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Lafayette's Ellipses: The Privileges of Anonymity

> Have more than thou showest
> Speak less than thou knowest,
> . . . . . .
> And thou shalt have more
> Than two tens to a score.
>
> Shakespeare, *King Lear*

WOMEN'S WRITING in France is often confined to a territory circumscribed in either utopian or negative terms. On the one hand, this territory is a projected new frontier, an "elsewhere" that, while still a no-woman's-land, will be claimed by women authors when they forge a writing that, in Hélène Cixous's phrase, "inscribes femininity" (878). On the other, the accomplishments of women writers in France are described in terms of absence and effacement, as though writing "otherwise" had thus far only been writing against (dominant masculine discourse), a type of *écriture blanche* or non-writing, a negative discourse, and therefore invisible and indescribable. Claudine Herrmann's *Les Voleuses de langue* stands as eloquent testimony to this view of women's writing as a camouflaged, self-effacing, fearful, derivative (because stolen) medium.[1]

It may be impossible to delimit the female literary estate more concretely and more optimistically as long as theory attempts to account for the entire history of women's writing, as though occurrences at different periods could always be understood in the same way, as though similarities should be pointed out, even at the price of an awareness of diachronic change. We should not minimize the significance of striking ahistorical resemblances made apparent by synchronic comparisons such as the one Herrmann draws between a tenth-century Japanese writer, Lady Murasaki, and her counterpart in seventeenth-century France, the comtesse de Lafayette (34–48). However, unless we also interpret women's writing in the historical context in which it was created, we run the risk of reading assertion as effacement, of dismissing demonstrable gains as unreadable blanks. Writing "otherwise" always takes place somewhere. For the authors who concern me here, seventeenth-century French women writers and Lafayette in particular, that somewhere is no uncharted utopian space but a territory clearly and self-consciously defined by its creators.

Recently, historians and cultural historians—Ian Maclean, Dorothy Backer, and Carolyn Lougee, to name but the most eminent specialists—have laid the groundwork for a significant revision of seventeenth-century French history by giving new and detailed evidence of the extent and the force of women's political and social influence during what is arguably the century that set the standards for modern French literature. Their conclusions apply as well in the literary domain. All too often, women's literary achievements are discussed as though English literature constituted a generally valid model. Thus Lawrence Lipking—and I cite but one recent example of a recurrent fallacy—contends that "only in the Romantic period did women begin to construct a poetics" (81, n. 36). In France, however, women's writing acquired a history and a tradition long before it did in England. In the seventeenth century, the modern French novel came into existence, and, as has often been true in the history of this genre, women writers played a decisive role in its development. Though by no means the first writer to forge the association between women and the novel, Marie-Madeleine Pioche de la Vergne, comtesse de Lafayette, is the best known. Remarkably, although she composed her novels just after an age when women were, in Maclean's characterization, "triumphant," Lafayette either published under the name of a male writer and friend (Segrais signed *Zayde*) or resorted to anonymity (as she did for her most famous fiction, *La Princesse de Clèves*).

By refusing to attach her name to her creation and thereby choosing absence over presence, silence over speech, Lafayette would seem to be writing against the grain of a tradition of women's literature already well established in France. In the twelfth century, the founding poet of this tradition, Marie de France, launched both her *Lais* and the story of French *écriture féminine* by proclaiming that "he to whom God has granted wisdom and eloquence in speech, ought not to hide these

gifts in silence" (6). Among those echoing her inaugural pronouncement is a writer closer to Lafayette's time, Louise Labé, who in the mid-sixteenth century spoke out just as openly and with greater gender specificity against women's effacement and silence: "Because the time has come . . . when men's harsh laws no longer prevent women from devoting themselves to study, I believe that . . . if someone [quelcune] reaches the point of being able to put her conceptions in writing, she should do so wholeheartedly and without scorning glory" (1).[2]

Most scholars interpret the anonymous publication of *La Princesse de Clèves* as the mark of the woman writer's "discretion": Lafayette did not wish to be taken for a *femme savante* (Herrmann 33–34). Such a reading follows the model established by Virginia Woolf, who argues, in *A Room of One's Own*, that female literary anonymity results from the internalization of a patriarchal demand for effacement (52). But in her late essay "Anon" Woolf herself takes a far more suggestive position on anonymity, one that is inextricably bound to her remarks in a second unfinished essay, "The Reader." In the oral tradition, she maintains, storytellers and their audiences were disinterested in each other: on the one hand the singer sought no recognition (391); on the other, the audience "was so little interested in [the singer's] name that he never thought to give it" (382). In this situation of impersonal reception, anonymity was a source of authorial power: "Anonymity was a great possession. . . . It allowed us to know nothing of the writer: and so to concentrate upon his song. Anon had great privileges. He was not responsible. He was not self conscious. He is not self conscious" (397).

For Woolf, strong anonymity cannot be gender-specific—"Anon is sometimes man, sometimes woman" (382)—because she refers only to absolute namelessness, instances when the author's identity will never be established. Furthermore, in her view this strong anonymity, this authorship beyond person, is impossible once the individual reader has replaced the plural audience (398). I would like to suggest that Lafayette anticipated Woolf's view of Anon's "privileges," that she sought both to appropriate those privileges for herself and, in so doing, to alter the relation between author and reader by returning it to the distanced, impersonal sphere described in "Anon." For Lafayette, however, authorship beyond person is clearly not writing beyond gender: she saw that the reader's invasive power over the author after the death of Anon poses a particular threat to the female writer. The complex strategy she devised to counteract that threat resulted in the creation of a double signature. In the first place, she forged an external authorial signature that should not be confused with effaced, silent instances of anonymous publication. Then, in her novel, she staged woman's initiation both into writing and into the privileges of anonymity. This dramatic representation of an authorial signature climaxes in the princesse de Clèves's own use of anonymity to protect herself against the dangers of public exposure and to gain control over her (life) story. Furthermore, the critical reception Lafayette sought was also gender-specific, for both author's and character's signatures were designed to bring about a new type of reading of women's fiction.

Anonymity, or what is usually termed anonymity, was in no way a surprising stance for a seventeenth-century French author, especially a novelist. All rejections of the signature in that period have generally been interpreted in the same way, perhaps because the standard modern definition of an "anonymous" publication, a work "bearing no author's name" (*OED*), refers only to the nonrelation between author and book and not to the reader's reception of a text. Yet in seventeenth-century France, the anonymity of a work depended primarily on the reader's ignorance of its author; both Richelet's (1680) and Furetière's (1689) dictionaries define an anonymous author as one "whose name is not known." Examined from this second perspective, many, if not most, of the seventeenth-century works printed with no authors' names on their title pages would not have been considered anonymous in their own time, because the authors' identities were an open secret. Thus, for example, during the eight-year period 1662–69 that forms the literary context for *La Princesse de Clèves* (1678), seventy-one original novels were published in France—including *La Princesse de Montpensier*, by Lafayette herself; *La Promenade de Versailles*, by Scudéry, her novelistic precursor; and the still controversial *Lettres portugaises*. Nineteen of those seventy-one remain unattributed today, but an additional thirty-four were originally published without authors' names or with only undecipherable initials on their title pages, so that

fifty-three novels (74%) would have corresponded to today's standard definition of "anonymous."[3] Many of the thirty-four, however, failed to fulfill the essential condition for textual anonymity in the seventeenth century, because their authors—like Scudéry, whose prose fiction is a clear-cut example of transparent anonymity—were known to all.

Many explanations have been advanced for the pervasive practice of anonymous publication in seventeenth-century France. Adrien Baillet, writing in 1685, listed no fewer than fourteen possible reasons for an author's refusal to accept public responsibility for his or her work. The most diachronically valid explanations concern politically dangerous works, a category that includes several of the thirty-four originally unidentified but today attributed works—for example, Bussy's *Histoire amoureuse des Gaules*, first published with no authorial signature. Baillet rehearses certain culturally bound reasons as well, such as those he advances for the anonymity of seventeenth-century aristocrats: they would feel shame at being associated with an activity unworthy of their rank, and their modesty would make them oblivious to public recognition of their talents (5: 2). These have been the traditional explanations for unsigned publication by writers of aristocratic birth, or with aristocratic pretensions, when the work's content did not preclude acknowledgment. (Thus historical justifications for an author's self-effacement join recent feminist discussions of anonymity as a classic signature of the woman writer.)

It is usually impossible to test the validity of these assumptions about a well-connected writer's avoidance of public exposure, for virtually all the evidence is found in correspondence that records only the writers' self-presentation to an audience well informed about authorial secrets. Thus Scudéry sends her anonymously published works to friends, with authorial commentary, and in return accepts their epistolary praise. The example of Lafayette's close friend and literary collaborator, La Rochefoucauld, is even more revealing. Although his *Maximes* (1664) was originally published with no author's name on the title page, his correspondence testifies to a serious, prolonged, and well-publicized involvement with his text. Indeed, these anonymous publications seem to have been readily decoded by their intended audiences, for the identity of their authors has never been disputed.

In the literary annals of seventeenth-century France, however, a few anonymous works fall outside all standard patterns of both authorial intention and reader response. It is surely no accident that all the texts never completely accounted for are tales of female passion that portray the dangers of public exposure for the woman who dares to place herself in an authorial position. Furthermore, in all but one the intratextual threat was doubled by either an extratextual loss of authority or an invasion of the privacy of the woman writer responsible for the transcription of the story. One of these texts, a series of letters from a woman who loves too much, was interpreted either as a real correspondence made public by a woman indifferent to her privacy or as an early epistolary fiction; in either case it was an anonymous text that aroused great curiosity about its author's identity. Only recently have researchers penetrated the anonymity of the so-called *Lettres et billets galants* (1668), revealing that the slim volume was a greater indiscretion than any of its curious readers had dared imagine. The letters are an authentic correspondence composed by one of the most talented women novelists of the day, Marie-Catherine Desjardins, but made public against her wishes by their recipient, her former lover, the Villedieu whose name she appropriated to sign most of her novelistic production.[4] As a result of its anonymous publication, this text of a woman's passion reduced its author to another type of anonymity, a consequence she herself foresees in a letter written to the book's publisher in a futile effort to stop its publication: "Exposing" what was intended for "the eyes of love alone" to those of the general public made her story impersonal, a generalized, inauthentic fiction in the public domain (92–93).

It is hardly surprising that Desjardins-Villedieu's publisher did not heed her plea for the rights to her story, for he was none other than the man Lafayette's closest confidant, the marquise de Sévigné, referred to as "ce chien de Barbin" 'that dog Barbin' (1: 459), the century's most prolific purveyor of the fictions of women seduced and abandoned. Just the year after the Villedieu correspondence appeared in print, he brought out the most elusive of the age's unsigned outpourings of female passion, the *Lettres portugaises*, a text that, because the evidence for a widely accepted recent attribution is inconclusive, remains in the

same undecided generic space that both it and the Villedieu letters inhabited in the seventeenth century. Even today, some regard the "letters of a Portuguese nun" as correspondence handed over to Barbin by the writer's former lover, and others consider it a novel written by a man to exploit the public's hunger for fictions of female desire, a novel in which the absence of proper names allowed readers to appropriate the authorial right to assign identities to actors in the drama.[5] The very presentation of the text illustrates perfectly the consequence that Villedieu foresaw would result from the woman writer's exposure. The foreword ("au lecteur") characterizes the work as an arrangement among publisher, translator, and recipient, an arrangement that denies the writer all rights to her story, eliding her scriptive authority even as it makes her betrayal public.[6]

It is impossible to know how Lafayette interpreted any of these texts or even how much any seventeenth-century reader could have known about the complexities surrounding their publication. Nevertheless, two of the key stories in *La Princesse de Clèves*, the princess and Nemours's recreation of the lost love letter and the oral publication of her *aveu* (confession or acknowledgment), can be seen as representations of these betrayals of the privacy of female passion, with the resultant erasure of the woman author's authority once her text passes into the public domain. Both Lafayette's authorial strategy and the controversial conduct she devises for her heroine are attempts to avoid the loss of authority that accompanies every public appropriation of fictionalized female desire and to create enigma from the protection of privacy, thus generating new privileges of anonymity.[7] Both author and character forge an *écriture féminine* that is beyond person but not beyond gender, because it focuses the reader's attention in a new way on the central problem for the woman writer in Lafayette's day—and possibly for the woman writer in any age—her signature, the trace of her authority that must simultaneously assert her power and protect her person.

The complex relation that Lafayette engineered between author and text provoked a new type of reading for women's fiction and may thus have altered the course of criticism in France. On the one hand, previous commentaries on women's novels of unacknowledged authorship had been exclusively of the à clef variety, for readers regarded these fictions solely as literary games, whose potential was exhausted once their protagonists were identified.[8] Works whose authors were known, on the other hand, generally suffered a related fate, though perhaps a more interesting one, when they were read as autobiographical projections—witness Donneau de Visé's *Réponse à l'impromptu de Versailles*, which devotes more pages to the possibility that Molière was himself a cuckold than to Molière's portrayal of the anxiety of cuckoldry in *L'Ecole des femmes*. The complex, perhaps unique, anonymous signature Lafayette crafted for herself precluded both these responses. When *La Princesse de Clèves* appeared with no author's name on its title page, critics were unable to view the story as an extension of Lafayette's life. Furthermore, as the following pages show, Lafayette's anonymity, unlike that of other women writers of her day, was neither transparent nor total. Her creation of extra- and intratextual authorial enigma forced critics to go beyond the issue of identity and to focus their attention on questions of strategy and motivation. Thus the earliest important readings of Lafayette's novel, Valincour's *Lettres à Madame la marquise de . . . sur le sujet de* La Princesse de Clèves and Charnes's *Conversations sur la critique de La Princesse de Clèves* are not only the first detailed considerations of the modern French novel but the first important readings of an individual literary work to focus almost exclusively on the text.[9] Through the complex relation Lafayette maintained with her fiction, she managed to turn the absence of signature into a distinctive mark, laying claim to her fictional territory and indicating her identity as a woman writer.

That Obscure Object of Desire

The appearance of Lafayette's most famous novel may well signify the creation of modern techniques of book promotion. Months before the novel was put on sale, on 17 March 1678, various strategies were deployed to whet the public's literary appetite. Copies were evidently passed around in manuscript, not enough to begin to saturate the demand that was quickly created, but just enough to prompt the spread of rumors announcing the novel's impending "birth."[10] During the winter preceding its publication, a series of letters were circulated containing the same affirmation, almost identically phrased. Thus in De-

cember Georges de Scudéry's widow wrote to Bussy-Rabutin that "Monsieur de la Rochefoucauld and Madame de Lafayette have made a novel of the intrigues of Henri II's court, which is said to be admirably well written."[11] At this stage, there is no question of anonymity; on the contrary, the novel, while not yet officially "born," has both a "mother" and a "father"—to borrow the terminology proposed by the correspondents. At about this time, what is undoubtedly the most remarkable publicity campaign of the century was launched in the pages of Donneau de Visé's *Mercure Galant*. That journal's January issue featured an anonymous *nouvelle*, "La Vertu malheureuse," with a plot so similar to part of *La Princesse de Clèves* that its author almost certainly had access to a manuscript of Lafayette's novel. Maurice Laugaa refers to this story as an "advance reproduction of the masterpiece"(26) and claims that publishing it a full two months before *La Princesse de Clèves* was "a veritable preconditioning of the public" (25).[12]

By the time *La Princesse de Clèves* was put on sale, suspense had primed its potential public into a state of eager anticipation. "Never has a work made me more curious," Valincour notes. "It had been announced long before its birth; enlightened people, very capable of judging the matter, had praised it as a masterpiece. . . . One can say that there are few books which have enjoyed . . . such widespread approval . . . before they have even been seen by the public" (2). Apparently, that public was not disappointed. In March, the very month of the novel's publication, the *Mercure Galant* reported, "You know for how long and with what favorable preoccupation everyone was waiting for [*La Princesse de Clèves*]. It has lived up to these expectations" (qtd. in Laugaa 21). Parisian readers were evidently as quick to grab up copies of the new novel as the *Mercure Galant* was to proclaim its success, for Sévigné, writing her cousin Bussy, described it as "a little book that Barbin gave us two days ago, which seems to me one of the most charming things I've ever read" (2: 602). Their less fortunate counterparts in the provinces, such as Bussy, had to beg for copies from their numerous correspondents who sang the new best-seller's praises. The prepublication buildup was more than matched by the clamor that surrounded the novel's first months on the literary scene. Correspondences like Sévigné's and Bussy's function as veritable scorecards, with these masters of the epistolary art tallying favorable and critical responses to the novel.

Contemporary letters record the phenomenon to which Valincour and Charnes trace the origin of their texts, what could be termed the apotheosis of *La Princesse de Clèves*, the novel's reign as chief subject for debate in Parisian salons. "Everywhere people are on the alert about this work" (Valincour 102; see also 250, 260, 269, 365–66). When Lafayette's early critics composed studies of her novel nearly as long as the novel itself, they commemorated this debate in print and added fuel to the fire of publicity. Only a little more than a month after the novel's publication, Bussy was informed that "We are promised its critique" (4: 98). Indeed, *La Princesse de Clèves* had been on the market barely six months when Valincour's *Lettres* provided the informal academies in the salons with both a mirror image of their debates and a new subject of controversy: who was the author of the impatiently awaited critique? what was the value of "his" arguments? A mere five months later, Charnes's anonymous defense of the novel and his critique of Valincour's critique reenacted both controversies.

During this entire year of intense debate, the *Mercure Galant* followed suit: Donneau de Visé attempted to turn his readers into small-scale Valincours and Charnes by printing a series of *questions galantes* to which readers were invited to respond. For example, in the April issue readers were asked:

> . . . whether a virtuous woman, who has all the esteem possible for her husband, the perfect honnête homme, and who is nonetheless combatted by a very great passion for a lover . . . does better to confide her passion to this husband than to say nothing of it, at the risk of the battles she will continually be forced to concede because of the unavoidable opportunities to see this lover, from whom she has no other means of distancing herself than the confidence in question.
>
> (qtd. in Laugaa 27)

Responses were printed in subsequent numbers, and near the end of the debate readers responded to other readers' responses to the novel, echoing Charnes's analysis of Lafayette through Valincour. As Laugaa points out, the *Mercure*'s questions universalized the novel's plot (29): readers were asked to reach a verdict on "une femme de ver-

tu" rather than on the Princesse de Clèves. De Visé's elimination of the proper names had the same effect as Lafayette's, Valincour's, and Charnes's choice of anonymity. The *Mercure*'s readers—who frequently remained anonymous themselves, thereby prompting future rounds of debate—were encouraged to put themselves in the place of Lafayette's heroine, to replace her elided name with their own names as they sat in judgment on her acts. Furthermore, they were encouraged to publish their own versions of the princess' story and thereby invite others to respond to the urtext only through these new versions. The story of the first year of *La Princesse de Clèves*'s life is a hall of mirrors in which one sees the same scenario reflected seemingly ad infinitum: an author refuses to accept responsibility for his or her work, creating an enigma to make the work controversial; others accept the author's invitation to evaluate the work, appropriating in the process the author's abnegated authority, becoming in turn writing subjects inviting critiques of their own anonymous texts.

Despite its complexity, the publicity campaign that attended the publication of *La Princesse de Clèves* might seem a mere literary curiosity were it not for the unsettling denial that throws new light on the entire enterprise. As I mentioned earlier, before the novel's publication the names of its reputed coauthors, Lafayette and La Rochefoucauld, are always linked to the object of desire. But during March and April of 1678 hesitation creeps in, for the newborn novel now seems an orphan. "It is not, however, all that we had been promised," Mme de Scudéry informs Bussy, "it's an orphan [une orpheline] whose father and mother disown it" (*Bussy* 4: 77; see also 4: 98). The novel is no sooner published than those recently rumored to have been "pregnant" with such a fiction vigorously and unequivocally deny any responsibility for its existence. Their repudiation of the text apparently leads to the final, most troubling stage in the seventeenth-century maternity trial, a general silence regarding the novel's author (or authors)—witness Valincour's and Charnes's critiques. From this point on, even those close to Lafayette—Sévigné, for example—never again associate an author's name with the much talked-about novel. The question of the contemporary public's attribution of the controversial text is ultimately undecidable. It is, however, related to a potentially more fruitful subject for inquiry: why did the author disown her most famous fiction? Sainte-Beuve, commenting on Lafayette's decisive role in the evolution from romance to novel, observes that "certainly she was aware of what she did, and she intended to do it" (250). By the same token, Lafayette's decision to sever the connection already established between her name and her fiction must be taken for nothing less than a carefully calculated strategy. To understand the terms of her calculation, let us turn to *La Princesse de Clèves* and to Valincour's and Charnes's readings of it.

The Language of Angels

The debate Donneau de Visé orchestrated in the *Mercure Galant* concerning the advisability of Mme de Clèves's famous avowal ends on an apparently whimsical note. The members of a provincial wedding party reach the conclusion that the entire controversy on uxorial secrecy would have been of greatest interest to another literary character: "Arnolphe of *l'Ecole des Femmes* would have profited from this conversation for the salutary advice he gave Agnès" (qtd. in Laugaa 40). Valincour also compares Lafayette's heroine to Molière's Agnès: "It seems that the Princesse de Clèves is nothing but a more serious portrayal of this innocent of comedy [cette innocente de comédie]" (127). What Valincour means by the princess' "innocence," what he calls her "outrageous simplicity" (129), is, quite simply, her silence. Valincour becomes angry (150) because Mme de Clèves, in almost all the central confrontations in the novel, simply says nothing or next to nothing, failing to reward her interpreting publics with any form of expression more eloquent than a blush or a turn of the head. The novel's most dedicated early detractor was the first to understand the interpretive dilemma posed by the woman's language Lafayette developed for her heroine. When dealing with the princess, readers must read between the lines: they must interpret (verbalize) the unsaid and even the unsayable, for the language of Lafayette's heroine is a language of lack, of silence, of repression, of gaps.

Valincour's critique of *La Princesse de Clèves* has been rediscovered by modern critics: Gérard Genette and, most recently, Nancy Miller have used his ideas on verisimilitude as a springboard for their own theoretical constructs. So far, however, critics have limited their reading of his

Lettres to the first letter, concerning the characters' conduct. His third letter, devoted to Lafayette's style, seems on the surface a mere repetition of contemporary views on language; yet Valincour also offers a personal stylistic analysis that sheds light on the function of the princess' "innocence."

Charnes defines Valincour's method as "une Critique de guet-à-pens" 'ambush criticism' (25), and nowhere is the type of hairsplitting he must have had in mind more in evidence than in the pages devoted to Lafayette's style. Valincour attacks her text with a vengeance, for her language angers him as much as her heroine does. Quoting Voiture, Valincour affirms that if Lafayette's discourse were to gain currency, "we would soon see ourselves reduced to the language of angels, or at least we would be forced to speak to each other in signs" (318). In his view the author shares in the princess' simplicity. The novel's "language of angels" (a language of purity and innocence and therefore the "language of Agnès"?) is a language of lack: ellipsis and ambiguity ("équivoque") are rhetorical sins that Valincour notes most frequently in *La Princesse de Clèves*.

To lend force to his contentions in the third letter, Valincour brings in a grammarian to carry on a dialogue with the author of the *Lettres*.[13] The unifying thread in the grammarian's arguments is his attack on forms of ellipsis in Lafayette's novel. He uses a variety of terms for this stylistic fault—ambiguity, brevity, abbreviation, laconism, and so on—but his meaning is always the same: *La Princesse de Clèves* is too elliptical. Through repeated analysis, Valincour attempts to demonstrate that the novel is often obscure because its author is driven by a rage to eliminate and abbreviate that goes beyond concision and creates a text riddled with gaps. His criticisms apply not only to individual sentences but to the overall construction. "At least if the author had secret reasons for not leaving out [Mme de Tournon's] story, he should have given it . . . more of a connection with the rest of his work"(159). Genette has referred to this lack of justification as narrative "mutism" (78). John Lyons, in a detailed and stimulating analysis of the passages criticized as digressions, has demonstrated the correctness of Valincour's perception: by the standards of her time, Lafayette was saying (too) little and shifting enormous responsibility onto her reader (386 et passim). In characterizing her style as a poetics of lack, Valincour's grammarian prefigures the judgment of later critics. He argues that this desire to suppress is the result of a failed wager. The author of *La Princesse de Clèves* "resembles those people, who as a result of trying to say too much, say nothing" (318).

The excessiveness of Valincour's attack should not blind us to its correct evaluation of the stakes involved in Lafayette's wager. Ellipsis, as rhetoricians consistently point out, is an all-or-nothing figure, in some sense a mathematical impossibility. Thus Fontanier gives the etymology of "ellipsis" as "retrenchment, suppression: derived from . . . to lack, to be lesser" (483). Simultaneously absence and presence, ellipsis gives a plenitude to silence: though there is nothing on the page, the reader is made to recognize that there could have been something more, that something has been removed. Thus ellipsis has the potential for unusual semantic fullness. Once again according to Fontanier, "Ellipsis is one of the figures that express the most and provoke the most thought" (308). In other words, the elliptical lack is one of the most economically sound figures of rhetoric: for a loss that is not completely a loss, a writer has the possibility of winning, in Pascal's terms, an "infinite gain." The budget-conscious critic that Genette has shown Valincour to be was quick to note the central role of ellipsis in *La Princesse de Clèves*. The same type of economic analysis that Genette, using Valincour, applies to the example of *vraisemblance*[14] can also serve to illustrate the functioning of Lafayette's poetics of lack.

Although—or perhaps because—critics like Genette use Valincour as a theoretical straight man, they have demonstrated the pertinence and the essential correctness of his evaluation of Lafayette's stand on verisimilitude. Ultimately, however, Valincour's attack is wrongheaded, largely because his literary economics and his poetics are resolutely conservative. His instincts are right, but he cannot understand the economic potential of Lafayette's *écriture féminine*. Valincour's contemporary Du Plaisir, a no more perceptive but a far more receptive critic, was quick to champion the innovations Lafayette's risk taking could bring into play in the novelistic marketplace. In *Sentiments sur les lettres et sur l'histoire* (1683), he unmistakably evokes *La Princesse de Clèves* without naming it: "a story about a young person who refuses to marry her lover because she thinks she loves him too much" (47). He uses this

unidentified tale to explain his admiration for narrative gambling. Du Plaisir reviews contemporary thinking on the subject of plausibility. If an individual action is judged "morally incredible," then the work in which it appears is condemned as "defective." Unlike Charnes, Du Plaisir does not deny that *La Princesse de Clèves* is implausible according to the code governing literary behavior in his day. Instead, he proposes that the thinking on this issue should be reversed: novelists ("historiens") should not be discouraged from inventing incredible fictions but, on the contrary, should be encouraged to do so; since an unlikely story is more difficult to relate convincingly, it provides the author with a better opportunity to "show off [faire voir] his intelligence and his skill." The author who succeeds in telling such a tale well is, in Du Plaisir's estimation, "of lofty genius" (47). The most esteemed literary genius is the writer who plays for the highest stakes, and what Valincour criticizes as "innocent" lack becomes, in a less conservative system, a strategy that uses repression to awaken desire.

Perhaps the sin of omission for which Valincour criticizes Lafayette most frequently is the substitution of a third-person pronoun or a general noun for a proper name. He contends that antecedents and referents are often not clearly indicated. While some of his analyses stem from an overzealous critical imagination, at times he objects to sentences that are in fact difficult to interpret. One of his victories is provided by the following passage:

> [Monsieur de Clèves] prévoyait de grands obstacles par le duc de Nevers, son père. Ce duc avait d'étroites liaisons avec la duchesse de Valentinois: elle était ennemie du vidame, et cette raison était suffisante pour empêcher le duc de Nevers de consentir que son fils pensât à sa nièce.
>
> [Monsieur de Clèves] foresaw great obstacles from the duc de Nevers, his father. The duke had close ties with the duchesse de Valentinois: she was an enemy of the vidame, and this might prevent the duc de Nevers from allowing his son to think of his [or "her" in French] niece. (44)

"Is it the niece of his son," Valincour asks, "that of the duc de Nevers, that of the vidame, or that of the duchesse de Valentinois? For this [sa] could refer to any of the four" (292). Readers of the novel, as even Valincour admits, can supply the name that identifies the pronoun ("du vidame"). Yet when the sentence is taken out of context, the accusation of ambiguity no longer seems farfetched. Valincour has once again put his finger on an obsessive trait of Lafayette's style: the elimination of proper names and their replacement with third-person pronouns that take on some of the elusiveness of free-floating signifiers. These incompletely anchored pronouns work against the principle of difference, as characters seem almost interchangeable—witness the effect of "la sienne" 'hers' in the first sentence of the novel's third paragraph (35).

In *Traité des tropes*, Du Marsais refers to this sort of ambiguity as "équivoque" 'equivocation' (Valincour's word) or as "louche" 'ambiguous' or 'cross-eyed':

> *Louche* is a metaphorical term here; for just as cross-eyed people seem to be looking in one direction while they look in another, so in cross-eyed constructions, the words seem to have a certain relation to each other, while they in fact have another. (196–97)

Du Marsais's rule of thumb is that it is best to avoid *louche* constructions if they are immediately clear only to those "who already know what they are reading" (197). Unlike Valincour, however, Du Marsais is not blind to the figure's potential for increasing a passage's semantic charge. The constructions he calls cross-eyed, like other forms of ellipsis, use elimination for the purpose of multiplication. *Louche* words have a certain relation to the context, but they appear to have a different one, or at least suggest the possibility of an alternative; in *La Princesse de Clèves*, they suggest that individuals are, grammatically if not socially, infinitely replaceable. Du Marsais's description, "cross-eyed people seem to be looking in one direction while they look in another," is particularly appropriate for the microcosm Lafayette paints in her novel of false appearances. "[C]e qui paraît n'est presque jamais la vérité" 'What seems to be is almost never the truth' (56), according to Mme de Chartres's often cited formula. The characters in the novel pretend to look one way while looking in another in an attempt to glimpse the truth camouflaged by a façade of codified behavior. Lafayette's *louches* and elliptical constructions identify the act of reading with her heroine's struggle to preserve her identity and to

avoid the reduction to anonymity that inevitably results from being seen through.

The Wages of Anonymity

The ultimate lack in *La Princesse de Clèves* may be the text's original ellipsis, the absence that dominated contemporary readings of the novel: the suppression of the author's name.[15] Though insisting on all that is missing from the pages of the novel, Valincour represses its already repressed origin and makes no mention of the enigma most frequently alluded to by its first readers. Despite his apparent neutrality, however, there is evidence to suggest that the stridency of his attacks on Lafayette's language and plot reflects a fear that the work's anonymous signature was a sign of female self-assertion.[16]

That *La Princesse de Clèves* appears with no author's name on its title page does not make it an anonymous publication according to the seventeenth-century usage of the term. Many early readers must have been privy to the rumor about Lafayette and La Rochefoucauld's joint authorship. For them, the missing information on the title page was, like an ellipsis, simultaneously absence and presence. Because they were able to identify *La Princesse de Clèves* as the novel they had been waiting for, they could simply fill in the absent author's name, just as they filled in "du vidame" after "nièce" in the example criticized by Valincour. For them, the real enigma of the novel's title page was not the absence of *le nom d'auteur* but the denial of what Lafayette and La Rochefoucauld had presumably encouraged these readers to believe.

Even this denial follows the elliptical model Lafayette stamped on her fiction: she simultaneously suppressed and multiplied. Had she really wanted to end the association between her name and this novel, why would she have continued to praise it so lavishly, as contemporary accounts maintain that she did? "M. de la Rochefoucauld and Mme de la Fayette strongly deny being its authors, but at the same time they praise [the novel] outrageously," Mme de Seneville wrote to Bussy, 25 April 1678 (4: 98). Lafayette's often cited letter to Lescheraine of 13 April 1678 confirms the contradictory behavior that puzzled her contemporaries. She opens the discussion of *La Princesse de Clèves* by denying that she is in any way responsible for the novel; she then proceeds, exactly like the other amateur critics of her day, to give her opinion of the work, an opinion that appears as ingenuous as it is laudatory:

> Je le trouve tres agréable, bien escrit sans estre extrêmement châtié, plein de choses d'une délicatesse admirable et qu'il faut mesme relire plus d'une fois. Et surtout, ce que j'y trouve, c'est une parfaite imitation du monde de la cour et de la manière dont on y vit. Il n'y a rien de romanesque et de grimpé; aussi n'est-ce pas un roman; c'est proprement des mémoires et c'estoit, à ce qu'on m'a dit, le titre du livre, mais on l'a changé.
>
> I find it very pleasing, well written without being extremely polished, full of things that are admirably delicate and that one must even reread more than once. And above all, I find in it a perfect imitation of the world of the court and the way people live there. There is nothing either novelistically fantastic [romanesque] or laborious about it; in fact it is not a novel: it is more properly a memoir, and that was, according to what I've been told, the title of the book, but it was changed. (*Correspondance* 2: 63)[17]

It is easy to understand why such behavior bewildered Lafayette's contemporaries. The recipients of her denials of authorship must have found the shape of those denials more confusing still. For example, her eulogy of *La Princesse de Clèves* to Lescheraine begins with this disavowal:

> [J]e vous asseure que je n'y en ay aucune [part] et que Mr. de La Rochefoucauld, à qui on l'a voulu donner aussi, y en a aussi peu que moy; il en a fait tant de serments qu'il est impossible de ne le pas croire; surtout pour une chose qui peut estre avouée sans honte. Pour moy, je suis flattée que l'on me soupçonne et je croy que j'avoûrois le livre, si j'estois asseurée que l'autheur ne vînt jamais me le redemander.
>
> I assure you that I have no [part] in it and that M. de la Rochefoucauld, to whom people have tried to attribute it also, has as little [a part] as I; he has taken so many oaths to that effect that it is impossible not to believe him; especially for a thing that can be admitted without shame. For myself, I am flattered that people suspect me and I believe I would acknowledge the book, if I were assured that the author would never come to ask for it back. (*Correspondance* 2: 63)

Lafayette argues that La Rochefoucauld must be taken at his word because "he has taken so many oaths to that effect." Yet nowhere in La Rochefoucauld's correspondence is there any

reference to his authorship or nonauthorship of *La Princesse de Clèves*. He praises the work, but only Lafayette combines flattering critical commentary with repudiation of the fiction.[18] The coy ending—she would accept the attribution if only she were sure it wouldn't be taken away from her—is a denial that opens up the possibility of an affirmation, a configuration she later puts to even more striking use in what is certainly her most bizarre denegation of authorship.

In 1691, a lifelong friend and former teacher with whom Lafayette had recently been out of touch, Ménage, begged her to confirm for him that she was in fact the author of *La Princesse de Clèves*. Explaining that the subject had come up in a history he was writing, he adds, "Having had the honor of knowing you since you were born, . . . I would be ashamed to have been misinformed of this circumstance, and to have misinformed the public" (Lafayette, *Correspondance* 2: 181). Even this personal appeal is rewarded with nothing more straightforward than a formulation so convoluted as to be nearly incomprehensible: "Les personnes qui sont de vos amis n'advouent point y en avoir [part]; mais à vous que n'advoueroient-elles point?" 'The people who are your friends don't admit to having a part in it; but to you what wouldn't they admit?' (2: 182). The editor of Lafayette's correspondence refers to this letter as proof of Lafayette's authorship (182), but this sentence can be read at most as an admission wearing the mask of a denial: "What wouldn't your friends admit to you?" is prefaced and therefore silenced by "your friends will not admit having had any role in it." The phrase, far from putting an end to the question it allegedly answers, only raises additional questions. "Qui s'excuse, s'accuse." Lafayette's denegations are true denials in the psychoanalytic sense of the term: they are simultaneously affirmations and negations, simultaneously presence and absence. They function like the elliptical structures that Valincour describes as her novel's dominant stylistic trait. It seems inevitable to conclude that Lafayette struggled to establish and maintain undecidability at her most famous novel's origin because she was hoping to reap the high profits Fontanier considered the reward of ellipsis.

Lafayette's first published work is perhaps most remarkable for its title: "Portrait de Madame la Marquise de Sévigné par Madame la Comtesse de LaFayette sous le nom d'un inconnu" 'Portrait of Madame the Marquise of Sévigné by Madame the Countess of Lafayette under the name of an unknown [man].' The title defines the fiction of the portrait: the unknown man is the "narrator" of Sévigné's charms. Read literally, however, the title illustrates the elliptical relation Lafayette maintained with her fiction throughout her career. Her strategy in this text, the only work for which she ever publicly accepted responsibility, perfectly prefigures what was to become a recurrent authorial pose. Time and again, Lafayette as author hides behind a man (Ménage for "La Princesse de Montpensier," Segrais for *Zayde*, La Rochefoucauld for *La Princesse de Clèves*).[19] Each of these men serves as her amanuensis, her adviser, and her editorial assistant. In these strange voluntary reenactments of an age-old situation—behind every great man there is a woman—Lafayette uses the male writers as fronts for her activities. Whenever she denies her authorship and casts doubt on a work's origin, she has her name covered with "the name of an (un)known man." Both Valincour and Charnes refer to "the author of *La Princesse de Clèves*" as "he"—masculine, singular, and undefined. As we have seen, however, this disguise does not end the association of her own name with her fiction. The trace of "Madame la Comtesse de LaFayette" is tantalizingly (in)visible, as the title of the Sévigné portrait claims, behind (*sous*) the (un)defined masculine name. In the portrait, the anonymous narrator explains that the quality of the narration results from "ce privilège d'Inconnu dont je jouis auprès de vous" 'this privilege of the unknown person which I enjoy in dealing with you' (95).

The "privileges of anonymity" that Lafayette sought to obtain through her signature are more clearly defined in the short text that serves as a foreword to *La Princesse de Clèves*. In this text, the only one in the margins of Lafayette's novel, the author is referred to as "he," the name of an unknown man. The foreword is devoted to this ambiguous authorial status, to the factors responsible for it, and to those that could resolve the situation:

> Quelque approbation qu'ai[t] eu[e] cette Histoire dans les lectures qu'on en a faites, l'auteur n'a pu se résoudre à se déclarer; il a craint que son nom ne diminuât le succès de son livre. Il sait par expérience que l'on condamne quelquefois les ouvrages sur la médiocre opinion

qu'on a de l'auteur et il sait aussi que la réputation de l'auteur donne souvent du prix aux ouvrages. Il demeure donc dans l'obscurité où il est, pour laisser les jugements plus libres et plus équitables, et il se montrera néanmoins si cette Histoire est aussi agréable au public que je l'espère.

However much readers may have admired this story, the author has not been able to resolve to declare himself; he fears that his name would diminish the success of his book. He knows from experience that works are sometimes condemned on the basis of the mediocre opinion people have of the author, and he knows also that the reputation of the author often increases the value of a work. He is remaining, then, in his present obscurity to leave judgments freer and more equitable; he will show himself nonetheless if this story is as pleasing to the public as I hope it will be. (31)

The first sentence suggests that "the author could not make up his mind to make his identity known." In this context, however, "se déclarer" can mean literally "to endorse" (an opinion) or "to declare" (one's feelings). From the outset, the author of *La Princesse de Clèves* makes it clear that "he" is keeping his views and his feelings, as well as his name, hidden from the reader. The explanation given for this withholding reveals above all a desire for judgment. A vocabulary of debate and controversy dominates the passage, and debate and controversy are ultimately equated with literary success. The author wears "the name of an unknown," so that "debate will be freer" and so that "he" will "not diminish the success of his book" (more controversy equals greater success). The truth of this axiom is borne out both by the princess' story and by the history of that story's reception.

To begin with the reception: Mme de Scudéry was correct in calling the novel an "orphan," for when Lafayette refused to give it her name, she refused to have it received as an extension of herself. She sent it out into the world to be judged instead on its own merits. In the letter to Lescheraine, Lafayette asserts that authorship of the novel is "something that can be admitted without shame." Had she really been either a shy and retiring "lady novelist" or a discreet aristocrat anxious to protect herself from exposure to the public eye, the well-managed publicity campaign surrounding her novel's appearance could never have taken place. Yet Lafayette's wiles are still devalued today. Claudine Herrmann supports her characterization of Lafayette as an anonymous thief of knowledge by pointing out that the novelist's maiden name, La Vergne, finds its Latin equivalent in Laverna, the name of the Roman patron of thieves (34). Herrmann's insight is in fact in plain view in Lafayette's correspondence: when Ménage writes to his former student, he refers to her as "mea carissima Laverna." But Laverna, patron of thieves, is also the goddess of gain. Lafayette worked under cover of anonymity—"without being seen," in Herrmann's terms—not because she was afraid to be taken for a *femme savante*, but because her enigmatic disappearance could win her great profit. According to the writer who took public responsibility for her *Zayde*, Segrais, Lafayette understood literary suppression in terms of economic gain: "Madame de Lafayette used to say that one sentence cut from a work was worth a gold *louis*, and one word, twenty *sous*" (196). In Lafayette's authorial strategy, the nonsaid represents not a passive blank or silence but an active suppression, a distinction Marguerite Duras maintains when she insists that the marks of the feminine in her writing should be characterized not as "blanks," "voids," or "lacks" but as "suppressions" (12).

Commercial considerations, then, form the context in which Lafayette's signature must be evaluated. Neither model for anonymous publication adopted by women writers in her day can be termed economically sound. On the one hand, transparent anonymity, though it guaranteed authors the credit that was their due, brought on a concomitant loss of authority for their fictions, which were judged solely as extensions of their persons. On the other hand, absolute anonymity, while protecting works from à clef reception, exposed their authors to a potential double loss of authority. They might never receive credit for their production, and their unclaimed texts would fall into the public domain, where they would be attributed to others, appropriated by others, and on occasion deformed by editors eager to make a profit from these explorations of the female heart. With the elliptical enigma Lafayette devised as her signature, she protected her person and her property and also increased their authority. Contemporary correspondences provide ample evidence of her work's ability to generate critical discussion, and they support the remark she made in ending her letter to Lescheraine: "On est partagé sur ce

livre-là à se manger'' '[Readers] are so divided over this book that they are ready to devour each other' (*Correspondance* 2: 63). The commentaries of Valincour and Charnes, the founding texts in what is known today as practical criticism or textual analysis, stand as the greatest tribute to the success of her authorial strategy.[20]

In *La Princesse de Clèves* Lafayette demonstrates that writing beyond person is not writing beyond gender. The lessons that can be learned from the history of the publication of women's writing in the seventeenth century determine the fate of the most famous early heroine in women's fiction. Like the anonymous contemporary texts of female passion discussed earlier, the princess' story is simultaneously a sentimental education and an authorial apprenticeship. In learning both to shape and to direct her story, she comes to understand the powerful narrative attraction of female passion and the difficulty of controlling the fiction-making process. Lafayette's novel contains two texts of female desire originally intended for private communication, texts that generate outbursts of interpretive and attributive curiosity when they are published anonymously. One is a written text, a woman's complaint addressed, like the Portuguese nun's, to an unfaithful lover and prudently left unsigned.[21] Following the same model—witness the foreword to the *Lettres portugaises*—the recipient arouses greater curiosity than the author. Some say that the letter was written to Nemours; others champion the cause of the vidame. For the princess the lesson of this purloined letter is double, since the incident makes her first a reader, then an ''author,'' of women's fiction. She discovers the power of anonymity to awaken curiosity and provoke discussion and the eagerness of readers to transform themselves into academies, interpreting bodies thirsty for half-told tales and elliptical stories that they can complete, thereby appropriating all authorial rights.

The princess, the first to read the letter (97), also becomes the first of its indiscreet readers, for she initiates its passage from authentic amorous artifact to literary text. Like ''that dog Barbin,'' such readers are interested more in the addressee than in the writer, whose scriptive authority is elided and whose identity is important only because of her relationship to the lover who betrayed her trust. Yet the princess responds differently from other readers, whether male or female. They allegedly want to expose the letter to public scrutiny because of its literary value. Thus the vidame brags to an assembled company of young men that he has received ''the loveliest letter ever written'' (101), then cannot find the document, which he intended to read aloud to justify his boast. The queen claims that she wants to see it because she has heard how ''lovely'' it is (116). But the voyeuristic public really covets the letter because its *écriture* (handwriting) *féminine* can, if identified, determine male guilt. The princess alone finds the letter's story of interest. Instead of trying only to determine its author's identity, she generalizes its message—just as readers of the *Mercure Galant* were instructed to generalize Mme de Clèves's story—and reflects on what it tells her about the female condition, woman seduced and abandoned, a fate with which she identifies: ''Elle voyait seulement que M. de Nemours ne l'aimait pas comme elle l'avait pensé et qu'il en aimait d'autres qu'il trompait comme elle'' 'She saw only that M. de Nemours didn't love her as she had thought and that he loved others whom he was betraying just as he had betrayed her'(99).

But the princess' compassionate involvement with this text is temporarily suspended when she allows herself to be turned into a poor imitation of the ''Guilleragues'' of her day, authors whose literary genius was measured by their ability to trick readers into accepting sometimes plagiarized fictions of female desire as genuine documents. Lafayette's heroine personally completes the erasure of female identity she had initiated when she follows the dauphine's advice and has the purloined missive rewritten ''in an unknown hand'' (117). Nor does she simply plagiarize the letter: by the time she and Nemours get together under her husband's surveillance, she has to reinvent it, since the original has been returned to its author. In her private space, the room of her own, the princess becomes a writer, a writer with a male collaborator, playing Lafayette to Nemours's La Rochefoucauld. With her initiation into writing, the princess makes her contribution to a major literary enterprise of her day, the trafficking of female passion as literature. The product of this collaboration represents the fate of similar anonymously published contemporary texts, for its ersatz *écriture féminine*—a text copied and reimagined after an original that has been lost, stolen, and passed around—bears little resemblance to its model in either writing or handwriting (118). Yet the afternoon the princess and

Nemours devote to preparing another woman's betrayal for public consumption is also the closest they ever come to a consummation of their own passion. At the time, writing serves only to mediate their desire. The scene also performs a critique of that desire, for unlike predecessors like Paolo and Francesca, Lafayette's lovers do not read amorous fictions together but share in the forgery and debasement of a true confession. The princess eventually views the scene as emblematic of the destiny of all women's stories allowed to circulate among men and realizes that in this textual economy her female authority will always be eroded.

Lafayette's heroine cannot know that the vidame would have made the letter public had others not done so for him, but the fate of her own private narrative teaches her why the recipients of such letters enter into bargains with booksellers: "J'ai eu tort de croire qu'il y eût un homme capable de cacher ce qui flatte sa gloire" 'No man [is] capable of keeping secret something that flatters his glory' (138). Her involvement with the letter leads directly to her controversial *aveu* (acknowledgment), for to avoid the anonymous woman's fate she chooses to tell the story of her love for Nemours to what she believes is a private audience (100, 119). Even the dauphine, commenting on that narrative, which she knows only as another anonymous tale of a woman in love, correctly sees that the unidentified woman recounted her story to gain control over it, to remain "maîtresse de sa passion" 'mistress of her passion' (132).

After the voyeuristic reception scene in which Nemours represents all the indiscreet readers of tales of female passion, he assumes the princess' authorial rights and gives an à clef version of her account, substituting pseudonyms ("des noms empruntés") for all proper names (126), thereby transforming her story into what an eager public can take to be an enigma in search of a solution. This transformation liberates Mme de Clèves's story for public speculation: when it finally returns to its origin, the princess finds herself in the singular position of being asked to sit in judgment on her own tale, narrated by the dauphine, who has appropriated it with all the confidence of an author. When the princess witnesses the usurpation of her right to control the transmission of her own story, or even to possess that story, her experience marks the logical conclusion of the erosion of female authorial status and female identity in narrative that has been operative throughout the novel.[22]

It is no accident that this lesson is driven home most forcefully for the princess through the appropriation of a narrative that is her attempt to break free of all those seeking to control the plot of her life—her mother, her husband, her lover—and to create a story that, because it is without precedent, is uniquely hers and incapable of being taken over by anyone else. To underscore this point, she announces to the prince that she is about to make "un aveu que l'on n'a jamais fait à son mari" 'an acknowledgment that no one has ever made to her husband' (122). Immediately after the *aveu*, she reenforces her self-characterization by meditating on "la singularité d'un pareil aveu, dont elle ne trouvait point d'exemple" 'the singularity of such an admission, for which she could find no precedent' (126). Her initial public confirms her evaluation: Nemours calls the acknowledgment "un remède si extraordinaire" 'so extraordinary a remedy' (124),[23] and the prince refers to it as "la plus grande marque de fidelité que jamais une femme ait donnée à son mari" 'the greatest mark of fidelity that a woman has ever given to her husband' (123).

Aveu is usually translated "confession," although Lafayette avoids the substitution of this possible synonym, perhaps because it suggests a female revelation that is both too literal and too negative. In fact, *aveu* only came to be used in the sense of "confession" in the mid-seventeenth century, when it was first used in the legal procedure by which criminals were forced to *avouer*, or admit, their crimes. The princess, however, does not use the term in this sense, as she is careful to make clear: "l'innocence de ma conduite et de mes intentions m'en donne la force" 'the innocence of my conduct and my intentions give me the courage [to do this]' (122). Rather, she is attempting to enact an *aveu* in the earlier legal sense of a loyalty oath—in her husband's words, "the greatest mark of fidelity that a woman has ever given to her husband." The word originally meant "a written declaration admitting the vassal's commitment to his lord, in exchange for the heritable estate (*fief*)" (Robert dictionary). This written acknowledgment of indebtedness, the representation of future obligations, was but half of a transfer in writing: to figure the guaranty of the property and of the personal authority offered the

vassal, the lord "signed" and "sealed" the charter granting the estate.

The context of the princess' *aveu* reveals an awareness of the proper format for such a declaration: her husband, as though recognizing her intention of transforming her speech into a written acknowledgment, says that she has given him a "*mark* of fidelity," a sign or signature of homage. The princess also realizes the danger of attempting a transaction in and on male terms: "the singularity of such an *aveu*, for which she could find no precedent, made her aware of its peril." Although she knows only the rudiments of this male script, she attempts to forge a legally binding contract or pledge: "elle trouvait qu'elle s'y était engagée sans en avoir presque eu le dessein" 'she realized that she had pledged herself almost without having had the intention of doing so' (125). In her formulation, *dessein* denotes explicitly her "intention," but it also contains "design," the equivalent of her husband's "mark," the *sein*, "sign" or "seal," that could validate such a transaction. Lafayette's heroine attempts to "pledge herself" in the male script because, to maintain her innocence, she must have access to the commodity exchanged for the pledge of fidelity, land. The princess wants to escape the temptations of life at court by remaining alone at Coulommiers, the estate that her husband inherited from his ancestors, one of whom received it in return for an oath of homage. Using the proper legal code, she asks for a male prerogative: to rule as lord over an estate.

Her plan backfires: the prince wants more information, the name of the man she loves. He attempts, as the novel's readers have done from the first, to turn her promise of future loyalty, an as yet unwritten narrative, into a confession, the completed accounting for past guilt. He wants, in other words, to have her life conform to the plot male writers of Lafayette's day were crafting for female passion. *Aveu* in the sense of "confession" enters French literature in classical theater, most famously in Racine's *Phèdre* (1677), in which it refers to the heroine's revelation of Hippolyte's name and thereby of her crime of passion. For Phèdre, the *aveu* is the text of her unraveling, the mark of the self-dispossession that leads directly to her suicide. Lafayette rejects this (male) view of female revelation as loss of self. She transforms the revelation of forbidden love from a scene of female weakness to a conquest of language (*prise de parole*) that is at the same time an initiation into writing, the act by which the princess first lays title to her own story. From her aborted scene of acknowledgment, Lafayette's heroine learns that, to gain authority, she must fashion herself according to a female script.

As the repercussions of this episode demonstrate conclusively, being "extraordinary" or "singular" does not guarantee an author control over her story and thereby protect her privacy. On the contrary, narrative originality merely fuels the public's desire to identify the woman who attempts to be unlike other women. It also increases the dangers of exposure for the princess. Although the tale of betrayal told in the anonymous letter could be applied to many women, Lafayette's heroine fears that the plot she has chosen for herself will be transparent once it has been published anonymously: "il n'y a point dans le monde une aventure pareille à la mienne; il n'y a point une autre femme capable de la même chose" 'there isn't in all the world another story like mine; there is no other woman capable of the same thing' (136), she protests to her husband when he assures her that she must have taken another woman's story for her own. After the dauphine relates the episode of the *aveu* to the avower herself, Mme de Clèves does not merely suffer in silence but, uncharacteristically, offers an opinion on the quality of the (her own) narrative: "cette histoire ne me paraît guere vraisemblable" 'this story doesn't seem plausible to me' (132). The princess' remark is more than a self-conscious foreshadowing of criticism of her conduct (or, rather, the refutation *avant la lettre* of criticism based on verisimilitude): her analysis demonstrates that the standards by which her story can be evaluated lie elsewhere. Her judgment also marks a reorientation of her efforts to gain control over her story. When Lafayette's heroine pronounces her own story "incredible," she expresses a desire to be outside of story, to be unnarratable. This she will achieve by rejecting Nemours and life in society, by scripting a negative plot that resists accountability. The events of the last years of her life are summed up in less than a paragraph, and the narrator's global judgment of her existence is laconic, the novel's final suppression: "sa vie, qui fut assez courte, laissa des exemples de vertu inimitables" 'her life, which was rather short, left inimitable examples of virtue' (180)—"inimitable": that which cannot be repeated, in

life or in fiction. The princess comes to realize that to control her story she must suppress it. In Lafayette's novel, we witness the struggle of a subject suspended between two modes of its own dissolution. The princess can allow herself to be dissolved by others' curiosity, or she can direct her story at any price, even at the cost of making herself inimitable, literally walking out on the story of her life. The princess is no "innocent" speaking the "language of Agnès." Her language and her story are marked not by lack but by suppression. Lafayette's heroine knows the power of the ultimate ellipsis, the ellipsis become ambiguity. She creates a rupture in narrative that the reader is powerless to fill.

Throughout the long history of the novel's reception, a great deal has been made of its conformity or nonconformity to contemporary standards of literary verisimilitude or plausibility.[24] One of its first critics, Bussy, inaugurated this interpretive tradition by characterizing both Mme de Clèves's attempts at shaping her own destiny, the acknowledgment to her husband and her refusal to marry Nemours, as "incredible" (Laugaa 18–19). Recently, Genette has attempted to understand the terms of this judgment by explaining that Mme de Clèves's actions were considered unbelievable because they were outside the codes governing women's conduct in her day (73–75). Both these readings, Genette's as much as Bussy-Rabutin's, take the princess at her word in her remark to the dauphine that the story of her confession is "hardly plausible." Yet her comment is delivered, not as an evaluation of her conduct, but in a desperate attempt to stop the circulation of her story. She calls the anonymous woman's behavior "implausible" in the hope that those interested in learning her identity will stop their efforts because they will no longer believe the story. Her ruse is unsuccessful because, within the microcosm of the novel, readers are asked to believe that such conduct is not only possible but desirable. Furthermore, the context in which such actions would have been considered plausible in Lafayette's day was far broader than a critic relying only on Bussy could realize.

By situating both the princess' singular actions in the context of contemporary women's fiction, Valincour—though unaware of his insight—erodes the value of the charge of implausibility that he, too, levels against Lafayette's story. He brings up the two comparisons allegedly to denigrate the novel. Thus he claims that the "confession" scene is not only unbelievable but unworthy of any claim to originality (extraordinariness) because it is plagiarized from another novel, also by a woman, Desjardins-Villedieu's *Les Désordres de l'amour*, published by Barbin in 1675 (215–17). Valincour uses similar reasoning to write off the power of the princess' rejection of Nemours: this action, too, lacks both verisimilitude and originality. On the one hand, no real woman would refuse to marry a man to protect her "repos" 'tranquility,' and on the other, the princess' behavior, while outlandish, is not even so interesting as that of Scudéry's heroine, Sappho, in *Le Grand Cyrus*: "Madame de Clèves should have, following the example of this heroine, proposed to Monsieur de Nemours to go with her to her estate near the Pyrenees to spend the rest of his days, having first received his word that he would never push her to marry him" (275–76). Despite the implausibility of the plot, Valincour contends, readers will not be surprised by its twists, which they have seen before.

In his attack, Valincour accurately, though unwittingly, defines the perimeters of the elsewhere in which both the princess and her creator inscribe their fictions. This perception, that women writers of his day had carved out a special territory for their narratives, explains the occasional violence of his commentary—for example, his concluding critique of the novel's style: "I am afraid that there may be a secret conspiracy to force the [French] Academy to accept this sorry manner of speech [méchante façon de parler] and that [*La Princesse de Clèves*] may be the signal sent out to the conspirators" (339). The critic felt intimidated by what he correctly termed a conspiracy, if by conspiracy he meant a plot that threatened to assert the authority of women's fiction to provide an alternative to the anonymous, stolen scripts of female passion. Within the separate narrative space delimited by the female conspirators, the princess' actions not only seem plausible but constitute a "triumph"—a term I borrow from *Le Triomphe de l'indifférence*, the title of a seventeenth-century explanation of the desirability of the life the princess chooses. This text, a dialogue between two young women recounted by a third,[25] is a justification of what the interlocutors term "indifference"—what the princess calls "repos" ("peace" or "tranquillity")—the decision to live apart from all the

"agitation" and the "anxieties" of the world of *galanterie* in which men control all the plots (175). Since the women realize that their relative inactivity might seem "sad" to outsiders (just as the princess' fate does to some readers), they explain what they see as its positive aspects: a loss of affective life ("the heart is almost dead or leads a listless life") in exchange for permanent control over one's actions and one's emotions (204).

Le Triomphe de l'indifférence was not made public in its day. Obvious ideological affinities led its twentieth-century editor to attribute it to Lafayette. Although this attribution seems unlikely, the text still provides significant evidence of the type of female conspiracy Valincour saw as a threat to the center of male intellectual power, the French Academy.[26] Lafayette's fiction is inscribed into a textual tradition in which the princess' decisions are the proper responses for a woman aware of her story's commercial value. In all likelihood, that plot was far more significant—if not in life, at least in fantasy and fiction—than Valincour knew or than we will ever know. For example, the letters that Mlle de Montpensier (herself a novelist of note) and Mme de Motteville exchanged in the 1660s project a plan of action identical to the one that both Lafayette and the anonymous author of *Le Triomphe de l'indifférence* imagined for their heroines: renunciation of the world of the court, with its intrigues and its *galanterie*; rejection of marriage (though, following the Scudéry model, not necessarily of men); and the creation of "a corner of the world where women are their own mistresses [maîtresses d'elles-mêmes]" (35).

The very vocabulary with which the princess' gestures toward self-possession are characterized—"extraordinary," "singular," "inimitable," "without precedent"—signals Lafayette's fidelity to the ideals of her century's most powerful female voices. These hyperbolic affirmations of female superiority, of woman's advancement beyond previous norms and thereby outside narrative, are the language of *préciosité*, the exclusively female literary movement with which Lafayette was associated in her youth, whose adherents both lived apart from society and defined a separate space for *écriture féminine*.[27] Furthermore, it is the language that defined Lafayette's own superior status within that movement. When Costar collected his correspondence for publication, he noted above his first letter to Lafayette (still "carissima Laverna") in 1653, that "she was usually called 'the Incomparable'" (qtd. in Mouligneau 12). In one of the numerous contemporary treatises affirming female superiority, *Le Mérite des dames* (1657), Saint-Gabriel calls Lafayette "la non-pareille" (qtd. in Mouligneau 11–12, 14). When she who was judged beyond comparison proclaims that the plot she devises for her heroine is similarly without precedent, Lafayette continues the type of ellipsis that characterizes her style. She creates a narrative void that is also a repartition of territory and an outpouring of women's language. At the conclusion of her masterpiece, Lafayette arrives at the paradoxical situation already reached by her precursor, Scudéry—in, for example, the conversation "De la magnificence." Both want to place their fictions in an elsewhere outside existing public scripts of female desire and to do so without further contributing to the elision of female authority that results from free circulation.

Lafayette demonstrated the value of a personal mark or signature that guarantees (female) textual authority with no risk of personal exposure. When she refused *publicly* to acknowledge her fiction (*Correspondance* 2: 63, 182), she consistently used the same word, *avouer*, that her heroine uses to characterize the controversial declaration in the novel. Lafayette could "disavow" her fiction without losing her authority because she had forged a personal meaning for the ambiguous term *aveu*: "signature." The princess' *aveu* is the text of her self-definition, the mark of her self-constitution, her signature. The princess exchanges her husband's estate for the female literary estate, a territory beyond male control. At the novel's close, Nemours admits that he is incapable of "la faire changer de dessein" 'making her change design' (180)—and, as in the scene of the *aveu*, *dessein* signifies "plot" more than "intention." The princess, like her creator, replaced the acknowledgment in the male script (*le nom d'auteur*) with a signature in the feminine.

Bussy pronounced *La Princesse de Clèves* so "implausible" that it "smells of the novel" ("sent le roman," Laugaa 19). Though it is difficult to know what type of novel he had in mind, since he himself wrote the most blatantly voyeuristic "fiction" of his day (*L'Histoire amoureuse des Gaules*), his attack, once again inadvertently, was right on the mark. In the second half of the seventeenth century, *roman* (as opposed to *nouvelle*) was generally associated with Scudéry's literary

production, precisely the type of feminocentric fiction whose odor Lafayette encoded into her own language and plot. Both Lafayette's signature as a novelist and the scenario she devised for her heroine's coming to terms with the plots of women's fiction carve out a special territory for the woman writer, a "corner of the world" in which, as "mistress of herself," she can enjoy the privileges of anonymity. The "chez elle" to which the princess withdraws is the actual as well as the utopian elsewhere that seventeenth-century French women novelists delimited as the estate of *écriture féminine*.[28]

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Notes

[1] These texts by Cixous and Herrmann are representative of criticism on women's writing (*écriture féminine*) and women writers in France. *Les Voleuses de langue* has become the standard reference work in French on the role and the place of women writers.

[2] The translation is mine, as are all translations from the French in this essay, unless otherwise indicated. I provide my own intentionally literal translations from *La Princesse de Clèves* because the readily available English translation (Penguin) is far from accurate. I am grateful to Elizabeth MacArthur for her help in translating Lafayette's elusive prose.

[3] I owe my statistics to Maurice Lever's excellent bibliography of seventeenth-century French prose fiction. Since Lever is understandably interested only in whether a work has had definite attribution, he does not always indicate that it was published anonymously if its authorship was never in doubt. My figures may therefore not be totally accurate, but my aim is merely to suggest the extent of anonymous publication. I classify a novel as anonymous if the title page omits the author's name, thus offering readers what might be termed a "contract of anonymity," even though the name appears, as it does in several of these works, in the *privilège*, the permission to publish included on the work's last page.

[4] Micheline Cuénin recounts the story of the letters' publication and reception in the introduction to her edition. The letters were attributed to, among others, one of Scudéry's closest friends, Mme Arragonais.

[5] For evidence that the text is a real correspondence, see Yves Florenne's preface to his edition; for the case attributing the text to Guilleragues, see the preface to the Deloffre-Rougeot edition. All editors discuss the identities that have been proposed for the nun and her lover.

[6] "I have been able . . . to recover a faithful copy of the translation of five Portuguese letters that were written to a man of quality, stationed in Portugal. . . . I know the name neither of the man to whom they were written [celui auquel on les a écrites] nor of the individual [celui] responsible for the translation" (*Lettres portugaises*, ed. Bray and Landry-Houillon 69).

Still another anonymously published novel, from later in the century, may present a related configuration of authentic love letters made public by a former lover and read as either a novel or a real correspondence published by the woman herself. See Godenne's discussion of the third part of Anne Ferrand's 1689 *Histoire* (v–vii).

[7] Several important recent readings of *La Princesse de Clèves*—for example, Domna Stanton's, Jules Brody's, and Harriet Allentuch's—have suggested positive interpretations of the princess' final renunciation. My reading differs from theirs in its emphasis on authorial strategy.

[8] Scudéry resisted such limited readings of her fiction. To a request for the "keys" to *Le Grand Cyrus* and *Clélie*, she responded that she could not provide them because they did not exist (*Correspondance* 296).

[9] Both Valincour and Charnes repeated Lafayette's gesture and published their texts anonymously; this triple suppression of the *nom d'auteur* created a multilayered case of mistaken identity. Contemporary readers decided that the *Lettres* must be the work of Bouhours and attributed the *Conversations* to his adversary, Barbier d'Aucour. Valincour (thought to be Bouhours) seems to have believed that he was criticizing the work of a man (La Rochefoucauld?)—he refers to "the author of *La Princesse de Clèves*" as "he."Charnes (thought to be Barbier) believed that he was attacking Bouhours's critique of the novel of a male author. Charnes realized that the original authorial camouflage had inspired this critical outpouring: "I don't know if it was the author's great modesty that gave an unknown critic the audacity to attack this story [*La Princesse de Clèves*]" (iv).

[10] The birthing metaphor is recurrent in seventeenth-century discussions of *La Princesse de Clèves*. Lafayette may have learned the promotional value of anticipation from her experience with a novel that helped shape her own fiction, *Clélie*. In her early twenties, she wrote repeatedly to her friend Ménage to beg him to send her each volume of Scudéry's novel as soon as it appeared. Despite her entreaties, the volumes never arrived before reports of them from other sources had sharpened her curiosity dramatically (*Correspondance* 1: 45 et passim).

[11] She concluded her announcement caustically: "They are not of an age to do anything else together" (Bussy-Rabutin 3: 431–32). I limit my discusson here to the anonymous publication of *La Princesse de Clèves* and do not consider the question of La Rochefoucauld's possible role in creating the novel.

In analyzing Lafayette's use of anonymity, however, I evoke some arguments that could also apply to her use of male cover-ups—La Rochefoucauld, Segrais, and others.

[12] In citing the *Mercure Galant*, I quote from Laugaa's excellent anthology, which contains selections from the journal's 1678 issues. Laugaa contends that the *Mercure Galant* played such an active part in *La Princesse de la Clèves*'s campaign because the journal's format was expanded the year of the novel's publication. "The launching of the novel benefited from the launching of the journal, and vice versa" (26).

[13] Like Charnes after him, Valincour created a fictional context for his critique. The "I" taking responsibility for the letters is in no way identified with Valincour himself—a fact confirmed by Charnes's attribution of the text to Bouhours.

[14] *Vraisemblance*, a key term in the seventeenth-century reception of women's fiction, can be rendered either as "verisimilitude" or as "plausibility." See Miller's and Genette's discussions of the concept.

[15] As John Lyons has reminded me, it could be argued that the so-called confession scene was at the forefront of seventeenth-century discussions of Lafayette's novel. Yet, as I contend here, the princess' confessional strategy is tied to the pattern traced by authorial suppression.

[16] For example, Valincour's remarks concerning the "language of Angels," which cite a letter by Voiture concerning the *précieuses*' linguistic quarrels, may have been intended to apply to women's writing in a more general sense (Valincour 318, Voiture I: 171).

[17]The letter presents one seemingly critical comment as praise: "full of things . . . that one must even reread more than once." This oblique directive to the reader reveals Lafayette's understanding of her novel's narrative complexity and her conviction that this interpretive difficulty is a source of the book's strength.

[18] Since La Rochefoucauld's correspondence contains many references to the composition of the *Maximes*, the absence of any such comments concerning *La Princesse de Clèves* seems proof that his role in the novel's creation was no more than advisory.

[19] Lafayette's elliptical authorial stance leads critics from time to time to read her denials literally. Most recently, Geneviève Mouligneau has done so, arguing that the fictions to which Lafayette's name is now openly assigned are the work of Segrais, the writer who signed her *Zayde*. Such attempts to reattribute an *œuvre* are not unheard of—witness the example of Shakespeare—but here the author herself is responsible for the controversy.

Both *La Princesse de Montpensier* and *Zayde* were published anonymously. Both were connected more or less openly with Lafayette. Both (even the apparently uneconomical *Zayde*) share important stylistic affinities with *La Princesse de Clèves*. While I cannot explore this matter here, I would contend in general that Lafayette's strategic use of anonymity evolved along with her work.

[20] On 28 Dec. 1982 I presented an early version of the central section of this essay in an MLA seminar, organized by Domna Stanton, on criticism in seventeenth-century France. The proceedings of that panel appear in *Papers on French 17th-Century Literature* 10 (1983): 79–97.

[21] The letter is written by Mme de Thémines to the vidame. But since its author's identity is revealed only after the contents have been discussed at length (109) and is never made public, for all intents and purposes the letter remains anonymous.

[22] This invasion of narrative territory doubles the invasion of private spaces evident throughout the novel (see Lotringer 506). Arnold Weinstein has characterized the novel as a "massive assault on privacy, a transformation of intimacy into public spectacle" (73). In a stimulating article, Michael Danahy has analyzed the sexual politics of spatial vulnerability in the novel. He points out, for example, that in the scene in which Nemours secretly watches the princess winding ribbons on a cane, the invasion of her private space is triple, for the prince's servant, representing the husband himself, watches Nemours (219).

[23] Nemours employs the very adjective that provides the name of the supplementary issues of the *Mercure Galant* in which many of the central elements in the publicity campaign surrounding *La Princesse de Clèves* were published. Since the first "extraordinaire" appeared in January 1678, Donneau de Visé may have chosen the name with Lafayette's novel in mind. The issues were to be "extraordinary," like the novel and like its heroine. It should be noted that the princess' use of anonymity in her confession, her refusal to name the man she loves, is responsible for her husband's obsessive fascination with her story: "Vous me cachez un nom qui me donne un curiosité avec laquelle je ne saurais vivre" 'You are concealing from me a name that gives me a curiosity I cannot endure' (127).

[24] Nancy Miller's insightful essay convincingly situates this discussion in a broader context of women's fiction.

[25] The narrator-author remains anonymous, but the agreement of adjectives and participles reveals her to be a woman. A. Beaunier transcribed the text from a manuscript in the Arsénal. His heirs published his transcription posthumously with the note "attributed to Mme de Lafayette." In his introduction, however, Beaunier does not suggest that Lafayette wrote the text, only that she reached the same conclusions about love as its author did (153–54). Perhaps Beaunier's heirs added the attribution. The novel bears no formal resemblance to Lafayette's fiction. Among the interlocutors' stories of women betrayed by inconstant men, the most detailed concerns Louise de Lafayette, the sister of Lafayette's husband (189–91).

[26] Not all seventeenth-century critics and scholars shared Valincour's negative view of women's fiction. Scudéry may nearly have been admitted to the French Academy, and other *femmes savantes* were also nominated for this honor.

[27] For an overview of *préciosité* and the *précieuses*' views on female superiority, see Backer. For a more scholarly and detailed history of the movement, see Lathuillère. In "The Fiction of *Préciosité*," Stanton analyzes the image of *précieuse* created by Molière and other seventeenth-century writers.

[28] Lafayette's insistence, in her letter to Lescheraine, that *La Princesse de Clèves* was not a novel but a memoir (*Correspondance* 2: 63) may reflect a desire to stress the historical as well as the literary implications of her plot.

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