
REVIEWS

Faith E. Beasley and Katharine Ann Jensen, eds. *Approaches to Teaching Lafayette's The Princess of Clèves*. New York: MLA, 1998. 211p.

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Madame de Lafayette's 1678 psychological study of love, avowal, and seeming self-sacrifice in the 16th-century court of King Henri II recently has experienced a resurgence of popularity in college-level curricula, not only in French literature classes, but also in English-language studies of feminist criticism and courses in women's studies. This collection of essays on varying aspects of *The Princess of Clèves* — the latest in editor Joseph Gibaldi's series of *Approaches to Teaching World Literature* — is a timely response to this revival.

"Teaching *La Princesse de Clèves* to undergraduates is like administering cod-liver oil to a child; it requires a lot of coaxing," states Marie-Paule Laden in the essay "Virtue and Civility in *La Princesse de Clèves*." This and numerous other articles in this collection focus on how teachers can help students comprehend and value the rich layers of this novel, and, in particular, reduce the typical frustration they experience with the story's unexpected and ostensibly unromantic conclusion.

Geared for professors and scholars who teach in English as well as French (in every article, quotations from Lafayette's novel are given in both the original French and in English translation), these essays offer professors suggestions for classroom approaches, discussion questions, and various assignments that will aid students in grasping an appreciation for the novel. Much advice is centered on how professors can develop students' sensitivity towards the time period in which the work was written — the classical era during the reign of Louis XIV — and the time in which the story takes place — the French royal court in the late 1550s.

In their introduction, Beasley and Jensen list and evaluate various versions of the book that have existed since the original anonymous publication, including early and more recent English translations. They also recommend a number of critical studies on the work and some other aids to teaching including two different film versions of the story and a teaching film with narrated excerpts. Two appendixes include portions of a debate by Valincour and Charne, two critics of

the novel during its own time, and a comprehensive study guide for undergraduates.

The editors note that today's students can relate to many issues that *La Princesse de Clèves* identifies such as difficulties in heterosexual relationships of love or desire, the need to keep up appearances, the restricted position of women in society, problems in mother-daughter relations, and the insularity of social circles. What modern university students probably will not understand are the historical contexts of 16th- and 17th-century court life — with its salons, strict mores, and expectations for women and for the institution of marriage. Students also need to be aware of specific influences of the time such as the Fronde and other reactions against human liberties and the rise of austere, Calvinist-inspired Jansenism that gave rise to deeper analysis of the allegedly corrupt nature of the human mind and soul. (Louis MacKenzie's "Jansenist Resonances in *La Princesse de Clèves*" offers several interesting insights on this last concept as he mulls the meaning(s) of "virtue" in the princess' actions.)

Beasley and Jensen also point out that the 17th-century salon was a unique place where women, such as Lafayette and her heroine, could display their intellectual and artistic talents with impunity and achieve a measure of autonomy. Such a background gives this novel an anachronistic feminist twist. Where are all the domineering males? the editors ask. Several of the essayists focus on how to help students address and comprehend the questions of sex roles, sexuality, and celibacy within the story's social/historical context.

"The sooner students begin to read *La Princesse de Clèves*, the better," states Michèle Longino in "The Mother-Daughter Subtext in *La Princesse de Clèves*." In addition to his thought-provoking discussion of the maternal dynamic in the text, he admonishes instructors to introduce the novel early in students' careers, helping them through the historical apparatus and abstract language, but letting them teach it largely to one another. Later, as graduate students, they can draw on their background studies as well as their personal life experiences to formulate more in-depth analyses of "theoretical issues of narrative and psychology at play."

To prepare students for what they often see as the princess' troubling and illogical decision to opt for solitary life instead of romantic fulfillment with the man she truly loves, several essayists advise professors to help the decode such vocabulary (either in the original or translation) such as *galanterie*, *bienséance*, *merite*, *virtu*, *honnêteté*, and *repos* in terms of the semantics and social mores of the times.

The first essay, "Lafayette's First Readers: The Quarrel of *La Princesse de Clèves*," Elizabeth C. Goldsmith describes how the novel was first debated in period salons, particularly by the traditionalist Valincour, who denounced the work for its

supposed lack of *vraisemblance* (plausibility) and by the more free-thinking Charnes, who knew Lafayette personally and championed her modernity. Other writers, including Inge C. Wimmer In “Conflicting Emotion: Personal and Cultural *Vraisemblance* in *La Princesse de Clèves*,” explain that the princess’s lucid self-knowledge and powers of observation throughout the story help her to chart a courageous course that is based neither on society’s concept of *bienséance* (propriety) nor *vraisemblance*, but rather on her personal ethics. In short, her final decision represents control of her own life that is ultimately preferable to romance and sexuality.

Likewise, in “Teaching *La Princesse de Clèves* in Translation,” Beasley urges professors to explain that when the princess speaks of wanting *repos*, she is not seeking “rest” as students may assume, but rather “peace of mind.” Therefore, since different translations use different key word choices, one cannot always teach the novel the same way in French and in English. (Among the various English translations, Beasley recommends the Terrence Cave’s 1992 edition along with his introduction and notes).

In “Making Sense of the Ending: Passion, Virtue, and Female Subjectivity,” Jensen suggests a format for in-class discussion that may help students begin to understand the princess’ final decision “as a positive expression of her subjectivity rather than as an impenetrable or self-punishing action.” She notes that when students mull the fact that even some of Lafayette’s contemporaries did not like her ending, they are more willing to share their own reactions as well.

Éva Pósfay’s intriguing “Mapping *La Princesse de Clèves*: A Spatial Approach,” the only essay to contain illustrations about how and where the novel’s plot circulates within the court setting, discusses the concepts of both physical and mental “space” described in the story. Pósfay concludes, “By the time [the princess] finds her peace of mind (and her space?) and settles down in her final dual residence, my students and I are also ready to end our pursuit, not without gleefully reminding each other that while no one conquers the princess, we have just conquered together *La Princesse de Clèves*.”

Other worthwhile articles include Harriet Stone’s “Court Society and Economies of Exchange,” which examines the novel in the light of France’s gradual shift from an aristocratic to precapitalist society, Lewis C. Seifert’s spotlight on “Masculinity in *La Princesse de Clèves*,” and Kathleen Wine’s “Romance and Novel in *La Princesse de Clèves*.” John D. Lyons’ “Reading *La Princesse de Clèves* with the *Heptaméron*” describes how certain stories in Marguerite de Navarre’s 16th-century collection complement Lafayette’s themes, and Elizabeth J. MacArthur shares her experiences in “Teaching *La Princesse de Clèves* in a Women’s Studies Course.”

These essays will help launch professors and students on a course of digesting and appreciating the novel, though not demystifying every one of its numerous nuances. As James F. Gaines adds in “What’s Love Got to Do with It? The Issue of Vulnerability in and Anthological Approach,” professors should not tell students that discussion of *La Princesse de Clèves* is over, because it really never can be. “One of the greatest disservices that one can do to students through an anthological approach no matter how well intentioned, is to convey the impression that all has been studied.... Like the woman faced with the prospect of an avowal, the scholar is always vulnerable.” ✱