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The Will to Refuse in the *Princesse de Clèves*

The *Princesse de Clèves* is the first of French novels to move relentlessly towards its conclusion. Thus it stands out from most of the love stories of the same and preceding periods – episodic, sentimental, and heroic romances whose plots twist around obstacles separating faithful lovers and postponing, though not indefinitely, their happy union. Camus emphasizes this distinguishing feature of the *Princesse de Clèves* in an article entitled 'L'Intelligence et l'échafaud.' Novelists of the family of Mme de Lafayette, he writes, refuse to run irrelevant errands. 'Leur seul souci semble être de mener imperturbablement leurs personnages au rendez-vous qui les attend ... Ce qu'ils ont en propre, c'est l'unité de l'intention.'[1] Again for this reason, in addition to her many affinities with both Racine and Corneille, critics have long believed in the influence of the contemporary classical theatre upon Mme de Lafayette. Her novel enjoys, for its date (1678), unusual structural simplicity. Not only does the dénouement determine the action, but the number of digressive episodes, vestiges of a leisurely tradition, fond of collateral stories wound around the plot, never diminishes the reader's sense of an onward rush toward climax.[2]

The crucial rendez-vous that awaits the Princesse de Clèves at the end of the narrative is with her lover Nemours. In the final chapter, once attention shifts from the digressive episodes, the secondary characters, and the magnificent court ceremonies, and settles on the activities and inner feelings of the lovers, the novel seems to move at an accelerated pace. Then at last they meet, free for the first time, of all obstacles to their union. Given the momentum, the scene affects the reader like an application of the brakes. For the Princesse refuses to marry the man to whom she is irresistibly drawn and who has demonstrated his passion by an emotionally arduous pursuit in the face of her diffidence and remoteness. While her refusal is seldom termed 'invraisemblable,' for the novelist carefully prepares it and grounds her heroine's behaviour in moral principles, long in evidence, the Princesse unsettles the reader as well as Nemours. Such a dénouement, withholding rewards for suffering, contradicts expectations raised by a tradition in the literature of love to which this novel, despite its departures in form, clearly belongs.

Critics have provided varied glosses upon the novel's ending in the

three centuries since its publication. In the first full-length critique of the work, Valincour's *Lettres à Madame la Marquise sur le sujet de la Princesse de Clèves* (published in 1678), two opposite opinions, both of which stand at the head of a tradition, find expression. Valincour imagines a dialogue about the dénouement between himself and an admirable woman 'que tant de qualités extraordinaires élèvent au-dessus de son sexe.'[3] For his part, he insists on the courage and virtue of the Princesse, whose refusal of Nemours constitutes a heroic sacrifice to the memory of her recently deceased husband whom she never loved. Valincour's admirable feminine interlocutor, on the contrary, less charitable to women, deems the Princesse's motives based on fear and teasingly expressed: 'Et qu'est-ce que *l'intérêt de son repos*? C'est la crainte de n'être plus aimée de Monsieur de Nemours après qu'elle l'aurait épousé. Cela *lui paraît un si horrible malheur*, qu'elle emploie sept ou huit pages à le dépeindre avec des termes de la plus raffinée coquetterie' (p 224). The same clash of opinions reappears today. One group of scholars, with representatives still coming forward (to mention a few – Lanson, Raynal, Dédéyan, and Kaps),[4] see in the Princesse a heroine whose aspirations transcend those of normal humanity. She appears, in their judgment, as an avatar of the Cornelian protagonists who place honour above life. Another group, most of whose number are contemporary, challenge an idealizing tradition they associate with psychological naïveté, and portray the Princesse as frigid, incapable of love, egocentric, or self-deceiving (for example: Vigée, Fraisse, Doubrovsky, and Turnell).[5] The two interpretations of the Princesse's refusal dictate two conflicting attitudes toward the novel as a whole. Thus while one group is reading an allegory of virtue triumphant in an immoral world, the other reads a cautionary tale of extravagant self-denial.

To some extent I oversimplify. For advocates of both views find corroboration in the text. And alongside (or even among) those who see in the novel either a manifestation of human grandeur or, quite to the contrary, of human *faiblesse*, are those who discern the outlines of both. These critics emphasize the tragic dualities in a story structured around a fatal impasse helplessly, yet lucidly experienced, and concluded on an air of 'tristesse majestueuse' signifying the loss of what is presented as fine, however mixed with the frail.[6]

Camus furthers critical understanding of the pull of opposite tendencies in the novel by calling attention to its ambivalence towards love. In a work inspired by mistrust towards passion, he writes, more power is attributed to love than the boldest romantics of the nineteenth century would dare to show.[7] And, as evidence, he cites the characters who die here for no better reason than unfulfilled desire (for example, the Chevalier de Guise and the Prince de Clèves). Valincour finds the treatment of love in the novel altogether an insult to the intelligence: 'Et le duc

[sic] de Clèves n'aurait-il pas bien pu répondre à ceux qui lui eussent demandé la cause de son mal, qu'il se désespérait de pur désespoir, comme ce Portugais, qui passait les jours et les nuits à se plaindre et à soupirer, et qui répondait à ceux qui lui demandèrent de qui il était amoureux, qu'il était amoureux de pur amour' (p 126). One of Samuel Richardson's novelistic characters in the next century has the same reaction to the Princesse de Clèves's immediate obsession with Nemours after their first meeting at a court ball:

"A Duke de Nemours: said she, taking up the *Princess of Cleves*, that unluckily lay on my table – Ah, my Henrietta! have I found you out? – That princess, my dear, was a silly woman. Her story is written with dangerous elegance; but the whole foundation of her distresses was an idle one. To fancy herself in love with a mere stranger, because he appeared agreeable at a ball, when she lived happily with a worthy husband, was mistaking mere *liking* for love, and combating all her life after with a chimera of her own creating."[8]

Another literary character, this one romantic, the hero of Alfred de Musset's *On ne badine pas avec l'amour*, would surely argue the other side and characterize the Princesse de Clèves's refusal of her 'chimera,' as he characterizes Camille's plan to withdraw to a convent, as a flight from 'life.' In a recent article on 'Le Refus de la Princesse de Clèves,' Claude Vigée adopts this stance of romantic discontent with the defeat of love. Feminine psychology, as he understands it, leads him to conclude that the Princesse avoids 'le choc vital avec une autre liberté qui pourrait la sauver, aussi bien que la détruire' (p 738) out of an egocentric and narrowly pusillanimous desire to protect her autonomy. 'Elle s'aime elle-même plus que la vie terrestre ou que Nemours, dans le noyau spontané de sa personne. Afin de se conserver à soi, elle accepte la mutilation la plus cruelle, celle de ses affections humaines, de son bonheur de femme' (pp 739–40). And he likens her, with all the attendant implications of sterility and sexual inhibition, to Mallarmé's Hérodiade: 'Elles ont en commun le suprême repliement sur leur perfection désolée' (p 746). One could continue in this vein of disappointment and accusation and imagine footnotes from depth psychology. Under Freud's inspiration, the Princesse could be shown to fail her husband and refuse her lover out of a will-to-power derived from envy of the male and fear of the body. In Jungian terms, she (and her mother who educates her to be wary of men) could be said to represent fixation at an early man-hating stage in the development of the feminine psyche.[9]

But Mme de Lafayette is at best an ambivalent or rationalistic romantic and she seems not to have fixation in mind. On the contrary, her novel, as most critics agree, is a 'roman d'apprentissage' whose heroine grows in maturity and self-knowledge as her passion grows in strength. Inner monologues serve to depict the Princesse's new self-awareness. Though

very young, she learns to judge herself in a quite detached way, and to observe, under the influence of strong feelings, the fragmentation of her consciousness and the gap between her thoughts and her behaviour.

"Veux-je m'engager dans une galanterie? Veux-je me manquer à moi-même? Et veux-je enfin m'exposer aux cruels repentirs et aux mortelles douleurs que donne l'amour? Je suis vaincue et surmontée par une inclination qui m'entraîne malgré moi. Toutes mes résolutions sont inutiles; je pensai hier tout ce que je pense aujourd'hui et je fais aujourd'hui tout le contraire de ce que je résolus hier."[10]

Some critics propose, as a way of solving the dilemma of the novel, that the Princesse's refusal of Nemours is intended as a means for keeping his passion alive, particularly since she subscribes to the thesis Denis de Rougemont develops at length three centuries later (in *L'Amour et l'occident*) – that passion is no fixed emotion, but demands ceaseless renewal and thrives on resistance and obstacles. Marcel Arland writes that she sacrifices her happiness to a love 'dont elle craint l'affaiblissement, l'usure, la déchéance, et qu'elle ne peut garder intact qu'en se refusant à l'assouvir.'[11] This critical position ignores the final remarks of the narrator, who describes Nemours's 'recovery' ('Enfin, des années entières s'étant passées, le temps et l'absence ralentirent sa douleur et éteignirent sa passion,' p 394) and the Princesse's progressive detachment from things of this world: 'Enfin, elle surmonta les restes de cette passion qui était affaiblie par les sentiments que sa maladie lui avait donnés ... Les passions et les engagements du monde lui parurent tels qu'ils paraissent aux personnes qui ont des vues plus grandes et plus éloignées' (p 393).

Placing the *Princesse de Clèves* in the tradition of fairy tales, courtly romance, and the legends of Tristan and Iseut makes Camus's remarks about the romantic side of the novel even clearer.[12] The same narrative material emerges, many of its elements symbolic or mythical. Against the restraint of an austere style, the novel declares the magic of passion. The Princesse loves at first sight; her feelings strengthen with each glance (the symbolism of vision reappearing since the Greeks and Ovid). Just as Prince Charming succeeds, where all others fail, in awakening the bewitched Sleeping Beauty, so here the fair princess, admired, courted, provoking love, married, never understands, before meeting Nemours, what responses men seek from her ('Ces distinctions étaient au-dessus de ses connaissances,' p 259). Her feelings are intense and suffocating and, like those of Iseut, imposed, not chosen. Her life is composed of meetings and separations, fantasies and danger. Everywhere she is observed; all of her thoughts gravitate to love.

The myths, singly or mixed together (the optimistic courtly and Platonic tradition and the tradition of Tristan and Phèdre) present passion as a force for both good and evil. Love inspires heroic deeds or

spiritual regeneration but is ready to sacrifice everything – honour, family, life itself – to its own satisfaction. It joins the lovers and tears them asunder; it may deprave or exalt them. And so it does here, though in muted tones, through insinuation and distinctions of nuance. The Princesse, uninitiated, reserved, in her mother's shadow at the beginning of the novel, soon emerges transfigured. New feelings add dimension to her character and distinguish her from other women of the court absorbed in simulating passion or mere gallantry. She gains intelligence at the same time that she learns, like many a heroine under the sway of passion, to deceive herself and others. By the middle of the novel she discards all resemblance to the innocent ingénue Valincour mocks and likens to Molière's Agnès. The portrayal of Nemours, too, bears the imprint of inherited traditions about the curative powers of love. Several critics have remarked that whereas Mme de Lafayette plumbs Brantôme's memoirs for information, she radically changes the historical Nemours.[13] In Brantôme's text he is an intrepid seducer, a rapist when necessary, impatient and sensuous. Here he resembles no one so much as D'Urfé's platonic lover, Céladon, constant, passive, blind to other women, respectful of the Princesse, whom he idealizes as unique, in short, an 'héros tremblant.' He dreams in the woods, sighs, watches her from afar, flees from direct contact. Pierre Bayle is critical of this emasculation inspired by courtly romances and *précieux* tastes rather than by reality:

> Le monde ne produit point des gens de cette espèce, ils ne sont que le pur Ouvrage d'un Romaniste. Je voudrois bien qu'on me montrât une Dame en France, qui fût le vrai Original de la Princesse de Clèves. S'il y en avoit une, je vous promets que j'irois la voir, quand il me faudroit faire quatre cens lieües à pied. Mais je crois qu'il seroit encore plus rare de trouver l'Original du Duc de Nemours parmi les Seigneurs de la Cour. On ne connoît point cette grande timidité, ni ce grand respect, dans notre siècle.[14]

But Mme de Lafayette plays a double game with Nemours. Not only does she choose a hero whose historical reputation belies his portrayal in the novel, but she implants doubts in the reader's mind about his transformation. The Dauphine and Mme de Chartres speak several times of his past ('peu de celles à qui il s'était attaché, se pouvaient vanter de lui avoir résisté,' p 244), thus sounding and resounding a disturbing leit-motif. Presented in greater depth than most of the characters (he is the only one other than the Princesse to enjoy the use of inner monologues), he none the less remains shadowy. Vanity defeats his powers of discretion: he relates, in disguised terms, his success with the Princesse to his intimate, the Vidame de Chartres. (He eavesdrops on a conversation between the Clèves and hears her confess her love for a man she refuses to name but whom he recognizes as himself.)[15] The Prin-

cesse, gaining in perspective, picks up scattered clues, and begins to judge the man with whom she is obsessed:

"Il a été discret, disait-elle, tant qu'il a cru être malheureux; mais une pensée d'un bonheur, même incertain, a fini sa discrétion. Il n'a pu s'imaginer qu'il était aimé sans vouloir qu'on le sût. Il a dit tout ce qu'il pouvait dire; je n'ai pas avoué que c'était lui que j'aimais, il l'a soupçonné et il a laissé voir ses soupçons. S'il eût eu des certitudes, il en aurait usé de la même sorte. J'ai eu tort de croire qu'il y eût un homme capable de cacher ce qui flatte sa gloire." [pp 351–2]

In fairy tales and romances the heroine passively accepts her deliverance at the hands of her rescuing prince. Or if, like Psyche in Apuleius's tale, she takes an active part in her destiny, she wins redemption and happiness through selfless commitment to her lover and willingness to suffer in his name. Then all her problems are solved. Mme de Lafayette was an avid reader of romances, and perhaps felt drawn toward vicarious solutions and wish-fulfilment. But in this novel she tempers the urge with the reality principle. Nemours never rescues the Princesse de Clèves; she insists upon rescuing herself.

It should be remembered that the *Princesse de Clèves* represents the story of a feminine *éducation sentimentale*. Nemours and Clèves symbolize desires and fears, inhibitions and impulses, in the mind of the Princesse as Mme Arnoux does to Frédéric Moreau. It is also true that to read the novel as a *Bildungsroman* does not exhaust its possibilities. A generalized representation of the conflict between passion and the individual's drive towards inner freedom lies at the heart of the book. Thus, like so many of Corneille's plays, it dramatizes a fear both men and women entertain, that emotional engagement will endanger all hope for self-definition and self-control (the dreaded 'perte de la maîtrise de soi'). If the problem of passion knows no sex, it is none the less a somewhat different problem for each. In the scene in which the Princesse tells Nemours why she will never marry him, she outlines two sets of reasons clustered around the terms 'devoir' and 'repos.' First her conscience is deeply troubled. With the delicacy of a Henry James heroine sensitive to the hidden implications of her behaviour, she discovers within herself the enduring burden of unpaid debts – Clèves's loyalty and esteem never rewarded with her love, his torment from jealousy, his death-bed wish that she not remarry, Nemours's link, as agent of her passion and disseminator of her confession, to her husband's death. All this makes a new marriage an offense against the old.

Quand ... elle se souvint aussi que ce même homme, qu'elle regardait comme pouvant l'épouser, était celui qu'elle avait aimé du vivant de son mari et qui était la cause de sa mort; que même, en mourant, il lui avait témoigné de la crainte qu'elle ne l'épousât, son austère vertu était si blessée de cette imagination qu'elle ne trouvait guère moins de crime à épouser M. de Nemours qu'elle en avait trouvé à l'aimer pendant la vie de son mari. [pp 380–1]

When she confides this to Nemours, convinced as she is that her marriage to him means moral complicity in her husband's death, she reveals her inner vision of herself, bound by honour and loyalty, like Corneille's Chimène, to the memory of a man whose death her lover caused.

"Il n'est que trop véritable que vous êtes cause de la mort de M. de Clèves; les soupçons que lui a donnés votre conduite inconsidérée lui ont coûté la vie, comme si vous la lui aviez ôtée de vos propres mains. Voyez ce que je devrais faire, si vous en étiez venus ensemble à ces extrémités, et que le même malheur en fût arrivé. Je sais bien que ce n'est pas la même chose à l'égard du monde; mais au mien il n'y a aucune différence, puisque je sais que c'est par vous qu'il est mort et que c'est à cause de moi." [p 385]

Nemours treats this as a fiction in her mind, a 'fantôme de devoir' just as the King in the dénouement of *Le Cid*, insisting that Chimène's duty now is obeisance to the throne, glosses over the girl's protest:

> Mais à quoi que déjà vous m'ayez condamnée,
> Pourrez-vous à vos yeux souffrir cet hyménée?
> Et quand de mon devoir vous voulez cet effort,
> Toute votre justice en est-elle d'accord?
> Si Rodrigue à l'État devient si nécessaire,
> De ce qu'il fait pour vous dois-je être le salaire,
> Et me livrer moi-même au reproche éternel
> D'avoir trempé mes mains dans le sang paternel? [v.7]

The tradition, to which the King appeals, and which Chimène criticizes, regards women as rightful rewards to the conqueror for his victories. In accordance with seventeenth-century taste, Corneille offsets the insensitivity of the King and Rodrigue's father by endowing Rodrigue with an emotional delicacy seldom found in accounts of the warriors of early feudal times. He is as reluctant to violate Chimène's honour as he is prepared to die in battle for the King. Constant, unfailingly respectful and tender, Rodrigue proves the perfect chivalric hero. Nemours, no warrior at all (the novel seldom shifts from interior scenes to show more than a bit of jousting), relies solely on his physical attractions, his eloquence, respect, and long patience, so different from his previous behaviour, to win the Princesse. She allows that 'devoir' is not her sole reason for refusing him. What stops her most is what she foresees in the future – 'des malheurs à m'attacher à vous' (p 386). To explain this, she forgoes traditional feminine modesty ('toute la retenue et toutes les délicatesses que je devrais avoir dans une première conversation,' p 386), which is to say she disobeys conventions dictating how women speak to men. She does so, not as some critics insist, single-mindedly, out of selfish motives, though she admits to the pleasure of making a clean breast of her feelings ('plus pour l'amour de moi que pour l'amour de vous,' p 385), but to prove that her rejection should in no way damage his pride

('Elle est si peu offensante pour vous,' reprit Mme de Clèves, 'que j'ai même beaucoup de peine à vous l'apprendre,' p 386). Her deepest reason for rejecting this marriage is 'la certitude de n'être plus aimée de vous comme je le suis' (p 387), and the jealousy she will surely experience in the future as she has in the past.

Reason tells her that unlike Chimène she may marry her lover without fear of criticism or offence to the *bienséances*: 'Les choses sont d'une sorte que le public n'aurait peut-être pas sujet de vous blâmer, ni moi non plus' (p 387). But she cannot protect herself from fears of abandonment, a fate so often befalling heroines of passion in literature – Dido, Medea, Hermione, Ariane, the Religieuse Portugaise – are among those most likely to suggest themselves to the mind of a seventeenth-century reader. 'Mais les hommes conservent-ils de la passion dans ces engagements éternels? Dois-je espérer un miracle en ma faveur?' (p 387) Perhaps even Clèves, model of fidelity, has drawn his unquenched ardour from her lack of response ('peut-être aussi que sa passion n'avait subsisté que parce qu'il n'en aurait pas trouvé en moi,' p 387). Those critics who score the Princesse for egocentricity in this scene have little sympathy with her 'feminine' fears about emotional security, her longing for permanence in love, and her scepticism that Nemours has changed.[16] For them she is narcissistic or wrong-headed in her concern with her own welfare: they make no distinction between *amour-propre* and *amour de soi*, selfishness and self-love. And they take particular exception to her lack of trust in Nemours. In *L'Amour et l'occident* Denis de Rougemont argues that Tristan, image of the constant lover and hero of passion, firmly married to Iseut, would change into a Don Juan, ready to pursue once more the dream of a unique woman capable of inspiring an enduring passion. In literary versions of the famous legend, Elvire, in despair and shame, takes refuge in a 'maison de retraite' after her ill-fated marriage; the Princesse de Clèves does so in anticipation of hers. Thus in refusing Nemours, she refuses the 'miracle' of optimistic love stories that promise women who risk themselves, a new man. What seems like selfishness from a man's point of view, seems like self-preservation to a woman.

"Rien ne me peut empêcher de connaître que vous êtes né avec toutes les dispositions pour la galanterie et toutes les qualités qui sont propres à y donner des succès heureux. Vous avez déjà eu plusieurs passions, vous en auriez encore; je ne ferais plus votre bonheur; je vous verrais pour une autre comme vous auriez été pour moi ... On fait des reproches à un amant; mais en fait-on à un mari, quand on n'a qu'à lui reprocher de n'avoir plus d'amour?" [pp 387–8]

In refusing Nemours she also refuses, given the allusions in the novel, the courtly myth of women's magical regenerative influence upon men – that like Guinevere, merely by her presence in his life (for they have never known intimacy), she has permanently transformed her lover. On the contrary. She insists that obstacles alone account for his change: 'Je

crois même que les obstacles ont fait votre constance' (p 387). In a chapter on women in *Les Caractères*, La Bruyère reflects a pessimism about the relations between the sexes common to many *moralistes* in Mme de Lafayette's generation: 'Les femmes s'attachent aux hommes par les faveurs qu'elles leur accordent; les hommes guérissent par ces mêmes faveurs' (III.16).

Mme de Lafayette is known as a *précieuse*, and while in the literature of *préciosité* courtly idealism figures prominently, many of the *précieuses* are feminists and protest, like Mlle de Scudéry, against the situation of women and the meaning of marriage in the seventeenth century. Interestingly, in Valincour's critique of the dénouement, his imaginary female interlocutor ties the Princesse's refusal of Nemours to Mlle de Scudéry and her fictional world:

"Voilà-t-il pas une belle raison pour ne pas épouser un homme? Et depuis la Sapho du *Grand Cyrus*, s'est-il rencontré une femme à qui cette vision soit tombée dans l'esprit? Madame de Clèves devait, à l'exemple de cette héroïne, proposer à Monsieur de Nemours de venir avec elle dans sa terre proche les Pyrénées, pour y passer le reste de ses jours, et tirer auparavant parole qu'il ne la presserait point de l'épouser." [pp 224–5]

Writers often mock the *précieuses*, not only for their mannerisms but for urging the sublimation of passion as an answer to the problems of their sex and as a means for enriching the spiritual and emotional quality of the relations between the sexes. Marriage for a *précieuse* seems a legal and physical enslavement, and passion a trap for women. Most often in the seventeenth century women marry to satisfy family rather than personal needs and interests. Once married, they enjoy few rights, and pregnancies, too numerous for the frail among them, frequently result in exhaustion or premature death. Marital incompatibility and faithlessness are rampant.[17] Mlle de Scudéry writes:

Je ne puis comprendre que vous fondiez votre bonheur sur l'amour, qui est généralement parlant la plus passagère de toutes les passions et qui passe mille fois plus tôt par le mariage que par toutes les autres choses qui ont accoutumé de la ralentir et de la faire cesser entièrement ... Quand je regarde toutes les suites presque infaillibles du mariage, elles me font trembler.[18]

Which is perhaps why, in their desire for greater freedom and self-esteem, and in the absence of other alternatives, so many *précieuses* prefer 'le repos.' Mme de Lafayette herself writes 'raisonnements contre l'amour,' according to a letter to her friend Huet on 15 May 1663,[19] and congratulates herself and her friends on escaping the malady. Gossips call her a prude and find no evidence to call her long relationship to La Rochefoucauld anything other than 'pure.' Somaize, in his *Dictionnaire des précieuses*, classes her among the 'inhumaines.' For years she leads an entirely independent existence in Paris far from her husband in the provinces.

In the novel, the Princesse de Clèves's mother makes defensive feminism a principal aim of her education. In contrast to other women at court, Mme de Chartres seeks her daughter's companionship and lavishes care upon her. She warns her that behind the pleasures to be found in illicit love lies degradation for women and that court gallants, beneath charming manners, cherish the desire to humiliate those who fall in love with them. Thus she encourages her to look behind 'les apparences trompeuses,' political and amorous. Courtly love imagery – 'maîtresses,' 'fers,' 'flammes,' cloaks here, as it often does in Racine's theatre, the will to power. And the political struggles that openly divide the court into cabals are ruled by events in hidden bedrooms.

But contradictions form the legacy of Mme de Chartres's role in her daughter's life. She tells her: 'Ce qui seul peut faire le bonheur d'une femme ... est d'aimer son mari et d'en être aimée' (p 248). Nevertheless she obeys convention and marries her to a man whom she values most for his alliance, which saves the family's reputation, and for whom her daughter feels no sexual attraction. Thus the Princesse faces the test of a marriage inspired by gratitude rather than desire. Interestingly, happy marriages, either arranged (*de convenance*) or chosen (*d'inclination*) are entirely absent in the novel. All the digressive episodes, as well, depict failure.[20]

These collateral stories, recounted to the Princesse, and forming part of her education, help make the dénouement inevitable. Viewed from her vantage point, they confirm her worst fears about love. They seem to say: satisfy a lover and you lose him; resist or deceive him and you enhance your worth in his eyes. All of them, apart from the account of the King's death, take up the theme of passion. Where women play the 'masculine' role, act the Don Juan, lie to their old lovers and take new ones, as Mme de Merteuil will do in the *Liaisons dangereuses*, they retain their powers of attraction. Despite the age of his mistress Diane de Poitiers, rumoured to have been his father's mistress as well, Henri II is slavishly faithful to her. Like Alceste at a crucial moment in the *Misanthrope*, he begs to be persuaded of the wildest of lies and, in fear of losing his mistress, ends by rewarding his rivals. Sancerre, the Prince de Clèves's friend, learns of Mme de Tournon's duplicity and faithlessness only after her death. Bereaved and angry, he struggles, though recognizing that he is well rid of her, against a passion he cannot kill. If women 'triumph' when they adopt the duplicitous role, they fail when they refuse it. Anne Boleyn puts her trust in Henry VIII and learns (to borrow a critic's charming understatement about this archetype of marital inconstancy) 'satisfied male passion can be unenduring.'[21] At a crucial moment in her development, the Princesse herself reads a letter, filled with the suffering of a recent abandonment, from Mme de Thémines. The Vidame de Chartres, who deserts her, feels renewed interest once she turns away from him.

Catherine de Médicis, with little faith in men, takes elaborate precautions to ensure the same Chartres's fidelity. Her precautions prove entirely fruitless. A tangential theme orchestrated in these episodes is that of the destruction of women. So many of them, grand princesses, ladies of the court, are dishonoured, exiled, or die an untimely death: Diane de Poitiers, Marie Stuart (the Dauphine), Anne Boleyn, Mme de Tournon, Elisabeth de France.

The Princesse, too, after refusing Nemours, dies prematurely. But, despite the allegations of some of her critics, she fails to die of emotional paralysis.[22] On the contrary, in the scene in which she confronts Nemours for the last time she is self-possessed, active, more in control of her situation than at any other time in the novel. Valincour, the seventeenth-century critic, seizes upon this as quite unsuitable in the fair sex:

> C'est elle qui lui parle de sa passion, qui lui découvre tous les sentiments de son cœur, et qui le fait avec un ordre et une tranquillité qui ne se ressent guère du trouble qu'un pareil aveu donne toujours aux femmes un peu retenues. L'on dirait qu'elle n'est venue là que pour parler, et Monsieur de Nemours pour écouter, au lieu que ce devrait être tout le contraire. [p 222]

The Princesse proves a master analyst at this moment, but much of her reasoning is directed at her own conflicts rather than at Nemours. Georges Poulet has demonstrated how difficult is her undertaking: she resists a passion she experiences as ungovernable by devising barriers that will divorce her from spontaneous feelings. Hence her insistence upon her 'duty' towards her husband is, according to Poulet, a deliberate effort to use his memory against Nemours's fascination. And she expands past moments of jealousy, when she thought Nemours in love with someone else, into a future of uncertainty. Following her last scene with him, she withdraws to the country and practises what she has already begun under her mother's tutelage – a neo-stoic *thérapeutique antipassionnelle*, based on self-analysis and 'défiance de soi,' mistrust of the spontaneous urgings of consciousness, withdrawal from temptation and metaphysical meditation ('Les passions et les engagements du monde lui parurent tels qu'ils paraissent aux personnes qui ont des vues plus grandes et plus éloignées,' p 393). Her refusal of Nemours, arduous, never complete, requires unremitting effort, even in his absence. More a goal than an accomplishment, it is meant to render possible control over her behaviour if not over her feelings. Failing this, for her heart is devious in pressing its claims, she can at least, classical heroine in the French sense, keep her vision clear: 'Les passions peuvent me conduire; mais elles ne sauraient m'aveugler' (p 387). To say this at the conclusion of an *éducation sentimentale* is to say in answer to the myth of irresistible passion that maturity brings some measure of freedom. While passion is

represented here as fate, and the self as feeble against it, the Princesse, willing to know herself, has the freedom to say no. 'Il faut se connaître soi-même: quand cela ne servirait pas à trouver le vrai, cela au moins sert à régler sa vie, et il n'y a rien de plus juste.'[23]

Mme de Lafayette in her final characterization presents her heroine as exemplary: 'Et sa vie, qui fut assez courte, laissa des exemples de vertu inimitable' (p 395). Stendhal, convinced that the Princesse should have given herself to Nemours, nonetheless shows admiration for her courage in a situation requiring that to retain her self-respect and affirm her will for self-preservation, she must stifle her passion and deny herself and Nemours.

> Quant au courage moral, si supérieur à l'autre, la fermeté d'une femme qui résiste à son amour est seulement la chose la plus admirable qui puisse exister sur la terre. Toutes les autres marques possibles de courage sont des bagatelles auprès d'une chose si fort contre nature et si pénible. ... Un malheur des femmes, c'est que les preuves de ce courage restent toujours secrètes, et soient presque indivulgables. Un malheur plus grand, c'est qu'il soit toujours employé contre leur bonheur: la princesse de Clèves devait ne rien dire à son mari, et se donner à M. de Nemours.[24]

Before her death, Mme de Chartres, on the contrary, enjoins her daughter to refuse. She prefers dying, she says, to watching her 'fall' like other women.

Among the Princesse's literary descendants, all of them figuring in novels by masculine authors – Pamela and Clarissa Harlowe of Richardson, Julie of Rousseau, Mme de Tourvel of Laclos – none is as unambiguous and convincing in her resistance to love. Mme de Lafayette's distrust of passion, frequently explained as derivative from La Rochefoucauld and Pascal, has its own motives. It implies not only feminism, but a criticism of the social order in which the relations between the sexes, hampered by extreme formality and vitiated by pretense and games of sexual conquest, inspire so much mistrust and bring so little fulfilment. Whatever the cost, the Princesse de Clèves refuses the disingenuousness and desolation outlined for her in the novel's digressive episodes. Instead she chooses to embody, through her life and death, values of her own making.

NOTES

1 *Problèmes du roman*, num. spec. *Confluences*, ed. Jean Prévost (Lyon 1943) 218–23; this quote is from p 218.

2 See J.W. Scott, 'The Digressions of the *Princesse de Clèves*,' *French Studies* XI (1957) 315–22 for the most authoritative discussion of the subject.

3 Ed. Albert Cazes (Paris 1925) 222. All quotations of Valincour are from this edition.

4 Gustave Lanson, *Histoire de la littérature française*, 7th ed. rev. (Paris 1902) 483–5; Marie-Aline Raynal, *Le Talent de Madame de Lafayette* (Paris 1926); Charles Dédéyan, *Madame de Lafayette*, 2nd ed. rev. (Paris 1965); Helen Karen Kaps, *Moral Perspective in La Princesse de Clèves* (Eugene, Ore. 1968)

5 Claude Vigée, *'La Princesse de Clèves* et la tradition du refus,' *Critique* XVI (1960) 723–54; Simone Fraisse, 'Le "Repos" de Madame de Clèves,' *Esprit* XXIX (1961) 560–7; Serge Doubrovsky, *'La Princesse de Clèves*: Une intérprétation existentielle,' *La Table Ronde* 138 (juin 1959) 36–51; Martin Turnell, *The Novel in France* (New York 1951)

6 Here I am thinking particularly of: Georges Poulet, *Études sur le temps humain* (Paris 1950); Jean Fabre, 'Bienséance et sentiment chez Madame de Lafayette,' *Cahiers de l'Association Internationale des Etudes Françaises* 11 (mai 1959) 33–66; Jules Brody, *'La Princesse de Clèves* and the Myth of Courtly Love,' *University of Toronto Quarterly* XXXVIII (January 1969) 105–35; and Peter H. Nurse, *Classical Voices* (London 1971).

7 *Op. cit.* 221–2. Harry Ashton, *Madame de Lafayette, sa vie et ses œuvres* (Cambridge, Eng. 1922), noted the popularity of the novel during the period of the Romantics: 'Il est intéressant de remarquer, d'après le nombre d'éditions publiées, que c'est vers 1830, en plein mouvement romantique, que la *Princesse de Clèves* fut le plus appréciée' (p 178).

8 *The History of Sir Charles Grandison*, ed. Leslie Stephen (London 1883) IV 392

9 Anti-feminist reactions to this novel are not uncommon though sometimes uncommonly subtle. For open anti-feminism see Théodore Joran, 'La Princesse de Clèves ou une pseudo-héroïne de la piété conjugale,' *Revue bleue* (1925) 510–15. He is convinced the work is no masterpiece: 'C'est en somme l'œuvre d'une femme mal mariée, d'une Bovary aristocratique, et qui déverse dans cet écrit toute sa rancune contre le mariage. ... Son petit roman a bénéficié de ce manque de mesure que nous mettons dans nos jugements sur les femmes ou sur les œuvres féminines. Notre galanterie a tout fait' (p 510).

10 Marie-Madeleine Pioche de la Vergne, Comtesse de Lafayette, *Romans et nouvelles*, ed. Émile Magne (Paris 1961) 330. All quotations from *La Princesse de Clèves* are from this edition.

11 'Sur *La Princesse de Clèves*,' *Nouvelle Revue Française* 2 (déc. 1941) 717. This seems also to be the opinion of Bernard Pingaud, *Mme de Lafayette par elle-même* (Paris 1959) 104: 'Il se pourrait que, portée à son point le plus haut, elle [la passion] s'affirmât dans le refus de la passion.'

12 See Brody, *op. cit.* and Marie-Thérèse Hipp, 'Le Mythe de Tristan et Iseut et *La Princesse de Clèves*,' *Revue d'Histoire Littéraire de la France* (juillet-sept. 1965) 398–414.

13 For Mme de Lafayette's use of historical sources see (all in the *Revue du XVIe siècle*): H. Chamard and G. Rudler, 'Les Sources historiques dans *La Princesse de Clèves*' II (1914) 92–131, 289–321; 'La Couleur historique dans *La Princesse de Clèves*' V (1917–18) 1–20; and 'L'Histoire et la fiction dans *La Princesse de Clèves*' V (1917–18) 231–43.

14 Quoted by Maurice Laugaa in *Lectures de Mme de Lafayette* (Paris 1971) 113–14

15 Gérard Genette in *Figures II* (Paris 1969) 71–100, sees the famous confession scene, with Nemours present as an observer, as primarily of interest for its role in preparing the dénouement.

16 When I say 'feminine' fears I make no claim as to whether these fears are culturally or biologically derived.
17 For a discussion of feminism in the seventeenth century and its reflection in literature see: Francis Baumal, *Le Féminisme au temps de Molière* (Paris 1924).
18 Quoted by René Jasinski in *Deux accès à La Bruyère* (Paris 1971) 177
19 Marie-Madeleine Pioche de la Vergne, Comtesse de Lafayette, *Correspondance*, ed. André Beaunier (Paris 1942) I, 193
20 See Pierre Leblanc, 'Le Bonheur conjugal d'après *La Princesse de Clèves*' in *Mélanges d'histoire offerts à Raymond Lebègue* (Paris 1969) 293–303.
21 Scott, *op. cit.* 318
22 Vigée, *op. cit.*: 'Ces forces en conflit provoquent une sorte de paralysie de l'être entier, une fuite hors du réel, dans le domaine de la retraite et du repos' (p 725). Doubrovsky, *op. cit.*: 'En face d'une double impossibilité métaphysique – l'amour ne pouvant être satisfait, en raison des relations qui existent nécessairement entre deux libertés, ni refoulé, du fait qu'il représente une irrésistible expression de nous-mêmes – il ne reste plus de solution, ou plutôt il n'en reste qu'une: le suicide' (p 48).
23 Blaise Pascal, *Pensées*, Br. 66, Lafuma 72