The Princess and the Paradox: Irreconcilable Images in *La Princesse de Clèves*

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The last lines of Madame de Lafayette’s *La Princesse de Clèves* (1678) vaguely document the final days of the heroine, a figure famously torn between marital duty and extramarital passion: “Elle passait une partie de l’année dans cette maison religieuse et l’autre chez elle; mais dans une retraite et dans des occupations plus saintes que celles des couvents les plus austères; et sa vie, qui fut assez courte, laissa des exemples de vertu inimitables” (180). The narratological acceleration towards the princess’s death presents a striking contrast to the text’s much discussed and admired “grande finesse de sentiments” (Valincour 149). Blocking the reader’s access to the mind of the princess (a psychological channel that the work carefully constructs), the ending is all the more jarring in a piece that, in virtue of its characterological title, promises a *portrait*. Like a painted picture in a museum with its accompanying nameplate, the novel’s title frames its content as a cohesive picture of the Princesse de Clèves that is the text *La Princesse de Clèves*. The book’s dissonant dénouement is incorporated into the character of the eponymous heroine in virtue of that frame, and the result is a curious figure that is at once deformed and perfect, a notion suggested by the language of the book’s closing clause: “et sa vie, qui fut assez courte, laissa des exemples de vertu inimitables.” Analyzing the use of maxim and example in the novel, John Lyons summarizes her unique condition: “The heroine is throughout the novel considered different from other women, but this difference is not the sort that can be integrated into a system because there is no one the same as she” (“Maxim” 460). Simultaneously exemplary and inimitable, the princess as a conventional persona thus disappears in a cloud of formal, social, and representational paradoxes at the vexing end of this “first French novel.” What emerges in place of that stable entity is a shifting picture of evolving structures, an image provided by the very notion of *image*, for at the heart of the novel’s layered paradoxes, I will argue here for the first time, is the art of portraiture.

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Despite the general critical consensus that Madame de Lafayette offers the reader a “peinture du cœur” (Coulet I. 252) (emphasis mine) revolutionary in terms of its character development, scholars have traditionally ignored and disparaged her use of literary portraiture, particularly the book's series of initial character sketches. Within the last few decades, critics like Naomi Schor, Eric van der Schueren, Isabelle Ripplinger, Jessica Carpenter, Brigitte Roussel, and Malcolm Cook have drawn attention to the importance of the work's portrait objects: the miniature of the princess stolen by her love interest, the Duc de Nemours, and the painting of Nemours that the princess admires in her garden pavilion. However, the visual portraits that the characters steal, exchange, modify, and admire are only one element of a narratological and philosophical contract that is both brokered and broken via portraiture, a ubiquitous form of artistic expression during the seventeenth century.¹ In addition to those physical portraits, which drive moments of revelation essential to the plot, portraiture is a fundamental element of the text’s language and structure. For example, the novel consistently employs painting metaphors such as “peinture” and “dépeindre,”² and it displays a lengthy “portrait gallery” of salon-style literary sketches that serves as its introductory section.³ Its reliance upon different types of portraiture encourages a fusion of the visual and the verbal to generate a clear picture-story of the princess. Yet, at the same time, the book questions that process, for built into its pictorial economy is an ambiguity finalized in the book’s closing lines that reveals a global representational strategy, the focus of this paper.

The normative function of a portrait, however, runs counter to the notion of ambiguity. Traditionally, the visual portrait aims to commemorate a particular individual (Campbell 193, Pope-Hennessy 8) – to attain a level of accuracy (mixed with idealization, it must be noted) that allows the

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¹ Portraits infused early modern French society in the form of miniatures, paintings, engravings, medals, sculptures, panegyrics, dedications, woodcuts, funeral orations, inscriptions, sketches, and salon set-pieces. Many critics have studied their role in the rise of absolutism under Richelieu and Louis XIV. For more on the forms and meanings of portraits at the time, see, for example, Jean-Marie Apostolidès’s Le Roi-machine: Spectacle et politique au temps de Louis XIV (Paris: Minuit, 1981), Louis Marin’s Le Portrait du roi (Paris: Minuit, 1981), Erica Harth’s Ideology and Culture in Seventeenth-Century France (Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1983), and Peter Burke’s The Fabrication of Louis XIV (New Haven: Yale UP, 1992).
² For example, the princess’s mother “faisait souvent à sa fille des peintures de l’amour” (41).
³ Harth (214-15) and Roger Duchêne (70) also refer to the opening section as a “portrait gallery.”
viewer to recognize a particular model. Peter Brooks, when evaluating the “novels of worldliness” of the following century, suggests a similar goal for the written *portrait mondain*. Aiming to “fix someone,” the conventional literary portrait “signifies total knowledge about another person, total clarity of perception, total expression in language. It means an arrest of the movement of human life in a stasis of words, the metaphorical expression of an essence rather than a narrative development” (16). Brooks indicates that the literary sketch seeks to merge individual and text by compressing the sitter’s temporal and spatial existence into a describable point. The introductory section of *La Princesse de Clèves*, which comprises a series of concise salon-style literary portraits, seems at first to enact that reduction and, hence, to respond to the basic promise of portraiture. Although an object of criticism from the outset (notably by Valincour in the famous *Lettres à Madame La Marquise *** sur le sujet de La Princesse de Clèves*) (1678), the initial pages of the novel use set-piece literary portraits to describe the real and fictional members of the court of Henri II. The embedded sketches largely follow the formula for compact, flattering moral depiction established by Mademoiselle de Scudéry’s *Artamène ou Le Grand Cyrus* (1649-53) and codified in collections like Mademoiselle de Montpensier’s *Divers portraits* (1659), which features a portrait of Madame de Sévigné written by Madame de Lafayette (313-17). The reader first glimpses the princess through the lens of such a concise, idealized sketch:

> Il parut alors une beauté à la cour, qui attira les yeux de tout le monde, et l'on doit croire que c'était une beauté parfaite, puisqu'elle donna de l'admiration dans un lieu où l'on était si accoutumé à voir de belles personnes. […] La blancheur de son teint et ses cheveux blonds lui donnaient un éclat que l'on n'a jamais vu qu'à elle; tous ses traits étaient réguliers, et son visage et sa personne étaient pleins de grâce et de charmes. (40-1)

Introduced by an *alexandrin*, albeit one that lacks a caesura, and steeped in the conventions of literary portraiture, the description aggressively inserts itself into familiar literary frameworks of the period. In keeping with the written portrait’s normative goal of clear, truthful description (a claim that many of the *portraits mondains* make in their opening lines), the initial set-

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4 Key studies on the forms and functions of the *portrait mondain* are Jacqueline Plantié’s *La Mode du Portrait littéraire en France (1641-1681)* (Paris: Champion, 1994), Jean Lafond’s *Lire, vivre où mènent les mots: De Rabelais aux formes brèves de la prose* (Paris: Champion, 1999), and Harth’s *Ideology and Culture in Seventeenth-Century France*.

5 Madame de Lafayette’s own entry in the *Divers portraits* provides an example of the shared concern with authenticity. Addressing her subject, Madame de Sévigné, she
piece of the princess presents the reader with a crystal of perfection – an ideal starting point for the story of her adventures and trials.

Madame de Lafayette’s novel, by contrast, does not present a series of peripeteia that leads to the happy marriage of the heroine as found in the romance, and the major formal changes that the novel heralds play themselves out in her unconventional use of portraiture. The novel’s narratological swerve from the codes of both the romance and nouvelle, particularly its focus on interiority, is interwoven with its expansion of the portrait’s form and functions. Its psychological exploration of the heroine begins that process by challenging the unity – the “fixing” quality – of the initial sketch of the heroine. The novel allows the princess to expand beyond her idealized set-piece by means of a developing penetration of her thoughts, a technique applied only briefly to other characters. The radical shift in the text’s strategy of depiction begins after her first encounter with the Duc de Nemours at the royal ball, when “Madame de Clèves revint chez elle, l’esprit si rempli de tout ce qui s’était passé” (54). Her subsequent encounters with the duke make “une grande impression dans son cœur” (55), an attachment that forces her through the emotional landscape of denial, jealousy, passion, guilt, avowal, and self-deprivation. Madame de Clèves’s interior monologues increasingly overtake the narrator’s voice, as in the following scene that takes place after the princess works closely with Nemours to forge a letter in order to protect her uncle from the wrath of the queen. Consisting of a series of questions, it suggests the tentative, transitory nature of the heroine’s emotional self-exposure and, indeed, of the innovative narratological project:


declares (under the cloak of pseudo-anonymity), “je m’en vais vous peindre bien hardiment, & vous dire toutes vos veritez tout à mon aise” (313-14).

Focusing instead on their ability to “depict a believable personality composed of both good and bad” (215), Harth also discusses the book’s innovative literary portraits.

For example, the reader discovers the thoughts of Nemours in a passage following his final exchange with the princess: “M. de Nemours […] était si plein de joie, de tristesse, d’étonnement et d’admiration, enfin, de tous les sentiments que peut donner une passion pleine de crainte et d’espérance, qu’il n’avait pas l’usage de la raison” (176).
Such extended invitations into the princess’s mind are revoked at the narrator’s terse summary of her final days, the point at which Madame de Clèves disappears on many levels – from le monde (in both senses) and from the private space in the text where she voices her thoughts. Outside of the narrative frame, the dénouement removes the subject from her own ongoing self-portrait; the text strips the soul from its own “vérité d’âme” (Coulet I. 257) as the picture collapses back into the generic, superlative expressions of the initial encomium, now more like the related genre of the funeral oration. Like Nemours, who, in the end, can only view the princess through frames (his window overlooking her garden) and speak with her through intermediaries (the trusted servant who delivers her final message to him), the reader must negotiate the narrator’s ultimate obstructions to make sense of the novel. The portrait is terminated in a hasty and, hence, unsatisfactory way as compared to the expansive accounts of the heroine’s intrigues and emotional states. The ensuing published debates in Le Mercure galant and in treatises like that of Valincour – not only about the verisimilitude of the princess’s famous avowal to her husband, but also about her choices – prove that the picture of the princess lacks cohesion in this “puzzling masterpiece” (Hyman 15). The final acceleration and compression challenge the work’s pictorial project at the same time as it fails (purposefully) to meet readerly expectations regarding certain narrative strategies of the romance, most obviously the refusal of the marriage plot. Moreover, while the novel at first exploits the art of literary sketching in a conventional way, it reshapes the art to deliver a new type of four-dimensional picture: a portrait that merges with narrative. The novel, however, destabilizes its own portrait-story when it “ends on a disturbingly irresolute note” (218) as Harth and many scholars before her also notice. The result is a paradox of portraiture, a blurred

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8 The princess divulges to Monsieur de Clèves that she wishes to distance herself from court life because of her inclination for another man (Nemours): “Eh, bien, monsieur, lui répondit-elle en se jetant à ses genoux, je vais vous faire un aveu que l’on n’a jamais fait à son mari; mais l’innocence de ma conduite et de mes intentions m’en donne la force. Il est vrai que j’ai des raisons de m’éloigner de la cour et que je veux éviter les périls où se trouvent quelquefois les personnes de mon âge. Je n’ai jamais donné nulle marque de faiblesses et je ne craindrais pas d’en laisser paraître si vous me laissez la liberté de me retirer de la cour” (122).

image that denies portraiture’s basic tenet of authentic depiction in spite of the novel’s prior efforts and indicators to the contrary.

The mechanics of the dénouement perform the text’s central maxim voiced by the princess’s mother: “Si vous jugez sur les apparences en ce lieu-ci, [...] vous serez souvent trompée: ce qui paraît n’est presque jamais la vérité” (56). The formal uncertainty of the work’s layered portraits is thus closely related to its intense discussion of paradoxical social practices. The disparity between être and paraître – between the characters’ flawless, noble masks and their complicated, often perverse private lives – is a clear object of social criticism. Through its anecdotes of courtly intrigue, the novel challenges the initial gallery of the “nombre infini de princes et de grands seigneurs d’un mérite extraordinaire” (36) to reveal those images as a collective role in a highly theatrical society. The book presents in grand format Jean de La Bruyère’s cynical statement in Les Caractères (1688) about rampant duplicity (a common refrain in period memoirs and courtesy books): “Dans cent ans le monde subsistera encore en son entier: ce sera le même théâtre et les mêmes décorations, ce ne seront plus les mêmes acteurs” (VIII. 99).10

Despite enormous social pressure, the princess resists the role assigned to her as a desirable, young favorite during a time when “la magnificence et la galanterie” (35) reigned. Trying to be rather than seem a faithful wife by means of the aveu, the heroine fuses two principal period definitions of the term honnête: “vertueux, conforme à l’honneur et à la vertu” and “civil, courtois, poly” (569-70).11 She thus attempts to close the seeming-being gap in which members of the court of Henri II (and that of Louis XIV) play their identity games, but her effort fails because of its implausibility. News of the “private” admission spreads rapidly at court as Nemours divulges what he has overheard at Coulommiers, the Clèves’s country estate, and the characters unanimously pronounce the confession “extraordinaire” (125, 131) and “guère vraisemblable” (132). The novel further emphasizes the singularity of the event within the frame of the story. In the heroine’s

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11 These are two of the definitions, in order, appearing in the Dictionnaire de l’Académie of 1694. The distinction is also apparent in the Richelet dictionary of 1680, in which the first definition of honnête is “Ce qui est souhaitable à cause de lui-même, & ce qui mérite de la louange; ainsi [La vertu est honnête].” Additional definitions related to bienséance include “Qui a de l’honnêteté, de la civilité & de l’honneur” and “Ce mot se dit des choses, & signifie civil, plein d’honneur, galant, qui marque de la conduite,” etc. (405).
preamble to the _aveu_, she states to Monsieur de Clèves, “je vais vous faire un aveu que l’on n’a jamais fait à son mari” (122), and, in a prior scene, Madame la Dauphine scolds the princess for being truthful to her husband: “il n’y a que vous de femme au monde qui fasse confiance à son mari de toutes les choses qu’elle sait” (116). Frequently using the same adjective – “extraordinaire”\(^\text{12}\) – the opinion of Madame de Lafayette’s readership largely parallels that of her characters. Joan DeJean interprets the general tone of readers’ reactions (as documented most famously in a series of letters published in _Le Mercure galant_) as one of incredulity: “Their responses are marked above all by a sense of the _novelty_ of such behavior: one reader, for example, contrasts ‘husbands today’ with their precursors. Others are taken aback by what they consider an excess of honesty” (117).

Gérard Genette explains that their disbelief (and, in his opinion, hostility) stems from the fact that the avowal is “une action sans maxime” (75): “Le récit vraisemblable est donc un récit dont les actions répondent, comme autant d’applications ou de cas particuliers, à un corps de maximes reçues comme vraies par le public auquel il s’adresse” (76). The uproar over the confession both inside and outside the story’s frame indicates that it did not have social currency, and modern critics like DeJean interpret that opposition as proof of the novel’s subversion of the reigning patriarchal system. As Harth theorizes, the princess’s “option was limited by the primary desire prescribed to her by a male ideology: to fulfill her role as wife and/or mistress. […] Her idiosyncrasy is her freedom, for within an aristocratic, male ideological preserve, she asserts her individuality” (213).

However, the “prescribed” messages that bombard the princess throughout the novel lack cohesion. The dauphine’s reaction reveals the source of the princess’s predicament: the fact that she faces a double bind, a psychological trap resulting from contradictory commands. Unable to fulfill the conflicting desires of both male and female figures of authority, including her mother, husband, potential lover, uncle, and various members of the royal family, the heroine is compelled, “sans en avoir presque le dessein” (125), to admit her feelings for Nemours to her husband. That radical, “almost” involuntary response makes the princess extremely

\(^{12}\) In a letter, Bussy-Rabutin declares, “l’aveu de Mme de Clèves à son mari est extravagant et ne se peut dire que dans une histoire véritable; mais quand on en fait une à plaisir, il est ridicule de donner à son héroïne un sentiment si extraordinaire” (4:141-42). Valincour in _Lettres à Madame la Marquise_ *** finds that such “extraordinary” events are only found in romances: “je ne sais si je me trompe, mais il me semble que ces manières d’incidents si extraordinaires sentent trop l’histoire à dix volumes: il n’était rien de plus aisé que de rendre la chose naturelle et croyable” (111).
vulnerable in a society that demands dissimulation while pretending otherwise. The ongoing misery and death of the heroine suggest a critique of the moral and social conundrum faced by women of *le monde*, whose duties, established by the Church and court, involve a dangerous mix of authenticity and falsehood. Confused and anguished by the consequences of her decision to be truthful, she first resorts to isolation and then perishes in silence, a narratological and social exile both stated and staged in the novel’s dénouement.

Is her fate, however, justified by her final assumption of the status of an exemplum, a model used, as John Lyons explains, to “provide clarification” and “demonstrate the truth” (Exemplum x) of a general directive? The final clause of the novel claims as much (“sa vie, qui fut assez courte, laissa des exemples de vertu inimitables”), yet both past and present readers of *La Princesse de Clèves* have puzzled over the “uncertainty of its moral vision” (Levi 62). The devastation resulting from the choices of the princess is the novel’s most obvious source of moral ambiguity, but the fact that she willingly deceives others on many occasions (for example, she lies to avoid social engagements and forges a letter to protect her uncle) occasions reflection upon her role as an authentic model of behavior. The lack of clarity also stems from the complexity of the very idea of the exemplum, a common rhetorical device at the time. Lyons argues that its use often complicates and problematizes an argument as a function of its multiple meanings.

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13 Madame de Clèves describes the avowal as a “confiance extraordinaire, ou pour mieux dire, folle” (135) (emphasis mine), and the novel presents her mental state as one of near-madness on several occasions. For example, after her husband’s death, “elle perdit quasi l’usage de la raison” (164), and, after refusing Nemours, the princess, “dont l’esprit avait été si agité, tomba dans une maladie violente sitôt qu’elle fut arrivée chez elle” (178).

14 Lyons’s full definition of an example is that it is “a dependent statement qualifying a more general and independent statement by naming a member of the class established by the general statement. An example cannot exist without (a) a general statement and (b) an indication of this subordinate status. Moreover, examples are most frequently used to (c) provide clarification of the general statement and (d) demonstrate the truth of the general statement.” (x)

15 After the king’s jousting accident, Madame de Clèves chooses to remain at home to avoid meeting Nemours in the presence of her husband rather than attend the dying king. Indeed, the novel presents the fact that she “prit le parti de feindre d’être malade” as a self-indulgent gesture: “Ainsi elle demeura chez elle, peu occupée du grand changement qui se préparait; et, remplie de ses propres pensées, elle avait toute la liberté de s’y abandonner” (143).
meanings to different recipients.\textsuperscript{16} The example is meant to demonstrate a certain framing idea (in the case of the princess, a meticulous attention to duty and an extreme virtue), but both the parallel story that is the example and the “big idea” that it is meant to support are, at their core, hardly transparent. Compounding the basic ambiguity of the example in \textit{La Princesse de Clèves} is its final presentation of the paradoxical idea of the inimitable example, a model that others cannot follow. In light of the early deaths of both the heroine and her husband, the book further suggests that it should not be followed (even if the model were clear enough to follow). The heroine anticipates that curious singularity during a heated exchange with her husband after each accuses the other of indiscretion about the avowal: “Ah, monsieur […] il n’y a pas dans le monde une autre aventure pareille à la mienne; il n’y a point une autre femme capable de la même chose” (136).

Alone in her room after the same dispute, Madame de Clèves links her inimitability to the idea of resemblance: “je me trouve comme les autres femmes, étant si éloignée de leur ressembler” (138). She recognizes that she seems immoral to others by means of society’s expectations of her even though she claims not to resemble that image. The princess therefore refuses the act of posing, which is at the foundation both of mondanité (as suggested by the novel’s central maxim) and of portraiture. She wagers that if she actively rejects the pose of the coquette, the image that others hold of her as an unfaithful wife will not exist, but, as she realizes herself, others frame and pose her regardless of her actions. The best example of that phenomenon is the contradictory accusation of her dying husband, whose only physical evidence of her infidelity is the painted miniature stolen by Nemours.\textsuperscript{17} Monsieur de Clèves characterizes himself as “si cruellement trompé” (162) by a wife who feigns grief: “Vous versez bien des pleurs, madame, lui dit-il, pour une mort que vous causez et qui ne vous peut donner la douleur que vous faites paraître” (161). At the same time, he

\textsuperscript{16} Lyons makes the case for the ambiguity and flexibility of examples throughout his critical study \textit{Exemplum: The Rhetoric of Example in Early Modern France and Italy} (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1989).

\textsuperscript{17} During the avowal scene, Monsieur de Clèves counters his wife’s claim never to have acted upon her inclination for Nemours (“Contentez-vous de l’assurance que je vous donne encore, qu’aucune de mes actions n’a fait paraître mes sentiments”) with his version of the event of the stolen miniature: “Ah! madame, […] je ne vous saurais croire. Je me souviens de l’embarras où vous fûtes le jour que votre portrait se perdit. Vous avez donné, madame, vous avez donné ce portrait qui m’était si cher et qui m’appartenait si légitimement. Vous n’avez pas pu cacher vos sentiments; vous aimez, on le sait” (124).
blames the princess’s truthfulness for his death by admonishing her for not following the social practice of dissimulation: “Que ne me laissez-vous dans cet aveuglement tranquille dont jouissent tant de maris?” (162). Presenting “des choses tout opposées” (177), as the novel states on many occasions, the text displays a series of irreconcilable images that denies neat social and moral conclusions.

The book’s ongoing internal debates about truth and selfhood, when viewed through the lens of portraiture, seem manifestations of a deeper discussion regarding the complex relationship of representation and reality. As the above discussions and examples suggest, the interaction of the vrai and the vraisemblable, words that crop up frequently in the text, is the philosophical engine of the work. The portrait, an art form that simultaneously indicates contradictory ontological and emotional states – “absence et présence, plaisir et déplaisir” (291) in the words of Pascal – is the ideal vehicle to illustrate the paradoxical process of attaching the same meaning (here, identity) to both people and things. Indeed, the portrait’s unique ability to substitute for its putatively real model is performed during the scene of the portrait dérobé, in which the courtiers focus their attention on the miniatures instead of on the princess. The other characters, as do we, experience her through a frame of art and convention that allows them to see what they wish to see. That social reflex suggests the fluidity of representation and so-called reality, and it breaks down the dichotomy to suggest, rather, a state of being in many ways mediated by art.

At the end of Madame de Lafayette’s text, portraiture fails to fulfill its traditional function to provide a clear picture. However, its great flexibility and power to shape reality are fully recognizable by virtue of a dénouement that purposefully blurs the heroine’s image even as it “finishes” the novel. The final focus is therefore on the ambiguity lodged in the process of depiction rather than on the depicted object. That conclusion reconciles on certain levels the opposing interpretations of the novel’s peculiar ending, characterized by, on one hand, the princess’s “sad defeat” and, on the other hand, her assumption of “control of her life” (DeJean 123). The Princesse de

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18 For example, after her husband’s death, the princess concludes that seeing Nemours is “une chose entièrement opposée à son devoir” (168) and finds that “son devoir et son repos s’opposaient au penchant qu’elle avait d’être a lui [Nemours]” (180).

19 The narrator gives an example of that complexity during the conversation between the princess and her dying husband: “la vérité se persuade si aisément lors même qu’elle n’est pas vraisemblable, que M. de Clèves fut presque convaincu de son innocence” (163).

20 I have used the fragment number in the 1976 Sellier edition of Les Pensées.
Clèves as a character disappears at the end of the novel at the same time as the global, though self-contradictory, depiction of her (known also as *La Princesse de Clèves*) emerges as a referent that has clear agency, not least because of its ability to spur aesthetic debate both in the seventeenth century and the twenty-first. Denying everything that the text seemingly represents, the final sentence of the book demands that the reader reconsider the codes of prose fiction, social interaction, and depiction. In short, it calls into question our expectations of life and literature.

**Works Cited**


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