

# FILTHY GORGEOUS: IN DEFENSE OF KATHRYN MERTEUIL, FEMINISM, AND SEXUAL AWAKENINGS

Cruel Intentions came out in 1999 and was paraded as a dark and sexy drama about wealthy teens gallivanting about New York City. Inspired by Pierre Choderlos de Laclos' 1782 work *Les Liaisons Dangereuses*, the movie was a huge box office success and positioned its stars as amazing talents and widely popular heartthrobs.

It also gave all-around-good-girl-Buffy-heroine Sarah Michelle Gellar an edge as the movie's "villain" and step-sister of the romantic lead, Kathryn Merteuil. I put villain in quotation marks because as I get older I begin to see Merteuil as less of an outright villain and more a confident, independent young woman, who was highly misunderstood, demeaned, and neglected. Now, I know she had her issues – many very real mental health issues that were clearly not being dealt with properly.

I can't recall the exact moment I first saw *Cruel Intentions*, but it was early in my high school career, and I either watched it with my good friend Jess or she loaned it to me with a lofty recommendation. At the time, I was beginning to form my own opinions and ideas about sex and sexuality – hell, I still am. I was longing for more knowledge surrounding the topic and so this seemed like the perfect film. It was all about sex. That is the central premise of the movie: get self-proclaimed virgin, Annette Hargrove (Witherspoon) to denounce her holy creed and sleep with Sebastian Valmont (Phillippe) at the behest of his step-sister Merteuil, as a bet, and some other sexy stuff was done to exact revenge on a whole mess of people. Perfect.

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## ***“Strong women intimidate boys and excite men” – Unknown***

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Admittedly, however, when I first saw the film I identified with and rooted for Hargrove and her eventual romance with bad-boy-turned-reformed-hunk Valmont. Why wouldn't I? The film was set up for exactly that. Hargrove was the heroine and Valmont had a redemption arc. Good and effective storytelling. It effectively formed the Virgin-Whore dichotomy and positioned good vs. evil.

Again, it wasn't until I got older and continued to form my opinions on sex and my newly-found feminism that I began to see the complexity of Merteuil as a character. What I had thought of as "right" and "wrong" were changing. I realized those concrete, black and white perceptions society places on us regarding love, sex, and gender were arbitrary and ever-changing.

Merteuil, while devious and narrowly focused on revenge, was only doing so because she'd been shamed for her proclivities – SEX. She was a woman in charge of herself and her sexuality, and she not only enjoyed sex but sought it out. Unlike her step-brother, Sebastian who kept no secrets of his sexual desires or conquests, and was still beloved by many, Merteuil had to keep her desires hidden and position herself as the authority on all things good at her elite Manhattan private school to maintain her status and reputation.

The shaming double-standards dug themselves deeper into Kathryn's life when, before the start of the film, she was dumped by her rich, popular boyfriend, Court Reynolds. She and Reynolds had a fairly active sex life but she was dumped in favor of the younger, more "pure" character, Cecile Caldwell played by Selma Blair.

When I rewatched and began to realize this insane double-standard placed upon this character who was later revealed to be the "big bad" of the film, I became angry. A film I had loved for many years suddenly made me extremely angry. I'm a sex-positive feminist who would never shame another woman for enjoying one of life's greatest little pleasures, sex.

What really hit me was a speech Merteuil gives in the middle of the film. The speech is directed at Sebastian and is an attempt to get him to agree to her devious plan. Villainous, yes, but with decidedly more complex and deeply rooted motives than straight malicious revenge.

She begins her monologue by telling Sebastian to basically eff-off, and then goes into how it's not only fine, but even praised, if men like Sebastian or her ex (Court) can have sex with anyone and everyone. No one questions it or scrutinizes – at least not in the same way they would judge Kathryn. Sebastian may be seen as somewhat vile, but his action would not truly impede his trajectory in life. He would be seen as absurd, and detestable even, but powerful and confident nonetheless.

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***"God forbid I exude confidence and enjoy sex." – Kathryn Merteuil***

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This is my favorite line from Merteuil's speech. It is so incredibly on-point and cutting. She's mocking the standards put on her by society, the patriarchy and those contributing to that system. As a confident woman, she presents a threat to others, especially men. "Men don't want a confident women" is a line fed to us, either directly or subconsciously from the time we're young. And it's bull. Complete and utter bull. Throw a love of sex and a demand for her own pleasure on top of that. Well, she might as well be Satan in Prada heels.

While many of her actions point to a seriously troubled girl in need of some help, I don't believe that her relationship with sex alone played a large role in her damaged psyche. More so, I believe, it was the relationship the rest of society had, and still has, regarding sex and gender that greatly contributed to her problems. This double life she created for herself in order to hide her true desires and nature that led to her overall problems.

I guess I'm not incredibly surprised by this notion occurring in a film made in 1999. While some great strides in the world of gender equality had been made there was a long way to go. And there still is. I'm still learning about myself, the world around me, and how feminism intersects with so many identities in the world. I'm just now, as a woman in her late-20's, becoming more confident and comfortable in myself and my sexuality. Confident in my ability to demand that my pleasure and desires be met.

I attribute some of this confidence to Ms. Merteuil. Kathryn is a villain, yes. But like all great villains, she has a rather complex and compelling backstory. Anyway, villains are much more interesting than the heroines, if only we bother to look past the surface. Merteuil's confidence and thoughts sent me

down a path of self-discovery and led me to, perhaps, more profound feminist heroes like bell hooks, Roxane Gay, Audre Lorde, Joan Didion, and many more. But I will never forget Merteuil, implanting feminist ideas into my head before I even knew what they were. Helping me with my “baby-feminism” and pushing me to be confident, smart, fierce, sexual, and to embrace all aspects about myself, even the ones that aren’t deemed “good” by society.

All in all, Kathryn Merteuil is a feminist. A feminist with some interesting and intelligent thoughts, and we’d know that if we just bothered to actually listen.