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Games of Idealized Courtship and Seduction in the Paintings of Antoine Watteau and Jean-Honoré Fragonard and in Laclos' Novel, Dangerous Liaisons

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GAMES OF IDEALIZED COURTSHIP AND SEDUCTION IN THE

PAINTINGS OF ANTOINE WATTEAU AND JEAN-HONORÉ FRAGONARD

AND IN LACLOS’ NOVEL, DANGEROUS LIAISONS

By

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Barbara
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ABSTRACT

Although courtship is frequently referred to as a game because it is understood to have rules that follow a particular sequence when the individuals in a couple are getting to know each other, no one has argued that it is really two very different games. This dissertation examines two versions of the game of courtship. In the first version, called the game of idealized courtship, the players follow certain pre-determined rules thus ensuring that the game is fair and equal. It is also mutually consensual and each player has the right of refusal to continue the game at any point. The second version is called the game of seduction. This game is one in which one player corrupts the rules of idealized courtship through the use of deceit and secrecy to trick the other player into having a sexual relationship. This game must consist of a seducer and a victim who play using very different rules. As a result, this game can not be fair or equal. Consent and the right of refusal are subverted because the seducer is willing to lie to win the game. One way in which these games can be seen is through an examination of these themes in paintings and literature. Selected paintings of Antoine Watteau and Jean-Honoré Fragonard along with Choderlos de Laclos’ novel, Dangerous Liaisons, were chosen to illustrate these concepts because they successfully show the games of idealized courtship and seduction. As three of the most important examples in painting and literature found in 18th century society, these works reflect the enlightened view of the individual particularly with regard to a psychological emphasis on love and sexual relationships. The works of scholars in the disciplines of verbal and non-verbal communication, art history and the theory of games and play create the theoretical basis for the dissertation. Research for this dissertation focuses on three key rules of idealized courtship. These rules involve a combination of the principles of play and the definition of games, the inclusion of signs and symbols that represent love, and the communication cues that demonstrate consensual courting behavior. Once these rules are identified, it is then shown how the game of seduction breaks all of them.
INTRODUCTION

Inconstancy, teasing changes of the mind if not of the heart, is a large part of the flirting game. (Posner 76)

Since seduction never stops at the truth of signs, but operates by deception and secrecy, it inaugurates a mode of circulation which is also secretive and ritualistic, a kind of immediate initiation that plays only by its own rules. (Baudrillard 163)

What is courtship? On the one hand, courtship is a social process by which consenting couples find each other with the goal of marriage and reproduction in mind. But courtship also has an emotional and personal aspect that couples display when they are sexually attracted to each other. Givens notes that “courtship can be analyzed as a process by which intimate relationships, which may come to involve sexual commitments, are created” (346). In discussing the personal emotions, Perper comments “for the lover, courtship and love are hope and desire embedded in enchantment” (6). The idea of enchantment means that the couple engages in a relationship that is playful and fun. The process of courtship is also referred to as a game because it is assumed to have rules or behaviors that follow a particular sequence when the couples are getting to know each other and deciding whether or not to pursue the relationship. Viewing courtship as a game with rules defines the relationship between the players and determines if the game is fair and equal or if it is unfair and unequal.

What is the game of courtship and how does it work? In this dissertation I will examine two versions of the game of courtship. The first version, which I call the game of idealized courtship, is illustrated in the visual arts through the paintings of Antoine Watteau and Jean-Honoré Fragonard. In this version the couple agrees to play by certain pre-determined rules thus ensuring that the game is fair, equal and mutually consensual. The second version, which I call the game
of seduction, is illustrated in literature through Choderlos de Laclos’ novel, *Dangerous Liaisons*. This game is one in which one player corrupts the rules of idealized courtship through the use of deceit and secrecy to trick the other player into having a sexual relationship. The works of Antoine Watteau, Jean-Honoré Fragonard and Choderlos de Laclos were chosen to illustrate these concepts because they represent three of the most important examples of courtship practiced and abused in painting and literature found in 18th century society. In the following passage, Daniel Roche describes the major changes that were happening historically in society during this time period:

Because of the idea of religion primarily, along with other important forms of social organization in which equality and liberty had no part, a collective idea of man dominated. As in Plato’s *Republic*, the ideal social structure was defined in terms of ends rather than of individual happiness or progress. Over the long run, the emergence of a new conception of man can be seen in the gradual replacement of the concept of *universitas*, of which living men were merely parts, by *societas*, which simply referred to a collection of individuals. (519)

These changes reflected the 18th century’s enlightened view of the individual particularly with regard to government, politics and social institutions. One of the most important cultural developments in which this new individualism flourished was in the salons. In the following passage, Roche describes the impact that the salons had on society:

In the salons where men and women of the world met with men and women of letters, the art of discussion reigned. People were attracted by a shared interest in common pastimes: dining, gambling, reading, and debating...polite manners and *bon ton* were prized in a setting in which a spirit of equality reigned, a spirit born of constant interchange and mutual association. (443)
Women, in particular, were involved in these salons and presided over many of the most sought after and well known opportunities for members of society to gather. Vidal writes that “for under the direction of women, the salon became the institutional vehicle of their presence and effectiveness in society” (85). Roche also notes that “individualism was increasingly expressed through letters. Letters repeated what was said in conversations and spread the sociability of the salons far and wide. Painting also lent itself to the portrayal of this lively form of social intercourse” (546). The rise in individualism eventually led both literature and painting to move from the literary and scholarly emphasis to a more psychological emphasis (Roche 545). This psychological emphasis also found its way into the epistolary novel. Roche explains this transformation in the following manner:

Rousseau’s *Nouvelle Héloïse* (1761) and Laclos’s *Liaisons dangereuses* (1782) developed the genre to perfection. Both taught readers to understand characters from within in terms of psychological and poetic verisimilitude and social conditions. In both the epistolary novel and actual correspondence, what appealed to people was the possibility of using an instrument with which they could fashion themselves for the purpose of persuasion or seduction. (546-547)

The theme of seduction was a major influence on the paintings and literature of the 18th century. In the following passage Saint-Armand describes the concept and importance of seduction. These two differing views of seduction are found in the paintings of Watteau and Fragonard and in the novel, *Dangerous Liaisons*:

The eighteenth century, Baudrillard tells us, witnessed the twilight of seduction. Its flights of passion, elaborate arabesques of gallantry, and unabashed libertinage are still evoked with nostalgia. As Baudrillard writes, “The eighteenth century still spoke of seduction. It was with valor and honour, a central preoccupation of the aristocratic spheres. But seduction, I must argue, must be apprehended
somewhat closer to its origin. It is above all fascination, mesmerism, sorcery. (3)

The themes of the decorative arts of the 18th century also reflected the end of the baroque period and introduced the rococo. In the following passage, Levey describes the difference that the rococo made in determining how 18th century patrons viewed painting:

The standards set by the baroque were essentially those that are unattainable for ordinary humanity. It does not please or amuse but stuns the spectator. The rococo treats a solemn theme light-heartedly…it may be an absurdly rose-tinted view of life, but it has some connection with experience; it may even express a quite profound truth about the human heart – one more profound than can ever be detected in miles of battle pictures. (16)

This circumstance was particularly true in France because “the Rococo salon was the center of early 18th century Parisian society and Paris was the social capital of Europe” (Kleiner and Mamiya 782). The combination of the new individualism, the freedom of the salons and the shift to a psychological emphasis in painting and literature make the 18th century an ideal period to illustrate the games of idealized courtship and seduction.

The game of idealized courtship is best observed visually because there are standard signs, symbols and behaviors that indicate if a couple is involved in a courting relationship. This behavior can be recognized by an observer just as it is possible for a spectator to watch any other game and know what kind of game is being played. For example, when two teams of players are engaged in a sports match, it is apparent to the audience, who know and understand the rules of the game, exactly where the game stands at any point. In discussing courtship and its external visible signs, Perper comments that "visual artists - photographers, painters, cameramen, and dancers - are often familiar with the whole sequence,
[body] synchronization included" (84). In this statement Perper means that there are non-verbal communication behaviors which serve as courtship signs that artists can see and record through the use of images and representation. These images capture behavior as it is occurring between couples who are courting. The paintings of Watteau and Fragonard illustrate the game of idealized courtship because the painters have visually portrayed the game as erotic, sensual and sexual. It is also shown to be joyous and playful. The scenes and couples depicted in the paintings will show the range and scope of traditional courtship behaviors which may range from flirtation to the physical desire to engage in sexual behavior. The key to maintaining an idealized courtship relationship is to ensure that rules of the game include the idea of mutual consent. The right of refusal to play and the ability of either player to end the game without penalty at any time must be understood and followed.

The paintings of Watteau and Fragonard demonstrate different aspects of the game of idealized courtship. Watteau’s genre is the fête galante (Levey 56) which tends to portray couples in group settings who appear to be in the early stages of courtship. In speaking of this genre Vidal defines the fête galante as a “contemporary social occasion” and says that Watteau “repeatedly uses social contact in his art which is seen as amorous celebration or in terms of performances of music, dance, and theater” (2). Most of Watteau’s paintings are set outdoors where aristocratic lovers are pictured dressed in finery and costumes. They are engaged in dancing, singing, playing instruments and other activities that show visually that they are pursuing each other for courting relationships. Fragonard, though, paints couples who either already have a sexual relationship or who openly desire one. Commentators note that while the painters are similar in many ways, they are also significantly different in other ways. The Goncourts saw Watteau and Fragonard as the two poets of the 18th century because “there was always an element of the fantastic in their paintings” (Wakefield 14). For Hubert, “Watteau’s Gamme d’amour is a “metaphysical” blend of love, music, and color
scales while Fragonard captures Watteau’s poetic atmosphere on a less ethereal level…” (89-90). Saisselin presented a similar point of view in describing the differences between Watteau and Fragonard:

The great poet of the 18th century is Watteau. It is no longer a question of stylistic development with which we are dealing, but rather of a vision, of a dream…in the work of Fragonard love is frankly sensual and devoid of any metaphysical overtones. What saves him from vulgarity is the lightness of his touch. (146, 148)

Or Saisselin, quoting Chamfort, says about Fragonard’s work, “love is an exchange of two phantasies and the meeting of two epidermi” (148). The couples in his paintings touch and desire a physical relationship. While Fragonard’s paintings are explicit sexually, Thulliard shows that in the paintings’ consent is present which is very different from the concept of deceit and misrepresentation of motives:

Handsome lads kiss buxom lasses, who put up no resistance. We are far removed, indeed from Sade or even Laclos…in his (Fragonard) work we see frankness and health – even I would like to say, a certain innocence. This is because his women are young girls who blush at their first experience of love, his lovers are youth who show more boldness than they really feel. (93-94)

For Sutton “a painting such as Fragonard’s The Longed For Moment does not depict a seduction scene conceived with the cynicism of Laclos: instead, it represents the culmination of passion inspired by love” (110). Fragonard enjoyed painting women and usually focused on their sexuality in his paintings. Hubert describes Fragonard as “above all the painter of love. He lyrically expresses this feeling by his relentless dedication to woman, the central figure in a springlike, sunny, naughty world” (90). According to Thulliard, the women in Fragonard’s
paintings are described as “an abstraction or more; they are an ideal with pretty faces, smooth skin and perfect figures” (95). The women are also portrayed as being involved in a relationship of their own choosing. They seek and desire sexual pleasure to the same extent as their male partners. And this desire, which represents consent, is what defines the game of idealized courtship. The game can occur in different stages which may mean that some couples are only ready for flirtation while others are already involved in sexual relationships. What matters is that the game is consensual and mutual and that the players have made the choice to play.

Unlike the game of idealized courtship, the game of seduction can not be illustrated through a visual medium because the deceit, lies and secrecy needed to win the game are more commonly found in behavior that is revealed through a communication structure which consists of words and language. The game of seduction is, therefore, best shown using a literary approach because the way in which the characters exploit words in conversation with each other will determine if their behavior is open and honest or if it is secret and deceitful. *Dangerous Liaisons* was selected to illustrate this game of seduction because its reputation as a novel of seduction is well established. Sutton characterizes the game of seduction portrayed in *Dangerous Liaisons* as one of “cynicism which implies distrust and doubt about the objectives of the men and women who are seeking sexual relationships” (110). Showalter notes that “the subject is complex since it concerns the society rather than the individual and no single individual can have the necessary depth and breadth of knowledge…the letters serve as legal documents from society” (336). Thody believes that “Laclos never forgets that the reader is looking over his shoulder and is seeing different meanings in the novel. Only the reader is the omniscient narrator because each character is given his or her own language” (30 – 31). Todorov also explains that the entire story of *Dangerous Liaisons* is in fact recounted two, and often even three, times. Aspects
of the same events are presented from varying points of view as the following passage illustrates:

Cecile recounts naively her experiences to Sophie while Merteuil interprets them in her letters to Valmont. On the other hand, Valmont informs the Marquise of his experiences with Tourvel, who herself writes to Volanges. From the beginning one realizes the duality already remarked at the level of the relations among the characters.

(25 – 26)

This duality is what establishes a double standard in the novel. It defines the game of seduction and it is through the use of language or the (re)telling of the story in different versions that establishes the deceit and secrecy that prevail in this game.

This dissertation has an introduction, five chapters and a conclusion. Chapter 1 establishes the theoretical framework of the game of idealized courtship. The theoretical framework of idealized courtship will be used to show the contrast between the way this game is played and the manner in which the games of seduction are constructed. I will show that there are three primary rules of courtship which when taken together create a visual picture of a game in which each player chooses to participate because its outcome is fair and equal. These primary rules involve a combination of the principles of play and the definition of games, the visual signs and symbols representing love that are found in the paintings, and the communication cues that demonstrate consensual courting behavior. In order to explain the game of idealized courtship as it exists in the paintings, research for this chapter must include three areas. To illustrate the first primary rule which is that courtship is a game, it looks at the works of Johan Huizinga (Homo Ludens: a study of the play element in culture) and Roger Caillois (Man, Play and Games) to establish the framework that involves the rules of play and the components of a game. Well-known for their theories of play and
categorization of games, the works of these scholars provide the model for how I will define and structure the game of idealized courtship. Next, research includes the works of some of the foremost scholars involved in 18th century writing about the paintings of Watteau and Fragonard to show that the second primary rule is that signs and symbols illustrate the game of idealized courtship. The works of these writers describe the society of the day as it is portrayed in the actions of the characters, the typical dress and costumes of the century as well as in the social activities in which the players engaged for entertainment. These activities include dance, music and entertainment held in a pastoral setting. The scholars included in this list are: Colin Bailey, *(The Age of Watteau, Chardin and Fragonard)*, Thomas Crow *(Painters and Public Life in Eighteenth Century Paris)*, Michael Levey *(Rococo to Revolution)*, Jennifer Milam *(Fragonard and the Blindman’s Game)*, Julie Ann Plax *(Watteau and the Cultural Politics of Eighteenth Century France)*, Mary Sheriff *(For Love or Money? Rethinking Fragonard* ” and *Fragonard: Art and Eroticism)* and Mary Vidal *(Watteau’s Painted Conversations: Art, Literature and Talk in Seventeenth and Eighteenth Century France)*.

To illustrate the third primary rule, research focuses on literature dealing with communication cues and their relationship to courtship behavior in couples. This research establishes the communication theory behind these cues and shows how they illustrate the game of idealized courtship. The scholars in this area include Ray Birdwhistell *(Kinesics and Context: Essays on Body Motion Communication)*, David Given *(The Nonverbal Basis of Attraction: Flirtation, Courtship and Seduction)*, Karl Grammer *(Human courtship behaviour: biological basis and cognitive processing and Strangers meet: laughter and nonverbal signs of interest in the opposite sex)*, Monica Moore *(Nonverbal Courtship Patterns in Women: Context and Consequences)*, Timothy Perper *(Sex Signals: The Biology of Love)* and Schleflen *(Quasi-Courtship Behavior in Psychotherapy)*. These visible cues will allow the viewer to know immediately
that a game of idealized courtship is occurring and that it is mutual and consensual between the couple.

In Chapter 2, I examine the paintings of Antoine Watteau to show how the game of idealized courtship is illustrated. Watteau shows idealized courtship through the location of games in gardens and pastoral settings. He provides idyllic scenes and journeys in which couples are engaged in identifiable courting behavior. Watteau’s paintings will show the game in its early stages and the couples will represent the game at the point of flirtation and the start of desire.

Using the game theory, signs and symbols, and non-verbal communication cues developed in Chapter 1, I review selected paintings to illustrate how the three primary rules of courtship work in each one. The paintings chosen to represent the game are *The Pilgrimage to Cythera, Venetian Pleasures, The Shepherds* and *Le Faux Pas*. The first three paintings show couples engaged in social behavior in which the game is one that is played within group settings. Their flirtation and interest in love is evident but the presence of the group ensures that their behavior will remain at this level. Three of the paintings will show the refusal theme. In *Venetian Pleasures* and *The Shepherds* the theme of refusal is apparent in the non-communication cues of males with wandering hands who attempt to escalate the behavior to another level. *Le Faux Pas* also appears to escalate the behavior to include physical contact. Non-verbal communication cues will show that the woman is still able to refuse the man’s advances thus keeping the game within the bounds of a normal courting relationship.

Normal courting relationships also involve the desire for sexual pleasure in the form of a physical relationship. Chapter 3 examines the paintings of Jean-Honoré Fragonard to show another element of the game of idealized courtship. Like Watteau, Fragonard’s paintings contain the motifs of love and courtship and are for the most part shown in settings in which nature plays a role in setting the tone of the scene. In his paintings, however, the players are either already involved in sexual relationships or they demonstrate the strong desire to have one.
Fragonard’s paintings are more sensual and illustrate more strongly the themes of sexual desire and erotic play. The paintings selected to illustrate the game of idealized courtship are *The Meeting, Blindman’s Buff, The Swing* and *The Bolt*. In the first three paintings the couples are engaged in different stages of sexual behavior in an outdoor setting in which nature supplies a dramatic backdrop to enhance the desire. *The Meeting* shows a couple in a secluded part of a garden who are anticipating a sexual encounter when they are interrupted by an intruder who is off stage. In *Blindman’s Buff* a couple plays the game which supplies the intimacy to allow them to become sexually aroused in surroundings that are playful and acceptable. Then, *The Swing* shows a couple who already have a sexual relationship. They are playing and teasing each other although the outcome of the game is already known. Their behavior gives the viewer an inside look at their passion and the sexual consummation that will soon follow. Finally, *The Bolt* shows a couple who may have already engaged in some sex play. Their bodies are positioned as if in a dance which symbolizes their closeness and desire.

Chapter 4 establishes the game of seduction as it is portrayed in Laclos’ *Dangerous Liaisons*. In this game the players can not be equal because one of them puts his or her sexual pleasure above the rules and will do anything to win the game no matter what the cost is to the other player. This chapter looks at four elements that comprise the game of seduction. First, it explores the roles of the seducer and the victim to explain how the expectations and behaviors of each differ significantly in how they view and play the game. It will show that the seducer performs two roles concurrently. He or she pretends to play the game of idealized courtship to convince the victim that the game is fair; in reality, however, the seducer is actually engaged in the game of seduction. Their victims, in contrast, are naïve and innocent and trust in the rules of the game. Understanding these roles is important to the outcome of the game because their misuse affects the right of refusal to escalate the behavior or to end the game without penalty. Second, the chapter examines the characteristics of deception,
secrecy and denial of responsibility to show how the seducers create a false appearance when trying to convince the victim to have a sexual relationship. The third element of the chapter looks at the communication strategies that the seducers engage in to trick the victim into playing the game. This part reveals the misleading and untruthful verbal strategies as well as the gestures, facial expressions and actions that seducers exploit to deceive their victims. The final element discusses the seductive techniques that seducers use to make their behavior believable and unquestionable to the victim. The first technique involves the use of theatrical practices as illusory techniques in staging the game of seduction. The emphasis in this part is on the seducers’ knowledge of theatrical performance and techniques and their ability to use this disguise to fool their victims into thinking that they are involved in a game of idealized courtship. The next technique involves the seducers’ use of techniques found in games of war as strategies to win the game. These strategies are shown in the planning of seductions as well as in the language of war which includes the terms “victory” and “triumph” to describe the seducers desired outcome of the game.

Chapter 5 applies the concepts of seduction found in the previous chapter to two games of seduction found in Dangerous Liaisons. The first game is the one that Valmont plays with Tourvel and Cécile. These games are discussed together because they show how Valmont adapts the game of seduction to two victims. It examines the roles of the players to show how the seducer/victim identification is different for each one. Then the seducer’s use of the characteristics of seduction is considered to show how each victim is tricked into submission and why they can not recognize untruthful behavior. The games also show how Valmont uses communication cues and seductive techniques to mislead his victims. The second game of seduction is the one that Valmont and Merteuil, both seducers, play with each other as they try to resume their relationship. The section shows that their game is one of a parody of idealized courtship because they initially agree to reunite and resume their former sexual relationship once
certain conditions are met. These conditions include Valmont’s seductions of Tourvel and Cécile and the proof of both that he must provide to Merteuil. While this game begins as a friendly competition, it quickly disintegrates into one of the game of seduction as the two rivals compete with each other to win the game on his or her own terms.
CHAPTER 1

CREATING THE GAME OF IDEALIZED COURTSHIP

In this chapter, the primary rules of the game of courtship as it is idealized in the paintings of Watteau and Fragonard are established. In these paintings, courtship behavior is encoded as a game that is conventional, mutual, reciprocal, and pleasurable. The first rule of the game of idealized courtship is that it will have established rules that govern how it must be played so that it is fair and equal. This means that play will take place within a specific time and space. It will also have boundaries that contain and restrain the players. Section One discusses the characteristics of games and includes an explanation of the rules of games to show their application to courtship. It also discusses play and describes how it is the basis of games and courtship. The second rule is that the game of idealized courtship can be seen through visual symbols of love which create the erotic background for the lovers in the paintings. These symbols include statues, flowers, dress, music, dance and the pastoral setting. Section Two shows how the painters' use of setting, symbols and dress provide a visual representation of the game of idealized courtship. The third indicator of the game of idealized courtship is found in the observable non-verbal communication courtship signaling in which the lovers are openly engaged. Section Three presents the non-verbal communication cues that identify courting behavior in the couples depicted in the paintings. These behaviors, which are seen through facial expressions, body postures and positions, and gestures show that the participants are engaged in courtship behavior. The players’ behaviors show that they realize and understand the rules of the game. The goal of courtship as seen in the paintings varies from the initial phase of flirtation to the intermediate steps of touching (wandering hands) to the final stage of body synchronization.
Courtship, Games and Play

Courtship is commonly referred to as a game, because like a game, it is assumed to have rules or behaviors that follow a pre-specified order. For the game of idealized courtship to exist, there must be trust, honesty, interdependence and consent between the participants. Furthermore, the game must be ethical and honorable. For the game to be fair and just, the players must realize they are playing a game, understand its rules and agree in advance to abide by them throughout the game. In what follows it will be shown that the first primary rule of the game of idealized courtship is that it must contain the elements of play and games. This section first defines play in the context of its relationship to games. It then presents the characteristics of games. Finally, it explains how rules operate and shows their importance to the maintenance of an idealized game. Included also is a discussion of the roles of the players and their responsibility to abide by the rules to ensure that the integrity of the game is maintained. Finally, this section discusses what happens to the idealized game when it is corrupted and the rules are ignored.

At the root of a game is the element of play. The following definition of play, based on the works of Johan Huizinga and Roger Caillois, shows the elements of play that apply to idealized games of all sorts. In Homo Ludens, Huizinga defines the play-concept as a social function present everywhere. It is a voluntary, well-defined quality of action which is different from "ordinary" life (4). This definition is illustrated in his description of the six characteristics of play:

1) Play is freedom - it is superfluous activity done at leisure.
2) Play is stepping out of real life into a temporary sphere of activity.
3) Play is secluded and has limitedness. It follows its own course and has its own meaning. It has its own time and space.
4) Play demands order absolute and supreme. The least deviation from this order spoils the game.
5) Play has certain words associated with it. Some of these words are tension, mirth and fun.
6) Play has rules that are binding and leave no doubt of their meaning. Players must stick to the rules. (8)

In Man, Play and Games Caillois defines the rules of play. His rules are based on those of Huizinga but Caillois also includes two different types of play - those governed by rules and those which are make believe. What distinguishes games governed by rules and those of make believe is that in a make believe game the players know that it is a game and as a result act as if they were someone else. The as if part of the game replaces and performs the same function as the rules because it says that players know they are playing a game of make believe (8). Play is:

1) Free: in which playing is not obligatory; if it were, it would at once lose its attractive and joyous quality as diversion.
2) Separate: circumscribed within limits of space and time, defined and fixed in advance.
3) Uncertain: the course of which can not be determined, or the result attained beforehand, and some latitude for innovations being left to the player's initiative.
4) Unproductive; creating neither goods, nor wealth, nor new elements of any kind; and except for the exchange of property among the players, ending in a situation identical to that prevailing at the beginning of the game.
5) Governed by rules: under conventions that suspend ordinary laws, and for the moment establish new legislation, which alone counts.
6) Make-believe: accompanied by a special awareness of a second reality or of a free unreality, as against real life. (9-10)

Idealized play, then, forms the basis of games based on the characteristics presented in the works of Huizinga and Caillois. The essential quality of freedom separates play from ordinary life. Play is a voluntary activity. Players invite each other to participate in games the purpose of which is pleasure, fun and enjoyment. Play is a temporary activity that occupies its own space. Space can be defined as a playground or any other location where the game occurs. All games, regardless of type, are played in specific locations. The playground gives a temporary setting that provides players an escape from reality as well a sense of change and freedom from the demands of ordinary life. It also defines the space for the game and contains the activity within a certain area.

The designation of space or boundaries in the ideal playground ensures that the rules are followed because players understand the limits of the game. A boat, garden walls, fences and a bedroom are found in the paintings and define a particular space for playing the game. The game is played according to time limits that are defined and determined in advance. The time required to complete a game changes depending on the type of game being played but it serves to delineate the limits of the game. This means that the game has a beginning and an end or a starting and finishing point. Part of the fun in playing is the belief that the game will not end. This feeling of timelessness increases enjoyment of the game giving it a sense of removal from reality and ordinary life. While the lovers are absorbed in the game and each other, they are not aware of time. The rules of the idealized game, however, require time constraints which control the length of the game. Eventually it ends, and although the players may leave the game reluctantly, they realize that they must return to reality. Play is ordered; events happen according to circumscribed rules which the players understand and agree to. Even so, the outcome of the game is not known in advance. Much of the
game is left to the players' initiative so the results can not be predicted. Voluntary play is not required to produce anything. There does not have to be any expectation that a game will change circumstances between the players that existed prior to play. Idealized play has its own language and some of these words are tension, mirth and fun. Laughter and joy are associated with play and games. According to Huizinga, tension occurs in play and it is this element when correctly managed that helps to define idealized play:

The element of tension imparts to it (the game) certain ethical value in so far as it means a testing of the player's prowess: his courage, tenacity, resources, and last but not least, his spiritual powers - his "fairness"; because, despite his ardent desire to win, he must stick to the rules of the game. (11)

In idealized play the rules define the terms of play and must be recognized and affirmed. In the following statement Caillois emphasizes the importance of rules to the maintenance of the game's integrity:

Principles of play correspond to powerful instincts (competition, chance, simulation, vertigo). They can be positively and creatively gratified only under ideal and circumscribed conditions in which in every case the rules of play prevail. (55)

These powerful instincts correspond to Caillois' four fundamental categories of games. These categories, while unique, all presuppose that the players are participating freely and have the right to refuse to play. The games are ordered and have strict limits. The players in some cases attempt to remove themselves from reality but they also know they are playing a game. The first category is *agôn* or competitive games. These games can involve two players or a team. This type of game is characterized as "one in which the equality of chances is artificially created, in order that the adversaries should confront each
other under ideal conditions, susceptible of giving precise and incontestable value to the winner's triumph" (14). These games are performed with specific time limits and governed by rules applied equally to all players (15). Although these games have a winner and a loser, the adherence to the rules makes it fair. The players know in advance what to expect and respect the rules. Therefore, the winner of the game is undisputed. The second type of game is called *alea* or chance. These games are "based on a decision independent of the player, an outcome over which he has no control, and in which winning is the result of fate rather than triumphing over an adversary" (17). In games of chance destiny is the factor that determines the winner. This game maintains its ideal circumstances when the player acknowledges that the rules may or may not work in his or her favor.

The third category of game is *mimicry* or simulation in which "the player makes believe or makes others believe that he is something other than himself" (19). The pleasure lies in becoming someone else but the ideal quality of the game is maintained because the player and the spectators know it is a game (20). Masks, disguises and costumes characterize this type of game. In dressing up a player temporarily becomes another person. Huizinga notes that certain factors influence the fun in the game and include "the terrors of childhood, open-hearted gaiety, mystic fantasy and sacred awe are all inextricably tangled in this strange business of masks and disguises" (13). Caillois states that the game of blindman's buff is an example of a game that offers an opportunity to experience "the quality of perception in the absence of sight" (30). He also explains that "it is clear that theatrical presentations and dramatic interpretations belong in this category" (21).

The fourth category of games that Caillois identifies is *ilinx* or vertigo. In this game "vertigo attempts to momentarily destroy the stability of perception and inflict a kind of voluptuous panic upon an otherwise lucid mind. Various physical activities provoke these sensations including tightrope, falling or being projected into space and rapid rotation. There is also vertigo of the moral order - a desire
for disorder and destruction - drives which are normally repressed" (24). Dance is
another form of vertigo and Caillois notes that "men surrender to the intoxication
of many types of dance" (25). Pleasure is derived from achieving a temporary
lack of control and loss of equilibrium. The game remains ideal, however,
because the players choose to separate themselves from reality. The game occurs
within fixed time limits in a particular space. The activity is designed to reinforce
the character of play (26). Swinging is an example of a game in which a person is
projected into the air and is temporarily suspended in space thus releasing
inhibitions. For games of competition, examples of location include a sports field
or a card table. Games of chance may be played by lottery or in gambling
casinos. Games that require mimicry or make believe may be held onstage in a
theater or at a masquerade ball. For games of vertigo the location depends on
what the game is trying to achieve. Swinging is held outdoors as are games
requiring twirling or rotating.

To be ideal the game of courtship must contain the components of
idealized play and games. First, courtship must be voluntary and free. Couples
must decide the rules of love and enchantment that apply to them and then play by
these rules throughout the courting process. The most important characteristic is
that players know they are playing a game. If their game includes disguise or
blindfolding, they must realize that it enhances the enjoyment of the game. When
they engage in activities like swinging or dancing in which inhibitions are
released, they must be able to regain control and recognize the stimulation as part
of play for enjoyment. Players will have the freedom to play or to cease to play
the game. If play in courtship is transgressed by one player moving too quickly
for the other as in the case of unwanted touching, then the game must de-escalate
to the level determined by the player who does not wish to pursue it any further.
The rules must be followed for the game of courtship to be idealized.

Caillois raises the following question concerning the operation of a game.
"What becomes of games when the sharp line dividing their ideal rules from the
diffuse and insidious laws of daily life is blurred? If play consists in providing formal, ideal, limited and escapist satisfaction for powerful drives, what happens when every convention is rejected" (44 - 45)? If the conventions are not accepted by the players, the game is corrupted because the rules are broken and the players either attempt to win by cheating or by denying the validity of the game. According to Huizinga, the players who corrupt the game are called the cheat and spoil-sport. The cheat knows the rules of the game and pretends to show respect for them. He or she counts on the other players to obey the rules which make it possible to take advantage of this loyalty to the game to win. The cheat is disloyal but recognizes the rules so the game itself is not destroyed (11). The worst player is the spoilsport who destroys the game by ignoring the rules because this person denies the sanctity of the game. This type of behavior “robs play of its illusions and shatters the play world itself. The spoilsport must be cast out of the play community because he [or she] threatens its existence” (11).

Furthermore, the games of competition, chance, mimicry and vertigo can be corrupted. The following summarizes Caillois’ explanation of this corruption and explains how this corruption occurs. In a game of competition corruption occurs through trickery in which the rules are either ignored or denied and the fun element is removed. When this happens, the players can no longer count on the winner to be undisputed. Chance becomes corrupted when a player tries to influence the outcome of the game by relying on outside sources such as superstition to influence its outcome (46). Mimicry or imitation is corrupted when the player begins to assume the disguise or role he or she creates (49). Vertigo is corrupted when the players seek bigger and bigger thrills to increase the sensation of disequilibrium (51). This corruption occurs because the players no longer believe in the idea that the goal of the game is play. Subsequently, the rules are broken and the game is no longer ideal. When a game is corrupted, its motive or goal changes and the rules governing fair play are no longer in place.
At this point the game may become unequal or unfair because there is no process for determining a clear winner.

**Visual Signs: Setting, Symbols and Costumes**

The preceding segment discussed the general characteristics of play and games to establish the assumptions under which the game of idealized courtship must be structured. In this section it will be shown that the second primary rule of the game of idealized courtship is that it is depicted in the visual signs of setting, symbols, and costumes found in the paintings. This section begins with a discussion of the setting or the playground to establish the importance of space and time in establishing the game. Then, it explores the physical symbols of love and desire found in the paintings to show how they visually represent the elements of courtship. The final part of the section examines the costume or dress of the players to show how clothing for men and women was designed to entice and seduce thus signaling that a game of idealized courtship was being played.

With the exception of *The Bolt*, the playground in the paintings is a pastoral setting. There are exotic landscapes with cupids sitting near lovers encouraging their courting behavior. Scenes in other paintings take place in the countryside and include a more rustic picture with couples in peasant dress dancing and listening to music. Levey notes that for many painters the pastoral setting is a metaphor for the Garden of Love (62). As Seerveld notes in the following passage, since medieval and earlier times, the pastoral setting has been equated with love and desire:

> There is also a long literary tradition of *locus amoenus* (love-ly place, pleasance) which has grown up out of Homer, Theocritus, Virgil, Claudian, Isidore of Seville, and others, and describes no place in particular (but not no place either). *Locus amoenus* appears in literature as an enchanted landscape with certain specific charms, grassy meadow, a grove of trees, and spring
water, an ideal place that A. B. Giamatti calls "the earthly paradise.
(157 - 158)

For Bailey, the ideal landscape suggests peace and harmony (136). While Levey suggests that “the serenity of the landscape serves as an aphrodisiac for amorous escapades” (62). Fried describes it as a place that creates a “mood of sexual intoxication keyed to the doings of a pair of lovers which is in effect anticipated by the extravagantly lush and febrile settings in which their passion is aroused and crowned” (139 – 141). Large overturned urns, statues of Venus and elaborate depictions of beautiful, lush foliage create a dreamlike setting for the lovers. The gardens and lush vegetation create a setting for mystery and sexual intrigue. The idea of a journey to the countryside or to an island is in itself an escape from reality. The mood is one in which behavior becomes uninhibited, spontaneous and unconstrained. Nature increases desire and provides the space for it to flourish. In Diaconoff’s view “nature is an idealized construct of the mind, a peaceful sanctuary, a place for meditation and contemplation which accompany desire” (265). Further she states that nature is “a depiction of a mirage of happiness, a nostalgic vision evoking beauty, grace, and refinement, as well as the sweet pleasures of love” (p. 263). The landscape isolates the lovers from the outside world and provides a private space for couples to walk, converse and flirt. They also engage in other activities such as dancing and swinging which creates sexual excitement. Musicians add to the ideal setting by providing entertainment that is lively and fun. There is love, music and conversation in a pleasant landscape that itself promotes idealized courtship.

In The Bolt the bedroom serves as the playground for the lovers. The bed, as a piece of furniture, serves to delineate the playground. A major focus of the painting is the messy bed, which when viewed along with the couple who are only partially dressed, indicates that it has already been used for play. The bed itself resembles a lush garden with flowing curtains that appear to be blowing in wind. The bed coverings are plush and luxurious and entice the couple into the bed. The
curtains and the covers create a space that is private, secluded and designed for the game of love.

Time is an important factor in recognizing the game of idealized courtship in a pastoral setting. The pastoral setting was particularly intended to invoke timelessness (Koda and Bolton 26). Nochlin gives this example noting that the “mystery of the gardens and the splashing of the waterfalls gave a sense of time immemorial” (106). Pastoral settings rely on the time of day to mark the length of the game. Levey emphasizes this point saying that “in one painting sunset marks the end of love’s day” (63) as the lovers must return to the boat to sail back to the city. At sunset the game is over and the players return to reality. Games like swinging or playing blindman’s buff outside are held in gardens or other settings during daylight or early evening. Although in an idealized game the sense of timelessness increases enjoyment, this boundary also gives the game its mystery. Players must know they are involved in a game that will end because no one wants to play a never ending game. The game must be returned to again and again under similar circumstances to remain pleasurable, fun and exciting.

The playground also contains physical symbols that serve as signals indicating that courtship behavior is present. Plax comments that these “symbols or markers of desire represent human behavior that is lighthearted, fun, and playful” (139). Vidal offers examples of these symbols in noting that statues or musical instruments are “conceptual substitutes for unseen feelings or potential actions of the figures” (113). The markers take the form of the many facets of desire all of which are signals of the game of idealized courtship. These signals not only indicate the stages of courtship but they also show courtship in its normal, pleasurable and recognizable form. Statues symbolic of love play take the form of Venus and Cupid in various poses. And Plax speaking of these statues notes "plump, voluptuous nudes, which seem more of flesh than stone, are strategically placed" (139). The strategy is one of giving the lovers encouragement in the game.
The symbols also include the rose and its representational purpose as the flower of Venus and the herald of love. Cupid and his arrows show that love is in the air. Putti are engaged in playing with each other and are encouraging love play among the couples. There are animals including dogs, sheep and rams and other mammals such as the dolphin that symbolize aspects of erotic love. Seerveld notes that “dolphins have been messengers of secret love at least since Ovid. Then, there are dogs that symbolize fidelity in love and loyalty in relationships as well as the desire for physical intimacy” (152). Seerveld also comments that “a dog is licking his genitals in one painting thus symbolizing that one of the males is thinking about sex” (155). Sheep positioned in the countryside help to establish a rustic setting in which aristocrats and peasants are playing these erotic games. The sheep graze peacefully which adds not only to the peasant theme but also lends credibility to the peace and harmony of the pastoral setting. Unlike the behavior of the peaceful sheep in the meadow, the “horned ram's head symbolizes male desire” (Seerveld 155). This image changes the theme of the space and intentionally gives it an erotic sense. Other symbols are musical instruments which serve as phallic symbols of the physical act of love and desire. According to Seerveld “bagpipes are a well known folk emblem for male genitalia” (155). Plax describes the bagpipe in the following manner: “the bagpipe in its suggestive form and inharmonious squawking allude to base physical desire. There are players dancing which is a euphemism for sexual excitement” (139). Swinging also indicates sexual excitement and the releasing of inhibitions and was "readily understood to symbolize flirtation, changes of the heart (and of partners), and the act of lovemaking itself” (Bailey et al 134). As Seerveld shows in the following passage, the image of the swing implies love and sexual play:

As Watteau shows it, swinging is a model game for elegant lovers. It simulates the delicate, back-and-forth tug of learning to love, with movements suggestive of coquettishness; the man pushes softly and the woman glides through the air, pausing suspensefully
at each upswing; there is discreet physical contact, but not more.

(152)

In The Bolt the apple on the table is one symbol of the act of love and desire. It serves to warn the couple of the consequences of their behavior once they proceed beyond a certain point.

Finally, games frequently require specialized dress or uniforms to differentiate clothing appropriate to the game from attire that is worn on more formal occasions. Fashion in 18\textsuperscript{th} century France was intended to “attract, allure, and ultimately seduce” (Koda and Bolton 7). The couples’ dress in the paintings shows visually that they are engaged in the game of idealized courtship because they are wearing theatrical costumes and clothes indicative of other centuries. For example, Watteau's paintings "include celebrants in contemporary silk gowns and satin breeches, in fancy dress evocative of other countries and previous centuries and in theatrical costumes of the commedia dell'arte" (Bailey et al 128).

Couples also enjoyed masquerades and dressed as peasants to enhance the theme of playing in the countryside. The masquerade enabled participants to escape from the reality of ordinary life and assume a temporary identity. Koda and Bolton also note that “the appeal of disguise lay in the liberties it allowed…dress as deception provides endless possibilities for social and sexual adventures through the subversion of age, sex, race and class" (77). Clothing for men and women was carefully designed to enhance physical appearance and particularly the movement or pose of the body as indicated in the following passage:

Clothing produced a specific corporeal aesthetic not only through the obvious devices such as corsets and hooped skirts, but also through subtler strategies; stiff facings that held men's coat-skirts away from the body; breeches that were tight in the highly visible front but baggy in the never-visible seat, facilitating greater ease of movement; shoes with heels that slanted sharply toward the instep, producing a light, tiptoeing gait; armholes cut high and set toward
the backs of both men's and women's garments, holding the arms backward and away from the body emphasizing the chest. (430)

Ribeiro, in describing women’s clothing as that which was meant to entice, comments that it “was designed to force their shoulders back which pushed their breasts forward. The sack dress which was designed with loose pleats unstitched in the front and back is good example of a dress that women had in their wardrobes Another name for the sack was ‘robe volante’ or negligees” (37). This garment, which was popular for the first half of the 18th century, attracted criticism because it was so sexually alluring:

Another contemporary name for the sack was ‘robe volante’, implying the flowing, lilting movement so noticeable in the early unfitted versions of the sack, which paradoxically attracted censure, for it was felt that the looseness of the shape hid a multitude of sins and at the same time declared its origins in a garment suitable for the intimacy of the bedroom. (37)

Another aspect of dress included fans for women and swords for men. The fan was a symbol of sexuality and it was a necessary part of the wardrobe because it played an important role in courtship. The following explanation of the use of the fan in courtship behavior includes an 18th century source:

In the eighteenth century fans, like swords for men, were romantic adjuncts to a woman's costume. They served as aids for the elegant display of the hands, as well as for the subtle aspects of courtship, giving rise to a complex sign language that was taught in a special academy in London. Noting such visual communication, the essayist Joseph Addison observed in The Spectator (1711): "Women are armed with fans as men with swords, and sometimes do more execution with them. I have seen a fan so angry that it would have been dangerous for the absent lover who provoked it to have come within wind of it, and at other times so very languishing
that I have been glad for the lady's sake that the lover was at a sufficient distance from it." (Koda and Bolton 78)

Other items of a woman’s dress were also meant to entice and seduce as well. Koda and Bolton further state, "like fans, ribbons worn in knots at the arms, waist, and bosom were part of the vocabulary of allusion" (78). While dress for men was simpler than that of women, they too dressed to be admired. Koda and Bolton note that men wore the habit á la française which consisted of a coat, breeches and waistcoat (23). Furthermore, their clothes were “cut to curve away from the front of the body, conveying an impression of flowing forward tilted movement” (23). Ribeiro states that the coat was tailored tightly to the body and “this tightness was emphasized by side pleats…which were obviously comparable to the huge hoops being worn by women…the whole effect, like the hoop petticoat, is graceful and elegant” (17-18). Men wore tight knee breeches which were designed to show off their calves (Koda and Bolton 20). They also wore swords under their coats and carried a hat under their arms. It is evident that men and women dressed to attract each other physically. The entire effect was intended to portray a successful, sexually alluring image. The purpose of costumes was to help stage courtship behavior through dress that was both appealing and fun. Since the dress was free from the constraints that the every day formal attire symbolized, it indicated love and flirtatious behavior. Through these symbols of love, which in some cases were centuries old indicators of desire, the game of idealized courtship could be seen. In addition, the pastoral settings and the bedroom were places of love and enchantment which provided the playground and its rules for playing the game.

Non-verbal Communication Cues

According to a familiar phrase the "language" of love is universal. Recent ethological studies of nonlinguistic communication in
courtship using facial expression, gesture, posture, distance, paralanguage, and gaze have begun to establish that a universal, culture-free, nonverbal sign system may exist (Eibl-Eibesfeldt, 1975), which is available to all persons for negotiating sexual relationships. (Givens 346)

The third primary rule of the game of idealized courtship is that it can be recognized through the non-verbal behavioral communication cues that Watteau and Fragonard portray in their paintings. How is it possible to look at the paintings and know that the couples are engaged in courtship behavior? It can be done because there are observable behavioral signals that couples send back and forth to each other. These signals involve non-verbal communication cues that the outside observer can recognize simply by looking at a couple involved in the courtship process. These signals follow what biologist, Timothy Perper, calls “behavior patterns that simultaneously are visible to the external, objective observer and that have profound internal meanings to the participants” (77). These signals are also as powerful as verbal language or speaking in recognizing that couples are engaged in courting. An understanding of these behaviors is necessary to identify the game of idealized courtship because these behaviors further confirm that courtship is mutual, reciprocal and pleasurable to both people. In the game of idealized courtship both members of the couple must agree together to advance the relationship at every point because as Perper notes "true love can not grow from force" (105). When the couples agree to advance the game at the same rate, it means that they recognize and abide by the rules of the game. Perper, who has conducted much of his observational research on courting couples in a bar setting, makes the following comments about the importance of location and how it relates to the social rules in which the couple engage:

In a bar the entire courtship sequence is sharply condensed in time, for what may take weeks outside occurs in a few hours, or less, in a
Moreover the bar powerfully facilitates sociosexual interactions by compounding liquor, music, lights, dancing, other people's behavior, and subtler forms of ambience into an overwhelmingly erotic and even ecstatic atmosphere...men and women in a bar are really trying to meet each other, become friendly, and perhaps more...so, when we observe human behavior in a bar, we are observing it in a rule-obeying social world in which the rules are set not by the scientist him or herself but by the people we are observing. (258)

The point is that the couples whether viewed in a 20th century bar setting or in an 18th century pastoral setting have put themselves in a climate that is erotic and designed only for courtship. In these settings behavior can be abbreviated and sometimes hastened toward the end in mind. Nevertheless, there are rules which the couples create, understand and abide by.

This section looks first at a definition of nonverbal courtship and its connection to how couples interact with each other as they develop a relationship that leads to intimacy. Intimacy is defined as the level of contact and interaction in a relationship that is mutually agreeable to both members at a particular point in time. Then the section discusses the courtship sequence with its escalation points and the importance placed on this sequence if the couple is to advance to a level that is socially identified with courtship. Finally, the specific behaviors that occur between couples who are engaged in courting are examined. Grammer comments that the non-verbal cues, which are also found in non-courting behavior, are contextual because “non-verbal behavior in courtship holds an element of exaggeration and is directed at a defined targeted person” (158). So, these same behaviors when found outside the context of courting behavior may have altogether different meanings. These cues include head and facial gestures. Examples are gaze, looking directly at each other, neck bent over to 45-degree angle, the coy smile and serene expressions. Other non-verbal cues are body positioning and posture. Examples are leaning, whispering, lying down, touching, women with shoulders back and breasts protruding, and body synchronization.
Hand and arm gestures are also important and include palming, and arms and hands spread out from the body at 45-degree angles (Grammer 178).

Courtship is not a pre-programmed course of action that couples are required to follow. Instead it involves a series of observable steps or components that researchers have identified. For Perper this sequence is a form of communication that may lead to biological reproduction, but it also has cultural factors. Courtship is a dual process - both emotional and biological - in which two people who form a couple are engaged in behavior that leads to some end (70). Perper defines communication in courtship in the following manner:

Yet courtship does have a remarkably similar form from time to time and place to place. Courtship is not a fixed series of events somehow "encoded into the genes." It is a process that comes into existence as two people construct their own behavior in response to each other, and in response to quite specific signals and cues. This sequence is created dynamically…in mutual response in a cycle of loop of signals sent and received, sent and received. (78)

While the outcome of these events is negotiable between two people at a given point in time, the meaning of these events is also universal in that they can be observed in all couples engaged in courtship behavior. This is because in the game of courtship the couple forms a dyad and both people must agree on the behavior for it to continue. Perper further notes that if one person rebuffs the other, it is because courtship is “dyadically created, not driven unilaterally by one person's will or desire” (95). In the idea of ideal courtship it is the understanding of the behavior that lowers the risk that the signals will be misunderstood or interpreted improperly. The participants are playing a game with rules and limits. They are engaged in courtship and they both know that a series of events that may lead to intimacy. The idea of a courtship sequence is centuries old and is one in which couples follow a specified routine as Seerveld explains in the following passage:
It is a commonplace of medieval rhetoric, inherited from ancient erotic literature via Horace, that amorous experience follows a definite order of successive steps, stages or degrees, *gradus amoris*: *visus* (sighting), *alloquium* (dialogue), *contactus* (touch), *osculum* (kiss), *factum* (the deed). (157)

Although this sequence is not necessarily a conscious form of behavior, Perper has observed that there is a core sequence of steps that couples always follow in the same order. This process is described in the following excerpt from his work:

1) The core sequence begins with the approach. In this step one person moves closer to the potential partner.

2) Then, the second part of the sequence is the turn. As the couple talks, they begin to turn towards each other. The turn is usually slow and gradual beginning with the head, then the shoulders and torso and finally with the whole body. Eventually the couple will face each other and remain in this position for the entire interaction.

3) As they begin to face each other, touching will begin. Frequently, it begins with a light touch which may include the fingertips placed on the hand or a palm placed flat on an arm. If the touching is received positively, they will begin to look at each other perhaps indirectly at first. The look may wander over the face, hair, eyes, shoulders and neck.

4) Eventually the couple will be looking directly at each other without taking their eyes off each other even while taking turns speaking. (77 - 78)

The next process is what Perper calls the synchronization of their bodies. In the beginning the couple will both lean forward at the same time if facing each other or if sitting side by side one person will lean left and the other right in
behavior that mirrors the other (78). Finally they will achieve full body synchronization as Perper describes in the following passage:

As time passes, more and more movements occur in synchrony, especially after the first exchange of touches. Initially, synchronization involves only arm and head movements. Later synchronization includes simultaneous shifts of weight and swaying movements that result when hips, legs and feet of the two people move in synchrony. This is complete or "full body" synchronization, and involves all movements made by each person. (78)

This particular emphasis on body synchronization as the culmination of the courtship movement is meant to show the progression of the behavior. Key to Perper’s theory is that each part of the sequence contains an escalation point at which both members of the couple have to agree for the relationship to advance to the next step. While there is no way to know at any point exactly what the couple is thinking or planning, there are external indicators of steps in a process. If one partner performs a behavior such as touching and the other partner responds positively, the courtship behavior escalates to a new level. The courtship behavior will stop when one of the partners no longer responds to the escalating behavior of the other partner (87 – 92).

Jesser, Moore, Givens and Scheflen have identified specific non-verbal signaling behaviors that occur in male and female courtship behaviors. For Jesser, these behaviors in males and females include "a checklist of 20 items, covering direct and indirect verbal and non-verbal initiatives" (120). Seventy percent of both male and female samples checked two of the 20 signals. These signals were "touching (snuggling, kissing, etc) and allow hands to wander. Other sexual behaviors named were: use eye contact, change appearance or clothing, set mood atmosphere (music, lighting, etc.), share a drink, play games such as chase or light ‘roughhousing’, use suggestive body movements or posture, allow hands to wander and lying down" (122). Moore surveyed females and found 52
different non-verbal solicitation behaviors exhibited (239). The purpose of this study, which builds on the findings of many other researchers, was to observe and identify behaviors that are universally recognizable as courtship and to create a catalog of the behavior (Moore 245). These behaviors were placed in the following categories: facial and head patterns, gestures, and posture patterns. In the following chart Moore provides the most frequent behaviors in each category:

**Facial and head gestures**
- Type I glance (room encompassing)
- Type II glance (short darting glance directed at a particular man)
- Type III glance (gaze fixate - prolonged gaze - over 3 seconds)
- Head toss - head tilted upwards briefly
- Neck presentation - head tilted 45 degrees
- Hair flip - stroking or running fingers through hair
- Smile - corners of mouth turned upwards showing some teeth
- Coy smile - half smile with a downward gaze
- Laugh - generally responding to comments
- Whisper - mouth near another person's ear with some bodily contact

**Gestures**
- Arm flexion - arm flexed at wrist and elbow and moved toward the body
- Palming - hand was extended or turned so that the palm faced another person for a brief time
- Gesticulation - arms and hands waved or extended upwards in an exaggerated, conspicuous manner
- Primp - clothing patted or smoothed unnecessarily
- Skirt hike - skirt lifted to expose the legs
- Caress - face/hair, leg, arms, torso and back

**Posture patterns**
- Lean - moving body forward while seated; sometimes followed by a brush or a breast touch
- Touch - knee, thigh, foot to foot
- Hug - arm around shoulder, lateral body contact, frontal body contact
- Dance - female and male request and acceptance
- Play - pinching, tickling, and approaching from behind. (239 - 243)
Givens, in a landmark study of courting behavior, identifies five phases of behavior: attention, recognition, interaction, sexual arousal, and resolution. The following excerpt explains these phases and discusses how they operate:

1) The *Attention Phase* includes smiling, nodding, extending and retracting the arms, and quick glances.

2) The *Recognition Phase* involves a decision to respond positively or negatively to courtship signals. A positive response in this phase includes orienting the body toward the other person, gazing with intention to speak, flirtatious head tossing and protruding the chest to encourage further behavior.

3) The *Interaction Phase*, which involves speaking, is characterized by such behaviors as preening, head-tossing, hand-arm gestures, laughter and stretching to signify that the approach behavior is acceptable. There may also be close synchrony in body movements and gaze patterns as well as lateral head-tilts, shoulder flexing and raising, and upward rotated palm gestures.

4) The *Sexual-arousal Phase* in which the couple engages in touching behaviors including kissing, hugging and hand-holding. Lovers will typically gaze at each other at very close quarters with eyes aligned and faces parallel to each other.

5) The *Resolution Phase* will determine if the couple will continue their relationship.

(349, 352 - 353)

Scheflen has identified three facets of what he calls the basic elements of courtship. The following information describes these elements and how they further the courtship process:

1) The first element is courtship readiness. In this stage the person making the approach tightens the muscles in the body, holds the torso more erect, brightens the eyes, positions or moves the legs, and may undergo a change in skin color. This stage also includes preening in which men and women may touch their hair, readjust
their clothes, or glance at themselves in a mirror as they prepare to make contact.

2) The second element is positioning for courtship. In this stage the partners lean towards each other and may place their legs or extremities in such a way as to block off others.

3) The third element is when a man and a woman sit side by side and cross their legs forming a circle. This circle, which excludes other people, usually leads to closer physical proximity and to a more intimate mode of conversation. (248)

The courtship sequence is important to an understanding of the game of idealized courtship because it establishes the stages that all lovers go through in creating a relationship, sexual or otherwise. By going through the stages (even unknowingly), the couple is in reality working through a game with rules and limits. The rules are that both members of the pair must agree to an escalation of the behavior for it to be fair and equal. While one person may escalate the behavior, it is the second person who must agree for the behavior to move forward (Perper 87). The escalation of the behavior is a normal part of the courtship sequence. So, if one of the pair – the male, for example, begins touching that the female is not ready for – and she refuses and pushes him away, the game remains intact and ideal as long as he backs off and retreats to the previous stage. If he does not stop his behavior and uses persuasive or persistent tactics to get to the next step, the game is broken and it becomes cruel and exploitative and it is no longer ideal. An analysis of the paintings by Watteau and Fragonard will show that they reflect a wide range of these non-verbal communication behaviors. These courting behaviors are present in the paintings and from them the viewer can see that the game of idealized courtship is being played. Each painting was selected because it has couples involved in certain phases of courtship as established in the courtship theories of Perper, Jesser, Moore, Givens and Schlefen. While the courtship motifs found in the paintings of
Watteau and Fragonard are not confined to these works, these works reflect the motifs most thoroughly.
CHAPTER 2

THE PAINTINGS OF ANTOINE WATTEAU: FROM FLIRTATION TO FAUX PAS

Courtship and the themes of sociability, love, desire, and refusal are clearly established in the paintings of Watteau and are documented in the extensive literature written about his works. The following passage illustrates the theme of courtship in Watteau’s paintings:

If one asks what this picture, what all Watteau’s pictures, are about, they are about men and women falling in love, trying to make up a society of love which nothing will disturb. (Levey 68)

Posner describes Watteau’s paintings as “a wonderfully rich set of variations on the theme of love and desire” (77). In the following example Posner shows that the game is visible to the outside viewer who can see and understand its intention:

We sense the lovely excitement of the beginning of a game of love: invitation and flirtation will be followed by the playful vacillations of a young girl’s heart; and the game will end, presumably, in a happy embrace. (78)

The paintings contain more than expressions of desire – they celebrate and idealize desire. Diaconoff notes that Watteau’s paintings are “the evocation of an erotic dream incorporating the use of the Garden of Love topos, a euphemistic and artistic metaphor for desire and seduction…nature is an idealized construct of the mind, a peaceful sanctuary, a place for meditation and contemplation which accompany desire” (261, 264 - 265). The genre of painting for which Watteau is the most well-known is the fête galante. According to Levey, in this genre Watteau had “complete freedom of subject-matter and was able to dispense with the overt story. This gave him the ability to treat human nature psychologically as
the 18th century novel would also do” (56). In creating this genre Watteau in one sense reflected life as it was happening among the aristocracy; in another way, however, his fêtes were “not a literal rendering of life around him, however, much accuracy of description they might contain…Watteau presented lyrical, sensitive figures…with the exception of the torchlight Love in the Italian Theatre, Watteau’s fêtes galantes are bathed in radiant sunlight and his revelers never go masked” (Bailey et al 23). Watteau’s fêtes were not intended to reflect life exactly as it occurred but instead his intention was to depict scenes in which everyone was openly happy and enjoying themselves. Plax notes that Watteau’s fêtes are artful re-creations that focus on certain aspects of this particular kind of sociability (127). The fêtes showed modes of sociability in depicting theatrical scenes, concerts, dances and other leisure activities of modern life (Bailey et al 23). One aspect of sociability was captured in Watteau’s depiction of fashion which as the following passage indicates was an accurate representation of the dress and accessories of his time:

In his biography of Watteau of 1727, Dubois de Saint-Gelais noted that the artist had perfectly represented the concerts, dances and other amusements of civil life; and had made a point of showing real costumes, so that his pictures may be considered a history of the fashion of his times. (Bailey et al 23)

According to Plax, Watteau dressed his figures in “theatrical costumes as well as in the customary social clothing” (129) of the day. She further notes that the purpose of wearing a theatrical disguise implied a reverse identification: I am not what I am dressed up as…the costume was a sign of what one was not; yet at the same time, one’s ability to play that role, to bring it to life” (131). In other words this intermingling of different types of costumes and clothing on the characters gave his paintings the feeling of the excitement that a game outside of ordinary life was being played.
Bailey comments that in Watteau's paintings “states of the mind, and more specifically states of the heart, are a common theme. In fact, the central preoccupation of the *fête galante* is the erotic. In the rustic or pastoral genre a variety of gallant symbols is marshaled to delineate the burgeoning of desire and fulfillment. These symbols include decorations, shepherdesses, birds, animals, statues and flowers all of which serve as ciphers of sexual anticipation and sexual satisfaction” (22). As Plax explains it, Watteau’s figures act out a “complex ritual of seduction in which the more primitive and physical emotions are displaced onto a set of idealized signs. Glances are charged with erotic meaning, and the smallest gestures are loaded with possible significance” (134).

Cohen describes the way Watteau drew his figures as one “of preoccupation with nuances of figural representation...his figures were drawn with such attention to detail that the body and its gestures portray a body language that implied performance and art” (171). In the following passage Cohen explains that Watteau’s paintings are compared with dance and particularly with how the body is represented in ballet:

Watteau’s language is poetic, or *galant*, in its focus upon the look of the represented body...ballet depends exclusively upon physical presentation and thus demands particular details of costume and gesture... like dancers practicing their movements before coming together to perform a duet, Watteau’s figures attend to their gestures as if exploring what their own bodies could do. (171, 173)

Like a ballet dancer who uses no words to convey a message, Watteau’s figures indicate courtship behavior through their positions and gestures. Levey comments on the composition of Watteau’s paintings saying that they are “filled with social gaiety and that it was typical of Watteau to depict a group setting and then to isolate a pair within it” (67). His paintings frequently highlight a couple, who are preparing to dance, as the center of the painting. The couple dance became a central focus of Parisian theater and society and according to Cohen,
Watteau’s paintings shifted to the “inwardly focused ‘game’ of the couple dance. The idea behind the game means that the dance was designed for two people and that its intricate curves and diagonals implied an erotic bonding between male and female figures” (187). Further she describes the couple dance as one of a “shared focus upon male and female and their shared goal of perpetual flirtation” (190). Watteau uses this image of continual flirtation in his paintings to emphasize the mutual goal of sexual liaison between male and female. The couple dance creates a mirroring pattern in the behavior of the dancers. This mirroring or body synchronization will also be seen in Watteau’s paintings between couples who are engaged in courtship behaviors. This pattern serves to focus attention on the behavior between the dancers and emphasizes the erotic tension in the dance (190). Cohen describes this tension and its game-like qualities in the couple dance in the following manner:

A linear game played by two bodies moving in space, a perpetual tension between the order of pattern and the instability of constant movement toward and away from the vertical and horizontal planes: the couple dance worked much in the manner of the arabesques such as L’Escarpolete, with its introduction of “real” space into the framework of symmetrical tracery. In both cases it is a man and a woman at the center of it all: every line, every movement, every spot of spatial tension translates into an erotic story whose content is identical with the structure of the performance or picture. (190)

Cohen notes that French 18th century opera and theater audiences were becoming enamored with amorous play and the themes of love and couple dancing (192). Watteau’s paintings emphasized movements of the body as representative of the love relationship. The game was intended to be sexual because as Cohen explains, “Watteau teases the symmetry of line and linear pattern itself to make a spatial and sensual game” (194).
Levey emphasizes another very important concept that was expressed in Watteau’s paintings – this concept was the right of refusal that one person had in deciding whether to escalate the game of courtship to another level. He notes that “Watteau’s women are always courted and they have the power to refuse” (69). In the following example, Vidal makes this point about the right of refusal as it was pictured in Watteau’s paintings:

The refusal, witnessed by an onlooker, is thus not simply the beginning of an impassioned embrace intensified by an act or voyeurism…instead it creates sensations and ideas that are much more complex, much harder to seize, because the refusal represents the first move towards physical fulfillment, and equally, the first delay and conceptualization of the physical…The refusal shows the onlooker, the child and the viewer that the source of civility and art lies precisely in the tension between powerful natural impulses and their displacement in or through social rituals and other forms of representation. (115 – 116)

The delay mentioned in the passage just cited is the refusal of one partner to escalate the behavior to another level. These comments express the idea that sexual behavior can be controlled through involvement in and understanding of certain social rituals. These rituals are established to prohibit one person from advancing the game to a stage for which the other person is not prepared or willing. As long as both partners respect the other’s right to refuse or delay sexual behavior, the game remains idealized. Watteau’s paintings express this theme very clearly.

It has been established that the overarching theme in all of the paintings is courtship, love and desire. In each painting selected for discussion the concept of play is at the root of the game of courtship. The participants in the game leave ordinary life for the day to enjoy the outdoors. The freedom from everyday activities is sought and found in the pastoral setting. The pastoral setting which has its own boundaries ensures that the game takes place in a secluded location.
that is delineated by certain signs and symbols which signify that the game is one of love. Watteau’s paintings, *The Pilgrimage to Cythera*, *Venetian Pleasures* and *The Shepherds* show couples who are taking part in social situations in which the game is played within a group setting. These paintings show couples engaged in sociable and flirtatious behavior through dancing, singing and playing music. Love and the desire for sexual intimacy are implied but the presence of the crowd ensures that the courtship behavior will remain somewhat restrained. Tension in the form of escalation of the game is a factor in three of the paintings. *Venetian Pleasures* and *The Shepherds* contain the refusal theme which is shown in a group setting. *Le Faux Pas* isolates the theme of escalating the game to another level. These escalation behaviors are part of the progress in a normal courting relationship. In what follows each painting is discussed separately to show how it illustrates the primary rules of the game of idealized courtship. The discussion looks at how the erotic symbols in each painting enhance the mood of the day and show that couples are engaged in courting behaviors. It also shows how the observable non-verbal communication cues illustrate the game. Then, it discusses the type of game that is depicted.

**The Pilgrimage to Cythera (Figure 1)**

An analysis of *The Pilgrimage to Cythera* shows that its couples are involved in the game of idealized courtship. The game begins with the voyage itself. According to Posner, Greek mythology was famous for Cythera which was an island in the Mediterranean dedicated to love. (262) In the following passage, Diaconoff describes the nature of the island:

Cythera, a Greek island in the Mediterranean where a temple of Aphrodite was located in antiquity, is the prototype of locus amoenus: it is an island dedicated to love, a place where young women find lovers or husbands. (262)
Plax explains the meaning of a voyage to an island saying that the idea of a
voyage or a pilgrimage from the real world to the enchanted mythical island of
Cythera was very familiar to the 18th century public (143). Further, she notes that
“the pilgrimage to Cythera was in fact an 18th century turn of phrase for an
excursion to St. Cloud and by extension a commonly understood reference to a
voyage into the world of illicit sexuality. People went there to imbibe at one of the
numerous guingettes and St. Cloud also had a notorious reputation for being a
rendez-vous for illicit trysts and for noble débauche” (144). Levey comments that
“the notoriously uninhibited effect of islands and pleasure-cruises is obvious
enough…Watteau makes temptation a goal” (62). He knew that the island of
Cythera would be recognized as a place where men and women go to court each
other and eventually to engage in sexual behavior. Within this erotic environment
courtship was expected to flourish. The composition of the painting with its
symbols of love and desire and its non-verbal communication behavioral cues
shows that the game is pleasurable and follows the rules of the game of idealized
courtship.

The first symbol to consider is the mode of arrival or the boat itself.
According to Plax, there was a “love boat” that took the pilgrims to Cythera
(145). In the painting this boat resembles an elaborate bed. The sail, which is
pink and billowing out from the boat, looks like a gauzy curtain or a silk bed sheet
that would provide privacy for sexual trysts. Surrounding the boat are a number
of putti who are themselves a symbol of playful love. Plax describes these figures
as those who “grab at one another and pose in suggestive positions, gleefully
gliding up and down the ship’s mast in erotic abandon” (150). An examination of
their behavior shows the erotic meaning in the scene. It is obvious that the putti
are engaged in their own sexual games and that these games are designed to
stimulate and encourage the couples to do the same. In one case two putti are
embracing with one putting a hand in between the legs of the other touching the
genital area. They are both laughing as they play. Plax comments that the putti,
who carry bows and arrow, symbolize “carnal and corporeal” love (145). The remaining putti are spread out in the painting so that they can watch the lovers. They are particularly noticeable around the statue of Venus who is positioned on the outer boundary of the pastoral setting. One of the putti is pulling up a laurel wreath from the shield of Venus while the other is clutching her on the legs. Nearby other putti are beside a couple who are sitting on the ground. The rose, another symbol of Venus, is found everywhere in the painting. Roses, signifying love, are wrapped around the couple in the lower right side of the painting encircling them and creating their own private space which sets them apart from other couples. In a similar scene, the woman in the center of the painting wears a garland of roses and another woman near the statue of Venus holds her apron out receiving rose petals from her male companion.

The amorous escape from reality and the easy spirited lighthearted day are reflected in the costumes and dress of the couples. Wyngaard describes the men and women in the painting as “elegant figures, dressed in the costumes of shepherds and theatrical characters, chatting, dancing, and playing music in natural settings” (532). For Diaconoff, these elegantly dressed couples “suggest a past age” (262) which adds to the enjoyment of the day. For example, some of the men carry a staff to complete the masquerade as a pilgrim. One accessory that is found in the painting is a woman who is holding a fan in a casual manner as she leans in to listen to the man who is whispering in her ear. Vidal describes the use of fan and how it communicates the woman’s mood:

   The woman does not face him, but she listens intently, her head slightly tilted in the direction of her partner, her eyes cast down undistracted by the world, her fan held half-open in a gesture of suspended motion and attentiveness. (31)

The fan, which was a prop used to express many different emotions, is a form of non-verbal communication. The passage indicates that the fan is held motionless
in this case indicating that the woman was comfortable with her companion and that she was contented. Her body language expresses this mood because her head is held at a 45 degree angle while his body posture is precariously balanced so that he can lean in without touching her. She is paying attention to what he is saying and they are engrossed in a private conversation. The putto, who is present in the scene, pushes them together which indicates that their conversation is intimate and that desire is present.

The painting contains many other examples of non-verbal communication cues that indicate the couples are in mutual and consensual relationships. Facial expressions, hand and arm gestures, and body positioning are evident in the painting and show that the couples are engaging in mutual courtship behavior. For example, there are four couples positioned in the right part of the painting who are engaging in these non-verbal courting behaviors. One of the couples is located directly behind the woman with the fan. The woman in this scene is holding out her apron and the man is putting rose petals into it. She has her arms lifted up to receive the petals but her head is held at a 45 degree angle away from the man and her eyes are downcast. She is not looking directly at him although his head is straight and his eyes are on her. He holds the palms of his hands up in a gesture of supplication or connection. She looks at the flowers and not at him. They appear to be beginning a relationship and may be in the early stages. Her look is flirtatious but at the same time non-committal.

In another example of non-verbal communication a man and a woman, who are shown in the lower right corner of the painting, are sitting on the ground resting against each other in a loose comfortable embrace. She is leaning right while he leans left and their body postures are mirror images. Their synchronized bodies indicate that they are absorbed only in each other at the moment. His arm is on her shoulder while her arm appears to be held straight out touching him. The position of their bodies implies a physical, perhaps sexual, intimate relationship. They are forming a private circle which excludes anyone else. At
the entrance to the pasture there is another couple who have been sitting and who are rising to leave. In a similar posture to the other couple in the lower part of the painting, this couple is facing each other and making a circle while holding hands so that the man can help lift the woman to her feet. Their heads are facing forward and she seems to be looking slightly down while he looks at her. Their circle creates the feeling of intimacy and implies that they have engaged in courting behavior. In all of the couples in this part of the paintings the facial expressions, body language and gestures are peaceful. This pose sends signals to the viewer that the couples are absorbed in a game that is consensual.

There is also another group of couples standing around the boat waiting to board. The non-verbal communication cues in this group are more ambiguous. Although they are engaged in conversation with each other, their posture is more formal. Their attitude may indicate that they know each other and are friendly but that a courtship relationship has not developed. For example, one woman has her arm through her companion’s arm; their heads are bent away from each other – he leans to the right and she to the left in a mirror image posture and they are conversing. In front of this man and woman is another couple. This couple is talking to each other but they are not touching. His head is bent to the right and he is looking at her face but his hands are clasped in front of his body. She is also engaged in conversation but with her hands clasped behind her back giving no indication that they have any sort of a courting relationship. The explanation for this behavior may be that the couples have no interest in each other or it could be that they have left the pasture – or the site of the game – and it is over for the day. At any rate the non-verbal communication cues seen among the couples in the painting – regardless of their relationship - show that they are engaged in behavior that is mutual, pleasurable and reciprocal.

The game that the couples play is one that fulfills the requirements of the game of make-believe or mimicry and imitation described in Chapter 1 of this dissertation. In this case the game is fun and enjoyable because the players
assume a role that is different from the one they play in their everyday life. In this painting the players are dressed in theatrical costumes and the pleasure of the game lies in pretending to be peasants and pilgrims at play in nature. They are out for a day of flirtation which may very likely lead to sexual intimacy. The game is held on an island during the daylight so sunset will mark the end of the day and set a time limit for the game. The island is only a temporary setting dedicated to love. At dusk, the couples will return to the boat for the trip back home where presumably they will return to normal dress and resume their daily lives. The ideal quality of the game is maintained, however, because they know the game is over for the day and that they must return to reality. But they also know that the game can always start again on another day.

**Venetian Pleasures (Figure 2)**

This painting is considered one of Watteau’s most beautiful and meaningful works. Posner calls it a “consummate masterpiece. A statement of proud, self-confident love, it is ennobled by the clarity and poise of the orchestration of eighteen figures and a statue… a wonderful spectacle of intense assertive love” (240, 243). Seerveld, adopting a more down to earth perspective, says that it is a “good image of an arousal scene before mating” (174). In any case the love and desire in this painting is different from that shown in *The Pilgrimage to Cythera*. Although the game takes place in a pastoral setting, it is held at night which heightens the eroticism and provides the viewer with stronger sexual overtones. The focal point of the painting is the dance and the connotation its movements give to the game of love. The symbols in this painting, therefore, are more graphic and imply a game that is more sexual and carnal. The body language and behavior of the couples also show that strong sexual desire is present. This section looks first at how the dance represents love. Next it examines the painting’s symbols and costumes to show how they indicate the
visual signaling of sexual desire. It then looks at the body language and behavior of the other couples involved in the evening to show how this language reveals strong sexual desire between the players. Finally, this section discusses the type of game that is being played and describes the sexual content of the painting.

Crow notes that the dance is the central love play in the painting and that it is centered on the couple who are posed to begin a dance (63). Posner agrees saying that Watteau uses the dance to tell a story about the beginning of a love relationship (167). In the following passage, Edwards establishes how the game of courtship is illustrated through the dance:

In Watteau’s paintings, dance is understood not only as an amiable pastime, but also as an analogue for the process of human love. The linear progression of the dance parallels the rules of courtship: the choreography has an established course with a natural beginning, middle and end…the dancers move in accord with the music, governed by the rational order of the designs they create…men and women meet, pair off according to conventional rules and promenade into their future together. (224-225)

In this painting Watteau shows visually that dance is a game in which couples engage as a preparation for courtship and that it represents the overt sexual attraction that is present among members of the group. That the couples are engaged in play is evident from their surroundings and in their costumes. “The setting is a handsome park and the seated men and women are clothed in opulent fancy dress” (Bailey et al 138). Crow describes the male dancer as a portly figure dressed in oriental costume who is courting and strutting before his partner. His partner, in turn, is called “contained and doll-like” as she steps forward to begin the dance (63). The bagpiper is the only person who provides a contrast to the scene because he is dressed as a peasant in shepherd costume. In Chapter 1, it was noted that the bagpipes provide a sexual allusion that was intended to be carnal partly because the instrument itself makes a squawking sound. Although the bagpipes are not being played, its presence and that of the bagpiper provide a
tension between the controlled behavior of the dancer and the eroticism present in this painting. This tension is found between sexual desire that is restrained and that which could erupt at any moment. The following quote examines this tension and explains how it is expressed through elements in the painting:

The couple dance or the *danse à deux* becomes the embodiment of the life force and codification of erotic sentiment in *Fêtes vénitiennes*. The caped male figure underlines the contrast between the living statue and the live female dancer: Watteau purposefully sets up an opposition between the naked and clothed states, between passion and social convention, between abandon and restraint. (Bailey et al 225)

Seerveld explains how erotic desire and seduction are shown through the statue of Venus. She is described as “a full-breasted, reclining beauty, odalisque-hipped, arm raised above her head in an age-old artistic sign of seduction, about to sink out of sight on the back of a dolphin” (177). Crow states that Venus represents “a living figure of desire” (63) and further notes that the man in the back of the painting “reproduces the jaded knowing presence of Bacchus” (63). As a symbol of Bacchus, god of wine and festival, he implies that carnal love is in the making. Other symbols of sexual desire include the face of the male goat positioned on the large urn looking down at the crowd. From his vantage point, he can oversee the entire scene and its emphasis on sexual desire (Crow 63).

The male and female dancers at the center of the painting are surrounded by other couples. A look at these couples and their behavior shows that their non-verbal communication cues indicate a strong interest in the game of courtship. More than a backdrop for the dancers, these couples are formed into groups in which some members are following their own aims in establishing courting relationships. The groups create the impression of love and desire and their behavior complements that of the dancers. Cohen expresses this concept very clearly in the following passage:
As in the *Plaisirs du bal*, we confront the dancing pair across an expanse of space that encompasses the rest of the group as well; a series of asymmetrical diagonals sets up dynamic visual tensions while evoking the complicated forces of sexual attraction...for the erotic power here, as in most of Watteau’s *fêtes galantes*, is collective rather than specific; sensuality operates within the composition of the group, as pervasive a force as the flashes of red and yellow that charge the green-blue atmosphere. (248)

The impression given by the entire scene is one of friends and lovers spending the evening in a leisurely and sensuous manner. The body language and posture of the couples who are sitting around the dancers is consistent with people who are conversing in a friendly, pleasurable and relaxed manner. The dancers, for example, are facing each other but their bodies are not yet synchronized nor are they mirroring each other in posture. As the dance begins the courtship stance is tentative and uncertain. The woman’s face is almost expressionless and it is impossible to tell the level of interest she has in the relationship. She is standing with her body in an open position, chest out and arms held straight out by her side in an open position. She seems to be looking in the man’s direction and he in hers but their glance is not intimate or loving. His body is held stiffly with his chest out and one leg in front of the other as he begins the dance. Their posture and the fact that they are dancing indicates that they may be interested in entering into a courting relationship.

At the lower right side of the painting a man and a woman are sitting very close to each other on the ground. His body is turned and he is looking in the direction of the woman who is sitting beside him. His legs are extended and his body is leaning left as he uses his outstretched arm to balance his position. His other arm may be around the woman and he is slightly twisted as if trying to see her. She does not mirror his posture but is staring directly ahead as though she is watching the dancers. The position of their bodies indicates that an amorous relationship already exists. To the right of this couple is the bagpiper and another
man who do not seem to be part of the group which indicates that they may be a part of the entertainment for the evening. The bagpiper has his head tilted to a 45 degree angle as he watches the dancers. His body is facing forward and he has turned his head slightly. He is an observer of the courting behavior that is happening around him. He contributes to the game by his music, but he does not play the game. Then, there is a group of three people sitting behind and to the right of the bagpiper. Their posture indicates that they are comfortable and involved in a private conversation. Their backs are turned which indicates a lack of concern with the group. The man is leaning in to listen to both women and it is not possible to tell which one has his interest. This threesome appears to be conversing quietly and provides a contrast to the overt symbols of sexuality that surround them. It is not possible to tell the nature of the relationship in this group or if there is any sexual interest among them.

Behind this group the Bacchus figure stands pointing at the reclining statue in a dramatic way. His body position is strong and his head is held straight up. His fingers are pointed in the direction of Venus and he seems to be saying “what are you waiting for?” The woman standing behind him has lifted her face - a gesture that implies agreement with his message. Moving to the left in the painting, a man and woman who seem to be just getting to know each other are sitting behind the female dancer. The woman leans forward with a fan held loosely in one hand. While her body is forward, her head is turned at a 45 degree angle so that she can speak to the man behind her. He has his head lifted slightly and held back with his chin up so that he can speak to her. The positions of their bodies do not indicate courting behavior but the calm and relaxed manner in which she holds the fan would suggest that she is open to conversation and to being approached. Then to the immediate right of the male dancer a couple is sitting closely together. The man leans in towards the woman with his head turned slightly as if preparing to kiss her. Her eyes are cast downward although she has not yet inclined her body to reach his. The light shines in on her face and
she looks very peaceful. All of the couples just discussed are engaged in courting behaviors that suggest they have varying degrees of interest in each other. Their behavior is elegant and refined in contrast to that of the man in foreground who has just leaned over and attempted to place his hand on the breast of the woman sitting beside him. Plax discusses his move and describes this contrast in the following passage:

Yet in their gallant game of love, Watteau’s actors do let real signs of desire slip through. All passion is not repressed in the service of aesthetic seduction. One device that Watteau exploits is the inclusion of a couple engaged in obvious amorous combat, in contrast to the more refined and controlled love play represented by the other figures. (135)

Although Plax chooses to describe this scene as one which involves resistance, this man with his wandering hands has only attempted to escalate the courting behavior to another level without first obtaining the consent of his intended partner. She is being observed by another woman and with the presence of the crowd around her is in no danger of physical force. Her refusal and unfavorable reaction should be a signal to him that she is not interested in his advance. His behavior should end at this point. The “gallant game of love” that Plax just cited means that the other couples are involved in the introductory or early stages of courtship and are on the same level of play. The eager man’s desire has pushed him to a new level but he is not yet playing outside the rules of the game. The context of the painting implies that the man will stop his escalation once he is refused.

The type of game being played combines the elements of mimicry and vertigo. The players are dressed in theatrical and peasant costumes which increase their enjoyment of the game and indicate that they are playing a role. The dance, however, is the focus of this game of courtship. Dances have specific steps and follow rules with each dancer taking his or her turn in sequence. It is also
time limited and is performed within specific boundaries. Dancing is also a physical sensation that releases inhibitions that can cause the dancers to feel as if they are intoxicated and temporarily out of control of their emotions which is part of the fun of the game. Through dance the couple can touch and get to know each other more quickly while engaging in behavior that is free and unrestrained. In Venetian Pleasures the dance is just beginning which signifies that the intention of the couple is to test the beginning of a love relationship. The game will remain ideal as long as the each couple abides by the rules of the game.

*The Shepherds* (Figure 3)

This painting is a beautiful example of one of Watteau’s pastoral scenes. Similar to *The Pilgrimage to Cythera* and *Venetian Pleasures*, it depicts a group of peasants and aristocrats enjoying themselves outdoors. As in the other two paintings the pastoral setting represents a removal from reality and time spent away from ordinary life. In this painting the pastoral setting is rustic with sheep grazing in the background which supports the theme of the country setting for the game of courtship. The couples are also dressed in peasant costumes, which further indicate that they are playing a game. This painting contains behaviors and symbols of courtship that are more forceful, powerful and concentrated than those found in *The Pilgrimage to Cythera* and *Venetian Pleasures*. In *The Shepherds*, it is obvious that the men and women are actively engaged in courting behavior and it is evident that they are enjoying themselves very much. Posner explains this idea in the following passage:

*Le Plaisier pastorale* and *Les Bergers* are unusual in Watteau’s work in the degree to which their symbolic structure supersedes the requirements of verisimilitude. It is an unlikely assembly he shows, mixing rude peasants with elegant people playing
“pastorale.” But the company composes a wonderfully rich set of variations on the theme of love and desire. (163)

The variations on the theme of love and desire are seen particularly in the erotic intensity of the behavior of the couple who is dancing. A similar scene that reflects this behavior is found in the interaction between the man who has placed his arm around the woman and put his hand near her breast and her reaction to him. Finally, there is a woman sitting on a swing which symbolizes the beginning of a courting relationship. Posner describes the progression of the scene that is taking place in the pastoral setting:

The dance at the right, in front of a field where sheep graze and beneath a bright sky, symbolizes the happy union of the lovers, the happy conclusion of the pastoral interlude that begins in the left background, under a canopy of trees, where a girl sits on the swing. (163)

The performance of the dance means that the couple has advanced to the level of playful interaction with each other and will probably be involved in a sexual relationship beyond the dance. Although their movements are lively, their body language and gestures show that they are in a relaxed, pleasurable mode. They are absorbed only in each other and in the dance and do not appear to be concerned with the rest of the company. In the passage just cited Posner indicates that the relationship is symbolized by the swing. Plax has noted that swinging was an “erotic adult game” (135) in which couples engaged to determine their level of interest in each other. The woman on the swing has her back to the group and is not paying attention to the other couples. Her escort is sitting beside her with his head held at a 45 degree angle in a questioning manner. He is concerned about her reaction as he is trying to determine what their relationship means and whether it will move to the next level.
While the game of courtship is just beginning with this couple, it has advanced to the level of wandering hands with the couple who are seated in the foreground of the painting. The man is sitting very close to the woman and has his face extended and pressed very close to her body. His arm is around her shoulders as if he is planning to embrace and kiss her. Her face looks surprised and she is pulling away from him. Her hands are in front of her body as if to push him away and remove his hand from her shoulder. Vidal describes his face as “repulsively bestial in marked contrast to the woman’s” (115). Although his face is not necessarily bestial, it is ugly and he may be presuming too much in assuming that the woman wants him to move closer to her or to touch her. He is, however, holding a staff in his right hand and it appears to be planted firmly on the ground. By keeping one hand on the staff, he has not pinned her down nor is there any indication that he intends to do this. Attempting to kiss someone without asking permission may be cause for surprise, but if he stops his attempt once his overture is refused and he realizes that he has not gained consent, the behavior stays within the normal bounds of courtship. In this situation the rules of the game of idealized courtship are not broken.

Seated next to this couple is a woman who is leaning over and resting against a man who is playing a bagpipe. As stated previously, the bagpipe was a symbol that was intended to signify strong sexual desire. In this painting the bagpiper is positioned in the middle of the courting couples and appears to be playing the instrument. As in *Venetian Pleasures*, his presence in this painting indicates sexuality. Two other symbols of erotic desire are found in the positions of the man in the foreground who is reclining with his legs apart. He is seated next to a dog who is licking his genitals. Plax calls this a “somewhat comical juxtaposition of the dog licking his genitals and the reclining man whose pose mirrors the dog, which save for the telling gesture, is transformed into an emblem of human desire” (139). In any case these symbols reinforce the desire for erotic and sexual activity that is depicted visually in the painting.
The game that the couples play combines the elements of mimicry and vertigo. The theatrical mood is apparent because the players are dressed in rustic costumes which match the setting of their party which is held in the countryside. The dance and the swing imply the sensation of vertigo or loss of control. The couples, however, obviously understand their desires and know that they are playing a game and that they will eventually leave the pasture before nightfall. At this point the game will end for the day. The game illustrated in this painting is more sensuous and erotic than the previous two just described and in some cases the intentions of the players is more defined with regard to their physical desires. It remains ideal, however and is not exploitative or cruel.

**Le Faux Pas (Figure 4)**

Sexual contact is part of the courtship sequence and it frequently results in a situation in which one person attempts to escalate the relationship to a level for which the other person is not ready. The two comments that were found for this painting (in English) reflect conflicting points of view. The first is that in “Le Faux-Pas, the contact between the man and the woman becomes a tense physical struggle, shown in the claw-like hands and in the stretched fabric of the woman’s dress” (Vidal 115). The second comment was “the advances of the man, whose passion is signaled by the red glow of his hand, and the presumably pretended resistance of the woman – who is often interpreted as having stumbled – together make a picture of the process of falling in love” (Posner 169). An analysis of the body language and positioning in this painting does not support either of these comments fully. The woman is sitting on the ground and is leaning back slightly supported by her left hand. She is sitting almost upright and it does not appear as if she is being pushed. Her fingers are separated to help her keep her balance or to support her if she chooses to lie down. Her other hand is on the chest of man just below his neck. It is this gesture that makes it appear as if she were pushing
him away. If she were pulling him toward her, her arm would more likely be around his neck or shoulder. She has positioned her arm between him and her body to serve as a barrier and a signal that she does not wish to move the behavior to another level. Her hand does not appear claw-like just because her fingers are separated. If she were pushing him away angrily her hand may be in the shape of a fist or her fingers may be together to give her further strength and support. There does not appear to be a tense struggle although she may be rejecting his advance.

There is no basis in the painting for the idea that she is pretending to resist. Further, it can not be known whether or not she stumbled but there is a cloak on the ground nearby which may mean that the couple was sitting on the ground for a while before the man made a sexual advance which he may have felt would be well received. A clue to the intended behavior of the man in this painting may be found in its title, *Le Faux Pas* or the misstep. *Le faux pas* is also a dance term. In the previous section it was noted that dances require certain steps that must be made in a prescribed sequence so that a couple can dance together in an orderly manner. They may have followed these steps to a certain point until the man took the sequence a bit further than the woman may have been willing to go. He may have made a misstep in trying to turn her over and lay her on the ground. At this point the dance sequence was broken and it came to an end. The man’s face is very peaceful, however. His body is leaning forward as if he is on his knees and he is attempting to lay the woman on her back. This is as far as the viewer can take any assumption concerning the behavior. If the woman was pretending to resist or the man attempting to pursue the relationship with force, it would make the game cruel and exploitative. This game does not appear to be either. Watteau was probably painting an observation of normal human behavior in the courting process. If the man stops the behavior because his partner does not wish to escalate it, then he has followed the rules of the game of idealized courtship and the game will remain at the previous level.
Do you remember all those mischievous little cupids with their saucy naked bottoms, barely visible high up in the sky of *The Embarkment for Cythera*? Where are they off to? They are going to play at Fragonard’s and shed the dust of their butterfly wings onto his palette. (Thulliard 87)

Like Watteau, Fragonard’s paintings contain the motifs of courtship, love, desire and sexuality and these themes are documented in the literature written about his work. By comparison to the themes in the paintings of Watteau which tend to focus on groups of people playing games of love, Fragonard’s paintings present a more private and intimate atmosphere because they involve couples who are already courting and who have progressed to the stages of sexual arousal or resolution. Milam characterizes the differences between Watteau and Fragonard in the following quote:

In representations of blindman’s buff by Watteau, Lancret and Pater sensual behavior is held at bay by a large group of players or onlookers. Erotic symbols appear – bagpipes, a dog licking himself, sexually explicit garden sculpture – but passion is controlled by the company and the social form of a game. In contrast Fragonard’s use of distinct couples in the Toledo and Pregny paintings, far from the watchful eyes of the public or other courtiers, gives more freedom to natural impulses specifically because the games do not take place within a larger group. Passions are excited and expressed within the game. (8)

Crow describes Fragonard’s style as “personal, sensual and erotic and says that he pursues the possibilities of paint like no other artist of the century” (169). According to Levey “his genius lay in aiming lower, from an academic standpoint, in being more rational and natural – that is, by being more witty,
mischievous, and relaxed (than, for example, Boucher or Tiepolo)” (116). Thulliard notes that “Fragonard’s art ranges from sensuality to passion. More than any of his fellow artists he was the painter of love” (122). Fragonard’s game of courtship is apparent to the viewer who immediately sees that it is comprised of mutual desire and erotic play. Hubert describes this theme of courtship in Fragonard’s paintings in the following manner:

Gods and mortals no longer enact dreams, but spontaneously express unbridled instincts. A man chases a woman whose very flight is an additional inducement: he steals a kiss in a brief moment of intimacy. Fate will favor the lovers sooner or later: pranks, tricks, surprises, foreseeable accidents, will enable them to skirt the laws of modesty, the watchful eyes of prudence, and provide them with hurried bliss…their enticing gesture is not an attempt of visual seduction, but a sincere expression of desire, of joie de vivre. (90)

Furthermore, Fragonard’s paintings were so visually and erotically stimulating that Sheriff quoting the Goncourts says, “But he is also an audacious raconteur, a gallant amoroso. Any consideration of Fragonard they say, must lead to the bed” (334). The theme of his paintings is love and his focus depicts the innocent sexuality of couples who can not contain their physical attraction to each other. Although sexuality is not subdued in Fragonard’s paintings, the game of courtship is clearly idealized. His paintings differ from those of Watteau because they deal with subject matter that depicts un concealed sexual desire, pursuit, erotic play and consummation. Even so, the sexual relationships portrayed in the paintings are mutual, voluntary and consensual between the couples.

Wakefield compares Watteau and Fragonard saying that “while Watteau was recognized for his fêtes galantes, Fragonard’s genius was revealed in the way he made nature a central theme in his paintings. Fragonard evolved a genre – that of his use of nature – which was to stand him in good stead for the next decade and make a major contribution to French art” (14). Levey makes a similar
comparison saying that for “Watteau the pastoral setting provided a tranquil and beautiful background for lovers to engage in courting. While Fragonard’s paintings showed that “nature dominated figures…growing all the while, assuming giant proportions of beautiful green and lemon yellow trees, beside which mankind shrinks to marionette proportions” (119). Thulliard comments that “Fragonard’s oeuvre oscillates between erotic license and lyric dream, between conventional drama and a visionary’s feeling for nature” (88). For Fragonard it was impossible to separate the impact of nature from the theme of erotic desire. He relied on his view of nature to create an erotic atmosphere in which people were competing with its forces. Further Thulliard notes that “Fragonard spoke with the “voice of a lyric poet…he feels deeply the mixture of order and neglect and the grandeur of nature in its half tamed state…There was a mystery in Fragonard’s works and it was hard to detect if it was sensual pleasure or spiritual rapture” (108, 122). This statement implies that these emotions were intertwined and inseparable. Fragonard painted the forces in nature to mirror the very strong and normal sexual feelings that occur when couples desire each other. Having people shrink to marionette proportions which suggests that they were less important than or overwhelmed by nature is not what Fragonard intended in his paintings. His use of nature and its domination and beauty paralleled the extreme power of human sexual feelings. The power of nature underscored the passion between couples and provided an impression that was as wild and free as that observed in clouds, trees and foliage. Nature was lush and beautiful and its colors provocative thus setting the background for mutual love and desire. Nature with its wildness and order was intended to be an illustration of the force and strength of sexuality. If it overpowered the size of the human figure, then it was a true representation of the strong desire that takes place just before consummation. In the following passage Thulliard describes nature’s role in Fragonard’s paintings:

Trees no longer invite the spectator to day-dream, but form suggestive shadows while their foliage creates nooks and nests.
Hasty clouds wander, covering and uncovering strips of sky where branches inscribe the patterns of the love-game played below them. Flowers, immune to withering burst forth...Nature knowing no boundaries completely absorbs the artificial and decorative element. A constant creator of tracks, obstacles and surprises, she is the correspondance of lover’s pursuits. (91)

Nature was the backdrop for courtship but the game was played by rules that both partners understood and observed. While Fragonard’s interpretation of nature was more forceful and intimate than that of Watteau, he also used the pastoral setting to show a peaceful location in which the couples could flirt and spend time together. An examination of his paintings reveals that he incorporated many common symbols to represent the idea that a game of idealized courtship was in play. These symbols include gardens with roses and other lush foliage; statues of Venus and her arrows representing love; Cupids teasing the couples; dolphins equating to sexuality and a small dog serving as a traditional symbol of loyalty. Fragonard also dressed his figures in representative costumes of shepherds and shepherdesses.

In addition to these traditional symbols, he used others that were more sexually explicit. For example, Milam notes that “the blindfold and the swing represent the game of vertigo which equates to sexual disorder among the players” (3, 546). According to Massengale, “the sexual innuendo of the swing with its rhythmically rising intensity was well known as an erotic parallel to sexual intercourse” (88). “The tossed shoe and cap pictured in The Swing were symbols of sexual readiness and availability. Other symbols in The Bolt included the overturned vase as a symbol of the vagina and the apple representing original sin” (Bailey et al 290). These symbols represented sexual desire and the wish for consummation; however, Fragonard uses them to depict a game that is mutual and consensual. It is important to note that Fragonard does not portray the theme of refusal in his paintings so much as he does the idea of consent. Consent implies that the couple has decided to escalate their sexual behavior to a mutually agreed
upon level. This rule must be in effect for the game to be idealized. The facial
cexpressions, gestures and the body language of his figures show that they are
already involved in a game of love and that it either has already or will soon
progress to the stage of sexual resolution.

It has been established that the theme of idealized courtship is
demonstrated in Fragonard’s paintings through nature, the pastoral location, erotic
symbols, and facial expressions and body positions. The paintings in this section
were selected because they portray the game of idealized courtship among
couples who desire a sexual relationship. *The Meeting, Blindman’s Buff* and *The
Swing* show couples who are engaged in different phases of sexual behavior. In
these paintings nature establishes an exotic and private setting. In *The Meeting* a
couple anticipates a sexual encounter in a secluded part of a garden when their
game is interrupted by an intruder. Milam notes that in *Blindman’s Buff* the
couple engages in a pleasurable game in which they become sexually aroused
through “play that provides the frame for physical intimacy that otherwise would
be shocking” (3). Then, in *The Swing* Fragonard depicts a couple who already
have a sexual relationship and who are playing and teasing each other using the
sexual symbolism of the swing. The vertigo of the swing and the sexual
relationship it implies informs the viewer that the strong passion and desire for
consummation will soon be satisfied. In the final painting *The Bolt*, the couple
prepare for sexual intercourse. Their bodies are positioned as if they are dancing
as they prepare to lock the door and return to the bed. The following section
discusses each painting to show how its subject matter demonstrates the rules of
the game of idealized courtship. It looks at how erotic symbols, observable non-
verbal behavior and other cues show that these games are pleasurable, mutual and
consensual.
The Meeting (Figure 5)

This painting is one of a four part series entitled *The Progress of Love*. According to Sheriff, Fragonard painted this series to hang in a salon in Madame du Barry’s pavilion in Louveciennes. The other paintings are now called: *The Pursuit*, *The Lover Crowned* and *The Love Letters* (58). Most of the literature surrounding the meaning of these paintings concerns whether or not Fragonard painted them as narrative pieces with an intended message of a linear sequence of the progress a couple makes in courtship or if they were solely intended for decoration. The narrative point of view speaks to interpretation of the progression of the sequence while the decorative position simply deals with the order in which the paintings were to be hung based on the architecture and the dimensions of the space. Sheriff explains the narrative point of view in the following passage:

Whether interpreters considered the works as reconstituted at Grasse or as planned for Louveciennes, they applied to Fragonard’s *Progress* the model of an episodic narrative read as a determined sequence. Thus the problem of ordering the panels, of determining which scene should be looked at first, which second and so on, has been taken as central to understanding the paintings. (64)

Even if the interpretative or narrative approach is considered correct, commentators still do not agree on the overall theme of the series. The discussion of Fragonard’s intention usually centers on which of the two paintings, *The Pursuit* or *The Meeting*, was intended to begin the sequence. *The Meeting* is sometimes referred to as *Storming the Citadel* because as Sheriff relates “it seemed to Sauerländer that the scene depicted the medieval theme of storming loves citadel and the lover is like those knights who besieged a castle defended only by women.” In this view, however, women “feigned an adversarial relation to their knightly lovers” (74-75). Sheriff further believes that this adversarial view
is not supported by the body language and expressions of either the woman or the man in the painting (74). For Posner, Fragonard’s series illustrated “the natural behavior and ritual interaction of a boy and girl in the springtime of love. It shows the progress of the enchanted couple and takes love itself for granted” (533).

Calling *The Meeting* by a different name, *The Surprise*, Posner offers the following interpretation of the painting. In his view the girl who has been sitting alone in the garden reading a letter is surprised when her lover scales the garden and appears on the wall. Startled, she drops the letter and throws out her arms in a show of fright and turns away from him as she begins to call for help. He, in the meantime, expects a different response and is caught off guard and is uncertain about what to do (529). This interpretation is similar to that of the medieval knight in which the meeting is not planned, mutual or consensual. Molotiu offers a more middle ground approach that simply describes the painting noting that it “depicts a young man climbing a ladder to meet a young woman who is seated on a garden terrace; the woman is in an attitude of surprise, either at her suitor’s intrusion or at that of an unseen figure beyond the figure’s left edge” (95). This interpretation seems contradictory because if the suitor were climbing a ladder to meet the woman, it would not be an intrusion that would surprise her although she could be surprised at the entrance into the garden of a third person who was not expected. Another reason behind her behavior may be that she is feigning surprise as part of the game. Any or all of these interpretations may be correct but it can not be known what meaning Fragonard intended when he created the scenes. Sheriff confirms this view noting that “reading *The Progress of Love* is problematic because the subject is artist-created, that is, not supported by a literary text. Viewers can not know the narrative outside of the painting(s) and they are called upon to fabricate, rather than to remember, a story line” (66).

Given Fragonard’s history of painting erotic themes of love and desire that show consensual sexual relationships, it would seem likely that the depicted behavior does not support either the claim of naive innocence found in first love
or an unwelcome surprise attack by the suitor. Rather Sheriff believes that “Fragonard represents two lovers who are on the same side of battle and we see a prearranged tryst unexpectedly interrupted” (74). The evidence for this view is found in the secluded garden setting in which the statues and flowers are symbols indicating that courtship will take place. The facial expressions, gestures and body language of the figures also support the idea that the scene represents a meeting between two people who already know each other and who are planning some sort of sexual encounter. In this passage Sheriff describes the characteristics of the garden and the importance of its location for the tryst. It also explains how Fragonard painted nature and used it to bind the figures together in a scene:

The scene is set in an imaginary jardin de plaisir on a terrace engulfed by irregular foliage, unclipped and overgrown almost to the point of reclaiming the architectural setting…this foliage seems artfully arranged; a bare angled branch contrasts with a full, leafy trunk and repeats its C curve. Although these elements help to direct the viewer’s attention to the left side of the composition, this movement is counteracted by the bower that bends downward and to the right, arching over the male figure. Such decorative effects suggest artifice at the same time the overgrown state signals the naturalness of the represented garden. (73)

The garden provides a natural setting for the lovers and they are joined together by the composition of the painting. When the branches arch over the man, they, in effect, pull him into the scene and create the impression that he is already in the garden. Fragonard placed the lovers in the corner of a garden where they would have privacy and space for their rendez-vous. In addition to the lushness of the foliage, the garden is overflowing with roses that symbolize romantic love. Their presence everywhere is another indicator that a love relationship is intended. The statues of Venus and Cupid are symbols that will assist the couple in meeting their desire for sexual love. In the following passage Hubert expresses how this feeling works:
A coquettish Venus twists away from an agitated Cupid who by miracle has not yet fallen down from his small stone cloud. Statues catalyze the scene. Faithful to legend, they give free reign to lovers and love and thus become the guardian angels of youths eager to avoid etiquette and cumbersome restrictions. Under the miniature wing of Cupid and the protective eye of Venus, breathless lovers can pause for a moment. (91)

These statues are in motion as if they are expecting the young lovers; they seem to be alive and participating in the action. For Sheriff, Fragonard uses the statues and the couples interchangeably. “Fragonard depicts statues imitating actors – or is it that actors imitate statues – and thus obscures the distinction between what is (represented as) real and what is (represented as) representation” (75). Hubert expresses this opinion as well; “Fragonard obliterates the borderline between animate and inanimate, mobile and motionless, and incarnates the triumph of the living, the natural, the spontaneous” (91). The statues of Venus and Cupid behave as people would if they were observers in the garden. Knowing that the meeting will not take place Venus puts her arrows away. Molotiu interprets the pose of the statues in this way: “the outside intrusion interrupts their planned meeting, and thus accounts for the statue of Venus taking away Cupid’s arrows and its emblematic meaning of the interruption or postponement of love” (101).

Dress is another symbol showing that love and desire are present in the scene. The man appears to blend in with the colors in the garden. Sheriff comments that “his presence is forcefully marked because the dark pink jacket set against green breeches repeats more emphatically the complementary contrast established in the pink roses and green foliage” (74). The colors and tones emphasize the woman’s yellowish gown and she stands out from her surroundings. It is apparent that she and her reactions were the focus of the painting.
Fragonard frequently used visual puns or metaphors in his work. Posner explains how these puns play a part in establishing the courtship sequence between the couple. Speaking of the puns, he explains:

They were contrived which explains the appearance in his pictures of actions and motifs not easily related to pictorial traditions. Thus the idea of the youth using a ladder to reach his love, is as Sauerländer has shown, frequently found in literature and folk custom, but extremely rare if not unique in French eighteenth paintings and prints. The ladder and red-jacketed male rise up suddenly to intrude into the girl’s rose garden and frightening her is obviously an erotic pun. (530)

The woman does not appear to be frightened and is expecting the man. The manner in which he quickly mounts the ladder with the abrupt entrance into the garden is another way that Fragonard shows that the meeting was pre-arranged and consensual. The painting is focused on the girl and her behavior. She is sitting with her foot and ankle exposed possibly as an enticement to her lover which gives more support to the idea that the meeting was planned. Their body positions show caution as they look at something unseen. Their faces can be clearly seen and their expressions are guarded and watchful. The position of the woman’s arm indicates that she wants her lover to be aware of someone else. Sheriff notes “the young woman’s gesture both warns and holds off her lover…it implies less that the girl is unwilling than that the timing is wrong” (74). In the following passage Sheriff explains what is happening in the scene:

Boy, girl, foliage, and statue all direct their attention (and ours) toward the unrepresented interloper whose position is suggested as outside the composition and to the left. The young woman’s gesture both warns and holds off her lover, and the position of her body – twisted at the waist, head turned to the left – nearly parallels that of the statue whose duty it is to comment on the scene…love’s attack must be delayed…as Venus holds off Cupid, she holds off her lover until the intruder has passed…it is the beginning of a tryst, perhaps secret or illicit, but not the beginning
of a love affair between two people strangers to each other. (74-75)

Fragonard mels the human characters, the statues and nature to create a sense of collusion in an interrupted scene of sexual liaison. Interruption is a part of the normal game of courtship. *The Meeting* shows the game of idealized courtship because it depicts a mutual and consensual relationship between two people who are planning to have a sexual relationship. This tryst is to be held in a secluded corner of a rose filled garden. The man arrives by ladder which indicates that he only wants to be seen by the woman. There is another way into the garden and the couple is surprised by a visitor whom they did not expect. The behavior of the statues, Venus and Cupid, support the idea that the game is interrupted. The position of the woman’s body indicates that she has been facing the direction from which her suitor will appear and that she twisted her body quickly when she heard the arrival of a third person. She has a surprised look on her face but she is not afraid. She has consented to the meeting but the timing is now wrong. The game, although interrupted, has been played by the rules because both players gave consent. Although their sexual pleasure must be saved for another day, their intention reflects idealized courtship because the game played is mutual and voluntary. There is every reason to think that a sexual resolution will occur in the future.

*Blindman’s Buff* (Figure 6)

Traditionally, blindman’s buff was a game that took place among a group of people who were seeking a love relationship that would lead to marriage. In his painting, *Blindman’s Buff*, Fragonard used the recognizable visual cues of blindfolding and the behavior of searching for a partner found in the traditional game as the structure to create a personal game of courtship held for just two
people. This section first examines the origin of the game of blindman’s buff to show how it was typically played. It then shows how Fragonard painted an erotic game in which a pair of lovers engages in courting behavior. The location of the game in a pastoral setting with known symbols of love including flowers and costumes established the game of courtship. It was previously noted in this dissertation that “the game of blindman’s buff offers the opportunity to experience the quality of perception in the absence of sight” (Caílois 30). Blindman’s buff is a game of vertigo in which the loss of sight is used to stimulate or increase the suspense of finding a mate. For Fragonard, the blindfold created sensual stimulation and enhanced the game through adding another dimension of play and excitement. The couple used what was supposed to be a game of chance to create sexual tension during the courtship chase. In Fragonard’s painting chance was not a factor because there were only two people playing the game. This section will then show that the game of courtship is idealized because the non-verbal communication cues of body language and facial expressions make it clear that the couple understand the rules of the game. It is consensual and time limited. While the rules are expanded to include the feelings and sexual sensation found in the game of vertigo, they are not broken. The couple understands the rules of the game and will eventually finish it and return to reality. Courtship is depicted as playful, sensual, erotic and enjoyable.

Blindman’s buff was not a game that originated in the 18th century. It was played much earlier as a courtship game and its context was one of finding a mate. Posner explains that “the game of blindman’s buff appears in art as early as medieval times, when it was probably meant to symbolize the folly of love” (80). Hindman, in an analysis of Brueghel’s painting, Children’s Games, creates a link between blindman’s buff and marriage establishing blindman’s buff as a courtship game:

Between the house and fence, the group playing blindman’s buff also illustrates the theme of folly. As played in Antwerp, the girl,
blinded with a hood, tagged a boy, who in turn became her mock bridegroom. Blindman’s Buff was, thus, a type of courtship game. (451)

The original meaning of blindman’s buff as a courtship game was that it was foolish or reckless. The location of the game near a wedding procession was meant to imply that folly accompanies some of life’s major events (Hindman 452). The capriciousness of chance in the game was the source of its link to folly in marriage because it led to a haphazard selection of a mate (Hindman 455). The selection was haphazard because one member of the couple was blindfolded and forced to choose a mate randomly. The selection of a mate through chance meant that the union was most likely destined to be unhappy. By the 18th century blindman’s buff was generally considered a game played by the nobility. Milam explains that “the game of blindman’s buff in the 18th century was considered of noble status owing to the perception of its ancient lineage and association with the heroism of a knight known as Colin-Maillard, who continued to fight although wounded in battle” (24). In the following passage Posner indicates that, while the game was still considered one of folly, the attitude of the players in the 18th century toward the result of the game was different:

In the eighteenth century the meaning of the image had changed less than the attitude towards that meaning. Society had become less censorious, readier to accept certain things as they are: like youth and love. Love is blind and probably a little mad. The young heart gropes, feels its way anxiously in search of a partner. (81)

The idea of folly in courtship and marriage had changed to the theme of young lovers in search of a mate and the emotional risk involved in this pursuit. Uncertainty and chance were then seen as normal parts of the game of love. In the following passage Milam explains how Fragonard’s painting was conceived at a time when love was the purpose of the game but folly was not considered a
particularly important factor. It examines the game as one that was set up to permit sexual license that was otherwise not acceptable. The passage also looks at the pastoral conventions that indicated that blindman’s buff was a game of courtship and love:

Writers, artists and audiences since the middle ages have linked the subject of blindman’s buff to the subtleties of pastoral conventions. They have used the game to assist in the development of amorous plots …play provides the frame for physical intimacy that otherwise would be shocking…by the time Fragonard painted his first version of blindman’s buff, the pastoral mode of representing the amusement intermingled with a message of love, but that message did not necessarily or exclusively concern love’s folly. (3)

Fragonard created two companion paintings, *Blindman’s Buff* and *The Seesaw*, which show two phases in the game of idealized courtship. Together these paintings represent “scenes of a young couple’s romance on a summer day and serve as allegories of two stages in the universal adventure of love” (Posner 82). These two stages are courtship and consummation of the relationship. Massengale explains that in *Blindman’s Buff*, Fragonard has “sounded a note of one of his central themes: the great game of male-female rapprochement. As Fragonard tells it, it is the boy who makes the moves. The girl is receptive, in fact, enchanted; she peeks out from under the blindfold but admits nothing. The boy is a natural tease – he tickles her cheek with a straw” (48). Milam notes that the sexuality in the painting is suggested through the positioning of the girl on a step and a potential fall. The following passage explains this moment:

The blindfolded girl stands on the edge of a step. This precarious position alludes to a potential fall from innocence. Her playful partner grazes her cheek with a piece of straw, while the child at her feet uses a stick to tickle her palm…the composition as a whole urges blind love forward. (4)
In the first painting the young couple plays *Blindman’s Buff* but the game is a pretence. Since there are only two players, Posner explains that “the girl knows she will catch only the young man while he assists her in locating him by tickling her cheek. The outcome is that the two young people find each other and enjoy their union” (82). Further he notes that “The Seesaw represents the outcome of their love (or its consummation) through sexual images in the form of a seesaw which the girl rides. Wine and fruit, traditional symbols of love and sensual enjoyment, are present” (83).

According to Milam, Fragonard’s game of “blindman’s buff concentrates on the theme of courtship through the isolation of a couple” (11). This couple is using the game as a way to experiment with physical intimacy in a manner that would not openly violate social rules. Further she explains that Fragonard’s depictions of blindman’s buff are “positive and permissive with overtones of sexual risk in which shameless pleasure subverts the notion of folly in love” (5). The pastoral setting creates the framework for the game Fragonard depicts and supports the theme of courtship. Fragonard shows “typical characters of a pastoral romance, idealized rustics filling the day with leisure and love” (4). The girl and boy are dressed as a shepherdess and shepherd which indicate that they are playing a role. It is apparent that they are seeking love because they are alone together in a rose strewn garden in which it is evident that they are playing a game of make believe blindman’s buff. The light and color in the painting emphasize the feeling of play and enjoyment in his painting. Massengale notes that “he used clear, pleasant colors with warmth as in the girl’s rose-pink dress and flushed complexion, or in the boy’s yellow jacket” (48). And Milam explains, “Fragonard used light, color and brushwork to draw artistic significance from the blindman’s buff theme while dislodging the fixed and conventional meanings of his subject” (20). These meanings have changed from folly in love to a game played for consensual sexual motives.
The game of idealized courtship as played by Fragonard’s couple is not blind in that the boy and girl do not know each other at all or that they are meeting for the first time. They are pretending to play a game of chance when in reality they already know that the true goal of the game is sexual arousal. The players in Fragonard’s version are engaged in an erotic game. Milam notes that there is tension between the “randomness supposedly inherent in a game of chance using a blindfold and the predetermined course of the game as represented” (3). Rather than a game of chance, Fragonard paints “a game of skill disguised as chance because the end is already predetermined. It is really a skillfully manipulated game in which the pleasurable effects of eroticism stimulate love and so play begins with blindman’s buff…the temporary loss of sight in the game stimulates the imagination and interpretation” (Milam 4, 9). The game has released the emotions of freedom and escape from reality (Huizinga 13) thus making it one of mock courtship.

The blindfold is the key symbol in the painting. Fragonard understood and used the blindfold or blindness as a powerful sign of sensual stimulation. The themes of blindness, temporary and feigned, are as central to visual experience as they are to the blindfolded players. The girl has the “residual power of sight because she is peeking out from under the blindfold” (Milam 5). The meaning of the painting could be read as a promise of pleasure which directs the players toward the erotic potential of the game. Milam describes the non-verbal communication cues in the paintings in the following manner:

Her foot is on a step but she can see where she is going. Her arms are stretched out to help with balance but her face is peaceful and relaxed so she is not afraid of falling. Her body posture indicates that she is in control of herself and the game. His head is tilted to one side and his slight smile indicates that he knows there is no resistance on her part. The boy is also there to catch her if she slips. There is no chance that she will make a mistake. The overwhelming power of sight must be taken away to stimulate sensation, to involve imagination, to effect tactility. Blindness
disrupts expectations in a game that is familiar and related to courtship, love and sociability. Thus her fall is made inevitable, desirable and intentional. (17 – 20)

In Fragonard’s painting blindness simply heightens the suspense in a game that is mutual and voluntary. Freedom from the rules is experienced because one of the participants is blindfolded. With the absence of sight the player loses visual perception thus giving the game an aspect of mystery. One of the reasons that the setting is daylight is because the loss of visual perception is heightened. The blindfolding also creates tension and excitement which increases suspense. Blindfolding also removes some of the social responsibility that may be involved if a couple just meets in a garden and decides to engage in a sexual relationship. The concept of chance justifies the touching in addition to providing a strong stimulus for sexual foreplay. A game of chance implies that one person may not find the partner of choice. Milam explains that “in this game, however, the couple is only playing with each other so the outcome is known in advance. They are using the rules of chance to set up a voluntary sexual relationship” (5). She also says that “the structure of the game encourages the physical contact and the couple’s behavior follows as a permissible component of play” (10). They are enjoying the suspense of postponing the end of the game.

Fragonard has painted a game of courtship that is idealized and consensual because both members understand they are playing a game and they both know that they have temporarily suspended the rules to ensure the outcome of the game. They are aware of the significance of the blindfold and how it contributes to the relaxation of the rules. The end result of the game other than that it will lead to sexual arousal and possible consummation can not be known. Whether the game leads to marriage is not the concern. The theme of this painting is that the lovers have voluntarily decided to escalate their behavior to another level.
In *The Swing*, as in *Blindman’s Buff*, Fragonard used a game that was popular at the time to depict erotic courtship behavior between a man and a woman. In *The Swing*, unlike *Blindman’s Buff*, the couple is already engaged sexually and has moved to the sexual resolution phase of the stages of courtship. Even so, they are still involved in an idealized game because they both understand that their sexual relationship is mutually desirable and consensual. That the couple has a sexual relationship is illustrated through the visual symbols and non-verbal communication cues found throughout the painting. For example, numerous symbols that allude to sexual intercourse are found within the painting. The most prominent symbol is the swing which represents the desire for a sexual relationship. Massengale offers similar comments concerning the meaning of the swing including “its rhythmically rising intensity was an erotic parallel to sexual intercourse” (88). The act of swinging is in itself a game of vertigo in which movement and projection into space creates a sense of disorder which leads to the feeling that the rules governing courtship in society can be relaxed. The couple in Fragonard’s painting is involved in the game of idealized courtship and used the vertigo found in swinging to simulate sexual intercourse thus teasing each other and increasing their mutual sexual desire. Other symbols that represent a sexual relationship include the overgrown garden, the man’s hat and the woman’s shoe, the small dog, the cupids and the dolphin. Each of these symbols is associated in some way with the fulfillment of love and desire. This section first examines the symbolism of the swing along with the act of swinging to show how they represent a game of love and desire. Posner and Milam offer comprehensive, although somewhat differing, interpretations of the meaning of the swing, its sexual allusions and its relationship to the game of vertigo. Vertigo and its impact on sexuality is an important component in establishing the intensity of the game. In the following passage Milam explains how vertigo changes the game:
A preference for vertigo games expresses a longing for disorder and a desire to escape an otherwise stable perception of the world through the delirium of play. In a swinging game, the player’s normal sense of gravity is disrupted to accommodate a desire for disorder, to destabilize the player’s control over his or her own body. (554 - 555)

An examination of Posner’s and Milam’s interpretations will provide a context in which to establish that Fragonard used the swing and swinging to illustrate an erotic game of consensual courtship. Next, the section examines the location of the game in the garden along with the symbols just mentioned to demonstrate that Fragonard intended for the viewer to understand that the couple was involved sexually. Finally this section looks at the non-verbal communication cues found in the body positions and gestures as well as the facial expressions of the lovers to show that they understand the rules of the game of idealized courtship. They know the purpose of the game and that it is time limited. They choose to play it and they can quit anytime. Once the game is over, they will return to the reality of normal life that exists outside of the game.

Posner presents some of the traditional connotations that paintings of the swing may have had for 18th century viewers. For example, he says that “swinging was associated with romantic or erotic feeling and was one of the past-times of young lovers” (78). In some contexts, though, the meaning of the swing was one of “women and inconstancy, teasing changes of the mind if not of the heart as part of the flirting game…seated couples supposedly exchange heartfelt words of love, the girl on the swing prefers to play” (76). In this view the purpose of swinging and the swing was one of light, cheerful fun in which couples flirted with each other. Posner also comments that “the woman was seen as fickle and her position seated on the swing served as a warning to men that she may not need to be taken seriously as a mate because she may waver between suitors” (77). Another point of view was that the swing was associated with traditional
courtship behavior because the woman on the swing was passive and “control was exercised by the man in initiating and continuing her ride” (Posner 78). These views show the activities associated with the swing as simple flirtatious games played between young couples who are seeking companionship with each other. The painting, however, is not intended to be about women who are fickle or men who are in control of the relationship. Instead it portrays an ongoing sexual relationship between two people who are joined together in a mutually agreed upon consensual relationship. Milam concentrates on the element of play in Fragonard’s depiction of the couple and the swing. She makes two important points about how Fragonard treated the play in the paintings. Her points are that this painting creates:

A model for viewing Fragonard’s scenes with swinging women through a consideration of the full range and potential of meanings…we will see how the artist moves between various perspectives on play: from the physical and the social, to the emblematic, to the aesthetic. And second that Fragonard’s swinging scenes invite the viewer to participate in a visual game that…arouses the imagination and the senses, and operates to recommence the game at every instant. (544)

This text establishes Fragonard’s intent to paint The Swing for the entertainment of a viewer who would understand play and the game and who would be involved in its sexuality. The viewer would participate in a scene that was intentionally made erotic and suggestive. In discussing how the swing was viewed in the 18th century, Milam gives the following idea concerning the meaning attributed to the game of swinging:

The swings at amusement parks were not innocuous rides. They disrupted physical propriety normally observed off the swing. With the exhilaration of vertigo play, swinging permitted occasions of sexual disorder where uninhibited positions revealed the body and spectators glimpsed views that were usually hidden
Swings and swinging were viewed as legitimate ways to step outside of social norms regarding accepted sexual behavior. Perhaps the best definition of the meaning of the game is found in this statement by Milam when she explains “the defining quality of the game itself was the pleasurable vertigo brought on by the oscillations of the swing” (544). The pleasure obtained in swinging released the normal inhibitions of the person swinging and increased sexual desire. It also enhanced the game between partners as Milam discusses in the following passage. “The aim of swinging is to become intoxicated with motion…his amusing representation of a ride on a swing invites the viewer to consider the function and character of amorous and erotic games between the sexes” (556). The swing created the feeling of vertigo and provided the opportunity for normally stable people to experience a temporary disorder of the senses which created erotic tension and enhanced the game of love. The viewer understood this meaning and participated in it along with the couple.

In addition to the swing and its importance as the central theme of the painting, there are other symbols that indicate that a game of courtship is being played. Massengale describes how the symbols in the painting are coordinated to present a picture of courtship:

The picture is full of allusions. Even more than the comments made by the sculptures – dolphins and amours of Venus, the boy Cupid with his fingers to his lips (shh…a secret love affair), and the nude couple carved on the statue base – the joys and torments of Saint-Julien’s delightful situation are suggested by the twistings and writhings of the trunks and boughs and the exuberance of blossoms. (88)

One of the most prominent symbols in the painting is that of its location in nature. Both Posner and Milam consider the setting more of a stage than a naturalistic
portrait of a garden. “The artist wanted to establish a mood of tremulous excitement by the dense twisting and turning of the leaves in the garden…the density and thickness of nature’s growth seem to screen the figures and suggest a secret place for this curious lovers’ tryst…Further the game is not held at the traditional hour – instead it is held at dusk and associated with activities that occur after the sun goes down” (84, 85). Milam notes that “the lighting in the painting is brightest in the center of the painting. It is focused solely on the woman as if a beam of sunshine is able to get into the dark garden area” (554). This lighting design forces the eye to look at the woman and her behavior. The light emphasizes her pink dress and the motion of the swing. Whether it is dusk or not, Posner is correct in saying that the staging or setting is designed to indicate a private area where the two lovers can meet secretly. Fragonard has created a scene in nature that seems artificial and contrived. It simulates that of a stage setting and creates a highly erotic and romantic backdrop for the lovers’ anticipated sexual behavior. Milam describes the effect of nature and its influence on the game of idealized courtship. “In significant areas the trees, leaves, and flowers are carefully delineated. Seemingly existing to support and enhance the meaning in the figures’ actions, the garden setting in this painting appears artificial and stage-like. The bushes in which the young man hides appear more like a prop then a convincing feature of landscaped nature” (548). In this setting nature is so overgrown that its intent is to frame the scene and to emphasize the personal game of courtship between the two lovers.

Other symbols are also present in the garden and serve to indicate that a sexual relationship is taking place. The following passage sums up some of the major symbols in the painting:

More specific symbols – a tossed shoe (female abandon to passion), an unshod foot (lost virginity), an eager lap dog (impatient desire), a statue of Cupid who silences with one hand and pulls arrows from his quiver with another (love at work), and a hat that caps a budding bush (sexual engagement) – all collude
with the primary emblem of the swing to create a mood an encoded, erotic scene. (549)

The male hat was commonly used in rococo art to hide an erection and in *The Swing* it is paired with the woman who has kicked off her shoe thus indicating that she has lost her virginity and is ready for sexual engagement. Other symbols in the painting include the putti who are riding a dolphin, a traditional symbol of sexuality (Milam 555). Cupid has his fingers to his lips as if he is intending to silence a secret liaison. The entire painting is one of eroticism and desire.

The non-verbal communication cues seen in the painting also demonstrate the sexual relationship between the couple. Posner discusses how the non-verbal behavior illustrates their relationship:

A straightforward description of what one sees proves to be almost embarrassingly frank: the woman is in motion, her legs are parted, her pink dress opens. The man is in the rose bush, hat off, arm erect and well-aimed. And suddenly, to her own delight, as she reaches the peak of her ride, the woman’s shoe flies off her foot. (88)

According to Milam, Fragonard has painted “a visual pun on sexual engagement...the painting functioned as a scene of unbridled passion in which the principles of play and mimesis are compounded” (549). That the behavior is mutual and consensual can be seen in the man and woman’s facial expressions. The woman has her head tilted slightly to the right and is looking directly at the man. Her expression is very peaceful and satisfied as she looks at her lover. His head is tilted slightly to the left in a mirror image of the position of her face. His expression is more animated, and his mouth is opened as if he is breathing hard. His eyes are directed on her face. His body is propped up on his right arm which enables him to hold his hat in the air and in a line that leads to her skirt. The couple is involved in a sexual relationship using the game of vertigo implied by
the swing to simulate sexual intercourse. There are rules in place that the couple understands. The game is also time-limited because the couple will have to leave the stage once the light is gone and return to reality. The game is one of active involvement in a sexual relationship and its motives are demonstrated through the symbols in the painting. These motives are not those of flirtation or inconstancy but instead of a sexual relationship that is mutual, consensual, voluntary, and idealized.

**The Bolt (Figure 8)**

*The Bolt* is Fragonard’s most famous scene of a sexual liaison in progress. Much discussion has centered on the nature of the relationship between the man and woman in the painting. “For Thuillier, it is a pairing of the themes of Sacred and Profane Love including the double theme of the Fall...there is an overt reference to Eve in the apple on the table” (Massengale 116). Wakefield calls the apple interpretation “over-ingenious and says it is a straightforward seduction scene, treated in the rather lurid manner of an erotic novel” (85). Some critics believe that the woman is trying to escape the man’s passionate physical advances while others have stated that the woman is hesitant to let her lover leave. But Fragonard leaves the meaning of the tryst to the imagination of the viewer (Bailey et al 290). Massengale presents another view of the painting saying that “running through the sexual encounters depicted by Fragonard is rather consistently the thread of male aggression. The girl is of two minds – reluctant, a little frightened, outwardly resistant” (114). The theme described here is that of sexual coercion and resistance. However, Massengale further adds:

But the message of the total picture – of the forms and the color – is very different. Its radiant beauty foretells something quite wonderful. The adjective *ravissant* – more commonly used in French for something vividly pleasurable than the English
equivalent *ravishing* – is a word of two meanings that conveys perfectly the twofold expression of *The Bolt*. (114)

That something quite wonderful is powerful sexual desire between two people who are engaged in a consensual relationship. This section looks first at the symbols in the room because they serve as indicators that a sexual relationship is underway. It then focuses on the couple and their behavior to show that both members are involved in a relationship that is mutual. In this painting the rules of the game of idealized courtship are in place. For these rules to be valid both members must agree to the game and understand that they can quit at any time. The debate that includes the principles of aggression and resistance which imply that the game is not fair, equal and mutual does not seem to be supported by the images in the painting. An examination of the non-verbal communication cues, particularly those of the positions of the bodies and the facial expression of the woman, will show that the meeting is consensual.

Compared to the number of symbols found in many of Fragonard’s paintings, those in *The Bolt* are minimal. The primary symbol is that of the apple. It is an important symbol because it symbolizes the Fall or the expulsion of Adam and Eve from the Garden of Eden because they ate of the forbidden fruit. In this case the apple may be dramatically placed to imply that a sexual fall will occur, but there is no indication that this is a negative connotation. For Fragonard, the fall may be forbidden by society under the circumstances in which it is occurring but it is also a normal part of the courtship process. The apple does serve to inform the viewer of the impending action. Sheriff describes the scene in the room as “beautiful disarray in which the effect is further enhanced by the artfully random twists and turns of the bed drapes” (130). In this case the bed serves as the playing field for the game. Other indicators of the disarray include the “overturned chair draped with a fabric that may be clothing, the overturned vase symbolizing the vagina and the bouquet of roses on the floor, as a sign of love and stolen innocence” (Bailey et al 290). While these symbols show that a sexual
relationship will most likely take place, there is nothing to indicate that it is not voluntary. Given Fragonard’s history of painting erotic scenes in which a couple is engaged in the preliminaries to a consensual relationship, it would appear that a change in sexual innocence and the loss of virginity are a natural and welcome part of the courtship progression.

The non-verbal communication cues including body position and facial expressions show that the behavior is mutual and desired by both of the lovers. Both the man and the woman are partially disrobed which further indicates that some sex play has occurred. Their bodies are positioned as if they are dancing. His weight is evenly distributed on both of his legs and he is on his toes as he stretches out to reach the bolt. His other arm is on the woman’s waist which is a natural position for him to be in for a dance. While she is leaning sideways at almost a 45 degree angle, she is still in complete control of her own balance. Her weight is completely on her left foot which gives her the leverage she needs to help him bolt the door. Her right leg is completely off the ground and she appears to be almost as tall as the man. She could still maintain her position in the manner of a dancer if he were to let her go. Her facial expression is peaceful and her head is tilted at a 45 degree angle to match the position of her body. The man’s head is a mirror image of hers as he turns to look at her. His expression is partially hidden but it appears to be tranquil as well rather than harsh or callous. Her arm is around his shoulder, and as he turns toward her, her hand rests on his chin. There is no indication that she is pulling away from him at all or that she is hesitating to go ahead with the relationship. If she were, her weight would be on her right foot and her body would not be aligned with his. The signs of a struggle would show in the grip he would have to maintain to hold someone who was determined to back away. Her face would also reflect fear or panic and give some indication that she wanted to escape the relationship. Instead they are embracing and their bodies are synchronized in a dance movement, while the male reaches out as if to bolt the door. There is no resistance or aggression in the painting.
Fragonard has painted a scene in which idealized courtship is in place because both members want to play the game.
CHAPTER 4

THE GAME OF SEDUCTION IN DANGEROUS LIAISONS

First tell yourself all women can be won:
Just spread your nets; the thing’s as good as done.
Spring birds and summer crickets shall be mute
And greyhounds flee before the hare’s pursuit,
Ere woman spurns a wooer’s blandishments;
Even she you’d swear would never consent, consents.
(Ovid The Love Poems 94)

This dissertation has examined the game of courtship as it is idealized in the paintings of Watteau and Fragonard. It has shown that idealized courtship is encoded as a game that is conventional, mutual, reciprocal and consensual. The love and sexual relationships depicted in the paintings of Watteau and Fragonard ranged from frivolous and light-hearted games in which flirtation was the goal to games involving mutual sexual passion and the desire for physical pleasure. In contrast to this game, there is another form of the game of courtship that breaks the rules thus changing the strategy of the game. This game, which is built on deception and lies, is represented by the term seduction in this dissertation. It will be argued that the game of seduction breaks the rules of idealized courtship because the goal is for one player to obtain a sexual relationship from another player using deceptive and dishonest means to win the game. Unlike the game of idealized courtship, the game of seduction is adversarial because one player is driven by the idea that his or her pleasure is the most important thing in the game. It is a game in which one player considers the other player(s) to be an opponent or an enemy who must be defeated at any cost. Since this game can not be equal or mutual, it must consist of players whose roles are those of seducer and victim. In the game of seduction, the victim may eventually consent to a relationship. Consent, however, is based on lies and misinformation so that participation can not be mutual, reciprocal, equal or fair. The victim does not really have the right
of refusal to limit escalation of sexual behavior because he or she is not playing
by the same rules as the seducer. The seducer views the refusal to escalate to the
next step as nominal resistance that must be overcome by force if necessary. The
characteristics of this game are deception, secrecy and denial of responsibility.

Laclos’ novel, Dangerous Liaisons, is chosen to illustrate this game of
seduction in which the rules are broken and the game is corrupted. Like Watteau
and Fragonard, Laclos incorporated the themes of love, desire and sexuality into
his novel. His themes diverge from the painters, however, in that the emphasis
in the novel is on the use of deceit, power and manipulation to exploit the rules to
get sexual favors. Duyfhizen describes the novel as one that clearly establishes the
themes “of deception, seduction, retribution and isolation” (2). The essence of the
game of idealized courtship is that people follow the rules. In the novel, seduction
is seen as a diversion in which some people are playing by their own rules that are
not disclosed to others who think they are playing the same game by the rules of
idealized courtship. According to Goscilo “ in Dangerous Liaisons, love is a game
won by the most adroit percipient or experienced player in command of rules that
he can manipulate to emerge victorious in the sexual skirmish” (399). Kavanagh
writing about the novel and the type of seduction it portrays, notes that “sexuality
may remain the coin of Laclos’s realm, but all his major characters, female as
well as male, exploit the moment’s sexual potential as a means of consolidating
their power and domination” (96).

This chapter first looks at the roles of the players to explain who will be
the seducer and who will become the victim. Next, the characteristics of
seduction are explored to show how they impact the game. Then, the
communication strategies are examined to show how they reveal a game that is
neither mutual nor consensual. Finally, the chapter explores techniques of
seduction to show how they are used to structure and control the game. These
techniques involve the libertine view of love on which Laclos based the games of
seduction in the novel. Other techniques examined include the use and the
corruption of the deceit and disguise used by actors in theatrical performances as well as the military strategies used in campaigns of war.

**What are the roles of the players in the game of seduction?**

How are the roles of the seducer and victim determined? And how do they differ from each other? Unlike the mutual relationships formed under the rules of idealized courtship and recognized in the paintings of Watteau and Fragonard, there is no equality in the game of seduction because its players must consist of a seducer and a victim. The seducers, who are concerned only with their own desires, will use the rules of idealized courtship to exploit their victims. Therefore, the behavior and expectations of the seducer and victim differ significantly with regard to how they view the relationship. The seducer performs two roles simultaneously. While pretending to be engaged in a game of idealized courtship and abiding by its rules, the seducer is actually engaged in another game – that of seduction. The victims are players who innocently trust in the rules and tend to be naïve and inexperienced. They have illusions that the game is fair and that the other players are sincere and honest in their behavior. The seducer’s deceptive behavior, however, leads to conduct that is cruel, mean and ruthless.

Another way to understand the difference between the outward show of respect for the rules and the private interpretation of disregard for the rules is found in the differentiation between the terms, *being* and *appearance*. Todorov gives the following explanation and definition of these terms in discussing how the characters in *Dangerous Liaisons* used these concepts to define the rules of the game which in turn determines how they behave toward each other:

Each action can at first appear like love, confidence, etc., but can then be revealed as a totally other relation, of hate, opposition and so forth. The appearance does not necessarily coincide with the essence of the relation
although it concerns the same character and the same moment. Thus we can posit the existence of two levels of relations, those of being and those of appearance. The existence of these two levels is known to Merteuil and Valmont, who use hypocrisy to arrive at their end. (15)

For the game of seduction to exist it must entail the concepts of *being* and *appearance*. *Appearance* is equivalent to the outward observance of the rules of the game. *Being* is equivalent to the deception and secrecy that break the rules of the game. Another way to explain how *being* and *appearance* operate is to say that the terms represent a double standard. Merteuil and Valmont, the seducers, plan their seductions in a manner that conveys *appearance* as truth publicly while privately they practice *being*. They know how to apply the double standard and understand how this standard will be interpreted by the more naïve characters, Cécile, Tourvel and Danceny. These characters, who unknowingly become victims, do not realize that there can be a difference between *being* and *appearance* so they do not even suspect that they are being deceived. According to Todorov, these characters will eventually exhibit the traits “of becoming conscious, of perceiving. This designates the actions produced when a character realizes that the connection he had with another character is not what he believed” (15). When this realization happens, the game is over. Mole writing about the novel’s double meaning makes the following observation which sums up the difference between what is and what seems to be; “the entire novel can be read as a treatise on the politics of seduction versus the naïveté of morality” (5).

**How do the characteristics of seduction control the game?**

How are the characteristics of deception, secrecy and denial of responsibility understood in the context of the game of seduction? What role do they play in determining how the seducer creates a game that subverts the rules of
the game of idealized courtship? According to Baudrillard, seducers intentionally create a “trompe l’œil or a false appearance” (157) to achieve their goals. He also states that “to be seduced is to be diverted from one’s truth and to seduce is to divert the other from his truth” (163). An aspect of seduction is what Rosbottom calls the “absence of responsibility. Denying responsibility is in fact denying will and therefore meaningful action” (60). This section looks first at definitions of the terms, deception, secrecy and denial of responsibility to show the meaning that they have for the game of seduction as represented in the libertine behavior of Valmont and Merteuil. This section then explores how this libertine viewpoint provides the basis for a destructive version of seduction.

Like the terms, being and appearance, which determine who is playing a certain role in the game, the characteristics of deception, secrecy and denial determine which game of seduction is being played. Deception, secrecy and denial are words that can convey two forms of meaning with regard to the game of seduction. These distinctions are important because they are needed to understand which game of seduction violates the rules of idealized courtship. In what follows, the terms deception, secrecy and denial are defined to show how they can operate on two levels of meaning.

The Merriam Webster Online Dictionary offers the following clarification of the term, deception:

Synonyms: Fraud, double-dealing, subterfuge, trickery mean the acts or practices of one who deliberately deceives. Deception may or may not imply blameworthiness, since it may suggest cheating or merely tactical resource: magicians are masters of deception (www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/deception).

Likewise the term secrecy is defined as “the condition of being hidden or concealed.” And the term deny means “to declare untrue as in to deny an allegation” (www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/deception). The definition of
Deception given in the passage above does not imply a situation that is necessarily cruel or vicious while the terms deny and secrecy just state the fact that something is hidden or untrue. Deception, then, can be present in a game that is merely meant to trick in the sense of entertaining as in the example just given of a magician who uses it in a performance before an audience. Concealment is a part of the game because it adds to the fun. In this case the audience expects to be deceived, knows that certain things are concealed and agrees to play along with the rules of the game. A closer look at the synonyms shows that there are other interpretations of deception that give a different view. For example, the Merriam Webster Online Dictionary also offers another set of meanings which show deception as treachery, fraud and duplicity:

1) Fraud is Deceit, Trickery; specifically, intentional perversion of truth in order to induce another to part with something of value.
2) Treachery; a violation of allegiance or of faith and confidence.
3) Duplicity: or double-dealing; contradictory doubleness of thought, speech, or action; especially the belying of one’s true intentions by deceptive words or actions.
4) Subterfuge: suggests the adoption of a stratagem or the telling of a lie in order to escape guilt or to gain an end.
5) Imposture: applies to any situation in which a spurious object or performance is passed off as genuine (www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/deception).

In the same manner, secrecy and denial have other connotations. In the case of secrecy, it can mean concealment or “to prevent disclosure or recognition of - as in to conceal the truth.” Deny can also be interpreted as “to refuse to admit or acknowledge or disavow. Disavow in turn is defined as to deny responsibility for” (www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/deception). The games of seduction depicted in the novel have the meanings seen in this second set of definitions. Valmont and Merteuil repeatedly use fraud, treachery, and duplicity in dealing
with Tourvel, Cécile, Danceny and others. Valmont and Merteuil often use subterfuge to gain the results they desire and they are imposters who continuously give a performance that appears to be genuine when it is not.

Laclos based the characteristics of seduction in *Dangerous Liaisons* on the moral structure present in the society of his day. The moral structure was based on two principles. First, it consisted of the external or visible rules of conventional morality by which its members operated openly or publicly with regard to the values concerning love and marriage (appearance). Second, it was comprised of the internal or hidden rules that its members practiced in secret or privately and that governed their actual sexual behavior (being). The public view of society was one of a socially complex world in which its members outwardly observed prescribed manners and social behaviors without question. But underneath this veneer, lies, hypocrisy and deceit were at its core particularly with regard to how sexual relationships were viewed. Byrne describes this society as one in which “hypocrisy, double standards, and duplicity are rife” (23). The novel uses these conflicts between truth and hypocrisy to establish a game of seduction that operates within these opposing principles. Seductive behavior is practiced in secret and is concealed from external view.

According to Feher, there were two types of libertines who prevailed in eighteenth century society. A comparison of these libertines shows the differences in the games they play. This comparison is important because it will define the game that Merteuil and Valmont play with each other. The first libertine described plays a game of seduction that is in reality a version of the game of idealized courtship. In the following passage, Feher describes this libertine as one who played the game mindful of its rules and with the consent of his partner:

The lifestyle, as depicted centers on a type of decadent aristocrat called the *petit-maitre*, who combines, to the point of caricature, all the worldly practices and affectations of his class...he devotes himself entirely to the "small" pleasures
and “small” gains that a world never refuses the well born so long as they bend to its rules. (14)

Also known as a “fop or man of good fortune” (Feher 11, 23) this type of libertine engages in sexual adventures solely for pleasure. His female counterpart is the *petit-maîtresse* who plays the game of seduction with her suitor by adopting the behavior of pretended resistance to his sexual approaches. Speaking in language that is “somewhat formulaic, of necessity, the *petit-maîtresse* at first rejects and takes offense when the *petit-maître* declares his love...while they speak only of virtue and love the man of good fortune and his mistress are merely preparing themselves and each other for a brief moment of immodest and loveless pleasure” (22 – 23). Generally this game remains secret and involves some deception which is contrived yet mutually understood. Each member plays the game according to the rules of conventional society which require the outward show of love – yet each understands that their liaison is only temporary. Both members of the couple consent to the play game by the same rules and take responsibility for their behavior. The game is equal, fair and mutual.

Seduction in the novel is also based on the second type of libertine who believes in “love as an unbearable yoke for any man who wants to remain his own master” (Feher 914). Feher depicts this libertine and his revolt against the rules in the following statement:

Writers also depict a unique, more somber character, often called the “dangerous man” or ironically the “man of principles.” Not satisfied with merely living the flaky life of a *petit-maître* and looking beyond the small pleasures and gains sought by his peers, this more ambitious libertine endeavors to take revenge on his milieu. (14)

Feher offers the following example from the novel which illustrates how Laclos portrayed this view of the game of seduction:
I am going to tell you, the confidante of all my inmost secrets, the most ambitious plan I have yet conceived, writes Valmont, to the Marquise de Merteuil, when announcing his new infatuation with Mme de Tourvel. (26)

In this example, Valmont’s plan was the seduction of Tourvel. Her virtue and innocence raised the stakes in the game to the highest level and presented a challenge he could not resist. For the dangerous man, seduction was not a means for the lover to show respect for or to revere the beloved. Instead seduction meant personal satisfaction obtained at any cost. Feher writing about libertine seduction concludes that “libertines spend most of their time devising and executing campaigns of seduction using philosophical positions on love, nature and society as justification for reckless ways” (17). When Valmont seduces Tourvel, he does it deliberately to break her will knowing that he will have to use deceit to win the game. Feher also calls the libertine’s process of seduction one of “seducing, publicizing and breaking up with a din: such are the three steps of the libertine master plan” (29). McCallam, writing about the libertine’s view of himself provides the following insight into the importance of the behavior, “libertines realize their self-image between the sex-act and its telling” (858). Relating the adventure to society was the game’s prize. The telling constituted victory in the game regardless of its effect on the life of the victim. According to Brooks, “Valmont’s mode of seduction takes us back to the root meaning of the word: a leading away from the right path, dévoiement, - debasement, perversion of normal human relationships and social forms” (190).

An important factor in determining a libertine’s success is the establishment of a timeline for seduction. According to Mylne, “Laclos incorporates the use of time and gives the novel a precise framework and enables the reader to monitor the progress of the games” (234). Timelines are important to any game both at its beginning and at its end. In the game of seduction libertines were expected to
recognize when a woman was ready to give in to their advances. Feher describes this point in time saying that “the ‘moment’ appears when a woman reveals a hint of desire that her virtue has not yet acknowledged and it disappears as soon as her pride leads her to sacrifice carnal pleasures for the dubious glory of “invincibility” (20). The libertine had to be ready when this moment occurred because the woman could change her mind instantly. When she did, the moment had passed and the libertine could not be victorious in seducing her. Likewise ending the game was important. “Thus, even if a liaison begins at exactly the right moment, lovers can not expect to fend off boredom for very long…a pleasurable liaison involves a prompt consummation and a quick separation” (Feher 20). Then, once the relationship ended, the libertine refused to take responsibility for his behavior. In the following passage, DeJean explains this central tenet of the novel. She believes that the theme of a disavowal of responsibility for the destruction to life caused by the refusal to be accountable for sexual behavior is present from the beginning of the novel. This theme is seen in the novel’s opening pages and occurs throughout the story:

Publisher and editor devote their energy to finding fault. They then excuse themselves for refusing to accept fault, to take the blame for the tactical deficiencies of the text they are presenting. As Wohlfarth points out, their avoidance of responsibility foreshadows what is perhaps the most famous phrase in the Liaisons, “ce n’est pas ma faute.” By constantly shifting the blame – onto the editor, onto an implied author, onto “les personnes à qui elle [la correspondance] était parvenue”, even onto a nameless “on” – the publisher and the editor make one point absolutely clear: no one is prepared to take responsibility for this text. (213)

In the following passage, Blum explains this concept using the example of Merteuil and Valmont:
To obliterate the passionate attachment forming between Valmont and Mme de Tourvel, the Marquise had recourse to that most essential of Rousseauian doctrine: denial of responsibility. “Ce n’est pas ma faute.” Mme de Tourvel tried to console herself that yielding to passion was a law of nature; her lover now excused himself on the grounds that fickleness was another law of nature and so equally impossible to obey. (296)

This reading of “Ce n’est pas ma faute” is used in the game of seduction to deflect blame from the seducer. Further it also serves as an effective way to end the game. The seducer ends the game once he or she has succeeded in having a sexual relationship with the victim. The game is over and the seducer must move on to the next conquest. The victim plays no part in the decision and is forced to end the game prematurely. The characteristics of deception, secrecy and denial of responsibility as portrayed by Valmont and Merteuil establish a game in which the rules are not only subverted but one that is also callous and vicious.

**How is the game of seduction communicated between seducer and victim?**

What are the communication strategies that identify the game as one of seduction? How do these strategies differ from those of idealized courtship and more importantly, why do they work? While verbal and non-verbal communication between players in idealized courtship is used to convey honest and sincere messages, the opposite is true in the game of seduction. The game of seduction in the novel is revealed through the use of untruthful or misleading verbal and non-verbal communication words and signals. Rosbottom notes that “the novel is based on the central principle that all behavior becomes communicational…it was a carefully plotted narrative about a dysfunctional communication system” (121 -122). Goscilo speaking of non-verbal communication views this type of communication as one that translates into a
“game or art…that included the wordless language of love – gestures, expressions, and actions that presumably communicate emotions and states of mind” (401). McCallam, writing about verbal communication, observes that in Dangerous Liaisons “language becomes the tool of the game” (861). Persuasion through the use of language or words is the key factor in determining the success of a seductive maneuver. This section shows how the game of seduction is established through the communication structure in the novel. It looks first at how seducers use verbal and written communication as a means to create a relationship of trust with their victims. Then non-verbal communication cues are explored to show how they are used throughout the novel to advance and confirm the message of seduction.

**Communication as a means to connection**

Language and its meaning in the novel are examined first to show how seducers entice their victims to trust them by becoming their confidantes. Then, it examines the concept of the promise as a tool of language that is used as a ruse or a deliberate lie to mislead the victim into thinking the seducer is truthful. Communication in seduction is about having a means to establish a connection and to approach another either through conversation or written language in the form of a letter. The two characters who are most associated with the means are Valmont and Merteuil. In the following passage Koehler summarizes how they use communication to develop a relationship with their intended victims:

One of Valmont and Merteuil’s most effective strategies is to position themselves as instruments for facilitating forbidden or difficult communication; they associate themselves with the “means” [les moyens] and function as the very condition of possibility for relations. (221)
Koehler, in discussing communication as mediation, comments that the “seductive mediator works from a position of proximity to ‘feign’ the qualities of external mediation” (222). Then the seductive mediators, Valmont and Merteuil, create, from a distance, the means by which Cécile and Danceny can have a relationship with each other. Koehler further notes that “they appear to offer autonomy to the young man and woman, but the effects of their mediation work directly counter to such a prospect” (222). Relying on this form of communication, they pretend to be friends with the couple offering assistance in arranging for letters and meetings. In reality, Valmont and Merteuil are using false messages to set up a communication system with the young couple. This communication system uses deception and secrecy to create access which is crucial to the success of the game.

One of the most important tools that seducers use in speaking to victims is the promise. The promise is another critically important element of language that builds trust, reliability and confidence in a game. Its acceptance as a true statement ensures that players will understand and abide by the rules. In the following quote McCallam describes how a promise is supposed to work:

A promise is first and foremost a ‘performative’ discourse: that is, unlike constative, largely descriptive or factual statements, a promise realizes the very act it names; it carries out simultaneously the action authorized in and by its enunciation. When I say ‘I promise’, I effectively accomplish by my utterance the action it designates (giving my word, making a vow). In other words, its saying is at once its doing. (862)

When one person promises another something, this promise is a form of communication that says I intend to do what I told you I would do and you can rely on my word. For libertines, however, the promise took on a different meaning. McCallam makes the following statement which defines how libertines view the promise:
If promises are ultimately a form of contract, they are not underwritten by the sincerity of the speaker but by the strength of desire of the other their addressee to hear them spoken. Promises are predicated on an anterior wish of the other which calls them forth…the libertine is keenly aware of the fact that promises are ultimately produced more in the taking (by the other’s desire) than in the making (the speakers honesty). (863)

McCallam further notes “promises then can be broken, betrayed and violated” (860) by the libertines who say things they do not mean to get what they want from their victims.

The novel is filled with promises that will be broken due to the libertine code of communication which means that words and actions will have double meanings. The frequently used double-entendre is an example of how lies and deceit are used to create false impressions and images of love that advance the game and help the seducer achieve his or her goals. Mylne, in discussing how Merteuil and Valmont use language, states “the unprincipled characters themselves sometimes play on their superior knowledge and make their letters ironic by telling the truth in terms which the person receiving the letter is unable to interpret correctly” (237). Mole sums up this concept when he says “Language, then, is the tool of domination, and a comprehensive mastery of its possibilities leads to mastery over each other” (5- 6). Rosbottom gives the following example of how Valmont and Merteuil use language: “libertine language obscures rather than reveals the knowability of the writing subject. The aim of Merteuil and Valmont’s correspondence is not self-revelation but self-concealment; every position is constructed, in particular that of the confidant” (123). The following is an example of how this form of communication structures the behavior of the characters in staging the false premises of the game. Roulston in examining the communication structure writes:
In Letter 105, Merteuil coaches Cécile not to write to reveal her feelings but to write for the benefit of what the reader is thinking. “You will agree, I am sure that when you write to someone, it is for his sake and not for yours. You must therefore try to say less what you think than what he will be pleased to hear. According to Merteuil, the private act of letter writing, rather than creating a shared space of revelation, should provide instead the illusion of intimacy through the language of praise. (161 - 162)

It is clear that Valmont and Merteuil write to influence and manipulate their victims using the strategy mentioned in this passage. They craft their letters to set a tone of sincerity and to mask their true intentions of deceit.

**Communicating without words**

Seducers follow the rules of idealized courtship to provide convincing evidence of their love through non-verbal communication cues in the form of gestures and facial expressions. This evidence is misinterpreted by the victims who believe this behavior is sincere because they are unaware that they are being deceived. The same gestures and facial expressions if used in idealized courtship would be considered a positive component of the game. Valmont and Merteuil are able to read and interpret expressions and gestures in characters who respect the rules of idealized courtship. Merteuil is an expert at using and controlling her facial expressions and gestures. In Letter 81 she relays her strategy for keeping herself under control:

Since I was so often obliged to conceal the objects of my attention from the eyes of those around me, I tried to be able to turn my own whenever I pleased; from that time I have been able at will to assume the air of detachment you have so often admired. Encouraged by my first success, I tried in the same way to control the different expressions on my face. When I felt annoyed I practiced looking serene,
even cheerful; in my enthusiasm I went so far as to suffer pain voluntarily so as to achieve a simultaneous expression of pleasure. I labored with the same care and with even more difficulty to repress symptoms of unexpected joy. In this way I was able to acquire the power over my features at which I have sometimes seen you so astonished. (Laclos 1074)

By keeping herself under complete control at all times, Merteuil is able to conceal the fact that she is playing the game of seduction by pretending to play the game of idealized courtship.

**Seductive techniques**

What techniques do seducers use to convince their victims to engage in a sexual relationship? Seducers must use certain techniques in a game of seduction to overcome their victims’ resistance and to persuade them to engage in sexual behavior. These techniques must appear real to the victims although they will mask seducers’ use of deceit and their intention to use whatever means are necessary to accomplish his goal. The techniques are employed to make the victims think they are involved in the game of idealized courtship. In reality, the seducer is playing the game of seduction and intends to have the sexual relationship whether or not the victim consents to it willingly. The techniques, then, are in place to trick the victim into playing the game.

In this section it is argued that seducers must subvert the techniques of theater found in the game of idealized courtship to turn it into one of seduction. It is also argued that they must also use the techniques of military strategy to overcome the victim and win the game. In the novel, Laclos bases his seducers’ techniques on conventional methods of seduction that have been used for centuries to ensure victory in the game. To explain how these techniques originated, the historical basis of libertine seduction is given to show that the
fundamental techniques on which Laclos based the novel are those found in Ovid’s *The Love Poems*. Laclos also included the theatrical techniques of disguise and deceit that actors use to play a convincing performance before audiences as a basis for the games that Merteuil and Valmont play. Laclos, a military strategist, also had the seducers make use of techniques used in successful campaigns of war to defeat the victims. This section begins with a discussion of libertine games to show how the techniques in the game of seduction originated. Then, it examines the theatrical techniques that seducers borrow to stage their games. Finally, it compares the game of seduction in the novel to techniques used in a game of war.

**Ovid: originator of libertine games of seduction**

In her article *Tolstoy, Laclos and the Liberte*, Helena Goscilo establishes that Laclos used the techniques of seduction found in Ovid as a theoretical framework for the techniques of seduction used in *Dangerous Liaisons*. Goscilo traces the origin of the techniques of libertine seduction to Ovid. She notes “all novelistic treatments of sexual play must ultimately pay tribute to Ovid’s discursive *Ars amatoria*” (399). Ovid’s view of this behavior was that it was a game that should be played without any obligation other than sexual fulfillment on the part of the players. Goscilo interprets Ovid’s *Ars amatoria* as the “first significant textbook on ‘courtship’ offering urbane advice about reliable techniques of seduction” (399). In the following statement, she explains Ovid’s view of seduction in which it is necessary to learn the rules and then to apply them when seeking a sexual conquest:

Ovid’s frivolous version of didactic treatises conceives of love as a science, the rules and formulae of which may be learned and, with sufficient practice and application, mastered. Light-hearted amoralism, self-consciousness, and stylistic refinement mark Ovid’s concept of love which
dismisses all Platonic and Romantic idealization... *Ars amatoria* introduces the playful conceit of love as an occupation formalized by conventions, a matter not of ungovernable passion but of expertise. (399)

Laclos incorporates these techniques into the games of seduction in the novel with regard to the behavior of Valmont and Merteuil only with a twist. In their case, the games become brutal and vicious rather than lighthearted and frivolous. For Goscilo, *Dangerous Liaisons* is the primary example of this type of game as she explains in the following passage:

*Les liaisons dangereuses* brings to a culmination this amoral outlook on love as a pleasurable but exacting art or game enacted according to rationally-devised guidelines that regulate the four stages of a libertine’s activity: selection, seduction, subjugation and separation. (401)

The following excerpts from Ovid’s *The Love Poems* show how he recommends that a seducer use techniques to entice a lover. These techniques are meant to be part of a game in which the seducer pretends certain emotions and feelings to convince the victim of his love. Ovid’s advice is followed by examples from the text to show how closely Laclos incorporates this strategy into the novel.

First, Ovid teaches the seducers how to structure the specific communication techniques of writing, speaking and expression when dealing with the victim. In speaking of the content of language to include in love letters, Ovid advises the seducers to entice the victim by writing what they want to hear and then encourages the seducer not to despair because the letter will be read and its sentiments acted on:

Use language plain and speech of common folk,  
Yet coaxing, as though in flesh you spoke.  
If it’s rejected and returned unread,  
Expect she’ll read it soon and go ahead. (99)
In *Letter 34* Valmont writes to Merteuil explaining how Tourvel rejected his faked love letter from Dijon which she had tried to return unopened. When this proved impossible, Tourvel ripped the letter into pieces and put it into her pocket (Laclos 989).

Then Ovid teaches the seducer how to use verbal and non-verbal communication as techniques to lure and persuade a woman through promises and tears. This passage states that the lover should promise anything with no worry about the intention of keeping his word:

> Then promise bold: it’s the sex’s lure;  
> And all your gods as witnesses adjure,  
> High Jove at lovers’ faithless oaths does scoff,  
> And bids the winds to limbo bear them off.  
> To Juno Jove would break his deadliest vow;  
> He likes his own example followed now. (104)

McCallum gives the example of Valmont “who puts this lesson into practice in his own seductions both of Cécile (who loses her virginity for the promise of a kiss) and La Présidente, whom he promises to leave in peace - “Hé bien! Oui, je vous le promets, lui dis-jé - even as he embarks on a relentless, calculated attack to seduce her” (864). When Valmont comes into Cécile’s bedroom, he promises to leave her alone if she gives him one kiss. When she complies, he breaks his promise and seduces her. He tells Tourvel many times that he will leave her alone if she will correspond with him as a friend. When she agrees, he disregards his promise and takes advantage of the opportunity to bombard her with love letters.

Ovid also gives seducers the example of using the false shedding of tears as a technique that shows sincerity in desire:

> Tears too are helpful, tears will melt a stone;  
> Wet cheeks at all costs must fair be shown.
If tears – they come not always at command –
Should fail you, touch your eyes with moistened hand. (104)

In Letter 33 Merteuil writing to Valmont describes how useful tears are saying that “tears that come easily are an added advantage” (Laclos 989) in convincing the victim of his genuineness and honesty.

Ovid even advocates the use of force as a technique stating that it is what women really want:

‘Brute force!’ you’ll say: its force that women want,
They love refusing what they long to grant.
She who by love’s swift onslaught is undone,
Rejoices in the infamy she’s won:
Who might have yielded but retreats intact,
Though feigning joy, is sorry for her act. (105)

In Letter 10 Merteuil confirms Ovid’s message when she taunts Valmont for refusing to take Tourvel by force saying:

Don’t you know that however willing, however eager we are to give ourselves, we must have an excuse? And is there any more convenient than an appearance of yielding to force? As for me, I shall admit that one thing that most flatters me is a lively and well-executed attack, when everything happens in quick succession…which keeps up an appearance of taking by storm that which we are quite prepared to surrender. (Laclos 955)

The techniques of seduction given in Ovid’s work show a game that is intended to be deceitful and one that is based on secrecy. These techniques clearly define a game of skill in which verbal and non-verbal communication play a major role in obtaining victory for the seducer. The seducer also shifts the blame for his behavior,
thus denying his responsibility, to the victim because he wants to believe that she desires it even if he must use force or coercion.

**Theater practices as illusory techniques in the game of seduction**

What techniques do seducers use to create the illusion of sincerity and trust? In the discussion of the paintings of Watteau and Fragonard, it was noted that performance and play, particularly as seen in the theater and dance, were a part of the game of idealized courtship. Theatrical conventions such as acting, staging, dress and manners are well-established as part of play in the game of idealized courtship. This game is played openly by two people who recognize the rules of the game and mutually enjoy and contribute to its performance. Then, when the game is over, as when a stage play ends and the theater is darkened, the players return to reality. In games of seduction, seducers also use these conventions to entice their victims. The game becomes subverted, however, because the seducers do not relinquish their roles. They must continue to perform constantly because they are always on stage. Their theatrical performance never ends because the seducers can not have their true natures revealed. This section looks first at how these strategies of theater are incorporated into *Dangerous Liaisons* through the seductive behavior of Valmont and Merteuil. Then, this section discusses how the theatrical roles become corrupted and subvert the game of idealized courtship.

According to Goscilo, Ovid also advised seducers to take their cue from theater performances. She notes “Ovid, as founder of the tradition, not only advised his seducers to conduct their activities in the theater but also encouraged men ‘to play the role of the lover’” (402). In her book, *Love and Strategy in the Eighteenth-Century French Novel*, Vera Lee, defines the roles of players in the novel and outlines their relationship to performance in the theater:
The word *player* denotes not only a person who is participating in a game but also one who performs a role. In the novels the game player is indeed an actor, too, for he or she must employ artfulness in presenting an imaginary persona to the public, in convincing others, at least temporarily, that appearance is reality. Acting provides the favorite means here for attracting, for impressing, for getting one’s way in any situation…time and again readers find that the facial expressions of characters have nothing to do with their feelings, nor spoken words with unspoken thoughts. (68)

Lee also states that “such illustrations of acting and theatre demonstrate how, time after time, words and gesture represent an outward manifestation that is completely at odds with motives and feelings” (74). Goscilo further states that “Laclos underscores the libertines’ systematic dissimulation and code-interpretation by extending the organic metaphor of theater throughout the novel” (402). *Dangerous Liaisons* presents a game that uses the techniques of acting and staging found in theater to create a false reality for the victims of seduction. According to Lee, “*Les liaisons dangereuses* offers some of the most brilliant among the examples of acting and theatre in novels” (73). In *Dangerous Liaisons*, the seducers, Valmont and Merteuil can play two roles. Publicly they perform the roles of the players in the game of idealized courtship so that they can hide their true identities as seducers. Dunn makes this point in the following passage:

Madame de Merteuil and the Vicomte de Valmont are essentially theatrical beings, brilliant and entertaining performers who weave webs of illusion and deception in which they trap their victims, exploiting the gullibility of others while assuring their own power and freedom. (41)

Merteuil and Valmont use the illusions of honesty and concern in their performances as techniques to ensure success in the games of seduction so that
their victims will not recognize their true intentions. Hill, in speaking of how the game is masked comments, “disguise is both a defense and a weapon for Valmont and the Marquise, shielding them from exposure while at the same time permitting them to move freely in pursuit of their own prey” (115). Merteuil and Valmont are experts at the game and are capable of managing every aspect of it. They understand the conventions of the theater and perform every function required for success. According to Hill, “they are not the interpreters of an author’s inventions; they create their own dramas and invent their own roles. They serve at the same time as author, director, actor and metteur-en-scène” (116).

In the process of doing all of this, they forget they are playing a game. Earlier Caillois noted that the game of mimicry (imitation or theater) becomes corrupted when “the simulation is no longer accepted as such…when the player no longer plays another…but persuaded he is the other, he behaves as if he were, forgetting his own self” (49). Merteuil and Valmont have put themselves into roles which require them to lead double lives. The theatrical illusion has become reality. Dunn points this out in her comment, “Valmont has been taken in by his own performance in particular and by theatrical illusion in general” (43). Hill notes, “Valmont and the Marquise set themselves up as great actors, as masters of deception, without concern for the moral or emotional well-being of others” (114). The following rather bleak description shows that Merteuil, like Valmont, has transferred the illusionary world of the theater to her real life. She has also been captivated by her own performance:

In the real theater, moreover, all is illusion; the curtain falls nightly and the stage is darkened and deserted. Mme. de Merteuil scorns this stage and its idle applause in favor of the social stage where illusions can be sustained, where no pit separates actor from spectator, where the actor can by shrewd manipulation of illusions, achieve real and substantial benefits for himself. (Hill 116)
Valmont and Merteuil are actors who are always on stage; they are no longer able to differentiate between the role they appear to play and the role they have become.

**Games of war as techniques of seduction**

Love is a warfare; sluggards be dismissed,  
No faint heart 'neath this banner may enlist,  
Storms, darkness, anguish, weary trails you'll find  
On love’s campaign and toils of every kind.  
(Ovid 114)

Ever since words existed for playing and fighting,  
men have been wont to call war a game.  
(Huizinga 89)

“Very well: war.” The Marquise de Merteuil to the Vicomte de Valmont  
(Laclos 1222)

Love is considered war and war is described as a game which then makes love a game of war. In this section it is shown that in the game of seduction, the seducer considers the strategy of war to be the only way in which a victim can be subdued and defeated. Unlike the game of idealized courtship in which playful behavior is the rule, the game of seduction uses military strategies found in games of war to win the game. These strategies are necessary because the enemy or the victim is seen as resistant to the seducers’ or as someone who is holding them back from achieving their goals.

How do playing and fighting differ from the strategies of war found in *Dangerous Liaisons*? The strategy of games as play-fighting implies a game that may be fun, boisterous, involve clowning around and some trickery. Players in these games know that they are involved in a game with rules and they are in
control of its outcome. One of Caillois’ fundamental categories of games is *agon* or competition which is described in the following passage:

A whole group of games would seem to be competitive, that is to say, like a combat in which equality of chances is artificially created, in order that the adversaries should confront each other under ideal conditions, susceptible of giving precise and incontestable value to the winner’s triumph. The search for equality is so obviously essential to the rivalry that it is re-established for players of different classes. (14)

This passage describes the type of game that would take place in idealized courtship. The purpose of the game in this case is not to hurt the other person but to provide a form of physical contact that brings them together and makes play exciting and enjoyable. Competitive games are referred to as combat, however, which is a term of war. The type of combat mentioned here, though, reflects a situation in which the game is fair because every advantage is given to the players to ensure that there is a clear winner and loser. In speaking of war as play, Huizinga considers it to be a game of competition. Depending on how the war is conducted, it may in fact be considered honorable combat among equals. The following definition of war implies that there are two types of war games:

Fighting, as a cultural function, always presupposes limiting rules, and it requires to a certain extent anyway, the limitation of its play quality. We can only speak of war as a cultural function so long as it is waged within a sphere whose players regard each other as equals or antagonists with equal rights. In other words its cultural function depends on its play-quality. (89)

The type of war described in this passage applies to the game of war that Merteuil and Valmont play with each other. Huizinga also notes that there are other forms
of the game of war that are not competitive and are different from the type given in the previous passage:

This condition changes as soon as war is waged outside the condition of equals, against groups not recognized as human beings and thus deprived of human rights – barbarians, devils, heathens, heretics and “lesser breeds without the law. (90)

In the game of seduction, the victim is considered one of these lesser breeds which in turn make it permissible for the seducers to use whatever means appropriate to achieve their goals. This passage can be applied to the way Merteuil and Valmont view Tourvel and Cécile.

Huizinga also discusses elements of war that do not imply a competition but are more in line with the concept of a game that uses deception and secrecy to win. It is a game that only one side can prepare for:

If we are right in considering the ludic function in war to be inherent in the agôn then other functions are non-agonistic – surprise, ambush, the raid, the punitive expedition and wholesale extermination – although they may be subservient to an agonistic war. (90)

This passage describes the games of seduction that Valmont plays with Tourvel and Cécile in which he uses surprise and ambush to accomplish his seductions.

It is established in the literature that the war analogy is used as a basis in Dangerous Liaisons to describe seduction as a game that uses military strategy to win the game at any cost. This technique of seduction breaks the rules of idealized courtship because it creates a game that can not be fair, equal or mutual. Laclos incorporated the war motif into Dangerous Liaisons particularly with regard to the behavior of Merteuil and Valmont who openly use military strategy in their games of seduction. Goscilo discusses the war motif in the novel and notes,
“since the planning invested in these intrigues recalls a military campaign, it is hardly accidental that words such as ‘triumph’, ‘victory’, ‘war’, and ‘stratagem’ recur obsessively in the works under discussion” (405). War as a game of violence and deceit is clearly established in Dangerous Liaisons as Greshoff explains in the following passage:

The originality of Laclos, however, is to use this conventional metaphorical vocabulary almost in its literal sense and thus to make us realize that what we see in this novel is not a sham battle but a war fought with relentless ferocity and in which people die and get maimed. But it is also a game…like the vocabulary the game itself goes back to the Middle Ages. (384)

Feher also compares the libertine to the “gallant knight of the Middle Ages. The dangerous man measures his own ardor against the obstacles raised by the woman he covets…however where the chivalric lover felt respect and devotion for the lady who put him to the test, the dangerous man seeks to humiliate women who resist him. In order to fulfill this desire for vengeance, he resorts to the methodical elaboration of a plan of seduction” (25 – 26). In writing about Laclos’ intentions, DeJean comments, “Merteuil and Valmont govern themselves not on the basis of emotions or conscience, but according to the principles of strategy, primarily military strategy” (233). According to DeJean, Laclos incorporated defensive strategy into his games of seduction with the result that Merteuil and Valmont were always acting from the point of view of a defensive posture. Although at times their games appeared offensive, everything they wrote and every move they made was carefully calculated to protect their defenses or their motives from being known. DeJean states “When Merteuil explains to Cecile that her writing should be governed by the idea that she should not seek to express what she is thinking but what her correspondent wants to hear, she lays down the foundation of libertine defensive strategy” (235). According to Jones, “Laclos portrays a world from which
mutually satisfactory and beneficial relationships are banished, a world in which war has replaced love as the prime mover” (159). Although these words are dire and grim, they present an accurate picture of the game of seduction as it is illustrated in the novel. It is one in which the victim in the end has no chance of survival.
The passion of seduction is without substance and without origin: it is not through some libidinal investment, through some energy or desire that it acquires intensity, but through the pure form of gaming and bluffing. (Baudrillard 164)

Use all your arts to prove you’re speaking truth. (Ovid 103)

The previous chapter highlighted techniques used by seducers to achieve their goals. This chapter will focus on two games of seduction chosen from the novel to illustrate the range and scope of this seductive behavior. The first game(s) selected is the game that Valmont plays with Tourvel and Cécile. These games are analyzed together because they show how the seducer adapts the game(s) of seduction to two victims using the same principles and techniques to win. The second game is the one that Merteuil and Valmont play with each other when they attempt to re-establish their former relationship. This game is a very complicated game and one that will demonstrate how a parody of the game of idealized courtship masks what is in reality a game of seduction.

**Valmont’s seductions of Tourvel and Cécile: two versions of the same game**

No law prescribes one bed for you to share. (Ovid 112)

These games illustrate the game of seduction because they show how it is played with two victims who are innocent, naïve and incapable of recognizing that they are being deceived. The roles of players are examined first to show how they depict similarities and differences in the behavior of the seducer and the victims. It then explores how the seducer uses the characteristics of seduction –
deceit, secrecy and denial of responsibility - to advance his game with each 
victim. It looks at these characteristics in relation to the response that the victims 
have to the seducer to show why they are unable to recognize these characteristics 
as anything other than representative of truthful behavior. Another essential 
component of the game of seduction is its communication structure. These games 
will show how Valmont uses communication cues to mislead Tourvel and Cécile. 
The games also show why the women are unable to understand that these cues 
have a double meaning. Finally, this section looks at two techniques of seduction, 
theater and war, to explain how the seducer uses them to defeat the victims and to 
win the game.

Valmont functions in the role of seducer while Tourvel and Cécile are 
both victims. Alstad describes Cécile’s behavior and subsequent relationship with 
Valmont in terms of her convent upbringing:

The convent left Cécile with simplistic, abstract notions of 
morality totally inadequate for coping with concrete 
situations. Since she was never prepared for the transitions 
from cloistered life to social reality and marriage, it is not 
surprising that she was confused and vulnerable to 
Valmont. (159)

Nowhere is this naiveté and lack of social consciousness more apparent 
than in Letter 1, when Cécile writes to Sophie telling her about the encounter with 
the shoemaker. Mistaking him for a prospective husband, Cécile becomes panic- 
stricken, jumps up and “utters a piercing shriek…” (Laclos 942). Her 
inexperience with men was so profound that she could not distinguish a working 
man from a suitor. Then, in Letter 3 to Sophie, Cécile describes another social 
situation in which she was the center of attention. She commented, “I noticed that 
when the other women were looked at they did not blush…it must be very 
difficult not to blush when a man stares at you” (Laclos 945). In Letter 38 
Merteuil writes to Valmont about Cécile’s lack of awareness of her sexuality
telling him, “she is by nature very demonstrative, and this amuses me very much sometimes; she loses her little head with incredible ease and is so much the more diverting because she knows nothing, absolutely nothing, of all she wants to know so much about” (Laclos 997). Later after Valmont has seduced Cécile and she becomes pregnant, he has to tell her what her condition is after she has an accident that causes her to lose the baby. “But to tell her about it, I had first to tell her what her condition had been to begin with, for she was without the slightest suspicion. Never before, perhaps, has anyone preserved so much innocence while so effectively doing all that is necessary to lose it” (Laclos 1201).

In contrast to Cécile who knows nothing of love or sexual relationships, Tourvel is established as a married woman who has inviolable principles. In Letter 4 to Merteuil, Valmont describes Tourvel’s behavior at his aunt’s house. “Mass every day, a few visits to the poor of the district, morning and evening prayers, solitary walks, pious conversations with my old aunt” (Laclos 946). In warning Tourvel against spending too much time alone in the country with Valmont, Madame de Volanges, says to her, “it has been left to the most circumspect, the most of modest of all to set a pattern for such perversity; forgive me that I use that word, I use it in friendship. My dear friend, your integrity itself, even as it inspires you with confidence, betrays you” (Laclos 987). Tourvel, who attempts to resist Valmont’s advances, even speaks of herself in this manner when she asks him to leave her alone; “Your obstinacy in treating me to sentiments that it is equally against my desire and my duty to acknowledge; your unhesitating abuse of my good faith and my modesty in sending me your letters” (Laclos 1001). These passages from the novel depict the roles of each victim and show what makes them unaware of what a seducer like Valmont can do. The women are portrayed as naïve, innocent, unworldly, modest, truthful and religious. They follow the rules of the game of idealized courtship and believe that the game is fair, equal and mutual with the rights of consent and refusal. They do not believe that anyone would want to take advantage of them unfairly nor do they suspect
that anyone would have any motive other than respect for their reputation and integrity.

Valmont’s role as a seducer is well documented in the novel. His reputation is established beginning in Letter 2 in which Merteuil writes to him with her scheme to have him seduce Cécile. In Letter 9 Madame de Volanges tells Tourvel that Valmont “has never, since his early youth, taken a single step or spoken a single word without some dishonorable or criminal intention” (Laclos 953). Perhaps the best description of his reputation as a seducer is found in Letter 32 in which the Madame de Volanges writes Tourvel to warn her again about Valmont’s intentions after the incident in which he gave money to the poor family who were about to be evicted. The following passage shows that Valmont’s standing in society is one of a seducer who cares nothing for his victims:

Listen, if you like to the voice of the unfortunate he has rescued, but let it not deafen you to the cries of a hundred victims he has sacrificed. Though he only be, as you say he is, an example of the dangers of intimacy, would he be for that reason the less dangerous an intimate himself? You imagine him likely to undergo a happy reformation. (Laclos 986)

In this passage Valmont’s role is defined as that of seducer who will use whatever means necessary to win the game. This role is in contrast to his victims who can not realize his duplicity.

When he considers the possibility of seducing each woman, Valmont realizes that the stakes of the game are very different with each one. While Cécile is a 15 year old convent girl who has no experience with any type of sexual relationship, Tourvel is a religious, married woman with strong and solid principles who is committed to her husband. The following quote describes how he views the challenge each presents:
That I should seduce a young girl who has seen nothing and knows nothing – who so to speak would fall undefended. She would be beside herself at the first compliment and would perhaps sooner be swayed by curiosity than by love… Twenty other men could do it as well as I… You know the Présidente de Tourvel: you know her piety, her conjugal devotion, her austere principles. This is where I have launched my attack. This is an enemy worthy of me. This is the goal I aspire to attain. (Laclos 946)

While Valmont definitely describes each woman in different terms, it is clear that he considers them both victims. In this quote, he implies that seduction of each one will require different strategies. Valmont knows that he must assess each seduction so that he can decide how to use deception and secrecy in his strategy to convince the women of his sincerity. For Cécile, that strategy will be one of friendship. To seduce Tourvel, he will pose as a reformed libertine. Marlan makes the following observation on how friendship and seduction can work. “If seduction can take place in a friendship, if it is not always flagged by an event like sex, then conquest can begin to operate invisibly” (315). She gives the following example of how Valmont gains the trust of Cécile and subsequently deceives her:

Cécile believes that those who offer her friendship – Valmont, as Danceny’s representative, and Merteuil, as her own – are working in her best interest. He [Valmont] scolded me only after and gently […] which proved to me that he has as much friendship for me [as you do]. She does not imagine that far from being the object of disinterested compassion, she is actually the means through which Merteuil with avenge her own humiliation by the Comte de Gercourt. (316)

In her innocence and naïveté, Cécile is very susceptible to anyone who gives her attention or who shows her friendship. In discussing Cécile, Marlan notes, “of the
two victims of seduction in *Les Liaisons dangereuses*, Cécile de Volanges and Madame de Tourvel, Cécile is the one who is seduced by a claim to friendship (316). Cécile does not suspect that Valmont is using friendship to seduce her partly because of her inexperience with men and relationships, but it is also because of the nature of friendship in relation to seduction as Marlan describes. By pretending to gain her trust, particularly with regard to Danceny, Valmont creates the impression that he is trying to help the young couple.

If Cécile is convinced by offers of friendship, the same is not the case with Tourvel. She knows about Valmont’s reputation as a libertine so he has to win her trust through other methods. Rosbottom comments:

In his plan to convince Tourvel of his unique character and sensitivity, Valmont devises a scheme whereby he will be seen giving money to a poor family that lives on is aunt’s estate…He concludes: “I appeared not unlike the hero in the last act of a drama. And you will not forget that my [Tourvel’s] faithful spy was among the crowd. My aim achieved, I extricated myself and returned to the house. All things considered, I am pleased with my stratagem. (55)

Also included in his strategy of seduction is the recounting of his former exploits to Tourvel to convince her that he no longer engages in this type of behavior. To convince Tourvel that he regrets his past behavior, Valmont confides to Merteuil that his strategy also consisted of confessing his former seductions:

So as to deceive her as little as possible, and especially in order to forestall any rumors that might reach her ears, I myself have described, as if in self-accusation, some of my better-known exploits. You would laugh to see how openly she preaches at me. She wishes, she says to convert me. She has no suspicion as yet of how much the attempt will cost her. (Laclos 951)
When she tells Madame de Volanges the story of how Valmont ministered to the poor family, Tourvel asks the question, “Is Monsieur de Valmont really an irreclaimable libertine” (Laclos 972)? In Letter 8 Tourvel confides to Madame de Volanges that “he admits his faults with rare candor. He confides freely in me, and I lecture him with the utmost severity” (Laclos 953). Valmont tries to persuade Tourvel that she alone is responsible for redeeming him from his former libertine lifestyle when he says, “impressed in the same way here by your virtuous example, I have, without hope of emulating it, at least tried to follow it. And perhaps the action, on which you now congratulate me will lose all its value in your eyes when you know its real motive.” He completes this sentence with a side comment to Merteuil, “notice, my love, how near I came to the truth” (Laclos 974).

This last passage also illustrates the communication structure that Valmont uses to persuade his victims. Many of his words have double meanings which his victims are unable to interpret. About this use of communication Duyfhuizen writes:

Valmont’s strongest weapon of seduction is Mme de Tourvel’s confusion over the meaning of his words, which are routinely double-read within the Valmont-Merteuil correspondence. Acts of transmission are also acts of transformation because a letter’s original meaning and intention are never completely received. (5)

Calling Valmont’s use of conversation with double meanings parodies of noble words, Alstad notes:

He also displays particular virtuosity in using double-entendres to reveal ambiguities and duplicities concealed in words themselves. The love letter he writes to Mme de Tourvel, using the back of a courtesan as a desk, is the most outstanding example of his parodies of “noble” words. By mercilessly demonstrating how the noblest expressions of
love are identical with descriptions of carnal sensations, he blasphemes the concept of spiritual love. (158)

In Letter 47 to Merteuil, Valmont tells her of his experience with Émilie, a prostitute: “I have been using her for a desk upon which to write my Fair Devotee – to whom I find it amusing that I should send a letter written in bed, in the arms almost, of a trollop (it was broken off, too, while I committed a downright infidelity) – in which I give her an exact account of my situation and my conduct (Laclos 1014). In Letter 48 Valmont relates this same incident to Tourvel using double-entendre to persuade her of his love. In saying these words, he parodies his evening with Émilie:

I come, Madame, after a stormy night during which I never closed an eye, after suffering without cease now the turmoil of a consuming passion, now the utter exhaustion of every faculty of my being – I come to you to seek the peace I need, but which as yet I cannot hope to enjoy. (Laclos 1015)

This misuse of communication occurs repeatedly throughout his seduction of Tourvel. In Letter 132 Tourvel expresses her confidence in Valmont and subsequently her belief in the truth of his love. She writes to Rosemonde:

I want to live to cherish him, to worship him. Why should he cease to love me? What other woman could make him happier than me? And I know from my own experience that the happiness one gives is the strongest bond, the only one which really holds. (Laclos 1187)

She is unable to see the truth of his actions because of her belief that words only have one meaning and that meaning in this case is defined by what Tourvel thinks to be the rules of the game of idealized courtship. As a result she is not able to understand that Valmont plays the game of seduction.
Cécile, too, is unable to recognize the deception and hidden motives in the game because she thinks that Valmont has befriended her to help her and Danceny. Even after he has raped her, she remains accommodating thinking that he is her only means of being with Danceny. Valmont’s deception in communicating with Cécile and Danceny is illustrated in *Letter 117* which he dictates for Cécile to send to Danceny:

> I wish, too, that Monsieur de Valmont were not so eager in your cause. It only makes it the more difficult for me. Oh, you have a good friend in him. I do assure you! He does everything for you that you would do for yourself. But good-bye, my dear. It was very late when I began writing to you, and a part of the night is already gone. I am going to bed to make up for lost time. (Laclos 1159 – 1160)

The use of double meaning is very clear in this letter although neither of the young lovers understand what the deceit represents and the part it plays in the game of seduction. The reason why Cécile could not understand the game is explained in *Letter 171* in which Rosemonde writes to Danceny agreeing to safeguard all of the correspondence:

> For, after all, whatever excuses are made on behalf of a so-called sincerity of feeling, he who first seduces a heart still innocent and simple becomes thereby the abettor of its corruption and must forever be responsible for the excesses and aberrations that follow. (Laclos 1245)

Cécile can not recognize deceit and secrecy because as a victim she is far too young and inexperienced to understand that there is a difference between the game of idealized courtship and the game of seduction:

> Valmont accomplished his seduction of the two women using different techniques to achieve his goal. For Cécile, whom he called his prey, the method was that of ambush or surprise attack similar to that found in combat. Going to
her room in the middle of the night, he wakes her in bed and rapes her. In the following passage written to Merteuil, Valmont makes it clear that his technique involved force:

You are already wondering…what method of seduction can have been appropriate to such lack of years and experience. Spare yourself the trouble: I took none at all myself. While, with your skill in handling the weapons of your sex, yours was a triumph of cunning, I, restoring to man his inalienable rights, conquered by force of authority. Sure of seizing my prey if I could come within reach of her, I had no need of stratagem, except to secure a means of approach. (Laclos 1107)

When Cécile resists and tries to cry out, Valmont threatens her with exposure because she had given him the key. Valmont asks, “What will it matter if someone comes? How will you convince anyone that I am not here with your permission?” He relays to Merteuil that “this short harangue pacified neither grief nor rage, but it inspired submission…if you can picture the circumstances you will agree that they were favorable for attack” (Laclos 1109). Cécile is conquered and forced to surrender because she was defeated by an enemy and could not defend herself.

Lee compares Valmont’s game of seduction with Tourvel to a theater performance. She notes that “some of the most elaborate improvisation in a tête-à-tête takes place during Valmont’s seduction of Madame de Tourvel… As he assesses the stage that he will use for the seduction, he notices that there is one big asset, a sofa and one disadvantage, Monsieur de Tourvel’s portrait exactly facing this couch…the episode itself can logically be divided into five ‘acts’” (72). In this drama Valmont first confronts Tourvel with the wrong she has done to him saying that she had expressed “contempt” for him. After he realized that she was unable to respond to him because of her fear and grief, he implemented what Lee calls his “trump card: the Suicide Threat” telling her that “I must
possess you or die” (72). When Tourvel is finally overcome and faints, he then rapes her while she is on the stage that he had selected earlier. Once the seduction has occurred, Valmont tells Merteuil about his victory with Tourvel using the terminology of war:

Well, there she is, defeated, this arrogant woman who dared to think she could resist me! Yes, my dear, she is mine, utterly mine. Since yesterday she has had nothing left to yield to me…this is not, then, as in my other campaigns, a simple capitulation…it is total victory, bought with painful endeavor and decided by masterly strategy. (Laclos 1170 – 1171)

This passage contains the terms: defeat, resist, yield, capitulate, total victory and masterly strategy. None of these terms reflects the idea of a relationship in which love and equality was the goal. While “as an actor Valmont shows awareness, variety of technique and a gift for the quick ad lib…in the heights of theatrical passion he keeps well on the alert watching his partner’s every move” (Lee 73). Then once he has won the game of seduction, he switches to the language of a conqueror. Tourvel’s reaction is one of love and happiness. “I can no longer endure my existence unless it is of use in making you happy” (Laclos 1176 - 1177). She believes that they are involved in the game of idealized courtship.

The final move in the game of seduction is for Valmont to deny responsibility for his behavior with his victims. He ends the game with Tourvel when he sends her the “It was not my fault” letter (Laclos 1203) in which he explains that relationships such as these are not meant to last. With Cécile, he denies responsibility based on his lack of connection with her. After Cécile’s accident in which she loses the baby, Valmont decides to send her back to Danceny. He writes to Merteuil telling her this decision saying “as for me, I have not been guilty of so much as uttering the word ‘love’” (Laclos 1207).
Merteuil and Valmont: seducer as victim as seducer

Hence I know the other’s secret but do not reveal it and he knows I know it but does not let it be acknowledged. The intensity between the two is simply the secret of the secret. Baudrillard. (162)

Merteuil and Valmont play a very complex, very secret double game of seduction. Their game was chosen because it illustrates how a game can begin as one of a parody of idealized courtship and then become one of seduction. The first game appears to be established on the mutual trust and equality of roles which are required by the rules of idealized courtship. This appearance changes over time, however, as the behavior of the players is revealed. Once the game of idealized courtship begins to unravel, the real game that they are playing – that of the game of seduction – is exposed. In their roles as players, Merteuil and Valmont will be both seducer and victim. The game will also show how the characteristics of seduction evolve from one game to the other as well as how the techniques of seduction become altered as the game changes. One aspect of their game that makes it unique is that Merteuil and Valmont never resume their former physical relationship although that is the goal of the game they play. They will, in fact, only see each other one time throughout the course of their game. Their game of idealized courtship and its subsequent transformation into one of seduction will be played entirely through the communication structure that they establish. This section looks first at how Merteuil and Valmont structure the parody of the game of idealized courtship. It then shows how the game deteriorates into one of seduction.

Their parody of idealized courtship begins with a friendly competition in which Merteuil makes herself the prize that Valmont will win if he seduces Cécile and provides evidence that he has seduced Tourvel. In this game, which is similar to that played between the petit-maitre and petit-maitresse, both players understand that the only purpose of the game is to have a sexual relationship. Caillois notes
that “the game of competition obeys the law of the creation of equality between the players” (19). In this case the roles of the players are equal – both are seducers who work together to establish the parameters of the game. While Merteuil and Valmont must hide their behavior from society and particularly from the other players whom they plan to seduce, there is no deceit or secrecy concerning the purpose for which they establish the game between themselves. The technique of seduction they use is direct and straightforward and is best described in the following quote by Ovid:

To stolen joys both man and woman thrill;  
She hides her yearnings, he dissembles ill.  
Could men agree to ask no woman first,  
The asker’s role perforce would be reversed.  
(94)

It does not take long to realize, however, that their arrangement is seriously flawed. In what follows, the game of seduction is shown to be one in which the roles that Merteuil and Valmont play with each other will be significantly altered. They will begin to use deceit and secrecy to hide their behaviors from each other. The friendly competition will turn into a game of war and they will both deny responsibility for their behavior in changing the game after he seduces Tourvel and Cécile. When Valmont seduced Tourvel and Cécile, the rules of this game were supposed to be governed by the libertine code of ethics in which the seduction occurs and then ends quickly. The intent of this game was to be ready to expose it later if it became necessary to enhance the reputation of the seducer in society. The parody of the game of idealized courtship changes to one of seduction because Valmont broke the rules of the libertine game when he fell in love with Tourvel and found Cécile enchanting. In failing to confirm the libertine code of cold, heartless seduction, he put his relationship with Merteuil on par with the other women. If she followed through with her promise to be the prize, she would also become a victim. She began a strategy of trying to warn him not to view her in this light. Rosbottom
points out this strategy when he notes “there are reminders to Valmont which say: Watch out; I am not a normal woman; don’t treat me like one” (126). In comparing herself to other women in general, Merteuil says:

But I, what have I in common with these empty-headed women? When have you known me to break the rules I laid down for myself or to betray my principles? I say “my principles” intentionally. They are not, like those of other women, found by chance, accepted unthinkingly and followed out of habit. They are the fruit of profound reflection. I have created them: I might say I have created myself. (Laclos 1074)

Merteuil tries to get Valmont to understand her level of independence so that he will treat her like an equal competitor in the game. Later she will give him an even stronger warning saying that she will not allow him to treat her like Tourvel and Cécile. The following passage states her position very clearly:

I may sometimes have had pretensions to bodying forth a whole seraglio in my person, but I have never been persuaded to belong to one. I thought you knew that…! I, sacrifice my inclination, and a new one at that to devote my time to you! In waiting my turn, like a submissive slave, for the sublime favors of your Highness. (Laclos 1179)

In this passage Merteuil uses the terms “submissive slave” and “your Highness” to show Valmont her position of inequality in their relationship. The fact that he continues to misunderstand what she says creates a change that eventually turns their game of idealized courtship into a game of seduction. When Valmont pursues Merteuil trying to get the reward he is owed, she deceives him with her secret meeting with Danceny. When Valmont realizes that she has no intention of complying with the rules of the original game, he responds with a demand for her to fulfill the conditions previously agreed on by giving her an ultimatum,
“henceforth, I shall be your lover or your enemy… I might add that the slightest obstacle put forward by you will be taken by me as a declaration of war” (Laclos 1222). She retaliates and refuses to participate thus turning the game into one of war. Rosbottom notes that when Merteuil replies, “Very well – war. The connection short circuits” (124). When she makes this decision to escalate the relationship to the level of war, it is Valmont’s turn to become the victim because he can never claim her as his prize. The competition is over and another game has begun.

This significant change in the game can be explained through understanding how the communication system between Merteuil and Valmont gradually fails. According to Rosbottom the communication system in the relationship fails because it “was insufficient to meet the needs of the users” (122). The communication was not sufficient because as he further explains “all sequences of communicational interaction are described in terms of symmetrical (anything you can do – I can do better) or complementary (one-up or one-down) relationships, that is as relationships based on either equality or difference” (123). When Merteuil and Valmont begin their relationship their communication is symmetrical and equal. As the game proceeds, however, their communication becomes complementary and is based on one-upmanship. The main reason for the communication system failure and its insufficiency is attributed to its being supported by two myths that could not be sustained. The two myths that served as the basis of their relationship are explained in the following passage:

Letter 4 is significant because Valmont mentions the two stabilizing mechanisms that will be used by both correspondents to maintain their system and as relationship rules to govern it. Without these rules, as we will see at the end of the novel, the system self-destructs. These mechanisms, which act as forms of negative feedback to neutralize possible dysfunctions, are the “myth of sexual compatibility” and the “myth of mutual trust.” (Rosbottom 123).
With the myth of mutual trust, is “Valmont’s incredible claim that Merteuil is the confidante of all my inmost secrets” (Rosbottom 123). As for the myth of sexual compatibility, “there are numerous references throughout the novel, by both Merteuil and Valmont, to the fact that their sexual relationship, sometime in the past, was a perfect one” (Rosbottom 124). This myth was necessary to serve as a renewal of the sexual relationship and to give them the basis to trust each other again. When she makes herself the reward in the relationship, Merteuil uses this myth to ensure equality in their relationship. The following passage explains how she used their former sexual relationship to control the outcome of the game she had proposed to Valmont:

By making herself the game’s prize, Merteuil brilliantly and effectively determines how this game will work out. She has trapped Valmont; however realizing that he might resent this trap, she tries to attenuate her victory by suggesting that “seriously [that is, my real reason, which is not to control you,], I am very curious to know what a prudish woman will find to write in such circumstances….Letter 20. (Rosbottom 127)

When Merteuil demands proof in writing that Tourvel was seduced, it means that Valmont can not make any other conditions to go along with her plan if he wants the prize. To make any other stipulation would be to change the rules of the game. So, they are forced to rely on their myth of mutual trust to fulfill each other’s goals. Over the course of their relationship, this trust breaks down with the result that they can not communicate well enough to maintain the relationship. In the following passage, Rosbottom shows how their trust in each other deteriorates:

The Merteuil-Valmont correspondence is a sign of a mutual confidence that both characters wish to express: “don’t
hurt me; I’m not going to hurt you.” It is a “myth of mutual trust” which eventually degenerates to “don’t hurt me or I will hurt you,” and, finally, to “I’m going to hurt you because (I believe) you hurt me.” (115)

Another reason their game of idealized courtship breaks down is because Valmont does not understand the use of the promise as a form of communication. Valmont is caught in his own game, when he fails to realize that Merteuil can (and will) break her promise to him. As McCallam indicates “he breaks a promise for his own ends, but believes Merteuil, who abides by the same treacherous code, will keep her word for him” (861). Why she does not is illustrated in the following passage:

Valmont should have realized that Merteuil’s subsequent promise to him would have been broken on two counts: (1) because of the logic of the libertine code, that is, she was bound to break her promise in order to gain greater pleasure from exercising her power to transgress; and (2) because the promise was more taken than given, more of a token of Valmont’s desire than of the Marquise’s sincerity, something which his repeated reminders of the promise serve to illustrate. (McCallam 865)

That Valmont does not understand the conditions of the promise is further evidence that he does not consider Merteuil to be his equal in the game. Valmont and Merteuil, who are so good at using false communication against others, do not realize that they can not speak to each other. Mole comments on the dynamics of the communication between the couple and notes “Valmont and Merteuil, then, speak, but they do not communicate. They write, but they do not write to each other, but merely to an alter ego, the self-confirming mirror of Narcissus...language, then, is the tool of domination, and a comprehensive mastery of its possibilities leads to mastery over each other” (5-6). The concept of the alter ego implies that they are equal but in reality each player is trying to control the game for his or her
own ends. This is the behavior that subverts the game and reveals the disguise that they have set up. This disguise has masked the game’s intent which is that each player intends to win regardless of the rules of fairness and equality.

When Valmont seduces Tourvel and Cécile, he practices theatrical techniques pretending to be a concerned mentor or a reformed libertine to get the women to trust him. In their relationship, Merteuil and Valmont drop this pretense. They, however, pretend to each other that they are playing equal roles in the same game. In reality, they hide their true intent from each other. Roulston also says “it is clear that Valmont and Merteuil write to manipulate each other. This manipulation results in a communication system that is nonfunctional, undependable and which finally breaks down altogether” (161). Rosbottom notes that “Valmont and Merteuil, in a correspondence of fifty-three letters, show a series of abortive attempts by each to establish superiority over the other, to change the direction of the relationship, or to define the nature of the exchange” (123). In practice they assume an accommodating tone in their early letters, but their later correspondence becomes increasingly menacing until it finally ceases altogether. These letters establish a timeline along which the parameters of the game begin to change and they illustrate how the game of seduction breaks down because of irreparable communication failure.

The breakdown in communication leads to a change in the techniques established in the first game. At this point the communication is no longer symmetrical but becomes instead complementary. The game changes from one that tries to be mutual to one that uses the techniques of war to accomplish one-upmanship. Greshoff makes the following observation about how the game between Merteuil and Valmont is seen on the surface compared to the way it is conducted in reality as a bullfight or a form of combat:

And in this way the very nature of the game, its innocence, is being negated and betrayed, while at the same time it still retains its external façade of playfulness…it is not merely a
ballet or a parlour game but it becomes “une tauromachie.”
On the surface, however, it retains all the lightness and gaiety of a game. (385)

Rosbottom in speaking of how their understanding changes notes, “this playful tone will become a dominant and nasty one and, through the process of symmetrical escalation will explode into war” (123). In the following passage, he describes the techniques of war that Valmont and Merteuil practice:

These parameters are discovered through a process of trial and error, of feints and retreats, not unlike the maneuvers of skirmishers who precede two large armies seeking out each other’s weaknesses and strengths. Each knows how far to go, and the stabilizing mechanisms of the system are established and ready for use. (127)

While their game has changed to one of war, their roles are still equal until the game ends. The game breaks down entirely because neither of them can win it. The final step is for both of them to deny responsibility for their behavior. Valmont disavows responsibility when he tries to reassure Merteuil that his game with Tourvel does not mean anything to him and when he gives Cécile back to Danceny. Merteuil, for her part, will deny responsibility when she declares war because she can not convince him to treat her as an equal.
CONCLUSION

Animals play just like men. We have only to watch young dogs to see that all the essentials of human play are present in their merry gambols. They invite one another to play by a certain ceremoniousness of attitude and gesture. They keep to the rule that you shall not bite, or not bite hard, your brother’s ear. They pretend to get terribly angry. And – what is more important – in all these doings they plainly experience tremendous fun and enjoyment. (Huizinga 1)

In this dissertation I have shown that there are two versions of the game of courtship. The first version, called the game of idealized courtship, defines a game which the players enjoy because the rules are followed and the game is fair and equal. The second game, called the game of seduction, corrupts the rules of idealized courtship by subverting and exploiting its rules. Looking at these two versions as a game defines the relationships between the players, sets the rules and determines the outcome of the game. Of the research that I did for this dissertation, the passage from Huizinga just cited is my favorite because in it he has described the essence of play as it concerns the nature and purpose of a game of idealized courtship. The picture of a puppy at play includes the criteria needed to visualize a game that is fair, mutual and equal. The puppy’s game includes an invitation to play through a non-verbal communication gesture that instantly conveys the game’s purpose. It is also a gesture that is easily recognized by a playmate. Then, when puppies play, there are rules that include being careful not to harm the other player as well as the theatrics of pretending to be angry to encourage more play. Finally, it is apparent that puppies are having a wonderful time; and, it is implied that the game is voluntary and that either of them can stop the game at any time. Consent and the right of refusal to play are inherent in this play contract. Huizinga’s detailed observations on play were intended to show that it is a “cultural phenomenon” (Foreward ix). More than a basic animal
instinct (humans included) he notes that “play is present everywhere as a well-defined quality of action which is different from ‘ordinary’ life” (4). The paintings of Watteau and Fragonard visually show this element of play in the games of idealized courtship in which the couples are involved. The impulse to flirt, sing, dance, play music, swing and flaunt sexual desire is seen as a common element of play in the paintings. Like the behavior of the puppies, the couples use various strategies with each other to encourage the game because it is fun and pleasurable. The strategies include the interpretation of certain signs and symbols such as the rose or the dolphin or the swing which show the desire for mutual sexual pleasure. Huizinga addresses this aspect of play noting that “such rompings of young dogs are only one of the simpler forms of animal play. There are other much more highly developed forms: regular contests and beautiful performances before an admiring public” (1). The strategy of games as play implies that it may be boisterous, involve clowning around and some lighthearted theatrics. The purpose of the game in this case is to provide a form of physical contact that brings players together and makes the game pleasurable. Players in these games know that they are involved in a game with specific rules and that they are free to quit the game at any time.

But what happens to this play concept when the rules of game are broken? In the following passage, Caillois gives a definition of what happens when the game is corrupted:

Corruption of games: transposed to reality, the only goal of agôn (competition) is success. The rules of courteous rivalry are forgotten and scorned. They seem merely irksome and hypocritical conventions. Implacable competition becomes the rule. Winning even justifies found blows. If the individual remains inhibited by fear of the law or public opinion, it nonetheless seems permissible, if not meritorious, for nations to wage unlimited warfare. The corruption of agôn is violence, will to power, trickery. (34)
In describing what happens when the game becomes one of combat or war, Caillois has also illustrated the game of seduction found in *Dangerous Liaisons*. When the game becomes corrupted, winning at all costs is the goal which then denies any of the players the right to a fair and impartial game. Caillois further describes how play is corrupted when he talks about the consequences it has to the game:

> What used to be pleasure becomes an obsession. What was an escape becomes an obligation, and what was a pastime is now a passion, compulsion, and source of anxiety. The principle of play has become corrupted. (45)

Valmont’s behavior shows this level of obsession with Tourvel. He turns the game into a combat after he learns that to avoid him, Tourvel has left during the night. In his anger he writes to Merteuil:

> My dear, I am deceived, betrayed, ruined. I am in despair. She has left without my knowledge…ah, don’t imagine that I would have let her go. She would have stayed…had I been obliged to resort to force. (Laclos 1119)

In other words, it’s all about me. Valmont would have forced Tourvel to stay which shows that he is concerned about himself rather than the well being of his intended partner. This game of seduction has corrupted the game of idealized courtship because it has changed the rules. For this reason in the game of seduction, the roles of the players become those of seducer and victim. The game is also characterized by deceit, secrecy and denial of responsibility for behavior. Lies are the basis for a successful game of seduction. When Merteuil tells Valmont how she tricked her husband into thinking she did not desire sex, she illustrates this point: “I decided, for the very reason I had become susceptible to pleasure, to appear in his eyes impassive. This apparent frigidity proved later to
be the unshakeable foundation of his blind trust in me” (Laclos 1076). Seducers also use techniques from the stage to convince their victims to play the game. In doing so, the seducers forget that they are playing a game and assume the roles that they play. In this process, they corrupt the game because they can no longer differentiate between play and reality. Caillois describes this disconnect from reality in the following passage:

For the actor, a theatrical performance is mere simulation. He puts on make-up and costume, plays and recites. But when the curtain falls, and the lights go on, he returns to reality. The separation of the two universes remains absolute...the corruption of mimicry follows a parallel course. It is produced when simulation is no longer accepted as such, when the one who is disguised believes that his role, travesty, or mask is real. He no longer plays another. Persuaded he is the other, he behaves as if he were, forgetting his own self. (45, 49)

This passage sums up a critical point in understanding the game of seduction as Valmont and Merteuil play it. In the process of playing a double game, they have fooled themselves. They believe that they understand reality but they do not realize that they are trapped. They play a game within a game from which they can not escape if they want to continue to exist in society.

The key factor in understanding and comparing the games of idealized courtship and seduction is in knowing how the communication structure operates through the visual medium as well as through the language or the written format. The game of idealized courtship is expressed in the paintings of Watteau and Fragonard because the non-verbal communication cues – gestures, facial expressions, and body positions – illustrate to a viewer that the game is mutual and that both parties are in control of its outcome. In this manner the game can be “seen” and its purpose understood without the use of words. The game of seduction as portrayed in Dangerous Liaisons must be communicated through
words and language to be recognized. While the seducers use non-verbal communication in the form of facial expressions, sighs, and tears to play the game, this form of communication can not be the primary means through which the game is played. Language, both spoken and written, is required to convey a game with a double meaning – one that can be interpreted in different ways depending on the context and on who is communicating. It is this double meaning that makes the game deceitful and sometimes unpredictable. Or in the words of Ovid, “Oft, too, the feigner comes to love in fact, and lives the part that he’d begun to act” (103).
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BIBLIOGRAPHY


BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

Barbara Corley Robinson received her B.A. degree in Spanish from Valdosta State University in 1972. She also has a M.L.S. (1977) and a M.A. in Mass Communication (1995) from The Florida State University. She has worked at The Florida State University for 25 years. She began as a continuing education coordinator in the Center for Professional Development and Public Service. She then spent eight years as Director of Career Placement for the College of Law and seven years as Director of Master’s Programs for the College of Business. Currently, she is Assistant Dean for Student Affairs in the College of Communication. She was a teaching assistant in the Department of Interdisciplinary Humanities and taught the multicultural film course for five semesters. She received an outstanding teaching assistant award through the Program in Instructional Excellence (PIE) for this course. Other professional experience includes working as a librarian at the State Library of Florida. She also worked as a school representative at Hahn AFB, Germany (1974-75) and at Holloman AFB, New Mexico (1980-82). Barbara lived in Bangkok, Thailand from 1972-1973 and at Hahn AFB and Bitburg AFB, Germany from 1973-1979. Barbara currently lives in Tallahassee and Panama City, Florida with her husband, Brian. Together they enjoy visiting their children in Anchorage, Alaska.