

THE PRINCESS OF CLÈVES

MARIE-MADELEINE
DE LAFAYETTE



EDITED AND WITH A REVISED TRANSLATION BY
JOHN D. LYONS

A NORTON CRITICAL EDITION

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Marie-Madeleine de Lafayette
THE PRINCESS OF CLÈVES

CONTEMPORARY REACTIONS
CRITICISM

Edited and with a revised translation by

JOHN D. LYONS

UNIVERSITY OF VIRGINIA

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Preface

The Princess of Clèves has been translated into English at least nine times, beginning in 1679, just one year after its publication in France. The goal of the translator must be to bring the reader as close as possible to the experience of reading the original text. Thomas Sargent Perry's 1892 translation is indisputably the version that has given the English-reading public the greatest service. Reprinted many times over the century of its existence, the Perry version can justly be called a classic in its own right. It has reached many readers as part of *The Norton Anthology of World Masterpieces*, edited by Maynard Mack, et al.

We have used Perry's version for this Norton Critical Edition, but, on the occasion of its hundredth anniversary, we have reviewed the entire translation and made a small number of changes. The changes fall into two categories: correction of infelicities of translation and updating of vocabulary. The first group of changes is very small and entirely necessary to remain faithful to Lafayette's French text.¹ As for the second group, modernization of vocabulary, we have made changes only when it seemed that a well-informed reader would be so puzzled by a word or turn of phrase that a footnote was required. Rather than burden the text with an additional layer of interpretation, distracting readers from Lafayette's narrative, we have simply replaced Perry's rendering. We have, however, left many of the useful historical annotations prepared by Patricia Meyer Spacks for *The Norton Anthology of World Masterpieces*.

This edition of *The Princess of Clèves* includes a selection of contemporary reactions to the controversial 1678 publication. This is the first time such material has been made available in English except in the form of brief quotations in scholarly studies. To experience the vitality and newness of Lafayette's work requires an understanding of the resistance that her writing provoked in seventeenth-century France. This Norton Critical Edition brings the excitement of this pivotal cultural event to today's readers.

1. The author's name is spelled as Lafayette and as La Fayette. The former is currently viewed as more historically accurate, but both spellings will be found in the "Criticism" section of this Norton Critical Edition.

Introduction

The Princess of Clèves is often called the first modern French novel. Its publication in 1678 was a national and even international literary and social event. Within twelve months of its publication, two books had been published about the *The Princess of Clèves*, the novel had been translated into English, and a literary magazine, *Le Mercure Galant*, published voluminous correspondence in which the magazine's readers gave their opinion—somewhat in the manner of today's "Dear Abby" newspaper column—on the characters' conduct. *The Princess of Clèves* had such an impact on French literature that it is reasonable to say that Lafayette's work changed the very meaning of the French word for novel, *roman*, shifting the meaning from "romance" to our modern conception of the genre as a realistic narrative usually with a limited set of principal characters. The book's success has given it such an established place as a literary classic that we tend to forget that this little book is not at all a restful idyllic tale. If we consider the world represented in the novel, we discover that a facade of refinement and politeness scarcely masks a ferocious and pitiless court society where a teenage girl struggles to understand human nature and to define herself. If we consider the novel's effect on French literature and society, we can see many conflicts about important issues: fiction, history, plausibility, the role of the author, and the overall structure of plots.

Published anonymously, like many literary and philosophical works of its day, *The Princess of Clèves* was quickly attributed to Marie-Madeleine Pioche de la Vergne, who, by marriage, was countess of Lafayette. By her education, her connection to the most active and creative literary circles, and her knowledge of the royal court, Lafayette certainly had every qualification to write such a book. She was born in April 1634, in Paris, to parents who were not wealthy but who were talented, well-connected, and upwardly mobile. Her father, descended from a long line of magistrates and civil servants, after a career as an engineer and military officer, became tutor of one of the Cardinal de Richelieu's nephews. Her mother was from a large and prosperous Provence family. Marie-Madeleine's family was on the borderline between the middle class and the minor aristocracy. The future countess of Lafayette received a solid private education from tutors, and as an adolescent she frequented the literary and intellectual gatherings of the

novelist Madeleine de Scudéry and the famous Hôtel de Rambouillet where some of the most creative literary and artistic figures evolved a new aesthetic and social code called *préciosité*, which we now see as a form of early feminism. She also became a friend and protégée of Mother Angélique de Lafayette, mother superior of the convent of Chaillot, where Henriette-Marie, the queen consort of England, and her daughter Henriette lived in exile during the English civil war. Marie-Madeleine married the Mother Superior's brother, Count François de Lafayette in 1655. She lived with her husband on their estates in the Auvergne, in mountainous south-central France, for about four years, and during that time gave birth to two sons and also demonstrated her considerable talent for legal procedure and negotiation through her active participation in resolving legal problems weighing on her husband's inheritance. She settled permanently in Paris in 1659; her husband resided in Auvergne but continued to visit his wife in Paris from time to time.

In 1661, when Henriette of England married Philippe d'Orléans, younger brother of Louis XIV, Marie-Madeleine, now the countess of Lafayette, became a member of her entourage at the royal court. Even after Henriette's early death in 1670, Lafayette continued to lead an active life at the court where she enjoyed the king's respect. She served as intermediary between the French monarchy and the regent of Savoy, which was at that time an independent duchy and not part of France.

In addition to her contacts at the court, Lafayette had many close friends in the brilliant literary and intellectual milieu that flourished in Paris. The novelist Madeleine de Scudéry and her brother Georges, Daniel Huet (author of the first French treatise on the theory of the novel), the scholar and author Gilles Ménage, Marie de Rabutin Chantal de Sévigné (author of an extensive correspondence that has become part of the French literary canon), and especially François de Marillac, duke of La Rochefoucauld, were members of her immediate circle.

Since *The Princess of Clèves* was published anonymously, Lafayette's friendships have a more than anecdotal significance. Within a few years after the novel's publication, rumors held the work to be the fruit of a collaboration between Lafayette and her close friend La Rochefoucauld. Because an earlier work now believed to be by Lafayette, *Zayde, A Spanish History*, was printed with the name of her friend Segrais, questions have arisen as to Lafayette's authorship. The first edition of *The Princess of Clèves* bearing Lafayette's name appeared in 1780, eighty-six years after her death. Although many scholars have devoted great attention to this issue, it seems unlikely that we will ever know exactly how the novel was composed. It is entirely reasonable to consider Lafayette the author, but we should recall that our modern concept of "author" does not entirely fit the practice of writing in her day.

During the seventeenth century the idea that a text was both the product and the property of an individual was a very recent one, arising

with the technology of printing during the Renaissance. In the seventeenth century few writers could live on the proceeds from selling their works to printers, and aristocratic writers often kept their names off the title pages of books from a sense that publication, that is, the sale of their creation, was beneath them. Lafayette published only one text under her own name during her lifetime—a brief description, or literary “portrait,” of her friend Marie de Sévigné. Even this text was signed in a curiously ironic way that distanced the writer from her production: “by the Countess of Lafayette under the name of an unknown person” (*sous le nom d'un inconnu*).

It was not just the question of the writer's public ownership of the text that makes the concept of the author hard to apply to many seventeenth-century books. In addition, the link between creating a story and writing it was not as strong as it is today. The name on the book may simply be the name of the person who wrote stories down. This is especially true for collections of short stories. Charles Perrault, who published the French “Mother Goose Tales” in 1691–1697, may have gathered stories that had already been told and written them down. Moreover, in a way that parallels the question of Lafayette's authorship, it is not certain which member of the Perrault family was responsible for collecting the tales. In another instance, although La Rochefoucauld's name figures on the book entitled *Maxims* (first published anonymously in 1664), he was inspired by a social pastime of formulating general statements, or maxims, of human nature, and we do not know to what extent the precepts included in La Rochefoucauld's book are taken from the work of other participants in this exchange.

The concept of “salon writing” has been created to account for much of the fiction writing of the seventeenth century.¹ In the aristocratic intellectual gatherings presided over by such women as Catherine de Vivonne, marquise de Rambouillet, Madeleine de Scudéry, the Princess de Conti, and others, not only were literary and dramatic works read and commented on in draft form before their final publication (which might incorporate or otherwise respond to the comments made by listeners), but stories were certainly on occasion set out, modified, elaborated, circulated for revisions, and so on. Under these circumstances it is usually impossible to know how to apportion credit for the final written product. Given the reluctance of most aristocratic women to allow their names to appear as writers of novels, usually the name of a male collaborator figures on the printed version. *The Princess of Clèves*, though published anonymously, is almost certainly a text over which Lafayette presided, even if her friends La Rochefoucauld and Ménage participated in some way in its creation.

As the “first modern French novel,” *The Princess of Clèves* would

1. Joan DeJean, *Tender Geographies. Women and the Origins of the Novel in France* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1991), p. 77.

seem easy to classify—as a novel! But, the “first” of anything clearly must appear before there is any category into which it can fit. In fact, the great controversy that arose on the book’s publication in 1678 was partly caused by the difficulty of classifying the book. Was it a *roman*? Was it an *histoire* (history)? Was it someone’s *mémoires* (memoirs), and if so, whose? For modern English-language readers of the book, the matter is complicated by the fact that French uses the one word *roman* for two genres, which we call “romance” and “novel.” On the other hand, we are not much worse off than the seventeenth-century French, who could see that the book was not a romance, but did not yet know that a new kind of writing was emerging, one that would become so dominant that it would alter the meaning of the word *roman*.

Before the 1670s, seventeenth-century fiction had consisted of long, complex, multi-volume narratives with many important characters and many subplots. Some of the best known of these are *Astrea* (1607–1627) by Honoré D’Urfé, *Polexandre* (1619–1637) by Gautier de Costes, Sieur de Gomberville, *Faramond, or the History of France* (1661–1670) by La Calprenède, and *Artamène, or The Great Cyrus* (1649–1653) by Lafayette’s friend Madeleine de Scudéry. These romances were all set either in far distant places or in the remote past. Even though plots were often far-fetched—characters would rediscover long-lost children or parents, persons thought to be dead would reappear, characters included magicians and pagan gods—the exoticism of the setting tended to favor the suspension of disbelief. Lafayette’s work and a few others that appeared in the mid-1670s—such as Saint-Réal’s *Dom Carlos* (1672) and Catherine Desjardins de Villegieu’s *The Disorders of Love* (1675)—were situated in recognizable settings in or near France and within historical periods relatively close to the seventeenth century. The plots were simple, well-known historical facts were not violated, and magical incidents disappeared or could be given common-sense explanations. In short, it became harder to tell the difference between fiction and books purporting to be completely accurate histories, except that fictive “histories” or memoirs concentrated on minor background events that were not reported in the known documentation. Writers could “fill in the blanks” left among the historians’ accounts of battles, treaties, and negotiations.

The Princess of Clèves unites documented public history with a fictive form of the private history that belongs to memoirs and personal correspondence. Like Villegieu in her collection of four short stories called *The Disorders of Love* (1675), Lafayette suggests possible links between public and private history, suggesting plausibly that certain public events might have causes that are rooted in psychology and in fine details of personal relationships that are either not known to official historians or are too inglorious to be proclaimed in historical works sponsored by the state.

The basic outline of public history in Lafayette’s novel is clear and

would have been known to many readers in the seventeenth century. Much material apparently came from accounts by the well-known historians Mathieu, Mézeray, Anselme, Brantôme, and Le Laboureur. On the other hand, in historical fact, there was no *Mademoiselle de Chartres* who married a Prince of Clèves. The Prince of Clèves was only fourteen years old at the time of the action and did not occupy the important position at court attributed to him in this novel. Lafayette therefore centers her story on a person who did not exist in history, yet who is close to the most important real figures of the royal court. There are many interesting consequences to the author's choice of this combination of fiction with history. In purely technical terms, it is clearly a greater challenge to coordinate public and private events, when the public events are so recent and recorded in such detail. It means that the writer cannot stretch and shorten sequences of events as could be done in a story situated in prehistoric Gaul. Fitting events into the time set by the historical framework makes writing the novel a rigorous exercise analogous to fitting thoughts into the fixed form of a sonnet. For the characters who existed historically, moreover, some care must be taken either to invent private actions that are in keeping with their personality and reputation or to give an account for the discrepancy. For instance, Lafayette accounts for a secret liaison of Queen Catherine de Medicis by insisting on her reputation for cunning and dissimulation.

However, more is at stake in Lafayette's novel than the representation of the past, for the author clearly suggests that many characteristics of human behavior remain constant. The relationship of mother to daughter and its consequences, the nature, effect, and duration of sexual love, the importance of ambition and rivalry in the behavior of both men and women, the structure of court society, the systematic circulation of news and gossip through networks—these and many other aspects of the world of the Princess of Clèves in the mid-sixteenth century apparently apply as well to the court society Lafayette knew in the late seventeenth century. For Lafayette, then, her teenage heroine's experience is a kind of parable, a timeless illustration of a human dilemma.

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The Text of
THE PRINCESS OF CLÈVES

Translated by Thomas S. Perry
Revised by John D. Lyons

The Bookseller to the Reader

Although this History has been praised by those who have been present at readings,¹ the author is not yet willing to give his² name; he fears that his name may limit the book's success. He knows by experience that people sometimes criticize books because they have little respect for the author, and he knows also that the author's reputation can cause a work to be highly valued. He remains, therefore, in his present obscurity, so that the public may judge freely and fairly; he will, nonetheless, show himself if this History is as pleasing to the public as I hope it will be.

1. In the seventeenth century, portions of literary works were often read to guests in a social gathering prior to publication in printed form. Our current idea that printing and "publication" are the same makes it hard for us to understand how well known and how much a work might be discussed before it appeared in a bookstore.
2. The gender of the author remains ambiguous in the French text. In this sentence "his" could also be translated as "her." In the following sentences "he" is used only to agree with the word "author" which is grammatically masculine and does not indicate the gender of the actual writer. The issue of anonymity and the gender of the author is the subject of Joan DeJean's article in this volume.

The Princess of Clèves

Part I¹

There never was in France so brilliant a display of magnificence and gallantry as during the last years of the reign of Henri II. This monarch was gallant, handsome, and amorous; although his love for Diane de Poitiers, Duchess of Valentinois, had lasted twenty years, its ardor had not diminished, as his conduct testified.

He was remarkably skillful in physical exercises, and devoted much attention to them; every day was filled with hunting and tennis, dancing, running at the ring, and sports of that kind. The favorite colors and the initials of Madame de Valentinois were to be seen everywhere, and she herself used to appear dressed as richly as Mademoiselle de la Marck, her granddaughter, who was then about to be married.

The fact that the queen was there, permitted her presence. This princess, although she had passed her first youth, was still beautiful; she was fond of splendor, magnificence, and pleasure. The king had married her while still Duke of Orléans, in the lifetime of his elder brother, the dauphin, who afterward died at Tournon, mourned as a worthy heir to the position of Francis I, his father.

The queen's ambition made her like to reign. She seemed indifferent to the king's attachment to the Duchess of Valentinois, and never betrayed any jealousy; but she was so skilled a dissembler that it was hard to discover her real feelings, and she was compelled by policy to keep the duchess near her if she wanted to see anything of the king. As for him, he liked the society of women, even of those with whom he was not at all in love. He was with the queen every day at her audience,² when all the most attractive lords and ladies were sure to appear.

At no court had there ever been gathered together so many lovely women and handsome men. It seemed as if Nature had made an effort

1. The story opens sometime after April 1558 (when Marie Stuart married the crown prince, the Dauphin and became the Dauphiness). The heroine, Mademoiselle de Chartres, arrives at the court in late November or early December, when King Henri II returned to Paris from treaty negotiations in Artois, in the north of France. The reign of Henri II ended on July 10, 1559, and almost all the important events of the novel occur before March 1560, when the failure of the Amboise Conspiracy against the Guise family led to arrests that decimated the court. Except for the last paragraphs of *The Princess of Clèves* the whole story takes place in less than two years [Editor].

2. A formal gathering.

to show her highest beauty in the greatest lords and ladies. Madame Elisabeth of France, afterwards queen of Spain, began to show her wonderful intelligence and that unrivalled beauty which was so fatal to her. Mary Stuart, the queen of Scotland, who had just married the dauphin and was called the crown princess, or dauphiness, was faultless in mind and body. She had been brought up at the French court and had acquired all its polish; she was endowed by Nature with so strong a love for all the arts that in spite of her youth she admired and understood them perfectly. Her mother-in-law, the queen, and Madame, the king's sister, were also fond of poetry, of comedy, and of music. The interest which King Francis I had felt in poetry and writing still prevailed in France and since the king, his son, was devoted to physical exercise, pleasures of all sorts were to be found at the court. But what rendered the court especially fine and majestic was the great number of princes and lords of exceptional merit; those I am about to name were, in their different ways, the ornament and the admiration of their age.

The King of Navarre inspired universal respect by his exalted rank and his royal bearing. He excelled in the art of war; but he so admired the Duke of Guise that he had often laid aside his command to enter the duke's service as a private soldier in the most dangerous battles. This duke had manifested such admirable bravery with such remarkable success that he was an object of envy to every great commander. He had many conspicuous qualities besides his personal courage,—he possessed a vast and profound intelligence, a noble, lofty mind, and equal capacity for war and affairs. His brother, the Cardinal of Lorraine, was born with an unbridled ambition, and had acquired vast learning; this he turned to his profit by using it in defense of Catholicism, which had begun to be attacked. The Chevalier de Guise, afterwards known as the Grand Prior, was loved by all; he was handsome, witty, clever, and his courage was renowned throughout Europe. The short, ill-favored body of the Prince of Condé held a great and noble soul, and an intelligence that endeared him to even the most beautiful women. The Duke of Nevers, famous for his military prowess and his important services to the state, though somewhat advanced in years was adored by all the court. He had three handsome sons,—the second, known as the Prince of Clèves, was worthy to bear that proud title; he was brave and grand, and was endowed with a prudence rare in the young. The Vidame³ of Chartres, descended from the old house of Vendôme, a name not despised by princes of the blood, had won equal triumphs in war and gallantry; he was handsome, attractive, brave, hardy, generous; all his good qualities were distinct and striking,—in short, he was the only man fit to be compared, if such comparison be possible, with the Duke of Nemours. This nobleman was a masterpiece of Nature; the least of his fascinations

3. The title *vidame* designated the lay representative of a Bishop and the commander of the Bishop's troops.

was his extreme beauty; he was the handsomest man in the world. What made him superior to every one else was his unrivalled courage and a charm manifested in his mind, his expression, and his actions, such as no other showed. He possessed a certain playfulness that was equally attractive to men and women; he was unusually skillful in physical exercises; and he dressed in a way that every one tried in vain to imitate; moreover, his bearing was such that all eyes followed him whenever he appeared. There was no lady in the court who would not have been flattered by his attentions; few of those to whom he had devoted himself could boast of having resisted him; and even many in whom he had shown no interest made very clear their affection for him. He was so gentle and amorous that he could not refuse some attentions to those who tried to please him,—hence he had many mistresses; but it was hard to say whom he really loved. He was often to be seen with the dauphiness; her beauty, her gentleness, her desire to please every one, and the especial regard she showed for this prince, made some imagine that he dared to raise his eyes to her. The Guises, whose niece she was, had acquired influence and position by her marriage; they aspired to an equality with the princes of the blood and to a share of the power exercised by the Constable of Montmorency. It was to the constable⁴ that the king confided the greater part of the cares of state, while he treated the Duke of Guise and the Marshal of Saint-André as his favorites. But those attached to his person by favor or position could only keep their place by submitting to the Duchess of Valentinois, who, although no longer young or beautiful, ruled him so despotically that she may be said to have been the mistress of his person and of the state.

The king had always loved the constable, and at the beginning of his reign had summoned him from the exile into which he had been sent by Francis I. The court was divided between the Guises and the constable, who was the favorite of the princes of the blood. Both parties had always struggled for the favor of the Duchess of Valentinois. The Duke of Aumale, brother of the Duke of Guise, had married one of her daughters. The constable aspired to the same alliance, not satisfied with having married his eldest son to Madame Diane, a daughter of the king by a lady of Piedmont who entered a convent after the birth of her child. The promises which Monsieur de Montmorency had made to Made-moiselle de Piennes, one of the queen's maids-of-honor, had proved a serious obstacle to this match; and although the king had removed it with extreme patience and kindness, the constable still felt that he would be insecure until he had won over the Duchess of Valentinois and had separated her from the Guises, whose greatness had begun to alarm her. She had delayed in every way in her power the marriage between the dauphin and the Queen of Scotland; this young queen's beauty and

4. The title of *constable* at this time designated the highest ranking official of the court.

intelligence, and the position given to the Guises by this marriage, were very odious to her. She especially detested the Cardinal of Lorraine, who had addressed her in bitter, even contemptuous terms. She saw that he was plotting with the queen; hence the constable found her ready to join forces with him by bringing about the marriage of Mademoiselle de la Marck, her granddaughter, to Monsieur d'Anville, his second son, who succeeded to his post in the reign of Charles IX. The constable did not expect that Monsieur d'Anville would have any objections to this marriage, as had been the case with Monsieur de Montmorency; but though the reasons were more hidden, the difficulties were no less obstinate. Monsieur d'Anville was desperately in love with the crown princess; and although his passion was hopeless, he could not persuade himself to contract other ties. The Marshal of Saint-André was almost the only courtier who had taken sides with neither faction; he was one of the favorites, but this position he held simply by his own merits. Ever since he had been the dauphin, the king had been attached to this nobleman, and later had made him marshal of France, at an age when men are satisfied with lesser honors. His advance gave him a distinction which he maintained by his personal worth and charm, by a costly table and rich surroundings, and by more splendor than any private individual had yet displayed. The king's generosity defrayed this sumptuousness. There was no limit to this monarch's generosity to those he loved. He did not possess every great quality, but he had many, and among them the love of war and a good knowledge of it. This accounted for his many successes; and if we except the battle of St. Quentin, his reign was an unbroken series of victories. He had won the battle of Renty in person, Piedmont had been conquered, the English had been driven from France, and the Emperor Charles V had seen his good fortune desert him before the city of Metz,⁵ which he had besieged in vain with all the forces of the Empire and of Spain. Nevertheless, since the defeat of St. Quentin had diminished our hope of conquest, and fortune seemed to favor one king as much as the other, they were gradually led to favor peace.

The Dowager Duchess of Lorraine had begun to lead the way to a cessation of hostilities at the time of the dauphin's marriage, and ever since then there had been secret negotiations. At last Cercamp, in the Province of Artois, was chosen as the place of meeting. The Cardinal of Lorraine, the constable, and the Marshal of Saint-André appeared in behalf of the King of France; the Duke of Alva and the Prince of Orange in behalf of Philip II. The Duke and Duchess of Lorraine were the mediators. The leading articles were the marriage of Madame Elisabeth

5. Henri II had continued the struggle of his father, Francis I, against Charles V, leader of the Holy Roman Empire, for supremacy in Europe and particularly for control in Italy. The battles here alluded to belong to that struggle. At Saint-Quentin the French armies were defeated in 1557; the French drove the English from Calais in 1558; Metz was captured in 1552.