

Letts, Janet.

Legendary Lives in La Princesse de Clèves. Charlottesville, VA: Rookwood Press, 1998. xiv + 286 pp. Hardcover.

Solidly traditional in approach, Janet Letts' *Legendary Lives in La Princesse de Clèves* addresses a question posed endlessly by critics since the novel's publication in 1678: why would Lafayette, whose concern for natural, classical simplicity is apparent throughout the novel, nevertheless include such a large number of complicated historical narratives? Letts' response to this question is anchored in her extensive knowledge of the historical texts of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries: by comparing Lafayette's characterization of historical figures with more strictly historical sources, Letts hopes to demonstrate that the internal narratives are, in fact, essential to *La Princesse de Clèves*' classical integrity: "If the artistic integrity associated with classicism lies not simply in the exclusion of unnecessary ornaments, but rather in the apparently effortless integration of a maximum of intricately related elements into a whole to whose meaning each contributes, the pages of *La Princesse de Clèves* that set the heroine's story in its historical context contribute to that integrity" (250).

Letts' consideration of the historical narratives is divided into three parts. Part I, entitled, "Critics, Readers and History," offers a brief summary of the four internal narratives she will consider: the story of Marie de Lorraine; the love affair of Henri II and Diane de Poitiers; the events associated with Anne Boleyn; and the vidame's account of Catherine de Medici. Rather than simply serve as lessons for the heroine, Letts suggests, the narratives' true audience was Lafayette's readers, readers who had a certain familiarity with the historical figures in question and, consequently, a yardstick against which to measure Lafayette's treatment of them. Letts describes in detail public familiarity with the recent history of France and England, including references to the most widely read writers (Mézeray, Davila, Pasquier, De Thou, Dupleix, and D'Aubigné) and the number of libraries which held copies of these works. Letts' analysis suggests that French readers were quite familiar with the figures of ancient history and were curious to know more

about the characters who peopled their own recent national past. Lafayette drew amply upon the most widely read historical works, and relied on her readers' common knowledge of history when painting her own portrait of individuals whose names still resonated in the French consciousness in 1678.

Part II of Letts' study centers upon the complications and ironies of Lafayette's decision to choose Mary Stuart, the Dauphine, as her narrator of several significant historical anecdotes. Why, for example, should the Dauphine elaborate at length upon her mother, Marie de Lorraine, in a story with so little apparent connection to the central narrative of the novel? Letts suggests rather tentatively that Lafayette manipulates historical details so as to allow Mary Stuart to emphasize her mother's three suitors, a story which, according to Letts, would naturally evoke in the French reader's mind Mary Stuart's own "three crowns." The Dauphine's portrait of Anne Boleyn is similarly problematic, particularly in light of the role of the English queen's daughter in Mary Stuart's own execution: Mary's portrait of Anne is far more flattering than one would expect, and certainly more flattering than many portraits found in popular histories. Mary Stuart's references to Henry VIII are limited primarily to the later, unpleasant incidents of his reign. In the final chapter of Part II, Letts suggests that Mary Stuart's own multi-faceted history, and especially her ambition, must be considered when we judge her probity as narrator: ambitious royal and foreordained victim, Mary Stuart's efforts to narrate historical events completes, in a rather devious way, Lafayette's portrait of the Dauphine herself.

In Part III, Letts is concerned with the French triad which dominated the public consciousness of the 1550s: Diane de Poitiers, Henri II and Catherine de Medici. Letts' comparative study suggests that Lafayette's portraits of all three of these figures are even more unflattering than some of the most negative portraits of them available in the popular histories. Lafayette's Diane is more power-hungry and manipulative, more insensitive and unfaithful than other accounts of the royal mistress. Her portrait of Henri II similarly ignores the king's good points, focusing instead on how his actions, and particularly his somewhat whimsical choice to par-

tipitate in one final, fatal tournament, devastated the French kingdom and led most directly to the Wars of Religion. Lafayette's suggestion that Catherine was responsible for the vidame's death in the Tumult of Amboise similarly reinforces the more evil aspects of the Queen's character present in the minds of Lafayette's readers.

Letts' study is followed by a brief chronology of the major events in French and British history between 1509 and 1587; it is particularly useful where readers may become confused by typographical errors in the text which, for example, situate the Tumulte d'Amboise in 1660 (230)! Letts' bibliography of primary sources is extensive and impressive; her thorough knowledge of these texts is amply demonstrated throughout her study. However, the bibliography of secondary texts neglects several significant names in the history of the book (most notably Roger Chartier, of whom only *Lectures et lecteurs dans la France d'Ancien Régime*, 1987, is cited), and contains additional typographical errors in the names of her fellow dix-septièmistes. Indeed, a deplorable number of typographical errors (primarily spelling, but also repeated lines and miscited dates) detracts significantly from the reader's attention to the argument of the text.

Eminently traditional in scope, Letts' treatment of the place of history in *La Princesse de Clèves* is less challenging, perhaps, than other recent analyses of similar questions; Larry Gregorio's essay, "The Gaze of History," published in the recent translation of the novel edited by John Lyons, comes to mind. Yet, in situating her reading of Lafayette squarely within an appreciation of contemporary historical texts, Janet Letts provides a very thorough analysis of historical characterization which will doubtless be of some interest to those who study the critical nexus of literature and history in the seventeenth century.

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