

**THE COURAGE TO WRITE: NOTES ON
“LA PRINCESSE DE CLEVES”**

OF

MME DE LA FAYETTE

CONFERENCE PAPER

BY

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The Courage to Write: Notes on "La Princesse de Clèves" of Mme de la Fayette

Writing is an outlet for creative energy. It is one of the most glorious manifestations of man's quest for self-actualisation. The art is most often motivated by a firm belief that one has unique messages for mankind. The quality of art is enhanced, in varying degrees, by talent, inspiration, experience, effort, concern about the plight of fellow human beings, an awareness about the power of the written word and ability to address issues of universal interest.

Since one is not compelled to write, doing so means actualising freedom, a fundamental human right (Jean-Paul Sartre, 1948). In the process, one invariably performs an important social function in the sense that writing as a product of the intellect ends up being very useful for social edification. Indeed writers are regarded as opinion moulders and trustees of the people. As Sartre (op. Cit.) rightly suggests, the authentic writer unavoidably develops a sense of commitment. The level of commitment in turn determines the amount of energy invested in this venture. The rather painful fact is that writing, for many, is not a viable means of livelihood until it culminates in renown.

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Writers promote awareness about nature and human destiny. Their works distract and lift the spirit by eliciting diverse responses and proffering solutions to problems. Unfortunately, not all individuals endowed with creative talent are actually writing. This may be so because of lack of time, the absence of compelling forces known as "encounter" or because of the traumatic experiences of some writers in environments where their writings are wrongly adjudged seeds of subversion. Ngugi's *Petals of Blood*, a novel banned from circulation in Kenya; Hubert Ogunde's *Yoruba ronu*, an opera whose public presentation was halted in Nigeria by the government of the day and Albert Camus' *Révolte dans les Asturies*, a militant drama whose production was prohibited in Algiers of the colonial era, are among glaring instances that abound in literary history.

The writers just cited ran into trouble because they depicted the truth. Ironically, as Georges Sand (1846) rightly observes, artists cannot always focus on the ideal. They also must as much as possible portray the truth.

To write is to disclose the truth on the one hand (Ratner, 1950), and, on the other hand, to rupture one's privacy, for writing without a revelation of the self is inconceivable. In literary works, personal experience, products of the imagination and facts of everyday life intermingle. Indeed, one of the challenges of writing is the way reality is modified in the making of acceptable works of a lasting universal appeal. And one of its ordeals is the risk which writers run when they employ private facts for the sake of authenticity. In such instances, they may be accused of libel, malice, character assassination or invasion of privacy. While publishers protect their interest by dissociating themselves from opinions expressed in books, writers can only take cover behind the pretence that the contents of their works are fictitious. Many writers who abhor pretence have been put behind the bars. Wole Soyinka, the first African Nobel Laureate in literature, is an outstanding example. It therefore seems that writers who really want to create indelible marks on the social landscape must be courageous.

Courage is certainly a great virtue and one of those lacking in lower animals, whose activities are regulated by instincts. Unlike in the animal world, the dignity to which the human specie accedes is most often a result of rational choices actualised by courageous moves. Some human beings obviously exhibit more courage than some others, while women are believed to be less courageous than men. It is noteworthy also that writing is still the preserve of men. Simone de Beauvoir (1949) expressed the following views namely: that a woman's overture is naturally characterised by reticence; that a woman is easily distracted from her goal, that femininity limits her chances in life; that a woman readily accepts modest opportunities and that she does not aim as high as her male counterpart. Simone de Beauvoir is a French writer who more or less lived under the shadow of Jean-Paul Sartre, her colleague and life partner.

The novel examined in this article was written by a woman who denied being the author. Could this be due to her uncertainty about the positive reception of the work?

It should be noted that Mme de la Fayette wrote her works when female writers could be counted on the finger tips in France. At that time, women who ventured into creative writing were ab initio disadvantaged, because to associate a woman with a literary product was to reduce its value. With the exception of Mme de la Fayette, Mlle de Scudéry, Mme de Staël, Simone de Beauvoir, Nathalie Sarraute and a few others, French female writers are generally not seen in the avant-garde of literary movements.

CONFIRMING - AFTER

La Princesse de Clèves, the novel we intend to comment on, is nevertheless one of the greatest novels of 17th century France. Its authorship was according to Jean Basin (1971, p.55), attributed to Mme de la Fayette's acquaintances: La Rochefoucauld, Menage, her latin teacher, Fontennelle, Segrais, Huet who taught her Hebrew, Grim, Nicéron and some women. The above mentioned all disowned the book. Voltaire is among those who, in the 18th century, provided a clue in the affirmation that *La Princesse de Clèves* is the handwork of a woman.

With the exception of *L'Astrée* of Honoré d'Urfé, *Le Grand Cyrus* of Mlle de Scudéry, *La Princesse de Clèves*, whose author was undetermined, and some short prose by Jean Segrais and Saint Réal, the novel was commonly regarded as a genre of ostentatious techniques, a frivolous literary type that is not guided by rules, a loose composition, to use the words of Thibaudet (1922). It was in the 18th century that the novel gained recognition. According to René Lalou (1941), it was thereafter that the genre complemented the essay in the hierarchy of militant literature.

17th century French literature was visibly dominated by drama (such as Racine's tragedy, Corneille's tragi-comedy and Molière's comedy) plus the philosophy of Descartes and Pascal, the Poetics of Boileau and Buffon and didactic writings by La Fontaine, La Bruyère and La Rochefoucauld, among others.

Mme de la Fayette (née Marie-Madelaine Pioche:1634-1693) is often singled out as a gifted writer. Michel Butor (1960) underlined her dramatic and forceful depiction of the magnificence that characterised the reign of Henri II as well as the propensities of the French society of that epoch. According to Ashton (1922) *La Princesse de Clèves*, her most highly-rated novel, appeared in 1671 and 1678 without the name of the author. The situation remained the same in the edition of 1804. Ironically, the novel is ingeniously crafted. In psychological depth, it is comparable to works by great French classics such as Jean Racine, Honoré de Balzac, Gustave Flaubert and Emile Zola (Bourget, 1958).

La Princesse de Clèves portrays a very beautiful lady of excellent upbringing and her unparalleled moral rectitude as she wades through a society in which the comportment of most women falls far below expectation. Ratner (1950) observes that Boileau held Mme de la Fayette in very high esteem and that Fontenelle showered praises on her not only for the finesse of the emotions manifested by characters but also for the finesse of her language and the skillful way she handled various aspects of the intrigue. Some of the observations are also true of *Histoire d'Henriette d'Angleterre*, written after the death of le Comte de la Fayette in 1683. They are also true of her other works, some of them published posthumous. Such works include *La Princesse de Monpensier* (a short story: 1662), *La Comtesse de Tende* (1724), *Caraccio* (another short story: 1783), *Histoire de Don Carlos d'Astorgas* (1909) and *Le Triomphe de l'indifférence* (1937).

Mme de la Fayette is an offspring of the king's physician. She developed her creative talent in the ambience of Paris' salons. She started going to Pleiss-Guénégaud salon in 1652 and it was in salons that she met Mme de Sévigné and some male writers who contributed to her growth by encouraging her to read works by great classics. The French salons, we must note, were art resorts that provided an ideal climate for the launching in April 1654 of Preciosity. The tenets of Preciosity, a movement that propagated intellectual freedom, are articulated in ten maxims.

The movement is characterised by intellectual vivacity, linguistic inventiveness, a taste for novelties and the use of surprises and minute details. The activities of the salons according to Somaize (1661) included the recital of literary works, critique and conversation. Many of the salons were either run or animated by women. Apart from going frequently to salons, Mme de la Fayette started writing in 1659, shortly after the take-off of Preciosity. She is regarded by many critics as a "Précieuse".

How do we explain Mme de la Fayette's lukewarm attitude to *La Princesse de Clèves* in spite of her popularity and good connections? One of the reasons lies in the writer's political disposition at a point in time. After giving birth to a lone child for François Mortier, Mme de la Fayette became enmeshed in the intrigues of the royal court. In order to nurture her political ambition, she moved closer to Madame Royale, the regent and widow of le duc de Savoie. She spied for her and protected her interest. But le duc de Nemours, the protagonist of her novel, is an ancestor of the regent. Nemours is passionately in love with his friend's wife, a negative depiction which might jeopardize Mme de la Fayette's political ambition.

The recourse to historical data obviously posed some problems because some members of the families of the historical figures in the novel were still alive. The use of history is however beneficial. It helps to minimize elements of fiction and to facilitate the depiction of social mores. It also helps the author to magnify certain characters such as le Chevalier de Guise, who is interested in la Princesse de Clèves, and le duc de Nemours, who admires Henriette d'Angleterre.

The novel begins with a detailed description of the setting and concise portraits of historical figures. Prominent among such figures is Henri II, who reigned from 1515 to 1559. Henri II married Catherine de Medicis. But the most powerful woman in the novel is la duchesse de Valentinois (former Diane de Poitiers: 1449-1556), the mistress of François Ier and later of Henri II, who gave her two castles: one in Chenonceau and another one in Anet. La duchesse de Valentinois has a tremendous influence on Henri

II's decisions and she is said to have been instrumental to the propagation of an intransigent catholicism in France. Other important figures in the novel include Marie Stuart who married François de Valois, Madame Royale, le Vidame de Chartre, le Prince de Clèves, la Princesse de Clèves, le Chevalier de Guise, le roi Navarre, le duc de Nevers, and le duc de Nemours, the most sought after man in the royal court.

The historical figures depicted represent the French aristocracy, a world whose soul is ambition for social elevation, a world in which pleasant manners and intrigues are employed for getting closer to the seat of power or preventing others from doing so. The French aristocracy takes delight in flamboyant ceremonies including dancing, musical concerts and drama.

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Intrigues inundate the novel. They are in form of patronising acts and association with highly-placed individuals with a view to attaining specific goals. La duchesse de Valentinois stands out in matters of intrigue. She is said to have used intrigues to block marriages that she thought could have adverse effects on her personal interests.

For historical data, Mme de la Fayette may have consulted Brantôme's *Dames illustres, hommes illustres*, Mézeray's *Histoire de France*, Baudouin's French translation of *History of the Civil Wars* and perhaps Descartes *Traité des passions*, for psychological insights. Such works may have animated her flood-light on social mores and literary tendencies. For example, the pessimistic depiction of love is rooted in the guiding principles of Preciosity. In platonic love, which Mme de la Fayette highlights, emphasis is on the suffering occasioned by unrequited love, the nuances of jealousy and the misfortunes generally associated with passionate desires. Thus, Le Prince de Clèves dies on knowing that his friend is tenaciously wooing his wife. La Princesse de Clèves ends up in a convent in spite of her having been adequately prepared for a happy married life.

Mme de Chartre, the mother of the princess used to tell her daughter that the happiness of a married woman lies in loving her husband exclusively. One however

discerns that, although the princess does not succumb to Nemours' love advances, she admires the man. Her stunning beauty and elusiveness make her Nemours' unique object of admiration, in spite of the innumerable female admirers around him. The princess tries her best to avoid Nemours. Ironically, her absence and hibernation tend to reinforce the man's determination to possess her. Contrary to the cliché that suggests that whatever is out of sight is also out of the mind, the princess thinks about Nemours when she does not see him. This lends credence to a critic's opinion that man's fascination is sometimes for the inaccessible (Jean Starobinski, 1961).

As earlier noted, the princess, after self-examination, realises that she is not indifferent to Nemours. But she is very conscious of what should be her comportment as a married person. Her psychological perturbation leads to the innocent confession she makes to her husband in the hope that she will be relieved. Inadvertently, she kills her loving husband. But Nemours pays dearly for this, because the princess is determined not to see him again.

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With materials drawn from various sources, Mme de la Fayette has no doubt produced a rich novel reflecting several facets of life during her time. The work is however, far from being a carbon copy of the reality. In it are visible distortions and a myriad of episodes imagined. The novel's distant socio-cultural background, the complexity of the intrigue and the multiplicity of characters tend to make its comprehension rather difficult for the average reader. The efforts of critics over the years have consequently been geared toward shedding more light on the work to make it accessible to as many as possible. One of our inferences from their comments is that Mme de la Fayette's friends who are writers, La Rochefoucauld in particular, may have read the manuscript of the novel and may have made inputs.

But this is not a sufficient ground for Mme de la Fayette to disown her own work. The problem does not seem to be lack of courage or uncertainty about how the work would be received. The problem lies partly in a nascent political ambition that may be

jeopardized by some elements of intrigue and characterisation. Secondly, as the author advanced in age and turned to Jansenism, her preoccupations assumed a religious dimension and the claim of authorship became less paramount (Jean Basin, p.9).

When, in a letter, Lescheraine, the Regent's personal Secretary, questioned Mme de la Fayette on the authorship of *La Princesse de Clèves*, her response was negative. When other individuals posed the same question, her answer was neither yes nor no (Jean Basin, p.7). This equivocal stance suggests that Mme de la Fayette was resolved to leave the issue of authorship for time to tell.

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