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Roger Chartier

1678

La princesse de Clèves Is Published Anonymously

The Emergence of the Novel

The great literary scandal and debate provoked by the anonymous publication of *La princesse de Clèves* in 1678 marks a major renewal in the prose narrative tradition, a milestone in the history of the novel. There are many indications that Marie-Madeleine de La Fayette (1634–1693), the accepted author of the book, meant to create a literary sensation and especially to raise questions about what kind of book she had written. La Fayette was not alone in accomplishing the transformation of narrative prose that took place in the 1670s. *Les désordres de l'amour* (1675–76; *The Turmoils of Love*), by Mme. de Villedieu (Marie Catherine Desjardins), and *Don Carlos* (1672), by César Vichard, abbé de Saint-Réal, are similar to La Fayette's work in their brevity, their modern historical settings, and their emphasis on using narrative to raise important questions about the norms of human conduct. But *La princesse de Clèves* was the catalyst of public recognition that a new kind of narrative genre was becoming dominant. Twentieth-century readers often have trouble understanding why this story of an unfulfilled love should have generated the several volumes of criticism published about it within a year of its printing. The intense and introspective story of a young married woman who falls in love with another man fits a pattern with which we are familiar. But our calm acceptance of its characters, its style, and its plot is possible because we view it as belonging to a generic category unfamiliar to La Fayette's contemporaries and for which they lacked both a name and a theory. The novel, as we know it after La Fayette, fills the gap created by the juxtaposition of two previously dominant genres, the romance and the novella. La Fayette's text combines key elements of these genres.

In modern French a novel is called a *roman*, which is also the term used in 17th-century French for romances: the loves and exploits of Arthurian knights seeking the grail, pastoral fictions of princes disguised as shepherds, and tales of shipwreck, piracy, and rediscovery of long-lost family. Generally set in epochs or places distant from the author's and original readers', romances enjoyed considerable latitude in their characters' conduct and even in the order of possible natural occurrence. Magic and supernatural interventions were common, and the characters were likely to wrestle with problems of illusion, whether induced by magic or by human misperception. Although 17th-century French romances (such as Honoré d'Urfé's *L'Astrée*, 1607–1627, and Madeleine

de Scudéry's *Clélie*, 1654–1660) incorporated discussions of human nature and psychology, they traditionally involved the subjective confusions of a multitude of individual characters faced with the challenge of distinguishing illusion from reality. The narrative of each character's confusion provided many subplots harmonized into a complex polyphony.

The English term *novel* descends from the French *nouvelle* or Italian novella, a genre distinguished from the romance not only by its relative shortness but also by a host of other features, including the representation of the narrator as storyteller and the attitudes portrayed toward standards of conduct and truth. The novella was generally set in a location and period closer to those of the author and original readers. Its characters generally behaved in accordance with prevailing social conventions. Its plots were usually dominated by a single character. Whereas the romance emphasized subjective emotional quests and the problem of illusion and reality, the novella stressed the objective qualities of the world and the demonstration of certain laws of human conduct. The novella hero was often a trickster who had obtained a knowledge of such laws and used them to gain an advantage over others.

This generic background explains the perplexity of many of La Fayette's contemporaries when *La princesse de Clèves* appeared. The contemporary critics Jean-Baptiste-Henri de Valincour and Roger de Bussy-Rabutin argued that its historical inaccuracies, the exceptional events of the plot, and the nature of the heroine would have been acceptable in the exotic world of the romance but were not tolerable in a fictive representation of a world like our own. The story is set in the court of Henri II (1547–1559), little over a century earlier. Thus the proximity of the events seemed to favor realism and to invite readers to assume that the characters' behavior would be close to contemporary norms. This assumption would lead toward the logic of the novella. However, the text of *La princesse de Clèves*—including plot and characters—is not *normal*: that is, it does not confirm expectations about the way men and women did or should behave. For example, the heroine's admission to her husband that she loves another man but that she remains faithful as a wife seemed to many readers atypical of marital conduct; according to such readers, La Fayette's plot diverged on this point from the way things *were*, from the way people really behaved. As Bussy-Rabutin argued, such behavior on the part of a wife might appear in a *true* story (of some eccentric individual) or in a romance, but not in the kind of in-between, lifelike fiction that the author of *La princesse de Clèves* seemed to present. The heroine's confession also led to a discussion of whether a wife *should* make such a statement to her husband. These two concerns are among the most powerful indications of how the novel, as a genre, calls into question the ideology—that is, both its view of objective reality and the social values imposed on that reality—of the society that produced the text. In the 17th century the terms *verisimilitude* (*vraisemblance*)—"how we act"—and *propriety* (*bienséance*)—"how we should act"—converged in discussions of the heroine's conduct. It was not believable (or verisimilar), thought some, that the heroine would so depart from what was proper.

La Fayette herself participated directly in the critical debate. In a letter to the secretary of the duchess of Savoy, she denied being the author of the text, affirmed the overall accuracy of the book's representation of life at the French court, and claimed that *La princesse de Clèves* was not a *roman* or romance but a historical memoir. Yet the clearly nonhistorical character of the book—the “princess” herself did not really exist—prevents us from taking literally La Fayette's claim that the book is nonfiction. Perhaps she meant that the story was an accurate model of relationships in the royal court. By rejecting the term *roman* she pointed toward a stricter standard of accuracy than that of romance.

La Fayette also seems to have anticipated the critical debate through the deliberate emphasis on the unlikely and unverisimilar in the book itself, particularly through the characteristics and actions of the heroine, a young noblewoman recently arrived at the court and therefore without direct experience of amorous and political intrigue. The heroine (after her marriage, the princess of the novel's title) is repeatedly described as exceptional and even describes herself as unique. She is contrasted with several other female characters who fit the thematically central norms of fidelity and infidelity. The heroine's departure from these courtly patterns, together with other “unrealistic” behavior (for example, her suitor, Nemours, takes outlandish risks), seemed to contemporary readers to accord with the exotic realms of romance.

From a 19th- or 20th-century perspective, *La princesse de Clèves* appears to be a prototype of the *Bildungsroman*, the novel of education or development, centered on a young person's move out of the sheltered world of childhood. Education is an explicit theme of La Fayette's book, for the heroine's mother adopts a usual approach, warning her daughter in advance about the conduct of courtiers, and especially about the untrustworthy nature of suitors. Thus La Fayette creates an important distinction between innocence and inexperience. The mother's lesson not only provides the heroine with a series of concepts of what constitutes reality, or verisimilar conduct in courtiers, but also provides a particular structure of learning, which consists in placing a rule next to narrative accounts based on experience. Throughout the text the heroine hears other stories about the outcome of love affairs and compares her own experience with these narratives.

The princess's comparison of her own experience with others' illustrates an inductive approach to learning, the search for a single unifying pattern. Her introspection is thus not merely psychological, although *La princesse de Clèves* has long been recognized as the first narrative of psychological analysis: many passages seem to be an account of the thoughts of the heroine herself, mediated by the narrator only to the extent that these thoughts are stated in the third person as indirect discourse. For instance, “How could she not but recognize this nameless lady?” (p. 84) seems to be a transposition of the princess's own agitated question to herself, along the line, “How could that be anyone but . . . ?” This internal narrative is commented on by a nameless omniscient narrator who knows not only what the heroine thinks but also when she is

wrong about her own feelings ("She was quite mistaken, since the unbearable pain she was suffering was nothing more nor less than jealousy"; p. 105).

As both *Bildungsroman* and psychological discourse *La princesse de Clèves* anticipated directions taken by the novel in the 18th and 19th centuries. But La Fayette was also modulating the genres available in her own day. The heroine's internal search for a norm in the stories she hears is also related to a major preoccupation of the novella. The internal narrators of novella collections try incessantly to detect a pattern in the series of short stories they recount to one another. Significantly, the only explicit reference to another literary work in the course of *La princesse de Clèves* is to Margaret of Navarre's 16th-century collection of novellas, *L'heptaméron* (1559; *The Heptameron*), which the princess is said to have read. By this literary allusion La Fayette strengthens the parallel between the heroine's activity of listening to the stories told about the court and the generic structure of the novella collection. In *L'heptaméron*, as in other classic examples of novella collections, such as Boccaccio's *Decameron* (1353) and Jean Regnault de Segrais's *Nouvelles françaises* (1657), a group of characters tell one another stories and discuss the "truths" about men and women that appear to be demonstrated therein. The discovery of a recurrent pattern on the novella model is important to La Fayette's heroine, because the single most important decision she faces, whether or not to marry Nemours after her husband's death, depends in large part on a judgment whether or not there are exceptions to the demonstrated norm that men are generally unfaithful once they have been assured of a woman's love. The typical novella response to questions of this sort is a proliferation of further stories both proving and disproving the possibility of male fidelity. *La princesse de Clèves* separates itself from the novella by bringing the narrative to an abrupt halt, as the heroine chooses independence from men and from the court and a life of retreat and monastic community. The narrative and the heroine refuse to answer the question of male fidelity either affirmatively or negatively and thus also refuse a typical novella dichotomy.

La Fayette's text also takes elements of romance and turns them to new purposes. The court of Henri II is described as a place where appearance and reality are radically distinguished—her mother tells the newly arrived heroine, "If you judge by appearances in this place, you will go on making mistakes, for things here are seldom what they seem" (p. 55)—an important feature of the romance. But whereas romance attributes illusion either to magic or to obsessive individual desire, *La princesse de Clèves* attributes illusion to the systematic workings of the ceaseless political maneuverings of court society. When Nemours spies on the princess in a pavilion at her country estate, the whole episode is reminiscent of romance, and the highly unreal, dreamlike quality reinforces the sense of a movement into a different genre. But the traditional expectation that Nemours's desire will ultimately be satisfied is aborted by the heroine's preference to transcend the whole amorous pursuit. When she chooses to depart both from the court and from her relationship with Nemours, the novel ends by stressing once again the exceptional quality of the heroine's conduct: "Her life,

which was not a long one, provided an example of inimitable goodness." This inimitable example opens the epoch dominated by the novel, whose "birth-place," as Walter Benjamin observed in 1936, "is the solitary individual" ("The Storyteller," p. 87). Who better fits that description than the princess of Clèves, setting her own course outside the dominant patterns?

See also 1527, 1619, 1654, 1704, 1735.

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John D. Lyons

1680, 21 October

Seven Years after Molière's Death, Louis XIV Grants His Players the Monopoly on Theatrical Performances in Paris

The Comédie-Française

The establishment of the Comédie-Française was, after that of the Académie Française in 1634, the most powerful and enduring feature of the policy of cultural centralization developed by the French monarchy in its transition from feudalism to absolutism. One law, one faith, one king . . . one theater.

On 21 October 1680 an order signed by Louis XIV and his minister Jean-Baptiste Colbert under the king's private seal directed that the two French theatrical troupes in Paris merge, becoming the only group authorized to perform "comedies"—that is, plays—in Paris. Thus an establishment monopoly was founded. Actors in the temporary fairground theaters and the Comédie-Italienne continued to perform, but they were not allowed to present the works of established writers and the "great genres."

The consequences of the measure were manifold and immediately apparent. For the actors—the *comédiens français*—it meant both privilege and constraint. Subjected to the authority of his majesty, their contracts and regulations depended upon the whims of his representatives, the "gentlemen of the king's bedchamber." Moreover, the king "decided on the actors' and actresses' inclusion in the troupe." On the other hand, the monopoly guaranteed exclusive rights to the most prestigious texts—and therefore roles—in the French theater. For contemporary writers the results were also dual. Because the "great genres" had only one outlet, rejection could mean an aborted career. However,

an accepted and successful actor like Caron de Beaumarcq's immortalized the concept of the actor that had the monopoly.

The concept of the actor in French medieval theater was the medieval corporation in which an actor had an artisan's masterpiece. He established the concept of the actor in the 17th century, as there were only three theaters in Paris: the Hôtel de Bourgogne, which Molière took over in 1658 (*Impromptu*) and the Théâtre du Marais. The successes of many plays became the basis for the existence of the Illustres, Molière (and assigned an *acte d'association* to divide the profits—that had pleased the actor, director, and accepted. In June 1680, the Marais, deprived of its troupe called Troupe de l'Écuyer, Molière's old company was swallowed up and reduced to one troupe "to make the performers free from competition by using the collective force autocratic center."

The most influential sustained by the king (Racine), the membership guaranteed by the classical repertoire, of Poetry), and canon of Louis XIV). The troupe formed, wrote with the Comédie-Française modeled largely on by Jean-François B