

A Mother's Discourse: Incorporation and Repetition in *La Princesse de Clèves*

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Marianne Hirsch

**A Mother's Discourse:  
Incorporation and Repetition in *La Princesse de Clèves*\***

I.

Our expectations of women's fiction need to be revised. It is not surprising that "the first text of women's fiction in France" should also be the first female novel of development. Neither is it surprising that that text, like women's fiction generally, has not only been discredited<sup>1</sup> but has also been seriously misread. Seen through the optic of traditional expectations about fictional patterns and women's lives, *La Princesse de Clèves* is the story of a young woman's struggle between marital duty and extra-marital passion, of her conflict between two men. Read in this manner, the plot is marked by a number of incongruities and "implausibilities" [Miller's term] which have been pointed out by critics since the novel's publication: the heroine's extraordinary confession to her husband; her ultimate refusal, when free and supported by the conventions of her culture, to marry the man she passionately adores; and her choice instead to withdraw from social involvement to the tranquility of a convent and an early death.

The novel's plot and the Princess' choice become plausible only if we revise our expectations; I use the term re-vision here in the sense that Adrienne Rich has given it: "Re-vision—the act of looking back, of seeing with fresh eyes, of entering an old text from a new critical direction—is for us more than a chapter in our cultural history;

\*This paper was presented, in a shortened version at the 1980 National Women's Studies Association Conference, and as a lecture at Brown University. I wish to thank the Wellesley Center for Research on Women and the Dartmouth Faculty Fellowship Program for supporting my research on mother-daughter relationship in literature.

<sup>1</sup>See Nancy Miller, "Emphasis Added: Plots and Plausibilities in Women's Fiction," *PMLA*, 96, 1 (Jan., 1981), 36. This essay was largely completed when Miller's truly illuminating article appeared. Although we approach *La Princesse de Clèves* from somewhat different critical perspectives, our arguments do, in part, proceed along parallel lines. This suggests the primacy of the feminist perspectives that inform both of our essays.

it is an act of survival.”<sup>2</sup> As a process of re-vision and an act of survival—of salvaging women’s texts from accusations of incongruity—I propose to read *La Princesse de Clèves* not as the story of a young woman’s development in relation to two men, but as her apprenticeship to another woman, her mother. My own re-vision of this character follows Freud’s revision of female development generally, his discovery of the importance of what he calls the pre-oedipus phase with its strong maternal attachment, a discovery which leads him to give up “any expectations of neat parallelism between male and female sexual development.” Perhaps for us the discovery of the primacy of mother over husband and lover, of early childhood over maturity has, as for Freud, the surprise of “the discovery of the Minoan-Mycenean civilization behind the civilization of Greece.”<sup>3</sup> Perhaps also, it poses equal difficulties of analysis, challenging, as it does, the very foundations of individual development (the oedipal conflict) and of fictional plots (the love story).

This paper examines the formation of the Princess’ female identity as it is dominated not by adult heterosexual desire, but by another (erotic) longing, one that points back to a pre-history of mother-daughter symbiosis. In subordinating the love story to another submerged plot, that of the “cathexis between mother and daughter,” not as much “the great unwritten story” as the “great unrecognized story” to play on Adrienne Rich’s terminology,<sup>4</sup> I shall read the novel with the “fresh eyes” of recent feminist psychoanalytic theory which sees the mother-daughter relationship as the dominant formative influence in female development.<sup>5</sup>

## II.

With your milk, Mother, I swallowed ice. And here I am now, my insides frozen. And I walk with even more difficulty than you do, and I move even

<sup>2</sup>“When We Dead Awaken: Writing as Re-Vision,” *College English*, 34, 1 (Oct., 1972), 18.

<sup>3</sup>“Female Sexuality” (1931), reprinted in *Women and Analysis*, Jean Strouse, ed. (New York: Dell, 1974), p. 54.

<sup>4</sup>*Of Woman Born* (New York: Norton, 1976), p. 225.

<sup>5</sup>For a more extensive review of this literature, see my review essay, “Mothers and Daughters,” *Signs*, 7, 1 (Autumn, 1981).

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less. You flowed into me, and that hot liquid became poison, paralyzing me. My blood no longer circulates to my feet or hands, or as far as my head. It is immobilized, thickened by the cold. Obstructed by ice chunks that resist its flow. My blood coagulates, remains in and near my heart.

In *Et l'une ne bouge pas sans l'autre*, a lyrical and personal address to her mother, Luce Irigaray<sup>6</sup> pleads for distance and separation, laments the paralysis she feels as a result of the interpenetration between mother and daughter, calls desperately for a new kind of closeness possible only between two separate individuals. Irigaray's book, directed to her mother, is a search for herself: "Was I a participant or was I the dream itself—another's dream, a dream about another?" (p. 8). She finds not herself, but her mother within herself and herself within her mother: where she seeks autonomy, she finds relatedness. Most pronouns in the books are slashed: "You/I," "my/your"; most statements are comparative: "with more difficulty than you," "less than you." Self is defined only in relation to the (m)other. As a result, female identity is revealed as double, triple, multiple: "You look at yourself in the mirror. And already you see your own mother there. And soon your daughter, a mother"(p. 14).

Most recent psychoanalytic work on mother/daughter relationships has shown that the pre-oedipal bond between mother and infant determines female identity quite differently from male identity. Jean Baker Miller goes as far as to contend that "the ego, the 'I' of psychoanalysis may not be at all appropriate when talking about women. Women have different organizing principles around which their psyches are structured. . . . Indeed women's sense of self becomes very much organized around being able to make and then to maintain affiliations and relationships."<sup>7</sup> Miller's key term is "affiliation"—the acquisition of a sense of self through relationship derives from the early symbiotic bond between the mother and the female infant, a bond whose importance for female identity Freud recognizes only in his late essays on female sexuality, but which is stressed by

<sup>6</sup>(Paris: Minuit, 1979), p. 7. The translation, "And the One Doesn't Stir without the Other," by Helen Vivienne Wenzel is forthcoming in *Signs*. Page numbers refer to the French.

<sup>7</sup>*Toward a New Psychology of Women* (Boston: Beacon, 1976), pp. 61, 83.

Jung, by the object-relations school, in the writings of recent American feminist psychoanalysts, as well as by Irigaray, Kristeva and Cixous.

Freud's discovery of the little girl's pre-oedipal attachment to her mother convinced him of the inaccuracy of his equilateral theory of male and female development. The strength of this mother-daughter bond continues to trouble him: in order to explain the girl's transfer of affection to her father, Freud is forced to posit her hostility and anger at a mother who deprived her of the coveted penis. Freud both emphasizes the lasting power of a primary attachment which is never adequately superseded by the girl's desire for her father, and tries to find definitive evidence for her transfer of cathexis from mother to father, her progression from clitoral to vaginal sexuality. He needs this evidence to bolster his vision of heterosexuality as a natural impulse. Boys experience only rivalry with the same-sex parent: threatened with castration, they resolve the oedipal conflict very rapidly. Girls, in contrast, feel ambivalent toward the mother who is both rival and object of desire. Moreover, for girls, there is no motive equivalent to the castration threat in boys, for a definitive resolution of this conflict. In fact, neither the pre-oedipal attachment to the mother, nor the oedipal rejection of the mother is ever adequately surmounted. In spite of his strong arguments supporting natural heterosexuality, Freud is forced to stress that the ambivalent relationship between the girl and her mother dominates her entire life, including her relationship with her husband.<sup>8</sup>

Jung carries this vision of continuity even further by making it the emblem of what he calls the archetypal feminine. Demeter and Kore are for him not separate figures, but merely two aspects of woman, the mother and the maiden:

. . . every mother contains her daughter within herself and every daughter her mother, . . . every woman extends backwards into her mother and forwards into her daughter. This participation and intermingling gives rise to that peculiar

<sup>8</sup>In addition to the essay cited above, see also "Some Psychical Consequences of the Anatomical Distinction Between the Sexes" (1924) and "Femininity" (1931), both reprinted in Strouse, *op. cit.*, and "The Dissolution of the Oedipus Complex" (1924), *Standard Edition*, 19. For an excellent analysis of Freud's often contradictory insistence on heterosexuality as the biological norm, see Sarah Kofman, *L'Enigme de la femme: la femme dans les textes de Freud* (Paris: Galilée, 1980).

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uncertainty as regards *time*: a woman lives earlier as a mother, later as a daughter. The conscious experience of these ties produces the feeling that her life is spread out over generations.<sup>9</sup>

American feminist psychoanalysis relies on object-relations psychology which has replaced the Freudian notion of *Trieb* with the vision of an interpersonal field, an interaction between the infant and the primary caretaker. These early interpersonal relationships are internalized by the infant and determine adult personality. Winnicott's specular relationship between mother and infant, based on Lacan's "mirror stage," posits the mother's face as the child's mirror, the mother's responses as the field from which the child's sense of self is carved out.<sup>10</sup> Even if the process of separation from this primal unity and subsequently of individuation is successful, the mother remains a permanent inner object throughout the child's life, whether male or female.

Nancy Chodorow<sup>11</sup> and Jane Flax<sup>12</sup> use Winnicott, Mahler, Deutsch and Balint to investigate in what ways mothers may treat female infants differently from male infants and what influence those differences might have on adult personality. They find, indeed, that mothers identify more strongly with their female infants, seeing them more as extensions of themselves. Ego boundaries between mothers and daughters are more fluid, less defined than those between mothers and sons. As Chodorow says:

Feminine personality comes to be based less on repressions of inner objects, and fixed and firm splits in the ego, and more on retention and continuity of external relationships. From the retention of pre-oedipal attachments to their mother, growing girls come to define and experience themselves as continuous with others; their experience of self contains more flexible or permeable ego boundaries. Boys come to define themselves as more separate and distinct, with a greater sense of rigid ego boundaries and differentiations. The basic feminine sense of self is connected to the world, the basic masculine sense of self is separate. (p. 169)

<sup>9</sup>"The Psychological Aspects of the Kore," in C. G. Jung and C. Kerényi, *Essays on a Science of Mythology* (New York: Bollingen, 1963), p. 162.

<sup>10</sup>D. W. Winnicott, "Mirror-role of Mother and Family in Child Development," in *Playing and Reality* (New York: Basic Books, 1971), pp. 111–118.

<sup>11</sup>*The Reproduction of Mothering* (Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 1978).

<sup>12</sup>"The Conflict Between Nurture and Autonomy in Mother-Daughter Relationships and Within Feminism," *Feminist Studies*, 4, 1 (Feb., 1978), 171–189.

Chodorow's revision of Freud concentrates most of all on clarifying the resolution of the oedipal conflict: instead of turning from the mother to the father, the girl adds the father as an additional object, developing all relationships with men in a triangular instead of a binary pattern. In a heterosexual relationship, then, she needs a third figure which will enable her to relive the original triangle, either a child or her mother. Whether in the role of daughter or of mother, women continue to repeat the mother/daughter relationship throughout their lives:

Mothers feel ambivalent toward their daughters, and react to their daughters' ambivalence toward them. They desire both to keep their daughters close and to push them into adulthood. This ambivalence in turn creates more anxiety in their daughters and provokes attempts by these daughters to break away. Deutsch suggests that this spiral, laden as it is with ambivalence, leaves mother and daughter convinced that any separation between them will bring disaster to both. (*The Reproduction of Mothering*, p. 135)

The pre-oedipal relationship between mother and daughter is also pre-verbal; it is here that the female child learns to communicate in the *mother tongue*, as distinct from the patriarchal language she acquires later. In her attempts to define the specificity of female discourse and to locate it in the female body, Hélène Cixous comes back to the mother and to the original feeling of fusion which is a permanent part of the female self-image:

In the woman there is always more or less of 'the mother' who repairs and sustains, and resists separation, a force which won't be severed. No more than the relation to childhood (the child she was, she is, she makes, remakes, unmakes, in the place where the same becomes other), is the relation to the 'mother,' in its role as delight and violence, ever severed.<sup>13</sup>

For Irigaray, the woman as Other in relation to man is herself a multiple being who therefore gives rise to a new syntax, a new critical vocabulary:

. . . it also becomes necessary to be able to assure the role of *matter*—mother or sister. Be it of that which will always begin to nourish speculation, of that which functions as *resource*—red blood of resemblance—, but also as a waste

<sup>13</sup>*La Jeune Née* (Paris: Union Générale d'Éditions, 1975), p. 172.

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of reflection, as rejection and externalization of all that resists transparency, of madness.<sup>14</sup>

To study the relationship between mother and daughter is not to study the relationship between two separate differentiated individuals, but to plunge into a network of complex ties, to attempt to untangle the strands of a double self, a continuous multiple being of monstrous proportions stretched across generations, parts of which try desperately to separate and delineate their own boundaries. It is to find continuity and relationship where one expects to find difference and autonomy. This basic and continued relatedness and multiplicity, this mirroring which seems to be unique to women have to be factors in any study of female development in fiction.

### III.

*La Princesse de Clèves* both corroborates and illuminates the implications of these psychoanalytic findings for the analysis of women's fiction. The mother-daughter dyad and not the love triangle dominates the novel's plot structure and language.<sup>15</sup> The mother's admonitions, especially those uttered at her deathbed, represent a fixed point in its social, psychological, and moral topography, a fixed point which determines the heroine's subsequent development. Critics since Fontenelle have commented on the work's rigorous geometric precision. It is my contention that the mother's lesson is at the center of a nexus of scenes that reflect and echo one another, trapping the heroine in a structure of repetitions which ultimately preclude development and progression.<sup>16</sup>

<sup>14</sup>*Ce Sexe qui n'en est pas un* (Paris: Minuit, 1977), p. 147.

<sup>15</sup>Two articles deal specifically with Mme. de Chartres' influence in the novel: William O. Goode, "A Mother's Goals in *La Princesse de Clèves*: Worldly and Spiritual Distinction," *Neophilologus*, 56 (1972), 398-406 and Timothy M. Scanlan, "Maternal Mask and Literary Craft in *La Princesse de Clèves*," *Revue du Pacifique*, 2 (1976), 23-32. Most critics minimize her importance, one going as far as to treat her speeches as digressions, see J. W. Scott, "The 'Digressions' of the *Princesse de Clèves*," *French Studies*, 11 (1957), 315-22.

<sup>16</sup>For a more complete analysis of the novel's patterns of repetition, see S. W. Tiefenbrun, *A Structural-Stylistic Analysis of "La Princesse de Clèves"* (The Hague: Mouton, 1976) and Michel Butor, "Sur *La Princesse de Clèves*," in *Répertoire* (Paris: Minuit, 1960).



The heroine first appears at the age of sixteen. We are told that her father died many years before and that she has been raised away from the Court by her mother who devoted herself fully to this education. Above all she was concerned with inculcating the love of virtue. Unlike other mothers who are silent, she often told the young girl of the attractions of love, only the more to persuade her of its dangers. She presented men as insincere and unfaithful cheats and maintained that affairs were sure to plunge women into disaster. Only an honest woman can retain the tranquility and the virtue which promise to highlight her beauty and mobility. In fact, Mme. de Chartres' ambitions for her daughter far exceed the expectation of the court: she creates in the daughter the potential for absolute uniqueness. For Mme. de Chartres, the appearance of virtue is clearly insufficient; in her daughter, she aims at the absolute correspondence between her heart and her actions. Two factors would facilitate the success of such a plan, according to the mother's early lessons: the effort to love one's husband and be loved by him, and in the face of danger, extreme self-restraint (*défiance de soi-même*).

The world the young girl encounters as she enters the Court warrants all of her mother's warnings:

The Court gravitated around ambition and love, the chief occupations of men and women alike, for there were so many factions and intrigues, and women played so large a part in them, that love was always mixed with self-interest and self-interest with love. Nobody was either tranquil or indifferent. . . . Thus there was a kind of agitation without disorder in this Court which made it attractive but also very dangerous for a young person. (pp. 41, 42)<sup>17</sup>

In this context, the heroine's marriage to the Prince de Clèves is extremely unusual: his proposal is based not on social or political advantage, but on his personal inclination for her. Mlle. de Chartres, however, fails to share his passionate attachment: "She had no particular inclination for his person" (p. 47). Characteristically, it has surprised many critics that Mme. de Chartres should encourage such an unequal match after her insistent reminders about the importance

<sup>17</sup>Translations from the text of *La Princesse de Clèves* are my own and have been in part based on Nancy Mitford's translation (Penguin: 1978). Page numbers in parentheses refer to the Penguin edition.

of marital love; Goode, for example, calls her consent a lapse that causes the ultimate failure of the mother's plan for her daughter's virtue (p. 401). The text itself suggests ambivalence on the mother's part, rather than a lapse; her approval is phrased in ambiguous negative constructions: ". . . she did not fear that she might be giving her daughter a husband she could not love in giving her the Prince de Clèves" (p. 48). I would suggest that the marital "amour" Mme. de Chartres has in mind could naturally grow out of the Princess' feelings of "respect and gratitude"; its function is not to disturb or move her in any way, but to guard her against the danger of extramarital affairs. A different kind of "amour" forms the subject of the mother's narratives about court life, one from which she intends to shield her daughter altogether: hence the ambiguity in the very verb *aimer* and hence the mother's hesitation.

The cornerstone of the Princess' education is the bond of sincerity and honesty between her and her mother: the young girl keeps nothing to herself; she reveals to her mother the most insignificant events, thoughts and feelings. These exchanges are all the more necessary as the Princess realizes that the colorful and deceptive spectacle of the court is virtually incomprehensible to her. As Mme. de Chartres says in a frequently noted passage: "If you judge by appearances in this place, you will surely be deceived, for things are almost never what they seem" (p. 55). The mother teaches and guides her daughter in her social encounters; moreover, she works to shield her from dangerous feelings altogether. Thus she tells her about the passionate intrigues that go on around them, not to initiate her into the rituals of court life, but almost as if to substitute the narrative for the forbidden experience.

Yet if we read the novel in light of the psychoanalytic paradigm outlined above, the intense bond between the young Princess and her mother takes on a psychological significance that far outweighs its social role. Such a reading involves an attempt to project into the novel the characters' pre-fictional history, and reveals the following picture: before reaching the age of sixteen, the Princess lived in virtual isolation with her mother. Since she was never allowed to confront society directly, all she learned about the world was

mediated through her mother's reports. This bond of dependency became all the more intense in the absence of other family members, especially of a father figure. Chodorow sees the father's role as "a symbol of freedom from the dependence and merging" represented by the mother. "A girl is likely to turn to him . . . as the most available person who can help her to get away from her mother" (p. 121). In the Princess' case, there was *no one* else to turn to and thus she remains, more than other women, dependent on and bound to her mother. Moreover, since she never had the opportunity to transfer her libidinal attachment to a male object, the mother remains for her the only object, both internal and external, both positive and negative, both intensely needed and intensely feared. We can assume that the quality of their bond is severely affected by the pressures of Court life.

On a symbolic level, another interpretation suggests itself: the country retreat where the mother mourned her husband's death and raised her daughter can be seen as an all-female pre-oedipal realm, while the Court with its dominant heterosexual intrigues, with the Vidame as paternal figure and Clèves and Nemours as husband and lover, clearly becomes the oedipal realm the Princess must enter if she is to grow up. Yet, if this reading is plausible, she enters the adult patriarchal world with expectations derived from the matriarchal pre-history of her childhood, expectations she is never able to relinquish.

The complete honesty between daughter and mother is not interrupted by the marriage to Clèves, but is actually bolstered by it: the three protagonists coexist in a triangular relationship. Up until this point, the young heroine's identity is one-dimensional and incomplete. She is a product of her mother's educational plan and depends on the presence of her mother to function publicly and privately. Her husband provides her with a change in status, thus constituting not as much an adjustment as an additional support.

The insufficiency of the Princess' education emerges most forcefully when, a short time after her marriage, she meets the most attractive man at Court, the Duc de Nemours. The Princess' naiveté is such that she becomes aware of her attraction after it has already been observed by others. Her mother also fails to enlighten her,

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fearing to reveal to her daughter the attraction of which she herself might not be aware. Realizing that whatever she might be feeling needs to be kept secret, the Princess is silent as to the reasons for her reluctance to attend St. André's ball. The unfathomable feelings Nemours inspires, feelings unavailable to rational understanding and therefore uncontrollable, thus occasion the first moments of silence and deception between mother and daughter: they represent a clear transgression of the code established by Mme. de Chartres and of the mutual loyalty that characterizes their relationship.

Suddenly the mother is threatened with the loss of her daughter, just as the daughter is threatened with the loss of her mother's approval, and thus with the loss of her very identity. It cannot be accidental, then, that Mme. de Chartres should become deathly ill just at this particular point, nor is the Princess' guilt for causing her mother's illness surprising.

It is only with the emergence of her illicit feelings for Nemours that the Princess begins to develop what might be called an identity of her own. The full emergence of that identity would clearly depend on a more complete separation from her mother. As Judith Kegan Gardiner shows in "A Wake for Mother: The Maternal Deathbed in Women's Fiction,"<sup>18</sup> maternal death plays precisely this function in more recent fiction: the mother is painfully murdered so that the daughter should not need to take her place, so that she can separate. Irigaray also echoes the matricidal impulse basic to female development when she says, "And the one doesn't stir without the other. But it is not together that we move. When the one of us comes into the world, the other goes underground. When the one carries life, the other dies" (p. 22).

In spite of her mother's early death, this separation is never complete in the Princess. Mme. de Chartres' presence and power far outlast her lifetime: she remains a permanent and influential inner presence. This powerful connection is solidified in what I consider the novel's key scene, Mme. de Chartres' death bed speech, which characterizes with great clarity the relationship between the two

<sup>18</sup>*Feminist Studies*, 4, 1 (Feb., 1978), 146–164.

women. Mme. de Chartres is the first to verbalize her daughter's passion, thus giving shape and reality to what so far has remained disordered and unnamable. Yet she does so only to emphasize the dangerous, even deathly nature of that passion: "You stand at the edge of the abyss and can only hold back by means of great effort and great violence" (p. 69). She commands her to withdraw from the court and to spare no effort to keep from succumbing to her attraction. In addition to the abstract ideals of "virtue" and "duty" and to the concrete obligation to her husband and herself (and, by implication, to the mother who raised her), Mme. de Chartres adds yet another deterrent, a sense of damnation that extends far beyond their lifetimes: the mother's very death would be troubled by the thought that her daughter might "fall like other women" (p. 70). With this admonition, Mme. de Chartres dismisses her daughter and refuses to see her again before her death which occurs three days later.

The entire encounter is completely one-sided: the mother alone has a voice, one which informs the daughter about her own feelings and instructs her as to her behavior. Mme. de Clèves has no chance to reply but merely weeps: "Mme. de Clèves dissolved in tears over her mother's hand which she held tightly clasped in both of hers" (p. 70). It is my contention that "fondre" is to be taken literally: as conflict threatens her relation to her mother and symbolically causes her mother's death, the Princess loses the continuous and firm sense of herself. As she emerges from her mother's deathbed, Mme. de Clèves has incorporated the mother's deathbed discourse as she had previously incorporated their early symbiotic bond; she exists only in relation to her mother's advice and admonitions. The Princess' progressive acknowledgement of unfamiliar feelings, and her gradual discovery of how to interpret them, her intricate process of self-creation and self-knowledge are haunted by her mother's very words. Even as she learns about herself, the Princess must remember that the truths revealed are unacceptable and must reiterate the mother's admonishments both to herself and to others.

Unable to cope alone with the powerful and contradictory emotions to which she is subject, and deprived of her mother's active guidance, the Princess seeks to replace it with her husband's. He now

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becomes the guide and protector, continuing the mother's education with similar stories about Court intrigues, fostering her complete honesty, encouraging her dependency. The scene in which the Princess confesses her love for Nemours to her husband is no longer surprising when one considers the pattern of dependency that characterizes the Princess' existence. The symbiotic tie to her husband has replaced the connection to her mother, yet the husband does no more than to repeat the mother's advice almost in the same words. He insists on "sincerity" (p. 76), commends her "strength and virtue" (p. 137), and says, echoing Mme. de Chartres: ". . . I see the danger you are in. You must control yourself for your sake and, if possible, for the love of me" (p. 140). It is interesting that Clèves' reaction to his wife's revelation is quite similar to her mother's—he also tricks and deceives her, withholding information and trying to gain control. Both in the Princess' social interactions and in her private reflections, he fulfills the mother's functions.

M. de Clèves' death, the result of his jealousy and thus once more the fault of the Princess, reinforces the pattern of repetition which convinces the young woman of the deathly yet uncontrollable power of her passion. After her husband's deathbed words, she is enclosed in a double prison of guilt which precludes any future action on her part. She can neither fully explore her passion nor let it develop; as she ventures out, she is, at every point, pulled back into her mother's sphere of influence and, more seriously, made to feel responsible for another death. Transgression is tantamount to murder; knowledge and action are equally dangerous.

It is necessary, at this point, to examine both the reasons and the implications of Mme. de Chartres' educational plan: why, in a society that is virtually ruled by amorous intrigues and where marital infidelity is practiced by everyone from the king and queen down, is Mme. de Chartres so adamant about her daughter's virtue? Her reasons go beyond the desire for the abstract ideals of uniqueness or perfection. They need to be approached from two perspectives, social and psychological.

In this novel, passion is represented as loss of self. In the words of Camus, "Mme. de Lafayette's aim—nothing else is as interesting to

her—is to teach us a very particular conception of love. Her singular postulate is that this passion endangers our being.”<sup>19</sup> This is especially true for women; the interaction between the sexes is presented as a battle in which men conquer and women are vanquished. Thus, for women, the loss is a double one. They submit both to male will and to the force of passion itself: “You are at the edge of the abyss” (p. 70); “fall like the other women” (p. 70); “I am conquered and overcome by an attraction which lures me on in spite of myself” (p. 127). In her discovery of her passion, the Princess is struck by extremes and contradictions she is unable to comprehend. What starts as a “deep impression on her heart” (p. 53), becomes a “turmoil she couldn’t control” (p. 88), and finally overwhelms her to the point of total contradiction: “. . . I thought yesterday all that I am thinking today but today my actions are the exact contrary of yesterday’s resolutions” (p. 127). This double loss of control is exacerbated by the rupture in temporal continuity inherent in her inclination for Nemours: “. . . you inspired me with feelings which were not only unknown to me before I saw you but of which I had not even guessed the existence, so that the agitation which they always bring was in my case exacerbated by my great astonishment” (p. 187). Not only does passion take the self out of its continuous existence in time, but it substitutes for tranquility an unalleviated insecurity, because, for men, as Mme. de Chartres so convincingly demonstrated, passion inevitably erodes. Equally threatening is the extremely public nature of passion: an amorous involvement exposes the participants to the intrusive curiosity of the entire court. Love letters are read aloud and passed around; men wear the colors of their ladies in tournaments. Every piece of information is consumed and disseminated in minutes. Dissimulation and discovery are the most popular activities; looks are weapons of intrusion and violation. Nemours himself participates in this activity to the point of voyeurism. He steals Mme. de Clèves’ portrait, spies on her in her country retreat, on one occasion overhearing her most intimate conversation with her husband, on another watching the most private revelations

<sup>19</sup>“L’Intelligence et l’échafaud,” in *Théâtre, récit, nouvelles* (Paris: N.R.F., 1962), p. 1890.

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of her soul. Later he rents a room with a view of her garden and spends his days watching her.

In view of the realities of “love,” it is clear that there are many excellent reasons to resist it and to refuse Nemours. Mme. de Chartres plans for her daughter a life of “*repos*,”<sup>20</sup> of order and control, bolstered rather than hindered by marital love. In preparing her for a life outside of passion, the mother seemingly gives the daughter the key to independence, self-determination, and autonomy. In refusing Nemours, the Princess can remain an equal in the power structure in which men conquer and women fall; she can refuse to be a victim of male inconstancy, protecting her private self from the assault of lovers and on-lookers alike. Sylvère Lotringer sees the mother’s advice as the transcendent message in the novel, comparable to the divine message in the epic.<sup>21</sup> For the Princess, the possibility of transcendence is enhanced by the superhuman control, the saintly and violent courage and effort demanded by her mother. In order to keep from being conquered by passion and by Nemours, the Princess literally has to conquer herself.

Yet Mme. de Chartres’ lesson offers independence from passion and men only to enslave the Princess in another form of dependence. In order to reach the transcendent state, in order even to function under the pressure of conflicting impulses, she has to rely on her mother’s help. Continuity with the past is important in that it means continuity with the mother. Throughout the novel, the mother remains her backbone, the very foundation of her ego: “I have never given any sign of weakness . . . and I would have had no fear if Madame de Chartres had still been here to help me” (p. 131). The mother’s lesson, then, is double-edged: on the one hand, it seems to offer Mme. de Clèves the possibility of autonomy and even transcendence; on the other, it traps her in a state of continued dependency and emotional infancy. As a result, the Princess is ineluctably caught between two opposing forces: the passion for Nemours with all its psychological and social agitation and the world of mother and

<sup>20</sup>See Domna Stanton, “The Ideal of *Repos* in Seventeenth-Century French Literature,” *L’Esprit Créateur*, 15 (1975), 79–104.

<sup>21</sup>“La Structuration Romanesque,” *Critique*, 26, 177 (1970), 498–529.



husband, wife and daughter, with its tranquility that resembles death, its dependency that keeps her incomplete. The Princess develops, creates and destroys herself precisely in her vacillation between these forces. Her own private and separate discourse emerges in the battles of her conscience, in the need to respond to the annihilating demands of family and society. It is in these moments of questioning and doubt that Mme. de Clèves develops.

Yet even the Princess' most private moments of self-interrogation are still dominated by and tied to the mother's discourse which she has internalized. Her development of a separate identity is held in check by one fixed unbendable point to which she continually returns—the mother's deathbed advice, her words and values. As the following passages demonstrate, every potentially new insight turns into a repetition of that moment:

Mme. de Clèves:

Do I want to enter into a love affair? Do I want to *fail M. de Clèves*? Do I want to *fail myself*? and finally do I want to expose myself to *the cruel remorse the deadly pain that love brings*? . . . I must *tear myself away* from M. de Nemours' presence, I must go to the country. . . . (p. 127, italics mine)

Mme. de Chartres:

. . . your duty, both to your husband and to yourself. . . .  
 . . . the wretchedness of a love affair  
 . . . retire from the court. Force your husband to take you away. (p. 69)

As a result, Mme. de Clèves develops only in the ways allowed her by her mother—that is, morally and spiritually through suffering and denial. Being worthy of herself means to deny and defy herself. She can ultimately assert herself only against her own desires and impulses. This typically female form of development through self-denial is also a form of extinction, a death-warrant passed on to the daughter by her mother. Mme. de Chartres envisioned for her daughter a life of *tranquilité*, of passive vicarious experience, a life of being rather than becoming. The young Princess does develop, but only in this characteristically negative sense.

In her final confrontation with Nemours, the Princess admits that the “duty” which prevents her from marrying, “only exists in [her]

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imagination” (p. 192). This makes it all the more powerful a force, however, because, introduced there by her mother, it becomes the core of her self-image. All of the reasons she gives Nemours are almost exact repetitions of her mother’s and her husband’s phrases. Speaking first of her duty (“the austere rules imposed by my duty” [p. 187]), she admits that it is his inconstancy she fears, an inconstancy she suffered so violently when she read and then composed the famous love letter of Mme. the Thémines.

The duty I owe to M. de Clèves’ memory would, in itself, be too weak were it not reinforced by considerations of my own peace of mind (*repos*). My peace of mind in its turn needs to be reinforced by my duty. I may be unsure of myself, but I think my scruples are invincible. . . . So I am not going to see you again, whatever it costs me. (p. 191)

Even though her refusal is neither required nor even recognized by society, the reasons for it conform to the requirements of her own psyche which must be obeyed. She finally reaches the state of *tranquillité* or *repos* desired by her mother by withdrawing from the court, but, in so doing, she begins to live an afterlife in the very course of her young life. Mme. de Clèves’ withdrawal from the court and refusal of Nemours is not a refusal of desire; on the contrary, as Sylvère Lotringer argues, she chooses to preserve it in its pure, integral and therefore imagined form. The scene that prefigures her final withdrawal, her retreat to Coulommiers, illustrates well her choice of Nemours’ portrait and staff over his person: “in preserving the passion without the lover, she rids it of the pressures and degradations of the court.”<sup>22</sup> She is furthermore justified in her decision by the ultimate extinction of Nemours’ ardor: unlike hers, his passion is subject to factors of time and space.

The Princess’ fear of change and degradation, her withdrawal into the safety of the Coulommiers pavillion and the convent reinforces the system of oppositions in which she is so hopelessly caught:

Court life	life outside the Court
husband and lover	mother and husband
change	permanence

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, 519.

agitation	<i>tranquillité, repos</i>
danger	safety
oedipal identity	pre-oedipal identity

Thus, I would argue that the passion Mme. de Clèves shares with Nemours must be seen in relation to the attachment that so permanently binds her to her mother. Unlike the mother's total and permanent love, Nemours' is limited and subject to erosion. In contrast to the safety and seclusion of her childhood home, he offers the danger and exposure of the Court. In leaving, Mme. de Clèves follows literally her mother's advice to flee the Court; she thereby returns to the haven of her childhood, recreating in her own imagination the perfect untouched pre-oedipal bond between mother and child. The real Nemours can at this point only trouble her unnecessarily.

The structure of progressive interiorization that characterizes this novel, the movement from the colorful spectacle of the court (historical novel) to the subjective realm of the protagonist's thoughts and feelings (psychological novel) has been noted by several critics.<sup>23</sup> Still others suggest that the novel traces the philosophical progression from sixteenth to seventeenth-century French thought.<sup>24</sup> It is important to note that the Princess' withdrawal from the court coincides with a change in the court itself; Henry's death and Diane de Poitiers' exile mark the end of a world ruled by amorous intrigues and the beginning of the reign of the *reine-mère*.<sup>25</sup> This social and political change mirrors the psychological movement the Princess enacts, from heterosexual passion to a return to the maternal realm; yet, in the context of the novel, that realm is already tainted by intimations of betrayal and unhealthy mutual dependency. The relationship between mother and daughter is an alternative to the other disastrous relationships in the novel only by projection backwards, to a pre-historical, pre-fictional moment of origin.

<sup>23</sup>See Tiefenbrun, and also Stirling Haig, *Madame de Lafayette* (New York: Twayne, 1970), esp. pp. 107–110.

<sup>24</sup>See Pierre Malandain, "Écriture et histoire dans *La Princesse de Clèves*," *Littérature*, 36 (1979), 19–36.

<sup>25</sup>Butor points out the parallelism between the Princess' withdrawal and Diane's exile.

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Although the mother's lesson amounts to a death-warrant, it responds in a very real way to the limited possibilities for women in a male-dominated culture which is ruled by uncontrolled passions that further enslave women. Phyllis Chesler says in *Women and Madness*: "Women in modern Judeo-Christian societies are motherless children."<sup>26</sup> Adrienne Rich interprets this as a statement of female powerlessness: "Women have had neither power nor wealth to hand on to their daughters . . . the most they can do is teach their daughters the tricks of surviving in a patriarchy by pleasing, and attaching themselves to powerful or economically viable men."<sup>27</sup> One could say that Mme. de Chartres does much more than the mothers Rich refers to: she wants to teach her daughter not only to survive but to transcend, and, to do so, she does give her a form of power, although it is a negative one. It is the power of absence, abstinence and denial, the strength to remain equal by saying "no." This power of renunciation is Mme. de Clèves' only protection against the violation to which she is subject. Yet in Mme. de Clèves' case, it represents neither freedom nor autonomy. Since it is a function of her dependency on her mother and her husband, it actually keeps her from surviving.

The patterns of dependency that tie the daughter to the mother also tie the mother to the daughter: "l'une ne bouge pas sans l'autre." The key to Mme. de Chartres' own psychological motivations for trying to prevent, at all costs, her daughter's passion for Nemours, lies in a seemingly insignificant detail of the text, one which has, with the exception of Scanlan's article, been overlooked by critics. In one of her narratives about the history of the court, Mme. de Chartres alludes to an unnamed lady who was in love with the Duc d'Orléans, although, due to the coincidence of the death of her husband and lover, she was able to keep her extramarital passion a total secret. Mme. de Chartres insists in keeping the name of this woman silent because "she has lived with so much wisdom since then . . . that she deserves to keep her reputation" (p. 58). This seemingly virtuous

<sup>26</sup>(New York: Avon, 1972), p. 17.

<sup>27</sup>"*Jane Eyre: Temptations of a Motherless Woman*," in *On Lies, Secrets, and Silence* (New York: Norton, 1979), p. 91.

woman might well be Mme. de Chartres herself who, having lost both her husband and her lover, devotes the rest of her life to the education of her daughter, her only cathectic object. That education, in turn, would then be designed to atone for her own guilt, for the discrepancy in her own life between appearance and reality. The relationship to her daughter, moreover, would give her the ego-completion she needs. We can see how strong Mme. de Chartres' motivation for keeping her daughter from passion must be. Passion threatens the Princess, but, more importantly, it ruptures the symbiotic bond between mother and daughter, a bond which far outlives the mother's death. Moreover, it attacks Mme. de Chartres' resolution of her own guilt, her achievement, through her daughter, of the tranquil and virtuous life.

Mme. de Clèves, caught between her mother and her lover, succumbs to the cycle of repetition and continued dependency by withdrawing from the court, as her mother had done after her own husband's death. Yet, having no daughter of her own to raise, having no continuity and solidity to her existence, she dies at a very young age. In an inverted and uncanny way, the Princess fulfills the mother's plan. Yet in the process of questioning, vacillation and repetition that takes her to *tranquillité* and to death, she does discover passion. In her efforts to understand this passion, she does develop a truncated discourse of her own. But her subversive, private and brief journey of self-discovery only reaffirms old affiliations.

Nancy Miller has chosen to read the novel's resolution not as a defeat, but as the emblem of a peculiarly female form of victory, as a protest against and a withdrawal from the love story in which women are given the role of exchange object, and as an enactment of a female fantasy of power. The psychoanalytic theory I have used as a new optic on the novel suggests a similar pattern—an early erotic attachment between mother and daughter which remains permanently incorporated into the daughter's psyche, a need to recreate the quality of that bond in adult heterosexual relationships which promise to duplicate but ultimately threaten the principal loyalty to the mother, all in the context of a society in which women are subjected to male inconstancy and betrayal.

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At the age of nineteen, Mme. de Lafayette writes to her friend and admirer Ménage: “I am so convinced that love is an uncomfortable thing that I am happy that my friends and I are exempt from it.”<sup>28</sup> Her novel enacts the heroine’s process of exemption, of liberation from the love story, revealing beneath it another submerged plot, an alternative to adult heterosexual love. As feminist readers engaged in an act of re-vision, we see the strength in the Princess’ uncompromised withdrawal, we see the victory of her refusal to be the female object in the exchange of love, of her insistence on attachment and continuity. Yet we cannot help but question the unbridgeable oppositions which prevent her from growing up. It seems that the fictional heroine who refuses to be possessed and destroyed by the “uncomfortable” game of love has two alternatives: an enslaving attachment to family and childhood or religious/mystical transcendence. Both constitute an early death.

<sup>28</sup>Quoted by Bernard Pingaud in *Mme. de Lafayette* (Paris: Seuil, 1978), p. 33.