

**The Counterfeit Refusal :
Models, Copies and Mme de Thémises' Letter
in *La Princesse de Clèves***

by
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*... et sa vie, qui fut assez courte,
laissa des exemples de vertu inimitables.
Lafayette, La Princesse de Clèves*

Inimitable. The last word of Lafayette's classic *La Princesse de Clèves* calls attention to her use of the literary rhetoric of imitation common in seventeenth-century France. From Renaissance works based on the rhetoric of example, to the reproduction on the French stage of ancient Greek theater, to academies and prizes dedicated to emulation — the re-writing of another's works, better — the hermeneutics of imitation animated early modern French literary creation. Lafayette's novel is no exception. From its beginning, *La Princesse de Clèves* is riddled with words, actions and metaphors having to do with modeling, duplication, copying, repetition, and mirroring. The text opens with a description of a litany of characters at the court of Henri II, each one a paragon of perfection as if its members are merely interchangeable copies of one another: "Jamais cour n'a eu tant de belles personnes et d'hommes admirablement bien faits; et il semblait que la nature eût pris plaisir à placer ce qu'elle donne de plus beau dans les plus grandes princesses et dans les plus grands princes" (Lafayette 130).¹ At the court, selfhood is a reductive notion. Yet, Lafayette distinguishes two characters from the crowd: Nemours and Mlle de Chartres, the future Princesse de Clèves. By the novel's end, it is the Princesse alone who is labeled as "inimitable."

The very use of this term calls into question the value of copying versus originality in the novel. The tension evoked by the Princesse's novelty became evident almost immediately upon publication of the work in 1678 when her unprecedented actions caused a virulent debate led by Valin-

¹ See Lotringer 499, Albanese 93.

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cour's *Lettres à la marquise de *** sur "La princesse de Clèves."* Valincour denounces incredible passages in the book such as, most notably, her incomprehensible refusal of Nemours. For Valincour, the Princesse's choices are incongruous since they do not follow any previous model.² His consternation may in part be explained by John Lyons' location of Lafayette's novel at the end of a literary trajectory that values the role of exempla, or the replication of provided models: "Over the century and a half from Machiavelli's work to Lafayette's, example declined as a source of knowledge and as a means of persuasion" (*Exemplum* 238).³ Contrarily, Joan DeJean labels Lafayette's work as the first "modern" novel and the Princesse herself first on a spectrum of heroines who act on their own volition, underscoring the importance of individuality.⁴ *La Princesse de Clèves* marks a crux in the evolution from imitation toward originality in French literary history.

Within Lafayette's novel, however, models are indeed provided to the Princesse for her to follow. The four intercalated stories told to the Princesse are meant to guide her actions. These stories, all told to her by other characters, are learning moments for her — exemplary texts of how to or not to act in society.⁵ And ultimately, she rejects three of the models offered (Diane de Poitiers, Anne de Boulen and Mme de Tournon), all of which demonstrate learned talents of deception, manipulation, deceit and adultery, in favor of an exaggerated virtue.

²On Valincour's critiques, see in particular Beasley, as well as Lyons' chapter, "Marie de Lafayette: From Image to Act" in *Exemplum* (196–236).

³ Lyons' definition of the term "exemplum" underscores the implied assimilation between the example and its imitation: "the term *exemplum* denotes both the model to be copied and the copy or representation of that model, a sense that is maintained in the French noun *exemplaire* as copy (of a book, etc.)" (*Exemplum* 11).

⁴Among the critics who make use of the commonly accepted qualification of *La Princesse de Clèves* as "the first modern French novel" (Lowrie 41) are DeJean, Lyons, Judovitz, Desan, Todd, Gevrey etc. The *Cambridge Introduction to French Literature* even entitles its chapter on *La Princesse de Clèves* "Madame de Lafayette: The Birth of the Modern Novel." Nicholas Paige, however, in a fascinating counterculture article, refutes the claim that *La Princesse de Clèves* began the modern tradition of the novel ("Lafayette's Impossible Princess"). He maintains that Lafayette's novel was an aberration rather than the first in a series.

⁵ On the importance of the intercalated stories, see Lyons *Exemplum* and "Narrative," as well as Paige, "The Storyteller and the Book."

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I contend, however, that a closer reading of the last of the four intercalated stories, that of Mme de Thémynes' letter, leads to a textual explanation of the Princesse's final rejection of Nemours well within the accepted discourse of modeling and imitability. In fact, the rhetoric of imitation applied to the letter itself, its replication and the words included in it reveal multiple forms of narrative modeling for the Princesse's ultimate decision. Surprisingly, this letter is "unexplored" by critics, as Hodgson points out, despite its structural prominence (56).⁶ The story of Mme de Thémynes' letter takes up approximately one third of the printed text; it is located at the very center of the book, straddling parts two and three of the four-part novel; it is the only letter of any import in the novel, and is given in full.⁷ Mme de Thémynes' letter divides the novel in two and the development of the Princesse's character in half. At first the Princesse functions passively as an object, unable to control her speech and movement at court. In this regard, Mme de Thémynes' letter functions as a structural double of the Princesse. Her entry into and departure from the court mirrors that of the letter. But in the refusal, the Princesse replicates the content of Mme de Thémynes' letter, in words and in action. The Princesse has accepted Mme de Thémynes as a palatable model, but ultimately, it is one that she is unable to emulate. This article examines the porous boundaries between models and copies, between exempla and counterfeits, as it argues the importance of the only letter in Lafayette's novel, a letter authored by Mme de Thémynes and forged by the Princesse.



At the very center of the novel, the actual text of the letter written by Mme de Thémynes and sent to the vidame de Chartres is often printed in italics, as it was in the original edition. Its jarring inclusion, both visually and narratively, is compounded by the length and complexity of its story.

⁶ Hodgson offers a "brief analysis" of Mme de Thémynes' letter, maintaining that the letter offers a *mise en abyme* of the Princesse's story: "virtually all of the major recurrent stylistic structures of the novel and, more importantly, the themes to which they are related, are mirrored in this remarkable letter" (56). In a footnote to her captivating *Sightings: Mirrors in Texts – Texts in Mirrors*, Joyce Lowrie invites the further examination of this letter as a source: "Mme de Thémynes has been primarily ignored as a model for Mme de Clèves" ("Mirror" 44n14). Lowrie also affirms Hodgson's thesis that the letter is a *mise en abyme* of the whole work (49).

⁷ See Masson, Horowitz and Lowrie for interpretations of the central position of Mme de Thémynes' letter in the text.

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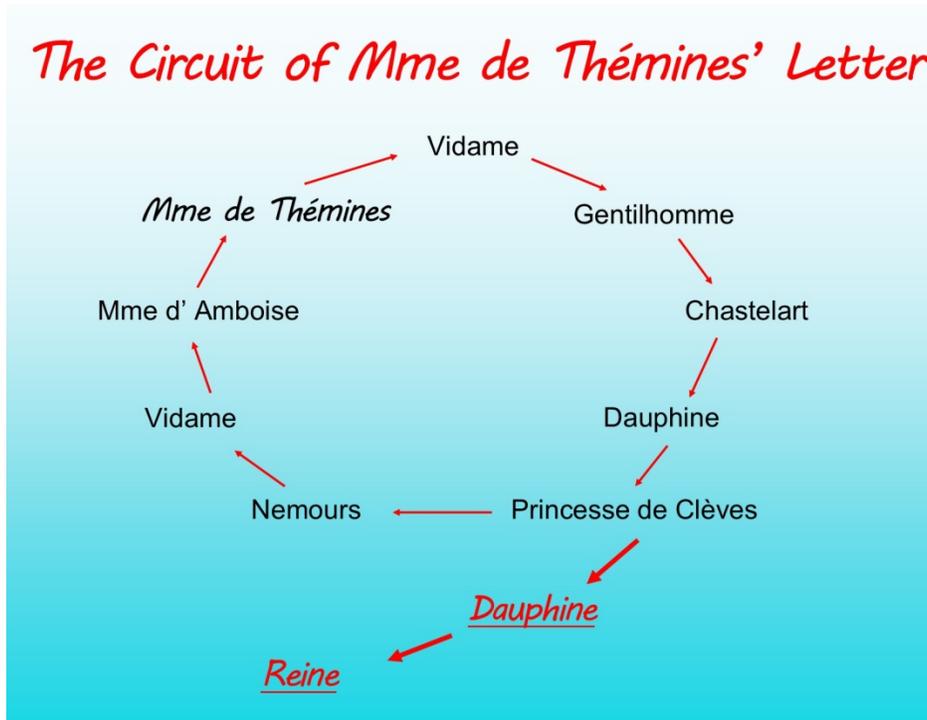
At a dinner party following a tennis match, the vidame boasts of having inspired delicate and passionate emotions in a woman, and brags that he has the letter to prove it. However, he discovers that it is no longer in his pocket. This letter, which bears no addressee nor signature, had fallen out in the dressing room, was found, read aloud, and led to a debate about which of the four tennis players had lost it. Chastelart, who believes it fell out of Nemours' pocket, brings it to the dauphine who had been amorously linked to Nemours. Because she is in company, she gives it to the Princesse with instructions to see if she recognizes the handwriting and to return it to her that evening. The Princesse, believing it to be addressed to Nemours, retreats and reads it many times, spending a bitter, tearful, jealous night believing that Nemours loves someone other than her.

In the meantime, the vidame is in a panic. The queen has demanded his fidelity and this letter is damning evidence of his unfaithfulness. The vidame wants Nemours to claim that the letter is his. Knowing that Nemours has a love interest and might be loathe to risk his status with her if it is publicly assumed the letter is addressed to him, the vidame provides evidence of the identity of the author and recipient to Nemours: another letter from one Mme d'Amboise that asks for the return of Mme de Thémynes' letter to her.

Nemours guesses correctly that the dauphine would have spoken to the Princesse about the letter, so he goes to the Princesse's house at a very early hour to assuage any suspicions that she might have that the letter belonged to him. The Princesse's husband introduces Nemours into her bedroom and leaves him there alone with her. Nemours succeeds in convincing the Princesse that the letter is not his, and that together they need to help the vidame. She returns the letter to Nemours, who takes it to the vidame, who gives it to Mme d'Amboise who returns it to Mme de Thémynes.

Later that morning, when the dauphine asks the Princesse for the letter since the queen has requested to see it, the dauphine is aghast that the Princesse no longer has it. The dauphine tells her to reproduce its content from memory. The Princesse and Nemours then spend several guilty hours, in the presence of her husband, joyfully flirting and ultimately producing a very bad copy of the letter in the Princesse's falsified handwriting. This forgery is provided to the dauphine who gives it to the queen, who does not believe it is the original, and the vidame "fût ruiné auprès d'elle." Additionally, the queen believes the dauphine is implicated and "elle la persécuta jusqu'à ce qu'elle l'eût fait sortir de France" (235).

The Circuit of Mme de Thémynes' Letter



The similarities between the Princesse's presence at court and the circulation of the letter written by Mme de Thémynes make one a structural double of the other. Both the Princesse and the letter share a sudden entry into an already existing narrative. The book begins with a long introduction of the major characters at the court of Henri II. Then, suddenly, Mlle de Chartres enters the text and the court: "Il parut alors une beauté à la Cour..." (136). The letter, too, makes an unanticipated entry into an already existing narrative. In the middle of the novel, the king is about to enter into a jousting match when "Chastelart s'approcha de la Reine Dauphine et lui dit que le hazard lui venait de mettre entre les mains une lettre de galanterie" (206–07). Lacking perhaps the dramatic turn of phrase "[i]l parut alors" that marks the introduction of Mlle de Chartres, the letter makes an abrupt entry nonetheless.

Mlle de Chartres and the missive written by Mme de Thémynes also both originate from anonymous sources. The day after her arrival, Mlle de Chartres goes alone to a jeweler's shop where M. de Clèves is shocked to see her, a young woman shopping unaccompanied and obviously of a high social status, but unknown to him: "il ne pouvait comprendre qui était cette belle personne qu'il *ne connaissait point*" (my emphasis, 1388). He inquires and "il fut bien surpris quand il sut qu'on *ne la connaissait point*"

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(my emphasis, 138). The next day, he goes to a gathering hosted by the king's sister and describes "son aventure" but "Madame lui dit qu'il n'y avait point de personne comme celle qu'il dépeignait et que, s'il y en avait quelqu'une, elle serait *connue* de tout le monde" (my emphasis, 139). In the closed world of the court, identity is based on being known there, and despite her wealthy appearance the young woman's name is unknown; she is anonymous. The letter, too, arrives at court from an unknown origin. Even when it is read aloud by Chastelart, no mention is made of the author or addressee. Just as no one knows from whence Mlle de Chartres hails when she enters the court, no one knows who authored the letter that has suddenly appeared.

The Princesse and the letter both pass from hand to hand before altogether leaving the external narratives into which they had been injected. Like an object such as the letter, the Princesse often does not have control over the movement of her own body. After her arrival at the court, her mother arranges a loveless marriage to the Prince de Clèves. At the ball to celebrate the marriage of the king's sister and the duc de Lorraine, the king pushes her into the arms of the duc de Nemours: "le Roi lui cria de prendre celui qui arrivait" (153). M. de Clèves refuses his wife's requests to leave the court, remain at their country estate and avoid courtly commerce, most of which has to do with the interchangability of lovers. It is to avoid this objectification that the Princesse willfully returns to a life removed from the court. The letter, too, passes from hand to hand, before, as Masson demonstrates, it returns like a boomerang from whence it came - the countryside (34). Mme de Thémynes' letter and the Princesse both enter a preexisting narrative and complete a circuit before being jettisoned away from court. The Princesse, then, rather than replicating the actions of a person like Diane de Poitiers, Anne de Boulen or Mme de Tournon, is at least initially the structural double of an inanimate object in the text, passive and unable to act on her own.

The turning point in the text and the moment after which the Princess works to take control of her actions occurs just after she has spent a woeful night reading and re-reading Mme de Thémynes' letter. She suddenly experiences an epiphany: "elle revint comme d'un songe" and "elle ne se reconnaissait plus elle-même" (235-236).⁸ She realizes that her jealousy caused by Nemours' presumed infidelity make her like all the other

⁸ See Kelley "Epiphanies."

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women at court. She has “tombée comme d’autres femmes,” just as her mother had feared. She has become a mere copy.

In addition to the emotion of jealousy, this “mal...insupportable” (213), that results from her passion for Nemours, the other emotion she has experienced that makes her common is that of extreme pleasure. She recognizes that in re-writing the letter with Nemours, she has acted in concert with him, and this act of reproduction has given her a “joie pure” (158) that closely resembles the sexual act.⁹ A close reading of Lafayette’s text reveals suggestive vocabulary that invites this interpretation:

Ils s’enfermèrent pour y travailler [...] Elle ne sentait que **le plaisir** de voir M. de Nemours, et elle en avait **une joie pure et sans mélange** qu’elle n’avait jamais sentie : cette joie lui donnait une liberté et **un enjouement dans l’esprit** que M. de Nemours ne lui avait jamais vus et qui redoublaient son amour. Comme il n’avait point eu encore de si **agréables moments, sa vivacité en était augmentée** ; et quand Mme de Clèves voulut commencer à se souvenir de la lettre et à l’écrire, ce prince, au lieu de lui aider sérieusement, ne faisait que l’interrompre et lui dire des choses plaisantes. Mme de Clèves entra dans le même esprit de gaieté [...] M. de Nemours était bien aise de faire **durer un temps qui lui était si agréable** et oubliait les intérêts de son ami. Mme de Clèves ne s’ennuyait pas et oubliait aussi les intérêts de son oncle. (Lafayette 158–9, my emphasis)

Muratore sees this experience as leading to the concretization of the Princess’s desire to maintain her originality:

This intimate forgery (an act of aesthetic transgression), committed within the secured confines of the princess’s bedroom, constitutes the climax of what to this point is an innocent and gazed-based relationship. After the epistolary transgression, even the princess considers her behavior akin to marital infidelity. [...] The move from aesthetic appreciation to active plagiarism, from harmless gaze to illicit forgery, articulates the novel’s most cogent and consistent metatextual point: the explicit condemnation of the mimetic enterprise. (254)

⁹ On this reading of the forging of the letter see Muratore 254 and Judovitz 1045.

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Thus far, when the Princesse acts she makes forays into the culture of duplication, copying and replication that negate her extraordinary self-image.

The product of this metaphorical illicit love affair is a badly written forgery that does not resemble its original. The letter written in the Princesse's hand is a malformed progeny that reinforces the Princesse's inability to conform to the code of court duplicity. She permits Nemours to help bastardize the letter's content, and in so doing he removes the power of Mme de Thémynes' words of rejection, neutralizing them as he molds the Princesse into what he wants her to be — one of the many women “dont la gloire n'eût été flattée de le voir attaché à elle” (132). Together they produce an unrecognizable offspring, a reject that is excluded from circulation. Despite her failure to (re)produce Mme de Thémynes' words on paper, by rewriting the letter, the Princesse actively works to deceive and manipulate, but she fails. The Princesse herself has become a “bad copy” — a forgery like that of the letter — of typical duplicitous court women, authored by herself and her own actions.

The metaphorical reading of the trajectory of the letter as object and its reproduction reveals that neither the letter nor the Princesse fit in at court nor are convincing. Others assign meaning to their physical presence without regard for their actual content. While at court, the Princesse is a text to be interpreted; members of the court expect her to act a certain way, but she does not demonstrate the anticipated behavior — or “content” — expected of a woman there. As the dauphine states, her actions make her unique: “il n'y a que vous de femme au monde qui fasse confidence à son mari de toutes les choses qu'elle sait” (157). Her husband fully expects that she is having an affair with Nemours when he sends a gentleman to follow Nemours to Coulommiers. But when the gentleman returns to give his report of what he observed, Clèves does not want to hear it: “C'est assez, repliqua M. de Clèves, c'est assez, en lui faisant encore signe de se retirer, je n'ai pas besoin d'un plus grand éclaircissement” (289). He has assigned meaning to his wife's actions based on common behavior at court and not on what she has actually done. Nemours, too, cannot believe that the Princesse would act so contrary to all other women. During the refusal, he struggles to understand what she is telling him: “quel fantôme de devoir opposez-vous à mon bonheur?” (240). The Princesse has no voice, her “content” left unknown, she exits the court in a state much like that in which she entered it: an unread text.

Just as Mme de Clèves' true content is “unread” by Nemours and others, the text of the letter at the heart of the novel is largely ignored, by

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critics as well as by the characters in the book. The content of the letter initially seems to have very little impact on the narrative. Catherine Labio, for example, claims that the content of the letter is “not particularly memorable” and that “the text [of the letter] is of little consequence” (8, 9). One aspect of the letter that has gotten some critical attention is the fact that it, like the novel itself, is “published” anonymously as the name of both the author and the recipient are missing. The relationship between authorship and anonymity has been famously explored by DeJean, who maintains that women authors left their writings unsigned, lending authority to their texts. Unsigned works remove any implication that might come with the name — or gender — of the author and instead draw attention to the value of the content of what is written.¹⁰ Mme de Thémisines did not sign her letter, thereby, following DeJean’s logic, this should draw attention to the letter’s content. At first glance, however, just the opposite occurs.

Different values are assigned to the letter by different characters: the dauphine, the queen, and the Princesse herself. The actual existence of the physical letter trumps its content, which perhaps explains why critics often refer to the letter as “the vidame’s lost letter” and not “Mme de Thémisines’ letter.” The dauphine and the Princesse think the letter is addressed to Nemours, revealing a love interest other than each of them; the queen suspects the dauphine wrote it and thus has a lover; Nemours only reads in the situation what the false attribution to him might do to his chances with Mme de Clèves (Masson 35–36).¹¹ That first night, the Princesse “lut cette lettre et la relut plusieurs fois, sans savoir néanmoins ce qu’elle avait lu” (212). It seems that no character — not even the Princesse — shows interest in the actual content of the letter.

Reading the words of the letter as given in the novel, another parallel between the letter and the Princesse emerges: the Princesse recognizes her experience in that of Mme de Thémisines. The letter reveals a woman who has been wounded by her lover’s infidelity; the Princesse has experienced the pains of jealousy when she believes Nemours loves another. Mme de Thémisines offers a model of how to act in such a situation. To get revenge, Mme de Thémisines does not remain passive, but acts: she dissimulates her emotions and controls her actions so as to win her lover back, only to

¹⁰ See DeJean, “Ellipses.”

¹¹ On the letter as signifier, see Masson’s enjoyable article, as well as Meltzer, Labio and Judovitz.

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break with him voluntarily so that he, too, feels the pain of no longer being loved that she has already experienced. For the first time, the Princesse has a model with which she can identify.

Even though when she wrote the forged letter the Princesse cannot reproduce Mme de Thémynes' words, in the refusal it seems that she has indeed retained much of that content. As Joyce Lowrie demonstrates, the Princesse repeats some of the "letter's content, grammar, syntax and vocabulary" (49–54).¹² In the refusal, the Princesse will cover many of the same themes:

(1) as did Mme de Thémynes, Mme de Clèves will tell the man she loves that she had and always would love him; (2) that her experience of jealousy was the worst thing she had ever known ; (3) that she had and would always remain virtuous, (4) that she would never see the man she loved again. (Lowrie 51)

Lowrie also draws linguistic parallels between the words of the letter and the Princesse's words in the refusal. For example, she writes that Mme de Thémynes

concludes the letter with a resolve: '[Votre infidélité suffit] pour me laisser dans *cette résolution que j'ai prise de ne vous voir jamais*'. In the final dialogue between Nemours and Mme de Clèves, this very phrase, almost, is repeated. Mme de Clèves will say to Nemours: 'il faut que je demeure dans l'état où je suis et dans *les résolutions que j'ai prises de n'en sortir jamais*.' That final and irrevocable *jamais* is stated by both Mme de Thémynes and Mme de Clèves. Mme de Clèves reflects, or repeats, Mme de Thémynes' experience as well as her diction. (52)

By the end of the novel, it becomes clear that Mme de Thémynes is the only model given to her that the Princesse chooses to follow.

She does not, however, do so with great success; the Princesse's actions do not effectively duplicate those of the much more resolute Mme de Thémynes. Mme de Thémynes has manipulated and deceived her lover and, as she reveals in the letter, claims victory over him. She informs him in no uncertain terms that she has "jouï de tout le plaisir que peut donner la vengeance" and is now "dans cette resolution [...] de ne vous voir jamais"

¹² See also Moye and Masson.

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(210, 212). The Princesse is far less able to master her emotional reactions throughout the novel as well as at its conclusion. Notably, she loses control of her expression when Nemours falls from his horse: “Ce lui était une grande douleur de voir qu’elle n’était plus maîtresse de cacher ses sentiments” (209). Soon after, the Princesse reads in the letter of how Mme de Thémynes successfully and tactically hid her emotions from the Vidame so that he would want to work to win her back. The narrator tells us that the Princesse “enviait la force qu’elle [Mme de Thémynes] avait eue de cacher ses sentiments” (213). In the refusal, the Princesse attempts this same mastery, but she falters. While speaking to Nemours frankly during the refusal, she tells him she will be able to control her passion: “Cet aveu n’aura point de suite et je suivrai les règles austères que mon devoir m’impose” (303). But later in the conversation, she finds herself tempted to give in: “Pourquoi faut-il, s’écria-t-elle, que je vous puisse accuser de la mort de M. de Clèves? Que n’ai-je commencé à vous connaître depuis que je suis libre, ou pourquoi ne vous ai-je pas connu devant que d’être engagée? [...] Attendez ce que le temps pourra faire” (308). Upon greater reflection, she recognizes her weakness:

Elle fût étonnée de ce qu’elle avait fait; elle s’en repentit; elle en eut de la joie: tous ses sentiments étaient pleins de trouble et de passion. Elle examina encore les raisons de son devoir qui s’opposaient à son bonheur; elle sentit de la douleur de les trouver si fortes et elle se repentit de les avoir si bien montrées à M. de Nemours. Quoique la pensée de l’épouser lui fût venue dans l’esprit sitôt qu’elle l’avait revue dans ce jardin, elle ne lui avait pas fait la même impression que venait de faire la conversation qu’elle avait eue avec lui; et il y avait des moments où elle avait de la peine à comprendre qu’elle pût être malheureuse en l’épousant. La raison et son devoir [...] l’emportaient rapidement à la résolution de ne se point remarier et ne de voir jamais M. de Nemours. (310–311)

She hesitates again, realizing that “la bienséance lui donnait un temps considérable à se déterminer” and then resolves to at least not see him for the time being, although “elle connaissait que ce dessein était difficile à exécuter; mais [...] elle espérait d’en avoir la force” (311). The Princesse is afraid that she will not have the strength to resist her temptation, “[e]lle jugea que l’absence seule et l’éloignement pouvait lui donner quelque force; elle trouva qu’elle en avait besoin” (312).

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Mme de Thémynes announces a categorical interdiction to never see her again directly in writing to the vidame, but Mme de Clèves' final interdiction lacks such a firm injunction. It is not until he makes the journey to her home in the Pyrenees that Nemours hears through the voice of a third party that she

le priaît de ne pas trouver étrange si elle ne s'exposait point au péril de le voir et de détruire, par sa présence, des sentiments qu'elle devait conserver; qu'elle voulait bien qu'il sût, qu'ayant trouvé que son devoir et son repos s'opposaient au penchant qu'elle avait d'être à lui, les autres choses du monde lui avaient paru si indifférentes qu'elle y avait renoncé pour jamais. (314)

Her final mediated refusal to see him is couched in fear, weakness and temptation, while Mme de Thémynes' proud, calculated, written words are sent directly to the vidame. Although the Princesse seeks to imitate Mme de Thémynes, she falls short of emulating her. Mme de Thémynes offers an exemplum, an idealized model to imitate, a model of perfection impossible to attain.

Of all the women offered to her as models in the other intercalated stories, the Princesse chooses to imitate Mme de Thémynes, and does so only with great difficulty. Shedding her role as passive object — a double of the letter — whose lack of resistance leads her down a path of assimilation into the mass of court nobles, she acts to determine her difference, but cannot claim to be incomparable. In repeating Mme de Thémynes' words and actions, she falls short of duplicating her purposeful intent to reject the man she loves permanently. Like the letter the Princesse forges, her refusal of Nemours is a poor copy of the strength of spirit and resolve originally authored by Mme de Thémynes. If but for her self-control, it is Mme de Thémynes, and not the Princesse, who offers an inimitable example.

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