

INTRODUCTION

The idea of the present study arose from my curiosity about the internal narratives of *La Princesse de Clèves*. Two facts about them seemed obvious: they detract from the classical simplicity of the work, and they all provide glimpses of sixteenth-century history. Did this mean that for Mme de Lafayette the historical background of her heroine's adventure contributed enough to the meaning of her novel to be highlighted from time to time, even if such highlighting added material extraneous to the central narrative? From 1678 to the present, critics and scholars have condemned the narratives as extraneous, but also defended them in two ways. Many of the commentators whose views I allude to in Chapter 1 believe they constitute a sort of sentimental education for the heroine. By showing how men and women who happen to be kings, queens, and members of their courts have inspired and experienced love, jealousy, and revenge, they warn her of the probable results of emotional entanglements. Other commentators see the narratives as enriching the novel for its readers in various ways, but particularly through the historical background they provide. My first step in elucidating the meaning and functions of the narratives was thus to decide whether to treat them as lessons for the heroine or as background likely to interest readers.

Chapter 1 contains my reasons for taking the latter view. Mme de Lafayette did not treat the narratives as instruction for the heroine, and they have too many possible meanings to serve that purpose. As historical background, on the other hand, they could be related to what the novelist's first readers believed about women like Anne Boleyn or Catherine de Medici and men like Henry VIII of England or Henri II of France. Such figures were not simply human beings whose experiences might befall the *princesse de Clèves*. They were individuals whose personal and political careers were known through the works of many historians and other writers. If these writers had conveyed to readers of 1678 a single clear image of each, that image would indicate the meaning of a given narrative which, without such a clue, seemed irreducibly polyvalent. If, on the contrary, previous writers had disagreed about the character of a protagonist of one of the narratives, the choices made by the novelist between conflicting versions of that person's story would reveal something of her purpose in telling it.

My task was, then, to compare her characterization of historical figures with those her contemporaries could have read. And if characterization of historical figures was my object, internal narratives were not the only parts of the novel to consider. Diane de Poitiers, Henri II, and Catherine de Medici appear both in narratives and in various episodes of all but the final section of the novel. I would have to study their portraits as they were elaborated partly by internal narrators and partly by the same alter ego of the novelist who tells the heroine's story.

It seemed reasonable to assume that Mme de Lafayette intended the meaning of her historical allusions to be completed for her contemporaries by the knowledge of sixteenth-century history they had acquired from other reading. Allusions that recalled the atmosphere imparted to certain events by the personalities of the powerful figures involved in them were an economical way of setting the heroine's story against a vivid background. A novelist could use such allusions in somewhat the same way panegyrists used comparisons of Louis XIV to Alexander the Great and political theorists warned kings against the failings of Herod and Tiberius. But was the novel-reading public well enough informed about events of the previous century to attribute to Anne or Catherine or Henri characteristics as distinctive as those of ancient conquerors and tyrants? Seventeenth-century critics who discuss the historical material in *La Princesse de Clèves* give widely divergent impressions of the knowledge of history possessed by their contemporaries. They suggest that such knowledge was extensive or limited, detailed or superficial. Because of these contradictions, in Chapter 3 I consider other indications of the average reader's familiarity with the past. This evidence shows considerable knowledge of many events, but also a conviction that their true causes are rarely known. It reveals images of the sixteenth century as a time of violence and uncovers views of history and of human nature that must have affected readers' evaluations of Mme de Lafayette's historical portraits. For instance, the didactic function of history gave the portraits painted by historians a stylized exemplarity that could make further novelistic stylization plausible. And while a taste for greatness of various kinds encouraged evocations of monarchs and momentous events, beliefs about human nature readily allowed motives to be passionate or petty. Readers' knowledge and their beliefs prepared them well to read between the lines of a novel set in a brilliant court where things were rarely what they appeared to be.

Since these readers could have learned about sixteenth-century events from a very large number of works, Chapter 3 provides an introduction to the most pertinent of these works and attempts to determine their relative popularity.

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Because their popularity tells us something about their readers, the chapter also shows that most of these readers made fairly serious efforts to inform themselves about events of the previous century. The findings of Chapter 3 confirm those of Chapter 2: many early readers of *La Princesse de Clèves* were able and likely to compare its author's portraits of historical figures with those of previous writers. Part One thus validates the assumption of historical literacy on which Parts Two and Three are based.

Part Two studies two narratives and a narrator. The Dauphine, Mary Stuart, Queen of Scots, tells the story of Anne Boleyn, part of which is that of Henry VIII; she also gives a brief account of the past marriage prospects of her mother, Marie de Lorraine. Mary's fame and the controversy that surrounded her life and death suggest that her tales and her reasons for telling them are worth examining, as does the fact that Mme de Lafayette twice made her the narrator of events whose relation to the heroine's story was minimal. On examination, the story that ends with the marriage of Marie de Lorraine to the king of Scotland appears to be the result of much curious maneuvering on the part of the novelist. Chapter 4 explains the devious means by which she used that story to characterize Mary Stuart, whose personality reflected an aspect of the atmosphere of the court. Chapter 5 deals with the surprisingly flattering account of the life of Anne Boleyn given by the young queen who was eventually to be put to death by Anne's daughter, Elizabeth I; and Chapter 6 examines the glimpses that account affords of the violence associated with the reign of Henry VIII. In Chapter 7 I conclude that when all the pages of the novel on which the Dauphine appears as a narrator are analyzed and compared with well-known judgments of Mary Stuart, they offer a realistic characterization of a queen who had been much admired and much decried.

The portraits examined in Part Three all begin on the first page of the novel, as the king, queen, and royal mistress who preside over the French court set its tone of problematic brilliance. The fact that Mme de Chartres traces the history of Diane de Poitiers from the time of her adolescence to the present suggests that her immorality and her power make important contributions to the author's description of the court. And as Chapter 8 makes clear, that suggestion is confirmed when Mme de Lafayette invents one additional scene and modifies a final one in a way that utterly condemns Diane. Each evocation of Diane reflects the bizarre nature of Henri II's devotion to such a woman. In Chapter 9 I show that historians had blamed this king for many other weaknesses and how *La Princesse de Clèves* reflects their negative judgments. Since Catherine de Medici dominates the internal narrative recounted by the vidame de Chartres, her portrait, like Diane's, has a narrative as a centerpiece while scattered scenes enlarge the meaning of that narrative. Chapter 10 shows that when Catherine

confides to the vidame her resentment of the behavior toward her of the Dauphine, Montmorency, and others, she is making a sort of understatement. Elsewhere in the novel Mme de Lafayette fully met her contemporaries' expectations of lifelong treachery and vindictiveness on the part of the Italian-born queen who was to rule France during the Wars of Religion. The portraits of the three figures who dominate the court reveal the extraordinary extent to which it is a disordered and dangerous environment.

After examining narratives and portraits and relating them to the historical traditions early readers knew, I reassess the importance of history in the novel. It is far from being a neutral or gratuitous background for the princess's adventure. As Mme de Lafayette assembled the historical elements of her novel, she was in fact methodically enumerating the evils that fester in the centers of power where history is made. So that readers would not fail to be aware of these evils, she involved her heroine in some of the most sinister ones. She was describing the ravages caused by love and also the disorder and destructiveness that underlie the glitter of courts. Because she accomplished her second purpose with consummate artistry, none of the devices she used to do so lessens the artistic integrity of her novel.