

#4 Valmont & MERTEUIL

VALMONT. I often wonder how you managed to invent yourself.

MERTEUIL. I had no choice, did I, I'm a woman. Women are obliged to be far more skillful than men, because who ever wastes time cultivating inessential skills? You think you put as much ingenuity into winning us as we put into losing: well, it's debatable, I suppose, but from then on, you hold every ace in the pack. You can ruin us whenever the fancy takes you: all we can achieve by denouncing you is to enhance your prestige. We can't even get rid of you when we want to: we're compelled to unstitch, painstakingly, what you would just cut through. We either have to devise some way of making you want to leave us, so you'll feel too guilty to harm us; or find a reliable means of blackmail: otherwise you can destroy our reputation and our life with a few well-chosen words. So of course I had to invent: not only myself, but ways of escape no one else has ever thought of, not even I, because I had to be fast enough on my feet to know how to improvise. And I've succeeded, because I always knew I was born to dominate your sex and avenge my own.

VALMONT. Yes, but what I asked you was how.

MERTEUIL. When I came out into society, I'd already realized that the role I was condemned to, namely to keep quiet and do as I was told, gave me the perfect opportunity to listen and pay attention: not to what people told me, which was naturally of no interest, but to whatever it was they were trying to hide. I practiced detachment. I learned how to smile pleasantly while, under the table, I stuck a fork into the back of my hand. I became not merely impenetrable, but a virtuoso of deceit. Needless to say, at that stage nobody told me anything: and it wasn't pleasure I was after, it was knowledge. But when, in the interests of furthering that knowledge, I told my confessor I'd done "everything," his reaction was so appalled, I began to get a sense of how extreme pleasure might be. No sooner had I made this discovery than my mother announced my marriage: so I was able to contain my curiosity and arrived in Monsieur de Merteuil's arms a virgin. All in all, Merteuil gave me little cause for complaint: and the minute I began to find him something of a nuisance, he very tactfully died. I used my year of mourning to complete my studies: I consulted the strictest moralists to learn how to appear; philosophers to find out what to think; and novelists to see what I could get away with. And finally I was well placed to perfect my techniques.

VALMONT. Describe them.

#4 Valmont & MERTEUIL

MERTEUIL. Only flirt with those you intend to refuse: then you acquire a reputation for invincibility, whilst slipping safely away with the lover of your choice. A poor choice is less dangerous than an obvious choice. Never write letters. Get them to write letters. Always be sure they think they're the only one. Win or die.

(VALMONT smiles. He looks at MERTEUIL for a moment.)

VALMONT. These principles are infallible, are they?

MERTEUIL. When I want a man, I have him; when he wants to tell, he finds he can't. That's the whole story.

VALMONT. And was that our story?

(MERTEUIL pauses before answering.)

MERTEUIL. I wanted you before we'd even met. My self-esteem demanded it. Then, when you began to pursue me...I wanted you so badly. It's the only one of my notions has ever got the better of me. Single combat