The Female Threshold: On Paratext and Gender in Lafayette’s La Princesse de Montpensier

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I.

Ever since Gérard Genette’s classic study, a consensus has existed on the central influence of the discourses and strategies of paratexts on the reception of literary works.¹ These zones of transition from ‘non-text to text’ are sites where the text is presented to the public, in which it becomes a book in the first place.²

The metaphors such as “vestibule” (Borges) or “threshold” (Genette), which are used to describe paratexts, already signal their important function in mediating between ‘inside’ and ‘outside’, between the producer (the author and/or publisher) on the one hand and the consumer (the reader and/or literary criticism) on the other. How a text is presented by means of its paratexts affects not just its immediate and long-term reception, but also the positioning of its author in the literary field and his or her place in the canon.

These processes are by no means gender neutral, but there has been little reflection thus far on the relationship between paratext and gender. Only a few studies have raised the question of the gender-specific functions of paratexts. Charlotte Simonin, for example, illustrates the dynamic of peritext, reception, and gender in an essay on the work of Madame de

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² Genette: 1.
Villedieu,³ while Nancy Miller has shown for the new editions of several novels by Tencin, Graffigny, Riccoboni, and Charrière how strongly book jackets model the current reception of eighteenth-century French female authors as “women’s literature,”—since cover illustrations portray them as erotic *romans de femmes*, an image far removed from the socio-political implications of these texts.⁴ A systematic inclusion of the influence of para-texts on the mechanisms of reception is therefore not coincidentally part of the European research network “Women Writers in History,” which has taken on the task of redefining women’s role in the literary field as authors, translators, mediators, and educators.⁵

In what follows, we would like to illustrate the relationship between paratext, gender, and reception for the case of an author who occupies a secure but rigidly defined place in the French literary canon: Marie-Madeleine de Lafayette (1634-1693). Lafayette is generally considered the ‘inventor’ of the psychological novel, the *roman d’analyse*, which focuses on love, especially the painstaking dissection of the lovers’ emotions, and a pessimistic attitude towards the *amour passion*. The precise temporal location of her plots in a not-so-distant French historical past, the manifold references to documented historical persons and events have been viewed as a literary strategy subordinate to this aim, a strategy whose function it is to guarantee a more realistic portrayal of the protagonists and their feelings than it was possible in the hitherto dominant heroic-gallant novel.

Some literary critics have already qualified this assessment. Joan DeJean in particular has proposed that the exclusive concentration on psychological analysis amounts to a depoliticized reception of Lafayette’s novels, which only has allowed her to enter the canon at the expense of downplaying political aspects.⁶ We would like to demonstrate this thesis by studying the paratexts and their reception in criticism of *La Princesse de Montpensier* (1662). Our reflections will focus on what Genette refers to as

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⁵ See the research project’s Internet presentation: [http://www.womenwriters.nl/index.php/Women_writers’_networks](http://www.womenwriters.nl/index.php/Women_writers’_networks) (June 29, 2011). Our remarks draw inspiration from Annette Keilhauer, who has prepared an overview study of paratexts in the framework of the research project.

⁶ “The most important consequence of Lafayette’s reception into the canon to replace the female tradition has been the evacuation of the political and social content of her fiction.” Joan DeJean, *Tender Geographies. Women and the Origins of the Novel in France*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1991: 103.
the *peritexts*, the textual elements “around the text and within the same volume,”7 which the critical literature has not yet treated systematically. Genette devotes the largest part of his study to the peritext of the preface, and it is here that he makes the most classificatory distinctions. For Genette, a preface is any “type of introductory (préludial or postludial) text, authorial or allographic, consisting of a discourse produced on the subject of the text which follows or precedes it.”8 It can be an introduction, a foreword, prologue or prelude, or a postface, afterword or postscript. If we follow Genette, the most important function of original prefaces is to serve as an instrument of “authorial control”. Forewords are “declarations of intent.”9 The prefaces to novels played a prominent role particularly in the seventeenth century, and were therefore also so numerous, since the novel was after all a new genre, which had yet to develop both its own self-understanding and a relationship to its readers.10

In Lafayette’s case, the original editions of all of her novels were already equipped with a preface: Like *La Princesse de Montpensier* (1662), *La Princesse de Clèves* (1678) contains a peritext entitled “Le libraire au lecteur”. The peritext to *Zayde* (1670) represents an entire poetics of the novel, namely Huet’s prominent treatise “De l’origine des romans.”11 Only the preface to the *Histoire de Madame Henriette d’Angleterre* (published posthumously in 1720) is marked as an authentic authorial document.

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7 Genette: 4; in distinction to this, Genette uses the term “*epitexts*” for all of the textual elements “located outside the book,” for example interviews, letters or diaries. Genette: 5.
8 Genette: 161.
9 Genette: 222.
La Princesse de Montpensier, Lafayette’s first, initially anonymously published, novel, enjoyed great success with the contemporary reading public. Two new editions appeared the year it was published, and another ten during the author’s lifetime; the 1679 edition published by Thomas Amaulry in Lyon was the first to mention the author’s name. The titles of the series in which La Princesse de Montpensier was included offer the first indicators of a depoliticizing and dehistoricizing reception of the novel: in 1684 the novel appeared as part of the Recueil de pieces galantes en prose et en vers de Mme la comtesse de la Suse et de Monsieur Pellison, a collection that went through seven new editions up to the eighteenth century. In 1741, the novel was published in the Bibliothèque de Campagne ou Amusements de l’esprit et du cœur, which went through two new editions. Finally, in 1826 the Paris publishing house of Werdet et Lequien printed La Princesse de Montpensier in its Collection des meilleurs romans français dédiée aux Dames.

This channeling of reception towards the novel’s semantics of love was promoted by changes to the original title; thus Beaunier refers to a manuscript version of the novel entitled Histoire touchant les amours de la duchesse de Montpensier avec le duc de Guise dict le balafré, which erroneously

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15  According to Genette, “[t]he series emblem... amplifies the publisher’s emblem, immediately indicating to the potential reader the type of work, if not the genre, he is dealing with...”, Genette: 22.

16  Ashton: 911.

17  Ashton: 910.
names not the princesse de Montpensier but her mother-in-law the duchesse de Montpensier as the protagonist.¹⁸

The novel’s reduction to its ‘amours’, whatever their nature, is by no means unproblematic: La Princesse de Montpensier is not merely the name of a documented contemporary of Charles IX, who gave the novel its title; readers also associated the name with a very prominent woman of their own era, Anne-Marie Louise d’Orléans, duchesse de Montpensier, known as ‘La Grande Mademoiselle’ (1627–1693). To this day, literary criticism has either ignored these parallels or ventured absurd theories to explain them away. This is all the more bewildering since the preface entitled “Le libraire au lecteur” addresses this matter explicitly. It reads as follows:

Le libraire au lecteur

Le respect que l’on doit à l’illustre nom qui est à la tête de ce livre, et la considération que l’on doit avoir pour les éminentes personnes qui sont descendues de ceux qui l’ont porté m’oblige de dire, pour ne pas manquer envers les uns ni les autres en donnant cette histoire au public, qu’elle n’a été tirée d’aucun manuscrit qui nous soit demeuré du temps des personnes dont elle parle. L’auteur ayant voulu, pour son divertissement, écrire des aventures inventées à plaisir, a jugé plus à propos de prendre des noms connus dans nos histoires que de se servir de ceux que l’on trouve dans les romans, croyant bien que la réputation de Mme de Montpensier ne serait pas blessée par un récit effectivement fabuleux. Si l’il n’est pas de ce sentiment, j’y supplée par cet avertissement qui sera aussi avantageux à l’auteur que respectueux pour moi envers les morts qui y sont intéressés et envers les vivants qui pourraient y prendre part.¹⁹


Tracing the ‘fate’ of the preface to *La Princesse de Montpensier* in literary criticism, one discovers that it has been dealt with in one of three ways:

1. In new editions of the novel the preface is left out altogether, or printed only as a footnote or excerpt. This is the case in the classic editions by André Beaunier (1926) and Micheline Cuénin (1979) as well as in the recent edition prepared by Martine Reid for the series “Femmes de lettres”. The textual edifice is thereby robbed of its “vestibule”, and the reader enters directly into the novel without crossing a threshold. In this instance, the preface is expressly not viewed as part of the novel, and is denied any function whatsoever.

2. Like the title, the preface is read as a purely external homage to the living princesse de Montpensier. Thus Sonya Stephens writes in her *History of Women’s Writing in France*:

   In the case of *La Princesse de Montpensier*, while the novel’s preface states that the work is entirely fictional—and thus does not relate the history of the real sixteenth-century princess—Lafayette most likely chose that particular figure to pay homage to her friend, La Grande Mademoiselle, duchesse de Montpensier.

   Jean Mesnard, too, rejects any historical and political implications in favor of such an homage, which in his view also represented a marketing strategy:

   Les noms propres appellent, à cet égard, un commentaire particulier. De la cour d’Henri II à celle de Louis XIV, les grandes familles étaient, pour une part, démeurées les mêmes. Les deux cours ont connu un prince de Condé, un duc de Nevers, un duc de Nemours, un duc de Guise, un duc d’Anville. Mme de Lafayette ne joue-t-elle pas de ces ressemblances pour réaliser une sorte d’interpénétration entre le présent et le passé? On peut en juger par le cas de la nouvelle de *La Princesse de Montpensier*, dont le nom, comme l’on sait, était porté, au temps de Louis XIV, par la Grande Mademoiselle. Or en tête de la nouvelle, l’auteur, en faisant allusion à cette homonymie, souligne la distance, d’ailleurs évidente, qui sépare l’héroïne de roman et la cousine de Louis XIV. Si le prestige de celle qui était en même temps première princesse de sang et l’une des animatrices les plus brillantes de la

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21 Charlotte Simonin’s explanation for the similar absence of peritexts in new editions of the works of Madame de Villedieu is that the publishers did not wish to waste costly paper on what they regarded as “textes obsoletes.” Simonin: 167, n. 37.

vie mondaine a pu déterminer le titre de la nouvelle et le choix de l’héroïne, c’est parce qu’il était possible de lui adresser ainsi une sorte d’hommage et de produire un effet de curiosité, nullement pour superposer deux époques.  

3. The preface—and this appears to be the version preferred by academic criticism—is taken literally as a note from the publisher stating that any similarity to persons living or dead was unintentional and that the novel was a work of pure fiction. To borrow Genette’s terminology, this preface thus honors a “contract of fiction,” which uses “professions of fictiveness” to warn readers against looking for “applications”, that is, possible counterparts in real life. The preface is read here as authentically allographic, that is, composed by an actual third person, in this case the bookseller-publisher (“le libraire”) Claude Barbin. The title’s bold allusion to the Grande Mademoiselle lends the preface a “conciliating” and “apologetic” function. This is the argument of Roger Duchêne, editor of the newest edition of Lafayette’s complete works (1990):

Montpensier, Guise, Anjou, autant de noms toujours portés et toujours vivants au moment où le roman paraît. Au point que l’éditeur s’en excuse. La réputation de Mme de Montpensier ne saurait, dit-il, «être blessée par un récit effectivement fabuleux». Curieux renversement de perspective. Mme de Lafayette a si bien donné l’illusion de la réalité qu’il faut rappeler que son livre est une fiction, rien de plus. Duchêne trivializes the author’s reference to her renowned contemporary, and attributes it to Lafayette’s instrumentalization by her friend Ménage, who had only been trying to ‘get one over’ on his archenemy, the Abbé Cotin, a protégé of the Grande Mademoiselle:

Elle [l’anecdote] montre que le sujet du roman n’était pas entièrement innocent. Ménage a dû mêler un peu de malice à ses encouragements quand sa tendre amie s’est mise à conter l’aventure peu glorieuse d’une des aïeules de la protectrice de son ennemi, l’abbé Cotin. A l’austère beauté d’un fait fictif élevé au rang d’épisode tragique de l’histoire de France s’ajoutait un

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24 Genette: 216ss.

léger parfum de mystère et de scandale. Raison de plus pour demeurer dans l’anonymat.26

The general scholarly consensus that the text “Le libraire au lecteur” was an authentically allographic preface appears highly unusual. In similar cases, scholars tend to assume that such messages from the bookseller or publisher constitute “fictive allographic”27 or at least “apocryphal allographic” prefaces.28 No one dreams, for instance, of taking the *Avertissement de l’éditeur* in *Les Liaisons dangereuses*, in which the editor also claims that the work is mere fiction, at face value (“... nous avons même de fortes raisons de penser que ce n’est qu’un Roman”29). Rather, *Les Liaisons dangereuses* has always and unanimously been perceived and canonized as a critical mirror held up to the morals of its time and no one has ever assumed that the author of the *Avertissement* was the actual publisher. Strangely enough, in the case of the *Princesse de Montpensier* only a few studies suggest this interpretation. Emile Magne makes the strongest argument in his classic monograph of 1927. He asserts that “Le libraire au lecteur” was written jointly by Lafayette and Segrais at the insistence of the publisher Barbin, who, because of the novel’s prominent namesake, feared difficulties from the real princesse de Montpensier. Magne adds that the two writers handled the task quite elegantly by giving the preface a promotional turn.30 To use Genette’s categories, Magne regarded the text as a pseudo-allographic and crypto-authorial preface. Magne unfortunately cites no sources, and the literature also offers no evidence either for his claim or for the assertion that Barbin penned the preface.

The status assigned to the preface is by no means insignificant for the interpretation of the novel. While the authentically allographic version may be considered a contract of fiction, which was intended to protect the author or, in the case of the anonymously published *Princesse de Montpensier*, the publisher, from being sued for libel, the pseudo-allographic/crypto-authorial version also serves an additional function that one should not underestimate: it marks the texts as inauthentic speech, which suggests a reception ‘from an opposite perspective.’ The inauthentic nature of the preface virtually demands that the reader search for the text’s truth

27 “... the preface-writer is fictive.” Genette: 189 and 288ss.
28 “… the attribution [of the preface] to a real person is invalidated by some para-textual sign.” Genette: 179.
content and reference to reality.31 Tellingly, in the few cases in which scholars have read “Le libraire au lecteur” in the pseudo-allographic/crypto-authorial version, they overlook this function. Martine Reid argues that with La Princesse de Montpensier, the author wrote a “recit effectivement fabuleux” for her own amusement: “Mme de Lafayette rappelle ainsi qu’elle s’est autorisée quelques libertés à l’égard de l’histoire véridique, sur laquelle elle a toutefois pris de se documenter soigneusement.”32 Reid fails to see that the preface contains a very obvious hint that the author expected (and probably desired) a reception that created a connection with the living Mademoiselle de Montpensier.

S’il [le lecteur] n’est pas de ce sentiment, j’y supplée par cet avertissement qui sera aussi advantageous à l’auteur que respectueux pour moi envers les morts qui y sont intéressés et envers les vivants qui pourraient y prendre part.33

That the narrative was intended to be read in the context of current events is evident here. In the case of the Princesse de Montpensier, this intention is all too plausible, since it is impossible to ignore the novel’s contemporary political implications.

III.

As was mentioned above, at the time when the novel appeared ‘la princesse de Montpensier’ was not simply the name of a historical figure: for contemporary readers, ‘la princesse de Montpensier’ also referred to Anne-Marie Louise d’Orléans (1627-1693), the Grande Mademoiselle, the highest-ranking noblewoman and the wealthiest woman in France.34 Henri IV was her grandfather, and her father Gaston d’Orléans (known as ‘Monsieur’) was

31 Genette: 211.
32 Reid: 19, n. 1.
33 Cf. n. 19.
the uncle of Louis XIV. She was a major figure in the Fronde, had commanded an army dressed in men’s clothing alongside Condé on the side of the insurgent nobles, and even gained modest military victories. For that Louis XIV had banished her from Paris and the court in 1653—doubtless the most severe punishment for a member of her class. She withdrew to her country estate in Saint-Fargeau, where she gathered an elite coterie of writers and artists, among them two learned men who would significantly influence the development of the new genre of the novel, and later became close collaborators of Marie-Madeleine de Lafayette: Pierre-Daniel Huet and Jean Regnault de Segrais. Montpensier also began to write. Among other texts she composed the first part of her Mémoires, a unique document of their time and so politically explosive that they could only be published after the death of Louis XIV.35

By the summer of 1657, when she was once again permitted at court, she had discovered that life also existed away from the center, and she left Paris again only a few months later. Champigny-sur-Veude—the scene of La Princesse de Montpensier—was a symbolic locale, since the palace had belonged to her family. Her father had ceded it to Cardinal Richelieu under duress—an act of “tyrannie” and “abus” upon which the Grande Made-moiselle comments extensively in her Mémoires.36 Once she reached her majority, she spent years seeking legal recourse—ultimately successfully—for this incursion by the central authorities, which her father had tolerated. She triumphantly reports in her Mémoires on the “joie infinite” that she felt when the property was returned to her.37 During her second “exile” in 1658 she dedicated her time to a literary project, the Divers portraits—a collection of biographical sketches of the most significant personages in the French high nobility. Because of their psychological portrayals, these portraits are now considered an important milestone for the development of the novel.38

36 Mémoires: 43ss.
Of the 59 portraits, Montpensier wrote seventeen personally; the other authors were often former Frondeurs or members of families associated with the Fronde, such as Marie-Madeleine de Lafayette, who made her literary debut here with a portrait of her best friend, the marquise de Sévigné. How great the distance between the great noblewoman Montpensier and the center of the courtly world was, however, became evident at the very moment when she again fulfilled her duty at court. In the spring of 1660 she was a member of the pompous retinue that accompanied the twenty-two-year-old Louis XIV to the Spanish border to meet his bride, the Spanish infanta Maria Teresia—a marriage that was quite obviously an act of state based on power political calculation. Against this backdrop, during one stage of the journey in Saint-Jean-de-Luz Montpensier conducted discussions with a court lady of her acquaintance, Madame de Motteville, which culminated in a correspondence that can only be called spectacular. Joan DeJean, who published the eight letters in their entirety for the first time in 2002, quite rightly entitled the collection *Against Marriage*.\(^{39}\) For this correspondence is devoted to no less a cause than the militant rejection of the institution of marriage, which the correspondents apparently could only conceive of as “esclavage”:

... ce qui a donné la supériorité aux hommes a été le mariage, et ce qui nous a fait nommer le sexe fragile a été cette dépendance où l’usage nous a assujetties souvent contre notre volonté et par des raisons de famille dont nous avons été les victimes. Enfin tirons-nous de l’esclavage, qu’il y ait un coin du monde où l’on puisse dire que les femmes sont maîtresses d’elles-mêmes.... (46)

Montpensier and her correspondent elaborately imagine this “coin du monde” as a “champêtre République” (38), a bucolic, gynocratic commonwealth. This model can be viewed as the reverse of absolute monarchy and its rigid behavioral codes to the extent that all of the characteristics of court life are replaced by their polar opposite: courtly pomp by simple dress, palaces by “petites maisons... dont le seul ornement serait la netteté,” (38) and the “turbulentes agitations de la Cour” by “repos” (38). The degree to which the princess of royal blood remained wedded to strict authoritarian thought, however, is evident in the fact that she wished to exercise the same relentlessness with which Louis XIV got rid of his enemies in sending into

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\(^{39}\) Cf. n. 38. It is from this edition that the following quotations are taken.
exile all those who did not agree to forego marriage.\footnote{“... j’étendrais ma bonté jusqu’à permettre que ceux qui auraient envie de se marier nous quittassent plutôt que de rendre notre solitude une habitation de gens sujets aux imperfections de la nature...,”, Against Marriage: 42.} It would be shortsighted, though, to reduce Montpensier’s projects to a mere reverse image of her second cousin’s regime. They contain a myriad of socially enlightened notions that prefigure the social theories of the eighteenth century. Thus, for example, the society envisioned by Montpensier largely overlooks the boundaries of rank when she wishes for “toutes sortes de personnes,” “pour pouvoir parler de toutes choses dans la conversation.” (28) She wants to live simply, drawing no privileges from her parentage (“... ceux qui ne me connaitront point ne devineront pas qui je suis”, 28). Like an enlightened monarch, Montpensier believes it her duty to ensure “qu’il n’y aurait personne qui n’eut sa bibliothèque” (28), that there is an orphanage where children learn a trade, that the sick are well cared for, or that every servant learns to play the violin. In marked contrast to strict court etiquette, she emphasizes the freedom of individuals—to build houses as they see fit (“Chacun ferait bâtir sa maison à sa fantaisie”, 28) and to do, or not do, what they wish (“... ceux qui aiment la vie active travailleraient à toutes sortes d’ouvrages, ou s’amuseraient à peindre ou à dessiner, et les paressesux entretiendraient ceux qui s’occuperaient de la sort”, 28). The ratio of proximity to and distance from the court is finely balanced. Montpensier by no means aspires to total rejection—one goes to court from time to time “pour affaires ou pour rendre quelque devoir de parenté” (30). But it is not the center of the world. On the contrary: for the self-assured Montpensier, it appears to be the periphery, when she proceeds from the assumption that “les amis de la Cour et du monde” (28-29) regard it as an honor to send letters regularly to the country, which is not necessarily the case in the opposite direction: “On ne romprait point le commerce qu’on aurait avec ses amis de la Cour et du monde, mais je pense que nous pourrions croire qu’il leur serait plus glorieux de nous écrire qu’à nous de leur faire réponse.” (28)

**IV.**

Even if Lafayette or contemporary readers were not familiar with this fascinating correspondence (although they may well have been, given the open circulation of the letters and the programmatic rather than intimate style of this correspondence), the name Montpensier clearly stood for a decentralized, anti-court, and women’s emancipatory worldview. Against this background, it is unlikely that the preface was not understood as an
invitation to look for political implications in the novel. That Lafayette may be regarded as a person who was highly aware of the political circumstances of her time is already evident from a glance at the correspondence of her friend Madame de Sévigné: In a letter of March 2, 1689 to her daughter, Sévigné writes, “Je reviens de chez madame de La Fayette... : on a fort politiqué.”

And thus the very first sentence of the Princesse de Montpensier points out the strong influence of political events on the novel: “Pendant que la guerre civile déchirait la France sous le règne de Charles IX, l’amour ne laissait pas de trouver sa place parmi tant de désordres et d’en causer beaucoup dans son empire.” The very fact that the author speaks of a “guerre civile” rather than a “guerre de religion” may be read as an allusion to the fractured nature of French society, in which at the time of the novel’s appearance it was by no means clear that the king, who had only recently assumed power, would be able to tame the centrifugal forces of the nobility in his realm. The trial of the deposed finance minister Fouquet was just beginning, and it suffices to read Madame de Sévigné’s letters, in which she wrote of this to her exiled friend Simon Arnauld de Pomponne, to recognize that the politics of Louis XIV and his brash minister Colbert placed a very concrete burden on the everyday life, the petite histoire, of a large segment of the old nobles of the sword and the intellectuals who were their protégés. In La Princesse de Montpensier, as our reading of the novel will show, the forward movement of the plot and the relationships among the characters—and that also means relations between the sexes—are determined by political events. This is particularly true of the protagonist’s marriage to the prince de Montpensier: The thirteen-year-old Mlle de Mézières is betrothed to the duc de Maine, the younger brother of the duc de Guise (‘le Balafré’), but is actually in love with this very same duc de Guise, her future brother-in-law, and it is mutual. The powerful house of Bourbon, which would provide the kings of France from 1589 on, manages to prevent a marriage between the rival from the house of Guise and the wealthy de Mézière and contrives a marriage with their kinsman, the prince de Montpensier:

42 La Princesse de Montpensier: 5. The quotations below are taken from the edition of Alain Niderst, see n. 19.
... la maison de Bourbon, qui ne pouvait pas voir qu'avec envie l'élévation de celle de Guise, s'apercevant de l'avantage qu'elle recevrait de ce mariage, se résolut de le lui ôter et d'en profiter elle-même en faisant épouser cette héritière au jeune prince de Montpensier. (5)

Political decisions determine how the plot continues: Thus immediately following the wedding, the prince de Montpensier instructs his wife to leave Paris, which was threatened by civil war, and to install herself in the country estate at Champigny. The protagonist thus spends the first two years of her marriage without her husband. Characteristically, these years exhibit clear parallels to the Grande Mademoiselle's ideal “champêtre République”; they are marked by the physical and intellectual sublimation of the protagonist, far from the world of the court and married life. When the prince de Montpensier returns to Champigny after a two years’ absence, his wife is for him “quasi une personne inconnue, par le peu de temps qu’il avait demeuré avec elle.” (9) The duc de Guise, too, upon encountering the princesse de Montpensier again, is struck by her “beauté... surnaturelle” and a “changement avantageux qui s’était fait en elle depuis les trois années qu’il ne l’avait vue.” (11) Her only confidant is her husband's friend, the comte de Chabannes, who admires not just the beauty and virtue of the woman entrusted to him, but also her “dispositions si opposées à la faiblesses de la galanterie.” (7) We see in the princesse de Montpensier an independent and self-confident woman: she has her feelings for the duc de Guise under control, and, as she explains to Chabannes, “elle n’était capable que d’avoir du mépris pour ceux qui oseraient avoir de l’amour pour elle.” (7) She also reacts with poise and control to the profession of love by her confidant Chabannes, and does so without destroying their relationship of trust.

The novel depicts this “confiance” prevailing in Champigny, which is mentioned several times, as diametrically opposed to the world of the Parisian court. The antonym “soupçon” recurs several times in this context: The queen mother Catherine de Médicis mistrusts Chabannes’ friendship for the prince de Montpensier (6), and the prince de Montpensier also is suspicious of his wife when she receives the duc de Guise and the duc d’Anjou in Champigny. (14)

When the war comes close to Champigny, the prince de Montpensier decides to bring his wife to Paris. It becomes evident that interpersonal relationships at court are marked not just by mistrust, but also by dissimulation,
On Paratext and Gender in Lafayette’s *La Princesse de Montpensier*

The princesse de Montpensier also adopts the courtly habitus and encounters challenges to the “résolutions qu’elle avait faites à Champigny” (16) in regard to the duc de Guise’s professions of love. This becomes abundantly clear when the duc de Guise gains the favor of Madame, i.e., the king’s sister, Marguerite de Valois. The protagonist’s first words in direct speech reveal how the courtly rules now also determine her situation and guide her conduct. She remarks to the duc de Guise, “Je ne comprends pas qu’il faille, sur le fondement d’une faiblesses dont on a été capable à treize ans, avoir l’audace de faire l’amoureux d’une personne comme moi, et surtout quand on l’est d’une autre à la vue de toute la cour.” (17) She now attempts to persuade him, who was prepared to jilt the sister of the king as a “sacrifice” (18) for her sake, of the strategic advantages of this match: “Elle... se mit à l’entretenir de la faiblesses qu’avait eue Madame de l’aimer la première, et de l’avantage considérable qu’il recevrait en l’épousant.” (18) The behavior of the princesse de Montpensier increasingly comes to resemble courtly calculation: In the key scene of the novel – the masked ball – mistaking him for the duc de Guise, she suggests to the masked duc d’Anjou (who is also in love with her) that he should conceal his true feelings in keeping with strategic “dissimulation”: “N’ayez des yeux ce soir que pour Madame... je n’en serais point jalouse, je vous l’ordonne, on m’observe, ne m’approchez plus.” (42) The duc d’Anjou succeeds in using this unintentional revelation to his own advantage: He schemes against the duc de Guise with the king, and the duc then falls into disfavor. He informs the princesse de Montpensier that he knows of the secret bond between her and the duc de Guise. In the courtly game, he now has her in his hands: “La princesse de Montpensier demeura affligée et troublée, comme on se le peut imaginer. Voir sa réputation et le secret de sa vie entre les mains d’un prince qu’elle avait maltraité...“. (21)

The novel reaches its climax during the final meeting between the princesse de Montpensier, her husband, and the duc de Guise. This part of the plot is also defined by a political event, in this case preparations for the St. Bartholomew’s Day massacre; members of the houses of Bourbon and Guise are told to leave Paris:

... l’envie qu’on eut à la cour d’y faire venir les chefs du parti hugenot, pour cet horrible dessein qu’on exécuta le jour de S. Barthélemy, fit que le roi, pour les mieux tromper, éloigna de lui tous les princes de la maison de Bourbon et tous ceux de la maison de Guise. (26)

The comte de Chabannes plays a central role in this context. Chabannes is the only character in the novel to place personal ties over political calculation. Thus we are told that he has turned his back on the Huguenots out of friendship for the prince de Montpensier:
... contre les engagements qu’il avait avec le prince de Condé, qui lui faisait espérer des emplois considérables dans le parti des huguenots, il se déclara pour les catholiques, ne pouvant se résoudre à être opposé en quelque chose à un homme qui lui était si cher. (22)

This makes the conduct of the protagonist all the more serious, as she exploits him as a messenger between herself and the duc de Guise, who was staying near Champigny. This does not prevent Chabannes from ultimately sacrificing himself for the princesse de Montpensier: through his aid, the duc de Guise is able one night to enter the apartments of the princesse de Montpensier; when the two are in danger of being discovered by the approaching prince de Montpensier, Chabannes presents himself as the presumed intruder, thereby forfeiting his friend’s favor. Chabannes will fall victim to the St. Bartholomew’s Day massacre, and the prince de Montpensier will feel satisfaction at the sight of his corpse, “bien aisé de se voir vengé par les mains de la fortune.” (33)

V.

Given the cruel end of the selfless Chabannes, the base vengefulness of the prince de Montpensier, and the ultimate death of the protagonist, it seems questionable whether references to ‘grand history’ were merely a pretext for the unfolding of a sophisticated erotic casuistry. The political events and power relations that help to drive the plot appear to suggest that, on the contrary, the love story is merely the backdrop against which the author explores the constellations of political power. The St. Bartholomew’s Day massacre, which the narrator calls a fraudulent maneuver by the king and “horrible” (52), is considered an important partial victory in the struggle to stabilize a political order characterized by the need to suppress minorities in order to hold onto power. This event was present as a traumatic one in the collective consciousness of Lafayette’s contemporaries, and they were far from having come to terms with a past dominated by civil war. For contemporary readers, the name Montpensier epitomized the minority position. The political views of the Grande Mademoiselle, her way of life, cultural and intellectual pursuits, her models of society and not least her notions of gender relations stood in diametrical opposition to the centralist political doctrine of Louis XIV. In light of this reception context, it appears questionable whether a literal interpretation of the novel’s ending really lends it plausibility and coherence. “Elle mourut ... dans la fleur de son âge, une des plus belles princesses du monde, et qui aurait été sans doute la plus heureuse, si la vertu et la prudence eussent conduit toutes ses actions” (34)—this final moral judgment in the narrator’s voice seems to appeal to an
inauthentic interpretation, for the “histoire” (in both senses of the word) suggests that it was more social and patriarchal power relations and less individual lapses of virtue that sealed the protagonist’s unhappy fate. Now we have come full circle, and find ourselves back at the introductory peritext. If one reads the novel with the preface, and its attempt to influence reception, in mind, as well as the expectations of contemporary readers, as we have tried to do here, then La Princesse de Montpensier is far more than the “récit fabuleux” surrounded by a “léger parfum de mystère et de scandale” that literary criticism believes it to be.

Bibliography


