ABSTRACT

FINDING HER VOICE: THE PRINCESS’S STRUGGLE IN MADAME DE LAFAYETTE’S
LA PRINCESSE DE CLEVES

by Ellen Schaf

In Madame de Lafayette’s novel La Princesse de Clèves, the princess’s voice is silenced by the people in her life. This begins by her mother’s pedagogy at a very young age. When her mother dies, her husband becomes the one to carry on her mother’s discourse. Her lover, Nemours, prevents her from finding her voice through his ceaseless gaze. This gives everyone in the novel power except for the princess. Many times in the novel power is linked to vision. In this novel, it seems that someone is always looking or being looked at, and the people looking are in power. Vision seems to be everything, yet appearances always seem to be deceiving. In this thesis, I will explore the themes of power, vision, and voice in La Princesse de Clèves.
FINDING HER VOICE: THE PRINCESS’S STRUGGLE IN MADAME DE LAFAYETTE’S

LA PRINCESSE DE CLEVES

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Dedication

This thesis is dedicated to the three people who have been my support system while writing it: my beautiful and loving parents, Elizabeth and Peter Schaf and the love of my life, my fiancé, Jonathan Main. Thanks for being so understanding and supportive in my five year struggle!
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La Princesse de Clèves (1678) by Marie-Madeleine Pioche de la Vergne, Comtesse de Lafayette is considered to be the first modern novel as well as the first psychological novel. It was the first novel to go inside the heads of its characters instead of only focusing on actions and heroic deeds (Beasley and Jensen 1). Since some readers judged that the novel lacked “vraisemblance,” it was seen as controversial. Faith Beasley and Katharine Ann Jensen describe this concept in the introduction to their collection of essays Approaches to Teaching Lafayette’s La Princesse de Clèves:

The public demanded that these…fictions be above all *vraisemblable*, a complex concept that combines accepted societal notions of plausibility and propriety. To conform to this criterion novelists wove their fictions so closely into well-known historical events, principally those involving the sixteenth-century French court, that it became virtually impossible to tell the difference between history and fiction…Authors of these new fictions were often called *historiens*, and their works *histoires*, thus playing on the ambiguity of the French term *H/histoire*, which means both history and story. (Beasley and Jensen 5)

If readers took those fictional works to be the truth, the fear was that they might mimic them, resulting in possible immoral behavior. Once again according to Beasley and Jensen, some moralists worried that

If a novelist created a character who acted unconventionally, outside socially sanctioned limits, and who escaped punishment for this deviance, then readers might be tempted not only to condone, but also to imitate this behavior, thus wreaking havoc in society. (Beasley and Jensen 3)

Although fictional, La Princesse de Clèves is framed by historical narratives involving actual members of Henri II’s court. Many of these narratives include love affairs and marriages and most are dominated by women. “These amorous affairs are further linked to politics. In this way, Lafayette posits not only that political actions are inextricably bound up with interpersonal relations and individual personalities but also that the most imposing personalities are female” (Beasley and Jensen 6). All of these narratives are also linked to the life and problems of the title
character, Mademoiselle de Chartres, who marries and becomes the Princesse de Clèves. Both her mother, Madame de Chartres, and, after her mother’s death, her husband, Le Prince de Clèves, use these stories throughout the novel to warn Mademoiselle de Chartres against immoral behavior and let her know of the danger of court life and men. These stories give her mother and her husband a more powerful voice than Mademoiselle de Chartres. Because Madame de Chartres and the Prince de Clèves are always telling these warning tales to the princess, they are overpowering the potential voice of the princess, and taking away any power that she might hold. Thus, within the world of the novel, story-telling serves a pedagogical moralizing function which silences the voice of the princess.

The internal narratives thematically illustrate the dangerous realities underlying the supposedly calm exterior of court relations, in particular the perils of love. Since the princess hears each of the internal narratives, they compose part of her education, teaching her that past entanglements still affect present alliances and warning her that politics, passions, jealousies, and animosities form a complex web in which she could easily become ensnared. Thus, Lafayette uses history not only to render her fiction vraisemblable, thus conforming to the principal law of the genre, but also and foremost as a pedagogical tool for the princess. (Beasley and Jensen 6)

Not only do these narratives increase the plausibility of the novel, but they also empower the people who are telling the stories (Madame de Chartres and M. de Clèves) because they are ultimately controlling the princess’s education and shaping her opinions for her. Her voice is absent from these pedagogies, and we see her searching for her own voice, space and power amid the chaos of court life.

The Princess’s search for a voice would be more appropriately described during the seventeenth century as a search for repos. The *Dictionnaire de l’Académie française, 1st edition* (1694) defines repos as “quiétude, tranquilité, exemption de toute sorte de peine de corps ou d’esprit.” According to Joan DeJean,

> From the beginning of the seventeenth-century women’s tradition, the interests of “retirement” and “repos” (tranquility, the absence of agitation) are linked to the choice of private space over the space of public exposure, the court, and this choice is seen (logically) as possible for a noblewoman only if she refuses marriage and a place in the landed order. The princesse’s refusal to marry Nemours grafts a new legal precision onto the tradition to which Lafayette subscribes: it is only by not marrying Nemours that she, as a woman and widowed, can truly have a “chez elle.” (*Tender Geographies* 122)
Throughout the novel, the Princess is struggling to find repos. In order to find it, she must leave the court, her mother, and her husband and escape to her private country home of Coulommiers, which is one of the only places we see her begin to develop her own voice and power. This choice, as well as the fact that she confesses to her husband that she is in love with another man, caused seventeenth century critics to call into question the vraisemblance of the novel.

One of these critics was Jean Trouset de Valincour. In his critique entitled Lettres à Madame la marquise de ***sur le sujet de La Princesse de Clevès (1678), the novel’s first critic, Valincour, called the princess an incomprehensible woman—“C’est une femme incomprehensible...C’est la prude la plus coquette et la coquette la plus prude que l’on ait jamais vue” (Valincour 272-273). According to Valincour, it is incomprehensible that she tell the Duc de Nemours that she is in love with him but still deny him. To him, this was an implausible action, even though it did follow the rules of bienséance. He also criticized the vraisemblance of the novel, saying “Il n’y a rien qui choque davantage un lecteur que de voir qu’on lui propose comme véritable, une chose qui ne l’est point, et qui est même entièrement fausse” (Valincour 96). According to Elizabeth Goldsmith, this was the “first psychological novel,” because the plot focuses on the “developing inner consciousness of the heroine” (33). Although the novel’s narrator explains events through the eyes of the characters in the novel, this narrator never goes into the consciousness of the princess. Instead, the princess’s voice is never fully developed. We do see glimpses of her power emerging, but she never comes across as a strong character. Even at the end of the novel, when she chooses herself over M. de Nemours, the narrator tells the end of the story through Nemours’ eyes:

M. de Nemours pensa exprimer de douleur en présence de celle qui lui parlait. Il la pria vingt fois de retourner a Mme de Clèves, afin de faire en sorte qu’il la vit ; mais cette personne lui dit que Mme de Clèves lui avait non seulement défendu de lui aller redire aucune chose de sa part...Il fallut enfin que ce prince repartit, aussi accablé de douleur que le pouvait être un homme qui perdait toutes sortes d’espérances de revoir jamais une personne qu’il aimait d’une passion la plus violente, la plus naturelle et la mieux fondée qui ait jamais été. Néanmoins il ne se rebuta point encore, et il fit tout ce qu’il put imaginer de capable de la faire changer de dessein. Enfin, des années entières s’étant passées, le temps et l’absence ralentirent sa douleur et éteignirent sa passion. (Lafayette 252)
Nowhere in this passage are Mme de Clèves’ thoughts and feelings revealed. She is the heroine of the novel, yet her voice is not heard. Until the end of the novel, Mme de Chartres, M. de Clèves and M. de Nemours’ overpower the princess’s voice.

The visual is also a relevant theme throughout the novel. The characters are in a constant state of looking or being looked at. The princess is so beautiful that the looking begins early in the novel when she is first introduced at court and continues when she first meets M. de Clèves and Nemours. Later in the novel, the visual theme continues when Nemours gazes at her while at court and constantly follows her to Coulommiers to spy on her. Because of this, the verb voir is often used throughout the book. According to the Dictionnaire de l’Acadamie francaise, 1st edition (1694), the verb voir has several meanings, two of which include: “apercevoir, recevoir des images des objets dans les yeux” and “de la connoissance qu’on acquiert des choses du monde, dans les voyages, ou dans la frequentation et la commerce du monde.” Therefore, the verb voir has a dual meaning when applied to La Princesse de Clèves. In the novel, it means both “to see” or “to look” and also “to understand” and “to learn.” This is relevant because of the constant presence of vision in the novel as well as the absence of the princess’s voice. Although she is always being seen and looked at, she is never being truly understood by the other characters in the novel.

In this thesis, I will discuss the princess’s struggle for repos and a voice and the people who stand in her way: her mother, her husband, and the man she loves. In the first chapter, I will present the princess’s complicated relationship with her mother and consider the way the princess was brought up by her mother, which ultimately shapes her beliefs and behaviors until the end of the novel. How does Mme de Chartres’ virtuous model and emphasis on la vertu in advice given to her daughter affect the princess in her journey? How does the princess’s presentation at court by her mother (and to M. de Clèves) as an object of beauty and her emphasis on the deceit of appearances influence the princess’s ultimate decision to choose herself? I will also discuss the princess’s relationship with her husband, who takes on the role of the replacement mother figure to his wife. How does the princess look to her husband as the judge of her morality after her mother dies? In what ways does he hinder her pursuit of a voice? In the second chapter, I will discuss the man the princess falls in love with, and the way in which his gaze prevents her from finding herself. I will discuss the many times throughout the book that Nemours pursues the princess not only within the confines of the court but also to her
private home in the country which is her sanctuary. I will explore how these three people in her life affect her search for what she wants most in her life, *repos.*
I. A Mother’s “Love”

When we first meet the protagonist of *La Princesse de Clèves*, she is a sixteen-year-old girl coming to court for the first time. Mlle de Chartres’ mother raised her alone since her father died when she was young. Mme de Chartres raised her outside of the court, hoping to instill virtue in her daughter. Mitchell Greenberg describes the family situation by saying:

We are introduced to this family when Mme de Chartres comes to the court to do business. She has reared her daughter, as we all know, away from this world, and brought her up according to her own radical pedagogy. When the Princess is sufficiently marriageable, she returns to the court with her in tow in order to find a suitable match…the court of the *Princesse de Clèves* immediately recalls a nobiliary kinship system in which rival clans each vie for power. Power is attained through the ever-widening formation of male alliances, alliances which in this radically heterosexual world necessarily must be mediated by the exchange of women. (Greenberg 185)

The power at court was seemingly with men, but in order to keep power, they had to find the right woman to marry. Since Mme de Chartres’ husband was not in the picture, she was really the one with the power in this situation, trying to find the right man for her daughter to marry. She held an extraordinary amount of power over her daughter, literally deciding her destiny. Again, Greenberg describes it this way:

Thus, on the one hand, Mme de Chartres, when she appears in the novel, is just like all the older women in the court, all power brokers in a sexual economy of exchange. On the other, what makes her different is precisely the ambivalent bonding that she has established with her daughter. (Greenberg 186)

Her mother holds all the power in the relationship and, according to Greenberg, this was not unusual. However, what does make her unusual is that she shares so much with her daughter. Mme de Chartres talks very openly about love and men with her daughter. Her mother warns her of the danger of men. In contrast, her mother also lets her daughter know that love is an important aspect of life and that she must eventually find a man she loves to marry. She also stresses the importance of loving her husband and her husband loving her. In a time when “marriage is but a coded word for an entire institutionalized network of social, sexual, economic and political stakes” and “politics is eroticized and love politicized,” (Greenberg 185) Mme de Chartres makes a grave mistake by associating marriage and love. In addition to this, Mme de
Chartres constantly instills in her daughter the importance of virtue in a woman. The narrator presents Mme de Chartres as [une] femme, dont le bien, la vertu et le mérite étaient extraordinaires. Après avoir perdu son mari, elle avait passé plusieurs années sans revenir à la Cour. Pendant cette absence, elle avait donné ses soins à l'éducation de sa fille; mais elle ne travailla pas seulement à cultiver son esprit et sa beauté, elle songea aussi à lui donner de la vertu et à la lui rendre aimable…. elle faisait souvent à sa fille des peintures de l'amour; elle lui montrait ce qu’il a d’agréable pour la persuader plus aisément sur ce qu’elle lui en apprenait de dangereux; elle lui contait le peu de sincérité des hommes, leurs tromperies et leur infidélité….et elle lui faisait voir, d’un autre côté, quelle tranquilité suivait la vie d’une honnête femme, et combien la vertu donnait d’éclat et d’élévation à une personne qui avait de la beauté et de la naissance; mais elle lui faisait voir aussi combien il était difficile de conserver cette vertu. (Lafayette 46-47)

In the seventeenth century, vertu had two different definitions. According to the Dictionnaire de l’Acadamie française, 1st edition one definition was “Efficacité, force, vigueur, propriété.” The second definition is what we think of virtue today “une habitude de l’âme, qui le porte à faire le bien, & à fuir le mal.” The first definition links vertu with strength, vigor and efficiency. Only the second definition uses words that we now associate with virtue, the soul doing good instead of bad. During this time, by telling her daughter the importance of vertu, Mme de Chartres was not necessarily telling her to be a morally good person but was instead telling her to stay strong and work hard to keep her reputation as a pure young woman.

We can see how much the importance of virtue was instilled in Mlle de Chartres by her mother since the word vertu is used four times in just this passage. Her mother wants her daughter to see the importance of vertu and chastity. The princess’s voice is nowhere to be found in this passage. The narration does not reveal the princess’s reaction to her mother’s advice. Does the princess understand the struggle that she must go through in order to live up to her mother’s expectations of vertu for her daughter? We don’t know because we cannot hear her voice.

Her mother desired most of all to raise a chaste daughter. However, it is ironic that Mlle de Chartres’ virtue (as well as her unique beauty) are the qualities that make her the most desired woman at court. Even though her mother is trying to do what is best for her daughter, Mme de Chartres’ advice does not serve her daughter well in the end. Instead, she will marry a man whom her mother deems worthy of her love, because, according to her mother, a woman’s
greatest happiness “est d’aimer son mari et d’en être aimée” (Lafayette 47). This advice goes against everything that really went on in court society during the seventeenth century. Love was not a part of marriage in reality, but Mme de Chartres associates them closely when educating her daughter. This pedagogy sets Mlle de Chartres up for disappointment in the end because, after being forced into a loveless marriage, she continues to search for love, due to her mother’s emphasis on it; however, when she does find it in Nemours, she can never seek it because of her mother’s emphasis on vertu.

Mlle de Chartres’ beauty is the first characteristic to be introduced in the novel, bringing out the theme of the visual. “Il parut alors une beauté à la Cour, qui attira les yeux de tout le monde, et l’on doit croire que c’était une beauté parfaite...[Lafayette 46, my emphasis]. It is important to note that the word beauté appears twice in this short passage because Mlle de Chartres’ most important characteristic is her beauty. The emphasis is on the way she looks and how all eyes are drawn to her outer appearance. Also, attira les yeux is one of many references to looking in the novel. The continuous theme of the visual begins here. This emphasis on the visual is important because it further hinders her voice. Even the first time we are introduced to Mlle de Chartres, her extraordinary beauté is the only feature that is described. What is she feeling and thinking while all eyes are on her at court as such a young girl? We don’t know because the narration does not reveal it.

The second piece of information that is given about Mlle de Chartres is the maternal pedagogy given to her since she was young. Therefore, after her beauty, her mother’s advice is the most important aspect of Mlle de Chartres’ life. Her mother’s emphasis on virtue expands the theme of the visual in that Mme de Chartres is concerned that the princess appear virtuous, beautiful, and pure to the members of the court, since this is what would attract a man for her daughter to marry. However, since Mlle de Chartres has no other parental figure in her life, she develops an unhealthy dependence on her mother.

The mother’s lesson, then, is double-edged: on the one hand, it seems to offer Mme de Clèves the possibility of autonomy and even transcendence; on the other, it traps her in a state of continued dependency and emotional infancy. As a result, the Princess is ineluctably caught between two opposing forces: the passion for Nemours with all its psychological and social agitation and the world of mother and husband, wife and daughter, with its tranquility that resembles death, its dependency that keeps her incomplete. (Hirsch 81)
I don’t believe that the mother’s lessons do anything but hinder her daughter’s voice and offer her contradictory advice. The princess will never be able to be independent and transcend, since her voice is absent. I agree that her mother’s advice traps her. Because her mother advises her to stay strong and virtuous, she can never pursue a relationship with Nemours. She must always stay locked up, never finding her own voice amidst the voices of her mother and husband. All of Mlle de Chartres’ actions are a result of her mother’s discourse. Her mother’s insistence on virtue at all costs hinders her daughter, making it difficult to think for herself during her short life. Even after her mother’s death, the princess must go to her husband for guidance, even confessing her love for another man to him.

During the time of Henri II’s court, which is the setting of the novel, marriages were arranged by aristocratic families to forge and consolidate fortunes and political alliances. Therefore, the appearance of the marriage for financial and political gain was more important than love. A man and woman were not married for love and passion, but for the woman to keep money and property in the family by producing male heirs. Because of this, it was common for both men and women to have affairs outside of marriage.

In ancien régime France, aristocratic families arranged their children’s marriages in the interest of class insularity. Once married, the wife was obligated to provide male heirs to ensure the continuation of her husband’s lineage and to keep money and property in the family. Because marriages were not made for love and passion, both men and women often sought to satisfy such desires outside marriage. (Jensen 70)

Mme de Chartres teaches her daughter that she has to be virtuous and to do so she has to find personal and emotional fulfillment in what is a business and political relationship rather than a relationship based on love. The evidence of this is that her mother advises her to find a man whom she loves but Mme de Chartres finds a man for her daughter to marry based on political gains. It seems that Mme de Chartres wants her daughter to be in love and be happy, but she does not support this in her actions.

...by linking virtue to tranquility and happiness, she [Mme de Chartres] locks her daughter in a double bind, since she mandates a course of conduct that proves impossible to follow in a world in which social and political considerations take precedence over the personal. (Laden 58)
By giving her daughter advice that contradicts the societal norms during this time, Mme de Chartres is (unknowingly) setting her daughter up not only to never experience love but also to never be able to find her voice. We know that she cares about her daughter, and she wants only happiness for her, but she gives her contradictory advice about love and men, forces her into a loveless marriage, and introduces her to the court as solely an object of beauty.

It seems, too, that Mme de Chartres, “dont le bien, la vertu et le mérite étaient extraordinaire” (Lafayette 46), is trying to realize her own virtue by creating a daughter who is exceptionally virtuous. According to Jensen, Mme de Chartres’ desire to control her daughter’s virtue is based on her own “narcissism” (Jensen 72). Her mother is trying to continue her own legacy by creating a daughter just as extraordinary as she was. By doing this, Mme de Chartres is selfishly pushing her own characteristics onto her daughter. Her mother’s hold over her causes Mlle de Chartres’ desires to be defined by what her mother wants. Not until the death of her mother can the princess even begin to find herself and then the Prince de Clèves takes the place of her mother as the princess’s guide.

Mme de Chartres also does her daughter a disservice when she introduces Mlle de Chartres to the court as purely a thing of beauty and virtue. The narration reveals how Mlle de Chartres is described purely through the eyes of the other court members, including the Prince de Clèves, which shows the emphasis that was put on beauty at court. “During the whole opening movement of the novel, Mlle de Chartres is presented as the perfect social object, adorned for others’ gaze, without any apparent life of her own” (Wolshinsky 108.) Nothing is written about how this sixteen year-old girl reacts to the court or what she thinks of all of the attention she is getting. There is no description through her eyes about what she sees. We really have no clue about what is going on in the princess’s head during this time. Once again, Mlle de Chartres’ voice is not present. Also, when Mlle de Chartres is betrothed to M. de Clèves, the third-person, semi-omniscient narrator (semi-omniscient because the narrator does not give the thoughts of the novel’s heroine) tells the reader the thoughts of her mother but not the thoughts of Mlle de Chartres. Here, her feelings are given only indirectly through the thoughts of her mother:

“Elle n’admirait plus moins que son coeur ne fût point touché, et d’autant plus qu’elle voyait bien que le prince de Clèves ne l’avait pas touché, non plus que les autres. Cela fut cause qu’elle prit de grands soins de l’attacher à son mari et de lui faire comprendre ce qu’elle devait à l’inclination qu’il avait eue pour elle avant que de la connaître et à la passion qu’il lui avait témoignée en la préférant à tous les autres partis.” (Lafayette 63-64)
Even though Mme de Chartres instilled in her daughter the value of love in a relationship, she is desperately trying to make her daughter fall in love with a man she clearly respects and likes but doesn’t love. Although Mme de Chartres admires the fact that her daughter lets her know that she has no inclination towards M. de Clèves, she continues to push her daughter to marry him because he showed interest in her before he even knew who she was, and also because no one else is interested in her due to court politics. In this passage, the narrator explains her mother’s opinions about the marriage between her daughter and M. de Clèves, but the princess’s feelings are not directly described. Instead, the narrator explains Mlle de Chartres’ feelings through her mother. In addition to this, the reader is told about M. de Clèves opinions about marrying the princess.

“M. de Clèves se trouvait heureux sans être néanmoins entièrement content. Il voyait avec beaucoup de peine que les sentiments de Mlle de Chartres ne passaient pas ceux de l’estime et de la reconnaissance et il ne pouvait se flatter qu’elle cachât de plus obligeants, puisque l’état où ils étaient lui permettait de les faire paraître sans choquer son extrême modestie.” (Lafayette 61)

Again, both her mother’s and her husband’s feelings are described, but nothing is directly revealed about how the princess feels about being married off. Also, the passé simple of the verb cacher is used here, indicating that the princess has no feelings to hide for the prince, as well as the verb paraître, describing that Mlle de Chartres would have let her feelings show if she did love M. de Clèves. Just as we will see later in the novel, the juxtaposition of “seeing” and “hiding” is revealed in this passage. The narrator does recognize that the princess would show her feelings if she had them for M. de Clèves. This is different from other times in the novel when the princess’s feelings are left out completely and never mentioned. In this passage, her voice is recognized but never directly given.

Because her voice is frequently omitted from the text, the princess is only an ornament of beauty to be admired. “Il parut alors une beauté à la Cour, qui attira les yeux de tout le monde, et l’on doit croire que c’était une beauté parfaite, puisqu’elle donna de l’admiration dans un lieu où l’on était si accoutumé à voir de belles personnes” (Lafayette 46). In this description, which I also cited earlier in this thesis, it seems that Mlle de Chartres’ beauty is her most important attribute. It is true that during this time, the beauté, noblesse, and vertu of a woman were what were noticed, but we can see that, at the beginning of the novel, the princess’s voice is
trivialized. When her mother chooses the Prince de Clèves as her husband, she does voice an objection, telling her mother she feels “aucune inclination pour sa personne” (Lafayette 87), but her mother ignores it. Even though this type of marriage was normal, Mlle de Chartres is unique in that she desires more than a profitable or prestigious marriage, but, rather one in which her feelings will be in line with her duty. She does tell her mother what she feels but her mother ignores this and continues to arrange wedding plans for her daughter to marry the Prince de Clèves. This is due to the fact that, because of court and family politics, her daughter did not have many prospects in marriage, and the Prince de Clèves is so in love with her and free to marry her after the death of his father, who was opposed to the marriage. Due to her sense of duty *(devoir)* to her mother, the princess marries the Prince de Clèves, even though she has no feelings for him.

Another piece of wisdom that Mme de Chartres gives to her daughter is “Si vous jugez sur les apparences en ce lieu-ci…vous serez souvent trompée: ce qui parait n’est presque jamais la vérité” (Lafayette 71). This may be true at court but appearances also seem to always be valorized there as well. Outward appearance makes a great impression at court. For example, the princess is described as the most beautiful woman at court and Nemours as “un chef d’oeuvre de la nature…l’homme du monde le mieux fait et le plus beau” (Lafayette 41). Another example occurs when the princess first meets M. de Clèves, her future husband, and his instant love for her is solely based on her appearance, since he has never talked to her.

“Il [M. de Clèves] fut tellement surpris de sa beauté qu’il ne put cacher sa surprise, et Mlle de Chartres ne put s’empêcher de rougir en voyant l’étonnement qu’elle lui avait donné. (Lafayette 48)

M. de Clevès is seeing the princess for the first time, and he is struck by her beauty and her modesty. Mlle de Chartres sees him looking at her, and she blushes at his stares. They both notice each other’s rank and the prince wonders if she is married, since she looks so young but the shopkeeper calls her *madame*. There are no words exchanged between the prince and Mlle de Chartres, yet “Il [M. de Clèves] demeura si touché de sa beauté et de l’air modeste qu’il avait remarqué dans ses actions qu’on peut dire qu’il conçut pour elle dès ce moment un passion et une estime extraordinaires” (Lafayette 49). Mlle Chartres’ visible qualities are all it takes for M. de Clèves to fall in love with his future wife. He is so mesmerized by her beauty and apparent humility that he falls in love with her due to her appearance. Yet, Mme de Chartres advises that
appearances are not reliable, so M. de Clèves does not really know what he is getting himself into by falling in love with this woman.

When the princess and Nemours first see each other, the narrative not only highlights the importance of the visual (they are both struck by each other’s beauty) but it also emphasizes the princess’s non-existent voice due to the omission of any of her thoughts and feelings. Even though they have never spoken a word to each other, their beauty is the attraction between Nemours and the princess. Nemours has come back to the court from Brussels for the marriage of M. de Lorraine. He and the princess meet at the Louvre during the wedding celebration. Nemours arrives at the ball just as the princess is looking for another dance partner, and the king suggests they dance together. After their first meeting, the narrator describes the passion that develops between them:

...comme M. de Nemours sentait pour elle une inclination violente, qui lui donnait cette douceur et cet enjouement qu’inspirent les premiers désirs de plaire, il était encore plus aimable qu’il n’avait accoutumé de l’être; de sorte que, se voyant souvent, et se voyant l’un et l’autre ce qu’il y avait de plus parfait à la Cour, il était difficile qu’ils ne se plussent infiniment. (Lafayette 69, my emphasis)

A form of the verb voir is used twice in this passage. So, we see that their only attraction is physical and, therefore, based on appearances and “seeing” each other. Also, the narrator describes Nemours’ attraction to the princess, but her feelings are completely left out of the description. Once again, we do not hear the princess’s voice. The pleasure that Nemours experiences while looking at her is described, but we have no idea what the princess is thinking and feeling about looking at Nemours and being looked at by Nemours and the entire court.

Each relationship in the novel begins due to the visual just as the court itself is described as being all about appearances. The events at court are described as lavish, magnificent, and spectacular. Greenberg describes the court as “a world where all is appearance, where all verbal communication is either foreclosed or highly suspect…. the only truth that may be had is the truth of the glance, of the darting look that seizes a blush, a surprise, a facial movement that is not controlled quickly enough (Greenberg 180). The advice her mother gives her may be valid in that, according to Greenberg, the appearances are all “subject to ambivalent interpretations” (Greenberg 180). There are so many scenes in the novel in which a character misinterprets another character’s action. An example occurs when, in a complicated storyline, the Vidame de Chartres loses a love letter from a woman names Madame de Themines. He does not want the
queen to find out that it was to him, for various reasons, and so he begs Nemours to tell everyone that he had lost it. Mme de Clèves finds out and is devastated. “Mme de Clèves lut cette lettre et la relut plusieurs fois, sans savoir néanmoins ce qu’elle avait lu. 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” (Lafayette 134). The verb voir is once again used in this passage. The princess sees what she wants to see. She sees what her mother has instilled in her her entire life—that men will only hurt her. In this case, her mother’s advice about appearances is true, but the other bit of advice her mother gave her about men always being untrustworthy is untrue since Nemours does not have a mistress but in fact loves Mme de Clèves.

On her deathbed, Mme de Chartres continues to give her daughter advice. Here is an excerpt from her monologue in which she warns her daughter about the dangers of a relationship with Nemours:

…vous êtes sur le bord du précipice: il faut de grands efforts et de grandes violences pour vous retenir. Songez ce que vous devez à votre mari; songez ce que vous vous devez à vous-même, et pensez que vous allez perdre cette réputation que vous vous êtes acquise et que je vous ai tant souhaitée. (Lafayette 88-89)

Her mother believes that her daughter is on the brink of destroying herself, and that it will take violent efforts to keep her from doing so. Her mother likens the loss of the reputation she has worked so hard to earn to being “sur le bord du précipice.” In Mme de Chartres’ eyes, her daughter and her own reputation are more important than her daughter’s happiness. Even in death, her mother finds a way to control her daughter’s actions with these words. Once again the princess’s voice is not heard in what her mother wants for her. When talking about her daughter’s virtue, she uses the line “cette réputation…que je vous ai tant souhaitée.” The princess is not the subject in this sentence but the grammatical object. This passage stresses the mother’s wishes over her daughter’s.

Her mother continues with her deathbed monologue, saying that the only thing that would disturb the happiness of leaving this world would be to see her fall like other women and that she would rather die than to witness her daughter’s destruction of her reputation.

Si d’autres raisons que celles de la vertu et de votre devoir vous pouvaient obliger à ce que je souhaite, je vous dirais que, si quelque chose était capable de troubler le bonheur que j’espère en sortant de ce monde, ce serait de vous voir tomber
comme les autres femmes; mais, si ce malheur vous doit arriver, je reçois la mort avec joie, pour n’en être pas le témoin. (Lafayette 89)

Again, Mme de Chartre continues to be the subject of the sentences related to what she wishes for her daughter: “…ce que je souhaite, je vous dirais que…” The verb voir and the expression être le témoin are also used in this passage, both relating back to the ever-present theme of the visual. The expression être le témoin has a much stronger connotation to me than the verb voir. Etre le témoin is an interesting choice of words here because it could have legal associations, as if the princess would be committing a crime if she cheated on her husband, as well as religious significance, since she would be sinning in God’s eyes if she had an affair. The words vertu and devoir are also used in this passage to describe the reasons why the princess should not have an affair with Nemours. I have already discussed vertu in terms of the seventeenth century, but devoir is defined by the Dictionnaire de l’acadamie française (1694) as “ce à quoy on est obligé par la bienséance, par sa profession, par le droit.” These two concepts have very similar definitions in the seventeenth century, except it seems that you must have the quality of vertu in order to do your devoir. In other words, Mme de Chartres wants her daughter to have enough strength to do her duty and not tarnish her reputation by having an affair with Nemours. Her mother does not wish to see or witness the fall of her daughter due to lack of virtue. Her daughter’s wishes are not even discussed. It is as if her daughter’s wants and needs are completely insignificant.

In this monologue, which are her last words to her daughter and one of the longest passages in the novel, Mme de Chartres finally reveals to the princess that she knows about her feelings for M. de Nemours. She tells her to have the courage to avoid Nemours by leaving the court and that what would make Mme de Chartres the most unhappy in leaving this world would be to see her fall like other women do. These words will stay in her daughter’s psyche forever. Her mother does not allow her daughter to respond in any way to her words. In fact, “Elle [Mme de Chartres] se tourna de l’autre côté en achevant ces paroles et commanda à sa fille d’appeler ses femmes, sans vouloir l’écouter, ni parler davantage” (Lafayette 89). She ends her last dying words to her beloved daughter very abruptly. Mme de Chartres does not even want to hear her daughter’s reaction to her last words. By turning her head and having her daughter call in her servants, she is denying her daughter’s desires and voice. Once again, the princess’s voice is muted.
Throughout the *première partie* of the novel, Mme de Chartres serves as her daughter’s advisor. She teaches her about the dangers of court life, the importance of *vertu* and *devoir*, and the significance of loving and being loved by your husband. We know that Mme de Chartres wants the best for her daughter, but her advice can be contradictory and unrealistic to the reality of court life. Also, the princess’s reliance on her mother seems to silence Mme de Clèves’ own voice. After her mother’s death, the princess needs another person to stand in as her guide. Her husband, M. de Clèves, becomes her teacher, continuing her mother’s pedagogical narratives about the dangers of men and court life.

Unable to cope alone with the powerful and contradictory emotions to which she is subject, and deprived of her mother’s active guidance, the princess seeks to replace it with her husband’s. He now becomes the guide and protector, continuing the mother’s education with similar stories of Court intrigues, fostering her complete honesty, encouraging dependency. (Hirsch 78)

I agree with this statement in that both her mother and her husband encourage her reliance on them. The princess is unable to stand alone until the end of the novel when both her mother and her husband are dead. Only then can she find her own voice amidst her mother’s and husband’s discourse. When her mother dies, her husband will take over the voice of Mme de Chartres, continuing to hinder the princess’s feelings and opinions. He will become the person to protect her from her own feelings for Nemours, taking over the role of moral compass for the princess, a role that her mother has played up until now. “M. de Clèves…replaces Mme de Chartres once she has disappeared from the world of the text. He takes on the same role in relation to his wife that Mme de Chartres played. Essentially that role is to protect her against difference, against any desire” (Greenberg 190). Her mother and her husband play the same role in the novel in that they both seem to think that they are looking out for the princess’s best interests, but they are also perhaps subjugating (dominating, controlling and overpowering) her, silencing her voice.

When the princess first meets M. de Clèves, her appearance once again is at the center of the scene. Lafayette again brings the visual into the forefront of their relationship.

Elle se remit néanmoins, sans témoigner d’autre attention aux actions de ce prince que celle que la civilité lui devait donner pour un homme tel qu’il paraissait. M. de Clèves la regardait avec admiration, et il ne pouvait comprendre qui était cette belle personne qu’il ne connaissait point. Il voyait bien par son air, et par tout ce qui était à sa suite, qu’elle devait être d’une grande qualité….il la regardait
toujours avec étonnement. Il s’aperçut que ses regards l’embarrassaient, contre l’ordinaire des jeunes personnes qui voient toujours avec plaisir l’effet de leur beauté. (Lafayette 48)

There is so much looking going on in this passage, and the princess is visually at the center of it. She and her mother are at a jewelry shop, and M. de Clèves enters and catches his first glimpse of the princess. He is smitten by her extraordinary beauty. Just by seeing her for a few minutes, he notices much about her besides her beauty. He sees that she is “d’une grande qualité” and also that, since she seems to be embarrassed by his looking, he knows she is, unlike other girls, humble despite her beauty. The passage is full of visual verbs such as “voir,” “regarder,” “témoigner,” “paraitre” and “s’apercevoir.” This indicates how relevant vision is in this text. The visual motivates the characters’ actions. It also gives power to certain characters. For example, in this scene, M. de Clèves has power over the princess. He is gazing at her, and she is embarrassed by this. She knows he is of a high rank, so she struggles to keep her composure while he stares at her. Even in her first meeting with the man who would become her husband, no words are exchanged, and the gaze is already becoming problematic for her, causing her embarrassment and discomfort in the public space of the shop.

Just as the princess valued her mother’s advice to a fault, she equally values her husband’s words. When the Prince de Clèves is telling one of many cautionary tales in the novel about a woman having an affair, he makes a fatal mistake by revealing that, if his wife were in love with someone else, he would be able to remove himself from the role of husband to advise her. “Si ma maitresse et même ma femme, m’avouait que quelqu’un lui plût, j’en serais affligé sans en être aigri. Je quitterais le personnage d’amant ou de mari, pour la conseiller et pour la plaindre” (Lafayette 97). The naïveté of both the prince and his wife are evident in that they both think that a husband could accept the fact that his wife has feelings for another man without any jealousy or anger. When the princess hears this story, and the prince tells her that he would prefer that his wife tell him if she was attracted to another man, “elle y trouva un certain rapport avec l’état où elle était, qui la surprit et qui lui donna un trouble dont elle fut longtemps à se remettre” (Lafayette 98). Because of what her husband says to her, later in the novel she decides to admit the love that she feels for Nemours to her husband, which was a unique and bold action.
The princess begins by stating that no one has ever made such a confession to their husband as she is about to make. In the confession scene, the princess is finally beginning to find her voice. By confessing her love for Nemours to her husband, she is made stronger. Finally, she is expressing her feelings, even if she never acts on these feelings. She says she would not be afraid to let her feelings show (“d’en laisser paraître”) if he allows her to leave court. Again, Lafayette uses a visual word (paraître). The princess wants to let her words appear. She wants her voice to be heard, but she cannot bear to let her emotions out while she is at court. She is not afraid to be seen as long as she is not under the microscope of court life. She also references her reliance on the advice of her mother, further stressing the fact that her husband has become Mme de Chartres’ replacement figure in the princess’s life.

Women during this time rarely confided in their husbands, especially this intimate of a feeling, since husbands were not looked upon as confidantes or friends. Also, many women during this time would have indulged in the affair, since marriage was not for love, rather than expecting their husband to protect them from their passions. The princess herself recognizes the uniqueness of her confession. She also mentions the fact that she would feel much stronger if Mme de Chartres were still around to advise her. She explains that she is only confessing to save her precious virtue. If her husband knows the gravity of the situation, then he will let her leave court to go to Coulommiers, where she would not be tempted by Nemours. She expects guidance, pity and love from her husband through this ordeal and despite this confession, but he is unable to give it. The princess’s voice is heard in the confession, but M. de Clèves does not hear what he wants him to hear. He hears only that she is in love with another man. He does not seem to understand the real point of her confession: to save herself from tainting her virtue. The
princess is desperate to be heard. Her husband does hear her but not in the way she had hoped. Instead of advising her in her predicament (or letting her leave court so as not to be tempted), he becomes obsessed with finding out the identity of the man his wife loves and also cannot believe that she would not have an affair with him, even though she vows she will not. On his deathbed, M. de Clèves asks this rhetorical question to his wife: “Que ne me laissiez-vous dans cet aveuglement tranquille dont jouissent tant de maris?” (Lafayette 224). The visual relevance of the word “aveuglement” shows that the prince did not want to see what his wife truly felt. He would have rather been left “blinded” than know his wife’s desires for another man. When the princess does try to express her opinions and emotions to her husband, her husband wishes that he had not been shown the truth. The prince wanted to be blind to his wife’s desire for Nemours rather than hear what the princess had to say. Once again, the princess’s voice is unheard and trivialized. Even though her husband said that he could handle a confession from his wife of this magnitude, the grief and stress from it ultimately kills him, and he would have much rather been left in the dark by his wife.

By confessing, the princess is trying to break free from Nemours and her desire for him, which she hopes will allow her to see more clearly, increasing her “repos” or “tranquility and sense of self” (Jensen 74). She hopes to “pass the burden and responsibility of her behavior on to him” [her husband] (Longino 83). Because she is lost and has no idea what to do in this situation (especially without her mother to help her), she hopes that her husband will solve the problem for her. According to Dorothy Kelly:

…the princess’ desire is paradoxical: on the one hand, in her desire for Nemours, she desires to remain invisible…In order to fulfill the desire for invisibility she removes herself from Nemours, but this ironically renders impossible the fulfillment of her other, conflicting desire to see. This parallels the paradox of her behavior when she confesses her desire to her husband: she wants to make her passion invisible, to withdraw from Nemours’ demanding eyes, and to do this, she makes her desire visible by telling, showing it to her husband and ultimately to Nemours. (Kelly 207, my emphasis)

The princess wants to see. She wants to develop her own voice and to understand the world through her own eyes, instead of the eyes of her mother and her husband. She attempts to make herself invisible by running from Nemours, escaping to Coulommiers, but, at the same time, she wants to be heard so she confesses her feelings to her husband. “The princess’s dilemma shows
the impossibility of her desire in the voyeuristic structure of her society, and thus she must escape to the convent in the end” (Kelly 207).

The confession ultimately causes the death of M. de Clèves, since it prompts him to have one of his servants spy on Nemours, and he dies of sorrow due to a misconception. When the spy comes to tell M. de Clèves what he has seen, M. de Clèves tries to send him away, saying “Allez... je vois ce que vous avez à me dire, mais je n’ai pas la force de l’écouter” (Lafayette 221, my emphasis). The servant tries to tell the prince that he has witnessed nothing between the princess and Nemours, but M. de Clèves refuses to listen to him. The servant replies “Je n’ai rien à vous apprendre... sur quoi on puisse faire de jugement assuré. Il est vrai que M. de Nemours a entré deux nuits de suite dans le jardin de la forêt, et qu’il a été le jour d’après à Coulommiers avec Mme de Mercoeur “ (Lafayette 221). The prince continues to silence his servant, saying “C’est assez... et je n’ai pas besoin d’un plus grand éclaircissement” (Lafayette 221). Even though the prince has no proof that M. de Nemours and the princess had an affair, M. de Clèves assumes that his wife has been unfaithful to him because of what appears to be (if only M. de Clèves would have heard the advice of Mme de Chartres). He accuses her of this on his death bed and also warns her of the dangers of Nemours, saying “vous connaitrez la différence d’être aimée, comme je vous aimais, à l’être part des gens qui, en vous témoignant de l’amour, ne cherchant que l’honneur de vous séduire” and “ma mort vous laissera en liberté... et vous pourriez rendre M. de Nemours heureux, sans qu’il vous en coûte des crimes” (Lafayette 224, my emphasis.) M. de Cleves’ last words parallel the last words of the princess’s mother, causing the princess to avoid Nemours even after the death of her husband and preventing her from finding her own voice. “(A)gainst these two ghosts, which echo each other... the princess cannot forge for herself her own voice” (Longino 84).
II. Nemours, the gaze, and the visual

The visual is an ever-present theme in *La Princesse de Clèves*. In fact, the verb *voir* occurs 419 times in the text. It is the fourth most used verb in the text, following the commonplace verbs *être*, *avoir*, and *faire* (Douthwaite 112). Sometimes *voir* means “to look” and “to see,” and, in other cases throughout the novel, *voir* means “to know” or “to understand.” Often the verb *voir* is used when referencing the princess as she attempts to grow emotionally, during the rare times in the novel when she is unhindered by her mother, her husband, and Nemours. This verb is an important one in the novel not only because it is used so often but also because the princess wants her voice to be heard and therefore wants to be visible. She is inhibited in her quest for a voice by not only her mother and her husband, but also Nemours, who inhibits her by his constant pursuit of her, which often involves him looking at her and invading her privacy and space. The fact that the princess even wants privacy was unique in the seventeenth century.

While extremely sensitive to issues of public civility and linguistic refinement, Lafayette’s contemporaries seem oblivious to some elements of modesty and hygiene that we take for granted. Our concepts of privacy and notions of specialized room usage, for example, would seem quite odd to the seventeenth-century French. In those days the bedroom was the focus of household activities—the place where visitors assembled and business was transacted. Both men and women received visitors while in bed, sometimes fully dressed, sometimes in *négligé*. (Douthwaite 109)

Lafayette presents a unique situation in her work. The princess yearns for a private space of her own, which was unusual during this time when public spectacle was the norm. However, Nemours prevents her from finding this space, following her to Coulommiers at every chance he can.

The visual is an especially important aspect of the princess’s relationship with Nemours. Because their only real conversation occurs at the end of the novel, their only attraction to each other is their appearances. Specifically, the male gaze follows the princess wherever she goes. The first time the princess is looked at in the novel is when her mother presents her to the court. She is regarded by everyone, and her unique beauty is noted by every court member. The second time she is gazed at is by the Prince de Clèves when he first meets her. The third time is when she first meets Nemours. During this scene, she is just as impressed by his looks as he is by hers.
Mme de Clèves acheva de danser et, pendant qu’elle cherchait des yeux quelqu’un qu’elle avait dessein de prendre, le Roi lui cria de prendre celui qui arrivait. Elle se tourna et vit un homme qu’elle crut d’abord ne pouvoir être que M. de Nemours...Ce prince était fait d’une sorte qu’il était difficile de n’être pas surpris de le voir quand on ne l’avait jamais vu...mais il était difficile aussi de voir Mme de Clèves pour la première fois sans avoir un grand étonnement. M.de Nemours fut tellement surpris de sa beauté que, lorsqu’il fut proche d’elle, et qu’elle lui fit la révérence, il ne put s’empêcher de donner des marques de son admiration. (Lafayette 66-67, my emphasis)

Just as all eyes are drawn to the princess when she is introduced at court (or really anytime she is at court), all eyes are also on Nemours when he enters the ball at the Louvre. When she finishes dancing she looks around for another partner (cherchait des yeux). When the king suggests that she take the man who has just entered the ball as her partner, the princess turns to see Nemours for the first time. Instantly, the princess knows that this man is Nemours, because she had heard of his striking good looks. The narrator lets the reader know that Mme de Clèves is just as striking. The visual is at the forefront of this passage. The princess’s physical beauty is her most important attribute in the text. Everyone is always looking at her instead of listening to her, which further weakens her voice. Her purpose is that of a beautiful image for all to admire, yet she is searching for more than this.

In the beginning of the passage, the focus is on the princess and her beauty as she is being presented at the ball then looking for a new dance partner. The perspective changes from the princess to Nemours as he enters the ballroom. At the end of the passage, the narrator’s point-of-view is fully that of Nemours and the fact that he is truly surprised by the princess’s beauty when he curtsies to him to begin the dance that he cannot hide signs of his admiration for her. When they are dancing together, everyone is looking at the exceptionally beautiful couple. “Quand ils commencèrent à danser, il s’éleva dans la salle un murmure de louanges. Le Roi et les reines se souvinrent qu’ils ne s’étaient jamais vus, et trouvèrent quelque chose de singulier de les voir danser ensemble sans se connaître” (Lafayette 67, my emphasis). Again, like her confession, the princess’s actions are described as “singulier.” The princess and Nemours are giving the guests at the ball a spectacle to look at and talk about. Nemours and the princess are also gazing at each other during this scene. This is the beginning of Nemours’ obsession with the princess. As Mitchell Greenberg puts it,
It is because she is so perfectly beautiful, the exquisite exemplum of what “nature” has produced as most unique, that she can only find her compliment in her mirror image: the Duc de Nemours, her counterpart in sexual difference, in perfection...It is, of course, particularly intriguing that their meeting and their attraction is staged in spectacularly visual terms, terms in which for the first time the Princess is shifted out of her position as pure spectacle and becomes also a spectator. Desire, when it finally manifests itself in Mme de Clèves, is a desire to see. (Greenberg 196-197)

Again, the princess’s beauty becomes her most relevant attribute. This is the beginning of Nemours’ obsessive pursuit of the princess due to her unique beauty. Since they rarely speak in the novel, she is also attracted to him only due to his beauty. In the scene of their first meeting, the princess and Nemours seem to be equals. They are both equally beautiful, they are gazing at each other simultaneously, and they are both at the center of the spectacle in the ballroom. Later in the novel, we see the power shift from equality to Nemours being the powerful one in the relationship. This is one of only a few scenes in which the princess is also looking at Nemours. In the other scenes in which the gaze is presented, we see Nemours looking at the princess, giving him the power over her.

The next scene in which Nemours’ gaze becomes relevant is when the princess is having her portrait painted at court, and Nemours cannot help but stare at her longingly. The painting of the princess adds to the relevance of the visual theme in the novel. Her image is being re-created while Nemours watches her. Then, he steals her portrait, running off with her image. Again, this signifies his power in their relationship. Now, he physically possesses her, making him even more powerful.

M. de Nemours ne manqua pas de s’y trouver; il ne laissait échapper aucune occasion de voir Mme de Clèves sans laisser paraître néanmoins qu’il les cherchât. Elle était si belle, ce jour-là, qu’il en serait devenu amoureux quand il ne l’aurait pas été. Il n’osait pourtant avoir les yeux attachés sur elle pendant qu’on la peignait, et il craignait de laisser trop voir le plaisir qu’il avait à la regarder. (Lafayette 122, my emphasis)

In this scene, Nemours is once again gazing at the princess. He continues to seek out opportunities to look at her, but he cannot let anyone know his intentions. He averts his eyes while they are combing her hair, preparing her for her portrait, because he fears that the pleasure
that her beauty gives to him will be seen on his face. It is ironic that he is looking at her but he must do so secretly so that no one sees him looking. The gaze is so pleasurable here for Nemours that he has to look away from her so that no one will see the look of pure pleasure on his face.

The Reine Dauphine, who commissions the princess’s portrait, gives it to M. de Clèves. Nemours witnesses all of this and, since he wants a portrait of the princess, he steals it, right in front of the princess. “...il [Nemours] rencontre les yeux de Mme de Clèves, qui étaient encore attachés sur lui, et il pensa qu’il n’était pas impossible qu’elle eût vu ce qu’il venait de faire” (Lafayette 123, my emphasis). Nemours and the princess lock eyes with each other after he has stolen the portrait, and she has seemingly been staring at him. He sees her looking at him. Because the princess has witnessed Nemours’ crime of passion, they now share a seductive secret. The princess is extremely embarrassed by the fact that she has seen Nemours’ theft of her portrait. When Nemours sees her embarrassment, he whispers this to her: “Si vous avez vu ce que j’ai osé faire, ayez la bonté, Madame, de me laisser croire que vous l’ignorez” (Lafayette 123). He takes the portrait home, overjoyed to have a representation of the princess to gaze at whenever he pleases. According to Greenberg, Nemours’ theft reveals a desire to possess the princess. “Not content with the surreptitious pleasure her view gives him, Nemours desires the more permanent pleasure of possession. He wants to possess the princess, and to do this he must carry off her image” (Greenberg 200). However, the portrait will soon not be enough for him; he needs to gaze at the actual princess in order to satisfy his hunger for her.

Nemours’ pursuit of the princess causes her so much inner turmoil that she decides she must leave the court in order to escape from him. The fact that the princess yearned for any sort of privacy is another one of her defining traits in the time the novel was written, during an era in which the public spectacle and ceremony of the court under Louis XIV was central to social and political power for nobles.

Ceremonies framed the royal day; these included the ritual morning dressing (lever) at which the formal toilette was performed with much assistance, and the ritual evening undressing (coucher)…Then there was the public dinner (grand couvert). More or less anyone who was decently dressed could come and gape at the royals at their food. (Fraser 86)

Virtually nothing was private at court during this time. Therefore, the princess is singular in that she yearns for her private life in the pavilion at Coulommiers. Because this space means so
much to the princess as a source of pleasure and strength, it makes sense that Nemours would try
to enter this space on multiple occasions. One scene in which Nemours invades the princess’s
private space occurs when she is confessing her love for the duke to her husband. In hopes of
seeing Mme de Clèves, Nemours visits his sister at her country home, which is close to
Coulommiers. While hunting, Nemours takes a walk in the forest and realizes he is close to
Coulommiers, so he dashes off to the princess’s house with no plan of what he will do once he
arrives. He finds the house, sees the princess and her husband in the garden, and “il ne put se
refuser le plaisir de voir cette princesse, ni résister à la curiosité d’écouter sa conversation avec
un mari qui lui donnait plus de jalousie qu’aucun de ses rivaux” (Lafayette 164, my emphasis).
The narration reveals that Nemours cannot resist the pleasure that he experiences when looking
at the princess. It is ironic that Nemours is more jealous of M. de Clèves than any of his rivals at
court since M. de Clèves is the princess’ husband, and the princess does not love him but loves
Nemours instead. However, it makes sense because M. de Clèves is the one who possesses the
princess, while this is what Nemours wants more than anything. Nemours hears every word of
the confession because he cannot help but gaze at the princess and eavesdrop on her conversation
with her husband, violating her private space. After the princess confesses, Nemours’ reaction to
the confession is given:

Il avait cru bien des fois qu’il ne lui était pas désagréable et il avait fait ce
jugement sur des choses qui lui parurent si légères dans ce moment qu’il ne put
s’imaginer qu’il eut donné une passion qui devait être bien violente pour avoir
recours à un remède si extraordinaire. Il était si transporté qu’il ne savait quasi ce
qu’il voyait, et il ne pouvait pardonner à M. de Clèves de ne pas assez presser sa
femme de lui dire ce nom qu’elle lui cachait. (Lafayette 168-169, my emphasis)

Nemours believes that the princess has feelings for him, but this is based on subtle clues. Again,
the narration reveals that Nemours has judged the princess’ feelings by appearances only. We
know that the princess believes that she loves Nemours, but the narration never delves deep
enough into her psyche to know what her true feelings are about the situation. In this passage,
we see a form of the verb voir once again (voyait) as well as a form of the verb cacher (cachait),
to hide. The difference is that the verb cacher indicates the non-visual or the hidden in the novel.
This could represent the invisibility that surrounds the princess. Her voice is not heard here,
even though she is confessing her feelings. The confession is described through the eyes of
Nemours, not through the princess’s eyes. Also, the hidden in the novel could represent the
princess’s desire to be shielded from Nemours’s eyes. The feelings of the princess about the confession (as well as the name of the man who has tempted her) are hidden and therefore a mystery to the reader as well as to Nemours and M. de Clèves. Although we know she is confessing her feelings for Nemours, the reader is not given direct insight as to how she is feeling about this, since the confession is described from Nemours’ point-of-view.

When Nemours does find out that she was talking about him in her confession, he is happy but then upset when he realizes that he will never have her because of the duty she feels to her husband. Even though the princess says that she will never act on her feelings, which is discouraging to Nemours, he now knows that she is attracted to him and, because of this, he will continue his attempts to consummate their relationship. Therefore, he will continue to prevent her from finding her repos and her voice by constantly following her to Coulommiers and using the gaze to gain power over her.

The next time Nemours invades the princess’s private pavilion space, he finds her in her window gazing at his portrait. This scene is a scene of triple voyeurism in that Nemours is gazing at the princess who is gazing at his portrait and M. de Clèves’ servant is spying on them both. Once again, Nemours is violating the princess’s private space, exerting his power over her, and interrupting her private moment of self-discovery. Similar to the confession scene, Nemours witnesses a secret act of passion that he should not be seeing. However, unlike the scene in which Nemours witnesses her confession to her husband that she loves another man, there is no doubt about what man she is thinking of in this scene. She is gazing at a picture of Nemours in battle and knotting ribbons of the same colors that he wore at the jousting tournament earlier in the novel to a cane that once belonged to him. Because he has witnessed such private moments in the princess’s life, Nemours becomes the powerful one in their relationship. Nemours dominates the princess through his gaze. Just as everyone’s reactions but her own were described during her introduction at court, this scene is also described in the eyes of Nemours and the princess’s side is not given.

Il [Nemours] vit qu’elle était seule; mais il la vit d’une si admirable beauté...Il faisait chaud, et elle n’avait rien, sur sa tête et sur sa gorge, que ses cheveux confusionément rattachés. Elle était sur un lit de repos, avec une table devant elle, où il y avait plusieurs corbeilles pleines de rubans; elle en choisit quelques-uns, et M. de Nemours remarqua que c’étaient des mêmes couleurs qu’il avait portées au tournoi. Il vit qu’elle en faisait des noeuds à une canne des Indes, fort
extraordinaire, qu’il avait portée quelque temps et qu’il avait donné à sa sœur.
(Lafayette 212, my emphasis)

Every detail of this private moment that belongs to the princes is described as Nemours sees it. The words il vit (which is the passé simple of the verb voir) are repeated three times in this passage, emphasizing the power of Nemours’ eyes on the princess. An extremely private moment in the space of her bedroom and Coulommiers, which is her retreat, is violated by Nemours’ eyes. Not only is he invading a private moment but a moment that reveals her longing for him.

Après qu’elle eut achevé son ouvrage avec une grâce et une douceur que répandaient sur son visage les sentiments qu’elle avait dans le coeur, elle prit un flambeau et s’en alla, proche d’une grande table, vis-à-vis du tableau du siège de Metz, où était le portrait de M. de Nemours; elle s’assit et se mit à regarder ce portrait avec un attention et une rêverie que la passion seule peut donner.
(Lafayette 212-213)

The princess shows the feelings that she has for Nemours all over her face. The scene is so vivid that the reader can picture the image of the princess in their head as she is gazing at the portrait of Nemours, her face framed in candlelight. Lafayette does this by once again making the princess the visual center of the passage. Her beauty and virginal sensuality are the focal point here. Nemours sees her watching him in the portrait. Again, her emotions are revealed by the look on her face of “un attention et une rêverie que la passion seule peut donner.”

On ne peut exprimer ce que sentit M. de Nemours dans ce moment. Voir au milieu de la nuit, dans le plus beau lieu du monde, une personne qu’il adorait, la voir sans qu’elle sût qu’il la voyait, et la voir tout occupée de choses qui avaient du rapport à lui et à la passion qu’elle lui cachait, c’est ce qui n’a jamais été goûté ni imaginé par nul autre amant. (Lafayette 213, my emphasis)

Nemours is feeling ecstatic to see the princess, whom he loves, in such an ideal situation: at night, in such a beautiful place, without her knowing that he is looking at her, and showing her passion for him. In addition the the verb voir being used four times in this passage, a form of the word cacher is used to describe the passion that the princess was hiding from Nemours before she unknowingly showed it to him. Again, the word cacher can also be used to describe the princess’s feelings since the narrative only reveals Nemours’ point-of-view and feelings in this
scene. Although we can see her feelings on her face, paradoxically, her viewpoint is overshadowed by that of Nemours.

Nemours’ feelings are described in detail, but we don’t know much about what the princess is feeling while gazing at the portrait (except for what the narration tells us that Nemours sees on her face: passion, beauty, and softness). Nemours is given the power to describe the princess as he sees her. Her thoughts and feelings are never actually described so the reader is unaware of what is going through the princess’s head during the scene (except for the passion that Nemours sees on her face). This gives the reader the indication that the princess’s thoughts and feelings are less relevant than Nemours’. Although the princess is gazing at a battle-scene containing Nemours’ portrait, this image is an idealized version of the real person. The image of Nemours in the portrait...is separate from the flesh-and-blood man who observes her from outside her window...the painted image in its regal splendor bears little resemblance to the real man as he performs in the scene. Moreover, the painting models not only Nemours’ court-enhanced image but also the princess’ own imagination, the conceptions of an idealized lover that she projects on the canvas...She represents to herself not the official story of the court any more than she does the actual history of the lover who spies on her and violates her solitary pleasure. (Stone 53)

Instead of seeing the real man who is violating her emotional and physical privacy, the princess is gazing at the ideal version of the man she loves. Nemours wishes that she would look at him in person the way she is gazing at his image. Both of them have a romanticized idea of their relationship. He longs for her to look at him with the same passionate gaze that she has on her face while looking at the portrait, but this will never happen since she is looking at a fantastic version of him. The painting of Nemours is also non-threatening whereas Nemours himself tries to pursue her. By gazing at an image of him, the princess is protecting herself from the real man. The romanticized image of Nemours is safer than Nemours himself. Since her worst fear is destroying her virtue by cheating on her husband with Nemours, she prefers the portrait over the real man so that she avoids the temptation of jeopardizing this unique virtue. Also, while gazing at the portrait, she is in control and the one who is looking rather than the object of Nemours’ gaze.

When Nemours arrives at Coulommiers the next night for his third visit to the gardens, he desires to gaze at the princess once again, but he finds that all of the windows and doors are shut,
which is a sign that the princess is denying him. Instead of leaving, he continues to taint her private space by sitting in the pavilion all night long, finding joy in looking at the surroundings of the garden that the princess looks at all the time. He finally leaves Coulommiers that morning, but he still refuses to leave the princess in peace. He goes to visit his sister who has a house close to Coulommiers and suggests to her that they visit the princess. We can see that he is now fully obsessed with seeing the princess, enough to risk visiting her unannounced. He even risks whispering to her about him spying on her the night before: “Il est vrai que j’y ai été sans vos ordres, et j’y ai passé les plus doux et les plus cruels moments de ma vie (Lafayette 219-220).” Nemours’ risky behavior distresses the princess because she is worried that his sister will realize what is going on between them (their affair of the gaze). Although Nemours still seems to have power over her, this power is weakening.

…after his first trip to the pavilion, the duke suffers a progressive loss of spatial power in Coulommiers, for he has less and less access to the pavilion and to Mme de Clèves. The princess, on the contrary, seems to grow stronger; she devises increasingly effective defense strategies against the duke’s incursions. By the end of the fourth visit to Coulommiers, M. de Nemours has become a different person. He looks ill and desperate. (Pósfay 108)

After so many pursuits and so many denials of the princess, Nemours is finally becoming discouraged. The more the princess attempts to escape him and the power he holds over her, the stronger she becomes. Without the constant imprisonment of Nemours’ gaze, the princess becomes more confident in herself and her thoughts and feelings. An example of this occurs when she sees Nemours right after her husband’s death. He is lying on a park bench, and, when he sees that someone is approaching, he leaves the scene, but not without bowing to Mme de Clèves while avoiding eye contact. Mme de Clèves sees this as a respectful action, as if he is giving her space to grieve her husband’s death, and she falls even more in love with him. However, the narrator tells us “S’il eût su ce qu’il évitait, avec quelle ardeur serait-il retourné sur ses pas!” (Lafayette 231). Once again, appearances are deceiving in the novel. The princess believes he is respecting her grief, when he really just didn’t see her, and, according to the narration, he would have continued his pursuit for her if he had. But, this scene also reveals that the princess is beginning to develop her voice. When describing the princess’s conflicting feelings about her love for Nemours and M. de Clèves’ death, Lafayette writes:
Toutes ces idées furent nouvelles à cette princesse. L’affliction de la mort de M. de Clèves l’avait assez occupée pour avoir empêché qu’elle n’y eût jeté les yeux. La présence de M. de Nemours les amena en foule dans son esprit mais….elle se souvint aussi que ce même homme…était celui qu’elle avait aimé du vivant de son mari et qui était la cause de sa….son austère vertu était si blessée de cette imagination qu’elle ne trouvait guère moins de crime à épouser M. de Nemours qu’elle en avait trouvé à l’aimer pendant la vie de son mari. Elle s’abandonna à ces réflexions si contraires à son bonheur ; elle les fortifia encore plusieurs raisons qui regardaient son repos et les maux qu’elle prévoyait en épousant ce prince. Enfin…elle s’en revint chez elle, persuadée qu’elle devait fuir sa vue…(Lafayette 233)

We can see now that Lafayette is revealing the princess’s voice to the reader. Lafayette even writes that all of these ideas are new to the princess. Her new, strong voice is causing her confusion but she realizes that, by denying Nemours, she will find not only her repos but also maintain her voice. She is conflicted about whether to pursue her feelings of love for Nemours or stay loyal to her husband. With expressions like “idées,” “jeter les yeux,” “se souvenir,” “trouver,” “réflexions,” “bonheur,” and “persuader,” the princess is finally expressing her thoughts and feelings. The princess has come to the conclusion, after much thought, that, in order to maintain the virtue that was so important to her mother, she must avoid Nemours at all costs. To describe her conclusion, Lafayette uses the expressions “elle devait fuir sa vue.” In order to maintain her strength of voice, she must flee from Nemours’ gaze.

Not only does the princess grow stronger in her convictions, but, after four visits to the princess’s private space without her succumbing to him, Nemours becomes weaker. Nemours needs to retain power over the princess in order to support his ego. Once he begins to realize that he will never have her, he loses his power, which weakens his ego.

Even though Nemours slowly begins to lose his power over the princess, he continues to try to gaze at the princess, never giving up hope that he will eventually possess her, making her less and less likely to find any kind of repos. When the princess goes to a silk shop, the owner tells her that a man occupies a room in the shop, and he comes to paint the houses and gardens seen from the window. The shop owner describes the man as very good-looking and says that he mostly only gazes out the window. Somehow, the princess infers that this man is Nemours.

Elle alla vers les fenêtres pour voir où elles donnaient; elle trouva qu’elles voyaient tout son jardin et la face de son appartement. Et, lorsqu’elle fut dans sa chambre, elle remarqua aisément cette même fenêtre où l’on lui avait dit que venait cet homme. La pensée que c’était M. de Nemours changea entièrement la
situation de son esprit; elle ne se trouva plus dans un certain triste repos qu’elle commençait à goûter, elle se sentit inquiète et agitée. (Lafayette 231, my emphasis)

Again, Nemours finds a way to unnerve the princess. His gaze from the bedroom of the store agitates her, interrupting the “triste repos” that she had been feeling after her husband’s death. After her husband’s death, she is trying to concentrate on herself, but Nemours interrupts this with his gaze, causing her to once again put the emphasis back on him and her passionate feelings for him.

When the princess and Nemours are finally alone together after the death of her husband, they have what is essentially their first and only conversation about their relationship. The princess is finally able to voice her opinion of their situation: although she loves Nemours, she can never be with him because she does not trust his fidelity. Not only this, but she goes on to say that she is denying his love to maintain her repos.

Je sais bien qu’il n’y a rien de plus difficile que ce que j’entreprends, répliqua Mme de Clèves; je me défie de mes forces au milieu de mes raisons. Ce que je crois devoir à la mémoire de M. de Clèves serait faible s’il n’était soutenu par l’intérêt de mon repos, et les raisons de mon repos ont besoin d’être soutenus de celles de mon devoir. (Lafayette 244, my emphasis)

Even though the princess makes it clear that she never wants to see Nemours again because she believes she would be once again tempted by him, he returns twenty other times in pursuit of the princess, continually interrupting her search for repos and her quest to find her inner voice.

Despite Nemours’ attempts, the princess chooses herself in the end, rejecting Nemours and living out the rest of her short life split between the convent and Coulommiers. In the end, she has finally decided to devote her life to her repos and her mission of self-discovery.

Her refusal to marry the man she desires is an exceptional act...because it defies patriarchal norms according to which women act in men’s interest, not on behalf of their own desires. Though the princess, in fact, concedes to these norms by enlisting her duty to her husband to shore up her argument against Nemours and to achieve self-preservation and peace of mind, her refusal to marry Nemours is, finally, a profoundly self-conscious, self-affirming act based on experience and on insight into the destructive consequences of male sexual privilege, the disempowering force of desire, and the confining structure of marriage....What the princess wants more than the momentary pleasure of sexual fulfillment is the lasting benefit of self and a life she can control. (Jensen 74-75, my emphasis)
The princess has finally taken control of her life, but there is no doubt that her mother’s and her husband’s constant advice about her virtue and duty has affected her decision. Therefore, is she really in control? In the end, she escapes the gaze and constant pursuit of Nemours, but did she decide on this escape on her own terms? Had her mother and husband not restricted her so much during her life, would she be making this same decision? If she had not been constantly watched over by Mme de Chartres and M. de Clèves and violated by M. de Nemours, would she have lived a longer life instead of dying so young? Because all of these people in her life have had such an effect on the princess’s psyche, we will never know the answers to these questions. What we do know is that the princess does not have a happy ending, which was one of the reasons for the novel’s harsh criticism.

This story is not a fairy tale, despite its fairy-tale setting. What the very ambivalent ending of the novel tells us is that happy endings—the union of those two terms that would affirm a sexual/political view of the world that is based on patriarchal heterosexuality—are but another illusion patriarchy holds out to those it subjugates. (Greenberg 210)

Just as the patriarchy controls women through their creation of a false fairy tale ending, the men control the princess in the novel. In this novel, the men hold the power. Although Mme de Chartres also holds power over her daughter, she dies halfway through the novel and the men take over any power she may have had. M. de Clèves and Nemours pursue the princess throughout the novel and subjugate her though the gaze. The most important events in the novel are told from a man’s point-of-view—the first meeting of M. de Clèves and the princess, the confession scene, and the scene in which Nemours is gazing at the princess at Coulommiers. The visual also controls the princess. Her mother is obsessed with the princess’s image of virtue and her beauty and so are M. de Clèves and Nemours. She is purely an object of beauty whose voice is stifled. Towards the end of the novel, the princess succeeds in finding her voice but dies before she can fully develop it.
Conclusion

In this thesis, I argue that the princess’s voice is silenced by the people around her. In many scenes in the novel, her voice is completely absent (for example, her mother’s death scene, the first meeting between she and M. de Clèves, the confession scene, and the scene in which Nemours gazes at her through the window at Coulommiers). The princess’s voice is also hindered by her physical beauty. She is presented as an object to be looked at by others. As the novel progresses, however, the princess’s voice is presented more and more often. Her voice becomes stronger as she escapes Nemours’ gaze. In the end, the princess makes a bold action by choosing herself and her repos over Nemours.
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