

LAFAYETTE, Mme DE

Mme. de Lafayette the person. Mme. de Lafayette (1634-1693) was the daughter of a doctor working in the service of King Louis XIV, and was thus a member of the minor nobility, a fact of great importance for the kind of exposure she was later to have to affairs of high society, literary salons, and court. At sixteen, the future Mme. de Lafayette was appointed Maid of Honor to Queen Anne of Austria, and in that capacity qualified for an exceptional education, especially in Latin and Italian. Not only was she gaining formal education, but was gradually being drawn inward up toward the social and cultural life of the court. A number of favoring personal relations enhanced her position in the milieu of upper class social life. Her mother was in close relation with a distinguished man around court, Renaud de Sévigné, whom she married at the death of her own husband, in 1649. This was an important development for the daughter, both because her step father was to remain one of her closest friends, and because Monsieur de Sévigné was the uncle of the Mme de Sévigné who was the doyenne of the most flourishing literary salon in Paris. The period was one where literary opinion and taste setting trends were largely generated by the power of literary salons, typically under the direction of women of class and fashion. Mme. de Sévigné and Mme. de Lafayette was soon to form a literary salon of their own, at which Mme. de Lafayette met and exchanged ideas with luminaries of the period, like Artaud, Henrietta of England, and the incomparably prolific and influential Mlle de Scudery, whose approval was decisive for success on the salon scene. Contacts of the highest level were important to bringing Mme. de Lafayette to wide public attention, but her own work was at the same time growing in maturity. From her novel, *La Princesse de Montpensier* ((1662) to her summit achievement, *La Princesse de Cleves*, Mme. de Lafayette shows a brilliant upward curve.

La Princesse de Cleves. *La Princesse de Cleves* (1678) was Mme. de Lafayette's masterpiece, and an overnight success in France. It is often considered the first novel by a woman, and however one feels about that, no doubt exists that the fictional landscape is jumpstarted with this work. The reason for the success of this tale of love in a court setting, temptation and prudence at war, and ultimate abnegation, surely has to do with the way it replicates both history and the author's own life. The short novel is set in the court of Henry II of France, about a century before Mme. de Lafayette's time, and is in all essentials—except the character of the heroine, La Princesse de Cleves—true to the facts. A young provincial lady is taken to Paris in search of a good match, finds the market shrunken, settles for a decent man twenty years her elder, then meets a dashing nobleman to whom love immediately draws her. She comes to suspect the honorable nature of that gentleman, but is then reassured and deepened in love, while all the time her husband's suspicions have been growing, until eventually La Princesse confesses her weakness, and leaves her husband heading for an early grave, while remorse leads the Princesse, now at last free, to retire to a convent, and to reflect on her life. The tale, which bears a subtle but continual relation to Mme. de Lafayette's own life, is told with a chastity of narrative and rhetoric which takes the breath away; only the dramatist Racine rivals Mme. de Lafayette, in the ability to compress, understate, and select with awesome relevance.

Reading

Primary source reading

Mme. de Lafayette, *The Princess of Cleves*, tr. Mitford, 2008.

Secondary source reading

Beasley, Faith, *Women's Fiction and Memoirs in 17th century France*, 1990.

Further reading

Showalter, English, *The Evolution of the French Novel, 1641-1782*, 1972.

Original language reading

Coulet, Henri, *Du roman jusqu'à la révolution*, 2 vols., 1967-68.

Suggested paper topics

Does *La Princesse de Cleves* seem clearly modeled on the court life and experience of Mme. de Lafayette? How has the author tweaked her own life, in order to create this fiction? What is the mystery that transforms life into art?

Does Mme. de Lafayette adopt an attitude, finally, toward the desires of the flesh? Is she a penitent and confessional personality type, or a cool observer? How does her imagination work, in comparison to that of Marguerite de Navarre in the *Heptameron*?

Excerpt

<http://www.gutenberg.org/files/467/467.txt>

Grandeur and gallantry never appeared with more lustre in France, than in the last years of Henry the Second's reign. This Prince was amorous and handsome, and though his passion for Diana of Poitiers Duchess of Valentinois, was of above twenty years standing, it was not the less violent, nor did he give less distinguishing proofs of it. As he was happily turned to excel in bodily exercises, he took a particular delight in them, such as hunting, tennis, running at the ring, and the like diversions. Madam de Valentinois gave spirit to all entertainments of this sort, and appeared at them with grace and beauty equal to that of her grand-daughter, Madam de la Marke, who was then unmarried; the Queen's presence seemed to authorise hers. The Queen was handsome, though not young; she loved grandeur, magnificence and pleasure; she was married to the King while he was Duke of Orleans, during the life of his elder brother the Dauphin, a prince whose great qualities promised in him a worthy successor of his father Francis the First. The Queen's ambitious temper made her taste the sweets of reigning, and she seemed to bear with perfect ease the King's passion for the Duchess of Valentinois, nor did she express the least jealousy of it; but she was so skilful a dissembler, that it was hard to judge of her real sentiments, and policy obliged her to keep the duchess about her person, that she might draw the King to her at the same time. This Prince took great delight in the conversation of women, even of such as he had no passion for; for he was every day at the Queen's court, when she held her assembly, which was a concourse of all that was beautiful and excellent in either sex. Never were finer women or more accomplished men seen in any Court, and Nature seemed to have taken pleasure in lavishing her greatest graces on the greatest persons. The Princess Elizabeth, since Queen of Spain, began now to manifest an uncommon wit, and to display those beauties, which proved afterwards so fatal to her. Mary Stuart, Queen of Scotland, who had just married the Dauphin, and was called the Queen-Dauphin, had all the perfections of mind and body; she had been educated in the Court of France, and had imbibed all the politeness of it; she was by nature so well formed to shine in everything that was polite, that notwithstanding her youth, none surpassed her in the most refined accomplishments. The Queen, her mother-in-law, and the King's sister, were also extreme lovers of music, plays and poetry; for the taste which Francis the First had for the Belles Lettres was not yet extinguished in France; and as his son was addicted to exercises, no kind of pleasure was wanting at Court. But what rendered this Court so splendid, was the presence of so many great Princes, and persons of the highest quality and merit: those I shall name, in their different characters, were the admiration and ornament of their age. The King of Navarre drew to himself the respect of all the world both by the greatness of his birth, and by the dignity that appeared in his person; he was remarkable for his skill and courage in war. The Duke of Guise had also given proofs of extraordinary valour, and had, been so successful, that there was not a general who did not look upon him with envy; to his valour he added a most exquisite genius and understanding, grandeur of mind, and a capacity equally turned for military or civil affairs. His brother, the Cardinal of

Lorraine, was a man of boundless ambition, and of extraordinary wit and eloquence, and had besides acquired a vast variety of learning, which enabled him to make himself very considerable by defending the Catholic religion, which began to be attacked at that time.