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Non-Thematic Article

Reflexions on Genre and Gender: The Case Of La Princesse de Clèves[1]

ANNE FREADMAN

In returning to *La Princesse de Clèves*, I am in a sense returning to the site of my initiation into the high canon of French literature. This represents a seduction for me, and a challenge. Since my early training, I have strayed markedly from the path traced out for me by that tradition which taught me, *inter alia*, that Madame de Lafayette may not have been the author of this wonderful novel, and certainly not without help. Feminism has been important in goading me into asking questions that did not, or could not arise under the older dispensation; but it has also been important for me to return with those questions to the canon and to the traditions of literary scholarship with which, for a time, I could do no business. I shall not tell the details of my detours, but the most recent one is pertinent. I have been working on the theory of genre. This tradition of theory is one of the great gifts of literary scholarship to the humane sciences in general, but there are some regions of the sciences of language that took it so for granted that they disdained its powers. It is those powers that I am concerned with restating. I take genre as a strong hypothesis about the nature of discourse, and hence of textuality, and I use it as a strong hermeneutic device. My interest in this paper is to test its subtlety for the purposes of feminist criticism.

I shall have three things to say about genre: a genre is first of all a category name, and it is also the way this name is used pragmatically; a genre is, second, a discursive practice, to do with who says what to whom, under what circumstances, and eliciting what kinds of uptake; third, a genre is an arrangement of topoï. Informing each of these topics is an overarching assumption: no genre is practised in isolation. I shall assume, and seek to demonstrate, a relational concept of genre.

I shall also have approximately three things to say about *La Princesse de Clèves*: (i) I shall argue that it deploys a set of generic names in order to claim for itself a generic place among other genres; (ii) I shall argue that it represents *en abyme* models of its own discursive practices, and hence, of the problem of uptake, or reading, that the reader has to solve; and (iii) I shall argue that the text raises explicitly a problem of representation, and that it states this problem, and sets about solving it, in terms of a contrastive set of generic possibilities. These are the same topics as those that I raise about genre. In other words, I shall use the specificities of the text itself to do the work of theory.

Inevitably, what I have to say about gender will be articulated by these three *topoï*.[2] In

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some senses my approach to this question may seem a little old-fashioned. I shall not be using psycho-analytic models of the gendered subject, and I shall not be deploying any fashionable slogans about the construction of identity and its deconstruction. My work harks back to an older question which I believe we failed to investigate thoroughly, when it was current in the 1970s. This is the question of the 'representation of women'. I do not, by this, mean to go over the familiar ground of debates about referentiality; further, insofar as it appears at all, the question of the 'real' vs. the 'imaginary' object will be construed in my work through the issue of generic difference. As a semiotician I take the problem of representation very seriously indeed. I am inspired in this by Charles Peirce. When he defines 'representation' for the Century Dictionary,[3] he most provocatively refuses to do what most dictionary entries for this item do, namely, to distinguish two senses of the term. Instead, he runs together 'to represent' as does a word, or the flag of a country, or a weathercock, with 'to represent' as does a vicar, a diplomat, an attorney, or a parliamentary representative. The implication of this is that he includes systematically in 'representation' the matter of its rhetoric. Representation, for Peirce, includes three things: (i) to represent is to name, to classify, to include in a category; (ii) to represent is to speak on behalf of; and (iii) to represent is to provide a sign of, that is, to interpret some object. As I believe that we cannot usefully discuss the topic of genre without raising the issue of representation, so I believe that we don't get very far in our discussions of representation without inflecting it for genre. I shall be asking the question: what do we know, further, about particular genres, by asking the gender question of them, and what do we know, further, about gender, by investigating the generic practices of its representation?

Let me start with the question of the generic name and its definition, which is often used to marginalize genre from literary scholarship, but which I shall use, perversely, to focus attention on it. A mere name, they say, a label: the assumption seems to be that the reality of the writing escapes from the meanings of the name; hence, we might suppose, the preference shown in the past thirty years or so for terms such as 'text' or 'writing', 'fiction' or 'narrative', over terms such as 'novel', 'tale', 'fable', 'novella', and so on. I shall call this the 'nominalist' position on genre, because, simplified as it clearly is, it nevertheless represents that nub of a nominalist philosophy, which is that what we *call* things has nothing to do with their reality as phenomena or real facts, or with their mode of acting in the world. The significance of calling some text a novel, or, in the case of *La Princesse de Clèves*, 'une histoire'—a history—is summed up in the nomination relation: the name is true or false, it may have connotations or ambiguities. It follows that the text is a pure, or alternatively a mixed, example of its genre, but that is all that can be said. Nevertheless, naming is also a practice, and the aptness of a name is a matter of negotiation.

We know that *La Princesse de Clèves* was written in the period following the final demise of medieval realism, and the triumphant ascendancy of nominalism. This was the period of Copernicus and Kepler, of Galileo and Descartes, not to mention the voyages of discovery that had redrawn the map of the world. Experimental science was made possible by many factors, in particular by the technical inventions of optics, but it was theorised in what was to become modern epistemology on the basis of a nominalist postulate. The reality of things was separate from the way in which human languages named them; names and the classes of things they produced were at worst misleading, and at best an impediment to true knowledge. Now it is useful, I believe, to recall the almost universal acceptance of nominalism at this time, in order to read the problem of the name in *La Princesse de Clèves,* for it is exactly this separation of reality from the names

we give it that is invoked in the editor's preface to the book. We are called upon, as readers, to judge its author by her work and not by her name.

The Publisher to the Reader

> No matter how well this History has been received in its public readings, the author cannot bring himself to declare his identity; he fears that his name might diminish the success of his book. He knows through experience that sometimes works are condemned on the basis of the poor reputation of their authors and he also knows that their value is sometimes enhanced by a great one. So he will remain in his present obscurity in order to free his readers to judge his work fairly, but he will reveal his identity if this History is as pleasing to his audience as I hope it will be.[4]

Naming, and the question of the name, pervade this book: reputations are made and lost on the basis of attaching names to actions, and Madame de Clèves goes to great lengths to maintain her name, firstly by ensuring that her name not be attached to the stories that start to circulate about her, and secondly, by attempting to hide the name of the duc de Nemours from her husband. But if a nominalist science can hold that the names of natural things have little to do with their reality, the relation of name with action and person in society has a different force. Indeed, the name is understood to have considerable power, and the attempt to keep actions unsigned and persons in stories unnamed is regularly, in this book, an attempt to control truth and its circulation.[5] You will notice that I shall have more to say about names and reputations as I proceed with my reading of *La Princesse de Clèves*. Names are the devices whereby a society maps the networks of relationships which define a person's place, and it is this place that is at stake in a reputation. I shall argue, on analogy, that genres are social and cultural things, they are not natural things, and that the nominalist taboo is for this reason inappropriate when we discuss them. What is the power of the name, in the case of genre?

The answer I offer is that generic labels are interpretive devices that determine the uptake of a story. The three terms, *histoire, conte,* and *fable* are used in *La Princesse de Clèves*, but only the first is used for stories that have a historical base: the 'history' of the court of England, the 'history' of the princesse de Clèves, the 'history' of Madame de Tournon. The word is used both for History, and for *la petite histoire,* i.e. gossip; in general, it refers to true stories concerning real persons. A clear representation of what is meant by 'histoire' in the text is provided by the painting of the siege of Metz that Madame de Clèves borrows for her house in the country. This is a *tableau*, but she uses it as a *portrait* of the duke, because he had a part to play in the siege, and because he is clearly represented in the painting. It is a portrait, when viewed as the depiction of an individual, and it is a tableau when this individual is located in his historical context. I am taking the word 'tableau' to mean the visual equivalent of 'History', and the word 'portrait' to mean the visual equivalent of a true story whose title is the name of a person. Portraits, in this sense, can be understood as visual reputations, and a book whose title is the name of a person—for example, *La Princesse de Clèves*—is a verbal portrait. To use the term 'history' for the story of this portrait is to create the assumption of its truth value, and to be able to contest this where necessary.[6] Thus, when Madame de Clèves hears the story of a wife who has confessed to her husband her love for another man, the danger for her is that it has been presented as 'une histoire'; she is able to diminish the danger of the generic label only by arguing that *cette histoire n'est pas vraisemblable* (this

is a most unlikely history), but she does not compromise her own values, her 'sincerity'—that is, her love of truth—by contesting the generic label itself.

If the nomination relation is seriously intricated in interpretation, then it also raises issues of the politics of discourse, impelling us to investigate the powers of classification, its capacity to act in the world. In *La Princesse de Clèves*, the generic classification of the story as a 'history' operates the politics of reputation. As several of the embedded narratives show, what is at stake is the power of women in the society of the court, or alternatively, their marginalisation from it. When Madame de Clèves retires from this society in order to live in seclusion in the country, the logic of the novel requires us to understand this act as a decision to withdraw from this politics of reputation, that is, to be a person, and a life, without a name. This logic matches the logic of the prefatory note. Yet the novel bears her name, and it is the story of her reputation, asserted against the other reputations that circulate in the standard gossip narratives of the court. Taken seriously as a history, it makes the claim that there exist stories that are different from the standard gossip, that these stories have other kinds of endings and concern other kinds of women. This claim provides the sustaining energy of a great deal of feminist polemic both before, and since the time of the publication of this novel.

You may object, and I would be forced to concede the point, that the politics of reputation operate on rather more intricate mechanisms than the nomination relation. Certainly it is the case that to claim of a piece of gossip that it is a true story, a history, not a fable or a joke, is to give it a force that it would not otherwise have. But that is not what constitutes it as gossip. Genres are not merely their own names; they are also the discursive practices that are so named. To describe a genre from this point of view involves describing the subject positions of the participants and articulating them with the pragmatic effects of the discourse. On this view, a genre is something like a speech act. We can approach this by considering the notion of 'conversation', which first appears in the novel to describe the early reputation of the young woman who will become la princesse de Clèves. When she is received in the circle of the queen, she is a sensation, and the book declares that 'This new beauty was long the subject of every conversation' (p. 12). When she retires into exemplary widowhood, it is exactly this that she puts an end to. She has to withdraw to a kind of trappist condition, avoiding all kinds of conversation so as to avoid being the subject of other conversations. Only then can she stop being a story that other people tell.

In these contexts, 'conversation' refers to what we call gossip, which is the principal mechanism of the circulation of stories in this novel.[7] In gossip, the crucial fact is that the 'subject of the conversation' is positioned outside the discursive act itself. It is the 'third person', represented by what is said, but without any power over the representations. This is most radically exemplified in the story of Madame de Tournon: what we know of her is the story that circulates about her following her death. Inserted into her absence, this representation displaces her, her person, her power to control what is known about her and what is hidden; its rhetoric is such as to suspend the possibility of grieving for her, replacing the ritual discourse of praise with that of blame. But not all stories require the death of their subjects; in the novel, these third person reports take the form of a convention, which we might call the 'somebody told me' convention: 'a friend of mine told me that his cousin is in love with a woman who ...', and so on. The formal condition is quite simply the pronominal structure of any language that ensures the discursive disempowerment of the third person. This is the structural condition for the fact that the third person does not and cannot own their own story.

In and of itself, the pronominal structure is static, and does not explain the second

crucial fact about gossip: the stories circulate. The receiver or audience becomes the purveyor of the story, never claiming to be its source but merely its relay. 'You' becomes 'I'. Several times in *La Princesse de Clèves*, characters are entrusted with stories and enjoined to keep them secret. Were they to deserve this trust, they would remain in the 'you' position without converting its discursive powers, but they never do. Monsieur de Clèves discovers the story of Madame de Tournon by discovering that his friend Sancerre has been in love with her, but he discovers this by learning not only that Madame de Tournon knows a story he told Sancerre as a secret, but also that she has already relayed it further (pp. 37ff.). The violation of secrecy may be against the moral rules, but it is an unavoidable consequence of the fact that 'you' is necessarily a relay position. Indeed, to suppose that the structural axis relating addressor to addressee is a description of the discursive mechanism of story-telling is to suppose that mechanism to be governed by the moral rule of the confessional. This is clearly not the case. Somebody who is not the addressee always gets to hear the story. A more marked form of the same mechanism is at work when that most secret of conversations, in which Madame de Clèves confesses her love for another man to her husband, becomes known at court and openly discussed. How? Because secret conversations are intercepted or overheard, in which case the conversation itself becomes the story that is retailed in further conversations.

So thoroughly pervasive is this mechanism of interception that it controls the whole of Madame de Clèves' destiny as a 'subject of conversation': 'la princesse de Clèves' as person becomes 'la princesse de Clèves' as story. In the last crucial episode, she is alone, in silent meditation on the portrait of the duke. She does not speak, but her gestures are eloquent. In a scene of blatant voyeurism, the duke is watching her through the window, after which he goes off to boast about his conquest to his friend the vidame de Chartres. The story is predictably retold. Worse than this, however, is the fact that his presence at the window has been noted by the jealous husband's trusted gentleman, who has been spying on him. He cannot see everything, and the husband is left to fill in the details. This, too, is a significant aspect of gossip. Like the letter that is also intercepted and then rewritten from memory, no story can either return to its source or remain intact: even when Madame de Clèves attempts to amend the story in her last conversation with her husband, the damage is done by the circulation of the story, not by any particular detail of it, whether true or false.

A technical way of describing the mechanism of conversation is to say that discourse requires something like a fourth person[8] that exceeds the structure of the three positions supplied by the grammar of a language. But precisely this description shows that 'conversation' is not a genre, not a single genre but the general mechanism of discourse. Furthermore, the word 'conversation' in the novel is used for all manner of verbal interchange: it is used for gossip, certainly, but it is also used to describe the salon discussion of the merits of astrology, the confession, the intimate avowal of love, the deathbed injunctions of the mother, and the representations made by the vidame de Chartres on behalf of the duke, at the very end of the novel. 'Conversation' is not a kind, but the mechanism that allows any particular kind to become the object of another, to be cited by it and thereby to become the stuff of narrative.

In its etymological semantics, the word 'conversation' connotes the conversion of 'speaking positions' and hence requires us to make explicit a requirement on a rhetorical theory of genre. It must, I think, assume and take full account of the mobility of discourse, the way generic forms themselves convert and reappropriate one another. Any theory of genre that relies on speech-act analysis is severely limited by the assumption of

a static structure. However, speech-act analysis is valuable for focussing on the question of uptake: for example, if some act of discourse is an invitation, we know to accept it or to refuse it, and doing so we commit ourselves to a series of predictable behaviours following. The question of uptake is therefore intricated in the interpretation, or the classification, of the text as one or another genre; it thus converges with the questions that emerged from taking seriously the proposition that genres are names.

Describing genres as if they were the same sort of thing as speech-acts leaves most literary scholars pretty unsatisfied because it omits most of the interesting interpretive questions which give us something to do with our time. But the very best generic studies articulate these questions with questions concerning the conventions governing subject matter and the standard ways of dealing with that subject matter. One way of describing the project to do just that is that we need to rearticulate the insights of rhetoric with those of poetics. We have a sense that the representation of women, for example, is a very different thing, in medical text-books, in advertising, and in government policy on equity in employment. If the articulation of genre with gender is to do a job, then it is this kind of difference that it must describe and account for. Presupposed throughout the ancient canon on these matters is the idea that a genre is a rule of representation. A genre, we might say, is an arrangement of *topoi*.

But this is not good enough. If the concept of genre is fundamentally a rhetorical concept, as I firmly believe it is, then it is important not to allow the assumption of conventional forms to override the expectation that the conventions available will be at all times strategically, or tactically, manipulated. As we know, genre is nothing if not a tradition, and a tradition dies if it is not in a continual, dynamic process of transformation. No text—even the humblest—merely conforms to the models of its precedents: it uses them as suggestions. A genre is a practice, not a recipe, and there may be no two instances of this practice that are alike in all respects; yet they may recognisably take their place within a tradition that is the product of a series, not its determining rule. If I said earlier that a genre is a rule of representation, I should like this word 'rule' to be understood as Charles Peirce would understand it, as a habit, a regularity whose reality is established by its occurrence over past events. In the words of the rhetoric teachers, genres are the outcome both of imitation and of adaptation, the repetition which, of necessity, is governed by difference.

If generic practices are rhetorical—that is, strategic and tactical—then it may be useful to think of them as achieving effects or accomplishing tasks that are not automatic. I want to suggest that a genre is generated by a problem of representation, and that insofar as it becomes a genre, it represents a set of habits, or a tradition, of solutions to that problem. Once these solutions are standardised, the problem may no longer be visible, but it can be retrieved, as the grain of sand, the nub of irritation, can be retrieved in the structure of the pearl. This is the proposition that I wish to explore in this essay, and it is to retrieve a problem of representation that I shall undertake my reading of *La Princesse de Clèves*.

To do so, I must refer to the recent criticism of the novel, and in particular, to two key feminist readings published by North American scholars. The first of these is by Nancy Miller, first published in 1981, then reprinted in her book, *Subject to Change*, in 1988, and the second is by Joan De Jean, and dates from 1984.[9] Although not named explicitly, Miller's analysis suffers from the defect that is the butt of De Jean's theoretical critique:

> It may be impossible [she writes] to delimit the female literary estate more

> concretely ... as long as theory attempts to account for the entire history of women's writing, as though occurrences at different periods could always be understood in the same way ... (p. 884)

Taking up this challenge, De Jean works to demonstrate the congruence of some very precise historical scholarship with the insights of textual criticism: she studies the enigma of La Fayette's refusal to sign the novel or to acknowledge it, in terms of documented practices of authorial signature and of criticism in seventeenth century France, and then goes on to interpret these practices in the light of some episodes in the novel which represent the issue of anonymity through the technique of *mise en abyme*. Her claim is that the erasure of the proper name has two major consequences for the female protagonist: (i) it gives her control over the uptake of the story through the creation of enigma; and (ii) it prevents the circulation of her story as gossip, and hence, prevents its appropriation by men as a *standard story* of woman's infidelity.

Now from the position I am taking, the question of 'standard stories' is the locus of the question of genre: standard stories are plots that are predictable, and predictable plots are those that illustrate and confirm habits of representation. So it is a mildly curious fact for me, that De Jean, who is such a fine historian, does not pursue her own suggestion down this track. I shall do so in her place. Genres have a diachronic reality, they are historical phenomena, and it is at the site of genre that history and textual convention come together. My reading will therefore be a modification of De Jean's, in which I add to her findings the question of 'genre', to see what difference it makes.

By contrast, I shall contest Miller's reading, and not only on the issue of history. Her reading of *La Princesse de Clèves* is based on Gérard Genette's account of plausibility ('le vraisemblable'), and it is Genette's account of this problem that I believe to be seriously flawed.

The central scene of the novel, in which the princess takes her husband into her confidence about her passion for another man, has always been a problem. From its very first reception, this scene has been judged 'invraisemblable' (implausible), and it is on this basis that the whole book has been the object of debate. The episode is introduced in the following manner:

> 'Then, sir', she answered, falling at his feet, 'I am going to make a confession such as was never made to a husband;' (p. 86)

That is, in reality, the action has no precedent, and therefore is difficult to assess as truth. The text registers this implication explicitly:

> When he had gone, and Madame de Clèves was alone and considered what she had just done, she was so terrified that she could scarcely believe it was true. (p. 89)

When the story of the unlikely avowal comes back in the form of gossip, it is Madame de Clèves herself who defines the literary problem of the novel:

> 'This does not seem to me a very probable story, Madame, and I should like to know who told it to you'. (p. 96)

The action is unprecedented, the story that is told about it is therefore unlikely; furthermore, this very implausibility raises the question of the author's credentials. De Jean's argument, that this episode works as a *mise en abyme* for the whole problem of the reception of the novel, is unassailable, but where she concentrates on the relation between story and author, Miller concentrates on the relation between truth and plausibility; this, of course, is the standard Aristotelian problem of literary mimesis.

The theoretical framework Miller uses from Genette makes two assumptions: one is that plausibility rests on a normative ideology, that can be analysed as a set of maxims and sayings, and the other is that this set is transcendent to genre. Ideology is both, therefore, discursive and non-discursive, in that the public opinion which it generates is not confined to particular discursive instances, forms, or practices; it is simply a 'view of the world' and a diffuse 'system of values'.

One of the standard examples used by Genette as he expounds the terms of his argument is precisely the confession scene from *La Princesse de Clèves*, and Miller takes up his suggestion, accepting his account of plausibility and seeking to recover the specific maxim that controls the princess's behaviour. Rather than accepting the judgment that the confession is implausible, she argues that it is normal—indeed predictable—in terms of the implicit code of conduct that has been set up by the princess's mother and her husband. The claim is that the mother and the husband provide a norm that does not coincide with the norms of court behaviour, and that the daughter/wife makes this norm the standard of her behaviour. She calls this alternative norm an 'idiolect'.

This is a perfectly persuasive reading in terms of the novel, and I do not contest it. Rather, I contest its theorisation. In the first place, Miller reconstrues the notion of markedness in terms of the postulate of the 'idiolect'. I recall that some prominent literary theory that came out of structuralism made exactly this move: if the linguistic system 'speaks me', it was argued, we must construct a place for personal creativity on the model of the oppositional pair between the social system and the individual. Miller appears to be claiming that Madame de Chartres is an 'individual' in this sense, pitted against the social system of the court in a play of oppositional politics; likewise, presumably, Madame de La Fayette contests the reigning ideology. This argument can only be made in the absence of historical information; the individual and society are the only terms we have left, when we take no heed of differential practices with their contextual and diachronic dynamic. I am not convinced, as I might have been in the 1970s, that we can construct a useful politics on the basis of an opposition between generalised conformity and alternativity, and when I invoke genre, it is geared precisely to displace the assumptions of this rather outworn couple. In the second place, I contest Genette's theory of plausibility: I give far too much weight to the concept of genre to accept that 'ideology' might be a product of a concept of discourse that operates without it. So I want to propose my own maxim for the conduct of my argument: plausibility, I shall say, is genre-specific.

If plausibility is not diffuse and generalisable, and is specific to genres, then to say that the plot of *la Princesse de Clèves* is implausible is to say that it does not fulfil the expectations that its genre sets up. What were those expectations? To answer this question, I shall have to reconstruct the generic framework within which the novel emerges. I shall also ask what alternative generic options were available, and how it used, contested, or transformed them. As I make this move, I am assuming some of my previous theoretical work on genre. Let me sum up the relevant assumptions in a negative, then in a positive form:

(i) A genre cannot be theorised as a set of rules inherent to itself.
(ii) A genre arises in a field of differential practices; its characteristics are contrastive with an open set of adjacent others.

From these assumptions there follows a methodological maxim:

> To read for genre is to read intergenerically.

The court, I have said, is a hot-bed of gossip. When Madame de Chartres brings her daughter to it to marry her, the daughter is defined as utterly innocent; she must be taught who people are, what alliances and what enmities determine their relationships, what histories have to be known in order to understand the politics of this strange society. This education continues the education that this unusual mother had initiated during her absence from court.

It is this education that Nancy Miller defines as marked, and she is no doubt right. What Miller does not point out is that this education is based on story-telling. These histories of love, of its pleasures and its pains, of the reputations that are ruined by it, these secret stories and hidden identities, are the stuff of the novel, told in counterpoint to the story of the young woman who is passionately attracted to a man who is not her husband, and who by dint of extraordinary measures, succeeds in resisting this attraction. I am inclined to read these stories as *mises en abyme* of the narration of the novel as a whole, taking the role of Madame de Chartres as figuring that of the narrator, but the question, as I argued earlier, is a question of uptake. Does the audience of a story of gallantry simply learn the gallantry, or is it taken as a cautionary tale? Let us consider the third story that Madame de Clèves learns: it concerns le vidame de Chartres, her uncle, who is morally ambiguous, structurally occupying the place of the absent father or indeed the mother, but in his character the very type of man whom she has been taught to distrust. At the end, indeed, he behaves as a parent in his attempt to mediate a marriage between his niece and the duke, and at the same time works against all the teaching of her mother by so doing. His own story is a story of infidelity and deceit, and the young princess connives with her husband and with the duke to protect him from discovery. In this episode, the possibility of two morally contrastive readings of the story is quite clear: on the one hand, by colluding in the deception, the young woman is learning to play the very games her mother had warned her against; on the other, the content of the story can be used as one of those very warnings, and we learn at the end of the book that the princess has retained intact her mother's view, that men cannot be trusted. This story, involving her own uncle, is the exemplum of that teaching.

We should note that in this episode, known as the episode of the letter, it would be in her husband's interests for her to use the story as yet another instance of the moral teachings of her mother, whereas it would be in the duke's interests, for her simply to learn gallantry from her collusion with the deceit it requires. These two uptakes correspond to two genres: the one the duke would have her learn is the *roman galant* (story of coquetry), while the story which the mother would have told would use the same material to tell a cautionary tale. The genre of the tale—cautionary or not—is alluded to when the dauphine tells the young Madame de Clèves the story of Anne Boleyn (Anne de Boulen), of whom she says that she acted for a while as lady in waiting to 'Mme Marguerite, soeur du roi, duchesse d'Alençon, dont vous avez vu les contes' (p. 199) (Madame Marguerite, the duchess of Alençon, whose tales are familiar to you).[10] The tales of Marguerite de Navarre are thereby given as a generic precedent with, moreover, an established place in courtly society. In some respects, this is the narrative tradition to which the novel affiliates itself. It may be marked in respect of courtly behaviour, but it is not 'idiolectal'.

The stories that the mother tells, and that continue to entertain us throughout the novel, are stories of temptation and danger. In what, exactly, does the danger consist? The novel has already told us that the danger is simply in being the subject of a story like that. Stories like that are all variations on medieval misogynistic stories, which have as their generic upshot the general proposition that there is no such thing as a faithful

wife. Fidelity and femininity are an impossible combination, but the princesse de Clèves sets out to become the exception to this rule, and thus to prove it wrong. This is the very *topos* of genre, of its theory and of its practice: it raises insistently the problem of particularity. Her mother's teachings take the form of saying, do not imitate these stories, do not take these women's behaviour as an example. We have already seen that when the question of implausible behaviour arises in the novel, it means precisely that there is no precedent for a certain action. The young Mademoiselle de Chartres is defined as being unique right from the start, when the prince de Clèves describes her to the circle of the queen. There is nobody like that, he is told. Later, when the dauphine rebukes her for involving her husband in the episode of the letter, she is told that she is the only woman in existence who would take her husband into her confidence. The confession, we have seen, is defined as being without precedent and therefore implausible, and at the end, the very end, we are told that 'her life, which was brief, left examples of inimitable virtue' (p. 142).

We may well ponder the paradox of an 'inimitable example'. Is it inimitable precisely because it is predicated on ceasing to be a story? In the novel, it is contrasted with the dangerous examples set by the women of the court, who spend their time 'emulating' one another, and whose stories are all too easily reproduced. What exactly is an inimitable example? Without wishing to answer this question so much as to set it up as a paradox, I want to note that it is a pervasive *leitmotiv* throughout the text, and that it designates the moral dilemma of the novel. The uniqueness of madame de Clèves as person, of her behaviour, and of the life she comes to lead is a uniqueness that has no precedent; but if her mother's story-telling is indeed a teaching, then she, her life and her actions, her virtue are precedents for an as yet unwritten future. 'Her life *left* inimitable examples': this conclusion has the force of a bequest. The word 'inimitable' thus works to issue a challenge. I want to suggest that this paradox is itself a way of representing the very issue of genre, that is, that—say—any piece of writing, is both creatively distinct, and an adaptive imitation belonging to, and marking itself off from, a tradition. The paradox therefore represents the claim that this novel is itself, or wishes to be, a generic precedent. If you saw the film entitled *Un coeur en hiver*, you will recall that it is built around a scene that is a direct allusion to the avowal scene in *La Princesse:* it was not implausible in this film. To say so is to say that *La Princess de Clèves* has in some way become the exemplum of a genre, that it has imposed its own norms and that they are accepted as norms by the cultivated viewing public whose literary sensibilities are in part a product of the tradition established by La Fayette's novel.

There are two standard ways of accounting for this claim of generic precedence. The more familiar and standard in literary studies is the claim of authorial originality; the more familiar in feminist criticism is the one that Nancy Miller invokes: women's writing necessarily undermines a generalised ideology, or masculine norms. My argument concerning genre would lead us to rework this somewhat: instead of ideology or masculine norms, I prefer to argue that generic precedence involves solving representational problems, using the strategies of available generic practices both to reflect upon, and to modify, others. To make this argument good, I shall run through a list of the genres that provide the conditions for the emergence of *La Princesse de Clèves,* and I shall be guided at all times by the issue of the standard representations of women in these genres.

To start with there is the Medieval bawdy tale. These are prose narratives in the tradition of the wife of Bath, with a presence in the popular as well as the literary culture, and represented through the middle ages and the early modern period by the canonical

figures of Chaucer, of Boccaccio and indeed of Marguerite de Navarre. The infidelity of women is a standard *topos* of stories such as these, and it is a *topos* that goes far beyond them, providing the basis for many of the tracts of popular literature which purveyed misogynist diatribes as well as their contestations;[11] these latter took the form of stories of the virtue of women, and of wives who are faithful under very trying circumstances. This debate, known as *la querelle des dames,* reaches far back into the Middle Ages, and provides the terrain for the work of Christine de Pisan.

Secondly, I recall the polemical bases of preciosity. The literature of preciosity, significantly its prose fiction, is a direct contestation of the bawdy literature of the narrative tradition I have alluded to, but the *romans galants* that emerge from the salons of the high seventeenth century are not stories of virtue so much as a refinement of the sexual mores that prose narrative most usually dealt in. These are stories of flirtation that stop short of real sex and assert a class difference from the popular stories rather than a defence of feminine virtue.

We have to acknowledge that there is very little about the princess as a character that aligns her with the mores of preciosity. Her whole story is involved in the avoidance of the major precious genre, the *histoire galante*, which, from her rather priggish perspective, must count as a mere variant of the bawdy tale. Similar stories of female infidelity are equally possible in both; simply, in the upper-class version, the sex is disguised and is not the object of the representation. One of the things that I find most astonishing about this novel, in fact, is how undisguised the sex actually is: it is frankly a story of repressed eroticism, where the body and mastery over its reactions are a constant focus. I am inclined to think that it is in this respect that La Fayette's 'ellipses' are the most eloquent, that it is in this respect that her work challenges the feminine literary conventions of the day.

These three genres, the bawdy tale, the moralistic defences of women that respond to it, and the precious novel, constitute a generic set which delineates the grounds of the problem that *La Princesse de Clèves* addresses. How to write a story in which the heroine is virtuous? Prose fiction provided no narrative models, and in particular, no endings for them. Christine de Pisan tells us that it is only in history that we can find the heroines of life and letters that help us to represent women in some other way. The novel, the story, the tale in which the woman character is virtuous seems indeed to be an oxymoron: hence the judgment, that the novel as we read it is implausible. It is a history, and the standard genres of prose fiction of the day provide no models for the representation of its truth.

This is also true of the moral tracts, which set up the ideals of nun, wife, or mother, none of which provides a model for the princess. Furthermore, she avoids a common variant of the unfaithful wife story that is represented as a possibility in the story of Madame de Tournon: she never becomes a 'merry widow'. The curious thing about her is that she is a paradigm of faithfulness to both her loves—to her husband, and to the duke—and it is in this, too, that her example is inimitable: in the very structure of infidelity, she doubles the representation of fidelity, doubles its example, and therefore doubles the reading of her story. Shadowing the story of courageous virtue is a very sad story, the one that we cannot help imagining when we wish that the book could end otherwise. If ever there was a novel that worked on the structure of fantasy, this was surely it. If ever a mother's teaching both promoted feminine virtue, and led its receiver to desire its opposite, this too was surely it. If ever author worked to produce in her readers the very conflict that her heroine embodies, Madame de La Fayette is surely she.

I have not yet mentioned an important essay on this novel that appeared in France

in 1981. This is by Béatrice Didier,[12] who points out that the principle interdiction of the novel is not on the deeds of sexual encounter, but on its words. Except in the two key scenes, the confession to her husband and the final conversation with the Duke, the princess never represents her own passion by talking about it; at all times, and notably in the scene where she makes love to his portrait, it is her mute but starkly eloquent body that gives itself away. Furthermore, the novel as a whole represents the problem of mimesis and verisimilitude through the questions raised by portraiture. Significantly, both the princess and the duke come to own portraits of each other by indirect means—indeed, by interception. Didier argues that this focus on visual representation, the body and its pictures, represents the interdiction on language which the princess eventually uses to end her story. I would add two points: the first is, that this analysis shows that the issue is indeed how to end the story, and the second reinforces a point that I made earlier: the genre of this novel and the genre of visual portraiture are mutually illuminating.

There is a further point to be made consequent upon Didier's attention to silence. If we ask, what is the model for the beloved who never speaks and who remains at a distance from the spectacle of love, then we cannot fail to recognise that this is a standard *topos* of Petrarchan love poetry; it is the *topos* that gives rise to the very structure of its enunciation. The lover is necessarily a poet, and the poet speaks in the absence, and especially in the silence, of his beloved.

It is conventional in such poetry to read the kind of story in which the lover, spurned, threatens to die of jealousy. This is what happens to the Prince de Clèves. Far from the figure of the angry cuckold, who is the standard character of the prose narratives I have mentioned, this husband is ennobled by his love. Indeed, he speaks of himself as less a husband than a lover, his passion kept alive by its own impossibility. It is also conventional in such poetry for the lover, believing himself to be loved, to remain unsure, and never to receive an unambiguous sign, let alone a proposition. This ensures the *topos* of the poet-lover, who remains in the beseeching mode. This, broadly, is what happens to the duc de Nemours, until the day he is told he is loved, and sent packing, all in the one speech. This ultimate rejection ensures both the continuing virtue of the princess, and the impossibility of a narrative reversal. Perhaps this is the most decisive topical characteristic of sixteenth century love poetry, that the characters are fixed in their postures, and the narrative does not—indeed cannot—reverse.

With the notable exception of Louise Labé and Pernette du Guillet, French love poetry of this period—again, following Petrarch—is typically gendered in the following way: the lady receives declarations of love, but never responds; she is therefore by generic convention and structural necessity silent, while the lover is by definition the poet who declares his love, sings it, beseeches, is spurned or left hanging. Whichever variant operates in particular instances, the structure guarantees that the woman's story is never told. It is with this in mind that I wish to read what I take to be a key passage in the novel. It occurs following the second episode in which the duke spies on Madame de Clèves through the windows of her garden pavillion at Coulommiers. This time, he has watched her decorating a Malacca cane in his colours, then giving to his portrait all the signs of tender love that she withholds from him. The passage is remarkable because it is stylistically at odds with the sobriety of the rest of the writing:

> Never had there been passion so tender and so ardent as was then in the bosom of the Duke of Nemours. He walked forth beneath the willows bordering a small stream that ran behind the house where he was hiding. He

> went away as far as possible in order that no one should see or hear him; he gave way to the transports of his love; and his heart was so full that he could not forbear shedding some tears, but they were not such as grief makes flow—they were tempered with joy and with the charm that love alone can bring.
>
> He began to recall all Madame de Clèves' conduct since he had fallen in love with her; what modest and proper indifference she had always shown, although she loved him! 'For in short, she loves me', he said; 'she loves me, I cannot doubt it; the most solemn pledges and the greatest favours are not as sure indications as those I have had; yet I am treated as severely as if I were hated. I hoped for the effect of time; I must no longer count on that. I see her ever on her guard against me and against herself. If I were not loved, I would think of pleasing; but, I do not please, I am loved, and the love is hidden from me. What then can I hope for, and what change should I expect in my destiny?' (p. 119)

Note the vocabulary, which is the standard lexicon of the genre, and notice, particularly, the setting, the stream and the willows, which allude indubitably to the setting of so many poems in which the poet seeks solitude in a wild or natural setting the better to call up the image of his beloved. 'What change can I expect in my destiny?' asks the duke. You will be reminded, as I am, that it is precisely the impossibility of narrative reversal that is mocked by Andrew Marvell: 'Had we but world enough, and time/This coyness, lady, were no crime ...' We see the duc de Nemours as we see many poets, clasping only fantasy, his poetic clichés contrasting markedly with the the discourse of conflict and passion that is read on the other side of the story.

For *La Princesse de Clèves* is the other side of this story in which the poet remains alone the better to fulfil his function as poet, and the lover remains alone the better to love as love deserves. My suggestion is that this *topos* provides the form of the solution for the generic problem I have outlined. I have asked, how is it possible to write a novel in which the heroine is virtuous, where she is a heroine, and where her virtue is narratively interesting? The answer I am proposing is that Madame de La Fayette has used the narrative provided by renaissance love poetry. But she has turned it around and asked the obvious question: what would it be, to be the woman of the story? The answer is, Madame de Clèves.

The conventions of love poetry are significant precisely because in it the woman's passion remains unspoken, and I have invoked them in order to discuss what Didier calls the silence of Madame de Clèves. She is silent, but her passion, not her lover's, is the centre of our attention; that is what we know, that is what moves us. The writing of the novel has therefore to address a further problem, which is how to represent a woman's passion without eliciting the misogynist judgments that the novel and its heroine seek to avert. What would it be to represent a woman ennobled by a conflict between love and the moral imperative of a higher order of values?

There was a model, it was famous, it was the subject of everybody's conversation, and it was called *Bérénice*, published only seven years earlier than *La Princesse de Clèves*. Bérénice is the captive queen, caught between two men. On the one hand, Antiochus, the man who could and wishes to be her lawful husband, whom she esteems and depends upon as a friend, but whom she does not love, and on the other, Titus, with whom she shares an all-consuming passion, but who is constrained to repudiate her once he becomes emperor. The conflict between love and duty is thus his, not hers, and it is possible to

read La Fayette as recasting the gender roles of this very famous play, again, in order to stake a claim for the nobility of women's love. Bérénice is eloquent about her love, passionate and fearful of rejection. She is a deeply personal, feminine heroine, owing a great deal to the model of Virgil's Dido. But *Bérénice* is a play in which the heroine must learn what genre she is in, and she rises to tragedy at the moment when she gives up on the postures of elegy, enjoining herself and the two men not to die for love, but to assume the nobility of their renunciation.[13] It is at this moment that she gives the rule of the genre of tragedy: it is the rule of exemplarity:

> *Bérénice:* Prince, with this farewell, you too must agree that I could not leave Rome only to receive other professions of love. Live, be brave and open-hearted. Follow the example of Titus, and my own: I love him, and I flee him; he loves me, and he leaves me. Take far from me your sighs and your enslavement. Farewell! Let all three of us serve throughout the universe as the example of the tenderest and the most unhappy love of which it tells the painful story. All is prepared, and I am awaited. Do not follow me. For the last time, my lord, farewell.
> *Antiochus:* Alas![14]

I have argued for a reading of *La Princesse de Clèves* that shows it to be constructed in contrastive relation with several adjacent genres: against the bawdy tale, it asserts with the moral tracts of the early modern period the reality of the virtuous woman; against the sexlessness of the virtuous woman, it asserts a feminine erotic. Against the absence of woman from the poetry of love, it represents her and makes her the focus of attention; against her sublimation in the same genre, she has a body. Against the victim role of elegy, it is she who determines her own and her lover's fate, and hence, the ending of the story. Against the lowly status of prose fiction and its ritual humiliation of her sex, she asserts the moral elevation of tragedy. In particular, I have argued that the princess's story is the other side of the Petrarchan narrative, and that its plausibility—the plausibility of the oxymoron, that ties passion with virtue—is guaranteed by the narrative line required by the story of unrequited love. I have used *La Princesse de Clèves* as an exemplary text, and I have argued that this is the status that it claims for itself. If it sets a precedent, I have tried to show that it is by undermining or disabling the standard generic expectations elicited by the material it is working with. So let me remind you of the opening of the *Canzoniere*, which is the start of the paradigm of love-stories—let me say, of a 'genre'—that was to continue for several hundred years: Petrarch's lover-poet laments that he has 'become the tale of common gossip'; his destiny as he starts his book is to repeat, and repeat, and repeat, a common story.

My reading is part of an argument for a practice of feminist criticism that relies on genre, because the genre postulate is a revealing way of addressing the politics of representation. I have not made this argument in general terms, but through examples. A key episode in the story is the theft of the miniature of Madame de Clèves by the duc de Nemours; like the episodes when he watches her through the window, this has been interpreted as a symbolic rape; but quite aside from the fact that such interpretations trivialise the utterly serious issue of rape, which is never symbolic, they miss the point. Monsieur de Nemours has stolen the princess's portrait; when she in turn borrows his, she reverses the power dynamic, only to be reappropriated immediately into the Petrarchan image. The theft of representation, and control over its powers, this is the issue that the rhetorical practices of the novel address, and this is the issue that genre can raise.

No text merely violates its genre, or transgresses its rules. It solves a problem. The problem posed by *La Princesse de Clèves*, and its solution, are represented *en abyme* in the text; but there are various possibilities. Let us take, first, the miniature, which can be touched up, and passed from hand to hand; in it, a person, her face, are decontextualized and idealized. This is a precious genre, appropriated by the duke, and appropriate to his imaginings when he is in his Petrarchan mode. It is not, for that reason, the model of the genre of the novel. Let us take, second, the scene which the duke watches through the window, the confession to the husband, as the statement of the representational problem: seen through the window and not in the frames of fiction, it is depicted as real, and hence as the stuff of history and of truth. This is what is implausible, and this is what the novel must find a way to depict. Let us take, third, the scene in which he sees her making love to his portrait: does this offer the form of the solution to this problem? Both like, and the opposite of, a miniature, the tableau depicts the person and his deeds against the backdrop of a larger history. Is *La Princesse de Clèves* a history in this sense? Perhaps, yet maybe not. To say so would be to transpose a woman's history into the modes of masculine fame. The genres of representation are distinctly gendered in this novel, and it is only the deeds of men that may be illustrated in tableaux and hung on the walls of great houses. The reputations of women are the stuff of conversation, passed on, like the stolen miniature, in titillating gossip, or passed from mother to daughter in the guise of a moral teaching.

I'm sure we should avoid the choice. Genre, like gender, is a matter of differences, not of stable identities. We are asked to heed the lessons of the prefatory note, which bids us not to know the gender of the author. Likewise, I could leave you to ponder the gender of the genre of her novel. But I am tempted by the *topoi* of my genre, and unlike the princess, I am inclined to succumb. If I were to name the strategies of *La Princesse de Clèves* in terms of the mixing of its genres, this is what I would say: it joins *la grande histoire* with *la petite*, and changes both, adapting the epideictic oratory of the tableau to the reputation of la princesse de Clèves. The painting, we should recall, depicts the siege of Metz, in which the duc de Nemours played a leading role. Is it an allegory, do you think? Metz fell, and she did not. Passionate and virtuous, doubly faithful, set in counterpoint to the intrigues of love and political alliances of the court, to paint her thus was the task of a history: this is the portrait of La Princesse de Clèves.

NOTES

1. This paper was delivered as a lecture to the Institute of Advanced Study at Indiana University Bloomington, on 4 December 1995. I thank the Institute for its hospitality, and my audience on that occasion for its interest, and the erudite and stimulating discussion that followed.
2. A *topos* is the 'place' (understood metaphorically) in which a topic is raised. The *topoi* do not dictate content; they are, rather, functional, requiring that some topic do a certain job that is useful for the strategic purposes of the genre. Hence, the *topoi* are effectively what govern the notion of generic decorum: certain topics, say constipation, would be 'out of place' in a novel of the seventeenth century, but entirely acceptable as an item for complaint or advice in Madam de Sevigny's letters to her daughter.
3. Charles Sanders Peirce, *Collected Papers* (Belknap Press) Cambridge, 1960 (1932), (2.273).
4. Madame de La Fayette, *La Princesse de Clèves*, préface de Bernard Pingaud, Paris, Gallimard, (Collection Folio), 1972 (translation my own). *The Princess of Clèves*, A Novel by Madame de Lafayette, translated from the French by H. Ashton with an introduction by Jean Cocteau and illustrations by Hermine David (The Nonesuch Press) London, 1943. Except where otherwise noted, translations are quoted from this edition.
5. I draw for this, and several other points, on Joan De Jean, 'Lafayette's Ellipses: the Privileges of Anonymity', *PMLA*, vol. 99, no. 5, 1984, pp. 884–902. A revised version of that argument is published in Joan De Jean, *Tender Geographies: Women and the Origins of the Novel in France* (Columbia University Press) New York, 1991.

6. This sort of thing happens throughout the novel, e.g. in the discussion of Elisabeth (sic) of England and her mother, where Madame de Clèves says: 'I have heard it said that she was born in France'. 'Those who thought so were mistaken', replied the Dauphiness, 'and I will tell you her story in a few words' (p. 55).
7. The following discussion draws heavily on two articles by Ross Chambers: 'Gossip and the Novel: Knowing Narrative and Narrative Knowing in Balzac, Madame de Lafayette and Proust', *Australian Journal of French Studies,* vol. 23, no. 2, 1986, pp. 212–33; and, 'Fables of the Go-between' in C. Worth, P. Nestor and P. Pavlyshyn (eds), *Literature and Opposition* (Centre for Comparative Literature and Cultural Studies, Monash University) Clayton, 1992, pp. 1–28.
8. This is shorthand for a more complex point that draws on the work of Michel Serres, *Le Parasite,* Paris, Bernard Grasset, 1980: I use 'fourth' rather than 'third' as he does in order to stress the polemical argument against the grammatical construal of speech-act theory.
9. Nancy Miller, 'Emphasis Added: Plots and Plausibilities in Women's Fiction', *PMLA,* vol. 96, 1981, pp. 36–48; and *Subject to Change: Reading Feminist Writing* (Columbia University Press) New York, 1988, chapter 1; Joan De Jean, 'Lafayette's Ellipses: the Privileges of Anonymity', *op. cit.*
10. My translation; Ashton's elides the generic reference: '... the King's sister, Marguerite, Duchess of Alençon and later Queen of Navarre, whose *Heptameron* you have seen' (p. 55).
11. For a collection of these from the anonymous 'livrets bleus' see *Le miroir des femmes, Textes présentés par Arlette Farge,* Bibliothèque bleue, sous la direction de Daniel Roche, Paris, éditions Montalba, 1982.
12. Béatrice Didier, 'Le silence de la Princesse de Clèves', in *L'écriture-femme,* PUF, Paris, 1981, pp. 73–92.
13. Contemporary crtics of the play panned it, precisely because it adopted what was recognisably the language of elegy, or, more broadly, love poetry, but it was a great public success nonetheless.
14. Racine, *Théâtre complet,* Bérénice Paris, Folio, 1982:

> Prince, après cet adieu, vous jugez bien vous-même
> Que je ne consens pas de quitter ce que j'aime
> Pour aller loin de Rome écouter d'autres voeux.
> Vivez, et faites-vous un effort généreux.
> Sur Titus et sur moi réglez votre conduite:
> Je l'aime, je le fuis; Titus m'aime, il me quitte.
> Portez loin de mes yeux vos soupirs et vos fers.
> Adieu. Servons tous trois d'exemple à l'univers
> De l'amour la plus tendre et la plus malheureuse
> Dont il puisse garder l'histoire douloureuse.
> Tout est prêt. On m'attend. Ne suivez point mes pas.
> Pour la dernière fois, adieu, Seigneur.
>
> *Antiochus* Hélas! (my translation).