The Equality of the Two Sexes in *La Princesse de Clèves*

by
Michael G. Paulson

La Princesse de Clèves, on the surface, scarcely appears a work in which one would expect to find equality of any sort. It is a novel in which kings, various levels of nobility and their ladies machinate for position and power and in which all struggle to maintain themselves above everyone else. Yet, in a sense, there is not only equality among men, but between the two sexes as well. Our problem is to formulate a working definition of "equal" upon which the present study can concentrate. The adjective *égal* is generally defined as "semblable, le même en nature, en quantité, en qualité ... qui ne varie pas" and as a noun as "qui est de même rang." The substantive definition does not seem to suffice, since by nature, a king is higher than a duke and a duke is higher than a count. Even among kings, equality varies according to ability and power. Henri II, who reigns at the novel's beginning, is a physically stronger, more capable king than his sickly son, François II, who reigns, but does not rule at the work's end. For our definition of equality, we must instead work with the concept of "similar" and "the same in nature" as we strive to establish the equality of the sexes in *La Princesse de Clèves*.

The plot outline itself does not inherently lend itself to this stance of equality. Writing nearly a century before Madame de La Fayette, Michel de Montaigne refers and disgresses to many of the historical characters of the novel in his *Essais*, but only the male figures receive extensive coverage. He delights in his narration of Henri II's death, the exploits of the Guise family, and even of the brief reign of François II. On the other hand, he refers to Catherine de Medici as only "la reine mère" and to the unfortunate Mary Stuart as merely the widow of the sickly François. Madame de La Fayette's innovation appears hence in her accordance of a personality to female characters, a trait lacking in the *Essais*.

Superficially, the world of *La Princesse de Clèves* is one in which men rule and dominate; women appear only

in subservient roles. The introductory part of the novel leads us to this belief:

> 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. Ce prince était galant, bien fait et amoureux.... (3).

Turnell (34) cautions us not to accept anything here at face value and we must read between the lines. Salic Law specifically bars women from the throne, even if they are more capable than the ruling males. Henri II, François II, the Duke Nemours, as well as various male members of the Guise clan, seem to be in charge, if we look at the trappings of authority seen from the opening passage. Legally, only a man can sit on the throne, wear a crown or lead an army, and the first tome of the novel concentrates on this aspect of power and authority. But there is more to be seen below the surface. Barbara Woshinsky points to the outward appearance of order:

> In the *Princesse de Clèves*, Mme de Lafayette reveals both the dynamism and the stability of the court and shows how they are combined in the daily lives of its members. History follows a continuous, orderly pattern, from father to son [not mother to daughter], from dynasty to dynasty. (64).

As the work unfolds we see on the surface various masculine figures maneuvering for power. At the top is King Henri, legal in ruler of France in theory. Below him we find the Duke Guise, struggling to rise to the top and dominate Henri's successor, François. On the other hand, the Duke Nemours does not aim for ascendancy in France, but sets his own sights for a crown and its power in England. Throughout the first tome of the *Princesse de Clèves*, we learn of the struggles of the Vidame de Chartres, Montmorency, Brissac and others to attain and retain power vis-à-vis their countless rivals. The royal crown, the marshal's baton, the bishop's mitre and the general's insignia all are visible signs of male power and ambitions and seem to prove that France is a man's country--or so it would appear on the surface.

Madame de Chartres' keen observation early in the novel provides a key to the proper interpretation of the actual situation. "Ce qui paraît n'est presque jamais la

vérité" (51) refers specifically to court intrigues, but it applies equally well to the social structure of the novel. Underlying the façade is an interior world which is less concerned with maintaining appearances of force than with the functional possession of power. This less visible society, based uniquely on influence, is one in which women predominate. While they lack the outward trappings of their male counterparts, females wield more effective power and actually are in charge where the men only seem in charge.

Reality vs. illusion. This theme prevails through many seventeenth-century works, possibly stemming from Calderón's *La vida es sueño* and Corneille's *L'Illusion comique*. Janine Kreiter refers to the opposition between essence and appearances in *la Princesse de Clèves*:

> Le monde du paraître, s'il est incompatible avec celui de l'être, lui est cependant essentiel, puisqu'il maintient l'illusion qui permet de vivre--dans la mauvaise foi--pour survivre. Cette illusion était nécessaire à tous, tous l'entretiennent, et chacun est dépendant et redevable de la complicité des autres. Il semble que Mme de Lafayette (sic) voite la dichotomie de l'être et du paraître comme irrévocablement inhérente à la condition de l'homme dont l'idéal et les aspirations, relevant de l'absolut, provoquent des actions qui se situent dans le domaine du relatif. (268)

What initially appears a patriarchy is in reality a matriarchy, as we soon realize upon closer scrutiny of the novel.

Corresponding to the major male figures of power are various *cabales* ruled by women. King Henri represents the focal point for two such groups, one headed by his wife, Catherine de Medici, the second by his mistress, Diane de Poitiers. At the opening of the novel, the second *cabale* predominates. While Henri wears the crown, Diane makes the important decisions. The king officially promotes, demotes and banishes his courtiers, but his mistress tells him whom to promote, demote or banish. Although the monarch may protest these dictates, once expressed, they are written in stone and are no longer subject to appeal. Despite the real authority which she exercises, Diane's rule depends on her ties to the king;

based on an extramarital relationship, her continued dominance without legitimate foundation is tied to Henri's life, not to the throne.

The faction centered on Queen Catherine seems eclipsed in power, for she wields little power in comparison to her rival. Yet the queen does not want for followers, for the patient realists of the court are aware of her potential and of the legitimacy of her power. While the impatiently ambitious seek Diane, those who recognize the total picture understand that the latter will stay in power so long as Henri lives, but that a change of monarchs will bring about a change in power. Catherine, long denied her husband's sexual favors, harbors a grudge against the mistress. Once her husband dies, she becomes queen-mother, the power behind the throne for her minor sons, François, Charles and Henri, who in turn will reign, but only under the direction of their formidable mother. Perceptive courtiers tie their own fortunes to Catherine, who, while lacking Diane's power during her husband's reign, still has enough connections and influence to make or break people--provided that her wishes do not directly run contrary to those of the royal mistress.

A third faction exists at the court, tied to the *reine-dauphine* Mary Stuart. This faction, too, appears eclipsed by the Poitiers *cabale*, but it manages to attract the young and the youthful, including the novel's heroine, the Princesse de Clèves and her aspirant Nemours. Many of the participants, including the sickly *dauphin* and his wife, are mere teenagers. This group serves as a school in politics to prepare its members for adult life when they can create or choose real *cabales*. The *dauphin* is the legal center at present, but his wife Mary initiates all discussion and activities as the courtiers come to pay court to her, no to him. At the outset of the novel, we see this as the future Valois court, but little do we suspect how soon the change will be made. The *dauphine* lacks the wisdom and power of her mother-in-law or of the royal mistress to break courtiers, but she can assist would-be aspirants to make their mark at court. Madame de Clèves, unable to penetrate either of the first two factions, finds her niche here and patiently awaits the rise of this faction for her own social rise.

This group has its limitations. Comprised of adolescents in age or maturity, it lacks present organization and real power. Moreover, it depends uniquely on the frail life of its symbol, the *dauphin.* Since he and Mary have produced no male offspring, she lacks the tie to the throne that Catherine holds; there is no possibility that the *dauphine* could become the *reine-mère.* Moreover, during François' reign, there will be jockeying of powers between wife and mother, each trying to exercise effective authority over the poor, dying boy.

Henri's death in 1559 in the third tome of the work precipitates Diane's downfall and raises Mary Stuart to queenship and power. The change of kings pulls down Diane's followers and on the surface, it elevates Mary's; one will note, however, that Catherine manages to draw courtiers to herself, both from the shambles of the Poitiers clique as well as from the Stuart group. The most notable "convert" is the Duke de Guise, Mary's maternal uncle, who knows exactly who will be calling the shots. Within the text there are a few indicators of the future; extratextually, we know from history that the Stuart faction will last less than a year and a half. At François' death in late 1560, Catherine will seize the reins of power without opposition for her second son Charles IX and will exile Mary to her native Scotland. Thus, Catherine's *cabale* will triumph over her rivals'.

Women need not ally themselves with kings to attain and exercise power. At the beginning of the novel, we find several single young men with ties to powerful families. These males pride themselves in the display of their titles or prowess, but all eventually fall sway to the irresistible, feminine attraction of Mademoiselle de Chartres. Her presence and its magical *coup de foudre* captivate the Maréchal de St. André, the Chevalier de Guise and the Prince de Clèves. Although superficially she seems weaker than any of the above, she is in fact stronger than all of the above. Denial of her hand causes both St.-André and Guise to despair; the latter will even join the Knights of Malta to forget her.

M. de Clèves, the "successful" candidate, remains distraught, for he has attained only her respect, but not her love. When the Duke Nemours enters the picture, he innerly captures Madame de Clèves' heart despite her

efforts to appear unmoved by him. By the end of the work, she alone has achieved mastery of her passions. Nemours languishes from unrequited love, while Clèves dies from exaggerated suspicions and jealousy. St.-André and Guise, both rejected early on, continue to despair. All four of these men are brave, capable individuals, who would not falter in battle or in the service of king or country. Yet once faced with denial or refusal from this beauty, they all crumble. She wields as effective a force over them as Mary Stuart, Diane de Poitiers and Catherine de Medici exercise over the various court factions. In essence, the latter are metaphors for the powers of Madame de Clèves. Males flock to females and willingly surrender themselves and their visible signs of authority in exchange for favors of one sort or another. Whether they seek sexual favors, a promotion or the ruin of a rival, all seek out a woman as a means to this end.

The novel seems to depict outwardly a man's world, where man is supreme, but there are other factors which merit consideration. The author of the novel, we must recall, is a woman; whatever importance she may assign to the males in her work, they are viewed from a feminine perspective. She selects and arranges the literary details to suit her ends, not the ends of males. Likewise, she has selected a female narrator, who in turn presents several women characters, who narrate tales in which women predominate. These digressions relate in depth the general dominance of women and show their power over men; whether in the tale of Diane de Poitiers, Marie de Guise or Elizabeth of England, we see females who have overcome obstacles to exercise authority successfully over males.

The French monarchy has a mirror image in England. A literary image, however, is only as good as its novel-mirror, which in *La Princesse de Clèves* tends to distort the picture. The reflections we see involve essence rather than ocular imagery, for in England, we find a country ruled by a woman. Elizabeth I reigns with an iron fist and holds the same outward trappings of monarchy as her counterpart, Henri II. We are aware from history that there are several male-oriented factions at her court. To receive promotions or favors from Elizabeth, the ambitious must first seek a male intermediary such as Leicester, Cecil or Hatton to intercede on their behald. When Henri II encourages Nemours to pursue his romancing of the

English queen, it is partially with the intent of having direct access to Elizabeth. What we find in England is the reverse of France: a female sits on the throne, but males seem to have some impact on her decision-making.

We have observed situations in *La Princesse de Clèves* which may cause us to debate whether there is indeed equality in the work. If we attempt to follow the guidelines of "same as," there is no equality. Twentieth-century feminists, civil rights activists and egalitarians seem overly preoccupied with possession of both *de jure* and *de facto* equality. What such individuals would require to complete the definition is that both sexes enjoy equality in theory as well as in practice and such a doctrine in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries seemed wholy impractical and improbable. In that age, women could not aspire to the French throne, but for that matter, very few men could entertain such prospects either. The crown, the foremost symbol of authroity, being unattainable to them, men and women of ambition sought to manipulate its possessor; hence, we understand the *raison d'être* of such characters as Diane de Poitiers, Mary Stuart and Catherine de Medici, who had seventeenth-century counterparts in the guise of Mesdames de Montespan, Maintenon and others. If a woman in the novel and in real life could not expect to reign directly, she could at least hope to rule the person in theoretical authority.

If we view the concept of equality from the stance of physical strength, we are perplexed. In the sense of military prowess and physical force, the males in the novel seem to display greater strength; nowhere do we encounter any female with physical force greater than that expressed in Henri II, the Duke de Nemours and the Duke de Guise, the male "giants." Still, not all men are physically strong as we know from the sickly François II. On the other hand, women are emotionally stronger. In terms of passion, men fall to women more often than women fall to men. The female alone seems capable of controlling her emotions and feelings, and hence, acquires a mastery of the situation. Kaps documents that the latter are better capable of dissimulating their true feelings:

> Dissimulation, however, requires a great deal of discipline. Perfect discipline would require perfect

> control; and although composure and quick-thinking are developed to a fine art in courtly society, occasional errors are inevitable. Even the most practiced do not attain complete self-mastery. (7).

If one equates emotional and physical strength, then each sex counterbalances or equals the other; in a parallel manner, male-symbol, female-power France counterbalances female-symbol, male-power England. For a contemporary concept of this equality, we have only to turn to the Duke de La Rochefoucauld, Madame de La Fayette's companion and possible collaborator, for the key; he states in his *Maximes* that "Quelque différence qui paroisse entre les fortunes, il y a néanmoins une certaine compensatin de bien et de maux qui les rend égaux" (LII), a statement in keeping with the situation of the novel.

If we look at the concept of equality as "similarity" or as "complementarity," we find less difficulty in establishing the *égalité des deux sexes* in the novel. If we do not expect to find equal power and authority vested in each sex, but instead consider each as the complement to the other to complete a unified whole, then we do find equality. The concept of separation of powers applies to good government as well as to *La Princesse de Clèves*. If we consider women as the counterbalance to men (in the same manner as we consider the legislative branch as a counterbalance to the executive branch of government), then we can suppose an equality, not in the sense of "exact" or "same," rather in the sense of "counterweight." Each unit has its own defined sphere of influence, whether it is "to reign" or "to rule." What we see in the novel is a symbiosis in which both sexes live in close association advantageous to each and to both. Men and women do not enjoy equality in *both* types of power, the *de facto* and the *de jure*. Through the association of the two sexes, they both jointly wield power and share trappings of authority. The equality of the two sexes resides in their complementary nature.

Kutztown University

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