Chapter Three

MADAME DE LAFAYETTE

**ENDANT 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 plus dans son Empire."¹ The abrupt beginning of *La Princesse de Montpensier* and its direct thrust upon the reader succeed in translating perfectly the view of passion as a violent, interrupting force in a world dependent upon monotonous repetition, upon unquestioned habit, for smooth functioning. In Mme de Lafayette's works, true passion results from a sudden shock, from the arrival on the scene of a new presence, unknown before, and capable of radically altering the existence of the participants. It is not by chance that the opening lines of *La Princesse de Montpensier* establish a link between love and war. The martial metaphor for Mme de Lafayette, as for La Rochefoucauld, was the most potent means of expressing the state of man subject to invasion by violent passions that call into question his yearnings toward repose as well as his belief in free will.

It is the explosive, destructive, anarchical force of Eros that Mme de Lafayette sought to depict. Under the decency of style (or the style of decency), the mind and the body are warring, the former manifestly unable to exert
control over the spontaneous, free impulses of the latter. In the tradition of the Rambouillet group and of the précieux code in general, passionate love could be traced to an origin of mutual understanding and admiration. In other words, it has a past. But for Mme de Lafayette, passion originates explosively, combustively, and is not related at all to the mental concepts of esteem and respect, based upon prior knowledge.

Originating spontaneously within the body, erotic passion is translated by the body, totally unreceptive to the dicta of virtue and common sense. This coup de foudre effect occurs on successive occasions in La Princesse de Clèves: M. de Clèves, upon seeing Mlle de Chartres for the first time, "demeura si touché de sa beauté et de l'air modeste qu'il avait remarqué dans ses actions qu'on peut dire qu'il conçut pour elle dès ce moment une passion et une estime extraordinaires." When Mme de Clèves and the duc de Nemours first meet at a court ball, the effect is absolutely electric and does not fail to astonish all who surround them: "Quand ils commencèrent à danser, il s'éleva dans la salle un murmure de louanges. Le roi et les reines se souvinrent qu'ils ne s'étaient jamais vus, et trouvèrent quelque chose de singulier de les voir danser ensemble sans se connaître" (p. 262). The moment a new passion is born, it is sufficient unto itself, and, originating in the demands of the body, is totally free from dependency upon the past.

That the body's impulses offer the most direct truth concerning the individual is perceived, although unconsciously, by the king and queens. Vaguely troubled, they react to this scene of perfect physical harmony by seeking to reinstall through a rapid introduction the reign of reason and virtue signaled by the term "se connaître." The instant, spontaneous accord between Mme de Clèves and the duc de Nemours is in violation of traditional codes—occidental, humanist, précieux—seeking to spiritualize love.

The entire story of Zaïde (in the tale of that name) and Consalve also belies the précieux, devout humanist conception of love based upon prior knowledge, admiration, and
respect. Early in the tale, Consalve expresses the belief that he could never love a woman without first knowing her well; the prince, his friend, takes the opposite stance (the whole discussion recalling a long tradition in courtois literature, the debate on love, from the medieval jeux partis to the précieux novel): “Je serais incapable de devenir amoureux d’une personne avec qui je serais accoutumé et, si je ne suis surpris d’abord, je ne puis être touché. Je crois que les inclinations naturelles se font sentir dans les premiers moments; et les passions, qui ne viennent que par le temps, ne se peuvent appeler de véritables passions.” Consalve falls passionately in love with Zaïde from the first moment he lays eyes on her and thus contradicts his own theory of prior acquaintance. The obvious conclusion from Consalve’s experience is that the nature of passion is sudden, violent, interruptive, independent of control by reason or by will.

Because Mme de Lafayette clothed her tales and novels in a habit of cold concision, where the voice of passion central to her writing adopts only the most lucid, structured, carefully modulated tones, the very obvious erotic center of the works is frequently shunned in criticism, as if to penetrate the style would be a transgression. Although criticism has not failed to point out that one of the major themes of the novels and nouvelles is the difficult transition between appearance and reality—hence the lengthy portrayal of courtly splendor in the early pages of La Princesse de Clèves, contrasting with the moral imperfection that soon follows—it has, nonetheless, not carried such analysis one step further by showing that Mme de Lafayette’s careful masking (through the channels of monotonous repetition, barren vocabulary, rigid structure) was only that, a mask, an appearance that barely veiled the erotic center and the diverse inner tensions.

It is true that allusions to the violent demands of the body, to the preeminence of the erotic over the mind and its illusions of will, may be stylistically reduced in Mme de Lafayette’s works. The sole exception to this general pat-
tern of minimal portrayal of that which is directly, explicitly sexual is the short, posthumous *La Comtesse de Tende* where the "language" of the body belies the code of decency, social and literary. Sensual fulfillment is ushered in, expressed obviously through recourse to adultery, pregnancy, and illegitimate birth. The guilty participants are punished severely, but for a short time, the duration only of the tale itself (the illusion of fiction translating the illusory situation of a reigning, satisfied desire), the code of erotic gratification presides. The language of the text is virtually "violated" by the intrusion of vocabulary such as *grossesse*, but with the death of the heroine, the temporary social and literary deviation is expunged.

Contemporary writers have the option of adopting the most primitive discourse in attempting to translate the outcry of passion. Neither grammar nor stylistic euphemism is required. Language can be not only direct but obscene in its effort to capture spontaneity, intensity, and violence. These same emotions were hardly absent from the literature of the classical age, but they were reduced or modulated by an extraordinary superstructure. The chaos of passion was thematically present, but linguistically ordered. Phèdre's lamentations, for example, over the tremendous burden and pain of her body, are cloaked in the rigid, highly structured Alexandrine verse:

*Que ces vains ornements, que ces voiles me pèsent!*
*Quelle importune main, en formant tous ces noeuds,*
*A pris soin sur mon front d'assembler mes cheveux?*
*Tout m'afflige, et me nuit, et conspire à me nuire.*

The body's disorder and pain are couched in poetry's contained refinement, the structure of the verse lending structure to, and thereby instantly diminishing, the effect of emotional chaos. In a similar fashion, mythological symbolism replaces more direct allusions while offering unambiguous explanation. That Hippolyte is painted as "ce fils de l'Amazone" serves notice that there will be a struggle with the opposite sex.
For Mme de Lafayette the relaxation of the socio-literary code occurs directly only in *La Comtesse de Tende*. Her other works are free of obvious violations. Hence, the recourse is to sexual symbolism as in the second scene at Coulommiers in *La Princesse de Clèves*, a scene that Michel Butor has analyzed thoroughly. Butor suggests that such symbolism, in this case, *la canne des Indes*, perceived by us in the post-Freudian age, was also discernible to the seventeenth-century reader accustomed to its frequent use in the fairy tales of the age.⁸ (I will discuss later Mme de Lafayette’s recourse to various elements derived from the romanesque and the atmosphere of the *contes de fée*.)

Although the truth of their extraordinary mutual attraction is already sensed by Mme de Clèves and M. de Nemours, it remains at first an unconscious, hidden perception. Within the boundaries of a socially acceptable act—dancing—an act that is moreover ordered by social authority (it is the king who commands them to dance), the power of the body’s extremely forceful presence and vitality is at once lessened and harmonized. The experience is still perceived as basically aesthetically satisfying; the beauty of the couple provokes “un murmure de louanges,” although, imperceptibly, there is already the beginning of a transgression, for the couple has never met before. But the physical harmony takes precedence over any sense of imminent danger, and the sexual nature of the pleasure the two partners experience is hidden by the veil of social acceptability and by the structured, measured elegance of the dance.

At Coulommiers, however, a different mood prevails; and although Mme de Clèves lives the entire scene in a blur of conscious and subconscious, of dream and reality, the moment posits the entirety of her conflict. What was before socially authorized becomes now a transgression, an intrusion, a penetration that threatens to destroy not only Mme de Clèves but the entire social network based upon a norm of control and restraint.

There is, in particular, at Coulommiers, a sense of under-
lying violence that menaces directly the person of Mme de Clèves. Her utter exposure to Nemours, the penetration of his look upon her, testify to strong male aggression. The game of love, as Bernard Pingaud has shown, is not played without some extreme consequences for the woman: "Un homme peut bien conquérir et abandonner successivement plusieurs maîtresses. Une femme, surtout si elle est mariée, perd à ce jeu non seulement la considération, mais le repos. Cette aventure qui n'est pour les autres qu'un sujet de curiosité, auquel on s'attache un jour et qu'on oublie le lendemain, est pour elle une déchéance progressive, contre laquelle, par tous les moyens en son pouvoir, elle essaie en vain de lutter." Throughout all of Mme de Lafayette’s works—in her fiction as well as in the short biography of Henriette d’Angleterre—there is a pervading atmosphere of male prowess that exerts itself either in the game of war or in the game of love. No less than four men attempt to control the princesse de Montpensier, each regarding her as his own exclusive conquest. The comte de Tende freely neglects his wife, subjects her to pain and humiliation, until his passion is eventually ignited through jealousy. And the duc de Nemours persistently views the relationship with Mme de Clèves in terms of an aggressive seduction.

Women are the prey of virile, violent instincts, and martial activity is seen by Mme de Lafayette as the sole satisfactory means to repressing aggressive, erotic impulses. Thus when the chevalier de Guise fully comprehends Mme de Clèves’ feelings for Nemours, he is so grieved that "dès ce jour, il prit la résolution de ne penser jamais à être aimé de Mme de Clèves. Mais pour quitter cette entreprise, qui lui avait paru si difficile et si glorieuse, il en fallait quelque autre dont la grandeur put l’occuper. Il se mit dans l’esprit de prendre Rhodes, dont il avait déjà eu quelque pensée" (p. 307). Aggressive energies must be released in some fashion, and war is perhaps the sole satisfactory outlet in a world where passion is rarely capable of being gratified and, when it is, of enduring. Women are
perceived as the object of the male impulse to vanquish, and the acts of transgression that their lovers commit leave them in a highly weakened position.

In *La Comtesse de Tende*, the most direct attack is of course the adultery that triumphs over female virtue, exposing the countess to guilt and dishonor. But although the reader is never witness to any adulterous scene (we are told only that she has become pregnant), a strong preliminary violation occurs when the chevalier de Navarre successfully enters her chambers, surreptitiously, thus penetrating beyond the limits of socially acceptable meeting grounds. This violation is, moreover, keenly felt as such by the countess; she perceives a direct threat to her person and reputation. The entering of a room is in itself, for Mme de Lafayette, an act of seduction over a weakened adversary, who quickly succumbs to irresolution and confusion: "La comtesse se laissa tomber sur un lit de repos, dont elle s'était relevée à demi et, regardant le chevalier avec des yeux pleins d'amour et de larmes: Vous voulez donc que je meure? lui dit-elle. Croyez-vous qu'un coeur puisse contenir tout ce que vous me faites sentir?" The chevalier's triumph, his successful attempt at drawing out the confession of love, is flawless.

In *La Princesse de Clèves* that Mme de Lafayette constructs her most masterful scene of symbolic rape. Early in the chain of events, Nemours freely steals a portrait of Mme de Clèves, and the symbolic possession is reinforced by his knowledge that the portrait belongs to M. de Clèves. The princess observes the entire scene, not at first without considerable pleasure. However, the ravishment is soon perceived as an aggressive attack on her person: "Elle fit réflexion à la violence de l'inclination qui l'entraînait vers M. de Nemours; elle trouva qu'elle n'était plus maîtresse de ses paroles et de son visage" (p. 303). For the moment Mme de Clèves has been successfully undermined.

The desired goal is physical possession, and this triumph of Eros is shared completely by the woman, although she
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is never the aggressor. She may flee, as does the princesse de Clèves, succumb as the comtesse de Tende, but she is not the initiator of the struggle to possess. If she does choose to withstand the attack, her conscious behavior may well conform to her prescribed rules; but her subconscious, through her body, her gestures, her almost imperceptible movements and reactions, succeeds in communicating her yearnings. The body announces exactly what the mind seeks to obliterate. The mark of erotic passion is the complete inability to disguise it, and the spontaneous expression of this passion—unnatural silences, blushes, self-conscious gestures—is the surest sign of the mind's loss of control. Originating in the body, erotic love is translated totally by it; and the upsetting, disquieting effect of passion upon the individual cannot be successfully masked. The dancing scene in La Princesse de Clèves reveals itself as the moment of optimum candor; here the basic truth of spontaneous drives is neither blocked outwardly nor repressed inwardly.

The nature of passion, as portrayed in Mme de Lafayette's universe, is to ravage, to destroy the smooth continuum of existence, to alienate the self from its most intimate conception. Surging suddenly, seemingly from nowhere, endowed with no past, no socially sanctioned signs (knowledge, respect), passionate love is experienced as a radical break, both temporal and psychological. In La Princesse de Clèves, which is the most complete of all Mme de Lafayette's works (the other tales offer more or less diverse fragments of the whole cycle), the goal is to reestablish the integrity of the heroine. Mme de Chartres' recourse to a vocabulary of imminent danger, of fall—"vous êtes sur le bord du précipice (pp. 277)—suggests that at stake is the concept of "breaking apart," of falling from one world into another, engendering dispersion of the self and its alienation from a preliminary set of values.

The problem then becomes, once the disquieting force of passion sets in, how to recompose the self, how to reestablish continuity, how to regain the lost sense of "one-
ness." The battle was hardly a new one in the century, and Mme de Lafayette's writings seem to bear directly upon the solutions of her predecessors, if only to deny their ideas. The whole of *La Princesse de Clèves*, from one point of view, is designed to combat a perspective of life based upon the strength of the mind. With the example of Con­salve, M. de Clèves, and the princesse de Clèves herself, Mme de Lafayette quickly and forcefully undermines Mlle de Scudéry's and the précieuses' belief in mutual understand­ing and admiration as a prerequisite to a satisfactory love relationship. The body, and not the mind, is the seat of passion, and therefore any struggle to resist it based upon reason and lucid discourse is doomed to failure.

Descartes, whose *Les Passions de l'âme* is perhaps at the base of Mme de Lafayette's thought, wrote that it was possible to acquire "un empire très absolu sur toutes les passions, si on employait assez d'industrie à les dresser et à les conduire," through the practice of *la vertu* (a pre­dominating word, moreover, of *La Princesse de Clèves* and certainly not by chance the final one). *La vertu* was con­sidered as the exercise of those standards that an honnête homme would judge to be superior. The necessary factor ensuring the continuity of this standard was "une ferme et constante résolution d'en bien user, c'est-à-dire de ne manquer jamais de volonté pour entreprendre et exécuter toutes les choses qu'il jugera être les meilleures." The concept of a resolution relies heavily upon the firm use of mental faculties to moderate the force of the passions and endows the "word" with ultimate powers of trans­cendence.

This path is foredoomed a failure by Mme de Lafayette, however, for, as Serge Doubrovsky has expressed, "la réflexion, comme son nom l'indique, ne fait que refléter les pensées que nous avons formées spontanément et sur lesquelles elle n'a aucune prise." Mme de Clèves' multi­fold attempts at extricating herself from her prison mis­carry because they are based upon language that is mani­festy unable to reply to the body's spontaneous drives.

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Mme de Chartres, in an effort to regulate her daughter's behavior on the side of virtue, depended upon a system of self-control, obtained in turn by a constantly on-going dialogue with the self in favor of certain moral values, the antipode of which is the disorganizing life of passion. This "extrême défiance de soi-même" (p. 248) is reached only via an unremitting inner soliloquy; the "right" words will achieve the desired goal of virtue. Thus the resolutions that Mme de Clèves makes after each emotional jolt are her chosen method of breaking the cycle.

After her portrait is stolen, after she reads the letter supposedly addressed to Nemours (the one that in reality was directed to the vidame de Chartres), after she spends time alone with Nemours in an effort to copy that letter from memory, Mme de Clèves, aware of her violently intense feelings for him, resolves to control herself, to re-establish reason in her life, to combat her passion. But this task will prove impossible, although she fully believes that her resolutions in themselves are sufficient to do battle with her desires.

In the moments following her reading of the letter, Mme de Clèves, totally absorbed in her remorse and guilt, is consoled by the recognition that, "après cette connaissance, elle n'avait plus rien à craindre d'elle-même, et qu'elle serait entièrement guérie de l'inclination qu'elle avait pour ce prince" (p. 311). Later, however, after the moments of solitude with Nemours in an effort to reconstruct the letter, moments that bring her considerable pleasure, she concludes: "Je suis vaincue et surmontée par une inclination qui m'entraîne malgré moi. Toutes mes résolutions sont inutiles; je pensai hier tout ce que je pense aujourd'hui et je fais aujourd'hui tout le contraire de ce que je résolus hier" (p. 330). With the full recognition of the impotence of the private, inner word, of reflections, in controlling her emotional state, Mme de Clèves opts for the sole remaining solution, flight: "Il faut m'arracher de la présence de M. de Nemours; il faut m'en aller à la campagne, quelque bizarre que puisse paraître mon voyage" (p. 330).
330). But flight in this universe is tightly constricted, and M. de Nemours has only to visit his sister, whose country home is a neighbor to Coulommiers, in order to be present at the scene of the *aveu*.

Flight is not an answer to the dilemma, for the locus is at once too restrained, and the heroine is constantly being called back to the even more intimate circle of the court. Feeling these parallel pressures upon her, Mme de Clèves returns to reliance upon the lucid, unequivocal word as a solution to her problem, only this time she chooses discourse not with herself but with her husband. The question of a sincere confession is not a new one in the history of *La Princesse de Clèves*. Mme de Chartres had maintained a strict relationship with her daughter, whereby the latter was to keep her mother informed of all the amorous intrigues developing about this newcomer to the court, a counsel the heroine follows until the encounter with Nemours. After the episode at the ball, Mme de Clèves enters into a whole new world, that of the secret. And when she finally resolves to speak openly to her mother, it is too late; Mme de Chartres is on her deathbed, unable to communicate at length. In the early pages of the work, the power of the word is still at its highest peak. Mme de Chartres relies upon it as the sole method of maintaining her daughter in a virtuous state. Nonetheless, when Mme de Clèves perceives the nature of her feelings, she abruptly falls silent, and communication is cut off or disguised.

The *aveu*, the confession to her husband is doomed, for it opposes two codes, two universes, that are radically unharmonious: the mind and the body, Logos and Eros. It has been questioned whether the *aveu* is truly an act of courage on the part of Mme de Clèves or, rather, its opposite, a wish to place the responsibility for her conduct on someone else. Possibly it is both. What is more significant, however, is whether, as an act relying upon the power of reasoned discourse, it can successfully combat passion and jealousy. It seems fair to judge it a failure, for the prince de Clèves, although intellectually esteeming his
wife's sincerity, is manifestly unable to control his rage for possession. Her "Fiez-vous à mes paroles" becomes an impossibility; M. de Clèves' suspicions will arise not out of logic, not out of dispassionate reason, but out of his frustrated effort to appropriate Mme de Clèves for himself. Belief, trust, and confidence are of perilously little weight in a world where the humanistic code has been stripped bare. What is sought is complete possession over l'autre—Eros being the symbol for that possession as well as for its eventual failure—and words are impotent as agents against this rage.

In the end it appears that there are really only two alternatives: to succumb, as do Mme de Tende and the princesse de Montpensier, or to fight, in accordance with the honnête code: resolutions, sincerity, and flight. The second choice, which may loosely be referred to as an attempt to repress, is unsatisfactory, for the spontaneous drives of the body will not be controlled by the dicta of the conscience grounded into the format of la parole. The transcendence of the passions that occurs in Corneille's plays reveals itself as totally bankrupt in Mme de Lafayette's moral structure, and the desire for possession, translated through the concept of sexual desire and energies, emerges as the superior force. Descartes' code of générosité, his heavy use of la réflexion is shown to be equally lacking, since the inner dialogue, the reasoning with the self, comes too late. The spontaneous drives of the body have preempted the reign of the mind.

If attempts at repressing fail, as they inevitably do, then the obvious alternative would be that of the two other heroines: to give in. La comtesse de Tende experiences the totality of her decision; la princesse de Montpensier succumbs in intentions only. Both women are severely "punished," through great suffering and eventual death; and within the context of these two tales, it would appear that a strict Christian moral alone prevents a happy conclusion. There is a strong sense of transgression, of having given in to the body, which a rigid Christian ethic cannot
tolerate. This ethic unquestionably permeates the writings of Mme de Lafayette. The erotic is seen as threatening and demeaning; women are prey to the seductive efforts of the male; transgressions occur that violate the most traditional, religious views. But the full cycle of Mme de Lafayette's thinking is really not complete in either La Princesse de Montpensier or La Comtesse de Tende, for in these two tales physical desire is merely punished. It is not shown as an empty path to possession as in the far more complex La Princesse de Clèves. The drive to appropriate l'autre, interpreted through erotic longing, emerges as a radical impossibility, and it is to this end that Mme de Lafayette's works are directed. Physical possession is recognized as vastly unable to satisfy the far more intense longing for control.

The theme runs strongly through La Princesse de Clèves, interwoven among others, almost lost at times, but looming up at the end, thereby giving new force to what was earlier not quite conclusive. The failure of Eros to satisfy on any level beyond immediate gratification is evident early in the marriage between M. de Clèves and Mlle de Chartres, prior even to her first encounter with Nemours:

M. de Clèves ne trouva pas que Mlle de Chartres eût changé de sentiment en changeant de nom. La qualité de mari lui donna de plus grands privilèges; mais elle ne lui donna pas une autre place dans le coeur de sa femme. Celà fit aussi que, pour être son mari, il ne laissa pas d'être son amant, parce qu'il avait toujours quelque chose à souhaiter au delà de sa possession; et, quoiqu'elle vécut parfaitement bien avec lui, il n'était pas entièrement heureux. Il conservait pour elle une passion violente et inquiète qui troublait sa joie. (P. 260)

The vague, nebulous quality that surrounds this passage, the imprecision of the "quelque chose," is not by accident. Rather, Mme de Lafayette's efforts here seem directed to portraying a still subconscious perception, experienced fully by M. de Clèves but not in a lucid, comprehensive fashion,
only within the realm of dim impressions. Having attained full rights and "privilèges" over his wife, whom he adored and desired from their first encounter, having "possessed" her physically, he remains unsatisfied. Although aware from the start that Mlle de Chartres never shared his passion, he undoubtedly anticipated that physical intimacy, achieved in marriage, would establish the intensity he had sought.

The queen, in her pursuit of the vidame de Chartres, expresses directly, almost violently, what was lolling about in M. de Clèves' mind. She offers the most brutal recognition of man's desires, seeking to appropriate the vidame de Chartres exclusively for herself, forever, and she will entertain no other attachments for him:

Je le souhaite, parce que je désire que vous soyez entièrement attaché à moi, et qu'il serait impossible que je fusse contente de votre amitié si vous étiez amoureux... Souvenez-vous que je veux la vôtre [confiance] tout entière; que je veux que vous n'ayez ni ami, ni amie, que ceux qui me seront agréables, et que vous abandonniez tout autre soin que celui de me plaire. (P. 317)

This absolute attachment, this fidelity with no end, is impossible to achieve, for it is truly a confiscation of l'autre, a denial of his autonomy.

But conscious desire to possess is rare in Mme de Lafayette's tales; more frequently, the wish plays itself out at the subconscious level. The ultimate failure to appropriate the partner is subconsciously perceived by certain characters long before emotional involvement has become a reality. It has been noted that Mme de Lafayette's works most frequently center upon a trio,¹⁵ the third person serving as the obstacle to the satisfaction of the two others. The trio structure is quite naturally a symbol in itself of the inability of the couple to re-create the "edenic isolation,"¹⁶ and a symbol also of the jealousy inherent in all passion. But the banal character of the trio structure is invested with an additional force when the metaphor of
“threeness” becomes a subliminal response and an obstacle to the mere project of the couple.

M. de Clèves falls victim to these strange, unconscious machinations, for his illness and his subsequent death result, not from any real situation, but from his fantasy of Mme de Clèves spending the night with Nemours. Without waiting to hear any precise details from his aide, who had observed Nemours at Coulommiers (for indeed, those precise details were lacking, since nothing occurred), he succumbs to a violent illness immediately, almost as if he could no longer endure the pain of not having achieved with his wife the relationship he had so ardently desired. His imagination, evoking fantasies based on the structure of a trio, becomes his sole defense against any further hopes for attaching Mme de Clèves exclusively to his own person. Illness and death are thus his only way out of the unsatisfactory “coupling” with his wife. Imagination becomes the means to freedom, to M. de Clèves’ liberation from illusions of “quelque chose . . . au-delà de sa possession,” of an existence devoted exclusively to himself.

The novel Zaïde is too reminiscent of the earlier trends of the romanesque, too different from the nouveau roman of Mme de Lafayette, to enter easily into an analysis. The structure of the work hardly conforms with the new trend toward brevity and concision. But certain themes in the set of tales do reappear in all of Mme de Lafayette’s writings. The hero, Consalve, involved in a passionate effort to woo Zaïde, very early in the novel constructs for himself an elaborate rationalization of her emotional distance. Not able to understand her language, he still perceives through various gestures and reactions that she is in love with another, and the intensity with which he endows this fiction points, to a fundamental sense of frustration inherent in many of Mme de Lafayette’s principal characters. His imaginary construct serves as a solid barrier to all his hopes, as if in advance, on the subliminal level alone, the perception of the ultimate failure of all coupling is already present.

With Consalve the story takes another turn and ends with
references to a happy marriage. But his addiction to anxieties over the threat of a rival, a nonexistent one, prefigures entirely the situation of Alphonse and Bélasire, whose short tale seems to serve no further end than to demonstrate in precise terms the subconscious blocking of fulfillment. Alphonse is presented as a man with a primary obsession, a fear of jealousy, that guides his life and allows him no serious attachment until he meets Bélasire. In the early part of his relationship with her, he remains tortured with doubts about marriage, preferring "le malheur de vivre sans Bélasire à celui de vivre avec elle sans être aimé" (p. 110). On a conscious level, he manages to surmount these fears; but the subconscious refuses to follow such a facile accommodation, and in a sudden, seemingly inexplicable transition, Alphonse passes from confidence to doubt, the lack of intervention on the part of the author testifying to the movement away from the conscious and toward the subliminal. Alphonse enmeshes himself in a paroxysm of jealousy for a rival, but he is a dead rival and can pose no threat to the harmony of the couple. As with Consalve, there is an extraordinary intensity to Alphonse's struggle that belies an almost deliberate attempt at destroying the relationship with Bélasire, as if his psyche, conditioned by a long tradition of suspicion toward marriage, fully anticipated the impossibility of having her exclusively for himself. Although his conscious mind at this time has gone beyond his fears and all his efforts are directed toward marriage, in reality his longstanding revolt emerges triumphant over his voluntary decisions. The transition from conscious confidence to subliminal rebellion is almost imperceptible; it is not analyzed or interpreted by Mme de Lafayette, for it is not a movement of reason but rather a complex, subconscious impulse. Thus the construct of the false trio serves Alphonse as a potent means to a radical rupture of the relationship.

It is not always through the device of a hypothetical trio that the perception of the ultimate inability to "possess" is manifested. Mme de Clèves eventually foresees how
Madame de Lafayette's recognition that passion can subsist only when barred from total satisfaction. Within the context of La Princesse de Clèves, the fading is seen occurring on the part of M. de Nemours, on the part of the male, and that may well have been Mme de Lafayette's bias; but it is precisely the same course that Alphonse long feared on the part of the woman. It is a pattern perceived as operating within the "other," but that is its psychological base. Metaphysically it is the recognition of the impossibility of possession.

The princesse de Clèves' problem, and Alphonse's problem as well, remain without obvious solution, for the paradox of the life situation will not allow for a compromise. "En face d'une double impossibilité métaphysique,—l'amour ne pouvant être satisfait, en raison des relations qui existent nécessairement entre deux libertés, ni refoulé, du fait qu'il représente une irrésistible expression de nous-mêmes,—il ne reste plus de solution, ou plutôt il n'en reste qu'une: le suicide. Si la spontanéité ne peut être réprimée, elle peut être supprimée, et la destruction de soi est la seule issue." A self-mutilation occurs; for the princesse de Clèves it is a solitary sacrifice; for Alphonse and Bélasire, the couple unite in an effort to annihilate their potentiality as two. Alphonse's intense subconscious drive to destroy any hopes of marriage is in the end consented to, and surpassed by, Bélasire herself. Establishing the pre-eminence of le repos, Bélasire renounces all further commerce with Alphonse and, going one step further, commits herself to a life without love by entering a convent. The renunciation is virtually a mutual one, with the couple united in a stand against marriage, against love, against the foredoomed attempt at possession. In the interest of repose, of avoiding the tumultuous jealousy that is inseparable from passion (for it announces the failure to possess), the couple will be sacrificed, sacrifices itself, destroys itself voluntarily. Bélasire's retreat is thus a spiritual suicide,
a denial of what is most fundamental, spontaneous, and free, a mutilation of her person and equally of Alphonse, for the couple-structure is ruptured.

Mme de ClÈves, in an even more extreme stance, chooses not only a spiritual suicide but a physical one as well, as if recognizing that the only way out of the dilemma of unsatisfied passion is the death of the instrument that is the seat of the longing: the body. The illness that debilitates her and leads to her death becomes the means by which she successfully purges her passion. Death installs itself in the place of Eros, in a revival of the Tristan myth.

There is, as Gabriel Bounoure has remarked, a strong element of auto-punition implied in the renunciation of Mme de ClÈves and of Alphonse-BÈlasire, a self-chastisement for having played the game poorly and lost, of having succumbed to a pattern of living totally opposed to earlier, stricter standards of vertu and défiance. The retreat to the convent may be viewed as an aspiration to purity, to a life beyond the disorder engendered by love, as a means to moral healing, or as the perfect clÔture translating the suppression of Eros. All these motives intertwine, quite naturally, and all come back to a more general theme of refusal dictated by aspirations toward repose.

If le repos here is essentially the absence of passion and suffering, then Mme de ClÈves and BÈlasire are basically opting for a minimal existence, a life characterized by absence rather than plenitude. The theme of repose traverses the moralist writings of the century, originating perhaps in the religious literature (Pascal, Bossuet), but finding room also in the ataraxia of the Epicureans. The tranquillity to which Mme de Lafayette's characters aspire is a strange paradox, at once an emptiness and a fulfillment—ultimately, a fulfillment in an emotional vacuum.

But if suppression is indeed the accurate word for the path that Mme de Lafayette sees as the sole "out" in a world where passion, desired eternal, rests finite, it is also the right one for her efforts to deny the most traditional forms of romanesque expression. The attack is thus against
the double illusion of the myth of passion and of its expression, the précieux novel. Reading through Mme de Lafayette's works, one perceives two distinct movements that compose the structure of the récit. There is the flat, monotonous, monochromatic repetition of certain basic passages: Mme de Clèves' continued efforts to reestablish the continuity of her emotional life; Consalve's slow, steady progression toward Zaïde. Varied only slightly each time, these passages form the foundation of each tale. Less frequently there are flashes of something else, scenes that are throwbacks to the traditional romanesque, sometimes even conte de fée, atmosphere. It is as if these latter scenes are there as traps, for no sooner do they surge upon the page than they are destroyed for the illusion that they create.

The early, descriptive pages of La Princesse de Clèves are among the snares; the superlative kings and queens, princes and princesses, dukes and duchesses, are portrayed in all their courtly splendor, only to "fall" rapidly into the most untenable situations far removed from aristocratic appearances. The dancing scene, also, stands out as an "interrupter" of the monotony, a moment when the illusion of harmony is at its peak, the atmosphere of the ball lending a highly romanesque flavor to the moment. The château of Mme de Clèves at Coulommiers is in itself a fantastic lure, the ideal and familiar place for the satisfaction of passion, the fairy-tale response to the problem. But the scenes at Coulommiers emerge as the antithesis of the romanesque experience. What is woven there is not satisfaction but rather the powerful destruction of any such possibility, for it is these scenes that are the cause of M. de Clèves' jealousy, illness, and death. Rather than opening onto a field of unlimited charms, of romantic play, they definitively shut out the possibility, the illusion, of a marriage between the princesse de Clèves and M. de Nemours. The château becomes the locus of death, belying its traditional wonderland symbolism.

This opposition of structures—the monotonous, flat scenes
pitted against the momentarily dramatic ones—is little more than the myth confronting the reality. The illusion of passion will be destroyed as will its medium, the long, adventure-laden précieux novel. Henceforth the tale will be short; romanesque-type episodes will be included in order for the illusion to be more systematically destroyed. Considerably more polished in her artistic skills by the time she wrote La Princesse de Clèves and thus able to avoid direct references to her method, Mme de Lafayette offered in her earlier works almost a commentary of her aims. In La Princesse de Montpensier, the first of her tales, she signals her intentions exactly and explicitly:

Un jour qu’il revenait à Loches par un chemin peu connu de ceux de sa suite, le duc de Guise, qui se vantait de le savoir, se mit à la tête de la troupe pour servir de guide; mais, après avoir marché quelque temps, il s’égara et se trouva sur le bord d’une petite rivière qu’il ne reconnut pas lui-même. Le duc d’Anjou lui fit la guerre de les avoir si mal conduits et, étant arrêtés en ce lieu, aussi disposés à la joie qu’ont accoutumé de l’être de jeunes princes, ils aperçurent un petit bateau qui était arrêté au milieu de la rivière; et, comme elle n’était pas large, ils distinguerent aisément dans ce bateau trois ou quatre femmes, et une entre autres qui leur sembla fort belle, qui était habillée magnifiquement, et qui regardait avec attention deux hommes qui pêchaient auprès d’elle. Cette aventure donna une nouvelle joie à ces jeunes princes et à tous ceux de leur suite. Elle leur parut une chose de roman. (P. 10)

In the pursuit of the romanesque, the hero and heroine are caught up in a web of intrigue and adventure, the culmination of which is the scene of the rapt manqué leading to a disheartening end, to the death of Mme de Montpensier. The irresistible trap of the myth of passion, the pursuit of “une chose de roman,” the construction of their own roman, are swiftly and brutally destroyed by an author intent on abolishing an entire code, both moral and aesthetic. And with the exception of Zaïde, which conforms in structure and even theme far more to earlier tra-
ditions than to the “new novel” of Mme de Lafayette, all the tales point in the same direction. Illusions must be dismantled, and to do so, the transmitters of the illusions, the précieux novels, must be revealed as sham, for they are perhaps after all not the transmitters but rather the very creators of the myth. Their so-called verity must fall, and Mme de Lafayette, re-creating romanesque scenes in the middle of vast monotony and pain, successfully reveals the extent of their bankruptcy. And that is undoubtedly why her final work, La Comtesse de Tende, is charged with a strange intensity, with allusions to illegitimate pregnancy and birth, to great suffering, to a pathetic death. It stands as a most definitive slap at the “old way.” The chimera is thus laid to rest.

1. Mme de Lafayette, La Princesse de Montpensier (Paris: Garnier Frères, 1970), p. 15. Subsequent references are to this edition, and will be found in the text. This method will also be followed for Mme de Lafayette’s other works.


5. Marie-Rose Carré, in “La Rencontre inachevée: étude sur la structure de La Princesse de Clèves,” PMLA 87 (May 1972): 475-82, shows the importance of “seeing” in the novels. She concludes that for Mme de Lafayette the visual experience always excites but never satisfies.

6. An important exception to this conclusion is the study by Jules Brody, “La Princesse de Clèves and the Myth of Courtly Love,” University of Toronto Quarterly 38 (January 1969): 105-35. Brody fully describes the erotic nature of the novel, insisting on the aggressive, sexual behavior of the due de Nemours.


13. Ibid., p. 139.


