

**The Name of the Game and the Game of the Name in
*La Princesse de Clèves***

by
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One of the most intriguing features about Madame de La Fayette's chief novel, *La Princesse de Clèves*, is the lack of proper first or so-called Christian names among the chief protagonists as well as among the secondary figures. The undergraduate reader--and even the graduate student reading the novel for the first time--must strive arduously to make headway through the seemingly endless list of titles and epithets such as "ce prince," "cette héritière," and "cette princesse." Moreover, the typical reader is overwhelmed by the high degree of "perfection" (or perhaps the author's exaggeration) at the Valois court, a type of pre-Eldorado of nobility where every court member's apparent excellence shines in contrast against everyone else's outstanding features; this highly-polished world seems to imply an underlying mediocrity on the part of all but a select few. All appear jewels in a crown: outstanding if viewed by themselves, but easy to overlook in their collective context, overshadowed by equally brilliant lights viewed together. Some hypothetical questions which this paper will attempt to resolve are (1) does naming or non-naming hold a function in this novel? (2) who are those who have first names? (3) what is the heroine's given name?

Madame de La Fayette limits her use of full names to a total of twenty-four figures in *La Princesse de Clèves*, not all of whom can be considered outstanding within the framework of the novel. Nor can we say that the absence of a given name relegates a personage to a secondary function, for among those in the latter category is the heroine, known initially as Mlle de Chartres, then eventually as Mme de Clèves. The present study intends to examine selected individuals of both the named and unnamed varieties and try to determine whether the

author's system of identification was intentional or mere coincidence. The lack of a complete name for the heroine does not necessarily constitute a defect on the part of the novelist. It should be recalled that Mlle de Chartres appears early on in the work as a mysterious beauty who has come to the splendid court apparently from nowhere. The nameless title designates mystery and yet a vague familiarity: everyone knows the Vidame de Chartres, her uncle, but yet this "new" family member represents for both the reader and the other characters an unknown factor. In the course of the plot line, the heroine changes name, but no one ever grows to know her and her dark secret love for Nemours. It seems very fitting that this non-historical character, physically and dramatically at the forefront of the novel, and yet psychologically hidden in its recesses and structures, should remain a "madame" or "mademoiselle" throughout. Since she has no historical basis, even the outside reader does not have access to a first name.

Time does not permit us to list and discuss all the unnamed figures in the work, but there are four principal ones whose importance to the plot and background belies their namelessness. Mme de Chartres, the heroine's mother and the source of her education, has no first name; given that she, like her daughter, is a completely fictional character, this omission on Madame de La Fayette's part is logical and possibly intentional. The author may have wished to avoid identification with any of her contemporaries who might have seen themselves in this figure. The mother's unusual philosophy on education, considered remarkable by Ashton (188)¹, seems to make her an abstraction and, after all, her importance lies more in her pedagogical advice to and methodology for her daughter (Stone 248-258) than in any direct psychological contribution to the novel. The Vidame, uncle to the heroine, is never addressed except by his title and yet his contribution to the intrigue--showing the reader and the heroine how *not* to act in love--is important. Being an actual historical figure, the uncle was known by name to discerning readers, but for no explained reason, Madame de La Fayette chose not to use his given name. The heroine's husband appears merely as M. de Clèves, despite

the fact that history knew him as Jacques de Nevers. Insofar as the author has failed to provide her heroine with a first name, it seems only logical that the unfortunate husband be equally nameless, at least to balance the couple from a novelistic standpoint.

The last of the great nameless is Catherine de Medici, initially referred to merely as "la reine" and afterwards, "la reine-mère." While no critic to date has provided a satisfactory reason for the absence of her name, none can state that she is unimportant. Even though she seems to play a subservient role to the royal mistress, Diane de Poitiers, as well as to her daughter-in-law, the *reine-dauphine* Mary Stuart, Catherine is still a chief player in the novel who waits her turn more or less patiently to wield power and exercise complete control. Few dare to cross her and those who have, such as Mary Stuart, Diane de Poitiers and the Vidame, all eventually seem to realize that they have sealed their own doom, even if it is not shown in the text. While Catherine is known by her title, this does take on a form of distinction, since she is not just another queen; she is *the* queen. *La reine* is clearly the one to look to for future control and Madame de La Fayette's choice of a title rather than a name for her sets her off for her future capacity. Catherine is by far more important for what she will be than for who she is at present.

Of the named characters, many are included merely for historical background or color. Thus, we learn that Louis XI is an ancestor of Diane de Poitiers and his only novelistic importance lies in this distant relationship. Charles IX is a future time marker, perhaps a temporal indicator that the heroine's life will extend beyond the "present" reign of the unnamed Francis II. Charles V of the Holy Roman Empire, Henry VIII of England, Pope Paul III and Francis I likewise serve as time markers for the not-so-distant past to show the international conflicts in which France has been embroiled (and for which the novel's present represents an unusual and uneasy peace). Henry VIII, however, has additional importance since his name has been linked with several love affairs and four of

his six wives appear by name in the textual digressions. This English king and his wives are important as examples of behavior for the heroine and other characters to avoid (Paulson, "Exemplary Novel").

Many of the other women named are background figures, usually married to a monarch or noble of importance to the novel. Marguerite de Navarre appears here as the author of the *Heptaméron*, while her niece, Mme Marguerite, is the match for the Duke of Savoie; Claude de France, for the Duke of Lorraine and Elisabeth de France, first for Don Carlos, then suddenly for King Philip II of Spain. Mme Magdeleine, another sister of Henry II, appears merely as the first wife of James V of Scotland, the first in a long series of tragedies that would befall that king and which would eventually have an impact on his daughter, the *reine-dauphine*.

Elizabeth I of England never directly appears in the novel, but is rather a figure in the musings of Mary Stuart. Elizabeth represents another potential competitor for Nemours' affections and is, hence, a rival for both the heroine and the *dauphine*. The latter seems to sense a fatal attraction for the English queen without fully comprehending how intertwined their future destinies will become. For the heroine, Elizabeth is merely a vague source of jealousy, not as serious as the physically-nearer flirtatious Queen of Scots.

Diane de Poitiers is the first woman named in *La Princesse de Clèves*, a key to her importance both in the historical as well as the novelistic sense. This is the one person who initially *is* in command and who exercises apparent power at the Valois court. By the author's own words, we learn that she has delayed Mary Stuart's marriage to the *dauphin* and has prevented Mlle de Chartres' engagement to potential suitors. Diane is the symbol of the splendid court, for her meteoric rise and fall are symptomatic of the rise and fall of typical courtier, to include several of the novel's characters.

The *reine-dauphine*, Mary Stuart, is perhaps the most prominent of the named figures in *La Princesse de Clèves*. She serves as a *confidente* of sorts to the heroine and manages to inform her of every piece of gossip and foolish activity at court. She is in a sense an alter ego to the heroine. Both women are approximately the same age, attract some of the same "suitors" and hold the limelight of both the novel and the court. Each is married to a respected, but basically unloved husband; the heroine's widowhood near the work's end presages the historical death of Francis II by a few months. Both men are unnamed nonentities, even though Francis does manage to live long enough to become king. Mary's flirtations and indiscretions warn the Princess of Clèves of the dangers of foolish behavior and possibly even serve as a deterrent against a relationship with Nemours.

While Mary and Diane are named at least once in the novel, we must recall that they too are also referred to by title more often than they are named. Hence, we find the titles "reine-dauphine" and "Mme de Valentinois" in much greater frequency than the names Marie Stuart and Diane de Poitiers. While the above individuals are exceptional and hence, merit a private identity, in the Valois court, all characters tend at some point to blend into the background, especially as the Princess of Clèves retires from the world. The same can also be said about the more prominent males.

Henry II is the first person named in the novel and his immediate presence is required, for his name is that of the age itself: "La magnificence et la galanterie n'ont jamais paru en France avec tant d'éclat que dans les dernières années du règne de Henri second" (3). This king is the cement which holds together the various factions; at his death, the old order comes to a close, courtiers jockey for new positions and many of the characters in the novel find themselves doomed. Henry is the force that maintains power and order, or at least gives the appearance of power and order; his absence brings about their subsequent disappearance. This king stands out with three members of the nobility at the tourney to take on the challenges of

any upstart. Since these four "champions" will face all challengers, each one deserves special mention, i.e., naming.

Alphonse d'Este, Duke of Ferrara; François de Lorraine, Duke of Guise; Jacques de Savoie, Duke of Nemours, align themselves alongside the king to joust with any opponent. As the great nobles, those who stand out from among all the rest, they merit names and identities apart from impersonal titles. They stand like a dare, not only as an invitation to the joust, but as a challenge for other courtiers to be as good, bold, glamorous, or outstanding as they are. Jacques de Savoie, it must be recalled, is one and the same as the Princess of Clèves would-be suitor--surely one of the most outstanding figures in the novel. Yet, ironically enough, it is only as a champion in the joust that he is directly named. All his dealings with the heroine are as the Duke or M. de Nemours. Apart from his public appearance, he would be as first-nameless as his beloved and her husband.

Mme de La Fayette's function of naming seems at least inconsistent. Although we have justified the lack of names of certain key personages, we find less significant characters, whose function is purely ornamental as background, whose naming seems to give them an importance well out of proportion to their role in the novel. Little or nothing would be lost if Charles IX, Pope Paul III and Marguerite de Navarre were omitted from the text, much less from the list of the named. On the other hand, both the Prince and Princess of Clèves would lose much of their coldness and mystery, if each had a name. This anonymity seems to give a stiff formality to the unhappy couple and alienates them from the readers, both past and present. Madame de La Fayette's purpose in name distribution/withholding is unclear and seems to leave something to be desired psychologically.

The final point to be discussed is what is the Princess of Clèves' first name? This detail is not evident through textual analysis, for she is never directly named, as we have stated earlier. Franklin Brooks (129-130), Charles Dédéyan (181), Alain Niderst (73) and others have

suggested that Anne d'Este, later the widow of the novel's Duke of Guise, is at least the model for the Princess of Clèves, if not one and the same person.² Antoine Adam (IV, 186) relates further that "il est en effet très probable que quelques phrases des mémorialistes sur cette intrigue [entre Nemours et Anne d'Este] ont fourni à Mme de Lafayette le point de départ de son livre. Mais il ne s'agit là que d'une donnée toute générale et vague...." If this inspiration were true, it would create the name Anne of Clèves, homonym for Henry VIII's fourth wife, one of two *not* mentioned in the novel. There are, however, other possibilities.

A reading between the lines with history as a key for analogies can provide two other possible suggestions. History alone here is not completely satisfactory and must be examined within the context of the novel. Mme de Clèves is most closely identified or associated outside of her family with the *reine-dauphine*, as Brooks (122) clearly has documented. Both young women are fatherless, James V and M. de Chartres clearly dismissed as dead long before the action unfolds. Mme de Clèves has as her one true advisor her mother, Mme de Chartres; the *dauphine's* mother, Marie de Guise, advises Mary and serves as her regent in far-off Scotland. The Chartres name alienates the heroine from Mme de Valentinois and other factions at court, much in the same manner that the *dauphine's* Guise connectoins alienate her from the royal mistress. Both Mme de Clèves and Mary Stuart are in their sixteenth year as the novel begins, the former's age revealed textually while the latter's can be documented by historical sources. Both women are sources of Nemours' attentions. These and other similarities have been previously noted by Armand Renaud (139-140) and others.

One proposal of the name is Mary or Marie, since the two women parallel each other and at times seem inseparable. Lady Antonia Fraser, in her biography of Mary Stuart, indicates that the *reine-dauphine* was accompanied by a special group of noblemen's daughters from Scotland, the four Maries: Mary Fleming Mary

Seton, Mary Beaton and Mary Livingston (36). Fraser elaborates:

In point of fact Maries or maids had been known in the train of a Scottish queen. The word Marie has its etymological derivation in the Icelandic word *maer*, the official designation given to a virgin or maid; from there it had come to be used in Scots especially for the maids-of-honour attendant on the queen [like the fictional Mme de Clèves]. Pitscottie describes how Queen Madeleine, the first wife of James V, was called on by her father the king of France [Francis I] to pass to his wardrobe and take his rolls of cloth of gold, velvet and satins as he pleased, to clothe her and her Maries (37).

One of the Maries, Mary Seton, actually had a French mother (37). It is possible that the heroine may be identified with Mlle Seton or may be a Marie in the general sense of an attendant to the queen. Perhaps Marie de Clèves, née Marie de Chartres, is the heroine's name.

Another possibility derives from an interesting parallel between M. de Nemours and one of the much-married kings mentioned in *La Princesse de Clèves*, Philip II. Using the perspective of history both prior to and following the narrative's time-frame, one can arrive at an interesting analogy. M. de Nemours is associated with four women, three in the novel, one in history. We learn early on of the linking with Elizabeth (Elisabeth) of England, and later with Mary (Marie) of Scotland and the nameless heroine. Historically we know that later in life he married Anne d'Este. Of all the kings in the novel, only Philip II is associated with just four women: Henry VIII had six wives, Francis I, two and all the others had either three or fewer or else five or more associations.

Philip married Isabel of Portugal, mother of Don Carlos, followed by Mary Tudor, Elisabeth de Valois (whose departure for Spain is announced toward the end of the novel) and finally to Ana of Austria. Isabel translated

into French is Elisabeth, Mary is Marie and Ana is Anne--the same names as Nemours' first, second and fourth love associations. The missing third name for him corresponds to Elisabeth. We propose then the possibility for the heroine's name Elisabeth de Chartres, then Elisabeth de Clèves. The namesake, Elisabeth de Valois is after all a character in *La Princesse de Clèves* whose importance lies in her time marking.

The novel seems intentionally vague in many respects. We are unsure exactly how long the heroine lives and we learn from Mme de Chartres early on that "ce qui paraît n'est presque jamais la vérité" (51), the key to the novel: nothing really is as it seems. Modern criticism has advanced various interpretations based on symmetry and structures to fill in gaps posed by Madame de La Fayette's silences. The present study has attempted to remedy in part this lacuna.

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Notes

¹H. Ashton, ed., *La Princesse de Clèves*, by Madame de La Fayette (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1930). This is the edition cited throughout the present study. All quotations from *La Princesse de Clèves* are indicated by the page numbers of this edition.

²Niderst (74) notes, however, that Anne d'Este did not die prematurely, as does the heroine, but lived to 1607, nearly fifty years after the novel's opening. Henry Bordeaux adds that the name Chartres appears among the titles of the House of Este (32) and Anne d'Este was blonde, but Bordeaux basically refutes the equation of this historical figure with the heroine of the novel (30-33).

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