

Valincour's Critical Notion of *Vraisemblance*

by
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When *La Princesse de Clèves* was published in 1678, a virulent literary battle arose during which the novel was concurrently praised as a masterpiece of the nascent genre of the *nouvelle historique* and condemned for its subversion of *vraisemblance*, the primary criterion of the new genre. Chief among the novel's detractors was Jean-Baptiste Trousset de Valincour, an established member of the literary scene who succeeded Racine to the French Academy. Valincour's *Lettres à Mme la Marquise de *** sur le sujet de la Princesse de Clèves* was hailed by de la Motte as "le modèle d'une critique raisonnable." In the 370 pages of his "reasonable" critique, Valincour focuses much of his attack on what he considers the unreasonable behavior of the novel's female protagonist whom he denounces as "une femme incompréhensible...c'est la prude la plus coquette et la coquette la plus prude que l'on aît jamais veüe" (272-73). Valincour's judgment of the princess and her fiction as *invraisemblable* is a clear illustration of the use of the concept of *vraisemblance* for literary and societal censorship. In Valincour's *Lettres*, *vraisemblance* is used to advance the acceptable lines of female comportment in an effort to counter the example Lafayette provocatively offers of a woman who intentionally steps outside of those boundaries.

The prescriptive quality of the notion of *vraisemblance* is not immediately apparent in definitions of the term. According to Furetière, *vraisemblance* is the "caractère ou apparence de vérité," thus a *vraisemblable* action is one "qui a apparence de vérité, qui est dans la possibilité des choses arrivées, ou à arriver." But as this definition illustrates, the concept does not correspond to *vérité* or truth. Furetière's use of the term "apparence" indicates the distance between *vraisemblance* and *vérité*. In fact, the example he offers to illustrate *vraisemblable* clearly distinguishes between the

two: "Les adventures des Romans et des piéces dramatiques doivent estre plustost vraysemblables, que vrayes."

Furetière's example points to the prevalent use of *vraisemblance* to evaluate literary works. Critics relied on it especially to judge the *nouvelle historique*. These works, even more than their generic precursor, the *roman héroïque*, had to present this "apparence de vérité." Some contemporary critics even attribute the conception of *vraisemblance* to the *nouvelle*. In *La Bibliothèque française* (1664), written when the *nouvelle historique* was just coming into its own, Sorel bases his distinction between the *nouvelle historique* and the *roman héroïque* on the *nouvelle's* aura of *vraisemblance*:

Plusieurs cherchent des romans vray-semblables que soyent faits pour des images de l'Histoire. Lors qu'on a esté las des premiers Romans, on a essayé d'en faire d'autres plus agreables, et qui tinssent quelque chose de la verité...On commençoit aussi de connoistre ce que c'estoit que des choses vray-semblables, par de petites narrations dont la mode vint, qui s'appelloient des Nouvelles; On les pouvoit comparer aux Histoires Veritables de quelque accidens particuliers des Hommes (Sorel 157, 160).

But while a novel should use history so well that it appears to be history itself, an author nevertheless has to choose carefully his/her historical referent. Truth and *vraisemblance* are not synonymous terms. Thus historical truth alone does not ensure plausibility. As Huet remarks in his treatise *Sur l'origine des Romans*: "la vraisemblance qui ne se trouve pas toujours dans l'Histoire est essentielle au roman." (Huet 49)¹

Huet's formulation alludes to the complex relationship between *vraisemblance* and *vérité* as it was formulated in the developing critical canon. In their analyses of the *nouvelle historique*, critics try to elucidate what Furetière refers to as the 'appearance of truth.' Their commentaries reveal that, when employed

to judge the novel, this appearance consists of a coupling of *vraisemblance* with the elusive notion of *bienséance*, that is "ce qui convient à une chose...ce qui est commode, utile et avantageux... la bienséance exige de nous plusieurs devoirs" (Furetière). This combination of plausibility and propriety is clear in Du Plaisir's definition of *vraisemblance*:

La vray-semblance consiste à ne dire que ce qui est moralement croyable, et on ne se confie point sur ce qu'il arrive des choses plus extraordinaires que celles qu'on avance...La vérité n'est pas toujours vray-semblable. (Du Plaisir 89)

Du Plaisir's contemporary, Rapin, distinguishes further *vraisemblance* from *vérité*, and underscores the prescriptive nature of the concept:

La vérité ne fait les choses que comme elles sont, et la vraisemblance les fait comme elles doivent être. (Rapin II: 115-116)

Inherent in the concept of *vraisemblance* is thus a notion of *bienséance* that is an essential factor in Valincour's condemnation of much of Lafayette's masterpiece. As Genette defines the concept, *vraisemblance* is "une idéologie, c'est-à-dire un corps de maximes et de préjugés qui constitue tout à la fois une vision du monde et un système de valeurs." (73) *Vraisemblance*--verisimilitude or plausibility--cannot be understood without taking *bienséance*--propriety--into account. Miller goes on to argue that the concept of *vraisemblance* corresponds to a set of maxims, both societal and literary; thus an action which is *invraisemblable* is one that does not correspond to a maxim. (Miller 36-37) The critical standard of *vraisemblance* is in reality a means of governing literary production and of making it conform to a system of values existing outside of the work itself. A work is plausible in so far as it reflects the universal maxims of seventeenth-century society. And a text must be *vraisemblable* because it must not only

conform to these values but transmit them, given its dual purpose to please and to instruct. (Zebouni 68-69)²

When Valincour exclaims at one point that "il n'y a rien de veritable dans tout l'ouvrage, que quelques endroits de l'histoire de France, qui, à mon sens, devroient n'y estre point" (88), he is implicitly censuring Lafayette's mixture of fact and fiction. But given the rules governing the *nouvelle historique*, Valincour's admonition is incomprehensible. It is universally acknowledged that the best way to ensure the essential quality of *vraisemblance* is to base the fiction on recognizable and verifiable history. (Charnes 13)³ In fact, the story of the Princesse de Clèves provokes Valincour to reject the critical constraints of *vraisemblance* and wish that this particular fiction did not have any affiliation with reality. For, in his words,

Il n'y a rien qui choque davantage un lecteur que de voir qu'on luy propose comme veritable, une chose qui ne l'est point, et qui est mesme entierement fausse. (96)

Valincour rejects Lafayette's use of history because the resulting composition is not "moralement croyable," to borrow Du Plaisir's terms.

Throughout the *Lettres*, the verbs *devoir* and *falloir* appear with amazing frequency as the *honnête homme* tries to rectify a deviant fiction. The adjectives "unnatural" and "extraordinary" are conflated with *invraisemblable* in this literary trial. At one point, Valincour's fictional *savant* exclaims in exasperation:

C'est dans ces petits ouvrages où les fictions extraordinaires sont insupportables au lecteur parce qu'il n'y est pas préparé, qu'il n'attend qu'une histoire simple et naturelle, à laquelle il puisse ajouter quelque sorte de creance, sans faire tort à son jugement. (116)

Like *Du Plaisir*, Valincour associates *extraordinaire* with *invraisemblable*. An action which "n'arrive pas tous les jours, [or] se voit rarement," as Furetière defines *extraordinaire*, does not adhere to a universal conception of acceptable behavior.

Valincour's reaction attests to the fact that Lafayette constructs a text which is a provocative transgression of seventeenth-century ideology. The critic isolates many "extraordinary" and "unnatural" events in Lafayette's narrative, all of which can be seen to present alternative modes of female behavior. Valincour finds the princess's trip to the jeweler shocking because the princess is unaccompanied and is given a task unsuitable for a woman her age: "Les femmes habiles soutiennent qu'on n'a jamais laissé à une fille de seize ans, le soin d'assortir des pierreries; que tout ce que l'on peut faire à cet âge-là, c'est de choisir des rubans et des garnitures...enfin cela n'est pas vray-semblable" (9-10). The princess is thus given too much independence and responsibility. The declaration scene is judged "un des plus extraordinaires événemens dont on ait jamais ouï parler (39)...Se trouve-t-il souvent des femmes qui fassent à leurs maris des confidences de cette nature?" (215). What woman would or should be so bold as to express openly her desire to withdraw from court?

Lafayette's depiction of Nemours is deemed equally implausible. The scene at Marie Stuart's when the princess hears her own story retold is constructed "aux dépens du vray-semblable" (50) because a plausible Nemours either would have chosen his confidant more carefully or would not have revealed his knowledge. Valincour queries "Mais une aventure ne couste-t-elle point trop cher, quand elle couste des fautes de sens et de conduite au Heros du livre?" (52). Lafayette subverts the expected mold of the acceptable hero. In addition, Nemours's passion for the princess develops too slowly. Valincour remarks: "Quand ce n'eust esté que pour la bien-seance, j'eusse voulu que la passion de M. de Nemours eust commencé au moins quelques jours avant celle de Mme de Clèves. Cela eust esté

plus regulier" (13). Valincour feels that Lafayette's heroine is too forward. "Je suis fasché seulement que l'Auteur luy [Mme de Clèves] fasse faire toutes les avances" (143).

Valincour is thus primarily drawn to those scenes in which characters do not conform to the behavior expected of their gender. The *Lettres* can be viewed as an attack on an alternative conception of *vraisemblable* female comportment advanced by Lafayette. Valincour finds extraordinary, unnatural, and implausible those narrative moments designed to illustrate female expression and self-determination. Following this logic, two scenes in particular merit condemnation under Valincour's pen: the princess's reverie of passion in front of Nemours's portrait and her final rejection of Nemours.

For the condemnation of these scenes, Valincour lends authority to a fictional woman of society. In the conversation he invents, he asks "Mais, Madame, que vous semble de Mme de Clèves, qui en s'en allant à Coulommiers, y fait porter de grands tableaux...Je suis sûr que vous me répondrez d'abord que cela n'est pas excusable" (245-46). In her reply, the worldly woman does not denounce the existence of the princess's passion, but rather the public expression of her emotions.

A vous parler franchement, l'action me paroist un peu inconsiderée...elle eust mieux fait de donner à sa passion quelque satisfaction plus sensible, pourveu qu'elle eust esté plus secreete.
(247)

Female expression of passion also provides the foundation of the critique of the final scene between Mme de Clèves and Nemours.

Mme de Clèves dit icy tout ce que devoit dire M. de Nemours. C'est elle qui luy parle de sa passion, qui lui découvre tous les sentiments de son coeur, et qui le fait avec un ordre et une

tranquillité qui ne ressent gueres du trouble qu'un pareil aveu donne toujours aux femmes un peu retenues. L'on diroit qu'elle n'est venue là que pour parler, et M. de Nemours pour écouter, au lieu que ce devroit estre tout le contraire...En verité, il luy [Mme de Clèves] eust esté bien plus glorieux de ne rien dire. (270-71)

The implicit maxims for female conduct become explicit. A woman should not usurp the male position of dominance. The enumeration of the verbs related to expression--"dire", "parler", "découvrir",--all of which have the princess as subject, point to the princess's principal transgressive act: that of speech. Nemours is relegated to the passive role of auditor, one that in fact parallels his earlier voyeurist positions. He is only present "pour écouter" in this *monde-à-l'envers*. Actions so contrary to expected norms can only be subsumed under the *invraisemblable*.

In addition to speaking too openly, the princess transgresses Valincour's conception of acceptable female behavior by her ultimate rejection of a relationship that society would have condoned. She is "incompréhensible" due to her refusal to act upon her passion in a way Valincour can find acceptable.

Pendant la vie de son mari elle aime M. de Nemours; elle ne fait point de difficulté d'avoir son portrait, de passer les nuits à le regarder: et lors que par la mort de son mari elle devient maistresse d'elle-mesme, et qu'elle peut disposer de son coeur, elle se fait un crime de le donner à un homme qu'elle aime passionnément. (273)

Valincour can only envision two possibilities for a woman in the princess's position who becomes "maistresse d'elle-mesme:" she can either "suivre ces sentimens jusques au bout,...ou les étouffer, et ne les point faire paroistre" (272). The princess remains an implausible mystery to him because she expresses a passion upon which she refuses to act. "Si elle avoit

assez de force pour surmonter son inclination, pourquoi n'en avoit-elle pas assez pour la cacher?" (271) he queries.

If Valincour finds the princess unacceptable, it is because he refuses another reading of the reverie scene and the final declaration in which the princess does not "surmonter son inclination," but rather creates an ideal passion according to her own expectations and seeks to preserve it from destruction by an unworthy Nemours. Valincour negates the possibility that a woman who is "maistresse d'elle-mesme" could script her own story outside of society's norms. Yet this is precisely what Lafayette suggests in the provocative story of her exceptional princess. The princess becomes emblematic of the woman writer and creates her own fiction at Coulommiers. First she "fait un aveu que l'on n'a jamais fait à un mari" as she expresses her desire to retire from the court to Coulommiers (122). Through the rhetoric of this scene, Lafayette underscores the exceptional nature of the action, and points to her own act of provocation. The qualifying adjective "jamais" appears nine times. The princess' own discourse emphasizes the strength of her deed. She refers to herself as the "maîtresse de ma conduite"(122).

The second controversial scene staged at Coulommiers, the princess's reverie of passion in front of Nemours's portrait, is the next step in the princess's construction of her own story. The episode can be seen as a *mise en abyme* of the act of novelistic production as practiced by Lafayette. The paintings that serve as props for this staging are identified as battle scenes:

Toutes les actions remarquables, qui s'étaient passées du règne du roi, étaient dans ces tableaux. Il y avait entre autres le siège de Metz, et tous ceux qui s'y étaient distingués étaient peints fort ressemblants. M. de Nemours étaient de ce nombre. (152)

Using these official historical paintings, the princess constructs her own private world:

...elle prit un flambeau et s'en alla, proche d'une grande table, vis-à-vis du tableau de siège de Metz, où étaient le portrait de M. de Nemours; elle s'assit et se mit à regarder ce portrait avec une attention et une rêverie que la passion seule peut donner. (155)

Within the idyllic confines of Coulommiers, the princess freely creates her own work, an ideal reverie of passion that cannot be destroyed by the whims of a shady Nemours. Of particular importance is the fact that the princess chooses to compose this ideal story using historical props which she transforms to suit her fiction. In this process of historical rescription, the official history depicting Nemours's military exploits at Metz is appropriated for the princess's particular fiction of passion. The princess's action mirrors Lafayette's own creative process, for, like her heroine, Lafayette constructs her fiction using an historically verifiable framework. Moreover, in order to strengthen the affiliation of this scene with specifically female creativity, Lafayette associates the historical painting to the Duchesse de Valentinois, the most powerful figure at court and the symbol in the novel of a woman who has managed to write her own story. Significantly, Lafayette intentionally deviates from her usually accurate portrayal of history, for these paintings never decorated Diane de Poitiers's château at Anet. (Cuénilin 121)⁴

The final declaration scene is also designed to illustrate the creative powers of female self-expression, and the transformation of a woman into an active writing subject. In rejecting Nemours, the princess is again motivated by a desire to retain control over her own plot. The princess refuses Nemours primarily because she does not believe he can live up to the ideal passion she has created. She explicitly states:

La certitude de n'être plus aimée de vous, comme je le suis, me paraît un si horrible malheur que, quand je n'aurais point des raisons de devoir insurmontables, je doute si je pourrais me résoudre à m'exposer à ce malheur. Je sais que vous êtes libre, que je le suis, et que les choses sont d'une sorte que le public n'aurait peut-être pas sujet de vous blâmer, ni moi non plus...Mais les hommes conservent-ils de la passion dans ces engagements éternels? Dois-je espérer un miracle en ma faveur? (173)

The princess acknowledges society's expectations, but refuses to conform to them, choosing instead to follow "un devoir qui ne subsiste que dans [son] imagination" (175). She does not surmount her passion, but channels it into a mode of action where it can be perpetuated but not destroyed. She assures Nemours that her love in its ideal form will continue: "Croyez que les sentiments que j'ai pour vous seront éternels et qu'ils subsisteront également, quoi que je fasse" (175).

In the eyes of a seventeenth-century public, an overly virtuous princess can refuse her lover to keep the memory of her husband alive, but cannot do so only out of her fear of rejection. Lafayette is conscious of the unacceptability of the princess's reasoning and actually inscribes the future reaction of her public into the novel: Nemours "demeura d'accord avec M. le vidame qu'il était impossible que Mme de Clèves demeurât dans les résolutions où elle était" (176). Valincour echoes the fictional duc's reaction and ridicules the princess's fear of Nemours's potential infidelity.

Cela luy paroist un si horrible malheur, qu'elle employe 7 ou 8 pages à le dépeindre avec des terms de la plus raffinée coquetterie. Voilà-t-il pas une belle raison pour ne pas épouser un homme? Et depuis la Sapho du Grand Cyrus, s'est-il rencontré une femme à qui cette vision soit tombée dans l'esprit? (275)

Significantly, the only model Valincour can find for such an implausible "vision" is that of another woman writer. Lafayette reaffirms the trajectory of a woman who is "maistresse d'elle-mesme" as advanced by Scudéry. Both Sapho and the princess live according to their own rules, passions, and desires.

In reacting so strongly to Lafayette's exceptional heroine, Valincour in fact recognizes the novelist's provocative stance with respect to the notion of *vraisemblance*. Lafayette uses a scrupulously constructed historical foundation to ensure the *vraisemblance* of the princess's story, and redefines *vraisemblance* with respect to women in the process. A woman can be independent and compose her own plot. When Valincour judges the princess's expression and scripting of her own story as "extraordinaire" and "invraisemblable," he is attempting to draw the princess back into line with acceptable maxims and preserve the status quo. Given the implications of Lafayette's *vraisemblance* for women novelists as well as for her female contemporaries in general, it is not surprising that critics such as Valincour found it advisable to dismiss such actions as pure fiction and Lafayette's literary effort as a breach of critical norms. While novelists should use history to make their fictions appear plausible, they cannot go so far as to invent their own notion of *vraisemblance*. As Valincour states:

Il ne leur [novelists] est pas permis d'en abuser, jusques à faire des monstres et des chimères, ni jusques à inventer des choses qui choquent l'esprit de tous ceux qui les lisent. (90)

In reacting so strongly to this female heroine, Valincour and the society he inscribes in his text are implicitly trying to ensure that the female self-determination and expression the princess represents remain a "monstre[]" and a "chimère[]." This princess must be viewed as "incompréhensible" and "invraisemblable."

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Notes

¹While in this context, "roman" refers to earlier fictions such as the *romans héroïques* by Scudéry, the same concept underlies the notion of *vraisemblance* in the *nouvelle historique*.

²Selma A. Zebouni examines the notion of *vraisemblance* within the context of seventeenth-century classicism. She ascribes the need for *vraisemblance* to the emphasis placed on the pedagogical function attributed to literature during this period. "Pour l'art classique c'est la coincidence avec le destinataire qui est le but de l'acte créateur. Et c'est précisément cette coincidence qui confère sa signification à la notion de vraisemblance. Il faut pouvoir convaincre le destinataire et pour cela il faut demeurer dans les limites de ce qu'il peut croire, car il ne peut tirer profit que de ce dont on peut le persuader...C'est parce qu'il a quelque chose à dire que l'art classique doit être vraisemblable, car ce qu'il dit doit avoir valeur de vérité, étant donné qu'il serait absurde de vouloir enseigner quelque chose qui serait faux." "Classicisme et Vraisemblance," *Papers on Seventeenth-Century French Literature*, 8 Winter (1977-78): 68-69.

³Charnes refers to this doctrine in his defense of *La Princesse de Clèves* when he explains that Lafayette uses history to "rendre son invention plus vraisemblable, en lui donnant quelque liaison avec les événements qui sont connus dans l'histoire."

⁴Micheline Cuénin, "Châteaux et romans au dix-septième siècle," *Dix-Septième Siècle*, Jan.-June 1978, 121. For a fascinating analysis of this scene that emphasizes the princess's creativity, see Joan DeJean's article.

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