

Study Guide for Madame de Lafayette: *The Princess de Clèves* (1678)



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Based on the translation by Robin Buss, for Penguin Classics

The Princesse de Clèves was an innovative novel in at least two ways. It can claim to be the first historical novel in that its author (with some help) made a serious attempt to research the French court of the preceding century and weave historical events into her tale's tapestry. If the emotions and attitudes are more characteristic of the seventeenth century than the sixteenth, that is a common failing of historical novels in all ages. More serious perhaps is the way in which the historical passages remain largely undigested clumps of information scattered throughout her narrative, not really blended into it. She uses the past largely as an excuse for examining her own time. Its other claim to priority is perhaps more important: as the first *roman d'analyse* (novel of analysis), dissecting emotions and attitudes in a highly intelligent and skillful way. This sort of writing was to become a hallmark of French fiction until it was swept away by the tide of Romanticism which preferred to revel in emotions rather than analyzing them.

But emotions are the not primary objects of de Lafayette's analysis: morals are. This is a book about ethical issues which avoids easy judgmental simplifications which might sort behavior neatly into sin and virtue and instead ponders at length the moral dilemmas which even the best-intentioned person can fall into. Especially interesting for us is the way in which the emerging ideal of romantic marriage is treated in the novel. Although Renaissance comedies often enough concluded romances with marriage, that age was far more prone to find entertainment in adultery and be very cynical about happiness in marriage. Arranged matches were still the rule among well-to-do people, and love was thought to be an agreeable but uncommon result of marriage. Keep in mind as well as you read the novel that divorce was

impossible and annulments very rare at this time.

The 17th century marked a crucial turning point in European attitudes toward love. The exalted language of the 12th-century troubadours which had turned into pallid clichés and cynical jokes by the 16th century began to be applied seriously to the every-day romances of ordinary men and women. Many people began to feel that it might not be a bad thing if one were able to love one's spouse romantically, rather than merely companionably. Numerous stories and plays were written in which the demands of young love conflict with those of overbearing parents. Whereas Romeo and Juliet could defy their parents only by wedding in secret and had to pay for their rashness with their lives, by this time it is common--indeed, routine--for the defiant young lovers to get their way by the end of the tale. But the challenge to established tradition was muted and indirect. The parents are often depicted as exceedingly foolish people who are made to come to their senses. They do not necessarily represent the ordinary run of parents. One of the most common plots involves parental rejection of the intended on the grounds that he/she is of too low a social station. This conflict is invariably resolved by a last-minute revelation that the two lovers are indeed of the same social class, and perfectly fitted for each other. Thus 17th-century readers could fantasize about triumphing over the unhappiness often imposed by arranged marriages without fundamentally challenging the social system.

Madame de Lafayette, a notorious social-climber herself, no more challenges the social structure of her time than any other writer, at least overtly. But her work poses a direct challenge to the mores of the court that foreshadows the views of the rising bourgeoisie far more than those of the aristocracy she so admired. Her ideal marriage involves partners truly in love with each other, confiding in each other, acting as each other's best friends and as lovers. If such a marriage seems impossible in the novel, that is because the idea was relatively novel. Not only did the heroine's openness with her husband shock the court in the novel, contemporary readers had the identical reaction in the author's own time. In a social milieu where adulterous romances were normally the sole romances, the ideal of wedded bliss was titillating and strange.

In the centuries that followed her model of romantic marriage grew with the class that embraced it: the bourgeoisie. In the 18th and early 19th centuries, it became a mark of distinction from the "decadent" aristocracy, which still viewed love as a game. Many Romantic works contrast the earnestness of middle-class love with aristocratic cynicism. With the triumph of the bourgeoisie, romantic marriage came to be seen as not only desirable, but normal. Obviously, the ideal was not always fulfilled, as Gustave Flaubert's *Madame Bovary* made painfully clear; yet it remained the cherished dream of most Westerners of all classes for the better part of two centuries. When it was noted that in other times and places romance and marriage were not connected with each other, it was supposed that those other times and places were at fault: surely romantic marriage was *normal*.

In our own time, the ideal is under heavy attack. Modern ideas about the importance of sex diminish drastically the importance of virginity and the romanticization of fidelity which were a part of it. Easy divorce robs the concept of some of its more exalted aspects--few people expect "happily ever after." Psychiatrists counsel that it is a mistake to expect one other person to fulfill all one's emotional needs and blame many break-ups on excessively high expectations for romance. Most of the fictional romantic

couples of the 18th and 19th centuries would be diagnosed as neurotic co-dependents today. Being willing to die for love is distinctly out of fashion. Feminists have criticized the romantic ideal as damaging women, idealizing thrilling but unstable, unsupportive men and counseling them to damaging self-sacrifice. The instability of modern marriage combined with the enormous lengthening of the modern life span has also made people more distrustful of love at first sight. People are much more pragmatic about their demands for a suitable partner than in the Romantic Age. Hence our ancestors would probably judge us as hopelessly incapable of *true* love, just as we may judge them as emotionally disturbed. We still speak the language of romantic love, echoing those long-ago troubadours, but few of us live it.

As we struggle to define what we think love should be in this age of transition, it is fascinating to look back three centuries to that earlier age of transition in which the ideal enshrined in so many novels, plays, and poems was struggling to emerge.

Book One

The endnotes beginning on p. 177 explain who many of the historical characters are. It is important to realize that Diane de Poitiers, Duchesse de Valentinois (also called "Mme ["Madame"] de Valentinois), official mistress to King Henri II is far more prominent at the court than Henry's legitimate spouse and queen, Catherine de Medici.

Kings had less choice in their marriage partners than anyone. Only women of the most exalted rank could qualify, and political considerations normally overrode personal ones. But the king was normally compensated for his unromantic marriage by being able to publicly maintain a mistress of his own choosing. She was required to be suitably noble, and it was strongly preferred that she be a married woman whose husband could be bought off or ignored because it was crucial that any children the mistress bore the king not be able to make legitimate claims on the succession to the throne. If the king's illegitimate offspring were officially designated the children of another man, the country was protected from potentially ruinous power struggles among claimants for the throne. (This precaution did not always work: some illegitimate offspring made just such claims.) The husband and children were usually rewarded with titles and estates.

On the other hand, the queen, whose sole important role was to bear legitimate heirs to the throne, was closely watched to make sure she did not take lovers. An affair with the queen was technically high treason, punishable by death.

The other courtiers naturally indulged in love affairs as well, though more discreetly than the king. For the little inbred community at Versailles, gossip about who was sleeping with whom was a major source of entertainment. Technically, these people were all Christians who disapproved of adultery, but actually they assumed it was nearly universal, so much so that faithfulness could seem an astonishing novelty. However, official morality dictated that a married woman whose affair became public should be disgraced and banished from polite society. Therefore the usual pattern was to be discreet enough to

avoid a serious scandal, whatever gossip might be going around. For women, the game was extremely dangerous.

Like all historical novelists, Madame de Lafayette romanticizes the period she is writing about. In fact, the court of Louis XIV, where she lived, was far more splendid, refined, and brilliant--if also more artificial and constrained--than the court of Henri II.

Dauphin is the French title for the heir to the throne, just as in England the heir is called the "Prince of Wales." Note that the Queen is not content to fade into the background, and constantly schemes to undermine the power of the Duchesse de Valentinois. She cannot confront her directly, however; and carefully hides her true feelings. As you read, note examples of people at the court concealing their true feelings. This is a major theme in the novel.

In the paragraph beginning "Never has any court . . ." a number of people are named, and there are many similar passages to come. Read the notes about them, but don't worry about keeping track of anyone named here except the Dauphin and Dauphine and "Madame, the King's sister," all of whom will turn up again later. Despite the large number of people named in this novel, fewer than a dozen of them are important to the plot. The Duc de Nemours is one of the three most important figures in the novel. What are his main characteristics? How successful is he with women? What role does love play in his life?

Note how marriages and love affairs are intimately entangled with power struggles: at the court the personal is literally political. The notion that Queen Elizabeth I might have been romantically interested in the (fictional) Duc de Nemours is of course highly flattering to the French; but the main reason for the invention of this one-sided "romance" will become apparent later. If M. de Nemours had married Elizabeth, he would have become King of England.

The heroine is introduced as the most beautiful of women, as had been the case with almost every heroine in European fiction before her. How has Mlle (Mademoiselle="Miss") de Chartres been raised differently from other women? What are her mother's views on love? What is her image of an ideal marriage?

In the era before literary Realism, psychological description was considered much more important than physical description. What precisely do we know about Mlle de Chartres' appearance? How does the Prince de Clèves react when he first sees her, and how does his reaction affect her? How does he react to her reaction? "Madame" ("Mrs.") is the form of address appropriate to a married woman. We have now met all three of our principals: Mlle de Chartres, the Prince de Clèves, and the Duc de Nemours. Secondary characters to keep track of include Mme ("Madame") de Chartres and the Chevalier ("Knight") de Guise (also called by his other title "Vidame"). Remember that "true" love in this era is always love at first sight.

Note the classic passage in the paragraph beginning "Mme de Chartres, who had been so careful" outlining the connection between love and politics at court. What do you think it is about a court like this

that makes love affairs so much more consequential than they usually are in a democracy? "A certain age" is a coy French expression for middle age as it applies to women. The implication is that women who are aging and no longer likely to engage in love affairs are likely to turn toward "virtue."

After having preached the virtues of love in marriage to her daughter, how does Mme de Chartres proceed to find her a suitable husband? Note the phrase "Those of a romantic disposition are always pleased at finding any excuse to speak with their lovers." This sort of aphorism was extremely popular in 17th-century France. Writers loved to deploy their worldly wisdom by making keen observations of human behavior. It is one of their chief contributions to literature, aimed at teaching the reader about human emotions and behavior.

Why is it especially courageous of the Prince de Clèves to court Mlle. de Chartres after his father's death? Note that although he is a mature man of high rank, he could not proceed against his father's wishes during the latter's lifetime. "M." is the standard abbreviation for "Monsieur," "Mister." Rephrase and explain this sentence: "The only flaw in his happiness was the fear that she might not find him to her liking, and he would have preferred the good fortune of being loved by her to the certainty of marriage without it." Note especially the last sentence in this paragraph. It is the key to much of the rest of the novel. How does Mlle de Chartres react to this declaration? What are her feelings toward him? What about Mme de Chartres' behavior contradicts her earlier statements? "Person" in this context means "body." How does Mlle de Chartres defend herself against the Prince's criticism? How does he reply to that defense? Which of them is the more insightful, in your opinion?

When the young woman tells her mother how distressed she is by the Prince's passion for her, the latter is astonished at her frankness. This openness contrasts sharply with the normal patterns at the court; and though technically it is a high virtue, it will prove her downfall. Why is her mother so anxious that this match not fall through? Note that when Mlle de Chartres is married she becomes the Princesse or Mme de Clèves.

What does it mean to say that "as a husband, he did not cease to be a lover"? What about their first meeting seems to indicate that Mme de Clèves and M. de Nemours are "meant for each other"? Why does the Dauphine say it is flattering to the Duc that Mme de Clèves claims not to know who he is? Note Mme de Chartres' comment, "If you judge by appearances in this place, you will often be deceived, because what appears to be the case hardly ever is." The long passage in which Mme de Chartres recounts the story of Mme de Valentinois is interesting but of no direct relevance to the plot of this novel although it illustrates well the social attitudes and customs of the court. In what sense was the former King "scrupulously faithful to his mistresses"? Note that Mme de Valentinois was first one of unofficial mistresses of this King and then the mistress of his son, the present King.

What is M. de Nemours giving up because of his love for Mme de Clèves? Why, despite his extreme discretion, is the Princess able to tell that M. de Nemours is in love with her? Why does M. de Nemours object to seeing his mistress at a ball? Analyze Mme de Clèves' reaction. What reason does she give her mother for avoiding the ball, and why is it significant? How does her mother discover her affection for

M. de Nemours? Analyze the paragraph beginning "The Dauphine believed Mme de Chartres. . . ." It is a classic example of analysis of the kind that characterizes the *roman d'analyse*.

Why doesn't Mme de Chartres want her daughter to know that she knows that the latter loves M. de Nemours? What causes her to feel ashamed about her feelings toward her husband? Note how consistently major developments hinge on what is *not* said or done. In a closed society where everyone knows everyone else intimately, the slightest nuances can be very revealing. It is not surprising that this sort of fiction evolves in courts. Try to list some examples as you go on.

Analyze the paragraph which begins "She could not help being disturbed at seeing him." What mixed feelings does she feel, and for what reasons? Mme de Chartres' deathbed interview with her daughter is one of the most important scenes in the novel. Her words are to exercise a powerful influence over her daughter for the rest of her life. It is crucial to remember that Mme de Clèves has been utterly devoted to her mother who has raised her to be exceptionally virtuous. Her statement that she would prefer to die before having to witness her daughter's infidelity to her husband must be particularly influential. To give in would be to shame her mother's memory. "Preparing for death" involves religious devotion, thoroughly confessing and repenting of sins and looking toward heaven and away from earthly things, even such a beloved thing as one's daughter. Why does the Princesse come to feel that M. de Clèves can protect her from her feelings for M. de Nemours?

Book Two

The story of Mme de Tournon is interesting in itself; but its main contribution to the plot is to provide a bad example of a faithless woman which can repel our heroine and make her want to flee temptation. There is a kind of pattern set up in the episodes of the missing ring (dealt with here), the missing portrait and the missing letter (which come later). The paragraph beginning "I am giving you the advice," is one of the major turning points of the novel. What is your initial reaction to the Prince's declaration of how he would act if his wife told him she was attracted to someone else? Why is Sancerre "in a state where [he] can neither be consoled, nor hate" Mme de Tournon? Why does Mme de Clèves think it is safe for her to follow her husband's advice that she should start seeing people again? In what way do subsequent events prove her wrong? What does this paragraph mean: "These last words of the Dauphine's caused Mme de Clèves to feel a different kind of agitation from the one she had experienced a few moments before"? How does Nemours manage to court Mme de Clèves in their interview in her bedroom without seeming obviously to do so? What is her reaction? Look for a good example of an aphorism on p. 75. How do Mme de Clèves' attempts to flee M. de Nemours affect him? Why is she reluctant to tell her husband that it is rumored that M. de Nemours is in love with her?

The king's point in scoffing at the astrologer's prediction is only social equals could duel; and only another king could legitimately duel with a king. Watch for the ultimate outcome of this prediction. Why does everyone suddenly agree that astrology is worthless? How does M. de Nemours turn this conversation to his advantage? Why is M. de Nemours able to recognize the signs of her love for him although they are successfully hidden from others? Why does she dislike Queen Elizabeth's portrait?

Elizabeth was highly intelligent, though perhaps not all that beautiful; but we shall never know because she rigidly controlled the official portraits made of her according to a stereotyped image. Read note 16, on Marguerite de Navarre, a most extraordinary woman. Besides being a writer, she was friend and protector to the great Renaissance French writer François Rabelais.

The sketch of Henry VIII's life retells the familiar tale of his split with Rome and his tumultuous marital career. All of this is relevant because he was Elizabeth's father. Note that the portrait of Mme de Clèves wins out easily over the portrait of the Queen of England. Why doesn't Mme de Clèves demand her portrait back? What forces are acting on her? What use does M. de Nemours make of her hesitancy?

Though during the 16th century the armored knight was being rendered obsolete by the gradual improvement in firearms, tournaments were still a popular form of entertainment. Why is the Duc de Guise so upset at Mme de Clèves' reaction to M. de Nemours' accident? What effects does the lost letter have on Mme de Clèves? Women in court society rarely approached men as lovers; they waited to be courted. Why is the Queen an exception, do you think?

Book Three

Why is M. de Nemours unperturbed by Mme de Clèves' initial refusal to see him? How does the missing letter bring the two of them closer together? In what way does the Dauphine say that Mme de Clèves is unlike all other women? Note that the failure of the clumsy forgery has momentous consequences for the Dauphine. In this society of multiple casual affairs jealousy can still be a powerfully destructive force. Analyze Mme de Clèves' own analysis of her feelings of jealousy concerning M. de Nemours. These are important in understanding her subsequent actions.

The momentous discussion between M. and Mme de Clèves in the country is the most important scene in the novel. Why does she speak as she does? What is his reaction? Why doesn't M. de Nemours assume at first that it is himself that she loves? What is his ultimate reaction after the discussion is finished? What effect does her husband's trust have on Mme de Clèves? What do you think of M. de Nemours' use of the conversation in the country which he had overheard between M. and Mme de Clèves? In what way are M. de Nemours and Mme de Clèves trying to deliver messages to each other while seeming to speak to the Dauphine on p. 127? What messages are they conveying? As mentioned earlier in the description of the preparations for the tournament, it was traditional for the combatants to include some decoration in their costume which alluded more or less discreetly to their beloveds. How does M. de Nemours allude to his love for Mme de Clèves in his costume, and how does his choice fit in with one of the recurrent patterns we have discussed in this novel?

Book Four

Notice that one of the consequences of the King's death is the exile of the formerly powerful Duchesse de Valentinois. Note Mme de Clèves' complex reaction to the news that M. de Nemours is coming to see her. Why has M. de Clèves been unable to live up to the ideal of sympathetic husband he preached

earlier? The scene of the wrapping of the cane seems irresistibly phallic to modern interpreters, who may not be far off the mark; for Renaissance writers delighted in naughty allusions like this. In the meditations of M. de Nemours after the scene of the cane-wrapping, he uses familiar stereotyped love language: "the greatest of favors" is intercourse, "unkindness" is refusal to have intercourse.

It was universally believed that strong emotions could lead directly to a life-threatening fever; and indeed, modern research has done much to link emotional disturbances to organic disease. Dying "with fortitude" was considered admirable because a good Christian should display confidence that he/she is about to enter into eternal life. What effects does his death have on Mme de Clèves? Which of M. de Nemours' qualities especially attract Mme de Clèves when she glimpses him in garden? What prevents her from marrying him now that she is legally able to? What are her fears about the future course of their relationship should she allow it to develop? What do you think of her arguments? Try to see both sides of the issue.

What effect does the approach of death have on Mme de Clèves' feelings? Since she dies pious and virtuous, would you say that the message of this novel is a religious one? Why or why not?

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