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The Princess of Cleves

Madame de La Fayette · *1678 · anonymous English translation*

At the glittering court of Henri II, a young woman married to the Prince of Cleves falls in love with the Duke of Nemours—and tells her husband the truth. Madame de La Fayette's short novel is often called the first modern novel of psychological conscience. The hosted English is a public-domain translation of this famous confession plot.

THE CENTRAL QUESTION

Is it virtue to confess a love one has not acted, and can a marriage survive a truth no woman, the princess says, ever yet told her husband?

"I am going to make a confession to you, such as no woman ever yet made to her husband;"

the Princess of Cleves · The confession to the Prince, the novel's central scene

The court is a world of beauty, politics, and watching eyes. The princess's love for Nemours is real, and her conduct, as she claims, has been innocent. She chooses speech instead of secrecy, hoping truth will be a guard. The Prince is wounded as only a generous man can be; jealousy and a later illness follow. After his death she still will not give Nemours the life they might have had. The book honors a costly chastity and leaves the reader to judge whether the confession was wisdom or a too-heavy purity. Quote this English exactly.

KEY CHARACTERS

the Princess of Cleves
A young wife of high conscience, whose love and whose confession are the plot.

the Prince of Cleves
Her honorable husband, who is hurt by a truth he would also admire.

the Duke of Nemours
The courtier she loves, and whom she will not take even when she is free.

the court of Henri II
A watching world of beauty, faction, and almost no privacy.

A CONFESSION NEVER YET MADE

> *"I am going to make a confession to you, such as no woman ever yet made to her husband;"*
>
> **the Princess of Cleves** · The confession

Grades 9–12

Read the full text free at classicslaunch.org.

01

A Court, and a Marriage

THE OPENING

The court of Henri II is drawn in all its luster. Mademoiselle de Chartres is married to the worthy Prince of Cleves, who loves her more than she yet knows how to love him.

- The historical court is not decoration; it is the pressure that makes secrecy almost a habit.
- The Prince is brave, generous, and younger than his prudence.
- The marriage is honorable before it is passionate.

02

Nemours

THE MEETING OF THE EYES

The Duke of Nemours, the most accomplished man of the court, and the princess fall in love almost at first sight. She will not act on it; she cannot not feel it.

- The novel's drama is inward: looks, letters, a lost portrait, a overheard moment.
- Nemours is not a simple tempter; he is capable of a real love.
- Her mother, dying, had already warned her about the court's dangers.

03

The Confession

THE CENTRAL SCENE

In a garden, she tells her husband that she loves another, that she has not been false in deed, and that she needs his help to remain true.

- 'I am going to make a confession to you, such as no woman ever yet made to her husband' is this text's wording.
- She claims the innocence of her intentions as her authority to speak.
- The Prince's pain begins at once; love and suspicion will now live together.

> *"I am going to make a confession to you, such as no woman ever yet made to her husband;"*
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04

A Watch, and a Jealousy

THE AFTERMATH

The Prince, and Nemours himself, are drawn into watching. A night near a pavilion, a misread sign, and the husband's peace is broken.

- Even a confessed love can be misread as a fault in deed.
- Court rumor is a second prosecutor.
- The Prince's generosity is tried almost to death.

05

A Widowhood, and a Refusal

THE CLOSE

The Prince dies, still loving her, still wounded. Nemours waits. The princess, after grief and a retreat from court, will not marry him. She chooses a withdrawn life.

- The last refusal is the book's most argued decision.
- Do not turn it into a simple prayer or a simple fear; she gives her reasons.
- The court goes on; she does not.

Conscience · A Costly Truth · Court and Privacy · Love Unacted · Refusal

What to watch for as you read

GRADES 9–12

1. The hosted text is the English of Project Gutenberg #467. The catalogue does not name a translator; quote this page, not a later academic version.
2. The confession is exact: "I am going to make a confession to you, such as no woman ever yet made to her husband;" She continues that "the innocence of my intentions, and of my conduct, give me power to do it."
3. The names are Cleves (not Clèves) in this English, and Nemours. Keep the court-historical setting (Henri II) without turning the book into a costume chronicle only.
4. The novel is short, grave, and about an unconsummated love and a husband's death. It is excellent for older students learning to read inward action.

Quotations are verbatim from the anonymous English translation, Project Gutenberg #467, the public-domain text hosted at classicslaunch.org/works/the-princess-of-cleves/. Citations give book and chapter (or canto and line) so every line can be checked.