reflect on the endless encompassing moment of God’s presence bears similarities to the libertine emphasis on embracing the present. The obvious difference is that the libertine focuses on the pleasures of the body in a way that reflects the materialist and hedonist aspects of the Epicurean philosophy which influences libertinism. This particular model of Christian temporality serves as an illustrative precedent for a philosophy which centres on experiencing the present moment. Ultimately, the emphasis on the present moment means that the quantification or tracking of time takes on a lesser importance, as one aims to live entirely within each instant of being with no consideration of past or future.

My third chapter will establish how libertinism’s orientation towards present-pleasure is both altered and made more salient within the literary context of the eighteenth century. However, we can begin to establish the way in which the libertine orients himself or herself towards the present moment beginning with George Poulet’s landmark 1956 text *Studies in Human Time*, which characterizes the eighteenth century’s preoccupation with moment as follows:

It is sensation alone, repeated, compared, analysed, transformed – but in all states always sensation and always actual- which not only determines existence but literally fashions and creates it. In a certain sense, therefore, human existence appears to the eighteenth century as a kind of continuous creation, insofar as it is the perpetual recovery of existence by a being who is slipping every moment into nothingness. But since this nothingness is pure insensibility, to escape nothingness means to be aware of one’s own sensations. (20)

Poulet suggests that to focus exclusively on the present moment the individual must constantly pursue stimulation and sensation in order to maintain a sense of self. Poulet’s assessment is supported by Richard Glasser, who characterizes the eighteenth-century understanding of living in the present as “the supreme happiness resided in a total unawareness of the passage of time, in the absence of a desire to recall the past or to control the future, that is to say, in an eternal present, devoid of duration or succession”
(248). If sustained sensation is the means to inhabit the present then pleasure is one of the best means to achieve this supreme happiness. While there may be other sensations that are equally strong, such as the experience of pain which Sade incorporates into his own model of libertinism, pleasure is understandably the preferred sensation with which individuals seek to sustain themselves. Libertinism has, even before the eighteenth century, always had pleasure as its central goal and Poulet’s model describes the foundations of a temporal existence that is extended and magnified within libertine writing of the eighteenth century. More than any other sensation, it is pleasure of the moment that becomes the means to selfhood.

However, this stance is difficult to adopt and sustain. It is impossible to be stimulated at all times, and when these sensations are absent one inhabits a state approximating nonexistence, a sort of vague torpor of self.\(^7\) This is especially true when one is oriented towards the singular sensation of pleasure in the manner of the libertine. Poulet identifies two primary temporal strategies for circumventing this sensation of lack:

The more intense they [one’s sensations] are the more one will feel his present existence; and the more numerous they are the more one will sense a duration in his existence. There are then in the eighteenth century two distinct forms of interior temporality. Intensity of sensation ensures the instant; multiplicity of sensation ensures duration.

Given that we are unable to sustain powerful sensations indefinitely, the libertine is forced to make a choice between emphasizing either their intensity or duration. The first of these strategies represents a model of self in which one places no restrictions on powerful sensory experiences. In the case of libertinism this is of course oriented towards pleasure. It aims to compensate for extended periods of non-sensation and lack of pleasure by embracing the full intensity of the moment when it does arrive. To embrace intensity in this fashion is to experience the self in long stretches of ennui that are occasionally annihilated in a conflagration of feeling and sensation. According to this model, pleasures of the moment take on a transcendent meaning as they warp one’s experience of time so that, despite their brevity, they fully recoup the self.

A recent example of this particular attitude towards sensory intoxication can be found in Hans Gumbrecht’s text *Production of Presence*. Gumbrecht attempts to reassert the importance of “presence” within the meaning-oriented culture of the arts and humanities. Presence is something that is physical and immediate which offers an unmediated experience to the human body or mind. Furthermore he suggests the need to create an

\(^7\) Both Poulet and Glasser speak of the threat of boredom as leading to a form of non-existence (Poulet 21, Glasser 249).
alternative way of knowing the world in which we abandon, at least occasionally, interpretation in order to develop a sense of the world through presence. Instead of the libertine focus on pleasure, Gumbrecht discusses “aesthetic epiphanies” as brief moments of intensity that serve to help one embrace presence. These moments are described in a way that aligns them with the strategy of temporal intensity in that they represent brief but extraordinarily powerful sensations rooted in the body which defy interpretation:

[…] The almost excessive, exuberant sweetness that sometimes overcomes me when a Mozart aria grows into polyphonic complexity and when I indeed believe that I can hear the tones of the oboe on my skin. […] The illusion of lethal empowerment and violence as if I were an ancient god, which permeates my body at the moment of the estocada final in a Spanish bullfight, when the bullfighter’s sword silently cuts through the body of the bull, and the bull’s muscles seem to stiffen for a moment – before its massive body breaks down like a house shaken by an earthquake. […] to know the feeling of having found the right place for one’s body with which a perfectly designed building can embrace and welcome us. (97-98)

Gumbrecht emphasizes that these moments contain nothing edifying, no messages of any kind, nothing that can be learned from them. Yet we recall these instances with a powerful nostalgia regardless of how happy or sad they are because they are instances of time that exists outside of our historical and cultural sense of self; they offer something that exists beyond the everyday world we inhabit and are thus attractive to us (99-100). The emphasis on physicality and sensation that Gumbrecht discusses within these moments of intensity is relevant, and indeed parallel, to strategies of embracing the full intensity offered by pleasures of the moment described in the libertine writing tradition. However, Gumbrecht’s model is not directly engaging this tradition, nor is the “moment of intensity” the only means he discusses to understand presence. Rather, for the sake of this study, these moments are used to illustrate how a model of temporality patterned after embracing fleeting pleasure might function, or appear to function.

Yet Gumbrecht also indicates the difficulty of seeking out these experiences when he discusses how these epiphanies cannot be anticipated:

I combine the quantitative concept of “intensity” with the meaning of temporal fragmentation in the word “moments” because I know – from many and mostly frustrating moments of loss and of separation – that there is no reliable, no guaranteed way of producing moments of intensity, and that we have even less hope of holding onto them. Indeed I cannot be sure before I hear my favourite Mozart aria, whether that exuberant sweetness will overcome my body again (99).
This is the cost of fully embracing the moment, its intensity is only so powerful and intoxicating because of its brevity. If sensation, especially the sensation of pleasure pursued by the libertine, is the basis of self, then there is a risk of a sense of lack or ennui when these sensations are no longer present. Despite this risk earlier libertine writing advocates the intensity of the moment, as emblazoned in Rochester’s destruction of the chronometer and its denial of past and future. Yet this strategy of embracing intensity remains dangerous for the libertine characters I examine. Instead my textual analysis will demonstrate that the eighteenth-century libertine character continually resists the full intensity of the moment in order to maintain an alternate temporal strategy that aims to sustain pleasurable sensation and avoid ennui.

The second strategy gestured to by Poulet relies instead upon a multiplicity of less-intense sensations in order to ensure an extended sensory stimulation. It is a strategy that emphasizes moderation of feeling in exchange for duration. Such an idea already existed in the ancient philosophy of Epicurus, who argued that the moderation of feeling was the means to happiness. Epicureanism experienced a revival throughout the seventeenth century, particularly via the rediscovery of Lucretius’s epic poem *On the Nature of Things*, which provided a model of Epicurean thought (Wilson 2). This influence can be seen throughout the moral philosophy of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. A prominent example is Bernard de Fontenelle’s 1724 essay “Du Bonheur,” which locates the source of happiness as the moderation of passion (Adkins 446). Within Fontenelle’s model pleasure is a matter of calculation in which the value of a given pleasure is weighed against the pain which must be endured in order to obtain it, as well as its instability in time (Adkins 447). The applicability of this attitude to the model of selfhood predicated on sensation and pleasure is obvious: if we moderate our sensations and pleasures we guarantee their temporal sustainability. While Fontenelle’s idea of moderation is predicated on virtues of humility, simplicity, and tranquillity, it can easily be conceived of as a means to ensure the happiness of the libertine who finds pleasure through transgression.

Thus the eighteenth-century libertine presents a model of self in which one restrains the full intensity of the moment in order to maintain a persistent state of sensation which never forces him to confront a lack of stimulation. One’s orientation towards sensation informs one’s experience of time, and therefore this new model of pleasure opens up new possibilities for the eighteenth-century libertine text. Within earlier libertine writing, such as Rochester’s poetry or the pornographic tableaux of Chorier, pleasure is experienced as an overwhelming sensation that obviates any consideration of past or future to constitute a sort of infinite moment; yet, as soon as pleasure disappears nothing can be
said—the text must conclude and the libertine ceases to exist. By adopting a pose in which pleasure is moderated and sustained, the eighteenth-century libertine is able to inhabit a much greater span of time and this gives them a greater power to communicate by means of a narrative.

Yet despite this moderation of pleasure, the libertine temporal mode, which continues to emphasize the present moment, still comes into conflict with the temporal mode of the narrator, which emphasizes a focus on past and future in the structure of plot. This tension is at the core of the libertine characters that are the subject of my analysis and represents the first key theme this study identifies. However, before the tension between these two temporal modes can be fully developed it is necessary to understand why narrative becomes such an essential aspect of the eighteenth-century libertine project. Accordingly the next section will briefly introduce another key theme, before returning to this concept of narrative temporality and the tension it introduces in the eighteenth-century libertine novel.

2.2 Legacy

Legacy is the second core theme of this study, and is essential to understanding why libertine literature makes a transition from a focus on the intensity of sensation to focus on the means to sustain it. The desire of the libertine character to fashion a legacy for himself or herself leads to the introduction of narrative temporality that demands an awareness of past and future in order to fashion a plot. Such a demand conflicts with intensity-based attitudes to pleasure and necessitates a shift in the way libertine characters present their experience of sensation and time.

All of the characters analysed in this study exhibit a profound concern over what will happen to them after their narratives, or lives, conclude. Each libertine character is concerned with futurity, and how his or her actions will be perceived by others. The desire to strategize and control one’s own sense of time extends to encompass the way in which others will interpret this strategy. Lovelace and Valmont desire to create a narrative so brilliant in its degree of transgression that it will stand out against his fellow libertines and take on an aspect of timelessness. Juliette wishes for the opposite, the annihilation of herself and her actions so that her memory is entirely lost to the future. Each character aims to exert control over his or her future. There is a preoccupation with the way in which the actions of the present will have a profound impact on the future, or the destruction of the future in the case of the Sadean libertine.
Legacy thus underpins every other theme examined here, especially that of failure, which is often constituted by the inability to achieve a specific type of legacy. Concern over legacy is rooted in a profound sense of anachronism that weighs on the eighteenth-century libertine in which the sensation of time’s passage is accentuated as previous modes of transgression fail to generate the same meaning they once did. The full context behind the shifting tableau of libertine writing, which places the eighteenth-century libertine character in a position that makes him extremely cognisant of futurity, will be dealt with in Chapter Three. For now it is sufficient to indicate that the idea of legacy, or the threat of its lack, lends these characters a desire for transgressive originality. More than anything, the eighteenth-century libertines wish to define themselves against earlier libertine forebears as well as their immediate fellow transgressors.

2.3 Pressures of Narration

If libertinism demands the pursuit of the moment, then this must be reconciled with the libertine character’s role as narrator. Narrative is inextricably wrapped up in issues of temporality and demands the consideration of a temporal whole which includes past, present, and future in order to effectively communicate a plot. Accordingly libertine narrators exhibit a tension between narrative temporality and a libertine temporality, the latter of which focuses only on the pleasures of the present. This tension is the foundation for my argument that the libertine temporal mode of the late eighteenth century comes to occupy a unique position within the libertine writing tradition.

A narrator must consider the sense of time’s passage felt during the reading or processing of his or her narration. Peter Brooks predicates his discussion of plot on the idea that narrative and temporality are inseparable, and that we are drawn to narrative explanations and reflections in order to comprehend and understand our own time-boundedness and mortality. For Brooks, the act of working through a narrative is a way of exerting control over the “chaos of life” and our own mortality by confining and reiterating actions within a “bounded” space so that they become comprehensible and produce meaning (22). It is particularly noticeable when we consider narratives in which ‘temporality’ embodies not only the state of existing within time, but the sensations and anxieties we experience as a result of its passage.

Brooks models narrative as a form of understanding and explanation, one that is deeply and inextricably linked with issues of time-boundedness and our ability to perceive relations of beginnings, middles, and ends (11). He argues that readers are compelled to continue reading a narrative by the desire to find meaningful, totalizing order in the
completion of its plot. Plot is a temporality of interconnected events—the arranged elements of story and their relation to each other that aims to produce and make sense of the meanings that develop through textual and temporal succession (Brooks 37). However, this desire for finding meaning through plot can only be fulfilled at the end of a narrative, and only if a certain amount of detours and dilations of plot have been experienced. We find it necessary to repeat events and actions until there is a sense of proper “boundedness” or mastery, a movement from the passive to the active in which the “right” ending is chosen (103). Narrative desire is therefore a desire for the end, but an end that mingle a conclusion of a narrative with the pleasure of its totalizing function produced by delay.

Delay refers to any temporal extension or repetition of plot before the conclusion of a particular narrative arc or overall plot, and thus it is an essential component to the production of narrative meaning. If an ending comes too soon, the narrative feels short-circuited and the meaning produced for the reader is lost. The libertine characters I examine are actively seeking to shape their stories into narratives, as will be demonstrated by their tendency to purposefully delay actions and resolutions in a way that demonstrates a comprehension of the temporal unity of their respective plots. Whether in the postponement of a seduction’s fulfilment, or the postponement of a sexual orgasm, the libertine must at all times choose the right moment in which to reach a conclusion. Frank Kermode also conceptualizes delay as an essential feature of narrative in novels and other genres, one that is only tolerated due to the reader’s absolute faith in a forthcoming ending: “It is a disconfirmation followed by a consonance; the interest of having our expectations falsified is obviously related to our wish to reach the discovery or recognition by an unexpected and instructive route. It has nothing whatever to do with any reluctance on our part to get there at all” (18). Thus conclusions can only occur once they have been laden with meaning through delay. Walter Benjamin similarly argues for the importance of delay in generating the meaning that accompanies the end of narratives when he states that: “The suspense which permeates the novel is very much like the draft which stimulates the flame in the fireplace and enlivens its play” (99). Delays are the means by which this suspense is created, heightening the meaning produced by the completion of the narrative. A brief example is found in letter 23 of Les Liaisons Dangereuses, in which Valmont describes his agitation at nearly allowing himself to consummate his seduction too quickly: “How powerful the force of circumstance if, forgetting all my designs in a premature triumph, I had risked losing the delights of a prolonged struggle and the fascination of a painful defeat?” (53). Valmont’s statement highlights how self-aware the libertine narrator is, and
how carefully he or she must plot a transgression which allows delay and repetition to engender meaning.

One therefore cannot produce a narrative without considering the temporal whole of plot, which is at all times oriented towards an end point. Accordingly, the libertine narrators of these texts, who instigate and create their own plots, self-consciously fashion their transgressions into a narrative for public or private consumption. As both instigator and narrator they have an “audience” for their actions in mind at all times. Consequently, while they strive to enjoy the pleasures of the present moment, they must also anticipate the retrospection of present events, or rather the expectation that a plot will be packaged into a narrative totality following its conclusion. This is expressed by Brooks when he discusses Rousseau’s Confessions: “All narrative posits [a being] capable of going back over the ground, and thereby realizing the meaning of the cipher left by a life. Narrative seems ever to imagine in advance the act of its transmission, the moment of reading and understanding that it cannot itself ever know, since this act always comes after the writing in a posthumous moment” (Brooks 34). For the libertine narrator of the eighteenth-century novel this is most obvious in the self-gratifying anticipation of a seduction’s conclusion, but more generally is demonstrated across each of the texts analysed here via a continual process of review that each of their narrators enacts. They seek to know how their stories will be told, and this fuels their desire for agency over the events of their plots. There are occasions in Juliette’s narrative in which she reiterates all of her actions up until that point, and thus her narrative represents only the most recent instance of telling. Similarly for Lovelace, Valmont, and Merteuil, the epistolary form demands a constant and continual reviewing of action through the act of writing. In all these cases we see these figures anticipate and prepare their narrative projects well in advance of their actual telling.

A tendency towards narrative review is hardly unique to novelistic libertines, yet it is particularly salient for such characters given the control they exert over their texts. Terry Castle makes a direct parallel between Lovelace and the Sadean libertine in her study of the former: the power of language the libertine wields over their victim, a power that includes the ability to silence any countervailing discourse (23). Within these works libertine characters structure and instigate the creation of plot of their own accord. Similarly they purposefully introduce delay in order to produce a totalizing narrative at the culmination of their seductive or sexual practice. Furthermore the very form of these texts are suited to their libertine narrators’ power over the plot. Letters, and their parallel in the various oratories of Juliette, imply the interpretation of actions, and the creation of narrative, within the very act of presentation. Tom Keymer labels this “[…] the wilful self-projection
necessarily at work in any autobiographical act” (10). Castle comments on the way in which letters are connected to narrative awareness: “Thus the letter, the basic textual unit in Clarissa, is a writing which is also, paradoxically, a reading. It registers its author’s acts of textual exegesis” (19). This interpretive act is also implied in oratorical practice, and both forms enable the libertine character to dominate their respective narratives through their ability to self-represent themselves in whatever means they see fit. This will be demonstrated in the extremely controlled and calculated nature of seduction, letter-writing, and in Juliette’s case the sexual and sadistic act itself, which sees these characters fashion these events into their plots. However there is a further innovation of form that impacts the temporal outlook of these libertine characters, and which must be discussed.

2.3.1 The Libertine Novel

Perhaps the most important differentiator between the eighteenth-century libertine character and his or her predecessors is his or her placement within the novel form. The novel has occupied a central position in eighteenth-century studies since Ian Watt’s The Rise of the Novel, which argues that the form is generated as a result of its employment of formal realism that produces “[…]what purports to be an authentic account of the actual experiences of individuals” (27). Watt outlines a number of the technical characteristics of the novel that highlight the movement away from classical universal forms via the individualization of characters and environments, and aligns these innovations with the widespread philosophic turn towards individualism, empiricism, and an emphasis on sensory experience (18). Under Watt’s model, the novel develops as a literary form modelled directly on these salient philosophies, which already exert an influence on libertinism, and which the libertine narrator can extend to encompass Epicurean or deistic views. The way in which the novel hones in on a realistic treatment of time, combined with its more general popularity throughout the eighteenth century, makes it an ideal vehicle for libertine writing.

It is, of course, important to note that Watt’s model has been extensively criticized and re-assessed since its publication. Margaret Anne Doody’s study The True Story of the Novel convincingly argues that the novel is a far older genre than Watt claims (5). Similarly Albert Guerard’s Triumph of the Novel indicates that this idea of formal realism is not implicit to the novel form in general, and that Watt has merely described a type of novel significant in the eighteenth century (12). The most significant of these objections for the purpose of this study is Tom Keymer’s criticism that Watt’s argument for the novel’s proximity to reality does not acknowledge the way in which the novel form, and
particularly the epistolary novel, contains the potential for false representations in the
deliberateness of the literary act undertaken by its characters (6). Consequently this study
recognizes the way in which libertine characters misrepresent themselves in their self-
narrative to consolidate their power over the text. Despite these limitations, Watt’s theory
remains useful for describing the way in which the novel form introduced a new
understanding of narrating temporality in its proximity to the experience of daily life within
the eighteenth century. Watt’s emphasis on the novel’s sense of detail, and detailed time
suggests that it is not mere coincidence that the depiction of libertine temporality
undergoes a profound shift precisely as it comes to be expressed through the novel form. It
is also not a coincidence that libertinism is a subject or theme of so many significant early
novels.

My focus on libertinism’s relationship to the temporal is stimulated by the novel’s
emphasis on the connection between temporality and narrative. Perhaps the most
important aspect of the novel’s unique treatment of time, as indicated by Watt, is its
strategy of establishing a character’s personal identity through the memory of past thoughts
or actions, and its emphasis on how these past experiences inform present actions: “the
characters of a novel can only be individualized if they are set in a background of
particularized time and place” (21). A character’s identity, his or her consciousness, is
defined through their sense of time and their memories of past thought and action. As will
be demonstrated in Chapter Three, this demands that a novelistic character act in
accordance with a fully-realized sense of personal “pastness” that complicates any pursuit
of the present and which distinguishes the libertine characters portrayed within the novel
form. The novel, however, also brings the reader closer to the level of immediate sensation,
particularity, and a tangible present that form the basis for any experience of “the
moment.” It is a powerful vehicle for attempting to articulate a libertine aesthetic
experience, and yet at the same time its narrative form also demands a consideration of the
past and a movement towards an end which comes into conflict with that same experience.

The novel seeks to move close to the texture of daily experience via a more
minutely discriminated time-scale than any previous form of narrative. Mikhail Bakhtin, like
Watt, defines the novel through its contrast with previous narrative forms, particularly the
epic, in order to argue that its emergence within the Early Modern period reflects a new
temporal perspective in which man becomes conscious of the present not only as a
continuation of the past but also a new beginning, with the novel as a developing genre
concerned primarily with the possibilities of the present:
The present, in all its open-endedness, taken as a starting point and centre for artistic and ideological orientation is an enormous revolution in the creative consciousness of man. […] The novel, from its very beginning, had at its core a new way of conceptualizing time. It took shape precisely when both the world and man were assuming a degree of comic familiarity, when the object of artistic representation was being degraded to the level of a contemporary reality that was inconclusive and fluid. The novel is structured in direct contact with inconclusive present day reality. (39)

Bakhtin’s definition of the novel as concerned with the human sense of the present, and Watt’s conception of it as concerned with the texture of daily life, help to explain why the novel is an important means by which libertinism could be described. It is through the present-time of the novel that libertinism can most effectively be demonstrated in the sensations and pleasures of the moment.

The novel is highly conducive to expressing a particular ethos through a depiction of its practice, as characters and narrators are provided with the textual space in which to explain the implications and interpretive meanings of their actions. Benjamin characterizes the reader of a novel as highly isolated in a way that allows these meanings to work upon him or her more intensely, causing him to “seiz[e] upon the material more jealously than anyone else” (100). This mirrors the isolated nature of the libertine seduction of both subject and reader, best summarized in Jean-Marie Goulemot’s statement that “with libertine fiction, the goal is that of overcoming the prejudices of some of the characters, which are assumed to be the same as those of the reader. The reader is somewhat the equivalent of the fictional object of seduction” (136). If one goal of libertine fiction is to convince then the intensity of expression produced by the novel’s combination of action and interpretation is its most potent vehicle. The persuasive nature of the novel is furthered by the psychological depth that Watt proposes is introduced via the individualization of characters that adds new methods for the discovery of truth and meaning (Watt 12). Tom Keymer notes the way in which the novel form introduces a second “story” that accompanies the action of the text “[…] a story of characters at writing-desks, struggling to fix their experiences adequately in prose and so define and assert their own conflicting sense, psychologically, epistemologically and above all morally, of what is happening in their world” (48). It is owing to this intimacy of expression that Keymer later notes how the narrative form “gives privileged access to Lovelace’s psychological ‘noircours’ [darkness] but also invites the reader to experience the novel in part from a libertine stance” (153). Thus a libertine in a novel, with the power, ability, and willingness to represent himself or herself however they like, has the potential to exert an unprecedented degree of magnetism and influence over his or her reader.
It is important to note that this does not imply the novelistic libertine should be considered superior to his or her forebears. Indeed Benjamin is highly negative about the novel’s aesthetic effect, and I will try to explain the problems these characters face in attempting to express the libertine ethos within the novelistic form. A side-effect of the intensity of expression and psychological depth produced by the novel is its frequent failure to produce cohesive meaning or thought that is not highly specific to its characters. Georg Lukacs explains that the novel’s vividness comes at the expense of its capacity to produce meaning:

The novel, in contrast to other genres whose existence resides within the finished form, appears as something in process of becoming. [...] As form, the novel establishes a fluctuating yet firm balance between becoming and being; as the idea of becoming, it becomes a state. (73) That the novel can never fully “become” means it cannot express fully formed meaning, despite the temporal dimension and the careful arrangement of plot described by Brooks and Kermode. Lukacs argues that the novel seeks and fails to find essence, and this is the reason plotted narrative time is essential to its form: “we might almost say that the entire inner action of the novel is nothing but a struggle against the power of time” (122). Lukacs’ argument that the novel can only gesture towards aspects of life’s meaning in a way that reflects a constant state of “becoming” underscores its proximity to our own lived experience. Novelistic temporality reflects our own sense of time in that we can never fully establish a final meaning for our behaviour. Even narrative conclusions that retroactively apply meaning to a character’s actions never extend this meaning beyond the characters themselves. The novel’s proximity to the texture of daily life inhibits it from speaking to universal truths, only individual ones.

That the novel is a difficult form with which to express universal meaning aligns neatly with Jean-Pierre Dubost’s suggestion that the literary orientation of libertinism, and particularly eighteenth-century libertinism, ensures it can never truly articulate a coherent philosophical model. He asserts that this deficiency stems from its expression within narrative forms:

Libertinage has no strictly philosophical core. [...] In libertine literature as a whole (including its paradoxical change in Sade’s works), the libertine discourse is always a “discourse within a text.” It is not possible, therefore, to speak about libertine “philosophy” but only about a literary universe of libertinage, mostly to be found in the form of narratives. (56)

The implication of expressing a philosophy strictly through novelistic narrative is that libertinism never presents a unified system for its practice; there is no consistent
understanding of how to apply its philosophy as a way of life. Instead Dubost argues that we are given individual characters that are only able to theoretically justify their actions within the logic of specific fictional worlds (56). Lovelace can only structure his all-consuming seduction against the exceptionally virtuous Clarissa. Likewise, Juliette can only maintain her constant upwards trajectory of wealth, transgression, and power in a world which recognizes and defers to her transgressive power. As a result of libertinism’s lack of overarching philosophical structure, the principles espoused by each individual libertine alter according to his or her personality, experience, and the narrative he or she attempts to produce. The negative or weak aspects of individual characters are projected onto their libertine code and their narratives as a whole. Failure is therefore embedded into the eighteenth-century libertine narrative, as will be demonstrated in section 2.5.

However, Dubost’s understanding of the novel’s potential to express or impart libertine ideas is directly countered by Catherine Cusset when she states: “The novel contains more powerful moral lessons than do philosophical and moral treatises precisely because they put morals into practice and convey morals through pleasure: morals in novels are more subtle and ambiguous, and therefore closer to human reality, which is full of contradictions” (9). According to Cusset, when it comes to ethical philosophy the novel’s proximity to the individual is a strength, not a shortcoming, and since she considers libertinism to have a distinct ethical component in attacking the hypocrisy of those who neglect bodily sensation, it is only fitting it is expressed within the novel. I would further contend that Dubost is remiss not to acknowledge seventeenth-century Epicurean and Empirical philosophies, which are not only fully developed as philosophical systems but have significant bearing on libertine writing. While it is not the purview of this study to determine whether libertinism can or cannot be considered a philosophical position, it is certainly the case that the novel form comes to be a dominant aspect of libertine writing and informs its development and shifts in the eighteenth century.

The libertine novel gestures towards the pleasures of the moment, and its narrative exists to reiterate and review sensory epiphanies while simultaneously being a vehicle by which libertines can seek to fashion meaning for their individual lives, if not the lives of others. Benjamin establishes the novel’s appeal when he states that we are compelled to read because we know it will produce meanings that cannot exist for our own life as we live it: “The novel is significant […] because the stranger’s fate by virtue of the flame which consumes it yields the warmth which we never draw from our own fate. What draws the reader to the novel is the hope of warming his shivering life with a death he reads about” (100). In this regard, few characters burn brighter than the libertine.
2.4 Temporal Articulation

The libertine character of the eighteenth-century novel thus inhabits a tension between two disparate goals, the first of which is to focus on the present moment and pursue sensation. In doing so the libertine hopes to establish a sense of self via sensation in the manner outlined by Poulet’s characterization of eighteenth-century time. This pursuit of sensation is oriented exclusively towards pleasure, a feeling that can only be experienced within present time in a way that neglects any sense of past or future.

Secondly, however, the role of narrator demands a temporal awareness of past and future in order to structure a plot and generate meaning for the libertine. Of particular note here is the requirement for delay or deferral, in order to produce this meaning, something that is directly opposed to a focus on immediate pleasure. This is compounded by the libertine character’s active role as the instigator of plotted action, so that he or she, as narrator, must strategize not only the act of transgression but also how it will be retold.

Peter Cryle views the conflict between these two attitudes towards time within the libertine novel as leading to separate subgenres within libertine writing. In the elegant seductions of Crébillon he sees narration emphasized over power and speed, a category he deems “fictions of negotiation” (“Passing the Time” 371). In Sade’s calculated increments of transgressive excess he sees the immediacy of the moment prioritized, and deems these texts “fictions of measurement” (372). Cryle asks a question of his reader that summarizes this tension between the emphasis on moment and the act of narration:

Can such a principle of [narrative] delay be maintained in stories which are committed to a strong notion of libertine mastery? Can there be a delay which, conceived in masculinist terms, does not just give itself up, through dilatoriness, to feminine power as coyness or coquetry? Are there principles of delay which can maintain the time of the story in the absence of that sustained, playful talk which is the very stuffing of [Crébillon’s] Sophis, without lapsing into the mechanics of tiresome repetition? (372)

This question is embedded within the eighteenth-century libertine characters who strategize, initiate, and narrate their own transgressive plot. It is at the core of what makes the eighteenth-century libertine characters unique in their attitude to temporality. Yet this study will depart from Cryle in affirming that Lovelace, Valmont, Merteuil, and Juliette all respond to the tension between their roles as libertine and narrator in fundamentally the same manner. Rather than affirm a division between two separate categories of libertine writing and by extension libertine temporality, I will demonstrate that each character
attempts to balance a pursuit of the moment against narrative temporality in his or her own way, rather than simply discarding one or the other.

The method by which this balance is achieved is suggested in Poulet’s statement that there are two means to resolve a desire for constant sensation in the moment. The first is to fully embrace the intensity of sensory epiphanies which the moment can produce, to allow them to totally intoxicate and engulf us when they occur at the cost of a sense of ennui and lack when they do not. This is the strategy of Rochester symbolized in the destruction of the chronometer, and the experienced described by Gumbrecht’s “moments of intensity”. The second is to aim to moderate the intensity of the sensations of the moment in order to guarantee their duration in the manner suggested by the moral philosophy of Epicureanism. It is this second option of moderation that I propose resolves, or at least lessens, the tensions between libertine aims. Libertines moderate their sensations of pleasure and time’s passage, with the intention of creating a successful plot while retaining constant sensation in the present.

To this end I propose that the libertine articulates time, a word I use in reference to its technical definition as “consisting of segments united by joints” (OED). The libertine uses his or her position as both the narrators and instigators of plot to divide time into discrete moments of being that are always placed within the context of a larger narrative. In theory, each moment is a self-contained instance in which one enjoys a degree of pleasure before progressing onto the next. This is the sense of time experienced by the seducer, a ceaseless evaluation and strategizing of the moment so that time is divided into discrete pieces of awareness in which one judges when to act and when not to act. The libertine character carefully plots a narrative which aims to produce a specific meaning, and then seeks to focus entirely on the individual steps that must be taken in order to ensure its realization.

Not only is libertine time articulated into discrete moments, but these segments also form a pattern so that action within the libertine text takes on a rhythmic quality through its strong and regulated repetition and expansion of these patterns. This is prominently displayed within the give-and-take of Lovelace’s and Valmont’s drawn out seductions and the repeated numeric crescendos of Juliette’s orgies. In each case actions are reiterated over and over while simultaneously being carefully varied and escalated in order to conform to a pre-arranged plot. Temporal articulation is not purely composed of either repetition or variety; it is the incremental adjustment of sensations in order to ensure the libertine character remains focused on pleasures, while simultaneously allowing for a
carefully strategized escalation of plot. Delay is a key factor here, as it is necessary to not upset the gradually increasing patterns of repetition by pre-emptively reaching the seductive or sexual conclusion. Thus the libertine moderates his or her pleasure in order to sustain this extended segmenting of time. By conforming to a scansion of the seduction or sexual encounter, obeying a carefully strategized rhythm, the libertine ensures a measured flow of time that equates to something like an eternal present. When all of these segments are taken as a unified whole it becomes a gradual escalation that corresponds to a pre-ordained plot, while at the same time ensuring the libertine is always stimulated with a degree of pleasure within the present moment.

In this manner the libertine is able to focus on a pursuit of the moment of stimulation without ever having to entirely obviate the consideration of past and future. It is to moderate one’s sense of time, to establish a rhythm of its passing that satisfies both sensation and narration. The presence of this temporal articulation within the behaviour of the libertine characters will be demonstrated in each chapter, primarily through their constant consideration of whether to accelerate or delay their actions in order to maintain an even pressure upon their seductive targets, and by extension an even movement towards the conclusion of plot. Here I pre-empt my analysis with a single example from Lovelace’s letter 108 in *Clarissa*: “And then to see how my will works, and what can be done by the *amorous see-saw*; now humble; now proud; now expecting, or demanding; now submitting, or acquiescing – until I have tired resistance” (Richardson 424). This rhythmic back-and-forth quality is the basis of the seductive-sexual articulation of time. It aims to bring the libertine and his victim into the same temporal rhythm, and then maintain that rhythm, even at the expense of his or her own progress, until the preferred moment of sexual consummation.

Unsurprisingly the imposition of this articulation upon not only oneself but over others as well demands an extreme amount of focus on the part of the libertine character. Strategy, and specifically the strategizing of time, is the primary focus of the libertine narrator. Each of my chapters will demonstrate the demand placed upon the libertine character to ensure that time’s passage remains within the tolerances of a carefully planned cadence of repetitions that form his or her plot. To craft these measured transgressions in a way that reconciles the tension between present pleasure and plotted time is to be ceaselessly vigilant against any lapse in temporal control.

As a result the most significant threat to the libertine character is to allow a moment of passion to short-circuit this carefully constructed temporal articulation and rhythm. To consummate a seduction before it is properly drawn out, or to bow out of one
entirely, is to forsake measured temporal moderation and give way to the intense highs and lows of fleeting emotion. To do so would be to acquiesce to the intensity of the unsolicited moment in the manner of Poulet’s first model of temporality, a temptation to throw away the carefully planned rhythmic structure of seductive-sexual time and unreservedly embrace the sensations of the moment at the expense of their narrative plot. Libertine characters struggle with this temptation constantly in the following chapters as they force themselves to delay narrative, physical, and emotional climaxes alike. The gravest possible error for the libertine is to break an unceasing focus on the measured deployment of time in order to indulge the desires of the heart.

For the libertines discussed in this study, the practice of seduction is to gaze with unceasing focus on the incremental deployment of time; it is to exert a total self-control. What, then, is the actual result of this articulated sense of temporality? Certainly it helps to ease the tension between a simultaneous desire for pleasures of the moment and a meaningful plot, but how does it manifest? To help illustrate temporal articulation I offer two examples from Western aesthetics that, while not identical to the articulated time of the libertine, bear many resemblances to it.

2.4.1 Rousseau and Monasticism

A measured deployment of time blurs the boundaries of past, present and future so that one is able to exist in an ongoing present, despite the sense of an eventual conclusion. To express this sensation I refer to a comparable model of temporality presented in the fifth walk of the *Reveries* by Jean-Jacques Rousseau. In a manner gestured to by Fontenelle nearly fifty years earlier, Rousseau describes a means to happiness created via a constant moderation of feeling. This ensures that one’s joy stems not from the emotions of a moment, which are bound to fade, but rather, from “a single and lasting state” (87). This calm deployment of self is reflected in how one is expected to pass the time and Rousseau presents emotion and activity as overlapping in this need for temporal moderation:

There must be neither a total calm nor too much movement, but a steady and moderate motion, with no jolts or breaks. Without any movement life is mere lethargy. If the movement is irregular or too violent it arouses us from our dreams. (89-90)

Rousseau’s recommendation is a steady and moderate measurement of self and time which leads to a higher state of existence. It is by removing the need to strive towards an appreciation of the “present” that Rousseau creates an eternal present in which “the soul can find a resting-place secure enough to establish itself and concentrate its entire being
there, with no need to remember the past or reach into the future, where time is nothing to it, where the present runs on indefinitely but this duration goes unnoticed, with no sign of the passing time” (88). He indicates that the ability to meet this constant rhythm relies on the appreciation of idle time. His activity is described as a collection of quiet reflections without any need for labour. Rousseau’s temporal mode thus allows him to gain control of time by letting it flow away. This is similar to what the libertine seeks to achieve through repetition.8

A second exemplar of temporal articulation is found within the monastic traditions of the Christian West. Part of Giorgio Agamben’s discussion of monasticism in his text The Highest Poverty deals with the temporal scansion of the monastic communal life. He argues that the rigor of this scansion has no parallels in the classical world or any institutions of modernity (19). Indeed he characterizes the monastery as founded upon an incessant and implacable temporal articulation that its inhabitants model their lives around, in which each hour has a corresponding duty (25). A monk’s life represents “a total mobilization of existence through time,” an unceasing prayer that transforms life into a divine office (23). This methodology extends the temporal mode of prayer to encompass an entire life, a rhythmic focus on specific repetition that leads to a dilation of time best exemplified within the lay Christian tradition by praying the rosary (24). Such a goal is not merely religious fancy or dogma: the monastic life is structured in such a way that there is a real and concrete experience of temporal collapse for those who experience it. Within Patrick Fermor’s 1957 layman travelogue of European monasteries A Time to Keep Silence, he verifies this sense of temporal slippage:

Time passes in a monastery with disconcerting speed. [...] There are no landmarks to divide it up except the cycle of the seasons; and I found that days, and soon weeks, were passing almost unperceived. The speed of this temporal lapse is a phenomenon that every monk notices: six months, a year, fifteen years, a lifetime, are soon over. (38)

This freedom from temporal thought or concern is the specific goal of the monastic practice, and part of a more general call within the Christian faith to experience what Agamben deems “messianic time” (Time that Remains 64). Messianic time, as discussed in the letters of Paul, eschews all sense of chronology in order to contract past present and future into a singularity of “real time” based on the presence of Christ’s life, resurrection, and return. Within church doctrine this is clearly represented within the concept of

---

8 A brief clarification: I do not seek to equate Rousseau with the libertine character. Rather, the attitude towards time he describes in his Reveries is being used as means to illustrate part of my theory of the libertine’s temporal articulation.
transubstantiation, which evokes a literal return to Christ’s presence at the last supper. Christian monasticism orients itself via rigorous temporal articulation towards a collapse of temporality.

Additionally, one will note within both the monastic tradition and Rousseau’s *Reveries* that there is an emphasis on the requirement for an isolated space in which to achieve this form of temporal articulation. In both cases there is a demand for seclusion, whether of the individual or of the monastic community, in order for the conscious structuring of time to take full effect. This seclusion is similarly reflected in the deeply private spaces required for the seductive and sexual transgressions enacted by the libertine. The importance of this private space is twofold: first—and most obviously—it is by virtue of being hidden from public curiosity and judgement that the transgressive action is able to be fully realized without constraint. Second, the attempt to seclude sexuality or violence as in the harem and torture chamber, or obviate it entirely in the cloister, actually highlights it as the locus of fantasy in which the worst debauchery or violence occurs. Christopher Rivers affirms the link between the cloister and libertine writing in his exploration of “convent pornography” as a distinct subgenre of literature in the eighteenth century, in which the private religious space becomes a highly charged site of pornographic fantasy (386-387). In regards to time, seclusion also protects a carefully crafted temporal articulation from being broken in upon by external temporal modes, such as the market or the social calendar, which would compromise the intensity of said articulation.

For all these striking similarities the monastery and Rousseau have entirely different goals in their deployment of temporal rhythm than the libertine. It is therefore necessary to briefly indicate how the libertine adaptation of this model of time is distinct in its combination of calculation and individualism. The intense calculation of action that exists within the monastic practice, in which each hour is assigned a specific task, is reflected in the ceaseless strategizing of action that the libertine narrator undergoes. Rousseau is diametrically opposed to this practice in that he specifically locates his pleasure in a freedom from calculation, so that as much as he aims to moderate his feelings he also allows the world to act upon him. This is exemplified when he is injured by a large dog while out walking, as the injury becomes a catalyst for a blissful realization of self during his return walk home. It is rather difficult to imagine a libertine taking such an interruption in stride. Yet at the same time, libertinism rejects the cenoby—meaning communal religious life—which is fundamental to the monastic tradition. While the libertine always seeks an
audience for his or her transgressions, especially among fellow transgressors, the structure of time is a product of the individual, and it is he or she alone who experiences it.\(^9\)

Furthermore there is an obvious focus within libertinism on bodily experience, especially pleasure, which is entirely obviated within monastic time. The body is of course very important for Rousseau as well, and he frequently reports the sensations it brings as an essential component in achieving his state of happiness. The rhythm of walking, the rocking of a boat, or even the disorientation brought about by injury or illness are all means by which Rousseau experiences his moments of clarity and transcendence. However, the difference between Rousseau and the libertine is again one of calculation, as the libertine attitude towards bodily sensation within the eighteenth-century text demands absolute control of one’s physiology while also placing the pleasures of the body, whether in a state of consummation or expectation, at the core of temporal minutiae. Merteuil’s autobiography in letter 81 of Liaisons proclaims this control over one’s body as the defining trait of libertine self-creation, as it transforms the pursuit of pleasure into a calculated action that is imbued with meaning (181). The libertine must not do anything with his or her body that is not meticulously planned as part of his or her overall plot.

As much as Rousseau also emphasizes the individual, he believes—unlike the libertine character—this state can be attained exclusively by reorienting one’s self, with minimal requirement for external interaction or any sort of emotion beyond “the feeling of existence” (89). This is clearly not the case with the libertine, who can only focus with the necessary intensity on time’s passage within the constraints of a seduction aimed towards an external victim-object. While monks focus on a single rhythmic pattern until their death, the libertine only does so until a seduction is consummated and must then seek another, moving onto the next victim once there is nothing left to gain. Accordingly this vampiric method sees the libertine act alone, yet rely entirely on external sources to achieve his or her goals. While these must at all times be modulated and controlled, the libertine still acts upon worldly desires and vanities and is profoundly concerned by his or her appearance within the public eye. Libertines act alone, yet rely entirely on others.

Both Rousseau’s Reveries and the monastic practices of Christianity offer insight into how a rhythmic temporal articulation manifests for the individual. Accordingly they give us a point of reference for the libertine experience of this articulation. However, the

\(^9\) Note that in Sade we do see a focus on pedagogical or communal dynamics in transgressive practice. However, the onus for reaching a transcendent sensation of time is placed exclusively on the individual libertine, and it is the individual alone who is held responsible for any failure thereof. This is most apparent when a Sadean libertine is killed by his or her fellow libertines for not being transgressive or powerful enough.
themes of tension, legacy, and failure are inseparable from the eighteenth-century libertine’s version of temporal articulation, themes that are not present within Rousseau’s writing or monastic practice. Therefore the libertine’s temporal articulation is only one component, albeit a crucial one, of his or her larger temporal outlook within these novels.

2.5 Failure

Despite their intensity of focus, each of the characters I examine fails to maintain the articulated temporality that is meant to run through the eighteenth-century libertine text. This is an extension of their inability to balance the two temporal demands of moment and narration, with each character producing a different admixture of the two. The precise nature of each failure will be discussed at length in the following chapters, yet in every case it returns to a failure to maintain a temporal rhythm that is adequately balanced between narration and moment. Already there are numerous points of potential collapse in the requirement to: a) live within the moment; b) moderate the sensations of pleasure, and, c) adhere to a carefully strategized plot. Furthermore this temporal model must be exerted over the victim-object(s) and be sustained almost entirely by the individual libertine figure. Orienting oneself too far towards an experience of the present moment or the build-up of narration sees this careful balancing act fall apart as the libertine either fails in the act of narration or fails to be suitably transgressive. It is an extremely delicate system that requires a degree of self-control that even the powerful aristocratic figure has difficulty maintaining. The degree of control this requires sometimes leads us to see the libertine character as adopting a machine-like attitude to time, as he or she attempts to suppress an immediate desire or emotion in order to align each action within a meticulously planned narrative path.10

Additionally, failure is the result, at least partially, of a profound anxiety that the libertine character exhibits. The anxieties about libertine selfhood within the eighteenth century discussed in Chapter Three are part of the impetus for creating the unique temporal structure I have just described. Yet the complexity and fragility of this libertine temporal mode introduce their own set of concerns that fail to offer any relief to the eighteenth-century libertine character. Each one is anxious in relation to nearly every aspect of his or her plots and transgressions, not only whether he or she will be successful but whether each is successful in the correct manner and at the correct time. The demand that

10 This notion gestures to the materialism of the French Enlightenment embodied in La Mettrie’s *L’Homme Machine* (1748), but it is only a gesture. The libertine-as-machine may be conducive to temporal articulation but it is never fully realized, even in Sade, as will be discussed in section 6.1
every passing moment be not only fully experienced but also carefully strategized so that it adheres to the escalation of plot ensures that the libertine is deeply concerned with his or her ability to sustain temporal rhythm. Accordingly there is a constant anxiety over the potential breakdown of plot across all of the texts examined here. This is demonstrated in Lovelace’s rants addressed to Belford about the way in which Clarissa undermines his power over women and may yet fail to be seduced; it is present in Valmont’s and Merteuil’s antagonism, which does not allow them to applaud or assist each other unless it serves their own purposes; and, it is seen in the melancholy that often affects Juliette and her libertine cohorts following an orgiastic episode that never quite produces the closure or fulfilment they desire.

Furthermore these characters demonstrate anxiety about the place of libertinism itself as a set of principles and practices. The next chapter outlines the shifting social and literary attitudes that place the eighteenth-century libertine in a position where he or she must define him or herself against previous transgressive models. This manifests in a distinct way for each character, but in all cases there is a latent concern with both the past and the posterity of libertinism as a set of principles, a structure of thinking that was built in the sixteenth century, made palatial in the seventeenth, and fades into disuse in the eighteenth. One clear example of this is when Lovelace declares that he will refuse to give in and marry Clarissa on the basis that it would compromise his place within “rakish annals” and that he has already taken too much pain to construct his seductive plot (Richardson 846). This returns to the way in which the eighteenth-century libertine character is fixated on legacy and how he or she will be perceived in relation to other libertines. This is true of Lovelace’s concern with “rakish annals” as well as the more immediate comparisons and antagonisms between libertine characters seen in Liaisons and Juliette.

Beyond the interior anxieties of the libertines that I examine, there are several external factors for the failure of libertinism’s unique temporal mode as it develops in the latter half of the eighteenth century. The first of these is its deeply elitist barrier to entry. To enact temporal articulation requires a degree of freedom from obligation available only to those who exist at the apex of an economic structure. In order to focus unceasingly on the temporal rhythm of life, one requires the same degree of freedom, or exemption, from other concern as is practiced in the monastery. Consequently unless one exists at the very top of society, or outside of it entirely in the manner of the monk, there is no possibility of enacting this articulation, as it demands that one is not subject to everyday economic,
The aristocratic character, of course, achieves this exemption through wealth. Notions of conspicuous leisure as a trait of the upper class are first introduced into popular consciousness at the turn of the twentieth century by Thorstein Veblen, whose work helps to describe the temporal resources afforded to libertine characters via their aristocratic position:

The term “leisure”, as used here, does not connote indolence (avoidance of labor/laziness) or quiescence (tranquillity/repose/inactive). What it connotes is non-productive consumption of time. Time is consumed non-productively 1) from a sense of the unworthiness of productive work and 2) as an evidence of pecuniary ability to afford a life of idleness. (Veblen 43)

“Non-Productive time,” in the sense Veblen uses here, relates to an absence of the manufacture of goods and service, and libertinism’s viability as a set of principles relies upon its practitioners having exactly this sort of leisured exemption from productive behaviours. In this regard temporal articulation, which demands so much effort yet fails to produce anything of material value, is a perfect expression of the conspicuous leisure afforded to the aristocratic class. This offers a partial explanation for why the relevance of the transgressive libertine character within literature following the French Revolution is profoundly diminished and changed.12

Another obvious problem with the libertine articulation of time is its requirement for the manipulation of the infliction of pain on others in order to achieve temporal freedom. This is particularly true of its highly problematic relationship with gender, as women are typically victim-objects. Alternatively, if women are portrayed as libertine, then they are defined entirely by their femininity, so that a gendered double-standard is enacted against them even within the highest echelons of transgressive practitioners, as will be demonstrated within my analysis of Juliette. Nancy K. Miller’s text French Dressing: Women, Men, and Ancien Régime Fiction has effectively discussed the way in which the socio-sexual power games of libertinism favour men (41).13

---

11 The difficulty of maintaining a private space that allows for temporal articulation often feeds into the libertine’s failure. Characters like Valmont and Lovelace rely on a court of public opinion to validate transgressive acts which demand deep seclusion. Merteuil and Juliette seek a similar validation, but from a smaller audience of libertine practitioners. Yet monasticism is a far more complete departure from society and therefore more successful in establishing and maintaining its own temporal structure.

12 It is worth noting that the French Revolution also targeted monasteries, further solidifying the idea that the monk, like the aristocrat, lives outside of society, as well as gesturing to the way in which this form of temporal rhythm becomes unsustainable with the onset of modernity.

13 I would also refer to my own piece in Porn Studies, which highlights the gendered asymmetry within Sade’s portrayal of women libertines, in which women libertines are held to a higher standard of transgression than their male counterparts (Froh 207).
Finally, and perhaps most significantly, the libertine fails to realize his or her constructed narratives. Each of these texts ends with the libertine character either unable to remain in control of his seductive or sexual plot, or unable to focus on the articulated moment without allowing his passions to disrupt its movement. Certainly this is partially the result of authorial intent on the parts of Richardson, Laclos, and Sade, but we must also acknowledge the inhuman demands of the libertine attitude to time in its requirement for an unceasing vigilance over the self.

In the case of Lovelace, Valmont, and Merteuil, it is because these characters are too human that they fail. They cannot subdue their feelings indefinitely, and so they inevitably lose their calculated seductive rhythm. This is the tragic flaw that partially redeems these libertine characters. For all of their conceits, for all that is problematic, for all of their failures, they present a compellingly human attempt to articulate a unique temporality and selfhood that stands, however briefly, as a narrative expression of the eighteenth-century focus on the present.

Juliette is, of course, very different from the other characters I examine. Yet she is also subject to failure in that she is so machine-like in her execution of transgression that it ultimately fails to hold any meaning for herself and her audience. If the other characters I examine fail to maintain their transgressive vitality, Juliette fails to maintain a narrative. Chapter Six will offer a full examination of the anxiety and failures that clearly establish Juliette’s temporal mode as part of the eighteenth-century libertine writing tradition.

Each of the characters examined here struggles against time, and the fact that they fail does not mean the libertine novel as a genre fails to be an engaging aesthetic or literary movement. Its focus upon the pleasure the body provides is made compelling precisely because of its simultaneous awareness of time’s power over that same body. The libertine’s attempt to struggle against this power is part of what makes him or her forceful, memorable, and compelling as a character. Their failure is what continues to lend meaning to their narration.

Chapter Three will establish the literary and historical context surrounding libertine writing in the second half of the eighteenth century in a way that helps to establish why these particular themes come to prominence during this period. Its concluding section offers a brief comparative study of the attitudes towards time in earlier libertine works in order to establish the eighteenth-century novel as distinct in regards to temporality.
The remaining chapters will present individual textual analyses, starting in Chapter Four with Samuel Richardson’s *Clarissa: Or the History of a Young Lady*. It will set out how the character of Robert Lovelace demonstrates the model of libertine temporality I have outlined here. Lovelace’s adherence to the above themes are presented within *Clarissa* with great clarity, and therefore help inform further analyses of other libertine characters. Chapter Five will discuss Pierre Choderlos de Laclou’s text *Les Liaisons Dangereuses*. The first half will establish the critically neglected parallels between Robert Lovelace and the Vicomte de Valmont while the second examines the unique temporal orientation of the Marquise de Merteuil. The sixth and final chapter will explore the Marquis de Sade’s *Juliette*. It will illustrate how each of these four temporal themes is manifested in the distinct form of libertinism that Juliette presents. It will validate previous scholarship that seeks to reorient Sade’s work and libertine characters as being part of the eighteenth-century libertine writing tradition, rather than somehow distinct from it.

Libertine temporality within these three texts attempts to focus on the present moment of being, within a context that makes such a focus impossible. It is for this reason that they are unique within the libertine writing tradition, and symbolic of the eighteenth century as whole. In spite of, and indeed because of, the failure of their characters, these texts are an important attempt to present a model of selfhood that defies a view of the individual as subservient to past and future.
3 Moment as Breath:
Contextualizing the Eighteenth-Century Libertine

My initial chapter sought to characterize the way in which temporality is portrayed within the eighteenth-century libertine text and how this was impacted by adaptation to the novel genre. This chapter aims to further establish the unique literary context around libertine writing in the eighteenth century, before returning to a textual focus for the remaining chapters. The contention that Lovelace’s, Valmont’s, Merteuil’s, and Juliette’s temporal understandings are interconnected is rooted in the historical precedents of eighteenth-century intellectual culture which influence them.

In light of this study’s focus on the thematic links between Clarissa, Liaisons, and Juliette, it is useful to recognize the distinction between these texts and the overtly pornographic literary “underside” of the eighteenth century identified by Robert Darnton and David Foxon. Each of these texts represents and comments on libertine behaviour, while also being widely read in the public sphere in a way that explicitly pornographic work were not. Scholars of pornography, most notably Lynn Hunt in the introduction of The Invention of Pornography, make a distinction between libertinism and pornography while also acknowledging their proximity to each other:

Libertinism followed the same trajectory as pornography; under the influence, in part, of the new science, it took shape in the seventeenth century as an upper-class male revolt against conventional morality and religious orthodoxy, and then spread more broadly in the eighteenth century into the artisanal and lower middle-class circles of many Western countries, especially England and France. Libertines were imagined to be free-thinkers who were open to sexual, and literary, experimentation (36-37)

This historical narrative, while broad, asserts a basic connection between novelistic depictions of libertinism and pornography. The texts under review intersect with pornography without being explicitly, or in Sade’s case exclusively, pornographic. By extension they also intersect with other genres of writing, most notably the sentimental novel, without being neatly categorizable under any one form. We can no more label Clarissa a strictly sentimental text than we can label Juliette a strictly pornographic one.

---

14 David Foxon’s Libertine Literature in England 1660-1745 was one of the first works to suggest the need for a critical recognition of libertine literature as a genre within the English scholarly tradition. Robert Darnton’s text The Forbidden Bestsellers of Pre-Revolutionary France similarly helped to expand the purview of French studies of libertinage to include pornographic works.
Peter Cryle recognizes a similar intersection of genres in Crébillon and Casanova, and distinguishes them through the rhetorical nuance they demonstrate: “High libertine literature does not work with binary dramas of vice and virtue; it trades in nuances, in subtle assessment of desire and resistance. [...] Writers like Crébillon find the most charming ways to tell us that here is no reliable symptomatology of sensual passion, no dependable classification of a given person on the scale from coldness to ardour” (Cryle “Codified” 52, 54). Cryle’s view has been criticized by James Turner for not acknowledging seventeenth-century libertine texts that also portray a high degree of nuance in their assessment of arousal and desire (Turner “Review” 207). Yet when it comes to themes of temporality, Cryle is right to suggest the mid-eighteenth century is characterized by a noticeable lack of binaries. What is original about this roster of texts is less the way that they present desire but rather the way they present time, a view which will be supported directly later in this chapter with a short comparative analysis of how time is presented in seventeenth-century texts from within the libertine tradition. It is not the contention of this study that its texts are in any way isolated or superior to other libertine works, but rather that they are reflective of a very specific aspect of the tradition—a “high libertine” sense of temporality in the eighteenth century.

The characterizations of the eighteenth-century libertine figure reflect this. Certainly each narrator identifies as libertine yet we have a large range of authorial and cultural contexts affecting their creation, as well as a wide variety of fictional characters from both early and contemporary writings who adopt the same moniker. All of the texts presented here have self-identified libertines as their primary transgressors, they are powerful and severe aristocratic characters fixated on manipulation for the sake of transgressive power. While not unique to this period, the prominence of this character type in the mid-eighteenth century is worth considering, especially in light of James Fowler’s contention that the contest between such a character and an equally strong woman prude is the primary means of distinguishing a major libertine canonical novel from its more frequently overlooked counterparts (9). This fictional libertine character is ideally situated to reflect shifts in intellectual culture as they pertain to temporality. This chapter will demonstrate that within the realm of libertine fiction there is an evolution in the portrayal of time from seventeenth-century texts as a result of philosophical, literary, and social developments which culminate in the establishment of the high libertine model of temporality from the mid-eighteenth century onwards.
3.1 A New Focus on the Present

A model of existence stemming from a continual sensitivity to the present moment is not a spontaneous product of the eighteenth century. Rather this position had been rehearsed beforehand as a facet of Epicurean and materialist philosophical libertinism developed within the seventeenth century (Wilson 20, 38). Prefigured in this body of writing is an emphasis on the moment that eventually became a defining feature of the libertine literary tradition. A crucial aspect of Epicureanism and materialism that comes to be reflected in the libertine novel is the ability to consider time in a way that is not influenced by Christian doctrine. Specifically there is a departure from the notion of Christian providence, in which the present is defined as part of a pre-ordained movement within a divine plan (McCann, *SEP*). Augustine’s *Confessions* affirm the importance of time’s subjectivity in his suggestion that time is simply a distension of our minds, and that there is no reliable way to measure it outside of our own consciousness (240). This is precisely the sense of individual subjective time that is structured within monastic practice to transform life into a ceaseless meditation or prayer through repetition. Yet it is not subjective time that is questioned by Epicurean or materialist thinking but rather the way in which Christian doctrine sets this individual sense of time against the eternal “present” of God’s existence. God makes “the whole present” in a way that we as individuals will never be able to process, so that there is no real past or future but merely our personal sense of movement: “All your years subsist in simultaneity, because they do not change; those going away are not thrust out by those coming in” (229-30). This is an extension of the doctrine of Christian providence. God does not need to determine our future because it is already fully realized. Thus it is this notion of an individual’s future as set, or non-existent, which is rejected by developments in Epicurean and materialist structures of time developed in the seventeenth century that became integral to libertine writing. Yet these philosophical positions eventually came to have a much broader impact that saw eighteenth-century intellectual culture express a similar reassessment of temporality. As a result, the libertine character is uniquely situated to express attitudes towards time in which the future is undetermined, and the present moment has new salience.

The extent to which this secularized vision of time impacts art, literature, and philosophy is expressed in George Poulet’s *Studies in Human Time*:

All the thought of the seventeenth century had been one long meditation on Augustine’s phrase “if God should withdraw his creative power from the things he has created, they would fall back into their primal state of nothingness.” This passage conceives of a nothingness bordering existence everywhere and affirms the conditional character of the act by
which one exists. Existence is constantly saved from nonbeing. There is only one difference in the eighteenth century, and that is that this continued existence is no longer continued by an act of divine creation. The preservation of the universe and of the creature is no longer directly conceived as the immediate effect of the creative action, the latter is relegated to a remote past, a far off moment, the primal moment of creation. From the present moment God the creator and preserver is absent. In place of God there are feelings, sensations, and whatever causes sensations. (19)

Poulet’s characterization of eighteenth-century God as a primeval creator but not a constantly present one indicates the way in which new attitudes to time do not necessarily seek to eliminate God but rather to establish a view of self which can act without guidance from the church. The most important implication of this eighteenth-century development is that without God’s guidance the future is undetermined, and therefore man no longer exists according to a pre-ordained cosmic plan. Poulet is supported by Thomas Kavanagh’s argument that the Enlightenment recognized the effect of moment and chance as forces at work in every human enterprise, in a way that contradicts earlier ideologies of God’s universal and unalterable plan for creation (Esthetics 275). While providence still plays an important role within eighteenth-century writing, the way in which libertine texts accord the present moment so much influence within their seduction narratives is unprecedented. The success or failure of an overall seduction or a specific ploy is never guaranteed for Lovelace or Valmont, and the success or failure of personal narrative never guaranteed for Juliette; each must focus entirely on the moment at hand in order to achieve a goal as a result of his or her own effort. In the place of unalterable providence is a requirement for constant sensory input to affirm one’s own existence. The implication for conceptualizations of time is that man is now able to look at his own life, and the succession of moments that make up its history, in a way that recognizes the power of the undetermined present moment (Kavanagh, Esthetics 5). Without divine providence one can seek to experience a moment free of an externally imposed structuring temporal narrative.

Poulet suggests that this freedom creates a model of human existence predicated upon a kind of continuous sensory creation, in which man must perpetually recover his existence from the threat of nothingness via a constant escalation or diversifying of sensory experience within the moment (20) Accordingly the eighteenth-century man, or at least those who aim to assume a secularized enlightened stance, must strive to live at all times within the present and indeed be defined by his experience of it. Present time becomes the “prime moment” of consciousness, generative of the self which takes shape by and through a series of instants that constitute a life and personal history (Poulet 23). The breadth of Enlightenment intellectual culture’s adoption of this attitude is reflected in its
characterizations of reason—the unifying concept of the century that abandoned earlier ideas about philosophical systemization and the temporal stasis they imply so that “the whole eighteenth century understands reason not as a sound body of knowledge, principles, and truths, but as a kind of energy, a force which is fully comprehensible only in its agency and effects” (Cassirer 13). Assessments of Enlightenment intellectual and aesthetic culture such as Cassirer’s recognize the dynamic shifts in thinking about the future which are accompanied by the shift towards modern conceptions of social and scientific progress. Within the space between the popular acceptance of religious providence, and Enlightenment rationalism, is a changing of attitudes toward the present moment in its power to determine the future. This change is reflected in the narratives I explore here.

Perhaps the most singular feature of eighteenth-century libertine writing is the extent to which it dedicates itself to the pursuit of the moment. What distinguishes the eighteenth-century libertine character is the sheer intensity of his or her focus on the present. Kavanagh dedicates his text *Esthetics of the Moment* to the assertion that the eighteenth-century experience of the present is a genuinely unique instance in Western history, one which affects every aspect of its artistic, intellectual, and cultural practice:

> To claim to make sense of life outside of narrative, to claim to experience a moment stripped free of story’s ballast, can easily seem little more than an abstract dream. But Enlightenment culture showed a concentrated effort to do precisely that: to lower one’s eyes from the grandiose sequences of society’s structuring narratives and look more closely at empirical reality in all the nakedness of a here and now freed from the supports of an assumed past and expected future. (3)

Kavanagh’s broad assessment overlaps neatly with the attitude towards the present moment that the libertine character seeks to adopt. Yet, at the same time as this shift in perception occurs, the development of the novel form introduces a narrative space in which time must be considered in relation to past and future. At the level of text, this desire to be “stripped free of story’s ballast” is precisely what the narrator of a novel cannot do, and yet the libertine must strike a balance between this and the act of narration. Unlike Poulet, Kavanagh suggests that this openness to the moment is fleeting, and is eventually replaced by secular narratives of societal and technological progress following the French Revolution and the onset of nineteenth century industrialization (275). Poulet proposes instead that the eighteenth-century project to try to live in the present continues into our own modern epoch (35). With regard to the libertine character, Kavanagh’s view that this focus on the moment recedes following the French Revolution offers an explanation for why libertine characters is so emblematic of the eighteenth century: namely,
that they are an ideal vessel to reflect the temporal attitudes of their century. It is important to note that the historical narratives of shifts in temporal understanding as expressed by Kavanagh, Poulet, and Cassirer pertain primarily to philosophical, artistic, and elite cultures within the eighteenth century. While these conclusions are therefore far from universal, the eighteenth century is a period in which new understandings of time are being developed and explored in a way that makes the tension between moment and narration far stronger than ever before.

A brief note on material history serves to reinforce this broad conclusion. Stuart Sherman’s *Telling Time* points to the way in which technological developments in clock and watchmaking during this period have a direct impact on prose depictions of time, particularly in the introduction of diurnal time (5-6). Similarly Roland Racevskis builds on Sherman’s conclusions to propose a privatization of time through the introduction of personal timekeeping devices, in which subjective awareness of temporality becomes an innovation of early modern and literary culture (17). Racevskis suggests technology impacts larger epistemological trends which construct new forms of early modern subjectivity, ones that are inflected by a focus on time quantities and the relative present (53). Technological changes in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries underscore how understandings of temporality are in a state of transition and flux, with more power ceded to the individual subject than ever before.

Libertinism is uniquely situated to capitalize on and express the breadth and depth of these new possibilities of the moment. Its epicurean, materialist, and hedonistic roots in the seventeenth century see it prefigure eighteenth-century structures of time. The libertine character reflects an epoch’s concern with temporalities of the moment and how they function within personal narrative. In his review of underground French literature, Robert Darnton comments on the extreme degree of cultural currency afforded to the libertine figure during the mid-eighteenth century (90). Similarly Erin Mackie’s study of masculinity in eighteenth-century England affirms the extensive amount of cultural hegemony accorded to the libertine character (39).

Yet a side effect of libertinism’s newfound importance within English and French culture is that its popularity results in libertine characters’ emphasis on the moment being not only unoriginal, but no longer socially transgressive. Accordingly the characters studied here exist within a social context that embodies the values of a libertine temporal outlook

---

15 See also Christine A. Mazurkewycz’s dissertation “Chronic Time, Telling Texts” for further detail on the varieties of temporality developed in eighteenth-century English literature.
while at the same time undermining the capacity for social transgression that defines libertine behaviour. It is precisely the cultural currency afforded to the pursuit of the moment that demands the transgressive limit be either pushed further or re-oriented in order for the libertine subject to continue to infringe on societal norm in a meaningful way. There is thus a shift in transgressive boundaries and practice. How, then, does the libertine react to a cultural climate in which new philosophical orientations lend a great deal of salience to the pleasure of the moment, something he or she has always championed?

This question resides at the core of the eighteenth-century libertine character, and manifests itself as an anxiety over the validity of his or her libertine identity—an anxiety which will be demonstrated across each of the characters examined in this study. This is compounded by what Richard Glasser characterizes as the “oppressive” nature of time in the eighteenth century once it is secularized (243). Without the presence of an afterlife, time’s passage appears to diminish or erode human life, lending it a power that it did not have before. For the libertine, the stimulation required to remain in the present must be heightened in order to compensate for the newfound threat that time’s passage poses to the individual, and thus the libertine character is pushed to transgressive extremes.

3.2 Changes from the Seventeenth Century

Libertine texts written during the eighteenth century underwent a distinct change from earlier seventeenth-century works. James Turner in his short but influential essay “Properties of Libertinism” identifies three different aspects of libertinism: “The word [libertinism] refers, not to a single entity with different facets, but three distinct movements of thought or clusters of attitudes: religious (spiritual) libertinism, philosophical libertinism (a combination of antireligious scepticism and scientific materialism) and sexual libertinism” (“Properties” 79). Each of these strands has its own literary history that develops alongside its historical practice, and each underwent changes as France and England moved into the eighteenth century. For example, Turner sees English Restoration libertinism as primarily involving the strands of spiritual and sexual transgression (76).

Jean-Marie Goulemot works within the French tradition to propose that the libertine novel of the eighteenth century is synthesized from what we can classify as a combination of primarily philosophical and sexual libertinism: “In its broadest lines […] the philosophical pornographic novel corresponds to the libertine treatise become libertine fiction, with the notable reservation that libertine fiction is never devoid of libertine philosophy” (137). This composite is a product of, on the one hand, explicitly pornographic texts concerned with arousing the reader that maintain a fascination with the interplay between the sexual and
cerebral, and on the other hand, the scholarly works of seventeenth-century Epicurean philosophers such as Charles de Saint-Évremond and Gabriel Naudé that emphasize hedonism and attack religious dogma (135). Goulemot is careful to stipulate that, despite emulating characteristics of pornographic fiction, the nature of libertine fiction within the eighteenth century is distinct in regards to some of its basic characteristics, namely the situation of the implied reader, the function of language, and the nature of the narrative tension. He summarizes this difference in a rough schematization that sees pornography emphasize its effect upon the reader’s body, whereas libertine fiction appeals primarily to his or her mind:

> With libertine fiction, the goal is that of overcoming the prejudices of some of the characters, which are assumed to be the same as those of the reader. The reader is somewhat the equivalent of the fictional object of seduction, whereas with the pornographic novel, the relation between reader and fictional hero is of another kind, both closer and more distant. There is transposition in both cases, but they are not of the same order. (144)

Goulemot’s structure complements the earlier assessment by Lynn Hunt in asserting a distinction between libertinism and pornography while recognizing their proximity. In doing so it helps to orient us towards libertinism as it presents itself at the core of a popular novel rather than a text that is explicitly erotic and read by far fewer people. Furthermore it is useful for establishing some of what makes eighteenth-century libertine fiction distinct in its adoption of new narrative strategies via the novel, strategies which de-emphasize erotic pleasure in favour of challenging or inciting the prejudices of the reader. This aligns with Catherine Cusset’s argument that the libertine emphasis on sensory pleasure gives this fiction a moral dimension in its criticism of intolerance: “They [libertines] are, indeed, moralists: they unmask the hypocrisy of the social being who claims high moral principles while his or her body obeys another law, that of the senses. They reveal how acts often contradict principles and how the denial of pleasure leads to intolerance” (5). Part of what identifies the eighteenth-century libertine text, then, is its aim to challenge the ingrained mindset of the reader and incite thought through its portrayal of transgressive characters.

However, the criticism of intolerance described by Cusset does not account for the entire spectrum of eighteenth-century libertine texts. With Richardson, Laclos, and Sade, we are presented with a variety of explicitly stated or unstated authorial intentions alongside different levels of pornographic depiction and moral ambiguity. Furthermore Goulemot’s model gestures to, but does not explain, the amalgamation of the two seventeenth-century strands of philosophical libertinism and philosophically-inflected pornographic fiction into the fictional aristocrats of the eighteenth-century novel. In this
regard, the history of libertine writing in English is crucial to understanding the medley of influences which establish the tropes of the eighteenth-century novel. As much as Crébillon fils pulls from the French aristocratic fixation with love to produce his libertine lordlings, so too does Richardson draw from the practices of the English Restoration court under Charles II and their subsequent theatrical depictions to flesh out and inform his portrayal of Lovelace. The direct citation of *Clarissa* by both Laclos and Sade points to the amalgamation of influences between France’s and England’s libertine traditions. In his examination of the thematic role of the ‘prude’ character within eighteenth-century libertine texts, James Fowler comments on the citation of Richardson by Laclos and Sade: “Given the evidence it seems we should rule out the idea that each of our writers somehow hit upon this structure [the opposition between libertine and prude] without being familiar with this use by previous writers” (13). By extension, the attitudes towards and ways of structuring time that are the focus of this study appear in the same light: as a mixture of French and English literary influence. Peter Wagner points to the fact that both French and British aristocratic circles arrived at ideologies of sexual libertinism and anti-Christian attacks at the same time during the eighteenth century as evidence of the degree of mutual cultural exchange:

The rakish males of England’s upper class, mobile and multi-lingual as they were, must have welcomed, with interested motives, the ideas and the practical example of France’s debauched aristocracy. The affluent in both countries enjoyed a lively cultural exchange, despite the several wars of the period between France and England; and it is hardly accidental that both nationalities should have reached sexual debauchery, combined with atheism at the same time. (59)

Literature is one of the primary avenues of this exchange between France and England, and thus the development of the fictional libertine aristocrat who synthesizes some or all of the various strands of libertinism owes its creation not exclusively to the writing of Crébillon, nor the writing of the Earl of Rochester, but rather some combination of the two.

British authors’ depictions of libertinism in the eighteenth century were heavily influenced by the culture of the earlier Restoration court following the reinstatement of Charles II as monarch. Several scholars have pointed to the decline of Restoration attitudes to sexuality and transgression following the turn of the century as a rough point of divergence in portrayals of the libertine figure. Roy Porter proposes that Restoration humour and libertinism portrayed sex in a largely negative sense, with the sexual act being chiefly aggressive and aimed to disgust, while its drama was cynical about love and marriage, encouraging defensive laughter at cuckolds and the impotent (3). Essentially, for all of its calls to merriment, Restoration libertinage is fundamentally uncomfortable with
and apprehensive of sexuality, a view that Turner echoes in his argument that Restoration libertinism confirms sexual and religious boundaries in the very process of infracting them ("Lovelace" 79, 81).

Porter then contrasts this assessment with the model of sexuality that develops under the Enlightenment, a model that emphasized sexual desire as a natural part of man’s condition and sex as potentially pleasurable (4). He cites John Cleland’s Memoirs of a Woman of Pleasure as embodying this trend within English thought. “Enlightenment England – I have been arguing – reconceptualised sexuality as being an essential part of Nature. As integral to human nature, it was an important component of happiness. As part of the universe, it was to be studied” (8). This contrast in attitude between Restoration and eighteenth-century libertine writing, while simplistic, is supported by other literary historians such as Tiffany Potter, who distinguishes between the two on the basis of their attitude towards the harm of others:

The central elements of Restoration-style libertinism are still present in the libertinism that develops in the eighteenth century, but in forms that lessen the hard edge of cruelty and aggressive ego-centrism that characterized libertinism in Restoration comedy and satire. There remain the public challenging of the culture of the hegemonic order and striving towards individualism, self-determination, and controlling power. [...] The Georgian libertine still favours the natural over artificial constructs of social acceptability, with the proviso (absent in the earlier, more Hobbesian embodiments) that no other individual be injured in the pursuit of pleasure. (405-6)

Potter’s model of libertine analysis thus draws a strong line of separation between the libertinism of these two centuries. However, both Porter and Potter’s assertions are somewhat open to question given the degree of cultural exchange between England and France established by Peter Wagner. The seemingly clear-cut division in depictions of English libertinism between the Restoration and the mid-eighteenth century is difficult to reconcile with a French libertine practice that remained relatively consistent from Louis XIV right up until the Revolution. The tempering of selfishness Potter describes is also addressed by Erin Mackie in her suggestion that libertinism is sublimated into English cultures of masculinity. Mackie’s history of aristocratic male practice suggests this “softened” attitude towards English depictions of libertine characters reflects new codes of behaviour that arose during the eighteenth century to invalidate Restoration constructions of masculinity as rakishness (39). However, Mackie also nuances this by arguing that there remains a long period in which these ideas competed with each other, and that despite this general change “a small coterie of elite males who aggressively flouted the new codes of civility enjoyed a disproportionate and, socially speaking, anomalous share of cultural
currency and social success” (43). A similar point is found in James Turner’s criticism of any attempt to draw a strong distinction between seventeenth and eighteenth-century libertinism, such as the ones proposed by Roy Porter and Tiffany Potter, as too simplistic. He argues that the eighteenth century had too complex and divided a culture to summarize libertine practice so neatly, as it contains many strands of continuity from seventeenth-century libertinism (“Properties” 82). Jeremy Webster’s survey of Restoration libertinism supports this view of the continued relevance of seventeenth-century libertinism in its emphasis on the various layers of performativity that become integrated into libertine ideology through early dramatic works. Spectacles of public behaviour, representations of libertinism onstage, and the character of contemporary libertines all encompass a notion of “enacting private acts in public” (3). By viewing libertinism as a set of performances Webster emphasizes the “radical” element of libertinism that challenged socio-patriarchal norms (6-7).

In order to exclude the libertine’s performances from the list of acceptable behaviours, his acts had to continue to be named and cited and thus perpetuated. Libertine performances were therefore crucial to England’s history of sexuality in two ways: they continued to offer Englishmen and women alternatives to normative sexual behaviour long after the libertine wits themselves had passed into history, and they served as one of the activities that had to be excluded from proper sexual behaviours, allowing normative sexual desire to become in fact normative. (35)

This cultural narrative offers an explanation for why the figure of the Restoration libertine remains so prominent well into the eighteenth century. It offers a strong support for Mackie’s assessment of the cultural hegemony that the libertine figure enjoyed, and clarifies the newfound sense of “pastness” that impacts Lovelace’s characterization. We thus might say there is a soft distinction between seventeenth and eighteenth-century depictions of English libertinism, but recognize the influence of French writing as well as the continued cultural relevance of the violent Restoration rake figure.

3.3 Libertine Literature in the Mid-Eighteenth Century

Within the realm of literature, if not historical practice, a distinction between seventeenth- and eighteenth-century English libertinism is useful for assessing the continued development of the fictional demonic aristocratic lord of the eighteenth century. Specifically, it is Clarissa’s depiction of such a character, who harkens back to Restoration libertinism, which has such a profound effect on Les Liaisons Dangereuses and Juliette. All of these texts centre upon the actions of such characters—narrators who are a wealthy member of the aristocratic class devoted to the pursuit of libertinism as a means of self-
realization through the creation of their own compelling narratives of transgression, narratives which celebrates their highly refined self-control and the power it grants them over others. The combination of fascination and criticism that informs the English depiction of libertinism is a part of this character’s overall development within European literature, and complements the ambiguity of French writing in which a veneer of strict social conformity permits inner autonomy (Feher 13). In addition to the spiritual and philosophical shifts of intellectual libertinism seen in England and France respectively, the onset of the eighteenth century brings with it a large-scale change in depictions of sexual libertinism. The general conclusions arrived at by historians of pornography and erotic writing emphasize that the start of the century saw a shift from tableau-like descriptions of various physical postures and behaviours to highly narrative, and therefore temporally fraught, forms like the novel (Hunt 31, Cryle 93). Kavanagh summarizes this view:

In Chorier, as in the tradition he culminates, the pornographic novel was the verbal equivalent of a series of images educating the reader in the ways that bodies might pleasure one another. […] Crébillon effectively reversed the proportions within that recipe. The actual physical descriptions became playfully elusive while the narrative links between them, the representation of the events bringing a given pair of bodies together, became paramount. […]The question giving shape to the narrative was no longer how the various body parts would fit together, but how the characters, gaining in psychological depth what they lost in exposed skin, would manage to maneuver their chosen partners toward the bliss of acquiescence. (Esthetics 22-23)

Kavanagh’s assessment speaks to the distinction between pornographic and libertine writing, and how the emphasis on narrative and psychological depth indicates a new emphasis on temporality that manifests in libertine writing from the 1740s onward. With the introduction of the novel form and its narrative focus on plot, time becomes the key dimension which the libertine character must consider in order to pursue pleasure. This view is supported by Peter Cryle’s comparative analysis of the ways in which Crébillon and Sade structure narrative. The former presents “fictions of negation” which emphasize seductive delay and the careful deployment of time, whereas the latter presents “fictions of measurement” which rely on a numeric increase of transgression to maintain the reader’s interest (“Passing the Time” 372). Whether or not one sees Crébillon as a key point of departure, there is a general agreement that pornographic and erotic writing underwent a significant change when it began to adopt the novel form rather than that of dialogue in the early to mid-eighteenth century. Lynn Hunt locates this recasting of pornographic writing as accompanying the rapid-fire publication of several novelistic works in the 1740s which include Memoirs of a Woman of Pleasure and Thérèse Philosophe (30). Robert Darnton echoes this assessment when he determines that libertine fiction first found a popular audience in the
mid-century (90). Bradford Mudge also argues that pornography and the novel were “invented” together in the eighteenth century, both of them the result of an expanding middle class, increased literacy, and a marketplace sensitive to the commercial reward of popular entertainment (Mudge, *Whore’s Story* 14).

These broad assessments can be nuanced by a return to Goulemor’s distinction between libertine and pornographic fiction. Intellectual libertinism that seeks to work upon the reader’s prejudice, while compatible with pornographic depictions as demonstrated by works such as *Memoirs of a Woman of PleASURE*, generally occupies a different space from pornography within the literary marketplace. Despite this study’s selection of prominent works of libertine literature, it is certainly important to recognize that overtly pornographic texts which aim to work upon the reader’s body continue to thrive during this time. Ample evidence of this can be seen in the careers of booksellers such as Edmund Curll, who owed a large portion of his financial success to the distribution of pornographic pamphlets (Mudge *Flesh* xxv). Yet even these “low” types of libertine literature contain social commentary, humour, and philosophy, and historians of pornography such as Walter Kendrick and Lynn Hunt have established that there is nothing resembling modern pornography’s unremitting focus on the body until the nineteenth century (Kendrick 64, Hunt 321). While this analysis is concerned with mainstream and widely-read forms of intellectual libertinism, scholarship of the past decade emphasizes the historical link between this “high” form of libertine discourse and alternative forms of writing found within the popular print market of the eighteenth century. This is the stated premise behind the collection of essays titled *Libertine Enlightenment*, whose editors—Peter Cryle and Lisa O’Connell—state in its introduction: “Our contention is that libertinism is a term that can usefully be applied to a broader range of practices and contexts than this understanding suggests. We argue that libertinism – the self-aware philosophically oriented practice of sexual freedom – merges into libertinage – the vernacular, dissident freedoms of everyday life” (2). My own study may appear to undermine this emergent connection between “high” and “low” forms of libertinism somewhat given its argument that the temporal structure of the canonical eighteenth-century libertine text is unique and gestures towards some form of cohesive model of high libertinism. Yet this position is not at all incompatible with establishing connections between intellectual libertinism and popular forms of libertine writing, and instead contributes a partial explanation for why the works of high-libertine literature are so often seen as markedly distinct. The strong thematic

---

16 Note that while Sade clearly draws from the mingling of philosophical pornography and the novel, his seemingly inimical relationship to the delay-oriented model of narrative time described by Kavanagh will be addressed within Chapter Six.
connections between the works presented here help to solidify why they became such prominent examples of libertine literature in the eighteenth century.

To summarize thus far, there is a change in the nature of intellectual libertine writing during the mid-eighteenth century that represents the culmination of shifts in libertine writing and contexts from the late seventeenth century onwards. It is a change that is spurred in part by its adoption of new narrative strategies and in part by new contexts of temporality that emphasize the moment. This highlights the tension inherent in the idea of a “libertine narrator” that I have previously outlined, one who is concerned with the pursuit of pleasure but must necessarily frame his or her actions for others in a way that obstructs the attempt to live within the moment. Owing to the longer narrative form of the novel that accompanies the mid-century shift in intellectual libertine writing, this tension is never more prominent within the libertine tradition.

Yet these new narrative forms and the reader engagement they generate introduce new problems for libertine literature of the mid-century Enlightenment. We thus return to the question: how does the depiction of the libertine narrator shift in relation to the popularization of the focus on the moment? As much as the libertine may alter his or her modes of expression and transgressive goals to accommodate this focus on the moment, such a change brings with it a degree of anxiety. The libertine undergoes a crisis when his or her self-identity as social transgressor is undermined, and accordingly we see Valmont and Merteuil strive to define themselves against each other. In each of the texts explored in this study, the libertine narrators attempt to define themselves as superior to the more basic transgressors who are their cohorts. In Clarissa, it is Lovelace’s band of rakes that he leads and aims to outdo in his seduction. Liaisons sees Valmont express envy towards Prevan, a predatory seducer who recently enjoyed a great success. Similarly Merteuil largely defines herself in opposition to Valmont, who she sees as the most capable of the male libertines she encounters. Finally Juliette is literally threatened by, and a threat to, her libertine cohorts, whose transgressive practice demands they exploit any sign of weakness in each other. Each of these examples will be expanded upon in their respective chapters; for now, it is sufficient to recognize that the libertine is profoundly anxious about his or her position relative to other transgressive figures.

This is particularly true in regards to the libertines of the past, particularly in the case of Lovelace, who has moments in which he questions what his place will be within “rakish annals” (Richardson 846). Similarly, Valmont declares he must distinguish himself from Lovelace in letter 110 of Liaisons. James Turner characterizes eighteenth-century
libertinism as fundamentally retrospective towards previous libertine forms which had been
developed by the end of the seventeenth century (Schooling 387). Essentially Turner
contends that the central conclusions of libertine thought had already been achieved by the
start of the eighteenth century. This assessment is useful in two ways. Firstly, it poses a
convincing challenge to histories of libertine writing that tend to view its gradual changes
and evolutions as inherently teleological or progressive. This is particularly true of scholars
who position the Marquis de Sade as the definitive expression of libertinism, a viewpoint
that Turner explicitly criticizes on the basis of Sade’s retrospective attitude and dependence
on earlier pornographic forms (Schooling 395). Turner’s view is an important reminder that
we must be careful not to assume the mid-eighteenth century libertine novel is the most
inherently valuable portion of libertinism’s long writing tradition. Instead the novel
represents an avenue of libertine expression specific to a time, place, and fictional setting.
Secondly, Turner’s argument underscores the fact that the characters contained within the
texts examined here exist as part of a highly problematic ideology that no longer functions
the way it did in the seventeenth century. It is because of this retrospective attitude that
libertinism does in fact come to be altered during the eighteenth century. Accordingly this
study departs from Turner in its aim to demonstrate that libertine writing continues to
innovate in regards to its narrative form and temporal structure. My analysis will establish
that part of the reason for this innovation is that the anachronism of the libertine character
manifests as a self-conscious anxiety about his or her position in relation to other
transgressive figures, both immediate and historical. Thus when the pursuit of the moment
is no longer taboo, the libertine is caught between a faithful adherence to methods of the
past and the requirement that he or she continues to be socially transgressive in the
present.

3.4 Shifts in Class

Further compounding the anachronism present within the libertine character is
his or her link to forms of aristocratic practice that gradually begin to shift. Erin Mackie, in
her analysis of the connection between rakishness and eighteenth-century constructions of
masculinity, convincingly summarizes this anachronism by declaring that the rhetorical and
aesthetic alibis at work in the justifications and apologies for rakish behaviour are
completely rooted within a matrix of seventeenth-century values of authority, absolutism,
and masculinity (59). Thus the challenge to dominant structures of class that occurs over
the course of the eighteenth century brings libertinism into opposition with developing
non-aristocratic ideologies.
Critical studies of *Clarissa*, *Liaisons*, and *Juliette* frequently portray class conflict as an overt or underlying theme within each, especially given the aristocratic status of the libertine transgressors themselves. The most emphatic of these studies is certainly Terry Eagleton’s *The Rape of Clarissa*, which provides an explicitly Marxist reading of *Clarissa* as a vehicle of class conflict and a largely successful attempt to establish an English bourgeois cultural hegemony. “These novels [*Pamela*/*Clarissa*] are an agent, rather than mere account, of the English bourgeoisie’s attempt to wrest a degree of ideological hegemony from the aristocracy in the decades which follow the settlement of 1688” (4). Eagleton’s reading presents Clarissa as an extraordinarily powerful and compelling icon of bourgeois and feminine virtue, who deploys a countervailing ideology of truth and the unitary subject against the profligate aristocratic cultural structures represented by a neurotic and anxious Lovelace. Despite the genuine challenge that Lovelace poses to this bourgeois ideology and the authorial guilt he might generate for Richardson in the narrative’s requirement that he be allowed a voice, Clarissa’s death ultimately signifies an absolute refusal of the libertine aristocracy he represents (Eagleton 76). “Lovelace cannot ultimately be indulged: the political price is too high. Richardson does not allow the unconscious to seduce him from the primacy of class struggle. The coherent bourgeois subject must be affirmed, and *jouissance* consciously sacrificed, if ruling-class rapacity is to be defeated” (85). In Eagleton’s reading *Clarissa* is explicitly concerned with expressing a bourgeois ideology in order to position it as morally and culturally superior to aristocratic libertinism. It is unequivocal that class dynamics are a central concern of *Clarissa* given the emphasis placed on the class difference between Clarissa and Lovelace. Opposition lends itself to self-definition and Lovelace’s explicit hostility towards the Harlowes supports his identification with aristocratic privilege.

Critical analyses of class within the writing of Laclos and Sade are informed largely by the texts’ proximity to the French Revolution and their authorial intent. Early studies of the sociological dimension of *Liaisons* often posit Tourvel as a bourgeois character in contrast with the aristocratic power of Valmont and Merteuil. The most notable of these readings is from Madeleine Therrien, who frames the novel as revolutionary in tone given its depiction of a class conflict between aristocratic libertine self-centeredness and bourgeois notions of love and piety (10). However, Suellen Diaconoff echoes more recent scholarship in criticizing this view in light of its weak textual basis and the profound ambiguity which surrounds Laclos’ text (6). Diaconoff instead convincingly establishes that all of the principal characters of *Liaisons* are members of the same social class and posits that Laclos is not seeking a call for revolution but rather to
“unmask a society which tolerates, when it does not actually celebrate, narcissistic ethics” (3). Given the ambiguous relationship of Laclos himself to bourgeois and aristocratic values, Diaconoff asserts that Liaisons represents a similarly ambiguous attack on established institutions and thought (7). A more emphatic conclusion is reached by Phillip Thody in his critical study of Liaisons, which also establishes the characters as members of the aristocracy, yet argues the novel is an unequivocally satirical composition designed to attack the nobility as a class (Laclos 46-47). Indeed Thody views Laclos as a sincere Rousseauist, one who attacks the immorality of the eighteenth-century French aristocracy and defends, by implication, the values which Rousseau made fashionable (Laclos 15).

When it comes to Sade’s libertine texts, critics have, understandably, focused on the linkage to the French Revolution which shapes many of their aspects. With regard to social class, Sade’s texts can be read in a variety of different ways as his libertine characters are a mix of various backgrounds despite their attainment of aristocratic privilege. John Phillips employs Bakhtin’s notion of the carnivalesque to argue that Sade inverts bourgeois and aristocratic values, behaviour, and language, by co-mingling high and low culture within larger narratives of sexual education: “The entire Sadeian dialogue can be read on a political level as inverting all hierarchies in ironic echo of the Revolution” (163). This view of Sade’s work as a generalized deconstruction and attack upon morality in light of contemporary instability is echoed by Lynn Hunt, who argues that Sade took the politically and socially subversive possibilities of pornography and libertine writing to their furthest possible extreme, to the extent that he paved the way for the modern apolitical variety of pornography (330). This understanding is problematic in its tendency to present Sade’s writing as the apotheosis of libertine discourse, a view that will be shown to be unsustainable in later discussions of Juliette. Yet the idea that Sade is concerned not specifically with class conflict but rather a broad warped inversion of society as a whole is borne out when examining a text like Juliette. Juliette presents no conflict between aristocrat and bourgeois but rather offers an unceasing focus on the absolute power of the libertine figure.

Between criticism of religious models of divine providence and the rise of class structures which define themselves in opposition to the aristocratic values libertinism is founded upon, the behaviours and expression of seventeenth-century libertinism are necessarily altered within the eighteenth-century libertine text. For characters contemporary with the eighteenth century, and who attempt to enact codes of transgressive practice developed in the seventeenth century, these alterations highlight the passage of time and the way in which philosophy and society have changed. Thus, as much as these texts are
emblematic of the eighteenth-century high libertine tradition, its characters exist in a world that demands the adaptation and development of the libertine values they proclaim. In defining themselves against the moralistic bourgeois, virtuous prude, or society as a whole, libertine narrators seek to establish their personal and philosophical worth. For Lovelace and Valmont it is the careful crafting of a great seduction using newfound temporal modes that will eclipse all that came before them, whereas for Juliette it is the desire to manifest absolute libertine power. Regardless of individual methodology each character examined here is deeply concerned with the creation of an original libertine narrative, one that will update or supersed previous transgressive forms.

In summary, the eighteenth-century libertine character wishes to experience the moment of pleasure in accordance with past libertine modalities which have been modified by Enlightenment contexts of time, philosophy, and social class. Within their texts they attempt to carve a passage between the two temporal demands of the moment and narration, yet ultimately fail to achieve this balance. However, I will demonstrate that this failure remains significant not only for the aesthetic beauty of the story they tell, but also in the attempt to articulate a model of libertine temporality.

3.5 The Evolution of Libertine Temporality

To reinforce the assertion that the eighteenth-century libertine novel offers a unique depiction of time, this section will present a set of comparisons between libertine texts from the seventeenth century and the eighteenth century in order to highlight their different attitudes to temporality. What this aims to establish is that artistic portrayals of libertinism and libertine characters before the eighteenth century are unconcerned with the production of a uniquely libertine temporal structure. My intention here is not a comprehensive overview of libertine writing that will definitively set apart its rendition in the eighteenth-century novel, but rather a brief sampling that seeks only to establish what is distinct in its attitude to temporality. These selections constitute prominent works of seventeenth-century libertine and pornographic traditions that have a clear place within the continuum of libertine fiction moving into the mid-eighteenth century.

The initial works I analyse are a cross-section of three English seventeenth-century poems from Robert Herrick, Andrew Marvell, and the Earl of Rochester. These have been selected due to their baroque counterpoint of death with the hedonistic pleasure of the moment, a contrast that is highly relevant to prefiguring the tension between moment and temporal awareness that is a key focus of my analysis. Following them is School of Venus, published anonymously in France as L’Ecole des Filles in 1655, which is
prominently featured in major histories of pornography including those presented by Hunt, Turner, and Wagner. Next is William Wycherley’s *The Country Wife*, written and first performed in England in 1675, which is one of the most important Restoration theatrical productions to feature prominent libertine characters and themes. Wycherley’s play was deeply influential on the theatrical characterization of the rake that developed from the Restoration onwards, and Ira Konigsberg has convincingly established the extensive influence of English drama on *Clarissa’s* plot and characterization (59). The final early text reviewed here is Molière’s 1665 rendition of the libertine figure in *Don Juan*, a play which presents a model of seductive temporality pulled from French aristocratic libertinism that remains highly relevant throughout the eighteenth century.

3.5.1 Poetry

The poems presented here are from a variety of contexts within seventeenth century England and each emphasizes a focus on the present moment. The first is Robert Herrick’s “To the Virgins to make much of time” from his poetic collection *Hesperides* published in 1648 (Cain, ODNB). The second is Andrew Marvell’s “To his Coy Mistress,” first published posthumously in 1681 within *Miscellaneous Poems* though written at an unknown earlier date (Kelliher, ODNB). A final poem of interest is John Wilmot’s “Love and Life,” likely written around 1677 during Rochester’s literary maturity (Rochester 199).

All three of these works make an explicit call to live within the moment that is associated with the *carpe diem* genre. The temporal dimension of this genre is succinctly described by Sarah Gilead:

> By means of its *memento mori* theme, the insistence on the absolute inevitability of temporal processes leading to death, the *carpe diem* poem offers the reader access to a strategy against time and death by control of the immediate future (through will and decision to act according to the *carpe diem* dictum), of the past (through accumulated memory), and of the present (through heightening of experience, especially, sexual experience). […] The *carpe diem* strategy posits sexual pleasure as life-intensifying, and thus a defense against mortality; intense pleasure, whether in anticipation, experience, or memory, in a sense displaces the consciousness or fear of death. (Gilead 146)

The *carpe diem* genre thus employs a focus on death in order to argue for a pursuit of pleasure in the moment. While this poetic structure has classical antecedents, it also neatly aligns with theories of materialism and epicureanism being developed at the time of these poems’ writing. The emphasis on pleasure and moment sees these poems represent and inform the temporal dimensions of English libertinism in the seventeenth century.
Yet these poems are not explicitly libertine in their content or moral position. Robert Herrick’s “To the Virgins” invokes the passage of time to argue for what appears to be the pursuit of moral action rather than libertine transgression. The stanza discussing the pleasure of youthfulness concludes with the sentiment “But being spent, the worse, and worst / Times still succeed the former” (Herrick 11-12). What exactly constitutes “worse” behaviour for one’s youth is not specified, yet the final quatrain sees the narrator implore its virginal addressee to seek marriage: “And while ye may, go marry” (14). By implication, time spent “the worse” is anything that ranges outside of this socially-sanctioned approach to sexuality, something which contradicts the call for sensual hedonism that the poem presents on the surface. Gilead comments on the way in which Herrick invites misreading through the speaker’s shift in tone in the second half of the poem, and places particular emphasis on the jarring nature of the statement “go marry”: “A bold plunging into unspecified delights (gather ye rosebuds) becomes mere acquiescence to socio-biological necessity. The final argumentative thrust of the poem seemingly takes the form of a threat: to fail to use one’s time is to ‘tarry,’ to be left behind in the race toward fulfilment” (137). Certainly Herrick describes the threat of mortality as the basis for a pursuit of the present, yet orients this pursuit towards the Christian sacrament of marriage as life’s highest pleasure. In doing so he cannot be said to align with the transgressive sexual practice that resides at the heart of libertine writing.

Andrew Marvell’s “To his Coy Mistress” makes no such acquiescence to societal taboo while remaining directly concerned with sexual love and seductive persuasion. Jules Brody describes the opening stanza as highly conventional in its lyric fantasies of infinite time, yet it invokes a dense network of literary sources that set up the reader for the inversion within the second and third stanzas (60). Brody notes that within the second stanza Marvell explicitly invokes the carpe diem form in the movement of “time’s winged chariot” (61-2). This transition from musings on what one might do with infinite time to an abrupt declaration of its ceaseless movement marks a shift to a highly realist view of time that is in keeping with the carpe diem genre. Marvell’s image of a “vegetable love” that would grow “vaster than empires” becomes withered and rotten on the vine. It is, in fact, precisely this materialist and naturalistic reference that sees Marvell move beyond the typical presentation of the carpe diem poem in his invocation of the grotesque and morbid. Marvell departs from the bucolic setting of Herrick’s “To the Virgins” by presenting a vivid material image of death, in which “Worms shall try / that long-preserved virginity, / and your quaint honor turn to dust, / and into ashes all my lust” (Marvell 27-30). Brody frames these depictions of mortality and fleshly decay as a purposeful departure from, and
potential parody, of the carpe diem concept: “Marvell’s vision of his lady being violated by telluric forces of nature, worming their way, as it were, into her ‘heart’ and ‘affections’, clashes so boldly with the usual diction of the carpe diem genre that the reader is led to ask whether the poet’s purpose is not to subvert and undermine the very premises within which he is working” (Brody 63). A.D. Cousins argues that this atomistic vision of death, and the “deserts of vast eternity” that follow it, is a direct reflection of the way in which Epicurean philosophy is integrated into the sexual libertinism that informs the lyric poetic genre: “The speaker’s conceptualization of space and time in the centre of the poem illustrates his dealings, throughout ‘To His Coy Mistress’, with sexual libertinism’s appropriation of Epicurean philosophy” (394). This assessment is supported by the final stanza, in which the speaker does not implore the addressee to embrace the moment in the face of bodily temporality, but rather to break the power of time entirely in a way that marks a definitive departure from the carpe diem genre. A clear example lies in the final couplet, which reverses a line from Herrick’s “Corinna’s Going a Maying”: “Our life is short, and our days run / As fast away as does the sun” (Herrick 61-62). Marvell’s narrator states instead: “Thus, though we cannot make our sun / Stand still, yet we will make him run” (Marvell 45-46). Brody argues that Marvell’s speaker inverts the functions and meaning of the carpe diem poem in order to transgress or transcend its limitations so that the speaker and his addressee might run ahead of time, not behind it, and at such speed that the sun itself must run to keep up with them (68). Similarly Cousins identifies the final stanza as a utopian fantasy: “In an imagined moment of sexual pleasure they exercise power over Time’s dispossession of them. They cannot impede or halt Time’s movement but they can take possession of it in possessing one another. Intensifying it, they make it their own” (400). Marvell’s poem thus articulates a highly original attitude towards temporality, an attitude which contains distinctly libertine aspects in its suggestion that pleasure of the moment might be able to supersede a larger awareness of time’s passage.

However, whatever transgressive potential “To His Coy Mistress” contains is qualified and tempered by the Biblical references it presents to the reader. This is most notable in the mentions of the Biblical flood and the conversion of Jews in the first stanza, the invocation of the Christian burial rites with its marble and ashes in the second, and finally the “iron gates of life” presented in the third. In regards to the iron gates, Brody argues that they are an invention formed on the Biblical model of the Gates of Death, Paradise, and Hell (72). These references are, by and large, overridden by the speaker of the poem, who employs these motifs in a pursuit of sexual pleasure that culminates in the destruction of the Biblical gates. Yet the association of Christianity with the passing of
time, whether as a point of reference in “ten years before the flood” or as the membrane between life and death, affirms its actual power over the narrator (Marvell 8). As much as he might offer a transgressive vision of time that draws from Epicurean and libertine writing, it is presented as a fleeting act of defiance, an unsustainable utopian dream. By implication, it will eventually fail and he will return to the orthodoxy of the Christian worldview. This aligns with A.D. Cousins’ assessment that the poem presents a distinction between a libertine and a Christian view of time between its narrator and addressee:

Looking at the poem from one angle, namely from the speaker’s perspective, the reader sees a voguish adaptation of Epicurean thought making claim to have superseded Christian orthodoxy. Looking at the poem from the perspective associated by implication with the lady, one is reminded of Christian orthodoxy’s claims to subordinate the material, to monopolize desire and to position all things in a teleological schema devised and overseen by an interventionist God. (403)

Cousins emphasizes that there is no resolution presented between these two views, and accordingly Marvell implies the validity of a Christian understanding of temporality that is either not present or explicitly rejected within eighteenth-century libertine writing.

Finally the Earl of Rochester’s “Love and Life” lyricizes the attempt to live in the present through an emphasis on pleasure. What distinguishes Rochester’s approach to the carpe diem poetic form is the profound melancholy he introduces to his call for the moment. In the first stanza Rochester’s un-individuated narrator immediately sets out the distance he feels from experience of the past: “All my past life is mine no more” (1). The ephemeral nature of his personal history is maintained only in memories that offer a ghostly image: “The flying hours are gone, / Like transitory dreams giv’n o’er” (2-3). From this disconnect with the past, the narrator moves to the future in the second stanza, which opens with a statement on its non-existence: “The time that is to come is not; / How can it then be mine?” (6-7). This brief statement dismisses out of hand any relevance the future might have so that he arrives immediately at the present moment as the only time that has any meaning. Yet the final stanza qualifies the importance of this focus on the present in the lines “If I by miracle can be / this live-long minute true to thee” (13-14). This retroactively establishes the narrator’s attitude to past and future as highly difficult to maintain; it is miraculous if he is able to live entirely within the moment for even one minute. Indeed the “live-long minute” might imply that only at the moment of orgasm can we fully inhabit the present. This is certainly the interpretation of Rochester’s use of the phrase as it appears in the prologue of Stephen Jeffrey’s biographical play: “Or is there some wall of wretchedness that we all batter with our heads at that shining, livelong moment?”(The Libertine 00:01:34). The poem implores its addressee to “talk not of inconstancy / False hearts, and broken
vows” (11-12). The transgression of social and sexual taboo leaves these littered reminders that are nestled in a matrix of connections to past and future. Given these connections, it is little wonder that the narrator begs to not hear of them. “Love and Life” is therefore a poem about the pursuit of the moment rather than a celebration of its arrival, as indicated by this final stanza. Rochester offers a concise expression of a theme readily apparent throughout all three of these poems: the tension between pursuing pleasures of the moment and recognition of one’s own temporal limitations. It is this tension that the libertine novels of the eighteenth century build upon and seek to resolve, a tension that is in fact prefigured by seventeenth-century works.

Yet where these poems differ in their temporal outlook from the eighteenth-century novel is that the threat of time’s passage is grounded within a fear of death, one which aligns with a theocratic conceptualization of man’s brevity set against an eternal afterlife. The acknowledgement of Christian ethos still features as evidenced in Herrick’s demand to “go marry” or the lack of resolution in Marvell’s contrast of libertine and Christian temporality. Similarly the statement by Rochester’s narrator that the present is “All that Heaven Allows” (15) can be read as a similar injunction to live within the moment in the face of a Christian afterlife, particularly in light of its author’s deathbed conversion. It is the demands of narrative—not Christianity—against which the characters of the eighteenth-century libertine novel struggle to justify their pursuit of the moment. Lovelace, Valmont, and Merteuil make little to no mention of their respective attitudes to faith. In Juliette Christianity is invoked extensively in order to be decisively destroyed by the libertine position.

Libertine transgression relies on an underlying belief in that which is transgressed, and in the carpe diem form of the seventeenth century this underlying belief is unquestionably the Christian structure of time. James Turner’s assessment of Restoration libertinism states: “Libertines may be seen as secular antinomians, not simply above the law but deeply in need of the law to guarantee their privileges and to fuel their emotional rebellion. They confirm in the very act of infraction” (“Properties” 81). Given this underlying affirmation of Christianity, the death voiced by the speakers of these poems speaks not of the death of narration—and by extension self—that concerns the eighteenth-century character, but rather the onset of eternity. Such a distinction is important when considering the tension between moment and time, as the novelistic characters contend with the threat of total annihilation as soon as their story is finished, whereas the poems presented here posit death as a simple, if unnerving, transition in which “The grave’s a fine and private place” (Marvell 31). For the libertine characters of the eighteenth century,
death is an absolute, with no prospect of Heaven or Hell to follow it. The end of narration equates to death, and it is only in the act of narrating that the libertine character might craft something which will transcend his or her death. Accordingly the libertine balances his or her transgressions against narrative time rather than a Christian time. The libertines of Clarissa, Les Liaisons Dangereuses, and Juliette necessarily have a changed relationship with the present moment and the pursuit of pleasure as a result of this shift. The threat of oblivion that accompanies the end of narration and the end of life leads the eighteenth-century libertine to adopt a strategy of moderating sensation in order to ensure duration. This stands in marked contrast to Rochester’s “live-long minute” and Marvell’s destruction of the “iron gates of life,” in which powerful instances of pleasure in the moment must compensate for the otherwise constant oppression of temporality. Instead the eighteenth-century moment must be sustained in order to maintain both narration and the self.

This change in attitude towards death during the eighteenth century affects far more than just literary depictions of temporality. Thomas Kavanagh regards aesthetics surrounding death as essential to the transition between Baroque and Rococo aesthetics:

The traditional Baroque draws its pathos from a contrast between the sensual vividness of its forms and the metaphysical backdrop of death’s inevitable sweeping away of all that seemed so very much alive. The Baroque’s emphasis on a vibrating sensuality presupposes life’s subordination to that other realm of disincarnated spirituality to which all are destined by death. […] Gone from the French [Rococo] version is any allegiance, implicit or explicit, to the omnipresence of death as the ultimate truth that gave the Baroque its fullest meaning. Both styles may centre on the sensuality of the incarnate moment, but the form that would define eighteenth-century French style elides from its vitality any hint of the moment’s antithesis within the timeless eternity of death. Instead the dazzling spectacle of the instant reigns supreme, erasing even the suspicion of death and its enforced exit from the realm of the moment. (Esthetics 16)

Death is therefore the hallmark of the baroque, and by extension the *carpe diem* poetic form, which points to death as the basis on which to seize the present. Yet in doing so it underscores death’s inevitability in a way that Gilead argues undermines the message to focus on the present, that is to say, death is impervious to human will, action, or decision and therefore the choice of whether to pursue the moment is irrelevant (146). The absence of death from French eighteenth-century aesthetics that Kavanagh describes above reflects the larger social shifts in understandings of futurity, an extension of the philosophical critique of religious providence. As a result, the lack of direct commentary on death is one of the key differences between the eighteenth-century libertine text and earlier libertine works which aim to speak upon temporality, and furthermore this lack of commentary
conceals an anxiety about death that is also distinct from earlier libertine texts. Such a shift has immense implications for the libertine. Just as his or her anachronistic practice continues to draw upon the baroque in its desire for the sensual libertine moment alongside a general temporal awareness, so too do these two elements have more power than ever before. The duration of the moment in the eighteenth century has the power to wipe away any thought of death, yet should that death arrive, it is absolute with no possibility of a last-minute conversion or eternity beyond. Thus, the stakes of one’s need to live within the moment have been raised, as to exist outside of it is to invite the abyss.

It is because of this power newly accorded to the moment and to death that the eighteenth-century libertine narrator needs to believe he or she can control time’s passage via the deployment of plot. The speakers in the poems of Herrick, Marvell, and Rochester are resigned to time’s passage, and therefore death figures as a natural part of their aesthetic view. Yet characters like Lovelace, Valmont, and Juliette entirely reject death so long as they can lend the moment duration and exert control over their sense of time’s passage. Some are more successful than others. For example, Lovelace’s difficulty in inhabiting the moment leads to the anxiety or neurosis so frequently ascribed to him (Eagleton 57). Yet even he is capable of forgetting about the deathlike end point of his seduction’s narrative during instances of great feeling. For the more effective transgressors in Laclos and Sade, concern about the death of the self is usually subsumed within endless strategies of seizing the moment in which time’s passage and one’s awareness of it are carefully manipulated. The goal of the eighteenth-century libertine then is expressed in Richard Glasser’s statement on eighteenth-century time that: “The supreme happiness resided in a total unawareness of the passage of time, in the absence of a desire to recall the past or to control the future, that is to say, in an eternal present, devoid of duration or succession” (248). Glasser’s summary describes what the libertines of Clarissa, Les Liaisons Dangereuses, and Juliette strive to achieve in their relation to time, and arguably do in a handful of instances. Yet it will also be demonstrated that for most of their narrative arcs these same characters exhibit a profound concern with controlling past and future, as well as an underlying anxiety over the possibility of death. Accordingly the tension embodied in mid-century libertine characters lies in their attempt to adhere to ideals of eighteenth-century temporalities of the present, and their awareness of the possibility of failure.

3.5.2 Pornography

Within seventeenth-century texts there are many libertine characters who do not exhibit this anxiety over potential failure, temporal or otherwise, and this is most evident

68
within the cheerful and carefree world of explicitly pornographic texts that espouse sexual libertinism. The 1680 English translation of Michel Millot’s *School of Venus*, originally published as *L’Ecole des Filles* in 1655, is a representative work of seventeenth-century erotic discourse that espouses such libertinism (Mudge, *Flesh* xvi).17 *School of Venus* represents a synthesis and development of key aspects of early modern pornography and marks the shift from Italy to France as the principle source of explicit libertine discourse and ideology (Turner, *Schooling* 106). The text itself contains all of the tropes of the “whore’s dialogue” genre that had been developed in Europe as the primary framework for erotic literature since its inception in the early sixteenth century with Pietro Aretino’s *Ragionamenti* (Mudge xxix). The educative sexual dialogue amongst women, the sequestered private setting, and the emphasis on a tableau-like listing of physical eroticism are all standard components of these early modern texts, texts which employ physical eroticism intended to arouse as a vehicle for philosophical libertine expression. Bradford Mudge argues that despite various works within the genre attempting to justify their own ideas about human sexuality, all of these proto-pornographic texts agree upon, and indeed are compelled by, the desirability of making private sexual knowledge public (xxx). While James Turner’s analysis of *School of Venus* is focused on uncovering the liminal disobediences of women and gestures to a female-controlled libertinage which troubles patriarchal models of sexuality, he also reiterates the linkage between the text and standardized sexual mores: “*L’Ecole de Filles* exploits the symbiosis of libertinage and traditional morality rather than denying it. Poised between two didactic procedures, the socratic person-to-person dialogue and the more abstract printed manual, both of these exploit the secrecy of one medium and the physicality of the other that aims to produce an interior state of arousal and receptivity, whether it leads to educational self-improvement, to libertine desire, or to devotional submission” (118-9). The eighteenth-century novel certainly contends that sexual libertinism speaks to universal truths about the body which lurk beneath the surface of traditional morality. However, libertine characters go to great lengths to assert a distinction between their personal desires and the behaviour of society as a whole. The libertinism that manifests in these later texts is embedded within the aristocratic context it inhabits, particularly in its focus on the need for seclusion in order to enact transgression. This distance between the libertine narrator and his or her reader in the eighteenth-century novel undercuts any resemblance to *School of Venus’s* straightforward intention of making the reader receptive to libertine ideology or desires.

17 The version cited here contained within Bradford Mudge’s 2004 collection *When Flesh Becomes Word*. 69
The populist nature of sexual education in *School of Venus* is expressed in Frances’ initial explanation for her instructive course: “People of all ranks and degrees participate therein, from King to cobbler, from Queen to Scullion Wench, in short one half of the world fucks the other” (9). No such commonality is produced within later texts, in which sexual behaviour is exclusively the realm of the libertine and there are no depictions of non-libertine sexual practice. While Frances later privileges a distinctive male “type” in the young male rakes of London whom she pronounces highly desirable, sexuality remains a social equalizer. Discussions of physical postures and arrangements reflect this highly normative outlook with an almost exclusive emphasis on vaginal penetration as the sole sexual act worthy of consideration. Frances, in her role as tutor, describes all other sexual acts as mere “cheating” intended to replicate or invoke penetrative sex while being fundamentally unsatisfying (50).

In its depictions of temporality, *School of Venus* reflects conventions of genre in its lack of any meaningful characterizations, complications of plot, or discussion of the moment. It is important to note that this does not make such texts inherently inferior to the eighteenth-century novel, as they are simply unconcerned with producing a complex narrative. This is a direct reflection of the sexual philosophy espoused in the text as summarized in Frances’ statement that:

> “Men love to please themselves, and though they deny it, believe them or not, and the chief mark they aim at is our Cunts; also when we embrace and kiss them, we long for their Pricks, though we are ashamed to ask for it, for notwithstanding all the Protestations of honor, the tears they shed, the faces and cringes they make, it all ends in throwing us backwards on a Bed, insolently pulling up our Coats, and catching us by the Cunts, getting between our legs and Fucking us. *In short, this is the end of all,* most commonly those that love most, swive least, and they that fuck oftenest have seldom a constant mistress, if they have, the love doth not last long, especially if the mistress was easily gained. ’Tis strange to see women pretend to love with constancy, making it such a virtue, protesting that it is not fucking they delight in, when we daily see them use to. To be short, all ingenious persons confess, that copulation is the only means of generation, and consequently the chief procurement of love.” (43)

This passage demonstrates that *Venus* rejects any sense of value in the temporal lengthening of the seductive process and the cerebral tactics contained therein. Instead it evinces a prioritization of speed and efficiency in which the endless exchanges of seduction are pre-empted. This aligns somewhat with the Sadean loathing of seductive process described by Peter Cryle, yet does not contain Sade’s emphasis on the one-sided dynamics of libertine power nor his replacement of seductive delay with the measured temporal
lengthening of the sexual act (Cryle 371). For the characters’ within School of Venus, sex is something that people from every walk of life unequivocally desire, and which in ideal circumstances can be experienced without any form of delay or obligation.

It is thus unsurprising that as a result of this attitude the text of Venus is untroubled and buoyant in tone. Katy’s sexual ignorance is the sole object that must be overcome and her efficient and untroubled education constitutes the entire temporal arc of the text. Both Katy and Frances are delighted to discuss and practice their sexual libertinism, and there is a general air of cheerfulness that is undercut only by their mutual commiserations about society’s failure to recognize, or at least openly admit, the joys of sex. The only mention of any sort of temporal anxiety is Frances’ early assertion that: “It [swiving] is the most sovereign pleasure we poor mortals enjoy” (8). This is the closest Venus comes to articulating an anxiety about death, and speaks to the profound difference in attitude between the pornographic “whore’s dialogue” and the eighteenth-century libertine novel.

For the eighteenth-century libertine the greatest source of pleasure is precisely the cerebral enjoyment of a drawn out seductive process, as much as, if not more than, the sexual act itself. The concern with plotted narrative is inextricably linked to a temporal anxiety about death and one’s potential failure of libertine self-definition. Within the high libertine literature of the eighteenth century, any potential for a carefree brand of libertinism has been subsumed entirely by the quest to legitimize and practice it within the respective fictive worlds of the various novels. Their attempt to control the temporal structures that encircle the sexual act and manipulate the way in which one perceives time’s passage within the framework of a seductive process is fraught with peril. Pierre Saint-Amand’s exceptional study, The Libertine’s Progress, offers a reading of the eighteenth-century libertine character as distinctly irrational and archaic, akin to a sorcerer or vampire who is the dark superstitious underside of the Enlightenment’s treatment of desire (4). For Saint-Amand, libertine seduction is a process of violence and fear, one which is just as dangerous to the seducer as the seduced, and he suggests there is always the potential for these elements to be mirrored back onto the seducers themselves in their devotion to the act: “Seduction tries to operate as a sort of exorcism of fear. But to do this, it ends up rivalling the seducer’s own terror of fascination” (12). In Lovelace, Valmont, Merteuil, and Juliette this latent anxiety and fear of their seductive victim—or fellow libertine—is present

---

18 See Chapter Six for further details on time within Juliette.
19 This is true of most early modern pornography. The only temporal concern they introduce is that one might go through life ignorant of the pleasures of the flesh. Venus in the Cloister, for example, is similar to School of Venus in its emphasis on the experience of sexual pleasure to a life well lived.
throughout, and it is a burden that weighs heavily upon them. While this anxiety speaks to the depth of their fictive worlds and narrative, it is little wonder they abandon the carefree masturbatory fantasies of *School of Venus* in the process.

### 3.5.3 Theatre

Frivolity and amusement as the primary expression of libertine sensibility can also be seen in theatrical representations of libertinism in the seventeenth century, particularly in the English theatrical tradition which fixated upon comedic wit and aristocratic indulgence during the Restoration.

Emblematic of this genre is William Wycherley’s *The Country Wife*, a sex-comedy that satirizes the operations of selfish desire which exist beneath the respectable social veneer. It is certainly true that the temporality of dramatic performance, and its emphasis on carefully plotted narrative to accompany dialogue, sets theatre apart from pornographic texts like *Venus* and does allow for some narrative ambiguity in the libertine’s adoption of various roles to further his own ends. The libertine character Horner’s deployment of a masquerade of impotence in order to spend time alone with married women anticipates the militaristic retreats, advances, and illusions of eighteenth-century seductive practices.\(^{20}\) Wycherley emphasizes this theme of societal masks in order to illuminate truths that lie behind them, as summarised in Harcourt’s statement: “Most Men are the contraries to that they wou'd seem; your bully you see, is a Coward with a long Sword; the little humbly fawning Physician with his Ebony cane, is he that destroys Men” (200). Libertine characters smart enough to see beyond the appearances of social respectability possess a playful ability to adopt different personas and roles to suit their situations—all of which point to the mimicry and imitation of seduction. Yet despite the characters’ love of mimicry, *The Country Wife*’s temporal structure still ultimately aligns itself with the pornographic in its demand, and perhaps requirement, for a lack of narrative delay. While Wycherley obviously enjoys social hypocrisy insofar as it offers a rich vein for satire and allows for the hectic tangles of comedic plot in which characters must balance their different personas, the play is also highly critical of social codes of conduct which lead to seductive or sexual delay. Horner is complimentary of Margery Pinchwife’s admission of love when he says: “‘Tis the first love-letter that ever was without flames, darts, fates, destinies, lying, and dissembling in it” (258). Yet it is precisely these rhetorical, or in Sade’s case sexual, strategies of dissembling that the eighteenth-century libertine considers all-important. Wycherley’s play, like *School of Venus*,

---

20 A fuller discussion of military metaphor in regards to the eighteenth-century libertine is present in section 4.3
seems to, at least in part, advocate for a world in which people are honest about their desires, and nothing could be further from the wishes of the latter-day libertine who thrives upon the ambiguity that shrouds him or her. James Turner characterizes Wycherley’s play as a comment on how the signs of arousal and ardour may be faked or mediated by fashion (“Review” 207). By attacking that which is dissembling and hypocritical The Country Wife, by implication, criticizes this mediation of desire—it suggests that the ideal life is one in which we are true to our sexual desires and do not allow them to be obscured by social convention.

However beneath the jovial and comedic tone of the play there are more serious questions that linger about Horner’s libertinism. Jeremy Webster places a great deal of emphasis on the fact that Horner is not reintegrated into society at the end of the play through marriage, and it is explicitly stated that he will continue to use his veneer of impotence to pursue sexual conquests. “The Country Wife suggests that the pursuit of pleasure as the primary good in life will lead a libertine to the necessary rejection of social institutions and even masculine friendship” (Webster 99). Webster further suggests that this aspect of Wycherley’s play established a prominent theme within Restoration drama of whether the libertine figure ought to be reintegrated into society or exist outside of it, with the majority of following plays arguing that “the libertine must be reincorporated into social and political institutions of their day in order to have the economic means to pursue pleasure without evoking fear on the part of England’s citizenry” (99). In many ways this prefigures the Georgian libertine model proposed by Tiffany Potter, and the sublimation of less aggressive forms of libertine behaviour into masculine codes of conduct described by Erin Mackie.

However there also exists contemporary theatre that depicts more severe form of libertine behaviour without the cheerful veneer of the Restoration sex-comedy, most notably Molière’s 1665 interpretation of Tirso de Molina’s Don Juan. A play that seems more willing to acknowledge social masks, artfulness, and ambiguities as sources of pleasure in and of themselves, rather than as necessary tools used to attain pleasure. Don Juan’s speech on the pleasure of seduction in act one is nearly identical to statements being made by Lovelace and Valmont over a hundred years later:

How deliciously sweet to lay siege to a young heart; to watch one’s progress day by day; to overcome by means of vows, tears and groans, the delicate modesty of a soul which sighs in surrender; to break down little by little the weakening resistance, the maidenly scruples that her honour dictates, and bring her at last where we would have her be. But once we have had our way with her there is no more to wish for. The
best is behind us. And so we slumber on, lulled by our love, until a new object appears to reawaken our desires, and lure us on with the charms of a new conquest. There is nothing so sweet as the overcome the resistance of a beautiful woman. And where they are concerned I have the ambition of a conqueror, who goes from triumph to triumph and can never be satisfied. (37-8)

Don Juan’s approach explicitly recognizes the pleasure that stems from delay and the seductive process itself rather than its consummation in a way that most other seventeenth-century depictions do not. In addition he describes the vampiric approach to seduction that characterizes its depictions in the eighteenth century which see the libertine move—or intend to move—between victims once “there is no more to wish for”. 21 Don Juan’s prioritization of the seductive act itself prefigures the delay-oriented model of narrative time that blooms with Crébillon and Richardson during the mid-eighteenth century. This pleasure in dissimulation is reflected not only in matters of love but all of Don Juan’s actions, such as his calculated false reformation throughout the final act. It is perhaps unsurprising that Molière, a playwright whose ability to provoke laughter is matched by a clear perception of the paradoxes and tensions of human existence, should be able to recognize the potential of masquerade as a source of pleasure for the libertine. Don Juan remains perhaps the most nuanced theatrical depiction of a libertine in the simultaneous appeal and repulsion he exerts over his audience. However, where Don Juan differs from the likes of Clarissa or Liaisons is that it completely abandons this nuanced acknowledgement of paradox when presenting the consequences of libertine behaviour.

Lovelace, Valmont, and Merteuil are punished for the profoundly human errors in judgement they make, and thus their respective falls are very much a consequence of their own actions and stem from interior motivations which see the denouement of their texts invoke the tragic. Yet the character of Don Juan presents no such faltering in his libertine behaviour, and indeed seems positively inhuman in his ability to continue, proudly proclaiming himself a libertine before the literal supernatural presence of the statue. His condemnation to Hell is the product of the exterior judgement of Heaven, an automatic result after he accumulates a certain degree of sin. Whether we read the ending of the play as ironic or not, perhaps due to the tastes of Molière’s audience, or a holdover of the Catholicism of its original author, Tirso de Molina, it affirms the highly static temporal understandings of the seventeenth century in the continued role that providence plays in conceptualizations of time. The risk that the immediate moment will bring about an

21 This movement between victims is most fully realized in Sade, albeit with a focus on sexual rather than seductive process. However, Lovelace and Valmont imply that each does move, and intends to move, between seductions in this way. It is merely that their narrative is centred on what they perceive as their most exceptional or noteworthy act.
eternity of punishment, reflected in the spectre’s statement that “Don Juan has no more than a minute left to make his peace with Heaven. Unless he repents at once, he is lost for ever” (90), is simply not present within the eighteenth century. Heaven, Hell, and divine providence no longer exist, or at least are unworthy of consideration, for the libertine and therefore there is nothing to stop the pleasures of the moment provided one can sustain them.

Theatrical temporality is defined by its inherently public nature, in which both the characters onstage and their audience are never actually alone. There is no moment during *The Country Wife* or *Don Juan* in which we see the primary libertine figure by himself, and all individual comments must be relegated to brief asides while characters cycle through the room at a rapid rate. Theatre shrinks down the experience of time into an immediate succession of moments in which there is no languishing, no threat of boredom, for the libertine character. Plays containing libertine characters and themes continue to remain popular throughout the eighteenth century. One example is Charles Johnson’s 1733 play *Caelia: Or, The Perjur’d Lover*, which Ira Konigsberg has noted for its striking similarities to Richardson’s *Clarissa*. Similarly in France the oeuvre of Pierre de Marivaux remained popular throughout the eighteenth-century despite its frequent libertine themes. Yet theatre largely continues to prioritize an immediacy of action which limits its ability to develop divergent temporal forms. Eighteenth-century libertine prose fiction is, by contrast, predicated on the extension of time and space that the novel introduces. While this space allows for an unprecedented depth of characterization, the novel’s length and the investment of time required to read it means that the constant stimulation of the theatre cannot be maintained. Goulemot comments on this when he says the eighteenth-century libertine novel positions the reader as a “listener” and “eavesdropper” in a way that makes the reader akin to the fictional object of seduction (144). It is only in the novel that we see the libertine character inhabit quiet moments. As readers, our eavesdropping leads not to an endless cavalcade of pleasure but rather someone hunched over a desk by candlelight, grasping at the moment in the act of writing. This is the challenge the novel form presents the libertine narrator: the impossibility of maintaining the moment at all times.

My aim with these comparisons is to demonstrate that artistic portrayals of libertine characters before the eighteenth century either did not intend, or were not able, to produce a uniquely libertine temporal structure. Texts like *School of Venus* and *The Country Wife* are comedic or frivolous in a way that speaks to libertinism’s focus on the immediate sexual moment, but generally disregard pleasure to be found beyond the sexual act itself; the libertine is simply uninterested in directing the temporal pace of his or her narrative.
More serious representations, such as English *carpe diem* poetry and Molière’s *Don Juan*, are concerned with libertine temporality, but are always underpinned by traditional structures of religion. It is only within the eighteenth century that the libertine is challenged to produce a model of temporality without these constraints. The libertines that are the subject of this study strive towards an original narrative legacy that fully reflects the Enlightenment emphasis on the present moment. Yet at the same time they are unbalanced by the shift in transgressive ideologies of the past and concerned with the potential futurity of their own stories.
4 “This charming clock that runs low”: Lovelace and the Arrival of Death

*Clarissa* is the natural starting point for any textual analysis of the late eighteenth-century libertine novel. Robert Lovelace, the primary libertine character in *Clarissa*, is granted his own epistolary voice in a manner that diverges from Richardson’s earlier novel *Pamela*. It is through Lovelace’s first-person narration that the thematic structures and concerns of libertine time which are present throughout the remainder of the eighteenth century come to be established. The immense success and influence of *Clarissa* within England and France ensured that Robert Lovelace would become the forerunner of the late eighteenth-century libertine character, and this is demonstrated in the direct references to *Clarissa* within the text of *Les Liaisons Dangereuses* in letters 107 and 110, as well as Sade’s praise for *Clarissa* in his *Reflections on the Novel* (Sade 106). As much as Richardson aimed to be critical of libertinism in *Clarissa*, it unquestionably had a profound influence on the libertine writing tradition that followed it.

Given the influence *Clarissa* exerts over later libertine texts, it is unsurprising that Lovelace provides some of the most straightforward instances of the temporal themes I have previously discussed. All four of the central concepts described in Chapter Two are present in Lovelace’s actions, plot, and self-representation. The purpose of this chapter is to examine *Clarissa*s text and establish Lovelace as the first depiction of a character engaged with temporal themes that are unique to the late eighteenth-century libertine.

4.1 Note on Editions

This analysis will employ only the first edition of *Clarissa*, published in three instalments between December 1747 and December 1748. Richardson’s compulsive editing of *Clarissa* following this first edition produced a second edition of volumes I-IV in 1749, a third edition of the entire text 1751, and a fourth, very similar to the third, in 1759.

Richardson was frustrated by what he saw as the constant misreading of the text by its audience, and consequently these multiple editions are designed to clarify and remove some of the ambiguities presented in the first edition, particularly as they relate to the characterizations of Lovelace and Clarissa (Keymer 247, Marter 130). The third edition represents his most comprehensive attempt to clarify this text, and contains the most significant number of changes as well as being an entire volume longer than the original text. Owing to the extent of these changes, *Clarissa*s third edition was long-perceived as the
definitive version until this view was challenged in the twentieth century by critical movements that de-emphasized authorial commentary or intention in favour of textual analysis and reader-response.

Two excellent acknowledgements of the problems inherent to later editions, and particularly the third, are presented in the studies of Clarissa undertaken by Tom Keymer and Terry Castle.

It is hard to imagine a set of measures more thoroughly at odds with the original text, where narrative explanation is never detached, in person or in tense, from the conflicts of the story, and where the reader is entrusted with the final resolution of meaning. But the objection to these retrospective interventions is not simply that they work to curtail the reader's interpretative role. The analyses they advance are often crude and reductive, significantly blunting the complex text they pretend to explain in full. (Keymer 247)

By insinuating himself into the text as its editorial voice, Richardson tries, almost as an afterthought, to confine the meaning of Clarissa's "story," to close off its gaps, and make it over as the pellucid fable of Christian heroism he desired that it should be. (Castle 175-6)

Criticisms of Richardson's edits therefore hinge on the way in which he attempts to undermine the nuances of meaning and complexity of character presented in the first edition. These criticisms compliment and inform the methodological approach of the present study to focus on textual, rather than contextual, parallels between Clarissa and other libertine works. The decision to employ the first edition side-steps Richardson's most egregious instances of attempting to control the reading of his text and characters. However, it should also be noted that the third edition offers significant additional support for the analysis undertaken here. 22

This is most noticeable in the blackening of Lovelace's character. Richardson's attempt to portray Lovelace as substantially more remorseless and dangerous aligns him far more closely to the libertine behaviours of Valmont, Merteuil, and Juliette. Of particular note in this instance is a letter added to volume IV in the third edition that has Lovelace describe a detailed plan to abduct and rape Anna Howe, her mother, and her maid during a protracted boat trip to the Isle of Wight (Richardson Passages 100). It also details how Lovelace will avoid any legal repercussions in court and his expectation that he will in fact

---

22 I would also point to Terry Castle's argument that Richardson's intrusions in the third edition actually have the opposite effect of what he intended, and incite the reader's rebellion against his prescribed vision of the novel through the editorial heavy-handedness. “By their very existence, the editorial additions (particularly the ubiquitous footnotes) serve not as a set of constraints on reading but as patent reminders to the reader of his or her own freedom” (178). Under this rubric, employing the third edition would, in fact, reinforce the methodological choice to focus on Clarissa's text rather than Richardson's vision for his text.
be lauded for his actions rather than condemned (103). This is only the most self-contained instance of Lovelace’s more malicious nature in the third edition. There are thousands of minor changes to his writing that making him considerably more demonic, and a survey of the most significant of these changes can be found in Shirley Van Marter’s article on the third and fourth edition of the text (130-135). However Peter Sabor has noted that the changes to Lovelace’s character do not function strictly to condemn its character, but continue to maintain his brilliance, wit, and social perceptiveness (Passages xxvii). Sabor notes the alterations to literary references throughout the revisions that don’t impact the characters so much as the overall texture of the novel to align it more precisely with contemporary references (xxvii). The most significant of these in relation to this study sees Lovelace style his plots as superior to those of Horner in Wycherley’s The Country Wife, reinforcing the network of references to Restoration writing that informs a broader understanding of the libertine writing tradition (Richardson Passages 135). Furthermore there are additional changes outside of Lovelace’s character that further support analysis presented here. In particular the association of Belford with death is reinforced within the third edition through extensions in his narration of Tourville’s death that take on a grotesque and poetic tone not seen in the first edition (131).

Despite the offerings of the third edition, the choice has been made to sacrifice the extensive support it offers and focus on the original text of the first edition. The primary reason for doing so is to demonstrate that the thematic connections between the libertines discussed within this study are present across a spectrum of behaviour. That is to say, Lovelace’s attitude to temporality, even at his most ambiguous and potentially sympathetic, remains connected in its temporal outlook to the most fanatical transgressions of Juliette. The libertine character need not be presented as inherently evil in order for the attitudes towards time discussed here to be relevant and applicable to them. Additionally it ensures that the analytic conclusions presented here apply to all subsequent editions of Clarissa, and do not hinge on letters not present in the first edition.

4.2 Context

Lovelace’s understanding of temporality begins with his awareness of the past. This is demonstrated in his anachronistic references to outmoded forms of libertine behaviour, as well as an emphasis on his personal history of rakishness. The temporal awareness brought about via these two forms of “pastness” contributes to his desire to create a legacy through the creation of an original seduction narrative. Issues of legacy, temporality, anachronism, and death are present within each of the works I examine, yet
Lovelace stands as the libertine character most responsive to these themes. His ambitious attempt to graft these preoccupations into his transgressive actions is doomed to failure, but in spite of this failure, he appears as one of the most important fictional characters within the English libertine writing tradition, and the originator of the eighteenth-century libertine temporal mode.

Numerous readings of Clarissa have clearly established the parallels between Lovelace and the libertines who inhabited the court, theatre, and literature of the Restoration. Of particular note are the arguments of Potter, Turner, and Mackie, who read Lovelace as anachronistic, nostalgic, or at least unoriginal in his seduction of Clarissa (Potter 409-10, Mackie 60). Turner summarizes his position when he describes the way in which Lovelace calibrates his seduction against maxims he has always obeyed:

This experimental and tendentious approach to seduction has one important corollary; it undermines the libertine’s claim to originality. The intense assertion of individual rebellion and individual libido turns out to be quite conformist, since it aims to prove an existing theory, an established (if scandalous) ideology of female submission and female arousal. It confirms a script already written. [...] We must conclude that Lovelace is motivated by a kind of neoclassical respect for authority. In his experiments on female virtue, and in his attempts to imagine an amorous future with Clarissa, he seeks to validate not only a libertine sexual ideology but a libertine literary tradition. (“Lovelace” 72)

Turner argues that Lovelace attempts to prove a previously developed libertine ideological proposition: that women want to be seduced, and even raped, regardless of what they may claim (72). Lovelace’s maxim of “once subdued, always subdued,” which he frequently invokes throughout the text, and which is dismantled by Clarissa following the rape, refers directly to the more violent forms of Restoration libertinism that Lovelace seeks to model himself upon, and therefore underlines that Lovelace as a character is deeply aware of the libertine past. It is this self-conscious anachronism that informs his anxiety regarding past libertine conduct and, as will be demonstrated, his fixation on crafting a legacy within the “rakish annals” (Richardson 846).

There is further evidence for this anachronistic attitude within the text in Lovelace’s relative level of violence and extremity of transgression compared to his fellow libertines. In letter 209 he describes an earlier seduction of a French Marquis that concludes with her being forced to leave her husband and subsequently dying in childbirth (675). Lovelace represents this as a youthful frolic of sorts, and invokes his maxim of “once subdued, always subdued” to explain the Marquise’s continued capitulation to him. He narrates this story to Belford in order to reaffirm his libertine identity in light of Clarissa’s
continued resistance, as well as to distinguish himself from his fellow libertines: “This, thou knowest, was always my rule – *Once any other man’s*, and I know it, *never more mine*. It is for such as thou, and thy brethren, to take up with *harlots*. I have been always aiming at the merit of a first discoverer” (674). Lovelace differentiates himself from other eighteenth-century libertines via the severity of the transgressions he seeks to enact—a perspective which makes him a greater threat to women, but also inclines him to the temporal delays and focus upon narration. In fact he defends his conduct to Belford after this statement on the basis of his exclusive concern with the severity of transgression, even if it results in comparatively fewer of them: “The more devil I, perhaps thou’lt say, to endeavour to corrupt the uncorrupted. But I say, *not* since, hence, I have but very few adulteries to answer for” (674). Thus Lovelace distinguishes himself within the libertine writing tradition by emphasizing not the *number* of transgressions, as in Sade’s writing, but rather the *difficulty* of enacting a seduction as the metric by which the worth of a transgression may be measured. It is for this reason that he makes worthy company for the likes of Valmont.23

Tiffany Potter offers a comparative analysis of the libertine characters present in *Clarissa* in order to argue that they embody an emergent “Georgian” model of eighteenth-century English libertinism: “Belford, Morden, and even Lovelace are all morally ambiguous in a way that the libertine stereotype had never been” (404). She contends that Belford and Morden embody the way in which Restoration libertine practice is subsumed and altered into the “good natured” orientation of the Georgian libertine, providing a host of contemporary literary examples to support this characterization (406). Yet this analysis also highlights the way in which Lovelace does not neatly inhabit either the Restoration or Georgian constructs. “Lovelace certainly achieves the libertine’s subversiveness, but his total absorption in flaunting his own power, and the lack of good nature that so typifies the evolving Georgian libertine, renders him quite unlike the model embodied by Belford, Morden, and Fielding’s characters” (Potter 409). In the same paragraph, Potter points out that Lovelace remains attractive because “he does not merely abandon every social prescription and all cultural mores as do the thoughtless libertine posturers, Belton, Mowbray, and Tourville, but he also analyses his own actions and motivations”(410). For Potter, Lovelace inhabits a liminal position between the Restoration and emerging Georgian characterizations of the libertine as defined against the other characters in *Clarissa*. In regards to Lovelace’s attitude towards temporality, this liminal position points to his awareness of the past. Anachronism informs Lovelace’s behaviour without defining it, and Potter’s analysis helps contextualize his drive for originality as defined against the

---

23 See section 5.1 for a direct comparison.
other libertines in the novel. His focus on legacy and the crafting of a narration mark an attempt to transcend both the thoughtless violence of Mowbray and the deferential sentimentality of Belford. In the attempt to balance these positions, he becomes one of the most important and original libertine figures of the eighteenth century.

Erin Mackie emphasizes Lovelace’s anachronism as part of a larger study of the link between criminality and masculinity in the eighteenth century. Her work outlines the matrix of seventeenth-century issues of authority, absolutism, and masculinity that informs Lovelace’s character, and she argues that he embodies a type of masculinity which remains culturally current into the eighteenth century in its intersection of criminality and prestige (61). Within a mid-century English context, these past modalities espouse a violence that does not coincide with contemporary codes of male conduct requiring a degree of consideration, respect, decency, and restraint at odds with the assertion of status-linked privilege performed by the libertine rake (Mackie 39). Mackie surmises this position in the statement: “Lovelace is a cultural anachronism in 1748, heavily invested in the nostalgic ethos that I have argued characterizes the modern rake” (62). This suggests Lovelace is highly aware of the past in a way that marks him as distinctive within the libertine writing tradition at the mid-century mark. This sense of “pastness” includes not only Lovelace’s personal history of rakish practices, but, as argued by Mackie, also gestures to an awareness of a broader history of libertinism that extends into the seventeenth century. Richardson lends Lovelace this awareness of the past in order for Clarissa’s text to criticize the continued relevance of the libertine figure, yet in doing so accords Lovelace an originality and authenticity that is unprecedented within libertine characterizations. Not only is Lovelace conscious of the past, but the depth and breadth of expression afforded to his character by the epistolary novel form sees this nostalgia compel him to seek originality and, by extension, the creation of a unique temporal model.

Erin Mackie concludes her analysis with the statement: “Yet although Lovelace must die, future rakes live on, each propelled by the narcissistic fantasy of existing as a ‘peerless peer’ outside the very ideology that engenders him. The rake is dead. Long live the rake” (70). The importance of Clarissa to the libertine writing tradition is thus expressed in the way in which Lovelace influences the continued depictions of the libertine character throughout the novels of the eighteenth century. Even if Valmont, Merteuil, and Juliette do not yearn for the transgressive practices of the Restoration rake in the same sense as Lovelace, he introduces a demand to consider some form of past, if only through his own presence. The unique sense of temporality espoused by the eighteenth-century libertine
character begins with the nostalgia, desire for originality, and conflicted sense of self-authorization held by Lovelace.

Similarly, Elaine McGirr makes this anachronism clear via an analysis of Lovelace’s affected style of language:

His first letter cements our opinion of Lovelace’s theatricality and anachronism. Lovelace does not write familiar letters. His correspondence is in an affected ‘Roman style’ with stilted and archaized diction; his narrative letters, even reported speech, are full of archaisms like “thee,” “varlet,” and “durst”. [...] Clarissa’s language mirrors the novel’s verisimilitude, while Lovelace’s repeats the figures of fiction’s past. (10)

McGirr establishes this anachronism in order to argue that Lovelace uses literary references to characterize himself as a tragic hero. A focus on Lovelace’s language and references reaffirms his characterization as both self-aware and anachronistic. However, it is important to recognize that the use of these references demonstrates how Lovelace feels compelled to assert his originality. None of the other libertine characters in the novel make such extensive textual references in his writing, and indeed the crude portrayal of the most definitively violent and anachronistic libertines, such as Mowbray, suggest they are in fact the least likely to offer such a nuanced synthesis of materials to justify their behaviour. Furthermore Lovelace’s self-conscious style of writing waxes and wanes throughout the novel and while there are many instances of literary allusion and metaphor, as in his first letter setting up the seduction, there are others where it is replaced by frank or sentimental expression. Lovelace’s style of writing invokes the past in his attempt to be original.

Lovelace is thus aligned, to an extent, with the legacy of the Restoration, and this awareness of the libertine past is used to inform his unique sense of temporality. This temporality leads him to structure the seduction in a way that resolves the tension between a focus on the present and the act of narration. Anachronism is a concern of Lovelace’s as it motivates him to develop an original transgressive strategy. It informs his libertinism without defining it. Textual evidence for this is seen when Lord M attempts to discourage Lovelace’s libertine practices. Lord M is not generally aligned with the redemptive moralizing of Belford, Anna, or Clarissa, as “the old peer had been a sinner in his day” (Richardson 1023). Yet he professes concern to Belford over Lovelace’s conduct: “I wish you would try what you can do with him; for I have warned him so often of his wicked practices that I begin to despair of my words having any effect on him. [...] What a pity it is that a man of his talents and learning should be so vile a rake!” (607) Even in the relatively sympathetic opinion of Lord M, Lovelace’s actions are too transgressive of
eighteenth-century codes of male conduct to be acceptable. Yet this same character is
deply concerned with the possibility that he has “overplotted” himself and undermined
his own transgressive power.

Lovelace’s self-identification as a libertine introduces a point of comparison
between his own behaviour and libertinism’s historical depictions. The history that looms
over the eighteenth-century libertine, his or her sense of the past, is explicitly invoked in
Lovelace’s “rakish annals” statement. The presence of this past is a constant that
accentuates the sensation of time’s passage as previous modes of transgression fail to
generate the same meaning they once did.

One instance of this is seen in the influence of English theatre on *Clarissa*. While
Lovelace directly references early modern heroic tragedies within the texts, Ira Konigsberg
notes that the plot and structure of *Clarissa* borrow most extensively from English theatre
of Richardson’s own time, notably Charles Johnson’s 1733 play *Caelia: Or, The Perjur’d Lover*
(50). Given the extraordinary similarities in theme, plot, and major characters between
*Clarissa* and *Caelia*, Konigsberg argues that Richardson likely based the structure of *Clarissa*
on Johnson’s play, while still acknowledging the extent to which Richardson gave
extraordinary depth to the relatively limited material found in *Caelia* and similar works (52).
This expands the intertextual web which informs Lovelace’s characterization and his sense
of “rakish annals” to include dramatic depictions of libertine characters. Tom Keymer also
notes the way in which the stage “[…] offered a precedent in which to express, deplore or
celebrate the subversiveness of libertinism” (158). The influence of these dramatic works
on *Clarissa* are therefore most relevant to Lovelace’s characterization. Libertinism’s
performance of transgression as a means of making an ideological statement align it closely
with the stage, so that, as established by Jeremy Webster, drama and performance become
constitutive elements of libertinism (25). For contemporary eighteenth-century readers,
Lovelace is therefore already situated within a context that explicitly connects him to past
forms of libertine writing.

After establishing the ways in which Lovelace resembles the libertines of earlier
drama, Konigsberg acknowledges the synthesis of texts that inform Lovelace’s character
with the caveat: “Lovelace, of course, seems a more complex figure than his dramatic
prototypes. Occasionally he seems to possess some of the lighter wit and gayety, as well as
the cynicism and fluency of such rakes of comedy as Dorimant and Horner, and
occasionally he seems to possess the same inflated egotism and extreme passions as the
heroes of the heroic plays” (50). Lovelace’s depth as a character stems from the
amalgamation of a number of different characterizations of libertine behaviour which
borrow not only from the Restoration but a variety of dramatic works. Richardson’s unique
achievement relative to earlier libertine writing is ceding Lovelace a narrative priority within
the novel that allows for the full expression of these influences and sees them furthered
developed within the novel form.

An instance of this nuance is encapsulated in Lovelace’s professed belief in God,
something which many past and future libertine characters might scorn. This belief serves
several functions, of which the most obvious is that it conforms to Richardson’s need that
Lovelace should offer the possibility of reformation to the reader.24 It also reaffirms the
libertine’s continued reliance on contemporary authority and sociocultural convention in
order to confirm his or her unique independence or exemption from them. Lovelace’s
belief in God actually highlights his transgression: he knows he is subject to a higher moral
judgement for his actions and yet still elects to pursue his seduction. The temporal
implications of this belief heighten this transgression: given the prospect of an eternal
afterlife, he still seeks to craft a material legacy via narration. He is unconcerned with
Heaven or Hell, and is focused not only on his experiences of the present but how those
actions will echo into the future.

Lovelace offers a model of the eighteenth-century English libertine who attempts
to generate meaning in the present by drawing from, yet not directly copying, seventeenth-
century modes of transgression. Clarissa’s success ensured that this orientation towards the
past came to influence other major works I examine. Indeed, Lovelace himself becomes
another entry in the libertine tradition that later characters draw upon while attempting to
differentiate themselves, as in Valmont’s reluctance to “resort[ing] to methods that are not
my own” in his reference to Lovelace.

4.3 Dominance and Submission as Temporal Articulation

In order to establish Lovelace’s concern with temporality, one need only examine
the way he structures his plan for Clarissa’s seduction. His plot is based entirely upon a
continual “see-saw” pattern of dominance and submission that will eventually wear down
Clarissa’s virtuous resistance:

24 For a detailed discussion of why the potential for Lovelace’s reformation is important to
Richardson’s didactic project see Mary Martin’s “Reading Reform in Richardson’s Clarissa.” Martin states that
it is necessary that Clarissa’s readers should consider Lovelace’s reformation both possible and highly
desirable in order for this “might have been” to inform the tragic end of the novel and reinforce Richardson’s
critique of masculine codes of conduct (607).
To such a place then – and where she cannot fly me – And then to see how my will works, and what can be done by the amorous see-saw; now humble; now proud; now expecting, or demanding; now submitting, or acquiescing – till I have tired resistance. (424)

This pattern ensures that Lovelace remains stimulated in the present through his movement between different seductive strategies. However, in order to affect this movement between dominance and submission, Lovelace is required to be highly aware of his behaviour and able to moderate it as needed. As such, he is able to inhabit the present constantly as he must always focus on what is required of him in the moment, so that the moderation of self becomes a moderation of time. This plan of seductive action embodies the key aspects of temporal articulation that are elaborated in Chapter Two. The focus on the present moment of cruelty or deference framed by the seductive plot helps Lovelace to resolve the tension between transgressor and narrator, a tension that will be demonstrated in the following section. These moments are then repeated so that they form an articulated chain of instances in which Lovelace alternates between dominant and submissive behaviours towards Clarissa. This serves not only to wear down resistance, but to extend the seductive discourse into a lengthy narrative and ensure that Lovelace is continually stimulated by the give-and-take of the seduction. In order to impose this carefully measured alternating behaviour Lovelace must exert a supreme control over his own actions and know precisely when to delay or advance his transgressions against Clarissa. The toll that this level of self-control requires will be evidenced in his messages to Belford. 25 Finally there is an emphasis on the need for an isolated space “where she cannot fly me” in order for Lovelace to impose his carefully measured alternating behaviours of dominance and submission. All of these aspects combine to demonstrate that Lovelace’s stated intention of creating a “see-saw” -like seduction produces an example of temporal rhythm, in which actions are articulated and repeated in order to maintain a constant state of stimulation and, by extension, a constant sense of self.

Lovelace’s alternation between dominance and submission produces a temporal rhythm through the stimulation it offers him. By carefully planning the variety of postures he adopts he can always inhabit the present moment as he considers when to shift his behaviour towards Clarissa. Lovelace’s variation between dominance and submission leads to a ceaseless flow of time through their steady repetition. This variation in seductive pacing keeps both Lovelace and Clarissa locked into a temporal rhythm he has plotted. Lovelace’s submissive behaviours, as embodied by the repeated apologies to Clarissa that punctuate the slow pace of the seduction, are purposeful elements of a seductive method.

25 See section 4.2 for further information about Lovelace’s relationship with Belford.
constructed around a sexual give-and-take. Lovelace plots his own submissions to Clarissa, so that the alternation of submission and dominance becomes a sexual correlative to the linguistic contest between them. This method contains elements of repetition without constantly repeating the same behaviour; rather Lovelace’s stimulation derives from the movement from one state to the other. Temporal articulation presents itself as a chain of moments that, while connected, are still intended to navigate towards a conclusion.

This constant shift in discourse and behaviour ensures that both of Clarissa’s leads remain entirely focused on the moment at hand, as noted by Clarissa’s best friend and confidante Anna Howe when she compares Lovelace’s rhythmic technique against that of her own suitor:

> I am so much accustomed to Hickman’s whining, creeping, submissive courtship that I now expect nothing but whine and cringe from him. … Whereas Lovelace keeps up the ball with a witness, and all his address and conversation is one continual game at the racquet. Your frequent quarrels and reconciliations verify this observation, and if only Hickman could have kept my attention alive after the Lovelace manner, I should have married the man by this time. (Richardson 466)

Anna clearly denotes Lovelace as the enactor of this back-and-forth dialogue. She acknowledges this “continual game at the racquet” as one of his own devising and a direct result of his discourse; and perceives Clarissa as a participant within a structure of Lovelace’s creation. It is important to note Anna’s use of a sporting analogy for Lovelace’s seductive technique as it not only highlights the body’s role in reflecting and initiating shifts in seductive discourse, but comments on the temporal structures of athletic activity as offering a parallel to the rhythmic sense of time that Lovelace is seeking to instil in the seduction. Sport sees the athlete aim to function at the level of instinct, entirely inhabiting the present moment, while at all times inscribing this action within a larger strategy. Anna’s reference to tennis is a particularly apt analogy, as the start of a game effectively locks both athletes into a competition with no ability to reorient themselves or pause until a loser is declared. It is a perfect illustration of an act which demands that one inhabit the present moment entirely if one wishes to succeed. The constant back-and-forth of the ball mirrors the rhythm of dominance and submission that Lovelace establishes in his discourse with Clarissa.

It is important to clarify precisely what Lovelace intends when he “submits” to Clarissa in these instances, as a total submission would see him comply with her desire to break off the seduction entirely. Obviously this is not the case, and instead he submits only so far as to ensure that his most recent plot or sexual attempt is pardoned to allow for the
next. Keymer notes the limitations of Lovelace’s apologies: “The balance between candour and apology is more unequal than Lovelace suggests; for his frequently reiterated frankness is rarely more than expedient, and on occasion it may even be set aside” (187). Keymer makes this comment in reference to Lovelace’s capacity for concealment and obstruction of meaning, using his submissive episodes as a means to twist his self-representation to the reader. This typically manifests in an avowal of Clarissa’s power that appears to undermine his control over the plot, as seen in his apology for his behavior following their attendance of a play: “Let me worship an angel, said I, no woman. Forgive me, dearest creature! – Creature if you be, forgive me! – Forgive my inadvertencies! Forgive my inequalities! – Pity my infirmity! – Who is equal to my Clarissa?” (Richardson 646). Here Lovelace’s submissiveness is primarily an expression of remorse and self-reproach accompanied by praise for Clarissa’s virtue and superiority, with no real allowances being made or proposed. That these submissive episodes are carefully anticipated in advance is demonstrated in an earlier passage:

She calls her maid Dorcas. No doubt that I may hear her harmonious voice, and to give me an opportunity to pour out my soul at her feet; to renew all my vows and to receive her pardon for the past offence: and then, with what pleasure shall I begin upon a new score; and afterwards wipe out that; and begin another, another; till the last offence passes; and there can be no other. (Richardson 575)

While Keymer notes Lovelace’s use of this strategy to conceal meaning, it is in fact core to the seductive project as a whole. Once again the back-and-forth rhythm of the seduction with its constant “renewal” is emphasized as the primary means by which Lovelace will succeed in making Clarissa his mistress without marrying her. Lovelace’s intention to “pour out [his] soul at her feet” highlights the submissive attitudes he will adopt throughout this process. Yet what is most important here is his statement that these submissions are specifically intended to “receive her pardon for the past offense” in order to enable this repetition. This is noted by Clarissa herself when she remarks to Anna, “This man, you know, has very ready knees. You have said that he ought in small points frequently to offend, on purpose to show what an address he is master of” (Richardson 166). She recognizes that his apologies go no further than their intention of gaining her forgiveness. It is therefore not only his acts of sexual aggression, but also those of compliance, which demand that Lovelace moderate his feelings and behaviour in order to conform to the plotted rhythm of the seduction. He cannot allow his transgressions to move forward or regress too much without compromising his strategy of wearing Clarissa down in minor increments.
Despite its slowness, the alternating pattern between dominance and submission still has a profound effect on how both Clarissa and Lovelace experience time. The frequent returns to an earlier state gradually imbue the seduction with a sense of endlessness. Melinda Rabb discusses the way in which time appears to warp for both the reader and the characters of *Clarissa* through its length: “Time seems to stand still when the characters are not writing or reading. Technical divisions between letters, which might account for moving the plot through time, become unreliable. Letters start and end, but the action snakes backwards and forwards around the divisions. The famous technique of ‘writing to the moment’ effects an ‘eternal present’, a constant flux of *now*” (62). Rabb gestures here to the concept of temporal articulation as outlined in Chapter Two, in which repetition and delay can produce a constant state of being in the moment. However, she does not acknowledge the extent to which this articulation is part of Lovelace’s seductive strategy. Keymer notes the way in which Lovelace exploits the assumptions of truth in writing that accompany the epistolary form. “In Lovelace’s hands words are not incarnations but contrivances, their referentiality no more than useful illusion” (179). In many ways Lovelace explicitly contradicts the idea of ‘writing to the moment’ in his careful crafting of words so that he represents himself however he pleases, and convince even as he lies (54). This assessment is echoed by Terry Castle’s reading of Lovelace’s ability to misrepresent himself through letters so that what people presume is an extension of his natural self is entirely artificial (84). This power to misrepresents is largely what gives him control over the plot, and his movements between dominance and submission are the means by which the action “snakes backwards and forwards,” since, as a libertine, he has a vested interest in inhabiting just such an “eternal present” as Rabb identifies. However, as will be demonstrated, Lovelace also exhibits an anxiety about his inability or unwillingness to arrive at a conclusion to the seduction. As much as he might seek to impose an eternal present, he can never give himself over entirely to it and always has the future in mind. Thus the endlessness which Rabb describes is certainly the dominant sense of time within the seduction narrative, but far from the only one.

The seduction’s lack of progress actually further stimulates Lovelace as he takes genuine pleasure in the unique nature of the seduction and the requirement that he defer to Clarissa so often. He is happy to conform to the pattern he has plotted, and he often expresses the pleasure he finds in his submissive episodes as unique amongst his previous seductions: “Her virtue, her resistance, which are her merits, are my *stimulatives*. Have I not told thee so twenty times over?” (Richardson 716). His frequent abasements towards Clarissa are not only a necessary part of his process but a pleasurable one. Lovelace
imputes a fundamental value to Clarissa’s ability to debase him that feeds into his conflation of fear and love evidenced in his earlier description of himself as one “who never inspired a fear that had not a discernibly-predominant mixture of love in it” (Richardson 143). The notion that love and fear are commingled is often attacked by Anna and Clarissa in the first third of the novel, when talking of Solmes, as a means to criticise arranged marriage (Richardson 187, 213). Yet Lovelace’s belief in this connection suggests a genuine sense of weakness when he behaves submissively towards Clarissa and it feeds into his warped perception of the seduction as a contest between equals. He appropriates those instances in which she exerts her own agency via resistance as part-and-parcel of his seductive strategy. Lovelace believes that to truly love Clarissa he must also fear her, just as she must fear him. By proclaiming the weakness her virtue and power engender in him with every rejection, he maintains this illusion:

If thou knewest, if thou but beheldest, the abject slave she made me look like! I had given myself high airs, as she called them: but they were airs that showed my love for her: that showed I could not live out of her company. But she took me down with a vengeance! She made me look about me. So much advantage had she over me; such severe turns upon me; by my soul Jack, I had hardly a word to say for myself. I am ashamed to tell thee what a poor creature she made me look like!

(Richardson 424)

It is precisely in this manner that Lovelace remains stimulated and focused on the present moment throughout the entire seduction. Even when he defers to Clarissa it leads to a unique experience of debasement that only her virtue and ability can engender in him. That Lovelace’s “high airs” only serve to demonstrate he “could not live out of her company” highlights his conformity to the seductive rhythm he has laid out. Clarissa, with her unerring virtue, is Lovelace’s ideal sparring partner, one who will never fail to stimulate him even if he never succeeds in conquering her. Lovelace is in fact happy to remain locked into the rhythmic pattern of submission and dominance he has plotted for the two of them. But he must also, of necessity, look to the future and consider the seduction’s endpoint.

Yet his reluctance to move towards this end has been noted by many readers. Judith Wilt goes so far as to suggest a reading in which Lovelace never actually arrives at any sort of resolution to commit the rape, and is instead pressured into doing so by the women of the house, particularly Mrs. Sinclair, who Wilt tentatively posits might even have committed the act herself. It is demonstrably true that Sinclair and her two accomplices, Polly and Sally, consistently goad Lovelace to end his seductive project and enact a rape, as Wilt effectively demonstrates with numerous textual references (23). She emphasizes
Lovelace’s correspondence as proof of this pressure, and in particular letter 99, in which he states: “And here from below, from BELOW indeed! From these women! I am so goaded on. Yet ’tis poor too, to think myself a machine in the hands of such wretches” (400). Wilt argues that Sinclair, Sally, and Polly hate Clarissa for refusing to pattern herself in the manner of other women and argues: “This loosed female violence overreaching the masculine ‘coquetry’ has been the essential pattern of the novel as a whole” (28). This seductive coquetry which is reluctant to arrive at a conclusion reflects that aspect of Lovelace’s libertine method that seeks to imbue his narrative with meaning through delay, as represented in the submissive episodes in his seductive rhythm. Indeed his claim that the women of the brothel wish him to act as a “machine” seems to anticipate the Sadean libertine, who pushes narrative forward through the numeric increase of transgression, rather than seductive delay, and is frequently described as machine-like.26

Wilt attempts to explain Lovelace’s coquettish practice as somehow indicative of a “female” soul within him that is imposed on Clarissa: “What Lovelace claims to understand about women, because he shares that drive, is the complicated domination-by-submission mechanism that he calls modesty” (22). However, this neglects the importance of delay to the development of a narrative that will act as his legacy-project, as well as the way in which Lovelace’s position within the seduction is defined against both male and female characters. Sinclair, Polly, and Sally’s behaviour appears no different from that of Lovelace’s fellow libertine Mowbray, who is equally uncomprehending of the former’s carefully strategized seduction and the rhythm it entails. Mowbray aligns with the women of the house in being portrayed as a crude and unsympathetic character. Lovelace is thus beset on all sides by people imploring him either to break off his seductive rhythm or conclude it. Belford and Clarissa present the arguments for virtue and abandoning the seduction, while Sinclair and Mowbray present those for vice in their suggestion that he enact a rape. Lovelace’s position between these parties is a purposeful one which emphasizes the ambiguity of his character and the careful planning of his plot. Wilt neglects to consider that the reader might interpret the contrast between Lovelace and the more crude transgressors as a means to make him appear sympathetic rather than impotent. This would align with Mary Martin’s reading of how vital it is that the reader should see Lovelace’s reformation as not only possible but desirable. Wilt sees the seduction’s conclusion in a rape as Lovelace abandoning his seductive project to enact a “revenge” against Clarissa for refusing to conform to his seduction plot (25). While the rape unquestionably destroys the back-and-forth of the seductive plot, Wilt’s assessment falls

26 For discussions of the “machine” in Sade see Section 6.1
short in light of Lovelace’s frantic attempts to return to the seduction’s back-and-forth rhythm following Clarissa’s escape. While his actions are at least partially the result of Mrs. Sinclair, Polly, and Sally’s criticisms and judgements, section 4.4 of this analysis will demonstrate that Lovelace’s failure to indefinitely maintain and inhabit the temporal articulation he builds the seduction on is equally to blame.

Lovelace conceives of seduction in a fundamentally different way to the explosive yet fleeting passion of his libertine forebears or the violence encouraged by Polly, Sally, and Sinclair. By structuring his transgression around a rhythmic and carefully moderated back-and-forth between dominance and submission he avoids the “dips” in stimulation that see previous libertine characters struggle with apathy, boredom and ennui. In seducing Clarissa, Lovelace views himself as walking a line between libertinism and reformation that extends far beyond the immediate seductive acts as he expresses to Belford:

Oh Jack! Jack! Thinkest thou that I will take all these roguish pains, and be so often called a villain, for nothing? But yet, is it not taking pains to come at the finest creature in the world, not for a transitory moment only, but for one of our lives? – The struggle, whether I am to have her in my own way, or in her? (Richardson 809)

This is an explicit rejection of trying to pursue the “transitory moment” that is the stated goal of the carpe diem poem and similar hedonistic or libertine texts from the seventeenth century, encapsulated in the Earl of Rochester’s lines “If I, by miracle, can be / This live-long minute true to thee, / ’Tis all that Heav’n allows” (13-15). Lovelace constructs the seduction not merely as an attempt upon Clarissa’s virtue that would allow him to grasp this fleeting pleasure, but rather as a critical act of self-definition that reflects a larger struggle between libertinism and virtue. It is for this reason that the passage above highlights the possibility of Lovelace’s reformation via the potential for it to conclude in “her” own way. Introducing this potential reformation is a necessary step towards establishing the result of the seduction as being of permanent consequence to both Lovelace and Clarissa. This permanence demands that Lovelace avoids those moments of “indefinable uneasiness” described by George Poulet, in which a lack of sensation leads to a lack of self (24). Such moments might tempt Lovelace to end the seduction prematurely with either a rape or by breaking it off entirely, and it is for this reason that Lovelace takes the “roguish pains” of constructing the rhythmic back-and-forth of the seduction, a rhythm that will ensure a constant stimulation as he moves towards his transgressive goal.

However, there are points at which this rhythm threatens to break, most notably in Clarissa’s various escapes. These moments serve to highlight the significance of the seductive rhythm to Lovelace’s character. An excellent example of this is seen in letter 228,
in which Lovelace bemoans Clarissa’s initial escape from the house he has imprisoned her in:

I have been traversing her room, meditating, or taking up everything she but touched or used: the glass she dressed at I was ready to break; for not giving me the personal image it was wont to reflect, of her, whose idea is for ever present with me. I call for her, now in the tenderest, now in the most reproachful terms, as if within hearing: wanting her, I want my own soul, at least everything dear to it. What a void in my heart! What a chillness in my blood, as if its circulation were arrested! From her room to my own; in the dining-room, and in and out of every place where I have seen the beloved of my heart, do I hurry; in none can I tarry; her lovely image in every one, in some lively attitude, rushing cruelly upon me, in differently remembered conversations. (Richardson 740)

This striking image demonstrates the movement towards non-existence that accompanies Clarissa’s departure, with Lovelace attempting to replicate the libertine sensations that affirm his own identity and allow him to generate meaning within the moment. It is telling that he employs a language of bodily senses: he touches the objects she touches, he longs for the sight of her within a mirror, and he calls out her name in the hopes of hearing a reply. His actions are an attempt to trace Clarissa’s presence via material sensation and conjure her image from objects in order to reintroduce the seductive dialogue he relies upon. Yet in doing so he only underscores her lack of presence and draws out his memory of previous conversations that make his present circumstance so inadequate. The allusion to chilled blood and arrested circulation refer to a personal death, a direct indication of the threat that a lack of stimulus poses to the libertine. This confrontation with non-existence is risked whenever Clarissa extricates herself from the seductive rhythm, with the temporary shift towards death here foreshadowing the suicidal undertones to Lovelace’s death at the novel’s end. The moments when Clarissa escapes Lovelace’s confinement threaten a premature end. Should such an ending arrive it would do so without the narrative meaning that Brooks states is founded upon the continually delayed anticipation that an ending will give order and significance to plot (94). Despite this threat, Lovelace’s power over the plot of *Clarissa* throughout volumes III and IV mean that it is less Clarissa’s actions and more Lovelace’s own failure to adhere to his seductive plan that ultimately sees it break down with his decision to enact the rape, as will be discussed in section 4.5.

The emphasis on Clarissa as the source of all stimulation makes her the source of Lovelace’s selfhood as summarized in his phrase, “wanting her, I want my own soul” (740). Rather than possessing a self-contained identity, Lovelace relies upon Clarissa and Belford to affirm his libertinism. There is nothing transitory about Lovelace’s feelings towards
Clarissa, and his claims to indifference following her death ring false as they immediately follow an extended madness (Richardson 1431). Lovelace’s madness demonstrates the extent to which he uses Clarissa as a means to define himself. There is a tendency across the texts examined here for the libertine to define him or herself in opposition to each of their victims or fellow libertine cohorts.\(^{27}\) Through this tendency the libertine comes to heavily rely on these external figures. Yet this is unprecedented at Clarissa’s time of writing, and Lovelace is distinct from the later characters I examine due to his explicit acknowledgement of the potential for his own reformation should the seduction fail. As a result he is forever contemplating the seduction’s potential outcomes and significance to himself, and consequently the “racquet game” rhythm he establishes is essential to his focus on the present.

### 4.4 Plotting, Legacy, and Futurity

An obvious way in which Lovelace asserts the temporal rhythm of the seduction is his frequent usage of delay. This is evident immediately in Clarissa’s length, and the seemingly impossible effusion of discourse surrounding a single transgression—an approach that stands in sharp contrast to the transient movement between Sadean victims that starts and ends in the course of a few pages. Lovelace and Clarissa instead produce an enormous amount of narration and commentary from their seductive back-and-forth, with Lovelace frequently telling Belford of his habit of staying up all night to write his letters (722). His writing, more than simply reporting events, indicates how he frames his seductive strategy, often loops back to past incidents, and considers the possibilities of the seduction’s future outcome. This process of review that accompanies his letter-writing acts as a means by which Lovelace ensures that he moderates the pace of his transgression, so that it moves neither too slowly nor too quickly. Letters provide Lovelace an opportunity to demonstrate his self-control and discuss the careful strategizing that maintains temporal rhythm.

That Lovelace should seek to carefully moderate, and frequently delay, the pace of the seduction is understandable in light of my earlier discussion of the role delays play in narration. Peter Brooks’ Reading for the Plot clearly identifies the importance of repetition to the creation of narrative: “An event gains meaning by its repetition, which is both a recall of an earlier moment and variation of it, hovering ambiguously between the idea of reproduction and that of change, forward and backwards movement. This creates a return

\(^{27}\) Indeed, the libertine’s opposition to the prude as a thematic thread across these works is the core premise of James Fowler’s study *The Libertine’s Nemesis*. 

94
in a text, a doubling back which interrupts a simple movement forward” (99-100). Lovelace is invested in maintaining the seemingly endless undulations of dominance and submission between himself and Clarissa precisely because they gradually build up the significance of his seduction of Clarissa to the transgressive heights he desires. Yet despite wanting to introduce this level of meaning, Lovelace worries that the delay it requires compromises his credibility as a libertine figure, and must frequently assure himself of his own ability:

Sally, a little devil, often reproaches me with the slowness of my proceedings. But in a play, does not the principal entertainment lie in the first four acts? Is not all in a manner over when you come to the fifth? And what a vulture of a man must he be who souses upon his prey, and in the same moment trusses and devours? But to own the truth, perhaps I have overplotted myself. (Richardson 574)

Clearly laid out in this passage is the tension between Lovelace’s dual role as a narrator, who must craft a well-paced plot and imbue it with meaning, and as a libertine, who must transgress in order to maintain his or her self-identity. As discussed earlier, Sally advocates for the latter and encourages Lovelace to abandon his plot and enact a rape. Yet Lovelace is fixated on the requirement that the seduction gains a narrative value through the rhythm of dominance and submission he enacts. The metaphor of the seduction as a piece of theatre, his defence of the “slowness” of its performance, and the mention of oblivion in which “all in a manner [is] over” affirm Lovelace’s deep and abiding concern with how temporality impacts the meaning behind plot. By defending his “slowness” he demonstrates an awareness of the connection between narrative and temporal delay in the manner outlined by Brooks (94). Delay is necessary to imbue the seduction of Clarissa with the level of meaning Lovelace has assigned it. The way in which he writes letters to review past incidents and build anticipation towards future ones indicates his focus upon producing a great narrative that will transform the seduction into a herculean act. Indeed the “vultures” he critiques are libertines who are unconcerned with the creation of narrative, and will not allow their transgressive intentions to be influenced by its demands.

Lovelace is precisely the opposite of such a libertine, as his main concern is the creation of a meaningful narrative. Melinda Rabb discusses the ways in which Lovelace, more than any other character up until the rape, exerts the most narrative control over Clarissa through his focus on plot and invention: “The figure of creativity in the novel is Lovelace. To him is given the function of manipulating action and the words most often associated with him suggest the same function: art, contrivance, design, scheme, plot, device, invention” (65). Rabb indicates that his frequent literary references, and the way in which he both imagines dialogue and engages in dialogue with himself, evidence the self-
conscious nature of Lovelace’s plotting (66). Terry Castle affirms the power that Lovelace wields in his ability to define the narrative through his patriarchal and unlimited power of expression that reduces Clarissa to a mere ‘cipher’ whose language is always disrupted and can be used to draw out whatever significance he desires (15, 23, 27). Castle explicitly criticizes the position of scholars such as William Warner and Terry Eagleton who view Clarissa as presenting a powerful and comprehensive challenge to Lovelace’s hermeneutic dominance (24). Clarissa is asymmetrical in the power it affords its two lead narrators. Through his privilege and his willingness to misrepresent himself in his writing and actions Lovelace maintains a control over the text up until the rape. He disorders and fracture’s Clarissa’s voice and replaces it with a temporal articulation that will simultaneously craft a narrative while allowing him to remain within the moment. “Lovelace’s schemes – long, intricate, brilliant – eventually sabotage him. His plots go out of control; one plot necessitates yet another plot. To be caught up in the relentlessly linear movement of plot proves self-defeating” (Rabb 61). Despite this failure, Lovelace never stops exhibiting a concern with plotting in both senses of the word, and he remains fixated on the narrative dimensions of his actions even as he seeks to inhabit the moment.

Lovelace’s desire to establish Clarissa’s seduction as a grandiose narrative is the product of a deep concern with legacy and futurity that informs everything he does. Unlike the carpe diem hedonism of his libertine ancestors, Lovelace is unable to give himself over entirely to the moment because of a concern with remembrance. He constantly has one eye to the future whether in relation to the outcome of the seduction or how his actions will be interpreted by others. He makes an explicit statement of his desire to create a legacy when he writes to Belford mere days before the rape, and considers the possibility of marrying Clarissa:

But if I should Jack, what a figure shall I make in rakish annals? And can I have taken all these pains for nothing? (Richardson 846)

This is one of the most important lines in the entirety of Clarissa as it clearly expresses the core underlying motivations behind Lovelace’s behaviour and the way he has constructed the seduction. His invocation of “rakish annals” is purposefully vague in that it encompasses both past libertine behaviours and future ones. Lovelace indicates his struggle with meeting the transgressive standards of the past that have fundamentally shifted. He desperately wishes to make himself a permanent “figure” within this libertine history, and consequently he must enact a transgression that is not only extraordinary, but also original. Just as the Vicomte de Valmont declares a horror of resorting to “means that are not my own” in reference to Lovelace, so too does Lovelace perceive past libertine behaviours as a
demand to create an original transgression that will guarantee his place in the future (Laclos 270). It is Clarissa’s extremity of virtue and beauty that establishes her as the means by which Lovelace might construct this transgressive legacy-project. The temporal rhythm of the seduction, as established by the movement between dominance and submission, is the strategy he adopts in order to attain it. This rhythm allows him to maintain a focus on the present while still enacting a larger plot that will be remembered and interpreted. Legacy becomes the impetus for Lovelace’s construction of the temporal articulation which is so integral to the eighteenth-century libertine character.

It is this desire to create a legacy that introduces a need to emphasize the narrative value of the seduction. The tension between the demands to live in the moment as a libertine, while simultaneously acting as narrator, is resolved at least partially by the temporal rhythm that Lovelace develops. The delays his legacy-project requires always threaten to undermine his power as transgressor, yet he has a vested interest in demonstrating Clarissa’s virtue in order to heighten the degree of her fall when she capitulates to him.

Evidence of the desire to establish a legacy is clearly seen in Lovelace’s frequent use of military metaphors that position him as a brilliant strategist attempting to take a nigh-impenetrable fortress. Metaphors of “love as war” have a long history in western literature, yet Lovelace employs them in a way that reiterate his concern with futurity in their emphasis on the consequences of his seduction, what happens after the “war” so to speak. He clearly seeks to elevate his actions to the realm of the heroic, and justify the delays he feels he must enact:

And come the worst to the worst, glorious terms will I give thee. Thy garrison, with General Prudence at the head, and Governer Watchfulness bringing up the rear, shall be allowed to march out with all the honours due to so brave a resistance. And all thy sex, and all mine, that hear of my stratagems, and thy conduct, shall acknowledge the fortress as nobly won and defended. (Richardson 401)

A key aspect presented here is the way in which Lovelace anticipates that the process and result of the seduction shall be made public in order for it to be memorialized in the manner of a military conquest. It is through a public account of his success as a libertine that he hopes to establish his legacy, as evidenced in his emphasis not only on his own strategy but also on Clarissa’s virtuous conduct so that his imagined audience will appreciate the full extent of his transgression. By emphasizing Clarissa’s virtue, the

---

28 The comparison of Lovelace and Valmont will be developed extensively in section 5.1
metaphor of the besieged fortress furthers Lovelace’s warped perception of the seduction as a contest between equals. Indeed, the passage suggests that Clarissa enjoys some form of advantage as a “defender” safely enclosed behind walls or atop high ground in order to portray her as an opponent against whom Lovelace must enact a variety of stratagems. Implicit in this attitude towards the seduction is the equation of delay with militaristic feints, retreats, and drawn-out sieges. This reframes Lovelace’s careful adherence to his plot and the submissive episodes it entails as part of a larger strategy, rather than a consequence of his own weakness.

John Cardwell presents a detailed analysis of the military metaphors throughout Clarissa, particularly those present in Lovelace’s letters. He emphasizes the influence of contemporary warfare on Lovelace’s writing and offers evidence that suggests Richardson had an active knowledge of warfare, particularly in relation to the War of Austrian Succession (156). Indeed, Cardwell repeatedly draws a parallel between Lovelace and Fredrick II of Prussia in that both are undeniably brilliant strategists, yet highly misguided in their actions (162, 171, 174). In discussing why Lovelace employs such extensive martial rhetoric, Cardwell states: “The aim of Lovelace’s grandiose military metaphors had been to create the illusion of an equal struggle in which he conquers women, and especially Clarissa, the champion of her sex, ‘fairly, in set and obstinate battle,’ allowing him to claim the glory of military triumph” (167). Of course, following the rape, this illusion fades as Lovelace’s “victory” is shown to have been over a woman he has placed within a vulnerable position—and who continues to resist him following the rape—rather than an epic military conquest between equals with a conclusive ending. Sections such as the siegecraft metaphor quoted above portray Clarissa as a stubborn fortress commander defying her attacker, demonstrate the extent to which his military language is a self-serving rhetoric that reveals a distorted view of the seduction. Cardwell’s assessment reaffirms the way in which Lovelace exerts control over the narration of Clarissa’s seduction, and seeks to shape the way in which it will be presented to a future public. He aligns the activities of the rake with the operations of the soldier.

This equation of seductive strategy with martial prowess demonstrates that Lovelace attempts to craft a legacy through a carefully shaped narration that will see him be remembered in a manner similar to that of a general who wins a notable victory. Cardwell notes: “In his reflections on the moral code and behaviour of the rake, Lovelace repeatedly associates himself with the great military leaders of past and present” (154). This is clear evidence of Lovelace’s ultimate intention to create a legacy through his narration. These fantastical descriptions of his own abilities are seen throughout the text:
What an industrious spirit have I! Nobody can say that I eat the bread of idleness. I take true pains for all the pleasure I enjoy. I cannot choose but to admire myself strangely; for, certainly, with this active soul, I should have made a very great figure in whatever station I had filled. But had I been a prince! – To be sure I should have made a most noble prince! I should have led up a military dance equal to that of the great Macedonian. I should have added kingdom to kingdom, and robbed all my neighbour sovereigns in order to have obtained the name of Robert the Great. And I would have gone to war with the Great Turk, and the Persian, and the Mogul, for their seraglios; for not one of those Eastern monarchs should have had a pretty woman to bless himself with, till I had done with her. (Richardson 762)

Lovelace compares his “industrious spirit” in the seduction of Clarissa to the military campaign of Alexander the Great, whose name remains synonymous with martial glory throughout the early modern period. In doing so Lovelace underscores not only the equivalence of the rake and the soldier, but his desire to create a legacy for himself. Lovelace suggests that the man capable of seducing Clarissa would also be capable of conquering the world, and accordingly her fall should stand as a testament to his abilities as a libertine. However, the fact that Alexander’s kingdom fractured and faded within a year of his death lends a profound sense of irony to Lovelace’s glorification of Alexander. It hints that Lovelace’s legacy-project might similarly collapse, and leads the reader to consider his entire effort as an exercise in wasted time.

In fact, the most striking element of the above passage is the dissonance between Lovelace’s intended actions and his stated goals. He seeks to go to war over brothels, or overcome titanic obstacles merely for the sake of overcoming them. He delights in the notion of his great potential being expended upon seemingly meaningless acts. Cardwell comments on this: “He possesses many of the virtues required for success, especially as a soldier, yet he conspicuously renounces his duty to do either, and degrades these qualities by harnessing them to a life of libertinism. This wasted potential is part of Lovelace’s tragedy” (178). That Lovelace wastes his time and potential is certainly a reading which aligns with Richardson’s intentions that the reader should condemn his libertine behaviour and the callousness he exhibits towards others. However, it is also possible to interpret Lovelace as consciously transgressing social norms by presenting a libertine model of personal achievement that denies altruism. It is precisely by selfishly “wasting” his potential that Lovelace considers himself worthy of being remembered. Keymer and Webster both recognize that Libertinism has the potential to present radical ideology, with the former suggesting that Lovelace’s actions contain a socio-political subversiveness (Keymer 168, Webster 6-7). It is not difficult to imagine how this privileging of “wasted” time might function as part of that radical challenge to cultural norms.
All of this is to say that Lovelace builds the seduction up not only as an act of permanent consequence to himself and Clarissa, but also as a carefully drawn out and grandiose narrative equivalent to the greatest historical conquests. Thus as much as he designs the temporal rhythm of the seduction to allow him to always inhabit the present moment, so too does it aim to establish a legacy for himself. These intentions are made clear in the very first letter he writes to Belford:

There are so many stimulatives to such a spirit as mine in this affair, besides love: such a field for stratagem and contrivance, which thou knowest to be the delight of my heart. Then the rewarding end of all – to carry off such a girl as this, in spite of all her watchful and implacable friends; and in spite of a prudence and reserve that I never met with in any of the sex. What a triumph! – What a triumph over the whole sex!

(Richardson 147)

Lovelace explicitly presents two goals in his seduction of Clarissa from the outset: firstly in the direct reference to the pleasurable stimulation offered by seductive strategy and contrivance; and secondly, in pointing to its conclusion, which will establish a transgressive legacy for himself. In regards to the latter, Lovelace’s aim to “triumph”, a word that is linked to military conquest and important victories, presents the seduction as an act to be remembered. Tom Keymer comments on the frequent use of “triumph” and suggests it may have had negative connotations that put contemporaries in the mind of a Jacobite motto associated with Charles Stuart and the Battle of Culloden. He frequently uses this word to refer to the seduction’s end, and his libertinism is structured around an anticipation of the transgressive power this triumph will accord him, the “rewarding end of all” that will obviate the need for any further proof of his power. Therefore both the conclusion and the process of the seductive act itself are taken as equally worthy, and the temporal rhythm described in section 4.3 is structured to meet both of these goals.

The text of *Clarissa* affirms and indulges Lovelace’s perception of himself as a unique libertine figure via the pursuit of originality and concern with legacy. As discussed earlier by Tiffany Potter, this is most apparent in the contrast between Lovelace and the other libertine characters of *Clarissa*. He lacks the “good nature” of Morden and Belford that typifies the Georgian libertine (409). Yet Lovelace also analyses his own thoughts and actions in a way that is unseen in the crudity of minor libertine characters within his gang of accomplices such as Mowbray, Tourville, and Belton (410). This self-analysis manifests in his temporal concerns, his simultaneous desires to create a narrative legacy and to live in the moment. These “lesser” libertine figures of his gang only understand their transgressions as attempts to live in pursuit of the moment, and therefore do not demonstrate any anxieties around temporality or their own libertine status. Mowbray,
Belton, and Tourville are simplistic and crude in their attitude towards transgression, and all of them conform to the social equation of rakishness with criminality. This is particularly true of Mowbray, who is repeatedly referred to as a “savage” character with little feeling. He departs when his friend Belton is dying because he finds it boring and melancholy, and when reviving Lovelace from his madness declares:

And you know, Jack, that it was a shame to manhood for a man who had served twenty and twenty women as bad or worse, let him have served Miss Harlowe never so bad, should give himself such obstipulous airs, because she would die: and I advised him never to attempt a woman proud of her character and virtue, as they call it, any more: for why? The conquest did not pay trouble; and what was there in one woman more than another? (Richardson 1360)

Mowbray’s simplistic model of libertinism is revealed in this inability to understand Lovelace’s actions and grasp that Clarissa represented an opportunity for an exceptional transgression, one that would require a patience and finesse that Mowbray clearly lacks. In Mowbray there is no concern with temporality beyond an immediate pursuit of the moment of pleasure, and consequently there is no narrative value to any of his actions. He thus evokes the traditional carpe diem attitude of the Restoration criminal rake. In advocating that Lovelace should have employed his time not in the challenge of seducing the virtuous Clarissa, but rather accumulating a number of “lesser” conquests, Mowbray reveals not only his conformity to earlier Restoration libertine model but also its limitations, limitations from which Lovelace consciously attempts to depart. Mowbray is unquestionably a libertine, yet he lacks the troubled psyche that makes Lovelace and later eighteenth-century libertine characters such compelling protagonists. He demonstrates no capacity for nuance or self-awareness beyond a potential deathbed reformation in the manner of his friend Belton. He has no desire to create a legacy and aims only to pursue the moment of pleasure, and consequently he has no real temporal concern outside of that pursuit. Such a character could never function as the libertine antagonist and narrator of Clarissa.

Instead, Mowbray’s purpose is to act as a point of contrast with Lovelace in order to highlight the brilliance of the latter, as well as the more “respectable” brands of libertinism evinced by Belford and Colonel Morden. Lovelace and Belford are opposed to Mowbray in their awareness of time’s passage and their desire for some form of stimulation beyond immediate pleasure. This more self-aware brand of libertinism is presented as naturally leading to either reformation, as in the case of Belford and Morden, or a self-inflicted damnation that sees Lovelace fail to realize his desires and lose Clarissa forever. The severe scrutiny and criticism that Belford and Lovelace enact against each other for the duration of the novel is an important forum for Richardson’s commentary on libertinism.
and Belford’s role as Lovelace’s conscience throughout the text ensures that the tragedy of the novel is strengthened by Lovelace’s awareness of the moral faults in his actions. Similarly, Lovelace acts as a devil on Belford’s shoulder in questioning his motives for reformation. This is particularly apparent following Clarissa’s death, where Lovelace attacks Belford’s earnestness:

> All I think, as I told thee in my last, is that the devil knows his own interest too well to let thee off so easily. Thou thyself tellest me that we cannot repent when we will. And I indeed found it so: for in my lucid intervals, I made good resolutions: but, as health turned its blithe side to me, and opened my prospects of recovery, all my old inclinations and appetites returned; and this letter, perhaps, will be a thorough conviction to thee that I am as wild a fellow as ever, or in the way to be so. (Richardson 1440)

This passage underscores the way in which Lovelace uses his dialogue with Belford to reaffirm his own libertine status when it is in question. Lovelace is certainly not a Mowbray-type libertine, but through such discourse he establishes that neither is he entirely a Belford-type one. Belford is a sounding board against which Lovelace flaunts his transgressive power so that his letters prove “I am as wild a fellow as ever.” In doing so, he attempts to soothe an anxiety that he has compromised his transgressive vitality through his obsessive focus on Clarissa’s seduction—an anxiety that stems both from his own self-doubt and also from the criticisms voiced by Mowbray, Sally, and Mrs. Sinclair.

The significance of the relationship between Belford and Lovelace is clearly pointed to in Richardson’s preface, which emphasizes the importance of their correspondence to the narration and the didactic message of the text (35). The dialogue between the two also illuminates the potential for Lovelace’s reformation that Mary Martin, as previously discussed, posits is vital to the didactic meaning of *Clarissa*. Lovelace is positioned between the criminal and reformatory aspects of the rake character in order to establish himself as both threatening villain and potentially sympathetic penitent. Richardson’s preoccupation with ensuring Lovelace inhabits this space is reflected in the process of additions, removals, or revisions he made to the character’s writing in the period leading up to and following *Clarissa’s* publication. These changes were often intended to darken reader’s impression of Lovelace in order to better express Richardson’s wishes that the reader should ultimately condemn him (Ross, Richardson 17). What differentiates Lovelace as a character from both Mowbray and Belford is his intense desire for legacy and remembrance, and through this focus he attempts to manifest an original form of transgression, and by extension an original temporal attitude, within the libertine writing tradition.
Given how the text of *Clarissa* frames Lovelace as a unique libertine figure, it is unsurprising that he becomes highly influential for later eighteenth-century depictions of libertine characters. He enacts a temporal rhythm that oscillates between submission and dominance out of a desire to craft his seduction narrative into something that will establish his legacy. In doing so he becomes the first and perhaps most extreme example of a libertine character who is willing to sacrifice immediate pleasure in order to heighten the narrative and transgressive significance of his actions.

### 4.5 Failure

Yet instead of a libertine triumph, what awaits the conclusion of Lovelace’s seduction is death, and his strategy falters under the temporal weight of its delays. The longer the seduction is drawn out the more its outcome becomes uncertain with the result that Lovelace experiences a heightened anxiety over his status as a libertine. In sacrificing the immediate pursuit of the moment in favour of narrative meaning, Lovelace diverges from his libertine contemporaries, to the extent that he worries about whether he can truly remain one:

> Have I gone so far, and am afraid to go farther? – Have I not already, as it is evident by her behaviour, sinned beyond forgiveness? – A woman’s tears used to be to me but as water sprinkled on a glowing fire, which gives it a fiercer and brighter blaze: what defence has this lady, but her tears and her eloquence? (Richardson 943)

The anxiety expressed in this passage over his libertine credibility is the result of constant delays introduced via the submissive episodes of his rhythmic seductive strategy. There is a longing for a past mode of transgression that aligns with his nostalgic view of the libertine past, but there is also a declaration of personal failure in his unwillingness to “go farther.”

Judith Wilt indicates that this leitmotif of “I could go no farther” refers to a fear of capacity, or incapacity, which paralyzes Lovelace in his actions towards Clarissa and suggests her rape was incomplete (28). One need not agree with Wilt’s hypothesis to see that Lovelace’s anxiety over his capacity to transgress has a significant influence on his actions. The above passage exemplifies the way in which he questions his own actions and tries to calculate precisely how he must act in order to maintain both his seduction narrative and transgressive power. The line quoted comes after the rape, indicated by his admission to having “sinned beyond forgiveness,” and yet his inability to console Clarissa and reintroduce the seduction dynamic in order to obtain her consent forces him once again to question his own transgressive prowess.
What follows the rape is a breakdown of the seduction dialogue between Lovelace and Clarissa. The temporal rhythm Lovelace has carefully structured and maintained falls apart, as he adopts a submissive attitude towards Clarissa, yet her refusal to forgive his violation of her leaves him unable to attempt further transgressions. As a consequence the earlier delays that Lovelace introduced become meaningless, and his seduction narrative rapidly shifts into a tragic one in which Clarissa resigns herself to death. All of his effort has led up to a non-consensual sexual act that he could have enacted at any point, and all his anticipations of heroic triumph ultimately prove false. Clarissa’s virtue and agency remain, and there is nothing he will be remembered for beyond the act of rape. The flights of heroic fancy and military conquest Lovelace envisage are threatened to be permanently ended, and indeed are revealed to have always been false, in light of Clarissa’s death.

This threat informs Lovelace’s ensuing fervour in seeking Clarissa’s hand in marriage as a means to restore his libertine power and affirm his maxim of “once subdued, always subdued,” which he makes a thematic return to throughout the text. Hence his proclamation that, “Were her death to follow in a week after the knot is tied, by the Lord of Heaven, it shall be tied, and she shall die a Lovelace” (Richardson 1169). Yet these declarations come too late, and Clarissa has moved beyond his reach well before her actual demise. Clarissa’s death finalizes the transition of narrative power away from Lovelace that had begun following the rape. William Warner goes so far as to suggest Clarissa is aware that her death will produce the text itself: “[…] If Clarissa dies in the right way, with the right blend of pathos and reproach, summoning the higher forces of Fate and Nature and God, then she will be able to solicit the tragic code that gives life a mysterious meaning through death” (76). Thus with Clarissa’s death Lovelace’s power over the narrative is emphatically destroyed. The delays, repetitions, and temporal articulation he enacted in order to maintain that power have been for naught, and he fails in the face of Clarissa’s ability to dictate plot at the cost of her own life.

*Clarissa’s* tragic form is only finalized with Lovelace’s own demise. Should Clarissa have died without Lovelace, the text would retain its moral core; yet it is in Lovelace’s eventual death that the tragic form is fully realized. Clarissa’s role as a tragic heroine only fully materializes after the rape, when she focuses upon her own death as inevitable and is content in her unceasing movement towards it. In order for *Clarissa’s* tragedy to encompass the entirety of the text, and include the letters of both Lovelace and Belford, the former must die. Lovelace’s death is framed as a self-created one, and he thus conforms to the
model of the tragic character in his persistence in the face of self-awareness of his own destruction.

Certainly the letter Lovelace writes following his madness suggests a return to form: “Except a tributary sigh now and then to the memory of my heart’s beloved, it gives me hope that I shall quickly be what I was – life, spirit, gaiety, and once more the plague of a sex that has been my plague” (Richardson 1432). Yet within the greater context of the failed seduction, this cheerfulness cannot help but ring false, as Lovelace has gambled all of his libertine credibility upon its outcome. Lovelace repeatedly states that the seduction is a competition between his libertine prowess and Clarissa’s virtue, the outcome of which will be permanent and immutable testimony to one or the other. Hubris leads him to declare that Clarissa’s capitulation is his sole transgressive desire, in the expectation that his success will be remembered as the greatest seduction ever enacted. Yet he fails, and with this failure becomes aware that it is impossible to reclaim his libertine credibility. That is to say, he is no longer able to maintain that he is a more transgressive and capable libertine than the other characters in the text. The way in which he defines his behaviour against that of Belford and Mowbray is predicated on his sense of power and originality, but his failure to win Clarissa over is a failure to transgress. He has gambled his credibility upon Clarissa succumbing to him, and with his failure she is able to determine the conclusion of Clarissa’s narrative.

Unable to conclude the seduction that has been the sole concern of his time, effort, and self-definition, Lovelace frantically attempts to induce Clarissa to return to him, and the two weeks of madness and depression he undergoes following Clarissa’s death reveal the extent to which he is conscious of his own failings. However, he is forced to seek death as the only means for his narrative to arrive at a proper ending. It is, in fact, Belford who introduces the possibility of Lovelace’s death long before the rape and the tragic turn of the novel. Indeed Belford is deeply connected to death throughout the text, being the lone narrator of the departure of his uncle, Belton, Mrs. Sinclair, Tomlinson, and Clarissa herself. These constitute every instance of death in the text outside of Lovelace’s own, and even before their occurrence, dying is made an underlying presence throughout the narrative as a result of Belford’s attempts to dissuade Lovelace on the basis of his mortality. In his very first letter Belford encourages Lovelace to be conscious of his own mortality, saying, “If thou art not so narrow-minded an elf as to prefer thy own single satisfaction to posterity, thou wilt not postpone till the rake’s usual time; that is to say, till diseases or years, or both, lay hold of thee” (Richardson 502). This injunction to reform on
the basis of one’s time being limited gradually increases throughout the course of the novel as Belford becomes a greater narrative presence, and eventually leads Lovelace to declare:

    Thou runnest on with thy cursed nonsensical reformado note, of dying, dying, dying! And, having once got the word by the end, canst not help foisting it in at every period! The devil take me, if I don’t think thou wouldst give her poison with thy own hands, rather than she should recover and rob thee of the merit of being a conjurer! (Richardson 1182)

This passage clearly affirms Belford’s invocation of and association with death throughout the text. By invoking mortality as the key basis for reformation, Belford establishes that his temporal consciousness stems from religious figurations of time in which eternal life takes precedence over a material one. Belford’s sense of temporality is therefore non-transgressive, yet his role as Lovelace’s conscience heightens the latter’s moral infraction. The rejection of both Belford’s and Mowbray’s temporal ideals underscores Lovelace’s originality. He rejects an exclusive focus on either the moment or its aftermath in favour of simultaneously attempting to pursue both. As Lovelace relies upon Clarissa to establish the temporal rhythm that sees him adopt this middle ground, he cannot allow her to escape the seduction’s conclusion. This is especially true given that Belford provides a constant reminder of Lovelace’s own inevitable death as the basis for his reformation. Thus both by his own doing and Belford’s, Lovelace is forced to consider his figurative and literal end in a way that sees his movement towards Clarissa develop into a movement towards death. Once she dies, so too must he.

    Lovelace, of course, already anticipates a narrative conclusion in the ending of the seductive discourse. While he is reluctant to lose the constant stimulation it provides him, he would be consoled with the legacy it would leave him: “The worst respecting myself in the case before me, is that my triumph, when completed, will be so glorious a one, that I shall never be able to keep up to it. All my future attempts must be poor to this” (559). Yet with the failure of Clarissa’s seduction he must confront the end of his narrative without his glorious libertine triumph. Consequently Lovelace’s desperation to reconcile Clarissa to himself, initially through forgiveness and later marriage, is an extension of his need to find meaning in his actions. Clarissa’s seduction cannot have been for nothing, and Lovelace’s turn towards death is the result of this desire to create meaning. The transition into a tragic conclusion is the product not only of Clarissa’s influence, as previously established by William Warner, but also stems from Lovelace’s evident familiarity with the form. Elaine McGirr convincingly argues for Lovelace’s close relationship with the tragic by establishing tragic texts as the most prominent amongst his literary citations throughout the novel (13). Given his awareness or appreciation for the tragic form, it is unsurprising he should look to
it in order to maintain and properly conclude the narration he has put so much effort into crafting. Warner identifies Clarissa’s reaction to the rape as the point at which the novel becomes either a rakish comedy, should Clarissa forgive Lovelace, or a tragedy with her death (77). Accordingly, Lovelace’s effort to be remembered for his transgressive ability naturally permutates into a desire for tragic remembrance, as he moves towards his death at the hand of Colonel Morden. Terry Castle further suggests that Lovelace’s failure stems not only from his plot giving way to the tragic meaning generated by Clarissa’s death, but also the socio-political implications of his death at the hands of Colonel Morden. “Lovelace succumbs to a system of meanings more powerful than his own, for the Colonel carries the symbolic weight of patriarchal law behind him – the very law Lovelace has broken by ravishing the heroine” (183). Despite reaping the benefit of patriarchal privilege in his shaping of Clarissa’s seduction, his transgressions are too radical to be permitted. A Georgian libertine who adheres to social convention killing a libertine associated with his Restoration-era forbearers is a symbolic denial of the past that Lovelace is so conscious of.

In letter 535 Lovelace reveals the extent to which Clarissa’s death has affected him, and further undermines the cheerful bravado he has affected since his recovery from madness by revealing how hollow his life feels without her:

> These reflections sharpened, rather than their edge by time rebated, accompany me in whatever I do, and where I go; and mingle with all my diversions and amusements. And yet I go into gay and splendid company. […] I can think of nothing, nor of anybody with delight, but of my CLARISSA. Nor have I seen one woman with advantage to herself, but as she resembles in stature, air, complexion, voice, or in some feature, that charmer, that only charmer, of my soul. What greater punishment, than to have these astonishing perfections, which she was mistress of, strike my remembrance with such force, when I have nothing left me but the remorse of having deprived myself and the world of such a blessing? (Richardson 1483)

This passage is the last instance of Lovelace confessing his inner feelings to Belford and it suggests he is a hollow shell of his former self. That he can no longer feel any pleasure now that his “charmer” Clarissa is gone indicates a turn towards death: without sensation the libertine is without self. Lovelace constantly has his past actions “strike my remembrance with such force,” leaving him unable to inhabit the moment at all. George Poulet states that this lack of stimulation leads to non-existence, and this is precisely what occurs to Lovelace (24). Lovelace describes a sort of sensory burnout, in which nothing is as engaging as his seduction of Clarissa, and thus he has nothing that can occupy or stimulate him. He is effectively unable to ‘live’ and his sensory death is akin to a state of non-being so that a physical death only constitutes a change of material condition. Clarissa has been
established as the focal point of both his potential transgression and potential reformation, and her death means that Lovelace’s need to attain one of these outcomes will never be fulfilled. The gay and splendid company that might have once buoyed his spirits has become an ashen reminder of his failure. The initial lines in which time *sharpens* pain, rather than healing it, underscore this point. The natural passage of time fails to obscure the past, underlining the depth of Lovelace’s melancholy. Clarissa’s death is a rupture in Lovelace’s self-identity, something he has experienced which cannot be avoided or healed. Given his inability to be stimulated and his fractured sense of self, we are led to read Lovelace as considering physical death as a means to escape his mental anguish, if he is not outright compelled towards it. The final line speaks to Lovelace’s emphasis on remembrance and legacy, as it is Clarissa’s virtue and worthiness that lives on in his and others’ memory, and his own legacy is only the act of deprivation. Lovelace still believes he can fashion his libertine triumph right up until the moment of Clarissa’s death, as Mary Martin describes in his inability to properly “read” the story that Clarissa shapes following the rape: “Robbed by Clarissa of his plots and his stories, Lovelace becomes a very bad reader as well. Once Clarissa escapes from the script he has fashioned for her, Lovelace cannot understand her, or her story” (605). This of course culminates in his misreading of her allegorical letter, which speaks of “going to her father’s house,” and when she does die, the reversal of expectation is so extreme that it inevitably places him on the path to his own death, which Belford has predicted.

Lovelace’s final letter immediately follows the one containing the passage above, and is a fairly rote description of his arranging of the duel with Colonel Morden. However, several scholars view Lovelace as suicidal by the end of *Clarissa’s* narrative. For Elaine McGirr, this is a reflection of his frequent reference to tragic texts as his chosen “genre” throughout the novel and accordingly the narrative he creates is, of necessity, doomed to tragedy so that: “[...] his over-reliance on tragedy makes death a textual necessity from his very first letter” (14). Within this reading, Lovelace seeds the potential for his own death from the very point at which he begins to construct his seduction of Clarissa, and he recognizes the potential for a tragic conclusion throughout his narration. McGirr’s assessment aligns with readings such as William Warner’s, in which Lovelace loses control of *Clarissa’s* narrative following the rape so that he is forced into the tragic conclusion in order for his attempted seduction to retain some narrative meaning (McGirr 14). In her analysis of Lovelace’s letter’s after Clarissa’s death Mary Martin states: “Recovering his spirits, Lovelace claims to give up on his belated repentance, but the bluster of his letters never quite rings true” (608). She instead posits that the plot of Lovelace’s reformation,
dangled before the reader throughout the text, is at last realized in his earnest desire for death as punishment and repentance: “Reading Lovelace’s death as another ending to this novel, we see that he, like Clarissa, has grown weary of the world and of himself. Truly repentant, he now seeks only to atone for his wrongs, and earn the right to Clarissa’s forgiveness with his life” (610). Even if one does not go so far as to consider Lovelace truly repentant, his inability to experience the same stimulation he had during the seduction, or reconstruct his fractured libertine identity, leads to a purgatory-like condition. Death is of course a release from this state, and the typical support for a suicidal Lovelace is found in Morden’s post-duel statement that “He [Lovelace] had made quite sure of victory!” (Richardson 1487). Morden’s exclamation suggests that Lovelace purposefully made errors within the duel to ensure he was wounded. However, Lovelace’s wish for death is equally demonstrated in the final lines he writes to Belford:

A shower of rain has left me with nothing else to do: and therefore I write this letter; though I might as well have deferred it till tomorrow twelve o’clock, when I doubt not to be able to write again, to assure you how much I am

Yours, etc.

Lovelace (1486)

There are some details that are highly unusual for one of Lovelace’s letters and that hint at a desire for death. Firstly, the mention of rain, when Lovelace rarely comments on the weather. The only other incident of note is when he waits in the Harlowes’ garden to kidnap Clarissa in the novel’s first act. That this rain sequesters him inside hints at its gloominess and reflects his feelings of emptiness and melancholy concerning Clarissa’s death. More significantly, the rain has left him with “nothing to do,” a nod towards his insensate state of being in which nothing will stimulate him and therefore nothing is worth doing. That Lovelace is left in this condition as a result of an act of nature, something outside of his control, speaks to the breakdown of the control he exerts over Clarissa and the narration he initially established. Against this, there is the claim that this letter could have been written after the duel; yet in choosing to write it now, he communicates an underlying belief that he will not be able to write again. Furthermore this passage is structured around a dialectical invocation of present and future time that reflects the original rhythm of his seduction of Clarissa. The present moment is referenced in “therefore I write this letter” and his expectations for the future in “when I doubt not to be able to write again”. The promised repetition in again is precisely what he subjects Clarissa to throughout the seduction, a continually renewed promise of love and reformation that
he rhythmically undermines. However, as Clarissa’s death and the failure of his temporal rhythm, both of which represent Lovelace’s inability to create his desired legacy, lead him to turn towards death as the only means to salvage any meaning from his narration, he expects that his promise will never be fulfilled. Essentially Lovelace is aware that his narration is coming to a close and chooses to conclude with the poignancy of a hanging promise of its continuance.

The direct reference to timekeeping in the mention of “tomorrow at 12 o’clock,” a moment two hours after the scheduled time of the duel, is also of note. There is a strong aesthetic contrast between the violence of an honour duel and the minutiae of day-to-day scheduling. Clocks compartmentalize time by dividing our experience of it into discrete moments of being for largely mundane purposes, and there is a distinct irony in using them to facilitate or structure a mortal conflict. This irony is not lost on Lovelace, whose casual and brief reference to timekeeping in the face of his own potential death represents a transgressive lack of concern with the afterlife, as well as his own resignation to death. In his mention of a specific time there is a note of finality in the implication that if he does not adhere to his schedule then he is dead or dying, and indeed by the forecasted time the following day, Lovelace lies in agony with a mortal wound. Lovelace also signs off with his full name, something that occurs somewhat infrequently in his communications to Belford as he usually does not add a full signature. When he gives his full name it accompanies a major event, such as the short line he sends Belford following the rape. Accordingly this goodbye implies both significance and finality, suggesting a departure far more permanent than most of his earlier communications. Lastly in saying “how much I am yours” to Belford, a character who is inextricably associated with death, Lovelace implies his own. Belford has already been established as someone who invokes temporal consciousness via his narration of every significant death in the novel up until this point, and his constant injunctions to Lovelace to reform out of concern for his future. Lovelace states that tomorrow his closeness to Belford will be assured, and in doing so implies a movement towards an inevitable death that Belford has invoked throughout the text.

In addition, within the context of the narrative as a whole, Lovelace’s choice not to defer his final letter to Belford takes on a new significance. Everything Lovelace does within the seduction is fraught with delay, and yet here he specifically avoids delay despite the relative lack of substance to his message. Accordingly this letter appears as a conclusion to the seductive discourse he begins with Clarissa and signals a movement towards both a narrative and bodily end. The only other occasions when Lovelace acts without delay are when he discovers Clarissa’s location following instances of her escape. His unwillingness
to delay the approaching duel is in the same vein: he is hurrying towards a hoped-for reconciliation with Clarissa, reflected in his dying words of “LET THIS EXPIATE!” (1488). Even if this redemption is impossible for Lovelace, then at least the oblivion of death appeals to him in a world that he has been rendered insensate towards.

Lovelace’s insistence upon his own death at the end of Clarissa confirms him as a character concerned just as much with the meaning brought about by the end of a transgressive narrative as with the stimulation produced by its enactment. His story conforms to the model of personal “ending” that Frank Kermode outlines, in which death leads men to imagine a significance for themselves via the creation of a narrative of their selfhood (4). Lovelace views his own end as the means by which he and his libertine project, with its unique temporal structure, shall be remembered. Terry Castle notes the way in which Lovelace continues to believe in his power to dictate or recuperate plot right up until his final moments.

His disintegration is a gradual and meandering business – culminating likewise in a death that seems at least partially or unconsciously self-willed, in the fatal duel with Colonel Morden. Lovelace is significantly unlike his victim, however, in that during his last weeks, and despite his general emotional collapse, he experiences no corresponding loss of faith in his exegetical powers. (123)

Lovelace’s awareness of narration and legacy, and the temporal attitudes associated with these traits, as well as his ability to shape them, remain unchanged. Rather his death stems from a conscious or unconscious awareness that it is the means by which he might establish a legacy, and it is in this light that Lovelace stands as the first example of the eighteenth-century libertine character’s unique concern with time.

This chapter has developed Lovelace’s understanding of temporality, particularly his sense of futurity, and its eventual collapse leading to death. Yet there is also an awareness of the past that heightens his perceived failure. This is evident specifically in Lovelace’s nostalgia regarding his personal libertine history that he references throughout his attempt to seduce Clarissa. The successes of this history are a means by which he reassures himself of his own transgressive power when Clarissa puts that power in doubt. One such instance is a story he relates to Belford concerning a French Marquise with whom he seduces and carries on an adulterous affair. The affair leads to a pregnancy and her death during childbirth, shattering the household and family (Richardson 675). Another example is an account of being jilted by his first love that is used to license his rakish practice, so that his sense of loss and jealousy is inflicted upon his women victims “[…]for many an eye have I made to sparkle with rival indignation: many a cheek glow; and even
many a fan have I caused to be snapped at a sister-beauty, accompanied with a reflection, perhaps, at being seen alone with a wild young fellow who could not be in private with both at once” (143). Given Lovelace’s anxiety over his libertine status and the delays he enacts, it is unsurprising that he should recall these moments to bolster his confidence in his own power. This emphasis on personal history is the basis of Lovelace’s construction of himself as a man of experience.

Lovelace represents his power over women as a natural extension of his own self-knowledge and experience. Following the rape, Clarissa does not conform to the pattern of these past experiences, and as she moves further away from Lovelace’s power, he yearns for her to return to the pattern of previous conquests. “But as to thy [Belford’s] opinion, and the two women’s at Smith’s, that her heart is broken; that is the true women’s language: I wonder how thou camest into it: thou who hast seen and heard of so many female deaths and revivals” (Richardson 1084). This appeal to the personal history of rakishness between himself and Belford as a means to question Clarissa’s sincerity makes clear the importance of his past experience to the way in which Lovelace understands the seductive process, as well as his desire that Clarissa should ultimately conform to these previous patterns of seduction. Even following Clarissa’s death Lovelace rationalizes his actions based upon these patterns, defending himself to his uncle and cousins by saying,

Is death the natural consequence of a rape? – Did you ever hear, my lord, or did you ladies, that it was? […] We either have no men so wicked as young Tarquin was, or no women so virtuous as Lucretia, in the space of – how many thousand years, my lord? – and so Lucretia is recorded as a single wonder! (1439).

Lovelace appeals to the experiences of his audience in an attempt to justify his actions towards Clarissa by appealing to contemporary social norms in which there are “no women so virtuous as Lucretia.” Lovelace considers himself deeply acquainted with the way of the world, and as such he defends his actions on the basis Clarissa’s behaviour is not natural. Instead he argues that she should have been submissive towards him following the rape, a reflection of his “once subdued, always subdued” maxim. Clarissa’s defiance of this expectation speaks to her agency in bringing the seduction’s narration to a conclusion on her own terms. Yet Lovelace’s appeal to worldliness, informed by his past experiences, is also profoundly contradictory with his desire to create a legacy for himself through a supreme transgression. Lovelace presents Clarissa as the most brilliant and virtuous woman he has ever encountered in order to support his narration of the seduction as a titanic struggle between virtue and vice, yet in his failure he bemoans the fact that she did not behave as women are supposed to. His reference to the semi-legendary story of Lucretia’s
suicide as the sole exception beyond Clarissa demonstrates a continued concern with the narrative value of her seduction even after her death. Lovelace attempts to rationalize his failure by suggesting that if Clarissa did not behave as his past experience would lead him to expect, then she is a singular individual equal to Lucretia, and thus her seduction remains worthy of remembrance as a result.

Lovelace’s desire for death highlights the importance he places on the seduction’s narrative value. As he has failed to compromise Clarissa’s virtue and she has forever escaped him, then he too shall die in order to convert his failed attempt at enacting a great seduction into a tragedy that will be equally well-remembered. He is well aware of how meaningful his own death will be when he states in reference to the duel with Morden, “It would be sweet revenge for him, were I to fall by his hand. But what should I be the better for killing him?” (1479). Again we see a conscious movement towards death, this time in the acknowledgement of the narrative value it would hold. It is only by dying that Lovelace can ensure the seduction he has crafted will be remembered, and it is his concern with legacy and futurity that sees him conform to the tragic ending Clarissa has brought about for herself. His final line, “LET THIS EXPIATE!” offers a desire not only to mend his relationship with Clarissa, but also to mend their mutual narration (1488). It is through his own death that Lovelace is able to participate in the narrative meaning that Clarissa has created for the seduction. It is through death that Lovelace assures himself he will be remembered.

Yet Clarissa’s ending remains an inversion of the legacy Lovelace hoped to create via the seduction. This is true not only in the aforementioned failure to establish his libertine power, but also in a more literal sense, given Lovelace’s desire for children. There are repeated passages in the text in which he points towards a future with Clarissa that includes children whom he shall raise and acknowledge as his legitimate heirs: “Oh Jack! Had I an imperial diadem, I swear to thee that I would give it up, even to my enemy, to have one charming boy by this lady” (916). Even within his preferred outcome of the seduction, in which she would succumb to his advances without being married, he retains this desire. He speaks to Belford of being deeply affected by a dream in which he and Clarissa have a boy together, who grows up to marry a girl also fathered by Lovelace with Anna Howe (922). This fantasy comments on Lovelace’s desire to control and shape the future on several levels; firstly, he is already considering another libertine project that would attempt an even higher transgression than Clarissa’s seduction given the incestuous

---

29 See also: “It would be the pride of my life to prove the triumph of nature over principle and have a young Lovelace by such an angel” (Richardson 1147).
nature of this fantasy. Secondly, it suggests that his desire for children is an extension of his desire to create a legacy for himself through narration: he desires the power to establish himself as the patriarch of a Lovelacian bloodline that we must imagine will continue to perpetuate itself. Such a fantasy clearly speaks to the extremity of Lovelace’s libertinism in relation to his contemporaries within the text. However, it is also strongly juxtaposed with a later dream which sees him offer to kill himself upon Clarissa’s command (1218). The thematic shift between these two dreams reflects the transition of narrative power away from Lovelace towards Clarissa, as the tragic conclusion of the plot begins to come into focus following the rape. Lovelace’s dream of creating life through his transgressive power is replaced by dreams of dying in deference to Clarissa’s virtue. These two dreams foreshadow the failure of Lovelace’s legacy-project, and his eventual conformity to her embrace of death.
5 “Remember that in your position time is precious”: Temporality in *Les Liaisons Dangereuses*

Time in Choderlos de Laclos’ 1782 novel *Les Liaisons Dangereuses* is a central preoccupation of the libertine character. Like Lovelace, the Vicomte de Valmont and the Marquise de Merteuil are subject to the same temporal pressures in the tension between their roles as narrator and transgressor and in their preoccupation with legacy and audience. They express the same concern with time as they pursue their goals and experience a similar failure to attain them. This chapter employs close readings of the text in order to establish the temporal concern which links these libertine characters to the others examined here, particularly in the connection between *Clarissa’s* Lovelace and Valmont, which is the subject of section 5.1. However, this chapter will also seek to define what makes the particular expression of temporality within *Les Liaisons Dangereuses* unique.30

When one examines the various libertine attitudes to time across the writing of Richardson, Laclos, and Sade, one may be tempted to place Valmont and Merteuil into different categories of practice associated with the earlier and later works respectively. Such a distinction would posit *Liaisons* as a “middle text” of sorts, in which Valmont evokes the discursive temporal strategies of Lovelace, while Merteuil anticipates the more overtly transgressive and immediate libertine methods of Juliette. This distinction would echo Peter Cryle’s division of libertine texts into “fictions of negation” which emphasize the overcoming of seductive obstacles and “fictions of measurement” which care only for the number of transgressions enacted with the utmost efficiency (371-2). Yet to place each of these late eighteenth-century libertine characters into one camp or the other is too reductive a position to take on novels which contain such a nuanced depiction of libertinism. *Liaisons*, more than both *Clarissa* and *Juliette*, presents ambiguities and questions rather than unimpeachable lessons. Indeed, the contrast in method and intention between Valmont and Merteuil belies an underlying similarity and to understand the significance of *Liaisons* we must acknowledge the ways in which Valmont differs from Lovelace’s practice, just as we must acknowledge Merteuil’s difference from Juliette.

---

30 For the sake of clarity and linguistic consistency this study employs Helen Constantine’s 2007 English translation. Olive Clasše’s *Encyclopaedia of Literary Translation into English* notes the immediate appearance of a contemporary English translation in 1784 under the name *Dangerous Connections*. However the most accurate translations remain Douglas Parmée’s 1995 version and Helen Constantine’s 2007, both of which are based on the original French text in Laurent Versini’s meticulously researched 1979 collection *Laclos: Oeuvres complètes*. As the analysis presented here emphasizes context, tone, and expression over individual choice of wording, Constantine’s approach is preferred to the slightly more utilitarian attitude of Parmée. However either could be used without compromising any of the conclusions presented here. Should this study be published, Versini’s original French will be employed.
Thus while the characters of Lovelace and Valmont share the same preoccupation with time, divergences between their texts and individual psyches produce a number of alternative expressions and responses to these pressures. Section 5.1 will establish the connection between these two male libertines in order to later draw out what makes Valmont’s temporal attitude distinct in section 5.2. The distinction between Liaisons and Clarissa is further developed with section 5.3’s analysis of how time functions within Merteuil’s transgressive methodology. This will establish the ways in which Liaisons’s libertine characters present alternative responses to the same temporal pressures confronted by Lovelace and Juliette.

In Laclos’ novel, time possesses a degree of propulsive force that is not present in the plodding action of Clarissa. Moreover, there is a narrative weight to the conclusion of its plots that is absent in Juliette’s compulsive and repetitive heightening of transgression. The excessive length of written correspondence in Richardson’s work, and Sade’s dreamlike movement between set-pieces, give those texts a sense of time’s progression being fractured. In contrast, Laclos’ novel is carefully structured in its use of short letters that gradually build in frequency and accelerate towards the conclusion. This acceleration in narrative pace lends temporality a dynamic force in Liaisons and makes time a constant presence within the lives of its libertine characters as the potential to mistime or miscalculate an action becomes increasingly likely.\footnote{It is worth noting that this acceleration sees the letters themselves become disrupted. They are written more hurriedly, they become lost, or intercepted enroute to their addressee. Some are hidden, some are dictated, and some are excerpted or written over previous writing. The temporal pressure of plot gradually builds to create a widening diversity of the form itself, as Liaisons characters respond to their running out of time.}

Awareness of time in Liaisons is heightened by themes of age and maturity in the stories of Cecile and Danceny. As both youths are exposed to the pleasures and evils of the world through Valmont and Merteuil, so too must they confront the fact that time works against them. Cecile’s first letter contains repeated references to the amount of free time she has available to her: “As you see, my dear Sophie, I am as good as my word, and not spending all my time on frills and furbelows; I shall always have time for you. […] It is not yet five o’clock; I am not to see Mamma until seven: there is plenty of time to write, if I only had something to tell!” (11). Cecile’s childlike style and diction reflect her immaturity, and her obvious youthfulness is encapsulated in her sense that she possesses an endless supply of time, a supply that is rapidly undercut as she comes to recognize the speed at which it passes. This is evidenced only several weeks later, when she laments to Sophie about her dread of a marriage proposal: “Not that I am not essentially very happy at
present. But I foresee that it cannot last. […] He [Gercourt] is in Corsica at the moment, a long way away. I wish he would stay there for ten years. […] And when I think that I have only one month of freedom left, I start crying straight away” (83-4). A core aspect of Cecile’s and Danceny’s confrontation with the difficult truth of the world is this recognition of temporality’s pressure upon us. Cecile fails to keep her opening promise to Sophie - “I shall always have time for you” (11) —as she comes to rely more and more on Merteuil for advice until Cecile begins sleeping with Valmont and Sophie is abandoned entirely. This is in keeping with the more generally heightened pacing of the novel towards its conclusion as the letters between characters increase in frequency and speed while becoming much shorter. This is epitomized in Merteuil’s one line declaration written at the bottom of Valmont’s letter 153: “Very well, then. War!” (369). As the plot of the novel moves inevitably towards a conclusion, its characters have less and less opportunity to consider how to act within their plots until even Valmont and Merteuil experience lapses of self-control that catch them within their own intrigues.

That Cecile so quickly relinquishes the ability to consider her actions in light of this movement is one means by which the reader recognizes Merteuil and Valmont as not only more experienced, but highly temporally aware. Time’s passage is a fact that each libertine deals with in their own way, and the pressure it exerts is an important factor in how each calculates their actions. They are subject to the same tension as Lovelace in their need to balance a satisfying narrative of transgression with the opportunity to enjoy or act upon those transgressive instincts within the moment. When Merteuil imposes obstacles between Danceny and Cecile in order to encourage them to consummate their love, she explains her actions on the basis that “he needed to be shown that time flies, and I flatter myself that at present he is regretting the time he has wasted” (130). This speaks to one of the core truths of Merteuil’s and Valmont’s own motivations for their actions: they are propelled by knowledge of time’s inexorability. Both of them aim to defy time’s hold over their lives by pouring their energy into seeming frivolities through which they present themselves as emotionally detached and aim to manipulate the emotions of others, but beneath this façade of intellectual superiority hides a very real personal investment. Valmont and Merteuil respond to the pressure that time places upon them with an attempt to completely master themselves, and by extension others, in a way that gives them enormous transgressive power. Yet the brilliance of Liaisons lies in the failure of this project, as each is forced to confront what is profoundly human about himself and herself at the denouement of the text.
One aspect of their latent humanity which highlights the thematic pressure of time within Liaisons is the sensation of growing old shared by Valmont and Merteuil. While their age is never explicitly stated, it is clear that they are not particularly young given their well-established social reputation, degree of competence in manipulating others, and their frustration with a lack of stimulation. Certainly there is a difference in age between the two libertines and the youthful Cecile and Danceny. Perhaps owing to this difference, depictions of Valmont and Merteuil sometimes represent them as middle-aged, most notably in the 1988 Stephen Frears film, which casts a 41-year-old Glenn Close as Merteuil, and a 35-year-old John Malkovich as Valmont. How much of this perceived maturity is a reflection of bodily age or merely a result of their contrast with the naiveté of Cecile and Danceny is ambiguous; however, it is clear that whatever their actual age, both Valmont and Merteuil consider themselves to be growing old. They demonstrate a highly jaded sensibility in discussing the continual threat of boredom to one another, as when Valmont states to Merteuil in letter 15: “It is very good of you not to abandon me to my unhappy fate. The life I am leading here is truly wearing, because of the surfeit of leisure and its tedious lack of variety” (37). This surfeit of leisure characterizes the aristocratic social class to which they belong, with the result that they have become tired of the typical methods of whiling away the hours and choose to fill their time with the challenges presented by seductions and libertine feats of transgression. This implied backlog of past pleasures that informs a present boredom is sharply contrasted with the youthful earnestness of Cecile and Danceny, who continually approach every development in their plots with an exaggerated sense of its importance, as demonstrated in Cecile’s naïve comment upon receiving Danceny’s first message: “But the fact is that I do not believe anyone has ever found themselves in this situation before” (42). Valmont and Merteuil know better than this, and indeed are keenly aware and appreciative of what is truly original. For Valmont, it is Tourvel’s seduction, and for Merteuil, her manipulation of Valmont.

Valmont and Merteuil’s past relationship is the clearest signifier of their mutual awareness of time’s passage. It is the one consistent mode of “pastness” that each dwells upon, and establishes the depth of experience that exists between them. For Valmont, the promise of Merteuil’s body is crucial to the eventual conclusion of Tourvel’s seduction as he ends it in the hope of enjoying the sexual favours of both women. Merteuil’s promise is an impetus for Valmont to conclude his seduction narration, one not present in Clarissa for Lovelace. Valmont’s eagerness to become Merteuil’s lover once again is evidenced from his first letter to his last, and the desire to return to or recreate that original relationship informs each of the liaisons he is part of throughout the text. David McCallam suggests
that Merteuil’s promise to reprise their sexual relationship is insincere, as evidenced in Valmont’s repeated reminders of her obligation to him (865). McCallam also argues that this privileging of the speech-act of the promise inflects the actions of Valmont and Merteuil with a temporal orientation towards a shared future (859). While this anticipation is certainly present, McCallam neglects to qualify the way in which Merteuil’s promise to Valmont is informed by their past, and a shared nostalgia that, at least on the surface, is just as strong as their sense of anticipation for the future. This is indicated in a telling passage from letter 6 where Valmont explains the attraction Tourvel exerts over him:

Shall I tell you plainly? I thought my heart had withered away, and with nothing but sensualities left to me I was bemoaning my premature old age. Madame de Tourvel has given me back the charming illusions of my youth. When I am with her I have no need to pretend to be happy. (22)

Here Valmont explicitly complains of a lack of stimulation owing to his “premature old age” and depth of experience. Obviously Laclos is ambiguous about how much of this agedness is merely intellectual, yet “premature” would suggest that he remains a relatively young man and, by extension, Merteuil a young woman given her statement that his reputation was already established when she entered public life in letter 81. Valmont’s nostalgia for the illusions of youth echo Lovelace’s recollections of his previous seductions, yet the way in which Valmont’s longing for the past feeds his attraction to Tourvel is unique. Unlike Lovelace’s obsessive masquerades, Valmont is attracted to Tourvel precisely because he does not need to disguise his emotions and “pretend to be happy,” and this earnestness of self—if not necessarily of action—is the means by which his love for her grows throughout the novel. It is this self-awareness that suggests to the reader Valmont is aware of his feelings for Tourvel.

Valmont’s past is a cipher as he rarely recalls previous escapades, his primary focus being the creation of an original narrative in his seduction of Tourvel. Yet the one aspect of his past to which he makes frequent positive reference is his relationship with Merteuil. This is particularly evident in his letters from part one, and the first time he writes to Merteuil he states:

Not for the first time, as you know, do I regret I am no longer your slave. And monster though I may be, I can never recall without a pleasurable feeling the days when you bestowed sweeter names upon me. Indeed, I often long to merit them anew and, with you, hold up to the world an example of perfect constancy. But larger matters beckon. It is our destiny to make conquests; we have to follow it. (16)

In addition to its description of the joys he shared in the past with Merteuil, this passage also frames Valmont’s sense of present and future. Futurity and desire for a legacy are seen
in what he states is a shared “destiny to make conquests” that propels them both forward. This destiny will not allow them to indulge their past, but rather beckons them to the present moment. Letter 15 expresses a similar nostalgia for their shared past, with Valmont expressing his jealousy that Merteuil should focus on her Chevalier exclusively: “I simply see in your lovers the successors of Alexander; they are incapable, the whole lot of them put together, of holding on to an empire where I reigned alone” (38). Both of these passages, even if they contain a measure of flattery, clearly establish the importance Valmont places upon his past relationship with Merteuil, and indeed represent the only time he mentions any of his past actions. He implores Merteuil to either take him back or take on other lovers to reduce his jealousy, and she agrees to the former on condition of his success with Tourvel.

Given this sense of the past, it is significant that Tourvel should provoke the “charming illusions of youth” in Valmont, this youthfulness can refer to the only thing he expresses nostalgia for; the joys of his affair with Merteuil (Laclos 22). This is further demonstrated in Merteuil’s manipulation of Valmont through these references to the past, most clearly shown in letter 130: “Do you know I sometimes regret we are reduced to doing these things! In the time when we were lovers, for I believe it was love, I was happy. Were you too, Vicomte? … But why must we think about a happiness which can never return?” (325). As much as Merteuil is consciously seeking to manipulate Valmont, we glimpse the kernel of true feeling beneath the calculated surface that she shapes to her own ends. Valmont's exclusive position within Merteuil’s life as her sole libertine audience, and her confession in her autobiography that her attraction to Valmont was “the only one of my desires which has ever momentarily had power over me,” undercuts any notion that her promises to Valmont are a total ruse (186). It remains ambiguous whether the feeling Merteuil has for Valmont is love or if she is even capable of love. Phillip Thody points to the jealousy between Merteuil and Valmont as the principle source of their antagonism towards each other and argues that regardless of how affectionate Merteuil actually is towards Valmont, she cannot bear the idea of him belonging to someone else (Laclos 12). Catherine Cusset argues more explicitly that Merteuil manipulates Valmont not out of love but in order to prove love’s falsity (“Lessons” 5). Regardless of whether we read Merteuil as a spurned lover or a libertine who attempts to act exclusively on principle, there is unquestionably a personal investment in her desire to harm Tourvel and preserve her status in Valmont’s eyes. Merteuil’s invocation of her shared past with Valmont plays a central role in both his success and his failure.
Through their shared sense of past and the didactic role they adopt in their seductions of Cecile and Danceny, it is clear that Valmont and Merteuil possess a maturity of thought, if not of body, that lends them an experienced and even jaded sensibility. Temporality is a central preoccupation of their lives and forms the basis for many of their actions, whether it is Valmont’s sense of nostalgia that makes Tourvel so fascinating, or Merteuil’s decision to seduce Prévan as quickly as possible in order to demonstrate her power. In Liaisons temporality is a constant presence, spoken and unspoken, within Valmont and Merteuil’s written correspondence to each other and the lessons they impart to others.

The brilliance of Liaisons lies in the different responses to the pressures of time that Valmont and Merteuil exhibit. The interplay between their divergent attitudes towards temporality ensures that Liaisons fully realizes its unique place within the libertine canon. We begin, then, with Valmont, given the profound parallels his seductive practice has with Lovelace.

5.1 Valmont & Lovelace: Parallels

Helen Constantine’s translation of Liaisons includes a brief footnote gesturing to the similarities between Lovelace and Valmont, yet there remains a dearth of critical sources that examine the similarities between these two key libertine figures (263). This can be partially attributed to some French scholars of Laclos denying the parallels between Clarissa and Liaisons. Laurent Versini declares that he sees only superficial similarities between the two texts in his extensive study Laclos et la Tradition (483-7, 518-9). Similarly Jean-Luc Seylaz also denies there is an important link between Richardson and Laclos in his own study of Liaisons, saying that it should not be placed as part of a literary history alongside Clarissa because the position of the latter’s eponymous character is never meaningfully challenged in the way that the virtue of Tourvel or the innocence of Cecile is (96-97). However, neither of these positions convincingly refutes the parallels between the characters of Lovelace and Valmont that are so evident, particularly in their attitude toward time and their emphasis on the need to delay their respective seductions. That Liaisons is morally ambiguous in a way not seen in Clarissa does nothing to deny their mutual depictions of dynamic, seductive, and evil libertine characters. Something which Valmont’s direct comparison of himself to Lovelace in letter 110 clearly indicates to any reader.

Katharine M. Rogers offers a rare analysis of the overlaps in plot, theme, and characterization between the two texts as it relates to social commentary on the position of women (37). Furthermore, she notes that contemporary readers of Laclos immediately
recognized the similarity between the two texts and noted the resemblance of Valmont and
the Marquise de Merteuil to Lovelace (36). Similarly, James Fowler’s The Libertine’s Nemesis
draws out the thematic parallel of the conflict between the prude and the libertine in both
texts (2). These works establish a precedent of comparison between Clarissa and Liaisons,
one which is sanctioned by Laclos himself in the direct reference to Clarissa in letter 107, in
which Valmont’s butler discovers that Tourvel reads the novel as she struggles to refuse
Valmont’s correspondence (263). Letter 110, written by Valmont to Merteuil, draws an
unequivocal parallel between his seduction of Tourvel and Lovelace’s behaviour towards
Clarissa (270). Valmont attempts to strategize an original method with which to conclude
Tourvel’s seduction and this reference presents a clear correlation between Lovelace’s
struggle for originality and Valmont’s own.

This comparison draws out the temporal anxiety that is at the core of the
eighteenth-century libertine character. The task is made easier by the obvious similarities in
transgressive methods and motivations that are apparent from Valmont’s first letter
onwards. As he writes here:

What are you proposing? That I seduce a young girl who has seen
nothing, knows nothing; who would be delivered up to me defenceless,
so to speak; who would be certain to be bowled over at my first
compliment and who would be swayed perhaps more rapidly by curiosity
than by love. Twenty other men would have as much success as I. Not
so with the business which occupies my thoughts. Its successful outcome
assures me of glory as much as pleasure. (16)

Valmont’s dismissal of Cecile’s seduction as too simple reflects a need to elevate his
frivolities into acts that will bring him glory via narrative. In doing so he reveals the same
concern with remembrance and desire for a transgressive legacy as Lovelace. Such
recognition can only accompany a successful seduction imbued with meaning via difficulties
and delay. When Valmont proclaims that the hurdles presented by Tourvel’s virtue and her
marriage make her the only subject worthy of his attention he echoes Lovelace’s
understanding of Clarissa’s extreme virtue as a “stimulative” to transgression that makes her
the only woman who might be his equal.

The key practice that links these two libertine characters is a seductive method
that purposefully creates temporal delays out of a deep concern for the creation of
meaningful narrative and the legacy it produces. Each desires that his seductive target
willingly capitulates in full knowledge of the immorality of her actions. In Lovelace’s case it
is the wish for Clarissa to become his mistress without any hope of marriage; with Valmont
the wish is that Tourvel should love him to the point that she chooses to consummate that love with an absolute awareness of her sin:

My plan is that she should feel most acutely the value and extent of each of the sacrifices she makes to me; not to lead her along so fast that she does not feel guilt; to let her virtue expire in long-drawn-out agony; to concentrate her mind incessantly upon this desolating spectacle; and not to allow her the happiness of having me in her arms until I have forced her no longer to hide the fact that she wants it. (148)

Valmont’s strategy clearly draws from the calculated temporal extension of seduction which informs Lovelace’s behaviour towards Clarissa and has roots in the libertine writing tradition stretching back to Don Juan, in which delay is a means to generate transgressive significance through narrative. The seduction requires this “long-drawn-out agony” in order for it to take on the almost transcendent meaning Valmont requires, given the established linkage between narrative significance and delay. Thus Valmont, like Lovelace, enacts a thematic struggle between his role as narrator and transgressor so his attempt to balance these roles in Liaisons parallel Lovelace’s same attempt in Clarissa. To this end there are repeated instances in Liaisons of Valmont purposefully delaying the conclusion of Tourvel’s seduction, one prominent example being his decision to return to Paris in letter 44 in order to avenge himself upon Volanges. He arrives at this conclusion immediately after learning of Tourvel’s genuine love for him from her stolen letters, and accordingly uses their physical distance as a means to further extend the seductive discourse and begin a correspondence with her. Like Lovelace, Valmont employs delay as a seductive strategy in order to heighten the narrative weight behind a transgression and control the flow of time in order to produce meaning. A further example is letter 99, in which he describes himself as having been alone with Tourvel in her room when she was prepared to surrender to him. Valmont makes the choice to leave her after she is sufficiently agitated, reasoning to Merteuil that: “As you know, one seeks total victory in these cases, and I did not wish to put anything down to circumstance” (236). In doing so he simultaneously achieves the narrative meaning brought about by delay and demonstrates a self-control which is the basis of his transgressive power. The lengthening of seduction via delay is reaffirmed as one of the primary methods available to the eighteenth-century libertine wishing to imbue his actions with meaning and substance.

Valmont is also susceptible to the moments of emotional intensity brought about by these drawn out interactions. Just as there are repeated instances when he imposes delay, so too are there moments when he is overwhelmed by his feelings for Tourvel. Letter 23

32 Merteuil challenges such as a strategy, as will be demonstrated in section 5.3.
provides a passage in which Valmont’s enthusiasm tempts him to short-circuit his own carefully planned seduction:

My head was spinning and I was so little in control of my emotions that I was tempted to take advantage of the moment. So how could I be so weak? How powerful the force of circumstance if, forgetting all my designs in a premature triumph, I had risked losing the delights of a prolonged struggle and the fascination of a painful defeat? (53)

Note that the word “circumstance” is used as in the previous passage; in both cases it implies not only the immediate situation but the organization of actions and specific events leading up to a given moment. Valmont enhances his seduction’s significance through delay, but can only conclude this temporal progression with a “moment” that is perfectly and completely crafted by him to reach the highest point of narrative meaning. If he leaves anything to chance, if he succumbs to the circumstances of a moment he does not control, then he has failed in his goal of producing a great narrative that can be reiterated amongst his social peers. There must be no means by which a listener could point to his victory’s being a product of coincidence or accident. Just as time is an inexorable force underlying the seductive practice, so too must the libertine exhibit absolute self-control if he wishes to utilize time to his advantage. This struggle for self-mastery in the face of one’s own human passion and a libertine desire for immediate transgression is what defines Valmont and Lovelace. Valmont’s words above are practically interchangeable with Lovelace’s own moments of emotion that see him almost agree to marry Clarissa and undermine his plans to make her a mistress. Similarly, if Valmont were to enact a more aggressive seduction he would never be able to attain his transgressive goal of inducing Tourvel to surrender herself to him.

Like Lovelace, Valmont employs a form of temporal articulation based on a rhythmic alteration of submission and dominance in order to attain his seductive goals. This is particularly evident in the letters he writes to Tourvel, such as letter 83, in which he proclaims his undying submissiveness to her with the words, “Do not refuse the power over me that I am offering you, from which I vow never to seek to escape” (190). This submissive tone is certainly, to an extent, a calculated ruse, as Valmont attempts to project a stronger sense of self-control and libertine mastery to Merteuil than the rambling confessonal tone Lovelace adopts with Belford. Of note in this regard is Valmont’s description of writing to Tourvel in letter 70: “I took a lot of trouble with my letter, and tried to reproduce the impression of disorder, the only thing that can depict feeling. Anyway, I reasoned as badly as I knew how; for without talking nonsense, one cannot express one’s love” (148). Further evidence of the apparent intellectual distance between
Valmont’s actions and his feelings can be seen in the extended double entendre of letter 48 written on the body of Emilie (103). However, it is equally apparent that Valmont crafts his letters around genuine feeling, and that he cannot do any less if he wishes to appear convincing to both Tourvel and Merteuil. This is demonstrated in letter 83, the same letter as the one offering his submission quoted above, when he states: “Which man would not prefer one word, one gracious look bestowed, to all the pleasures he might take or seize by force!” (190). Valmont makes this statement in order to convince Tourvel that he will not act upon his love for her and that he will impose limits upon himself to demonstrate the purity of his feelings. However, beneath this veneer of sentiment is a direct expression of his desire that Tourvel willingly submit to his sexual advances and gratify his transgressive project. This passage is a statement of desire, one which Valmont masks by crafting his language to serve his strategic goals. It encapsulates the way in which Valmont, like Merteuil, manipulates true feeling to represent himself a particular way within a particular moment in order to best suit his or her need.

As with Lovelace, we must rely on Valmont’s accounts of his behaviour with Tourvel which he presents to his confidante to best assess his experiences of the moment. If anything, his desire to maintain the appearance of libertine mastery for the benefit of Merteuil means that he underplays the extent of his disorientation within emotionally intense moments. This is almost certainly the case in letter 125, in which he describes Tourvel’s final capitulation:

Have I not found the delights I am speaking of with any other women? And yet this is not love. For I have to say that though with this astonishing woman I have sometimes experienced moments of weakness which resemble that unmanly passion, I have always managed to subdue them and adhere to my principles. Even if yesterday’s scene had carried me rather further than I expected in that direction and for a moment I had shared the passion and the delirium I created in her, that passing illusion would be dispelled today. (305)

Valmont attempts to present himself as ultimately in control of his feelings and sensations. Like Lovelace, he reframes his moments of weakness as a means to highlight how extraordinary Tourvel is and his carefully acknowledged bouts of “weakness that resemble that unmanly passion [love]” are admitted only to enhance the narrative value of his seduction. Valmont’s desire for Merteuil’s acknowledgement of his libertine mastery suggests to the reader that this account of his behaviour masks the depth of his emotional disorientation. Of course, Merteuil is able to see through his claims of self-mastery regardless and discerns the love that Valmont hides. This love is embedded in his statement of being “carried rather further than expected” and the “moment of shared passion” which
arrives as a result. Despite his protestations and his ability to restrain himself from consummating the seduction, these partial confessions are enough to reveal his true feelings.

As with Clarissa it is Tourvel’s ability to produce these moments of vulnerability, underplayed or not, which makes her such an appealing subject for a seduction. Her virtue allows for the tension between hedonistic and narrative ideals that is inherent to the seductive process, a conflict between the desire to transgress in the moment and the wish to delay that same moment in order to enhance narrative meaning. Valmont’s balance of tension between delay and the experience of the moment is largely successful, for despite the genuine love he feels for Tourvel he prevents it from prematurely ending his seduction and the buildup of its significance. Valmont is almost certainly conscious of his love for Tourvel given the emphasis he places on self-knowledge so that, like Merteuil, he takes pride in his constant self-scrutiny. That such a character should be completely oblivious to his own burgeoning love is unlikely, and his attempt to project a disinterested air to fool Merteuil in letter 143 demonstrates a self-awareness about his feelings towards Tourvel:

Might I not be able, for example, and it not be better, to try and bring this woman [Tourvel] to the point where she can see the possibility of reconciliation, a thing one always desires as long as there is some hope left? I might try this course of action without attaching too much importance to it, and consequently without giving you any offence. On the contrary, it would be a simple experiment for us to make together; and were I to succeed, it would just be one more way of renewing, if you wished it, a sacrifice which has been, I think, agreeable to you. (350)

This is a key passage that will be referred to several times throughout this chapter, as it presents the intersection of a number of different aspects of Valmont’s character to his reader. There is a clear self-awareness of Valmont’s desire to return to Tourvel in his suggestion that he could bring her to see “the possibility of reconciliation,” implying she might allow him to become her lover again. However, he manipulates this desire into a proposal to extend his libertine project in order to “renew” his sacrifice of Tourvel for Merteuil’s sake. He acknowledges that only Merteuil, as his lone audience, has the ability to approve of such an extension without compromising his libertine status, and his language is deferential to her throughout. His continued desire to renew his past relationship with Merteuil is reiterated immediately after this passage in his demand that she fulfil her promise to him of sexual favours. Valmont is thus caught between his nostalgia for his past liaison with Merteuil, the love he feels for Tourvel in the present, and his desire that the libertine seduction project should retain its transgressive power for a larger audience into the future. This letter attempts to thread a line and satisfy all of these contradictory
desires and thus leaves Valmont exceptionally vulnerable to Merteuil’s counter and refusal in letter 145. Valmont’s decision to break with Tourvel despite an awareness of these feelings means that he sacrifices her for the sake of his vanity, something Merteuil is only too happy to indicate and credit to herself. His actions become LaClos’ most striking commentary on human weakness as a source of both redemption and failure; it is through his love for Tourvel that Valmont comes to experience genuine emotional vulnerability, while that same vulnerability compels him to discard her when his vanity is threatened. Lovelace’s feelings toward Clarissa are similarly undercut by his pride in the masquerade of libertine mastery he understands as essential to his selfhood.

Of course Valmont and Lovelace exhibit stylistic similarities beyond the tension between delay and the moment within their respective seductions. The extension of time would fail to enhance the meaning of seduction if it was not filled with moments and actions of narrative value. In this regard, Valmont, like Lovelace, seeks to be artful in his actions: that is to say, he places an emphasis on creativity and stylishness that further enhances the narrative value of his transgressions. Like Lovelace, Valmont makes frequent metaphorical reference to seduction as warlike, something which Helen Constantine notes in her introduction to the 2007 Penguin edition: “Valmont views his seduction of Madame de Tourvel in terms of tactics, rules, methods, and strategies; he aims at victory and, finally, glory. Even his charm is a charm offensive, designed to seduce. The libertine, like the soldier, having achieved his objective, takes possession of the territory, and then abandons it” (xiv). Letter 34 offers an example of the way in which Valmont peppers his writing with militaristic turns of phrase or terminology. In contrast with Lovelace’s extended metaphor of the fortress, Valmont speaks of Tourvel being “[…] still on the defensive […]” and “[…] having applied such ingenuity in avoiding any encounter that it has thrown my own skills into disarray” (72). He describes the way in which “my letters are the subject of a small war between us” as she develops her own counter-strategies for avoiding his missives, such as sending them back to him in a new envelope without having opened it (73). As a natural extension of these warlike metaphors Valmont is a master of the double entendre, most obviously in letter 48, when he writes of his passion to Tourvel on a piece of paper that rests upon the naked body of Emilie. Indeed, Valmont places as much emphasis on behaving in a way that is entertaining as he does on overcoming obstacles, as he declares himself in letter 71 with the words, “I always opt for the most difficult or the most amusing course of action; and I do not regret a good action as long as it is entertaining or challenging” (149). He seeks to fill the temporal space created by his delays with actions that stimulate himself, an anticipated public audience, and his reader, Merteuil,
as evidenced by the suppressed anxiety in a statement from the same letter: “For I beg you to believe I am not wasting my time” (149). This line accompanies a description of the night he spends with the unnamed Vicomtesse beneath the nose of both her husband and her lover, a digression that is in no way relevant to his seduction of Tourvel. Yet his choice to narrate it over several pages not only highlights his transgressive power but suggests a pleasure in his ability to enact this betrayal and revisit it in narrative. As a result, his insistence that he is not wasting his time is not only an expression of latent anxiety but a testament to his focus on the seductive journey, with its string of engaging moments, and not just its destination. Infidelity to Tourvel is Valmont’s attempt to put his principles into practice. Merteuil, as his lone reader in the present, is the only one able to validate his success, and his rehearsing of the lesser seductions he enacts with Cecile, Emilie, and the Vicomtesse are all means by which he attempts to convince her of his continued mastery. Just as Lovelace harkens back to his former conquests in order to reassure himself of his transgressive credibility, and seeks always to be as artful as possible in his employment of disguise and misdirection, so too does Valmont use his infidelities to Tourvel as a means to affirm his continued libertine mastery and seek validation from Merteuil.

Another reason Valmont and Lovelace must employ their time in an artful fashion is the expectation that the seduction narratives they create will eventually be publicized amongst society. While the letters that make up each novel are deeply private in their content and tone, both Valmont and Lovelace write with an audience in mind and plan to make their affairs public as soon as they are successfully concluded. For Valmont this intent is demonstrated in a statement to Merteuil from letter 144:

As I told you some time ago, I shall reappear in society, despite your worries, shining with renewed brilliance. Let them show themselves, these severe critics who accused me of a romantic and unhappy love affair. Let them break off their own affairs in such a prompt and dazzling fashion. Let them just attempt the route that I have travelled entirely, and if one of them obtains the slightest success I shall yield pride of place to him. But they will all see that when I put myself to some trouble, the impression I leave is ineradicable. (350)

Public exposure of transgressive practice is the means by which Valmont and Lovelace plan to generate their legacy, to leave an “ineradicable” impression upon society. Thomas Kavanagh affirms this in his suggestion that the strategies Valmont adopts presuppose that every apparently private action is a vehicle for manipulating a public image, his own as well as those of his victims (Esthetics 95). It is thus crucial that the narratives he relays are not only successful but entertaining, and Valmont expects that being unfaithful to Tourvel at the same time he is seducing her will demonstrate his mastery to not only Merteuil but his
future audience. At the same time Valmont’s desire to silence what he perceives to be “severe critics” indicates the competitive public environment for these narratives. The jealousy Valmont exhibits towards Prévan in letter 70 for his successful seduction of the three beauties who “focused all eyes upon him” signifies the highly competitive nature of the public space (147). A seduction can only generate publicity once it is successfully concluded and packaged within an entertaining transgressive narrative and, as a result, both Valmont and Lovelace must constantly look to the future and consider how their actions will be represented in their retelling of events.

Of course, neither libertine manages to arrive at his desired conclusion; both Valmont and Lovelace meet similarly tragic endings. In addition to their libertine methodology, the conclusions of their plots are strikingly similar: each is unable to end the seduction on his own terms and becomes aware of the true extent of his feelings, with a failed reconciliation that leads to his death in a duel. That neither concludes the seduction in his preferred way is self-evident. Clarissa flees Lovelace, and Valmont’s vanity pushes him into a premature break with Tourvel as a result of Merteuil’s mockery. In regard to Valmont’s feelings for the Présidente, the common scholarly interpretation is that his self-proclaimed love is, to an extent, genuine. Both Phillip Thody and Catherine Cusset locate this love less in Valmont’s statements than in Merteuil’s interpretations of his actions and letters and in her ability to manipulate his feelings for Tourvel (Thody, Laclos 13; Cusset 4). Susan Dunn analyses Valmont’s use of “acting” and masquerade as a means to obtain freedom and power, and establishes that Valmont is limited to portraying roles that correspond to his true feelings, including that of the tender lover (47). However, these views have been recently challenged by Patrick Byrne, who argues that Valmont’s deathbed focus on enacting vengeance against Merteuil rather than seeking to leave Tourvel a final message is proof of his prioritization of revenge over love (966). If this were true, it would certainly represent a departure from Lovelace, who speaks of little but Clarissa up until his end. Yet Byrne’s reading seems to overlook the human flaws beneath Valmont’s rational and controlled surface that make him such a compelling character. His decision to take revenge rather than speak of love is a realistic extension of the passion that first propels him to love Tourvel and later leads him to sacrifice her. It would appear that this desire for revenge is equal in power to his feelings for Tourvel, and his final decision to prioritize the former is not necessarily a rational action but merely another instance of action based on feeling. While Valmont continues to reflect upon Tourvel after their break in a way that undercuts any chance at reconciliation with Merteuil, Byrne dismisses these moments as “a kneejerk provocation” (967). Yet the idea that someone as astute as Valmont would risk
everything he has achieved in an irrational provocation to Merteuil over a woman he does not love is profoundly unconvincing. This is especially true given his earlier statements of her extraordinary effect on him up until this point and his expressed desire to return to her in letter 144. In the same letter Valmont initially emphasizes how “prompt and dazzling” his break with Tourvel would strike a public audience, yet immediately undermines this sentiment with his suggestion of a return to her. Thus Valmont, as Dunn suggests, can only act if there is a kernel of real feeling which compels him to write, even if these feelings are contradictory as is the case in letter 144, in which his desire to conclude a dazzling public narrative is opposed to his passion for Tourvel. Edna S. Hudon suggests that Valmont’s performative storms of aggression and courtesy anticipate the courtship style of the romantic hero: “The mask that Valmont assumes before Madame de Tourvel most nearly resembles that of the Romantic hero, and his courtship, if such it can be called, becomes a parody of romantic love – ahead of the time, it would seem, if Lovelace and Saint-Preux had not already set the example” (28). In this regard both Lovelace and Valmont are atypical of their time in the way they attempt their seduction and present the love they claim to feel. The explicit connection between the two also suggests a similar attitude towards their seductive victim. Hudon’s declaration that Valmont’s behaviour is entirely a mask seems at odds with the examples of Lovelace. Even if Valmont does not truly love Tourvel, he is invested enough to risk his relationship with Merteuil for her. Whatever sensations of love Valmont and Lovelace feel are always obscured and mingled with a desire to recover from their failings as libertines and reassert their mastery.

In both cases, it is obvious that their remorse is still deeply tinged by libertine desires. For Lovelace this is demonstrated in his wish to marry Clarissa, even if she should die, so that he can still claim the transgressive success of her forgiveness. Similarly, in letter 144, Valmont speaks to Merteuil of the transgressive potential of winning back Tourvel in light of the severity with which he broke from her (350). In this passage, the nuance of Laclos’ characterization is apparent, as the air of detachment Valmont seeks to adopt here is distorted by his fixation upon Tourvel and his desire to renew their relationship. This distortion is a product of Valmont’s continual struggle, up until his open conflict with Merteuil, to present the love he feels for Tourvel as an extension of his libertine plot. He knows that he wishes to return to her, but he is unable to articulate a convincing reason to do so without compromising the libertine image he has managed to forge. He cannot speak of love he feels. Accordingly his statement suggesting that he returns to Tourvel—“I might try this course of action without attaching too much importance to it, and consequently without giving you any offence”—reads as helplessly naïve in light of the praises he heaped
upon Tourvel’s unique nature when they were lovers (350). Once Valmont’s and Lovelace’s seduction is broken off, each is aware of his own failing and is genuine in his fervent and obsessive wish to return to the woman he desires. It remains ambiguous how much of this desire to return is due to love, and how much is due to a wish to expunge their failure and demonstrate their perceived mastery over their victim-objects.

As a result of their failure to enact this return, each meets his end in a duel that is a direct result of his inability to maintain mastery over himself and his seductive target. Valmont is killed as a consequence of his loss of Tourvel, as his rancour prevents him from obliging Merteuil’s desire that he should be “charming” as detailed in letter 152 (368). Just as Merteuil cannot bring herself to see Valmont discover love, so too is he unable to take Tourvel’s loss with nonchalance, and his crude demand that Merteuil is obliged to sexually compensate him afterwards leads them to destroy one another. From here Merteuil declares “war” and tells Danceny of Cecile’s liaisons with Valmont, an act that leads Danceny to challenge Valmont to a duel. As a man who has lost both his love, Tourvel, and his libertine audience, Merteuil, Valmont is sometimes read as one who seeks to kill himself in this duel, as Phillip Thody argues when he states, “Although Laclos does not say so explicitly, it is his [Valmont’s] despair at having sacrificed the one person who has brought him true happiness which makes him so ready to accept Danceny’s challenge” (Laclos 14). As Thody indicates, this interpretation of Valmont’s actions relies on what the reader infers of his psychology rather than its explicit statement within the text. Patrick Byrne discusses a similar point, seeing a parallel between the mind-set of Tourvel and Valmont: “Rejected by Valmont she [Tourvel] presents symptoms of madness – a raging thirst, and a suicidal wish to remove the tourniquet after her bleeding – so much so that we wonder whether Valmont himself, in despair at losing her, is not possessed by a similar death-wish during the duel, with Danceny as the bloodletting surgeon-substitute” (965). Once again this reading of Valmont as wishing for death is based on a plausible interpretation of Valmont’s feeling and character rather than explicit textual evidence, and indeed Byrne himself criticizes it on the basis that Valmont’s failure to send Tourvel a letter undermines any claim that he is genuinely distraught at her loss. Yet this reading of the duel as a suicide is prominent enough that many of the film and theatrical adaptations of the novel have explicitly stated Valmont’s decision to die at Danceny’s hand. The 1988 film by Stephen Frears, based on the 1985 play adaption by Christopher Hampton, is perhaps the most overt in this regard, as it shows Valmont repeatedly pausing during the duel with a pained expression while the viewer sees flashback sequences of Tourvel’s seduction before Valmont runs himself through upon Danceny’s sword.
Unlike *Clarissa*, in which Colonel Morden comments on Lovelace making “quite sure of victory,” *Liaisons* contains no explicit suggestion of any suicidal behaviour within the duel, and rather relies on the fact that it would otherwise be unconvincing for the naïve Danceny to best the rather more experienced Valmont. D.A. Coward posits that Valmont’s possession of a death wish is likely given the abrupt shift in tone in the denouement of *Liaisons* and the ease with which it aligns with previous fictive treatments of libertine characters like Lovelace: “Valmont becomes the rake reformed by love and dies in an odour of sanctity, mourned by his venerable aunt and respected by his killer” (436). Coward proposes this reading in order to critique what he perceives as a ham-fisted introduction of transcendent forces in Laclos’ conclusion, as evidenced by Merteuil’s all-too-convenient ruination, with the loss of her lawsuit and disfigurement. The ruinations of Valmont and Merteuil are not nearly as abrupt as Coward presents them, however, and he makes no mention of the way in which motifs such as Merteuil’s lawsuit, Valmont’s love, and their mutual downfall, are firmly established and foreshadowed throughout the novel. Yet he is right to comment on Valmont’s death as overlapping with reformative tropes that frequently apply to the libertine novel, and particularly the death of a similarly repentant Lovelace in *Clarissa*. Under this rubric, death comes to Valmont as a result of the tragic inevitability of his love for Tourvel, a love that compels him to try to return to her and renders him unable to conclude his seduction.

Alternatively, it is possible to read Valmont as wishing for death not out of reformative penance, but rather despair at the failure of the libertine identity he crafts for himself. His final letter to Merteuil contains the statement: “A rival like that [Danceny] deserves that I should be sacrificed for him,” a reference to Cecile’s and Merteuil’s relationships with both men (377). The vehement irony of Valmont’s tone here demonstrates his bitterness at having lost Tourvel and an awareness of his own failures in the acrid jest that Danceny is a more capable seducer, a bitterness that could extend to his management of the duel. Given his inability to recuperate either Tourvel or his libertine identity, a reading of the denouement that suggests Valmont allows himself to be killed out of despair is certainly compelling; yet, the text remains ambiguous on whether Valmont’s death is a suicide. The extent of his anguish at having lost Tourvel leads Volanges to question whether his feelings for her might in fact be genuine in letter 154: “But what do you think of this despair on the part of Monsieur de Valmont? […] If for once he is sincere, he can truly say that he has brought his unhappiness upon himself” (370). There is a definite sense that Valmont is, at the very least, profoundly conflicted about his own existence and potentially wishes for death, as is supported by the fictional editor of *Liaisons*,

132
who claims to have suppressed Valmont’s final letter to Tourvel due to the ambiguity over its sincerity (370). Like Lovelace, there is a turn towards the tragic when the libertine plot fails as a means to maintain a narrative. The spectacle of aristocratic duelling ensures that the public audience both Valmont and Lovelace had anticipated during their seduction narratives does eventually hear their stories, albeit not the ones they had hoped to tell. Accordingly, while Valmont’s death is open for interpretation as the result of transcendent forces pushing him to reformation, or merely a harsh new awareness of his lack of personal libertine mastery, it is in either case a partially self-inflicted one.

Even apart from Valmont’s possible death wish, his link to Lovelace is acknowledged by Valmont himself in letter 110, when he learns that Tourvel has undergone a “momentous change in tactics” by confiding in Rosemonde rather than Volanges. He sees this as the sign of a heightened willingness to profess her love and an indication that he must prepare to conclude the seduction, yet he feels that he is unable to create the circumstances to do so:

[…] for the last week I have been vainly going over every stratagem known to man, those taken from novels and from my own secret diaries. I find none suitable, either to the circumstances of the affair or the character of the heroine. The difficulty would not be getting into her room, even at night, or yet again to make her go to sleep and create a new Clarissa. But after two months of toiling away and putting myself out for her, to have recourse to a means that are not my own! Dragging myself along in that servile way in the wake of others and winning a victory without any glory! (270)

Valmont directly compares himself to Lovelace via the shared virtue of their seductive targets. He expresses the difficulties involved, not only in making such women yield, but also in choosing the most meaningful time, place, and strategy to do so, pointing to the methodological similarities in their seductive techniques. Beyond this, we see in Valmont the same profound concern with anachronism in the pressure he feels to produce a seduction that is, above all else, original. He reads through fictions of seductions, the libertine literary tradition that he himself is a part of, in order to try to orient his desire to become a monumental figure in rakish annals. That his allusion to Lovelace is the only direct reference he makes to any of these texts points to his consciousness of their similarities and the fear that his method appears too much like Lovelace’s own. Thus we return to the fundamental concern with time and the establishment of legacy that underlies each action taken by the eighteenth-century libertine character. Valmont looks to past methods, his own and those of his fictive brethren, as a means to satisfy the desires of the moment in a way that will echo into the future.
Accordingly while this passage reveals Valmont’s awareness of his similarity to Lovelace, it also indicates his intention to diverge from him. The desire to distinguish himself and establish a legacy requires an original seductive method in the pursuit of an authentic libertine self. Valmont’s needs dictate his methods in a way that shapes Tourvel’s seduction into an act of self-definition.

5.2 Distinctions between Valmont & Lovelace

Yet, as indicated in the introduction, it is insufficient to characterize Lovelace and Valmont as possessing identical attitudes to time. The first and most obvious distinction between Valmont and his predecessor is that he is a far more efficient seducer. The delays in *Liaisons* are less severe and Tourvel confesses her attraction relatively early in the narration when Valmont reads her private letters and states in letter 44: “She loves me. I have triumphed over her unruly heart. […] Thanks to my painstaking exertions I have found out everything I need to know” (93). From this point in the novel, Valmont retains a degree of control over his seductive target that Lovelace does not, and the delays he enacts appear a product of calculation rather than a necessary extension of time in order to make Tourvel succumb. He states: “You will suppose I was in a great hurry, very urgent, will you not? Not at all. I have acquired a taste for *lenteurs*, I tell you. Once you are sure of arriving, why hasten the journey?” (227) While this passage refers to his first night with Cecile, these words apply as a general principle to all of Valmont’s actions, including those directed at Tourvel from the moment he is assured of her feelings for him. This is demonstrated in his frequent submissive retreats in order to draw out a declaration of love from her, as in letter 91, when he declares to her: “Who was ever more respectful and submissive than I am? […] I am the accused before the judge, the slave in front of his master. These roles no doubt impose new duties. I declare I shall fulfil them all” (216). The language employed here echoes the strategies of submission that Lovelace presents, yet the key difference is that Tourvel has already admitted her attraction to Valmont, and the temporal articulation that the movements between dominance and submission create are employed to further break her will without being strictly necessary to the success of his seductive plot. A large part of what makes Valmont appear so much more effective than Lovelace as a seducer is Tourvel’s willingness to recognize the attraction he exerts and declare it plainly to others. Philip Thody posits that *Liaisons*’ ambiguous treatment of vice as both harmful and attractive is the reason the novel appears realistic to the reader, and this certainly extends to the character of Tourvel, who is far more fallible than Clarissa in her willingness to admit her love for Valmont and the pleasure it might give her (*Laclau* 20). As a character, Clarissa is somewhat stifled by Richardson’s didactic intent in that her virtue cannot allow such a
confession. While it is certainly reasonable to read Clarissa as genuinely in love with Lovelace, as her friend Anna actually does, that she never explicitly states it to Lovelace or any other character reduces the degree of power he can exercise. In fact the purest expression of power Lovelace holds over her is physical, via her imprisonment, with her escapes representing a significant evasion of his control. Valmont, by contrast, has no need to be near Madame de Tourvel at all times once he reads the letters in which she confesses her love, and even uses their physical distance to his advantage in order to present the appearance of acquiescing to her demands.

Furthermore Valmont manages to appear more detached from his seduction of Tourvel, at least in his letters, than Lovelace ever does. This is particularly apparent in the fact that he is frequently unfaithful to her via his liaisons with Cecile, Emilie, and the unnamed vicomtesse. Valmont never intends to gamble the entirety of his libertine credibility upon Tourvel’s seduction and from his very first letter he acknowledges the possibility of failure in his use of La Fontaine’s lines: “And though I fail to carry off the prize / Still there is honour in the enterprise” (17). Consequently he is more open to diversions from his goal and the pursuit of lesser transgressions, and it is only when he recognizes his unexpected depth of feeling for Tourvel towards the novel’s conclusion that we see him prioritize her with the same fervour that Lovelace demonstrates throughout the entirety of Clarissa.

Additionally we might consider Valmont more transgressive than Lovelace in his willingness to destroy Tourvel’s marriage. He appears almost dismissive of the idea that virginal purity represents a significant social limit, and is very callous and abrupt in his taking of Cecile’s. What Lovelace sees as the ultimate act of trespass is hardly worth considering to Valmont. His description of the initial sexual encounter with Cecile, her first, appears uninterested: “Anyways, between surrender and accusation, and accusation and surrender, we only separated when quite satisfied with one another and both of us in agreement that we should meet again that evening” (227). This dismissiveness speaks to Valmont’s rather jaded disposition with regard to sexual pleasure that he shares with Merteuil and which pushes him towards the heightened transgression of pursuing a woman who is not only virtuous but already married. Their previously established “maturity” lends them a desire for originality and new sensations. It is not enough for Valmont to seduce Tourvel; she must succumb knowingly, aware of the “desolating spectacle” of her fall.

It is necessary to acknowledge the significant body of critical debate on the extent of Clarissa’s feelings for Lovelace. For the purposes of this analysis it is sufficient to acknowledge that Clarissa does not make any sort of explicit declaration of love to her libertine captor in the manner of Madame de Tourvel.
described in letter 71, not subject to a fleeting passion of the moment (148). Similarly it is not enough for Merteuil merely to sleep with whomever she pleases; she must do so while still being regarded as virtuous by society, and she must have power over the men with whom she enacts these liaisons. Valmont’s intellectual distance from Tourvel during her seduction is exemplified in his commentary on how he writes to her in letter 70: “I took a lot of trouble with my letter, and tried to reproduce the impression of disorder, the only thing that can depict feeling. Anyway, I reasoned as badly as I knew how; for without talking nonsense, one cannot express one’s love” (148). This level of calculation distinguishes him from Lovelace’s apparently more sincerely conflicted writing, and reflects not only a boredom with typical transgressive modes, but a greater degree of self-mastery. Edna Hudon summarizes this view as follows:

Lovelace is passionate and quixotic. He has impulses of generosity and moments of remorse, and, basically a believer, he is better suited to the role of blasphemer. Valmont has none of these moods, nor, for that matter, has Madame de Merteuil. Though they are caught by emotion in the end […] the dominant key of their performance – the element that distinguishes them from predecessor and posterity alike – is the absence of the quality of passion, without which the Romantic hyperbole cannot exist. (29-30)

Hudon’s reading of Laclos’ libertine characters as lacking passion would certainly make them more straightforwardly powerful than Lovelace in their lack of human emotions that might otherwise impede transgressions. Yet this view is more a testament to the self-control and ability of each to masquerade his or her feelings throughout the letters of Liaisons, rather than a true summary of Valmont’s and Merteuil’s characters. To dismiss the fact that it is precisely the human passions of the moment that lead to Valmont’s and Merteuil’s failure is to overlook what makes them such engaging characters.

What Hudon describes is what Valmont and Merteuil wish to present only when they write to one another and Hudon is right to argue this is a far more calculated and unfeeling libertine appearance than the one Lovelace adopts. Yet we cannot take the letters between them as their one ‘true’ expression of self. Danceny is accorded a moment of insight that may initially appear naïve when he says that “A letter is a portrait of the soul. […] It reflects our very emotion” (363). Yet its truth is borne out in the failure of Valmont and Merteuil to control their feelings in a way that leads to their death. The shifts in tone the two libertines produce as they write to various recipients are chameleon-like in their diversity. Merteuil’s letters offer advice on virtue to the stern Volanges, hedonistic instruction under a guise of tenderness to Cecile, and narrate Merteuil’s consummate libertine behaviours to Valmont. Similarly, in Valmont’s letters he is the humble lover, the
model nephew to Rosemonde, and the amiable confidant to Danceny. While they insist on maintaining their self-control and distance themselves from their feelings when they speak of them to each other, the brilliance of their writing lies not in the absolute denial of emotion but rather its careful shaping to suit their own needs. When Valmont writes to Danceny of his break with Tourvel in letter 155 and says, “Only love can make one happy,” he is unquestionably trying to manipulate the young man to reject Merteuil in favour of Cecile (373). Yet his wish to return to Tourvel is genuine, and beneath this calculated surface there is a kernel of real sentiment that is all the more affecting for its being hidden. There are thus true expressions of self in every letter that Valmont and Merteuil write, but they are never entirely themselves in any of them either: both fracture themselves across their various correspondences. Even in their most manipulative letters, we, as readers, can easily infer truth. One need only examine Valmont’s fascination and wonder after performing a charitable act to impress Tourvel in letter 21: “I shall admit to a momentary weakness. My eyes filled with tears and I felt within me an involuntary but delightful emotion. I am astonished at the pleasure one feels at doing good” (48). There is a genuine gratification here, which accompanies the equally genuine desire to seduce Tourvel. While he makes an explicit confession out of true feeling here to Merteuil, it is not difficult for the reader to use this moment as a precedent with which to interpret his other letters, so that the aggregate of Valmont’s and Merteuil’s correspondences come to be seen as a patchwork of manipulated truths. The natural desire to piece together the characters’ true feelings from the sum total of the letters they write to each other, and other recipients, has become the basis for much of the continued critical fascination with Liaisons.

This discussion of the distinctions between Valmont and Lovelace must conclude with a reaffirmation of their temporal awareness. Their libertine practice is linked by a seductive method that obstructs itself through temporal delays out of a deep concern with the creation of a narrative legacy that will establish each as a powerful libertine figure. The passion that the virtues of Clarissa and Tourvel provoke in these male libertines, which push the latter to enjoy the experiences of the present, must be balanced against a requirement for delay. The eighteenth-century libertine character is thus expected to exhibit self-mastery of his passion in order to effectively shape and give significance to his narrative, while also never compromising his ability to act within, and enjoy, the moment. This difficult balancing act is the tension between hedonistic and narrative principles at the core of these two characters’ actions, and which informs their oscillatory movements of attack and retreat throughout their seductions. Valmont’s and Lovelace’s desire to be original in their treatment of this internal conflict pushes each to review his personal
history and the larger libertine tradition that lies in the past so that he might avoid anachronism. In every aspect of their seduction, they must consider the intersection of time and meaning and the way in which temporality pressures the libertine to sacrifice narrative meaning. Despite a constant self-analysis as they attempt to seek the correct moment at which to act, a moment that is evenly balanced between narration and transgression, the feelings each develops for his seductive target ultimately shift his narrative towards a tragic conclusion.

5.3 Marquise de Merteuil

For much of Liaisons, Merteuil presents a critique of Valmont’s delay-focused seductive strategy, and even if he manages to succeed in his seduction of Tourvel we must give Merteuil partial credit for her frequent stinging assessments of his actions. Valmont is nothing if not prideful, and Merteuil’s shades of disappointment and amusement at his perceived follies unquestionably have some goading effect. A clear example is present in letter 33:

As long as you are afraid of succeeding, my dear Vicomte, or if your plan is to provide weapons against yourself, or you are less eager to win a victory than to be engaged in a struggle, I have nothing more to say. Your conduct is a masterpiece of prudence. It would be utterly foolish to suppose the opposite. And, to tell you the truth, I fear you may be deluding yourself. What I am criticizing you for is not for failing to seize the moment. […] Rather I do not quite see that this moment has arrived. (69-70)

Merteuil’s criticism here is aimed at Valmont’s claim that he is purposefully delaying his seduction of Tourvel. She suggests that these delays reflect the fact that he does not actually wish to conclude the seduction, or alternatively that there was never an opportunity to conclude it in the first place. As a result she questions whether he even wants to succeed at all. This returns to the idea that a credible libertine transgression leaves as little to chance as possible in the organization of events leading up to it. Merteuil believes one must create one’s own circumstances, and she perceives Valmont as unable to fashion a moment in which he may conclude his seduction. Intrinsic to this idea of creation is the articulation of time that accelerates and decelerates events leading up to a seduction’s consummation. On numerous occasions Merteuil expresses her belief that the gratification of a moment of transgression stems in part from control of the circumstances leading up to it. Immediacy is essential to her transgressive philosophy because choice is essential within the moment. She states this plainly to Valmont in letter 74:
You have often complained about the time you waste looking for adventures! At present you have them to hand. Love, hate, you have only to choose, everything under the same roof. And you can live two lives: stroke softly with one hand, strike hard with the other. (156-7)

In this passage Merteuil criticizes Valmont for failing to act despite being in what she perceives as an ideal situation for pleasure and transgression. He has the potential to indulge whatever desires he wishes, even if they are deeply contradictory, and can represent himself in a number of different ways to “live two lives.” What she is critical of is his failure to fully appreciate this moment and make a choice within it as to his course of action. The necessity of choice is something Merteuil places great emphasis on, and she concludes this letter with an incentivizing reminder to Valmont: “Remember that in your position time is precious” (157). Time flies, and the moment will not last, so one must make the most of it. This is especially damning in light of his complaints of boredom and wasted time leading up to this point. Merteuil’s criticisms of Valmont present us with a perfect summation of her own strategy of transgression, in which a choice must be made, and the moment indulged, lest circumstance and opportunity slip away.

Valmont eventually seizes the moment in his successful seduction of Tourvel, but up until this point Merteuil’s needling is so scathing precisely because the same criticism indicated in the above passage cannot be made of Merteuil herself. Throughout *Liaisons* it is clear that the Marquise has developed a model of libertine behaviour that emphasizes the efficient creation of circumstance, a choice within the moment, and an interpretation of that choice that suits one’s needs. There are several examples of this in *Liaisons*, firstly in letter 63, which describes her pleasure at being the confidant of both Cecile and Volanges:

> On waking I found two notes, one from the mother and one from the daughter. And I could not help chuckling when I found literally the same sentence in both: ‘It is from you alone that I may hope for consolation.’ It is pleasing, would you not say, to offer consolation for and against, and to be the only agent of two directly contrary interests? I am like the Deity, receiving the opposing wishes of blind mortals, and not changing my immutable decrees to one whit. (132)

Through the manipulation of her image Merteuil has created a circumstance in which she wields enormous power over mother and daughter, and may now freely dictate their courses of action to serve her own pleasures. She may choose between the two in accordance with the whim of the moment, something she analogizes to a state of godhood or divinity. Furthermore, she ensures that her actions will not be questioned by either party, and regardless of her choice she can ensure their continued reliance on her (133). Another excellent example of this is her seduction of Prévan, recounted in letter 85, as in the span of only a few days after learning of his existence, she constructs a situation entirely of her
own devising that will ensure he attempts to access her bedroom to pursue her promise of a liaison. Merteuil goes into great detail describing this arrangement, and makes sure Valmont notes her careful manipulation of circumstance: “You will observe that the affair is all arranged and no one has seen Prévan with me as yet” (201). She is then free to choose whether to indulge Prévan with a liaison or ruin him. She gives herself entirely over to the moment yet has arranged the situation in such a way that regardless of what she does it will be interpreted in a way that benefits her. She can sleep with Prévan and follow her stated maxim of making male tyrants her sexual playthings in private, or she can destroy him and signal her virtue to a public audience. Either is a transgression and either serves her goals. Of course the most extraordinary example of Merteuil’s power to create circumstance, choose, and dictate interpretation is not represented by her directly, but rather is seen in her reaction to Valmont’s dismissal of Tourvel. At this point she could have remained silent on her knowledge of Valmont’s true feelings for Tourvel, and allowed him to return to her with her promise of a renewed liaison. Yet she makes the choice to write and send letter 145, which makes it clear that she will only renew their relationship if he admits the power she wields over him (351). Merteuil cannot resist demonstrating to Valmont, as she does to Prévan, how weak he is. She reveals the full extent of her manipulations when she might otherwise have offered him an interpretation of events which crowns Valmont the victor. Regardless of how she chooses to behave, she can recuperate the moment to serve her own purposes, and this makes Merteuil a master of interpretation. This is in keeping with her autobiographical statement, which points to society’s hypocrisy in its endorsement of profligate males and condemnation of any slip in feminine virtue. The way in which Merteuil’s audience, whether public or private, interprets her actions is significant for her in a way that is distinct from Valmont’s desire to be recognized. She must maintain an appearance of virtue to the public on pain of social death, and therefore more is at stake for her as a woman. Her attempt to balance a private power against public virtue is something Valmont, as a man, need never consider.

It is precisely her ability to construct circumstances which allow her to give into her impulses that sees Merteuil end her relationship with Belleroche, ruin Prévan, and take on Danceny as a lover, with an efficiency whose outcome is determined only by her choices within these constructed moments. She alters her behaviour to vary her sensations, and this is her form of temporal articulation. She articulates time in order to realise a variety and multiplicity of transgressions that always aim to keep her stimulated and engaged. She is the virtuous confidante to Volanges, the experienced mistress to Belleroche, an unexpectedly tender lover to Danceny, and the consummate libertine to
Valmont. In many ways Merteuil’s variety of transgressive practice anticipates the Sadean pursuit of pleasure, but without demanding a continuous heightening of sensation, nor reducing it to a purely numeric undertaking. She breaks away from the “great seduction” narrative pursued by Don Juan, Lovelace, and Valmont in order to craft a new method for gaining power, one that accommodates her place as a woman. Given this extraordinary ability she is never compelled to justify herself to Valmont and replicate his lengthy explanations for his actions. She lives, at least to the eyes of her libertine reader, without regrets.

Merteuil’s originality in her transgressive method leads her to produce a greater number of direct references to time than anyone else in the novel. Examples include her previously mentioned reproach that Danceny must learn that “time flies”, a reproach that she repeats to Valmont in letter 74 when she emphasizes the importance of choice: “Farewell, Vicomte; remember that in your position time is precious” (157). There is also her chiding comment to Danceny, which reveals an underlying truth: “But you choose to have such young mistresses that you have made me perceive, for the first time, that I am growing old!” (295). Despite its playfulness we can read a genuine concern in this statement when it is considered in light of the previously established awareness of time’s passage she shares with Valmont, one which suggests an awareness of mortality. When Valmont has the audacity to preach to her about the importance of spending her time executing libertine projects rather than relating them, following his retelling of Prévyn’s notable seduction, her fierceness in attacking Valmont for his own weakness with the words, “What have you ever done that I have not outdone a thousand times?”, speaks to a pride at not wasting her time the same way he does and her ability to enact multiple transgressions with great efficiency (178). Valmont has not had to struggle the way she has by virtue of her gender; she continues in this passage: “But what problems did you have to conquer? What obstacles did you have to overcome? So where is the real merit in that? A handsome face, the result of pure chance. Nice manners, which can almost always be acquired with a little practice. Wit, certainly, but prattle will do instead at a pinch” (178). This attack is designed to convince Valmont of the social privilege he enjoys, privilege that enables and supports his transgression. That Merteuil moves from here into her own autobiography is not coincidental: she has questioned how much of Valmont’s success is his own in order to present herself as entirely of her own making. Merteuil describes the struggles of her life and her effort in overcoming them as a justification of her critique. The narrative of her past, present, and future collectively demands that she be recognized as unique amongst her fellow libertines. Within these passages Merteuil reveals a concern with temporality
equal to, or exceeding, that of Valmont and Lovelace. She has developed a different transgressive methodology out of the same profound apprehension of the passing of time and a desire to be the strongest libertine figure possible. This contrast between its two powerful lead characters is the basis for Les Liaisons Dangereuses’s brilliance within the tradition of eighteenth-century libertine fiction. Merteuil dances around Valmont’s great yet cumbersome seductive project with her nimble and immediate actions.

How then, does Merteuil’s decisiveness and hatred of delay allow her to distinguish herself within the libertine tradition? I have posited that the desire for remembrance is a core aspect of the eighteenth-century libertine character yet she is clearly not concerned with enacting a single lengthy seductive project like Valmont, nor does she voice a need to establish a ‘legacy’ through her transgressions. When Valmont speaks of his return to society in letter 44 he does so in terms that reveal a wish for remembrance, recognition, and applause. He speaks of reappearing with a “renewed brilliance” and predicts that “They will all see that when I put myself to some trouble, the impression I leave is ineradicable” (349-50). Merteuil never indulges in this sort of language, and despite her frequent references to time she makes remarkably little mention of how she aims to extend herself beyond it. Even when Merteuil plans a more time-intensive transgression, such as her plan to debauch Cecile in order to discredit Gercourt, she demonstrates a staunch opposition to delay as evidenced in her displeasure that Valmont will not begin his seduction of Cecile immediately (Laclos 18). Despite this she absolutely desires an audience, and her writing of a letter to Valmont about her life undermines her claims that she takes care to never reveal anything about herself. Merteuil violates her principles in the act of outlining them to Valmont. Thomas Kavanagh comments on the fact that she is compromised by her need to be applauded by Valmont for her accomplishments (Enlightened Pleasures 147). Indeed, Merteuil is compromised from the very start of the novel in her candid plotting with Valmont, and her autobiographical letter is merely the most complete instance of revealing herself to him.

The difference in their understanding of what constitutes a legacy lies in Merteuil’s emphasis on self-perception, rather than Valmont’s reliance on the perception of others, as the standard by which to be recognized as original and noteworthy in transgression. Valmont and Lovelace require a wide public audience, preferably society as a whole, to acknowledge their power, whereas Merteuil seeks a singular private acknowledgement from Valmont. This is partially demanded by her gender so that she is not ruined by a public that would not accept a powerful woman libertine. Instead of trying to lend her seductive actions narrative significance so that they might be appreciated by others, she chooses to
build a private narrative around her self-history and adherence to a personal code. She focuses on the masking of transgressive power rather than its public display. Merteuil emphasizes not only the creation of circumstance, but the creation of self via circumstance. The clearest demonstration of this appears in letter 81, in which Merteuil speaks with pride of her exacting self-reflection and recounts the entirety of her libertine awakening during childhood and its consequent refinement (177). Merteuil violates her code of secrecy in the act of explaining it to Valmont, yet she does so knowingly. She need make only this one exception in order to affirm the sense of self she portrays in her autobiography, and Valmont’s reputation as a libertine means he is the only one able to validate her. Valmont never produces a similar autobiographical account as it is simply not needed when his transgressions can be made public. Beyond his relationship with Merteuil, he clearly views his past as unimportant in comparison to his seduction of Tourvel. Valmont’s concern with singular seductive narratives is established beyond a doubt when, during a lull, instead of speaking of himself, he writes, with some jealousy, of Prévan’s successful seduction of the “three queens of beauty” (168). For Valmont, as a male libertine, his successful libertine narrative must be externalized so that it may enter into public competition with those of other men.

Not so for Merteuil, whose deepest satisfaction stems from manipulating and subduing this pompous masculine desire for the worship of others:

Since, then, you have seen me controlling events and opinions; making these formidable men the playthings of my caprices or fantasies; depriving some of the will, others of the power to harm me; since, then, according to the impulses of the moment, I have been able to attach or reject as suitors

*These unthroned tyrants now become my slaves*

and in the midst of these frequent vicissitudes, kept my reputation pure; have you not perforce come to the conclusion that, born to avenge my sex and conquer yours, I have succeeded in inventing strategies for doing so that before me were quite unheard of? (179-180)

Gender is thus at the core of Merteuil’s transgressive philosophy of life. She wages war against the male sex in a deliberate protest against the unjust disadvantages a patriarchal society imposes upon women. Suellen Diaconoff affirms this in her reading of Merteuil as fundamentally alienated from a society whose ideas and morals were created to serve interests which are not her own (6). Similarly Phillip Thody reads Merteuil as waging a war against the male sex as a deliberate protest against the unjust disadvantages that a predominantly masculine society imposes upon women (*Laclos* 17). The severity with which
she subverts eighteenth-century codes of female conduct is the basis for her originality, and is enhanced by her total lack of sympathy for lesser women who fall into the traps she avoids. If she bears similarities to Sade’s Juliette, it is less in her libertine practice and more in her emancipation from what Angela Carter deems “the mythic versions of women, from the myth of the redeeming purity of the virgin to that of the healing, reconciling mother” (5). The higher purpose of Merteuil’s power that governs all of her transgressions is an absolute drive to survive, and indeed flourish, within a patriarchal world. In letter 76, Valmont declares, “I like to think I am no more stupid than the next man. I have found hundreds, no thousands of ways of dishonouring a woman. But when I try to think of ways she might save herself, I can never see how it might be done” (160). Yet this is precisely what Merteuil is able to achieve: she is able to transgress and survive over and over again in defiance of the social conventions that serve Valmont and Prévan. In her rejection of delay, mastery of creating circumstance, and control of her emotions, she crafts out of her own life the “Merteuil” that she describes in the autobiographical letter to Valmont. To remain this person she must exert a perfect control over herself, something Cusset categorizes as a form of “active” libertinism, which involves complete mastery of one’s own feelings while manipulating the feelings of others (Lesson 2). Merteuil’s constant vigilance to ensure that her actions align with the power she expresses informs her aim to stand alone amongst women in the extent of her libertine self-mastery. The legacy she crafts for herself is that “I can say that I am what I have created” (181). Her self-recognition of her own calculation and brilliance is enough to establish this, and her deepest pleasure is the fact that it is hidden from the world. To flaunt a great seduction is the act of a fool, it is a man’s game, a childish desire for recognition that she is never compelled to emulate; consequently, she defines herself as unique.

Merteuil, however, does enact one singular transgression that employs some measure of temporal delay in her manipulation of Valmont, through which she ends his liaison with Tourvel and proves the extent of her libertine power. As with her manipulation of Prévan, the way in which she acts at the conclusion of her plot is highly adaptable depending on her desires of the moment. She chooses to end Valmont’s relationship with Tourvel, reveal her manipulation to Valmont, and refuse his sexual advances, each of which involves a purposeful choice in the moment. Most obviously, if she had decided not to reveal her manipulation, she might have played mistress to Valmont without difficulty in a way that still would have gratified her wish for Tourvel’s fall. She might also have permitted Valmont to return to Tourvel, only to force him to give her up again. However, her choice to immediately demonstrate the full extent of her power over him gratifies her stated
intention of humbling the male libertine figure. Not only does she destroy his claims of self-mastery, but she exploits his vanity, a weakness she articulates in letter 152: “Even the one who was loving and sensitive and lived only for you […] would still be sacrificed to the first caprice, to the momentary fear that you are being made fun of” (368). Merteuil’s initial offer to reward Valmont with her own body upon his success is the first point of leverage she uses over him, and she expands upon this via the continual mockery of his seductive technique, her refusal to adhere to his commands concerning Belleruche, Prévan, and Danceny, and finally her careful physical avoidance of him that sees Valmont complain of never seeing her in letter 59 (126). Merteuil uses deception, provocation, and delay to manoeuvre Valmont into doing what she desires, and when she boasts in letter 45 that “I was directing your blows,” it is not an idle claim (353).

Thus, if we credit Merteuil’s stinging rebukes as incentives to Valmont’s seductive acts, so too must we acknowledge that she undercuts any transgressive significance he might achieve by ending his great seduction on her terms, rather than his own. Furthermore, David McCallam states that Merteuil’s decision to break the promise to rekindle a relationship with Valmont aligns with the logic of the libertine code and the exercise of her power to transgress (865). Indeed Merteuil’s possible feelings for Valmont appear subsidiary to her manipulation of him, to the extent that her manipulation represents a grand libertine project in-and-of itself: “I freely admit that this triumph flatters me more than all I have achieved until now. […] It is not over her that I have the advantage, it is over you. That is what pleases me, what really delights me” (351). If Merteuil’s goal is to avenge her sex, then her great libertine project, as she claims in this passage, is the deception of Valmont: a demonstration of her superiority over the premier male libertine of her time. Her victory can be extended even further as being a victory over the idea of love itself, as argued by Cusset: “The failure of her life-long efforts at hiding her real nature does not matter. What counts is her final triumph over the force that makes libertinage fail – love” (Lesson 7). Merteuil therefore succeeds in disproving the power of love in Valmont’s rejection of Tourvel, and in doing so she reveals his weakness: that his vanity is stronger than his love. However, this does not equate to success in realizing her libertine principles, and this cannot be dismissed as lightly as Cusset suggests. Merteuil’s victory over Valmont is certainly a triumph over the male sex, but it comes at the cost of her “life-long efforts” to make herself into the woman she describes in letter 81. Merteuil’s legacy lies in proving that human weakness exerts a stronger hold over us than the positive forces of love and sentiment. However, this is proven through her own weakness, and comes at the cost of the perfectly mastered “self” she describes in letter 81. Merteuil is
vindicated in her desire to transcend her own weakness and adhere to her unique libertine ideals, but must abandon those ideals herself in order to demonstrate their truth.

Merteuil fails in the same way Valmont does, as her attempt to achieve self-mastery over her own emotions as a means to power goes beyond the limits of what even she is capable of. Valmont seeks to reduce love to calculation, while Merteuil attempts absolute self-mastery in every possible circumstance (Thody, “Problems” 835). As much as her self-creation gives her power, so too does it render her a prisoner of the “Merteuil” she describes in letter 81. Self-control in every action is an unceasing requirement if she wishes to continue pursuing her higher purpose as survivor and transgressor. Valmont speaks to the perils of not maintaining this self-vigilance in letter 79 when he warns her, “Beware of the pleasing or fanciful ideas which so easily lead you astray. Remember that in the kind of life you lead it is not enough to be clever; one single unwise step may mean irremediable disaster” (175). She fails to meet this standard, and thus fails to maintain her self-made identity, in only one action: the decision to inform Danceny of Valmont’s liaison with Cecile. It is here that her policy of taking immediate action works against her. Piqued by Valmont’s petty vengeance upon her in bringing about the loss of Danceny, she boasts that, “When I have cause to complain of someone I do not indulge in mockery. I do better, I take my revenge” (378). Yet it is this impulsiveness that undoes everything, and there is a profound irony in her choice to act upon a moment she has herself not constructed, the very thing she criticized Valmont for. This single decision, the only one she makes emotively, leads directly to the downfall of both herself and Valmont. They each have the capacity to destroy the other, a fact Merteuil herself acknowledges when she writes her life story to Valmont and states: “I have since, it’s true, told you all my secrets. But you know what our common interests are […]” (186). She is aware that her power over Valmont is not absolute and relies upon deception and cajolery rather than commands, yet she still forces him into a duel to the death knowing he possesses her letters, and knowing society’s tendency to pardon male libertine behaviour. Her awareness that they could destroy each other makes her control over him exceedingly dangerous. Valmont is the one person Merteuil has exposed herself to, and yet she cannot stop herself from revealing her power over him as her manipulation, more than any of her other actions, must force him to recognize her ability. Yet this compulsion leads to her downfall, as instead of being acquiescent, Valmont seeks to destroy her. She responds with a declaration of war in letter 153, and their common sense of pride ensures their mutual destruction (369).

Merteuil’s failure stems in part from her underestimation of how much she needs Valmont, and vice versa. Each is unwilling to recognize the extent to which they rely on the
other as the principal audience for his or her actions. Merteuil requires Valmont in order to affirm her transgressive superiority, and her desire to give her life narrative meaning can be achieved only in its retelling to Valmont. There is no-one else who would appreciate or understand the autobiography she presents to him in letter 81. He, in turn, requires her to recognize his ability in the seduction of Tourvel, something he demonstrates from the outset when he declares: “You yourself, my love, will be struck with holy awe, and will say with enthusiasm: ‘There goes a man after my own heart’” (17). Yet neither is willing to concede in the slightest way to the other. Valmont refuses to admit defeat and become his “charming” self again when Merteuil reveals her deception, and Merteuil will never affirm Valmont’s ingenuity in seducing Tourvel. Their correspondence is instead laden with antagonistic wit that pretends to be purely intellectual and entirely devoid of emotion, when every word is in fact laden with real venom. The central failing of both Valmont and Merteuil is that they recognize this latent truth in themselves and in each other but are unable to rise above it and thus, despite achieving their libertine projects, they are doomed to a tragic end.

Katharine Rogers offers a comparative analysis of Clarissa and Liaisons that emphasizes their tragic endings as the means by which each author comments on the social limits imposed upon women: “In both books, only the exceptional woman who flouts society’s standard of passive conformity in order to assert her ego like Merteuil, her integrity like Clarissa, or her passion like Tourvel earns the author’s admiration. It is true that all of them are destroyed, but that is because of the limitations of the society they live in” (50). While Rogers is right to point out the way in which these tragic endings drive home the social hypocrisies that these texts are concerned with, of these women only Merteuil can be said to have ruined herself, and thus the failure of libertinism takes on a particular importance within Liaisons. While the text may be bleak or cynical in its view of humanity, rather than explicitly moral, its realistic portrayal of what is compelling about libertine behaviour does not equate to an endorsement of that behaviour. Beyond the failures of Valmont and Merteuil to master their emotions, this is further implied by Merteuil’s failure to harm her original target, the Comte de Gercourt, who escapes completely at the end of the novel. Yet failure is a core aspect of eighteenth-century libertinism in a way that extends beyond the author’s intentions. That Valmont and Merteuil should meet a tragic end is the result, at least in part, of the failure of libertinism to effectively challenge the unyielding nature of time.

Liaisons highlights the extent to which libertinism can be differently defined by individual characters through Valmont and Merteuil, each of whom has the same
underlying concerns with time yet develops radically different transgressive methods. So too does the comparison between Liaisons and Clarissa demonstrate the shifting nature of libertine practice. Valmont’s jealousy and desire for social recognition lead him to enshrine publicity as a key goal of libertine practice, something he concedes to Prévan in recounting the latter’s seduction of the three beauties. Similarly, Merteuil’s belief in self-creation means that she cannot allow herself to ever act outside of the “Merteuil” she outlines in her autobiography, so that she is effectively a prisoner of the character she writes. She must always manipulate circumstance, make choices in the moment, and ensure the best possible interpretation. She cannot allow herself the vulnerability that true passion entails, as is expressed by Tourvel.

Libertinism’s focus upon the pleasure the body provides is compelling precisely because of its simultaneous awareness of time’s power over that same body. Valmont and Merteuil’s desire to craft a narrative legacy stems from the wish to present a comprehensive argument for the superiority of the libertine way of life. For Merteuil, it is that she becomes a powerful woman within the patriarchal structures of aristocratic society. Valmont, on the other hand, wishes to enact the most difficult seduction possible in order to achieve public recognition as the foremost transgressor. It is reasonable to posit that these narratives can never be allowed to come to fruition given the moral context of the novel’s time of writing. Yet more than this, the failure of their plots is what makes these characters so forceful. Indeed it is precisely this failure which makes them sympathetic and compelling.
6 All Pleasures Fade: 

*Juliette* and the Denial of Narrative

It is perhaps somewhat unfortunate that anyone who wishes to discuss the eighteenth-century libertine is forced to grapple with the figure of the Marquis de Sade, an author whose popular image sees him covered in blood and faeces, foaming at the mouth as he scrambles on the walls of his prison.\(^{34}\) His shadow looms over earlier libertine texts in the popular imagination, and the extremity of *Juliette* and its eponymous character seems to overwhelm the delicate balance adopted by Lovelace, Valmont, and Merteuil. Twentieth-century mythologizations of how brilliant or reprehensible Sade was as an individual have led to deeply polarized interpretations of his writing as either divine or barbaric. Depending on whom one reads, Sade either introduces postmodernity or encapsulates patriarchal sexuality, and he appears as both Guillaume Apollinaire’s “Divine Marquis” and as Andrea Dworkin’s figurehead of rape (Apollinaire 4, Dworkin 70). Each view has its own underlying problems and truths, but unfortunately the only thing they seem to agree on is that Sade stands largely apart from the pornographic and libertine writing tradition that comes before him. Certainly, the extremity of transgression present in Sade does not appear in *Clarissa* or *Les Liaisons* and this—alongside his being embedded within the French Revolution and the end of the eighteenth century—would appear to irreparably fracture any thematic linkages upon which one might establish a coherent sense of the eighteenth-century libertine novel.

Yet the intention of this chapter is to do just that: to reintegrate the Sadean text into the libertine writing tradition not as an outlier, nor its apex, but as an alternative response to the same temporal issues of tension and repetition this study has established as common to *Clarissa* and *Les Liaisons Dangereuses*. Consequently it will aim to focus exclusively on Sade’s writing rather than his life. This approach is a product of, and supplement to, the trend within twenty-first-century writing on libertinism to reorient Sade within the libertine literary canon in a way that highlights his connection to previously established libertine, erotic, and pornographic traditions.\(^{35}\) Such a reading serves to mitigate

---

\(^{34}\) I would point the reader to the final scenes in the 2000 film *Quills* starring Geoffrey Rush as the Marquis.

\(^{35}\) See: Peter Cryle’s *Geometry in the Boudoir*, which establishes the link between Sade’s narrative emphasis on immediacy and the pornographic tableau; James Turner’s *Schooling Sex*, which argues that Sade is highly retrospective and wholly reliant on seventeenth-century pornographic forms; and, James Fowler’s *The Libertine’s Nemesis*, which places Sade alongside the works of Crébillon, Richardson, and Laclos as an alternate expression of the core libertine/prude dialectic Fowler argues is a key theme of the late eighteenth-century libertine text.
extreme claims about either Sade’s genius or reprehensibility, and reinforce that he is not the literary outlier that he claims to be.

This reintegration is, however, secondary to the purpose of my analysis, which is to establish the ultimate Sadean libertine, Juliette, as adhering to the model of temporality characteristic of the libertine novels of the late eighteenth century. In doing so this chapter will establish the thematic proximity between the Sadean libertine and Lovelace, Valmont, and Merteuil. Section 6.1 will argue that what distinguishes Juliette from other late eighteenth-century texts is the portrayal of libertine characters who emphasize the act of transgression rather than the meaning which narrative lends to these acts. In this manner Juliette presents an alternative take on the same pressures of time and selfhood that animate the libertine characters of Clarissa and Les Liaisons Dangereuses. No Sadean character better represents this difference of expression than the eponymous Juliette, who will be the focus of my analysis throughout this chapter. Yet section 6.2 will establish that Juliette’s alternative libertine method still fails to realize her goals despite its difference from those of previous characters. Following from this, section 6.3 will argue that, as a consequence of Juliette’s lack of emphasis on plot, there is not actually a requirement to complete her narration in its entirety. Finally section 6.4 will reaffirm Juliette’s concern with legacy despite the apparent Sadean denial of futurity.

Histoire de Juliette ou les Prospérités du vice, first published in 1797, represents Sade’s most comprehensive and developed exploration of libertinism in length, breadth of content, and editorial polish. It has been selected as my primary text owing to its exclusively libertine narrative voice, which complements the epistolary narrations of the libertine characters in Clarissa and Liaisons. Sade’s other major libertine works employ either the third person dialogue of La Philosophie dans le Boudoir, the non-libertine narration of Justine, or the constant mingling of narrative voices seen in Les 120 journées de Sodome. While Sodome is frequently counted as the most extreme of Sade’s libertine texts, its unfinished nature means that any analysis of its depiction of time must necessarily consider what Sade “might” have intended. At least in regard to issues of temporality, such speculation is unnecessary when we have Juliette available to us, a text in which we read a truly complete and sustained personal narration from a Sadean libertine character. Consequently Juliette offers the most significant depiction of the Sadean libertine temporal

---

36 The translation present here is the 1968 version by Austryn Wainhouse. It remains the only complete and unexpurgated English translation of Histoire de Juliette. Any publication of this thesis will employ the original French text taken from the 1797 publication of La Nouvelle Justine, which includes both Justine and L’Histoire de Juliette in their entirety.
mode due to its proximity to a libertine psychological interior via the first-person novel form.

6.1 Narrative by Numbers

A clear point of divergence between Juliette and characters like Lovelace, Valmont, or Merteuil lies in her response to the temporal demands of being a narrator—demands which include the need for delay and peripeteia—and its inherent tension with the requirement of the libertine to occupy, or at least pursue, the moment. The characters I have previously explored have clearly oriented themselves towards the former by focusing primarily on the narrative quality of their seductions, and in doing so sacrifice some of their transgressive potential by putting off sexual consummation in order to service the needs of their plots. Of the libertine characters examined in this study Merteuil certainly incorporates an emphasis on immediacy into her libertine philosophy, yet is only Juliette presents a total abhorrence of narrative delay. In order to conform to the Sadean libertine ideal Juliette prefers to undermine her own narration rather than compromise her ability to transgress. She reverses the approach of earlier late eighteenth-century libertine characters: she is never obliged to delay a transgressive action. Accordingly, a key distinction between her novel and its predecessors is that there is never a suggestion that she will not achieve her goals. As will be demonstrated, this distinction does much to explain the focus on transgressive acts and the lack of suspense in Juliette’s narration versus the narration of Clarissa and Liaisons.

This alternate approach to narrative structure not only explains Juliette’s difference from earlier libertine characters but also reveals—notwithstanding this difference—the underlying similarity of the problems of time and selfhood confronted by the eighteenth-century libertine character. Lovelace, Valmont, Merteuil, and Juliette must all respond to the tension between their roles as libertine and narrator, a tension that each seeks to resolve via the creation of a temporal articulation. Time for these characters is managed through a rigidly organized repetition of individual moments, so that time as a whole blurs together and becomes an eternal present. However, these moments are carefully strategized so that they will continue to make incremental narrative progress and are not pure repetition in the manner of Agamben’s description of the monastery (19). There are thus two sides to temporal articulation: the repetition of stimulation in order to exist perpetually in the moment, and the carefully strategized changes to this repetition which ensure it still creates a plot and assuages the libertine character’s desire to narrate.

37 For details on my usage of Agamben, see Chapter Two.
The late eighteenth-century libertine character thus manages to balance an existence within the moment with the development of their narration. The difference between Juliette and her cohorts is an admixture of narration and transgression which emphasizes the latter, and substitutes the delays of orgasm within the sexual act itself for the delays of circumstance and calculation that fuel the seduction plot.

Peter Cryle has established the groundwork for this distinction via his exploration of erotic time in Crébillon, Sade, and Nerciat, an exploration in which he proposes an opposition between “fictions of negotiation” and “fictions of measurement” within eighteenth-century erotic literature. He points to a passage in Nerciat’s 1806 Le Diable au Corps that seems to transition between them.

The method set aside here is essentially the one we find in Crébillon: it is that of conversation and negotiation. The method which is preferred is recognizably that of Sade: a hand thrust under a dress, a mensurative look at a penis, and so on. And the difference between them is essentially one of power, of efficacy, of speed. By taking hold of the other’s body, the libertine master pre-empts those endless exchanges in which desire wanders off along the primrose paths of seductive elegance. […] It might be said that these are divergent representations, indeed competing fictions of fictive time. (“Passing the Time” 371)

This contrast between temporalities of seduction and those of transgressive measurement explains the alternative approach to narration that distinguishes Juliette from other late eighteenth-century characters. Juliette’s emphasis on speed and power manifests itself in a number of ways, one of the most obvious being the frequent “jumping ahead” of time in order to arrive as quickly as possible at the next escalation of erotic stimulation. This can happen within the minutes, hours, or days of an orgy, but is perhaps most jarring to the reader when it contracts extended periods of a character’s life into very brief vignettes, as when it takes Juliette only a half-dozen pages to describe two years of her life in a falsely virtuous marriage after she flees Paris, or covers months spent appraising Naples in a single sentence (Sade 555, 925). The most egregious example of this is found in Borchamps’ autobiographical narrative, in which he employs a single paragraph to encompass a ten-year stint as a prisoner in the Siberian wilderness before he begins to situate his next transgressive act (886).

Another aspect of this condensation of narrative presents itself in the multiplicity of transgressions instead of a single unique seduction or victim. In Juliette’s tale, seemingly every victim is of perfect beauty and perfect virtue in the manner of Clarissa or Tourvel, and by the end of her narration she has killed hundreds of such victims. Yet because these victims are no longer unique, and because there is no outcome of plot that might see
Juliette fail, this becomes relatively meaningless so that the number of perfect victims becomes the only measurement of transgression, rather than the actual defiling of virtue. While this unquestionably makes Juliette a powerful libertine character within the context of her own narration, Cryle points out that the narrative interest generated by these conquests is almost non-existent. “All that can be found in the orgy is the mechanical application of a kind of sexual algorithm – something which has little to do with truly aesthetic libertinage” (372). Juliette’s power and immediacy does indeed come at the cost of her narration, which, as will be established in the next section, demonstrates the inevitability of failure of the eighteenth-century libertine project. The Sadean libertine is not inherently superior to its seductive predecessors, a view established in Cryle’s statement that “There is no simple progress, no powerful leap forward from fictions of negotiation to fictions of measurement” (372).

Cryle supports this assessment by establishing that the same narrative requirement for delay applies to fictions of measurement. For all its apparent condensation, the sexual algorithm is still constrained by the need to generate narrative interest in a manner similar to seduction, lest it risk a “narrative short circuit” in which everything is attained and presented immediately and there is no reason to continue reading (382). Accordingly time’s passage manifests itself not in the back-and-forth of the seduction but the gradual crescendo of the transgressive sexual act itself:

Precisely because there are no real obstacles, no negotiations, no doubt whatsoever about the final outcome, it is possible to measure off the denouement as an ascending series of controlled, planned climaxes. This is how time is materialized in erotic terms: the libertine who is irritated by unsatisfied desire, and committed in principle to going through with his actions, may learn thus to hold back in order to enhance his very irritation, and with it his drive towards the most drastic libertine acts. So it is that Sade considers not ejaculating, in a situation of powerful stimulus, to be near the height of erotic mastery. Such is the physiology of virile delay - as opposed to pale, seductive waiting. (Cryle 383)

In lieu of obstacles Juliette’s method is to heighten the severity of crime over the course of her narration in order to produce a plot that does not compromise the speed and efficiency of her transgressive power. In doing so she creates a story that is propelled by orgasm: the overall escalation of crime over the course of her life is driven by the escalation contained within each sexual episode. These episodes are, in turn, driven by the build-up towards climax. The importance of controlling one’s ejaculation given this role as a propulsive force for transgression is highlighted in a reprimand Juliette makes to a male libertine in Venice: “‘My Friend,’ I say, ‘you are in a discharging humour, I can see it in your eyes: a little more and this scene will cost you your fuck, after which you will be unable either to consummate
your crime or to enjoy the further episodes which ought to precede this accomplishment”” (Sade 1123). Orgasm, or the delay of orgasm, becomes the driving force of narrative by escalating the sexual algorithms of transgression.38 While Juliette’s personal story does present the occasional lapse or regression in her capacity to transgress, her overall trajectory is clearly an upwards one. Her autobiographical plot is founded upon the requirement to continually outdo oneself. It is for this reason the structure of transgression in Juliette appears to accumulate in seemingly all directions with a steady increase in the quantity of victims, money, orgasms, companion “fuckers,” bloodshed, and size of the male genitals involved.

Connected with this narrative requirement for escalation is the idea of temporal articulation and the inevitable failure of the libertine character, both of which are unique to the late eighteenth-century libertine novel. To reiterate: the narrative requirement for delay and peripeteia does not automatically produce the type of articulation that is associated with the eighteenth-century libertine novel. Instead it is only when this narrative requirement for a carefully structured plot must be formatted in tension with the libertine narrator’s pursuit of the moment that the emphasis on temporal rhythm comes into play. Sade’s fixation with orderliness, moderation, and rhythm as temporal articulation is, in fact, already noted by Agamben in his discussion of Sodome and its similarity to Monastic practice:

[… ] At Silling, which is a castle and not an abbey, the time is articulated according to a meticulous ritualism that recalls the unfailing ordo of the monastic Office. Immediately after having been locked up in the castle, the four friends write and promulgate the statutes that must govern their new common life. Not only is every moment of the “cenoby” fixed beforehand as in the monastery – the sanctioned rhythms of waking and sleeping, the rigidly programmed collective meals and “celebrations” – but even the boys’ and girls’ defecation is subject to meticulous regulation. The rule parodies the scansion of the canonical hours. (7-8)

Sade thus evokes monastic temporality even more overtly than the negotiative seductions presented by Richardson and Laclos. The “rigidly programmed” deployment of time ensures that transgressions occur at the correct rate of escalation. While all three of the texts explored here portray their libertine characters as profoundly concerned with structures of temporal articulation, Juliette’s emphasis on prioritizing the moment over narrative sees her employ repetition to a much greater extent than Lovelace, Valmont, or

38 By “sexual algorithm” I mean the variety of bodily configurations the Sadean libertine uses to accrue the greatest number of transgressions efficiently. The orgy is set out according to these algorithms, and then propelled by the gradual build (and careful delaying) of orgasm.
Merteuil. In emphasizing repetition, her actions bear an even greater resemblance to monastic practice than those of previous libertine characters.

That this is a purposeful choice in the way that Juliette narrates the novel is established by the fact that Sade demonstrates an understanding of fictions of negotiation in his 1800 collection *Les crimes de l'amour*, a fact that goes unmentioned by Cryle and many other scholars. This collection of stories, written and published years after *Sodome* and *Juliette*, clearly portrays Sade’s ability to comprehend and depict the temporal modality of negotiation. I refer to a relevant statement from the libertine character Granwel in *Miss Henrietta Stralson*:

> Listen, my dear fellow, when this combustible heart of mine falls in love, there is no obstacle capable of preventing it from being satisfied. The more I fall in love, the more combustible it becomes. For me, having a woman is satisfying only by reason of the trouble I am put to on the way. Bedding a woman is the most prosaic thing in the world. Have one and you’ve had a hundred. The only way of avoiding the monotony of insipid triumphs is to achieve them by using only subterfuge, and it is on the ruins of a multitude of overturned prejudices that a man can find a modicum of entertainment in this business. (Sade, *Crimes* 22)

This statement corresponds exactly to the seductive pattern expounded by Lovelace and Valmont, which reaches back to Don Juan. It highlights the requirement for a single seductive victim whose virtue inflames the libertine mind, as well as the imposition of difficulty that emphasises delay and strategy. The “monotony of insipid triumphs” it rejects is, however, the narrative foundation of Juliette’s libertine writing. The plots contained in *Crimes* clearly demonstrate that Sade is aware that fictions of negotiation and measurement embody two distinct responses to the same problem confronted by the libertine character: the threat of boredom. This underscores not only the link between these two libertine temporal modes, but also challenges the assumption that Sade’s personal sensibilities are interchangeable with those of his most extreme libertine characters, such as those in *Juliette*. Sade demonstrates a comprehension of both forms of late eighteenth-century libertine fiction, and this further justifies the need to treat Juliette on her own terms as narrator.

Juliette’s incorporation of philosophical monologues throughout her text reinforces the careful escalation of transgression that forms her narrative. Yet within the epistolary narratives of *Clarissa* and *Liaisons*, similar reflective monologues and justifications are interjected into spaces between the unfolding action. An obvious example is of course Merteuil’s autobiographical letter 81, which outlines her libertine history and motivations in extensive detail (Laclos 177). While Merteuil creates and models herself as an extension of her personal philosophy, Sade’s philosophical diversions share a similar function:
explaining and affirming the transgressive ethos that structures the plot—and by extension the temporal understanding—of the libertine character. Merteuil’s autobiography establishes a belief in self-creation via self-control which informs her seductive methodology and desire to demonstrate herself as superior to her male peers. Similarly, the Sadean libertine reiterates the importance of immediacy, power, and rationality between the acts of transgression as the qualities that propel its carefully measured quantitative escalation. In both cases, these diversions act as a plateau within the narrative arc that reaffirms and justifies the form of transgressive action, and more significantly, the structures of time that lead up to it. Within Juliette, philosophy establishes a transgressive goal for the libertine to work towards. This goal must be forever reiterated and pushed upwards for the sake of the next transgression.

*Juliette* presents temporal articulation in a number of different ways. One obvious example is in the structuring of the Sadean orgy to resemble a machine, with an endless pattern of movement and action that facilitates the gradual increase of transgressive energy. This is evident in Juliette’s fixation upon arrangement and the precise organization of each sexual episode that always sees her describe the scene she wishes to enact beforehand, in order to establish rigid structures of transgressive method and time that must be followed. We see her emphasis on rhythmic arrangement in her admiration of one of the King of Naples’ sexual episodes:

> I had never in all my days seen any service more nimbly accomplished. Thus prepared, those splendid members moved from hand to hand until they arrived in those of the children appointed to introduce them; they disappeared then into the ass of the patient: they came back out again; they were replaced by others; and all that with an effortlessness, a smoothness, a promptitude which compel wonder. In less than two hours, all the three hundred pricks had sped into Francavilla’s fundament. (964)

Here the reader is led to imagine a bodily rendition of a clockwork machine, one designed to accumulate a desired number of transgressions. Several authors have commented on this machine-like rhythm of the Sadean orgy. Scott Carpenter has compared the orgy to a “perpetual motion machine” in the conservation of libertine energy, so that fluids pass back and forth but are never lost and remain within the closed system of the orgy (523-524). The restrictions on fluid here parallel the libertine’s fear of wasted time, and within the orgy Juliette seeks to produce an algorithm for the most efficient deployment of sperm and time. Indeed, Lucienne Frappier-Mazur comments on the Sadean machine as setting forth a relationship between time and production in order to increase the erotic output of
the body (29). Barthes comments on the temporal aspect of the Sadean orgy as machine, with its carefully modulated tempo:

What is being described here is in fact a machine; children, Ganymedes, preparers, everyone creates an immense and subtle mechanism, a meticulous clockwork, whose function is to connect the sexual discharges, to produce a continuous tempo, to bring pleasure to the subject on a conveyer belt. (125)

Yet this carefully measured implementation of the sexual act bears a striking similarity to the measured deployment of seductive action in texts like *Clarissa* and *Liaisons*. The pleasures each method produces are different in that Juliette’s pleasure stems from the attempt to put philosophical discourse into practice, while Lovelace’s and Valmont’s lies in erotic and emotional investment. Yet in each instance, transgression, and by extension orgasm, cannot occur too quickly or too slowly, and must not be pre-empted by unpredictable bursts of feeling. The difference is that Juliette’s temporal strategy emphasizes the orgy, rather than the seduction.

This strategizing of rhythm extends beyond the direct connections between bodies within the orgy to include the action that takes place between and before the sexual acts in each encounter. In one instance Juliette describes a scenario that sees a dozen young mothers with babes in their arms attacked on three occasions in a row. Initially, “a dozen men of very male and fierce mien, and costumed as satyrs” enter the scene to toss the babes aside, and whip the women’s backs and rears (976). Afterwards the men depart and the mothers return to pick up their children only for “another twelve men, of more awesome aspect then the first platoon and garbed as savages” to arrive; these throw the children away even more violently and whip the women’s fronts (977). Finally the men once again depart and the mothers pick up their children before “twelve other villains, of a countenance a thousand times more dreadful to behold than anything seen hitherto […] dressed like the satellites of Pluto” arrive and kill both the children and then their mothers (977). This provides a perfect example of Juliette’s temporal vision: a rigidly structured build-up of transgression that carefully measures out the increase of criminality in order to produce something like a narrative arc with a definite conclusion.

Naturally Juliette must, at times, break away from descriptions of the sexual act, as Clairwil bemoans following the above episode: “It was, to be sure, one of the most delicious horrors I’ve witnessed in all my days, but it is certain to leave me with an enduring sadness. For, alack, one cannot enjoy a massacre every fifteen minutes the whole length of one’s life” (978). While Juliette cannot maintain this compulsive transgressive heightening at all times there are other means of ensuring that she keeps to the appropriate temporal
rhythm throughout. We have already discussed how her narrative skims over anything that is not an orgy or philosophizing, and philosophy itself has its own rhythm to accompany that of the orgy. While the philosophical episodes in *Juliette* might not escalate the level of criminality in the way its orgies do, they not only function as a reaffirmation of the transgressive sexual act but also maintain the novel’s narrative rhythm in and of themselves. Each includes a frequent repetition and expansion of ideas that have already been established since Juliette’s early days as a pupil in their prioritization of nature and criticisms of religion, family, and government. The way in which these monologues are structured reveals a rhythm that echoes the mechanical repetition of the sexual act. One of the most obvious examples of this is the distinctly Sadean rhetorical device of listing supposed historical events alongside descriptions of foreign or historical cultures in order to support the link between libertine criminality and the natural order of the world. The premise behind these lists is that they reveal the falsehood or artifice of contemporary Western values by providing examples of human behaviour which align with nature. Their enumeration frequently lasts for several pages, with the most prominent example being Pope Pius VI’s speech advocating murder, in which he concludes his dissertation by enumerating a hundred and fourteen examples (782-94). Philosophy thus carries its own rhythmic, machine-like quality that maintains the temporal cadence of Juliette’s narrative. Her philosophical transgressions employ repetition more extensively than do those of Lovelace, Valmont, or Merteuil. This is an extension of the way she reduces the importance of her narration, as there is less requirement to advance the plot through significant changes in her method of stimulation. Unlike Lovelace and Valmont, for example, she feels no compulsion to alter her behaviour between dominance and submission.

Despite Juliette’s ability to maintain her temporal rhythm between narrating crime and espousing philosophy, she still faces the occasional setback. Juliette mentions a handful of instances in which she falls from her position and must resume the escalation of power and sadism from a previous transgressive point. The first major example of this is when she is threatened with death by Saint-Fond for a moment’s hesitation at the prospect of poisoning the entire French populace: for this she must flee Paris and spend two years hiding in a falsely virtuous marriage (549-52). The second is when Juliette’s accomplice Durand experiences a nearly identical hesitation towards a mass poisoning in Venice, a reluctance that costs Durand her life and leads to Juliette’s exile from the city (1149-51). In both cases Juliette’s constant escalation of transgression is, if not entirely reset, pushed back in a way that allows for both an extension in length of her narration as well as a repetition of events as she climbs upwards again.
These narrative setbacks function in precisely the same manner as the setbacks experienced in the seduction narrative of earlier libertine texts, as when Clarissa escapes for the first time from Lovelace’s imprisonment and causes him to lose ground in his seductive campaign (Richardson 720). Money is the primary barometer of Juliette’s relative location on her upwards trajectory towards the heights of libertine self-realization. In her first setback, she escapes Saint-Fond with very little: “I rise hurriedly from my bed; having deposited all my valuables and all my savings with Saint-Fond’s notary, I dare not go reclaim them. I ransack drawers, turn purses inside out: five hundred louis is all I can assemble, all I have left” (550). Thus she must accrue her fortune all over again. Yet in the second episode, which arrives much closer to the denouement of the novel, she remains extremely wealthy even after Durand’s misstep: “I set out with little more than eight hundred thousand francs; everything else was seized by the Republic; but still intact were my Roman investments, from which I had dividends of five million a year, and that helped cheer me up” (1151-52). Thus the algorithm of Sadean transgression overlaps with the algorithm of finance so that Juliette’s money provides a direct measurement of power that quantifies her location along the upwards trajectory of her narration. The numeric quantity of wealth reflects the numeric quantity of transgressions. Accordingly the ebb and flow of Juliette’s finances as she robs and is robbed in turn throughout her narration reflects the back and forth of the seduction. It further establishes the articulated moderation of plot alongside her sexual and philosophical episodes.

6.2 Juliette’s Failure

Despite the power afforded to Juliette by her structuring of narrative time in a way that emphasizes condensation, she is still subject to failure in the same manner as other libertine characters of the late eighteenth century. This section aims to unpack my earlier statement that Juliette elects to compromise her narration instead of her transgressive power. Yet in order to establish this compromise, it is necessary to counter those readings of Juliette which suggest it is somehow exempt from failures in narration. The most significant of these is proposed by Roland Barthes:

If the Sadian novel is excluded from our literature, it is because in it novelistic peregrination is never a quest for the unique (temporal essence, truth, happiness) but a repetition of pleasure; Sadian errancy is unseemly, not because it is vicious and criminal but because it is dull and somehow insignificant, withdrawn from transcendency, void of term: it does not reveal, transform or develop, does not educate, sublimate, accomplish anything save for the present itself. A present that is cut up, glittering, repeated. There is no patience or experience, everything is carried immediately to the acme of knowledge, of power, of ejaculation,
time does not arrange or derange it, it repeats, recalls, recommences,  
there is no scansion other than that which alternates the formation and  
the expenditure of sperm. (150)  

Barthes’ view here is the full realization of Sade as “The Divine Marquis,” an author whose  
work must exist outside of a libertine or Western canon of literature and cannot be judged  
by any metric associated with them. Under Barthes’ rubric, Juliette is protected from failure  
by the very dullness of her repetition, by her lack of intent to depict anything save the  
endless reiterated moment. Essentially Barthes is suggesting that Juliette is absolved of any  
temporal concern or engagement. However, this claim is based on a wilful neglect of  
Juliette’s literary predecessors and the structure of her narration.  

In regards to the latter, Juliette does not, in fact, immediately carry everything “to  
the acme of knowledge, of power, of ejaculation.” As much as her purpose might be to  
reiterate and inhabit the moment, she cannot pre-empt her narrative by revealing too much  
too soon, as clearly evidenced in Peter Cryle’s commentary on the narrative “safety valve”  
of secret spaces and cabinets that the more powerful libertines retire to with their victims in  
order that more extreme transgressions are not introduced too early (“Passing the Time”  
387). As much as she predicates her libertinism on condensation, Juliette is still careful to  
structure her text in a way that carefully measures out and escalates transgression, and thus  
still manipulates time to give her plot direction and form. Neither she nor her reader is  
exempted from temporal awareness. The moderation and delay of orgasm Barthes  
mentions as the only form of scansion within Sadean writing is, in fact, a direct reflection  
of the carefully modulated seductive rhythm contained within Clarissa and Liaisons and is  
the force that propels Juliette’s entire escalation upwards to create her plot. The Sadean  
orgy-as-machine is a variation on Lovelace’s “amorous see-saw” of seduction in its  
unceasing focus on the rhythm and tempo of time (Richardson 424). Furthermore the  
attitude towards narration that Barthes claims is unique to Sade, one which minimizes the  
role of temporality, was already developed extensively within the pornographic tableaux  
that had existed in Europe for over two hundred years by the time of Sade’s writing.  

Barthes also fails to acknowledge the influence of Juliette’s literary predecessors  
within libertine writing. In the concluding remarks to his exhaustive study of seventeenth-  
century erotica, James Turner suggests that Sade is a profoundly retrospective author, one  
who relies heavily on seventeenth-century transgressive forms despite his protestations that  
he despises them (Schooling 395). This assessment is supported by Jean-Marie Goulemot,  
who argues for Sade’s familiarity with, and employment of, earlier pornographic forms  
(“Sadean Novel” 65). Additionally, Peter Cryle has indicated that Sade’s usage of arithmetic
and enumeration are borrowed wholesale from the pornographic writing tradition, a position that seriously undermines Barthes’s claim that Sade is unique in being programmatic and metrical in his writing (“Beyond the Canonical Sade” 23). However, the most obvious way in which this pornographic influence manifests within *Juliette* is in its education narrative, which situates Juliette as a pupil of libertinism for nearly half of the novel. She acknowledges this tutelage with frequent statements of thanks and obedience to her libertine instructors throughout the first three parts of the text. This sexual education fantasy is a hallmark of early pornographic and libertine sexual writing and is the primary focus of every major seventeenth-century libertine text including *L’École des Filles*, Nicolas Chorier’s *Aloysia Sigia* dialogues, and the continually relevant pornography of Pietro Aretino from the sixteenth century (Turner, *Schooling* 166). Narratives built around sexual initiation and education are extremely prevalent within the pornographic and libertine writing traditions for a number of different reasons. In regards to temporality, the sexual education plot provides pornographic literature with a means to maintain narrative interest while still retaining its masturbatory purpose. Yet libertine pornography cannot circumvent time entirely without becoming a pastiche of episodes. *Juliette* employs the libertine education plot in order to establish a measured escalation of transgression, and includes philosophical discourse as part of that educative plot, while still emphasizing the condensation of transgression and its measurement. This is not to say that all earlier pornography is temporally fraught in the same manner as the late eighteenth-century libertine novel, as Juliette extends and reiterates the lessons of libertinism well past the point of her occupying the role of student.

Juliette is already largely complete in her education by the time she is forced to flee Paris. Just before she departs, she participates in an orgy that involves having sex on a field of bodies with Clairwil and Durand, an orgy that includes Juliette murdering a child by tearing out its heart and inserting it into her vagina (545). Yet all of this occurs towards the end of Part Three of the text. In later sections, Juliette continually requests powerful libertines to reiterate libertine philosophy, most notably asking for the Pope’s dissertation advocating for murder, a transgression with which Juliette is clearly already comfortable. Thus we cannot see Sade’s fiction of measurement and escalation as a mere transposition of the pornographic tutelage plot. *Juliette* clearly invokes the pornographic-didactic plot of

---

39 See, for example in *Juliette* pp. 55, 263, 285, 469

40 One of the primary advantages of the education narrative is its amalgamation of a formalized sexual theory which sets out the philosophical face of libertinism with depictions of its practice as the pupil is exposed to greater degrees of transgression. In this manner there is no need to distinguish between the philosophical and the masturbatory; both may be contained in the same text and impress themselves upon the reader simultaneously. See; Kendrick 41-42, Hunt 301.
libertine education, but it extends well beyond the completion of that education to constitute a seemingly endless climb. Despite begging Noirceuil to take on a pupil very early in her narrative, the numerous libertine students she instructs never live very long, and thus there is never an inversion of the didactic libertine plot in which Juliette becomes a teacher rather than a student (263). Yet as much as Juliette may become a self-sufficient libertine character, her educative project is never entirely abandoned, as it aligns too neatly with the upwards trajectory of her transgression. As much as she comes to play the role of mentor, she also continues to solicit lectures from powerful libertines, such as the Pope and Noirceuil, right up until the denouement of her text (756, 1153). Juliette’s narration builds on a pornographic structure, and this undermines Barthes’s claim that Sade’s writing occupies an unprecedented literary position.

While the Sadean text may not be a literary outlier in the manner Barthes suggests, *Juliette* is indeed unique in its employment of the pornographic education narrative within the context of the late eighteenth-century libertine novel. Juliette is not the first narrator to present a didactic sexual plot using the novel form, and she is preempted nearly fifty years earlier in France by *Thérèse Philosophe*, published in 1748, and in England by *Memoirs of a Woman of Pleasure* published in 1748-1749. Juliette’s narrative harks back to these texts, as well as earlier pornographic forms of the seventeenth century, in order to provide an alternative solution to challenges faced by libertinism in the later eighteenth century. Yet unlike these earlier texts, *Juliette* engages with the issues of selfhood and temporality that enfold the libertine character during the latter half of the century, and which manifest as a susceptibility to malaise and a concern with death. This is reflected in the text via a latent anxiety that exhibits several threads of tension pertaining to temporality and libertinism throughout Juliette’s narration.

An awareness of temporality as a problem manifests itself in *Juliette* in the spaces between the end of one episode and the frantic rush towards the next transgression or philosophical episode. There are several moments when Juliette reveals a profound susceptibility to melancholy following a climax or transgression. Early in her narrative, she recounts becoming immediately disenchanted with the lesser libertine Delcour: “And there’s the effect of irregular desires: the greater the height they arouse us to, the greater the emptiness we feel after” (312). A similar incident towards the end of the novel sees her lose interest in the beautiful and virtuous Fontange: “The fuck gone forth, the illusion

---

41 I should acknowledge that Valmont’s seduction of Cecile in *Liaisons* certainly contains elements of the didactic sexual education plot. However, these instances are secondary to the narrative as a whole, and the plot does not hang on them in the manner of *Memoirs, Thérèse*, and the various lectures of *Juliette*.
faded away” (1172). This post-coital disenchantment is frequently noted throughout *Juliette* as the primary motive for ever-increasing and endless stimulation. Both Minski and Borchamps bemoan that they could kill their family members only once, and the difficulty of further escalation is encompassed in the former’s statement that: “Often I have wished they were alive again so that I might have the pleasure of butchering them anew. What’s left for me these days? I have nothing but ordinary victims to sacrifice, my heart grows heavy, all pleasures fade, they pall, the enjoyment is gone” (598). This melancholy sentiment is a far cry from the jovial pornographic frolics of *Memoirs of a Woman of Pleasure* and *Thérèse Philosophe*, and reveals the undercurrents of anxiety within Juliette’s narration which mark it out as distinctly a product of late eighteenth-century libertinism. This anxiety is linked to the constant dissatisfaction Juliette feels at her and her cohorts’ inability to fully realize the utopian pleasures their model of transgression promises. Beauvoir comments on the act of plotting as the greatest moment for the Sadean libertine because he or she can pretend to be unaware of this inevitable disappointment, a view echoed more recently in Scott Carpenter’s discussion of the Sadean libertine’s inability to arrive at any form of erotic closure that would prevent the entropy of the perpetual motion of transgression (Beauvoir 32, Carpenter 524). Transgression is not escalated owing merely to a desire for pleasure, but rather because it is demanded in order to try to overcome this lack. Without this escalation, the libertine would cease to exist, as the lack of stimulation would lead to entropy and eventually death. A failure to escalate is a failure of selfhood.

Death, and particularly the death of the libertine, occupies a unique place within *Juliette’s* temporal structure. Given her libertine ideology, which posits no existence of any kind following death, it is clear that any personal anxiety about this tenet is expected to be externalized onto the body of her victim. For Juliette, murder is an assertion of power in that the murderer is the agent of a transition between life and death, yet it is an assertion that never satisfies. Simone de Beauvoir speaks to the inability of the Sadean character to realize the ideal erotic act, so that any transgression is linked with an inevitable dissatisfaction: “Sadistic crime can never be adequate to its animating purpose. The victim is never more than a symbol; the subject possesses himself only as an imago and their relationship is merely the parody of the drama which would really set them at grips in their incommunicable intimacy” (32). In order to transgress one must return to a state before the act itself in order to highlight the actual crossing of the threshold. Without this return, the taboo one transgresses is simply pushed forward. For this reason, there is no perfect transgressive crime that will permanently satisfy the libertine, and each is therefore compelled to either repeat themselves or escalate his or her transgressions. Juliette is unable
to realize the tenets of her own libertine ethos. She and her cohorts are never entirely satisfied with the ability to fully enact the principles of their libertine theories; and it is only in this enactment of philosophical principle that they find pleasure. Carpenter describes this as a problem of “closure” for the Sadean character: “One witnesses, then, in Sade a conflict between a plan or theory of closure and the practical impossibility of this theory’s adequate application” (520). Juliette’s inability to arrive at a perfect marriage of philosophy and transgressive behaviour thus constitutes a failure of libertine selfhood that haunts her in the same way that Lovelace is haunted by his inability to make Clarissa his willing victim.

Due to this inability to find a total satisfaction in the act of murder, and the inevitable uneasiness that accompanies it, Juliette compensates not only with multiplicity and escalation but by taking solace in the idea of her own inevitable destruction. In her and Clairwil’s tour of Naples, there is a notable moment when they reflect upon the ruins of Cumae and the life of Caligula:

He is no more… and ere a little, a few months, a few years, we too shall have come and gone: the shears of Fate spare no one, neither rich nor poor, neither the good man nor the wicked… Let us gather flowers while we tread this path whose end we reach so soon, and let it at least be of gold and silk the Dark Whore spins the thread of our days. (953)

Juliette’s narration here offers the same underlying temporal injunctions to live within the moment as the *carpe diem* expressions of seventeenth-century libertine writing, and the reference to “gather flowers” appears to cite Herrick’s “To the Virgins” directly. This passage is presented as spoken dialogue, yet Juliette obscures who the speaker is, saying only that it was a mutual reflection, a general comment on the need for the Sadean libertine to accept the prospect of his or her own demise. Indeed this acceptance often takes the form of pleasure or eagerness at the prospect of a final end as death would offer a relief from the constant pressure to escalate transgression, the irritation of its unsatisfying nature, and the melancholy that follows it. Of particular note is a woman in Borchamp’s autobiography named Amelia, who attaches herself to him on the condition that he promises to kill her at some point in the future as part of his crimes (873). While she fails to uphold this eagerness when Borchamps follows through on this promise, Amelia’s sentiment still embodies the values of the Sadean libertine in that her desire for death is only held off by an equally strong desire to transgress.

Juliette’s invocation of the pornographic tableau and the sadistic linkage of death with transgression thus offer an alternative response to the libertine tension between moment and narration in the latter half of the eighteenth century. As much as her emphasis on transgressive hedonism instead of the carefully delayed plot that lends meaning to
narrative reflects this unique orientation, it still ultimately fails to resolve the tension between them. While escalation of transgression manages to function as her plot, this does not ensure that it is compelling. The neatness of Juliette’s temporal and philosophical arrangement, in which nothing is in question, ensures that her actions become tedious and repetitive to the reader. Beauvoir comments on this tedium: “Even his [Sade’s] admirers will readily admit that his work is, for the most part, unreadable; philosophically, it escapes banality only to founder in incoherence. As to his vices, they are not startlingly original; Sade invented nothing in this domain” (4). Beauvoir goes on to comment that the only means by which his books take any hold on their reader is when they are considered in relation to Sade as their author. Consequently it is my contention that Juliette’s failure stems from the lack of meaning generated by her narration.

Juliette’s transgressive philosophy dictates that she must avoid delay at all cost, and transgress as efficiently as possible. The Sadean libertine is therefore unable to create narrative meaning via a delay-oriented typical approach described by Brooks and Kermode and discussed in Chapter Two. Yet Juliette remains compelled to narrate, so much so that despite her supposed hatred of delay, her text represents a recitation of over 300,000 words to her fellow libertines in preparation for an orgy. Juliette therefore substitutes seductive delay for the gradual heightening of transgression alongside a delay of orgasm within the act itself. In this manner, she produces what Peter Cryle describes as a “fiction of measurement,” which emphasizes the number of transgressions as the source of narrative meaning rather than the time it takes to achieve them (372). Yet, as mentioned above, Cryle contends that there is nothing inherently superior to this method, as opposed to transgression that relies on negotiating obstacles.

We can compare Lovelace and Juliette to reinforce this point. Each character is caught between his or her existence as a libertine, one who is defined by the desire to live within the hedonistic present moment and enact transgression, and his or her existence as narrator, one who is defined by an engagement with past and future. Each is in this position owing to a concern with creating a legacy through the act of narration while remaining distinctly libertine.42 Lovelace’s response is to focus all of his energy into a single seduction, one which takes an extremely long time as he negotiates a variety of obstacles but consequently accrues an enormous narrative significance for himself and his reader. His anxiety is that he delays too much, and in doing so, he compromises his own self-assurance in his ability to transgress and succeed. He worries that he is no longer a libertine, a fear

42 Juliette’s concern with legacy is discussed in section 6.4
that is realized in his failure to seduce Clarissa. Juliette’s response to the same initial quandary is to generate as many transgressions as she can in the shortest amount of time. Her energy is focused into accruing the highest possible tally of transgressions in the most efficient manner possible. Her status as a powerful libertine transgressor is therefore unchallenged, yet she experiences anxiety because she is never able to fully realize her own philosophy of living within an eternal present. She experiences malaise outside of the immediate verbal or physical act of transgression. Her failure is realized in the almost non-existent narrative meaning of her actions, owing to their repetitive nature and lack of delay.

Thus, we return to the question posed by Peter Cryle in his discussion of erotic narratives: “Can such a principle of delay be maintained in stories which are committed to a strong notion of libertine mastery? Can there be a delay which, conceived in masculinist terms, does not just give itself up, through dilatoriness, to feminine power as coyness, or coquetry?” (“Passing the Time” 374). The mutual failure of Lovelace and Juliette is an inability to effectively answer this question through each of their respective texts. Juliette offers a variation in the response to the same temporal pressures as the other libertine characters reviewed here, but she shares in their collective inability to address those pressures.

Furthermore, Juliette’s narrative failure is also apparent if we contrast it with the earlier texts I have examined, and there are at least two aspects of her text which indicate this failure. The first example is Juliette’s lack of the tragic sentiment found throughout Clarissa and Liaisons, especially in their endings. While lack of sentiment does not automatically imply a narrative failure, it does suggest the lack of meaning which Juliette must overcome within her narration. Lovelace, Valmont, and Merteuil all generate pathos in the attempt to quash their own humanity to fully realize themselves as libertines, so that their ultimate failure to do so is compelling and moving. Juliette lacks any such obstacle to libertine self-realization and there is never any question as to the ultimate success of her endeavours. She endures none of the suffering that Peter Szondi posits is the bedrock of the tragic form, nor does she exhibit any significant flaw within the logic of her text that would mark her out as a tragic character (Szondi 7, Bennett 108). That is to say, she and her fellow libertines enjoy the endless reassertion of an absolute power speaks to a lack of sentiment of any kind, so that Juliette’s narration becomes something like a tale of pure logos. If the other libertine characters examined here instil their narratives with the pathos of an emotional appeal to their reader, Juliette prefers logical argument designed to persuade. In this regard Juliette comes to resemble rhetoric designed to convince more than plot designed to produce meaning for the reader, once again demonstrating its proximity to
the pornographic tableau. Yet Juliette is not an essay; it maintains the structures of plot and character seen in Clarissa and Liaisons.

Instead the rhetorical stance of her narration stems from the way in which everything and everyone conforms without resistance to a rigorous temporal, spatial, and philosophical structure. Unlike the early pornographies of School of Venus, Juliette’s rhetorical stance is entirely unneeded in a world which already conforms to her philosophies. Given that her narrative conforms so directly to her libertine ethos Juliette represents the antithesis of the tragic character. That is to say that nothing troubles her endless assertion of self, and she is far less susceptible to uneasiness than the likes of Lovelace or Valmont. While Juliette is not totally inhuman, she is certainly superhuman in the degree to which she seeks to put transgressive philosophy into practice. However, she is not immune to malaise, merely resistant. Her anxieties stem not from doubt as to whether she will achieve her intended transgressions, but rather her inability to fully realize her philosophy and attain some measure of closure in the manner described by Carpenter (520).

This lack of closure extends to Juliette’s conclusion, in which there is a cessation or denial of meaning, so that the reader does not gain any insight upon the novel’s conclusion that is not immediately apparent from the first hundred pages. Juliette might very well presume to reject the temporality of the Western novel in the manner described by Barthes, but she fails to replace it with an alternate vehicle of meaning, such as the folktale or myth. While meaning is not the only thing that might define a successful narrative, there is a distinct lack of any sort of development within Juliette’s narrative. Her ending is the logical extension of her beginning, arrived at with an absolute minimum of setbacks. Consequently her plot is the opposite of typical narratives described in theories by Kermode and Brooks, in which the present moment is construed as a “time-between” designed to build a meaningful narrative arc oriented towards a totalizing conclusion (Brooks 24). Juliette’s moment, reiterated on every page of her text, is realized without any reference to her story’s eventual end. Accordingly Juliette’s transgressions are closer to a pure expression of those moments; yet her narration, which is repetitive and detailed, is unable to fully abandon the requirement for a narrative arc without becoming entirely a tableau or lexicon. Her transgressions are thus undermined by the compulsion or philosophical requirement that she narrate them in their entirety. Juliette’s narration does not completely fail to produce a narrative in the same manner that Valmont’s and Lovelace’s libertinism does not completely fail to produce transgression. Rather it is a question of degree, with each character undone by his or her particular weakness. The way in which Juliette borrows from
the past produces a temporal structure that is unique, but neither unprecedented nor any more successful than previous libertine texts.

Suggestions that *Juliette* offers more than the barest scratchings of narrative meaning are predicated not on the text, but on its author. Typically it is only in the biographical Sade that critics are able to find any locus of meaning. Lawrence Schehr exemplifies this attitude in his comments on the final paragraph of *Juliette*, in which a third person narrator appears to briefly summarize the remaining ten years of Juliette’s life: “Juliette’s desire and fulfilment were substitutes, rhetorical vicars, of Sade’s own. The installation of the third-person narration at the end of the novel is the sole available means for the author to produce the text, to come forth” (246). Beauvoir defends the value of Sade’s writing for his construction of an ethics of cruelty based on his own actual experience: “If Sade’s desire to grasp the very essence of the human condition in terms of his particular situation is the source of his greatness, it is also responsible for his limits” (62). It is from Sade that critics have found meaning in *Juliette*, not its eponymous character who narrates its pages. If we consider Juliette’s narration on its own terms, as we might given the clear lines of influence of earlier pornographic and libertine writing traditions, Juliette’s narrative clings only weakly to her reader. While the sexual algorithm of various escalating transgressions does provide some measure of propulsion through the book, it is a weak sort of propulsion.

Thus the true value of *Juliette* lies in its attempt to provide an alternative solution to the same issues of temporality evinced by earlier libertine texts. Juliette ultimately fails to strike a balance between narration and moment and is distinct only in that her failure is of a different sort than that of Lovelace, Valmont, and Merteuil. *Juliette* does indeed attempt to do something different with the literary mode of the libertine novel but does not entirely reconstitute it. Fictional characterizations of the libertine lord or lady subside at the start of the nineteenth century, not because Sade articulates its apotheosis, but because Juliette’s reversed proportions of transgression and narration represent another failure to overcome the temporal limits imposed on the libertine. Juliette is not the reason for libertinism’s decline in fiction, but rather happens to represent the final attempt by a libertine character to overcome its aesthetic limitations.

---

43 Most notable in this regard is Bataille, who declares that every Sadean character is merely a mouthpiece for the author. Bataille places particular emphasis on instances of extended philosophical treatises as examples of this (*Eroticism* 188).

44 A brief note on this: In applying the term “failure” to Juliette’s narration I do not mean to imply that there is *no* narration to speak of. Rather it is a failure of *purpose*. She elects not to emphasize it and consequently it does not produce the legacy I will soon demonstrate she is concerned with. In the same manner that Lovelace is still a libertine despite his failures, Juliette is still a narrator despite hers.
6.3 Non-Reading

One aspect of *Juliette* that has only been faintly alluded to by earlier critics is the fact that Juliette’s narration constantly invites us to stop reading. Barthes recognizes this to some extent when he suggests that the variety of textual forms within Sade, represented in the abrupt movements between philosophical diatribe and descriptions of orgies, allows the reader to ignore certain aspects at will:

For as it is possible to distinguish several motifs in a calendared material, to isolate and follow one and ignore the others [...] the plural of the text is based on the multiplicity of the codes, but it is ultimately achieved by the ease with which the reader can “ignore” certain pages, this ignoring somehow being prepared for and legalized beforehand by the author himself, who has taken pains to produce a *perforated* text so that anyone “skipping” the Sadian dissertations will stay within the truth of the Sadian text. (135)

Barthes suggests that readers are “legalized” by the Sadean narrator to read only what they wish to read so that one may skip the philosophical dissertations, travelogues, or sexual acts within *Juliette* without issue, despite the significant textual omissions this creates. This is evident in how clear the division of text is when it shifts between philosophical diatribes and Juliette’s actual transgressive narration, such as when the Pope begins his an extensive dissertation on murder with the words: “I shall ask for your whole attention, the subject demands it” (765). What follows is a dense self-contained speech that lasts for over thirty pages and concludes part IV of the novel as soon as it is complete. In these moments of transition between narration and rhetoric, *Juliette* resembles a lexicon or dictionary, in the same way that it sometimes resembles the pornographic tableau without actually being one. Consequently there is an active invitation to stop reading altogether throughout *Juliette* to the extent that **not** finishing it is a valid option proposed Juliette as its narrator. This stems largely from the textual aspects I have already indicated: firstly, the rote and mechanical way in which transgressions, both orgiastic and philosophical, are enacted as a constant repetition of what has already been presented; secondly, the way that these transgressions are shaped into a loose narrative via the constant transgressive escalation, which provides a minimal force to propel the reader through the text; and finally the failure of Juliette’s narrative to generate any pathos, catharsis, or meaning. The reader is never put in a position to lose anything should they stop reading and we have no opportunity to question her inevitable successful conclusion.

As a result, Juliette’s narration is difficult or even unpleasant to read by any standard of traditional narrative. Yet this seems a purposeful decision borne out in the
focus on moment that informs the philosophical dimension of the Sadean libertine character. Juliette’s and Clairwil’s decision to kill their long-time companion and fellow libertine Olympia by flinging her into Mount Vesuvius exemplifies this focus on the present:

“Oh my friends!” she gasped. “What have I done?”

“Oh nothing at all. We are tired of you. Is that not quite enough?” (1017)

Such is Juliette’s emphasis on the moment, with no attention paid to a shared historical past or a potential future. As soon as she becomes bored she must act to stave off a lack of stimulation. Accordingly the mindset that Juliette encourages in her reader is also one which encourages them, at any given moment, to simply put down Juliette and not finish it. The endless repetitions of her autobiography inevitably fail to stimulate us in any capacity, after the initial shock of her particular style has been overcome. The underwhelming narrative yield of the sexual algorithm described by Cryle and Barthes challenges Juliette’s reader to continue (“Passing Time” 372; Barthes 36). The repetitions that Juliette enacts in order to articulate time might function to keep her stimulated in the moment comes at the expense of narrative meaning.

It is important to reiterate that Juliette’s lack of concern with her narrative does not mean that there is none present. Cryle’s “fictions of measurement” do constitute a plot, albeit a weak one (372). That she is willing to eschew narrative delay for the sake of a focus on the present moment does not mean she is able to avoid the former entirely, and there are, in fact, threads of narration which could conceivably prove meaningful to her reader. How far will her transgressions go? Will she ever be stopped, defeated, or reformed? These are legitimate questions that might propel one through the escalating transgressions of Juliette. However, they are not questions endorsed by Juliette as narrator. There is never any question in her mind that she will succeed, and she does not discuss or develop any such thoughts. Whereas Lovelace hinges his entire narration on the single question of whether his seduction will succeed, flooding his reader with the importance of the answer, Juliette offers no such narrative hooks to her reader. She knows she will succeed in all things related to transgression, adhere to her philosophy, and never reform. One might be able to read Juliette in expectation of her failure to transgress, or potential reformation, but it is not a reading sanctioned by Juliette as narrator.

This can be seen as an extension of the philosophy Juliette espouses. The reason we are invited to stop reading Juliette is in order to conform to its eponymous character’s own injunctions, as any requirement for the reader to complete her tale undermines the
philosophical model she articulates throughout it. To stop reading after we have begun is to reject the temporal so completely that we reject the very act of narration. Accordingly it is only with the decision to stop reading *Juliette* that it takes on the superlative meaning ascribed to it by Barthes as an extension of a true focus on the moment and complete rejection of temporality. We return to Jean-Marie Goulemot’s comment: “With libertine fiction, the goal is that of overcoming the prejudices of some of the characters, which are assumed to be the same as those of the reader. The reader is somewhat the equivalent of the fictional object of seduction” (144). The values Juliette attempts to instil in her reader stand in opposition to the temporally fraught seductions of her predecessors, in which there are more frequently moments without stimulation. Her solution to the tensions faced by the libertine narrator is to reject seduction. Her philosophy rejects the temporal even if she herself cannot, and its ideal manifestation in her reader is the choice to put down the text and end the narration. Since Juliette makes no attempt to generate meaning through plotting in the manner of a typical novel, neither reader nor narrator is compromised in the decision to reject *Juliette*. Instead it is, for a fleeting moment, to make Juliette’s philosophy triumphant and to reject the unavoidable temporality of her narration. It does not assuage the failure of her narrative to generate a legacy but it does provide the possibility, however brief, that her lack of concern with producing meaning through plot is vindicated.

Furthermore, Juliette organizes her story in such a way that it creates a barrier between the reader and the text that ensures it cannot be absorbed casually. Instead of reading, or in the case of her fellow libertines listening to her, for pleasure, we are forced by *Juliette’s* structure and length to approach reading it as a chore. It is something that must be worked through, something that is work. By constantly inviting us to stop reading, Juliette ensures that those who actually do continue must predicate this decision on something other than narrative drive. *Juliette* thus provides something of an answer to the difficulty of elucidating a libertine philosophical model within the confines of narrative. Juliette resolves this problem in her creation of a narrative that is so dismal we must approach its reading as we would a philosophical treatise, with little to no expectation of narrative meaning or pleasure. We reiterate the choice to keep reading *Juliette* in the face of its invitations to stop, and thus those who continue to read its text have accorded it a measure of seriousness.

Consequently the relative meaninglessness of Juliette’s narration establishes an invitation to stop reading. Yet it is through that very meaninglessness that Juliette, as

---

45 See my discussion of Jean-Pierre Dubost in Chapter Two.
narrator, constructs her plot as an elaborate literary catch-22: one in which we either act, however briefly, upon her philosophy and prioritize the moment over narration and temporality, or push on and engage Juliette in the manner of a serious philosopher.

6.4 Juliette and Futurity

As unique as Juliette’s arrangement of plot may be, her attitude to time reflects her proximity to her libertine predecessors. She aims to resolve the tension between the temporally bounded narrative forms of the novel and the pursuit of the moment that characterizes the libertine ethos. Despite her choice to emphasize the moment rather than narrative development, she cannot abandon temporality altogether given her compulsion to narrate, and like her predecessors, she reverts to the rhythmic articulation of time as a means to strike a balance between these poles. She fails not as a libertine, but as a narrator, and consequently she joins the ranks of the late eighteenth-century libertine characters who are ultimately unable to sustain the transgressive structure of time to which they give voice. Lovelace, Valmont, Merteuil, and Juliette all arrive at the end of their respective texts bereft of their previous power. For Juliette, it is the power to interest us.

This brings us to the final thematic linkage between Juliette and these earlier characters: their shared concern with legacy. The suggestion that Juliette is concerned with futurity may seem curious in light of the Sadean libertine ethos that is calibrated towards a denial of future. Juliette certainly does not aim to produce a legacy for herself in the manner of earlier libertines, whose occupation with the future manifests as a desire to succeed in a great seductive undertaking in order to create a high watermark of transgression within the annals of rakish history. The Sadean philosophical ethos disallows any such undertaking due to the compromise of the present moment such a narrative focus necessarily entails. Juliette would have us believe that her repetitive narration is focused solely on structuring the present to the extent that it is presented as no different from the earlier oral renditions of transgressive stories throughout her text. Consequently Juliette’s autobiography aims to service the moment, not to outlast it; it is spoken for immediate purpose and then swiftly forgotten. This is evidenced in the denouement of the text when the emotional yield from the conclusion of Juliette’s immense narrative is a few tears from her sister Justine and “the straining full-colored pricks” of the Chevalier and the Marquis

---

46 Oral rendition and written narrative are equated throughout Juliette. Firstly through instances in which Juliette is said to rehearse her entire transgressive history up until that moment (461-462). Secondly in the inclusion of other libertine’s oral renditions as miniature texts, themselves embedded within Juliette’s larger narration, most notably the autobiography of Captain Brisatesta, which occupies pages 815-909 of the text, and begins with its own subheading.
that leads them to enact some transgressive actions that are undescribed (1189). Juliette’s narration is thus presented as a stimulative to the continual reprise of transgression, so that it endorses repetition rather than attempting to arrive at a definitive conclusion in the manner of Lovelace or Valmont.

Yet for all of Juliette’s claim to focus on the present, her attitude is undermined by her abiding belief in the finality and inevitability of death, which forces a conclusion. Durand summarizes this orientation towards death when she states: “You will admit that one cannot help but be certain that death is one of the necessities of Nature, who does not create us save to die; if we begin, it is in order to end; each instant advances us nowhere but toward that terminal point; everything indicates that death is Nature’s final and sole aim” (1038). This temporal attitude is an extension of the Sadean denial of the afterlife, so that there is no existence of the soul following death, only a material return to nature. Death is forever the caveat behind the joys of the present moment and as much as this may incentivize Juliette’s celebration of the present in the manner of the carpe diem poem, so does the centrality of death to the Sadean model of atheistic transgression ensure that she must, in fact, constantly consider futurity and conclusion. Indeed the constant dissatisfaction with transgression that spurs on its escalation and repetition is born out of a desire to deny the looming possibility of conclusion.

Juliette’s solution to this awareness is to deny the future by destroying its possibility within herself. This is most obviously seen in the frequency with which libertines kill their own children, a repeated transgression throughout the text which is enacted by Nourceil, Minski, Borchamps, Cordelli, and finally Juliette herself. Angela Carter locates Juliette’s murder of her daughter Marianne as the moment of her libertine self-actualization in its denial of womanhood and the maternal (Carter 98, Sade 1186). To kill a child, especially within the context of a libertine ethos that denies any afterlife, is to destroy the possibility of a future self or legacy. Lee Edelman comments on the centrality of the child figure to a universal politics of “reproductive futurism,” against which the queer individual is positioned as narcissistic and anti-social: “Whatever refuses this mandate by which our political institutions compel the collective reproduction of the Child must appear as a threat not only to the organization of a given social order but also, and far more ominously, to social order as such, insofar as it threatens the logic of futurism on which meaning always depends” (11). Edelman goes on to argue that queer individuals should embrace this future-negating drive as an act of self-definition, an attitude that Juliette and her compatriots clearly already inhabit in their intention to transgress all forms of established social order and future. Yet this destruction is, in itself, a commentary on futurity to the
extent that the intention to destroy one’s future requires the same level of consideration and energy as an intention to establish a legacy. To transgress a desire for legacy is to highlight that legacy, in the same way that Juliette’s atheism means she must constantly discuss God.

This personal denial of the future is expanded into a genocidal attitude towards humanity as a whole, so that mass murder becomes the ultimate expression of libertinism. Saint-Frond’s fantasy of his ideal existence perfectly encapsulates this sentiment:

Were I king, Juliette, were I sovereign lord of this world, my greatest pleasure would be to walk about with killing henchmen in my train, to massacre instantly whatever displeased my very sensitive glance… I’d tread the full length and breadth of my domain everywhere upon a carpet of corpses, and I’d be happy; I’d wade across an infinite scene of destruction, and to the sea of blood wherein my feet would steep I’d add my flowing seed. (185)

This is the paradise offered by the Sadean model of transgression. Saint-Frond describes a state of constant stimulation in which massacres occur “instantly” without need for the elaborate verbal strategizing and forethought to set up transgressions, as seen throughout Juliette. The constant flow of sperm he describes is the ultimate representation of this blissful state, as there is no longer a need to hold back the sexual orgasm in order to properly escalate the transgressive act. He dreams of a perpetual orgasm with no need for narrative, simply an eternity of constant stimulation. Saint-Frond’s paradise offers a personal rejection of procreation and futurity that extends to a rejection of these goals in all life. The universal application of libertine philosophy within Juliette establishes a singular line of thinking that can be difficult to follow to its inevitable crescendo, which requires the libertine to single-handedly kill thousands of people. This is something that both Juliette and Durand stumble over in their careers through their hesitation to undertake such transgression; it is their only significant point of failure as libertines, and demonstrates the challenge to the Sadean individual of true commitment to a denial of futurity. The purpose of the murder of children and mass populations is predicated on control. Just as killing situates the killer as the agent of the transition between states of being, so too does denying the possibilities of the future demonstrate a control over the temporal. One never owns anything so much as when one destroys it.

The deaths Juliette causes are the result of desire that is oriented not only around her own pleasure but also depriving others of pleasure. She acts upon a fantasy of humanity’s destruction, a fantasy that asserts her selfhood at the expense of all else. When this selfishness is enacted in the purposeful, methodical, and philosophically justified
fashion of the Sadean libertine, it takes on enormous transgressive potential. Yet to methodically exert oneself to preclude the possibility of the future is to demonstrate an extreme preoccupation with it. To scorch the ground so that nothing may grow is to reveal a preoccupation with what might happen otherwise, tellingly revealed in the libertine compulsion to constantly reiterate his or her explanations for the denial of futurity. Creation and death accompany one another so that a focus on destruction means you must necessarily consider creation. It is worth revisiting the similarities between the Sadean libertines and the monastic community, as the latter is equally uninterested in the creation of a material legacy. This is why each relies on practices of exclusion, so that they are not obligated to defer to the world in any way in their attitude to temporality. It is because the libertine must return to society, and indeed must rely on it in order to establish the taboo for their transgression, that they fail. Juliette is in fact required to have many children in order that she may craft her non-legacy by killing them.

A recurring contradiction within Juliette is the denial of futurity while also denying the awareness of the future it is predicated on. I would refer to two passages, one from the final paragraph of Juliette which describes the eponymous character’s eventual death, and the second from her author’s last will and testament:

The company left the following morning; greatest success crowned our heroes for the next ten years. At the end of that space, the death of Madame de Lorsange [Juliette] caused her to disappear from the world’s scene, just as it is customary that all brilliant things on earth finally fade away. Unique in her kind, that woman died without having left any record of the events which distinguished the latter part of her life, and so it is that no writer will be able to chronicle it for the public. (1193)

The ditch once covered over, above it acorns shall be strewn, in order that the spot become green again, and the copse grown back thick over it, the traces of my grave may disappear from the face of the earth as I trust the memory of me shall fade out of the minds of all men save nevertheless for those few who in their goodness have loved me until the last and of whom I carry away a sweet remembrance with me to the grave. (“Last Will and Testament” 159)

Both of these present a clear expression of the Sadean denial of the future, in which human death is a finality that sweeps away any memory of a person’s present deeds. Yet each is undermined by the profound concern with legacy that it clearly manifests. In Juliette the presence of the text itself completely upends its premise of being forgotten or unknown, so that Juliette’s legacy is established at the very point it is being denied. While the concluding passage refuses to record the final ten years of her life, it cannot deny the existence of the

47 This can be related to the inseparable dualism of Eros/Thanatos, life and death, discussed in Sigmund Freud’s works Beyond the Pleasure Principle, and Civilization and its Discontents.
earlier record of her life or her actions as a narrator, and thus attempts to deny the future while explicitly presenting one. The presence of Sade’s will, which demonstrates a concern with the self after death, similarly undermines his claim that he wishes to be forgotten. This is particularly evident in his desire that “acorns shall be strewn” upon his grave, so that his material death leads to creation within the natural world. The image of greenery and foliage Sade envisages, and Juliette’s successes and eventual death, are hardly the empty world of blood and sperm that Saint-Frond describes as his eternal paradise.

*Juliette* is thus equally concerned with legacy as other eighteenth-century libertine texts and equally unsustainable in its temporal attitude. Instead of Lovelace and Valmont’s wish to create a great narrative that echoes into the future, Juliette wishes to be forgotten, only to arrive at an equally conclusive failure. She is the last true inhabitant of the once-palatial estate of libertinism that has since faded and rotted throughout the eighteenth century, and her attempt to restore it is as fleeting as the attempts of her predecessors.
Conclusion

The relationship of the libertine character to time never manifests in the same way as in the mid-to-late eighteenth-century novel. While individual threads that compose the libertine character’s attitude to time might appear in other works of fiction, none combine these thematic elements in the same mixture as Lovelace, Valmont, Merteuil, and Juliette. I have established that these characters aim to both narrate a self-conceived plot while simultaneously pursuing pleasures of the moment. These two goals reflect fundamentally incompatible temporal viewpoints, and their underlying tension must therefore be resolved by the libertine. This is achieved through a form of temporal articulation, in which the libertine seeks to experience time in carefully measured increments which emphasize repetition, yet still gradually accrue narrative meaning through variation and delay. Each of the characters explored here attempts to focus on the present within these individual moments, whilst still conforming to a larger narrative structure that he or she has plotted out in advance.

Despite the complexity and nuance of this temporal understanding, these characters experience a general failure across all of the texts examined here. The control the libertine must exert over him or herself in order to maintain this carefully balanced temporal articulation frequently breaks down. Furthermore he or she might over-emphasize a narration at the expense of its moments of transgression, or vice versa. In all cases, the eighteenth-century libertine character is associated with failure and the inability to realize his or her goals.

Failure is therefore an essential component of these characters and their larger significance within both the libertine writing tradition and the eighteenth century as a whole. *Clarissa* is all the more memorable for its tragic conclusion, as is *Juliette* for its conspicuous lack of narrative in favour of an endless listing of sexual escapades. Failure is what establishes these texts as unique in that they portray libertine characters who treat libertinism, and particularly the libertine’s sense of temporality, as a serious subject with a bleak outcome. There is little in the way of frivolity or gaiety in these texts and the severity of its characters is equal to the seriousness of their attempt to craft a legacy for themselves.

By outlining the unique depiction of libertine temporality in the late eighteenth-century text this study sheds new light on the most significant libertine characters from this period. It reveals the way in which a cohesive sense of temporality frames and informs each of their actions, and reinforces the literary and cultural significance of these major works of fiction from the eighteenth century. Furthermore it contributes to critical discourse
surrounding these texts by counteracting any suggestion that libertinism fails to develop beyond the seventeenth century, and underlines the need to recognize the fluidity of literary networks by bridging the critical gap between French and English literary studies. In this regard, the connections established here in relation to temporality continue the work of James Fowler’s 2011 text *The Libertine’s Nemesis* to demonstrate clear thematic parallels across English and French libertine texts.

In broader terms, that libertine characters engage with the same temporal dilemma highlights the way in which new temporalities were being developed, discussed, and discarded within the eighteenth century. Lovelace, Valmont, Merteuil, and Juliette conceptualize their position within time in a way that is distinct not only from previous libertine works, but other ideologies of time that are contemporary to them. The most notable of these is the proto-capitalist valuation of time as labour. In 1748, the same year that *Clarissa* finished being published, Benjamin Franklin published his essay “Advice to a Young Tradesman,” which opens with the following passage:

> Remember, that time is money. He that can earn ten shillings a day by his labour, and goes abroad, or sits idle, one half of that day, though he spends but sixpence during his diversion or idleness, ought not to reckon that the only expense; he has really spent, or rather thrown away, five shillings beside. (304)

Franklin’s temporal stance labels its increments in monetary value. Under his rubric time not employed to generate income is devalued and undesirable, and this in turn implies an entire philosophical-ethical system built upon the “efficient” deployment of one’s time in the pursuit of money. Max Weber’s classic essay *The Spirit of Capitalism* argues that under capitalism, the acquisition of money becomes the ultimate purpose of man’s life, beyond even the means for the satisfaction of his material needs (18). Franklin’s attitude towards time, which he seeks to instil in his reader, offers a means by which the drive to acquire money is conceptualized and instilled at the individual level.

Nothing, of course, could be further from the articulated deployment of time presented by the libertine text, or its parallels in Rousseau’s reveries and monastic life. Obviously none of the philosophical frameworks which inspire these attitudes towards time are particularly concerned with material goods. The libertine is certainly interested in wealth, but only insofar as it is conducive to their freedom to transgress and never for its own sake. Rather it is how one spends time that is far more important to the libertine than the material or sexual rewards which his or her actions might produce. The expenditure of time is not a means to an end, but rather an end in and of itself. Whether in the attempt to enact an unceasing transgression in the manner of Juliette, or Lovelace’s focus on the
pleasure of the gradually unfolding seduction, the only reward for the tremendous effort these characters exert is an existence balanced between the moment, the past, and future.

That libertine temporality stands in opposition to proto-industrial attitudes to time does not mean it is recessive or conservative. Indeed, it prioritizes the experience of personal time in a way that is distinctly modern and forward-thinking for the eighteenth century. Roland Racevskis’ history of early modern clockmaking explores how shifts in external modalities of time, as timekeeping devices become more accurate—impact internal dynamics of thought and feeling (14). He declares the subjective awareness of temporality to be an innovation of early modern culture and literature, noting the gradual privatization of time gestured to in the spatial and aural contrast between the close sound of a watch’s constant ticking and the distant tolling of the church bell or clock tower (17-9). The libertine seducer acts on a highly individualized regulation of time rather than a communal one, and thus presents a pseudo-modern focus on the measurement of personal and subjective time. Temporal articulation is a tremendous expenditure of effort that aims to regulate only this subjective, personal, sense of time’s passage for the individual libertine. Thus, he or she employs the intense and carefully strategized measurement of personal time, something associated with the capitalist demand for efficiency, for a distinctly non-economic purpose.

I would suggest that this is the actual legacy that the eighteenth-century libertine character leaves us: an attempt to present a model of selfhood that defies a view of the individual as subservient to time’s passage. They stand against time’s erosion of the individual not only in their attempt to craft a legacy that will supersede that erosion, but also by living in each moment in a way that aims to make temporality irrelevant. They seek to transgress the power of time, to craft a life in which they will not experience its passage yet still enjoy the benefits of possessing a cohesive sense of plotted self. Lovelace, Valmont, Merteuil, and Juliette each fail, yet they continue to challenge us as readers to question our own attitudes towards temporality.
Bibliography


Martin, Mary Patricia. “Reading Reform in Richardson’s Clarissa.” *Studies in English Literature 1500-1900*, vol. 37, no. 3, 1997, pp.595-614.


