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Ruptures in Address: the Letter as Technical Device in Guilleragues, Sévigné, and Lafayette

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Ruptures in Address: the Letter as Technical Device in Guilleragues, Sévigné, and Lafayette

By

Starra Marie Priestaf
Bachelor of Arts, University of Wisconsin-Madison, 2003
Master of Arts, Miami University, 2007

Advisor: Dalia Judovitz, D. Phil.

An abstract of
A dissertation submitted to the Faculty of the
James T. Laney School of Graduate Studies of Emory University
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Abstract

Ruptures in Address: the Letter as Technical Device in Guilleragues, Sévigné, and Lafayette

By Starra Marie Priestaf

This dissertation examines the letter in order to explore both its effectiveness and failure as a communicative and transactional device. Focusing on Guilleragues's *Lettres portugaises* (1669), Madame de Sévigné's *Correspondance* (1725), and Madame de Lafayette's *La Princesse de Clèves* (1678), the letter discloses a fundamental anxiety concerning the difficulty of transmitting and securing meaning as well as validating its mission as a medium for exchange. I approach the letter as an apparatus, a technical device that attempts to mediate interpersonal communication through its particular structure: a framework defined by an addressee, a message, and a signature. At issue are problems attendant to representation and communication, since silence, indifference, and ambivalence subvert the referential capacity and reciprocity proper to epistolary exchange. I argue that the stability and reliability of the framework that the letter embodies as a means of communication and exchange will be consistently tested and challenged, reflecting in turn the inability to secure representation during the Classical period.

The first chapter on *Lettres portugaises* demonstrates that the letter does not enter into an economy of exchange for indifference and silence annul the reciprocity that the protagonist desires. Rather than instantiate the communicative act, the letter perpetuates a dynamic of non-correspondence and non-recognition, thus leading to a sense of alienation both in relation to self and other. The second chapter shows that Madame de Sévigné's address is not predicated on mutual reciprocity, but on the narcissistic return of her image as beloved. In my third chapter on *La Princesse de Clèves*, I argue that the lack of intersubjective recognition is not limited to epistolary correspondence, but is emblematic of the violence that governs human relations in the novel. My analysis focuses on moments of exchange during which the interlocutor is at once recognized (the recipient of an address) and denied such recognition (interdiction or denial of speech). Building on the insights of Roland Barthes and Jacques Derrida, the dissertation illustrates that one encounters the letter as an impasse, a device that presents a maddening image of the self for it neither confirms nor denies one's position in relation to the absent other.

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To my family, for whom there will always be an address

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INTRODUCTION

> …ta lettre qui aurait dû nous apporter quelque consolation n'a fait qu'accroître notre douleur, et tu as fait jaillir la source des larmes que tu devais essuyer.
>
> —Héloïse d'Argenteuil, *Correspondance*

In the first half of the seventeenth-century, French epistolary manuals of the court set out to illustrate the conventions proper to letter writing. In these manuals, letter writing constitutes a codified practice, a system marked by convention, rhetoric, and the esthetics of propriety. During this period, Jean Puget de La Serre's *Le secrétaire à la cour* (1625) is one of the most widely published and well-received epistolary manuals in both France and England. Based on Erasmus' formulation of the letter as the material form of a conversation between absent individuals, La Serre emphasizes the importance of knowing to whom one is writing and by implication the recipient's social position and standing.[1] By privileging practice and imitation over theory, letter writing emerges as a stylized mode of communication that is conscious of its status as rhetorical exercise. Learning to write, then, more closely resembles a script that locates the correspondents within a matrix of coded social and hierarchical relationships.[2]

As a matter of prescription, La Serre sets forth models for letters of advice, business, recommendation, and love, among many others. For each respective category, La Serre provides an initial letter and an appropriate response. Both the sender and the recipient are in turn implicated in this highly stylized and orchestrated practice. For instance, in his *lettre de résponse*, La Serre underscores the importance of answering each point addressed in the letter, of constructing a kind of mirror image of the message to which one responds. With this framework in place, the writer's response theoretically sustains the reciprocity and balance of exchange proper to epistolary correspondence. Simply put, the proposed formulas and models appear to guarantee letter writing as a mutual and reciprocal mode of communication.[3] Given the visibility

of this mode of communication, the letter-writing manual represents an important tool for presenting and promoting a universal model of courtesy and conduct while providing the illusion of mastery over the practice of writing.

In contrast, in the latter half of the seventeenth-century, this seemingly transparent mode of communication is fiercely interrogated in the face of a crisis in representation Michel Foucault ascribes to the emergence of the rational, modern subject and to a new concept of representation based on objectivity and certitude. In *Les mots et les choses: une archéologie des sciences humaines,* Foucault confronts this problematic by turning to the works of Descartes, namely, the *Regulae* (1628) and *Discours de la méthode* (1637). In the latter of these philosophical treatises, Descartes inaugurates the modern conception of the subject—a rationalist and disembodied thinker. By engaging a methodological approach based on the certitude and universal logic of mathematics, he systematically discounts the philosophical and scientific traditions that precede him.[4] Rather than rely on traditional modes of analysis, which are often marked by doubt and abstraction, mathematics frames his search for philosophical truth. In particular, he endeavors to master his thought, to eradicate all forms of doubt, and to enter into the indubitable. For Descartes, the rational subject is a figure of self-coincidence because it is entirely disembodied, estranged from materiality and otherness. By operating in a space of pure intellect, he puts forth a model in which language and thought coincide in order to eradicate the play of representation and its discursive modes. [5] Despite the emergence of the rational subject, much of Classical literature questions and resists this figuration of subjectivity and the transparent status of language. In particular, epistolary fiction represents a site of resistance to the paralyzing grip of Cartesian subjectivity, a literary space that embodies the shifting nature of language, images, and representation.

According to Foucault, this resistance is emblematic of the shift that occurs during the Classical period. During the Renaissance, the theory of the sign is predicated on three, distinct elements: "ce qui était marqué, ce qui était marquant, et ce qui permettait de voir en ceci la marque de cela; or ce dernier élément, c'était la ressemblance; le signe marquait dans la mesure où il était 'presque la même chose' que ce qu'il désignait" (Foucault, *Les Mots* 78). Contrary to the ternary conceptualization of the sign, the seventeenth-century marks the emergence of a strict binary organization of the sign. And as such, there is no longer a secret affinity between the signified and the signifier; rather, "les mots et les choses vont se séparer" (Foucault, *Les Mots* 58). From this point on, language belongs to the order of representation:

> À l'âge classique, rien n'est donné qui ne soit donné à la représentation; mais par le fait même, nul signe ne surgit, nulle parole ne s'énonce, aucun mot ou aucune proposition ne vise jamais aucun contenu si ce n'est par le jeu d'une représentation qui se met à distance de soi, se dédouble et se réfléchit en une autre représentation qui lui est équivalente. Les représentations ne s'enracinent pas dans un monde auquel elles emprunteraient leurs sens; elles s'ouvrent d'elles-mêmes sur un espace qui leur est propre, et dont la nervure interne donne lieu au sens. Et le langage est là, en cet écart que la représentation établit à soi-même. (Foucault, *Les Mots* 92)

If, in the past, the word had been assigned, as Foucault observes, the task of representing thought, the Classical period marks the impossibility of reproducing thought in its exactitude. The separation between words and things arguably manifests itself as a loss that fiction is continuously trying to recuperate and overcome. Language henceforth constitutes a system of signs whose function is defined in/through an economy of representation, thus eliding its

material role. In effect, the shift to the binary concept of the sign marks a new way of understanding language that is no longer in reference to the world, but—like mathematics—in a relation of doubling to itself.

Since language is no longer rooted in a world that gives it meaning, many Classical texts are haunted by the fact that there is no primitive act of signification only an endless play of signifying references. In my view, the shift Foucault discusses is emblematized in the letter and the problems attendant to securing representation and signification through writing. This dissertation therefore proposes to examine the manner in which the letter discloses a fundamental anxiety concerning the difficulty of transmitting and securing meaning. Can the sender control the reception and dissemination of his or her message? As outlined above, letter writing manuals provide the semblance of control by implicating the larger structure that governs this practice: a framework defined by an addressee, a message, and a signature. In theory, written correspondence provides the semblance of reciprocity or of a kind of open circuity between two predetermined parties. In particular, a point of correspondence structures the writers' discourse, thereby creating a construct in which each party actively engages the other's message. And as such, a relation of agreement and reciprocity traditionally emerges within this space of exchange.

In spite of the constituent elements of the epistolary framework, the letter as signifier is not bound to its origin (the scene of writing), and consequently neither the sender nor the recipient can determine, with absolute certainty, its meaning. As a result, a kind of loss frames both the scene of writing and reading for the truth of the letter eludes both of the correspondents. The works of three seventeenth-century French authors, Gabriel de Guilleragues (*Lettres portugaises*, 1669), Madame de Sévigné (*Correspondance*, 1725), and Madame de Lafayette (*La Princesse de Clèves*, 1678), each to a different extent, offer a rich reflection on the

inherent difficulty of negotiating this space of exchange. In each of these texts, a marked lack of recognition structures the interlocutors' discourse which attests, I believe, to the difficulty of securing, through writing, one's position in relation to the absent other. For the writing subject, the fantasy of the return letter lies in its potential to correspond with the terms set forth in the original address. Through writing, the sender endeavors to inaugurate an economy of exchange in which the letter constitutes a transaction between the correspondents. However, in the texts analyzed in this dissertation, I show how the recipient often assumes the position of interlocutor only to turn away, to regard the other's suffering with ambivalence or indifference. Rather than view addressing as a relation, the recipient abandons the frame that he or she is effectively charged with occupying as addressee.

This problem leads me to examine how the scene of writing gives rise to a space within which the writer attempts to negotiate the ambivalence and indifference that undermine the reciprocity proper to letter writing. How does the other's silence threaten the manner in which the subject understands him or herself? Does the letter reveal the limitations of the self, of a self that is constituted in relation to others, and therefore dependent upon another for recognition? In this way, epistolary correspondence discloses a fundamental need for recognition or for the desire to locate and find oneself in the return address. While the study of epistolary correspondence has elicited extensive and sustained critical interest, I approach the figure of the letter somewhat differently by examining the reoccurring figures of silence and indifference as they structure and govern interpersonal exchange.

To critically engage this problematic, the works of Roland Barthes, Jacques Derrida, and Michel Foucault are especially pertinent to my project.[6] In *Fragments d'un discours amoureux,* Roland Barthes' depiction of the anguish of silence underscores the indeterminacy that plagues

the sender's position: "De l'écoute distante nait une angoisse de décision: dois-je poursuivre, discourir 'dans le désert'? Il y a faudrait une assurance que précisément la sensibilité amoureuse ne permet pas. Dois-je m'arrêter, renoncer ? Ce serait avoir l'air de me vexer, de mettre en cause l'autre, et de là donner le départ d'une 'scène'. C'est une fois de plus de piège" (200).[7] Before the other who does not respond, the subject can either await the other's response or abandon the circle of addressing. However, as Barthes notes, either decision implicates the subject's continued suffering. To address the other constitutes a precarious venture for indifference, silence, and ambivalence often undermine the reciprocity proper to this mode of communication. This is to suggest that without the presence of a willing recipient, the sender perceives the threat of composing letters that will remain untransformed and unaddressed.

While each of these works belongs to a different literary tradition, I will focus on what unites them, namely, the manner in which each author destabilizes the conventions proper to this mode of communication to reveal the instability of the letter and the difficulty of uniting the correspondents within a space of shared, mutual exchange. Rather than instantiate the communicative act, the letter appears to perpetuate a dynamic of non-recognition and non-correspondence, thus leading to a sense of alienation both in relation to self and other. In the chapters that follow, I will demonstrate that the letter often subverts the very exchange that it is charged with meditating. As a result, the recipient encounters the letter as an impasse, a device that presents a maddening image of the self for it neither confirms nor denies, with any surety, one's position in relation to the absent other. And as we shall see, the other's indifference thrusts the writer's position into crisis for she upholds the letter only to perceive a darkened image, the place absented by the other and subsequently her non-presence or erasure.

When first published anonymously in 1669, *Lettres portugaises traduites en français* was presented as the authentic correspondence of a heartbroken Portuguese nun, Mariana Alcoforado. Despite the letters' presumed authenticity, there were early claims that attributed authorship to the French nobleman, Gabriel-Joseph de Lavergne, comte de Guilleragues. During his lifetime, Guilleragues never in fact acknowledged his role as author. While there is ample scholarship in favor of the work's authenticity, it is most often received as a work of fiction. In five unsigned and unaddressed letters, the heroine reconstructs the events preceding the officer's departure and pleads for his return. Rather than tend toward a kind of transparency between addresser and addressee, the heroine's discourse is riddled with baseless conjectures, digressions, and contradictions. In view of these inconstancies, Leo Spitzer, M.J. Muratore, and Jean-Michel Racault, among others, posit her work as a fictitious and autonomous enterprise that more closely resembles a dramatic monologue than epistolary correspondence. Read in this manner, the implication is that the letters are no longer letters, but five artificial entities that contain the heroine's solitary complaint.

This particular reading of *Lettres portugaises* leads me to consider the following questions: what are the consequences of disregarding the letters as letters? And, does the fictive status of this work enable readers to more easily negate the epistolary structure proper to the text? In the wake of such a negation, the following inevitably occurs: the letters are no longer letters. The epistolary framework that informs the nun's experience of unrequited love is reduced to an empty contrivance, a disingenuous form of communication. When there is no destination inscribed within Mariane's narrative, the addresser and the addressee disappear into oblivion. Rather than negate the epistolary framework, I examine the instability of this device to consider larger questions about desire, silence, and indifference. In *Lettres portugaises*, Mariane's letters

do not enter into an economy of exchange for the officer's indifference and silence annul the reciprocity that she so fervently desires. She addresses the officer in hopes of receiving, in the form of a return address, that which affirms her position as beloved. However, following his departure, the play of specularity is forever ruptured, and in its place emerges the love letter, a mournful address sent in search of a truth that would once and for all reinstate her privileged place in relation to him. In this chapter, my contention is that that which truly devastates Mariane is his indifference for she apprehends, in his return letters, the self as an undifferentiated image, a representation that thrusts her position into crisis. I therefore argue that the lover's indifferent and civil declarations mark the symbolic death or annihilation of the couple while signaling the impossibility of sustaining, through writing, this specular image of self.

Following the publication of her *Correspondance* in 1725, Madame de Sévigné was one of the most widely celebrated and read practitioners of epistolary correspondence. While this work is comprised of authentic documents, the marquise's writerly aspirations appear to elide, at least partially, the letters' non-fictional status. From March 1646 to April 1696, she writes over one thousand letters to family and friends, a large portion of which are addressed to her daughter, Madame de Grignan. Those letters destined for her daughter provide the model for an unprecedented and involuntary work of maternal devotion and love. However, Mme de Sévigné's status as a paragon of motherhood has, in recent decades, fallen subject to increased scrutiny in view of the fact that Madame de Simiane, her granddaughter and Mme de Grignan's daughter, intentionally destroyed the letters that her mother addressed to the marquise. Why did Mme de Simiane feel compelled to suppress her mother's half of the exchange? Jacqueline Duchêne, Michèle Longino Farrell, and Katherine Ann Jensen cite Mme de Simiane's decision to silence her mother's voice as evidence of the tension that existed between her grandmother

and mother. In turn, the traditional estimation of the mother recedes, and in its place emerges a more complex image of the mother-daughter relationship.

For the modern reader, the problem nevertheless remains of reconstructing the profile of the missing addressee, Mme de Grignan. In spite of the difficulty of this task, this reading considers the position of the silenced daughter, especially given the mother's often aggressive and intensely emotional discourse. Under the guise of maternal devotion, Mme de Sévigné scripts her daughter's position according to her own will. As such, epistolary correspondence more closely resembles a binding transaction in which the daughter is called to satisfy the mother's demands. I will therefore attempt to show that the maternal address is not predicated on mutual reciprocity, but on the narcissistic return of the mother's image as beloved. The problem of recognition then leads me to analyze the figure of filial obligation as it gives rise to a construct in which the daughter is forever indebted to the mother. Specifically, Mme de Sévigné obliges her daughter to repay her debt, to love her mother with the same fervor and passion that she loves her. Read in this manner, the mother's charge marks a shift from the letter as a communicative device to a transactional mechanism. My contention is that the mother's address symbolically purloins the function of the letter and in doing so supplants the daughter's position as addressee. Rather than contribute to a sense of shared experience, the mother's letters reveal the ambivalence and silence that pervade the women's correspondence.

In the third chapter on Madame de Lafayette's novel *La Princesse de Clèves*, my point of departure is the court of Henri II as it constitutes a closed space within which all elements (narratives, intrigues, and bodies) freely circulate for no discursive act is confined to the moment of enunciation. [8] I suggest that this framework both mediates and prohibits social interaction or the ways in which characters understand themselves in relation to others and to themselves. In

particular, this chapter focuses on moments of exchange during which the interlocutor is at once recognized (the recipient of an address) and denied such recognition (interdiction against speech). In the wake of such encounters, one is left to occupy an unbearable position—most often as the silenced recipient—as determined by the other. By reading closely *La Princesse de Clèves*, this analysis interrogates those moments when one cannot claim, in the form of speech, one's role as subject of enunciation. As a result, the recipient is left with a message whose destiny is never to return to its point of origin, whose single direction marks an irreducible rupture between self and other. Perhaps more problematic is that the interlocutor cannot redress the original message and in doing so transform his or her position into one of activity.

In view of the violence that structures human relations in the novel, I focus on the fundamental role that objects play in how characters endeavor to know other selves with respect to their individual positions and the social structures in which these interactions coalesce. In the novel, a purloined portrait and a lost letter function as pivotal points around which social interactions occur. This is to suggest that the object functions as an instantiation of courtly relations and affiliations, a mobile apparatus that mediates social encounters. Given and taken, the portrait and the letter provide the illusion of proximity to the other, and characters are thus compelled, by any means necessary, to take into possession the esteemed object. Despite the privilege accorded to these objects, I will attempt to show that they can neither secure meaning nor foster a sense of mutual recognition nor correspondence between the involved parties.

CHAPTER ONE

On Leaving No Address: Writing and Indifference in *Lettres portugaises*

…personne n'est encore mort de votre absence, hormis moi.

—Madame de Sévigné, *Correspondance*

When first published anonymously in 1669, *Lettres portugaises traduites en français* was presented as the authentic correspondence of a heartbroken Portuguese nun, Mariana Alcoforado.[9] *Lettres portugaises* is comprised of five letters written by Mariane to a French officer, previously stationed in Portugal, with whom she had a brief affair. Despite the letters' presumed authenticity, there were early claims that reputed this attribution in favor of acknowledging the French nobleman, Gabriel-Joseph de Lavergne, comte de Guilleragues, as author. For centuries, the question of attribution was a central preoccupation of readers and scholars alike. Though there is ample scholarship that maintains the work's authenticity, *Lettres portugaises* is generally received as a work of fiction.[10] Critics such as Leo Spitzer underscore the work's artistic merits, a concept, he argues, that is often overlooked in pursuit of uncovering the true identity of the correspondents. In particular, Leo Spitzer, M.J. Muratore, and Jean-Michel Racault, among others, call attention to the letters' monologic qualities, those moments when Mariane's correspondence more closely resembles a closed self-address rather than a form of dialogic communication.[11] In view of the letters' internal inconstancies and enigmatic structure, many scholars underscore their break from *vraisemblance* as well as the heroine's disingenuous and unreliable discourse.[12]

Read in this manner, the heroine's five letters appear to undermine rather than mimic genuine epistolary correspondence. Epistolarity thus constitutes a "fictitious, autonomous, and impersonal endeavor," whereby Mariane recasts the events preceding the officer's departure

(Muratore, "Loveless Letters" 298). This particular interpretation leads me to consider the following questions: what are the consequences of disregarding the letters as letters? And, does the fictive status of this work enable readers to negate more easily the epistolary structure proper to *Lettres portugaises*? In the wake of such a negation, the following inevitably occurs: the letters are no longer letters, but five artificial entities that contain the heroine's solitary monologue. One could in turn argue that the entire framework that informs her experience of abandonment is reduced to a meaningless contrivance, a disingenuous form of communication. Furthermore, by negating the structure proper to this text, the interlocutor/addressee disappears into oblivion; the officer's non-responsiveness and indifference are no longer significant ellipses that punctuate the narrative and complicate epistolary exchange.[13] Rather, without the epistolary framework, the figure of the address becomes inconsequential for there is no destination inscribed within Mariane's writings.

Rather than efface the structure proper to this text, I believe that it is important to examine the instability of this literary device to consider larger questions about desire, silence, and indifference. My intention is not to disregard the letters' internal contradictions and ambiguities, but to examine how *Lettres portugaises* discloses certain truths that are inextricably linked to the manner in which Mariane chooses to narrate her story—the letter. While the protagonist seeks to convey, through writing, both the devastation of abandonment and the intensity of her passion, the officer is presumably writing out of a sense of obligation and does not reciprocate her affections. Since the reader does not have access to the officer's return correspondence, a silence pervades Mariane's writings, thus leading to the difficult task of reconstructing the profile of the missing addressee. In effect, the only way to access the officer's address is through the heroine's letters. According to Mariane, rather than view addressing as a

relation, the officer assumes the position of interlocutor only to turn away, to regard her suffering with total apathy and unconcern. Unable or unwilling to negotiate the terms set forth in her address, the officer purportedly abandons the frame that he is effectively charged with occupying as addressee.

In theory, written correspondence provides the semblance of reciprocity or of an open circuity between two predetermined parties. Intended to function as a relay between absent individuals, the letter permits for the continuation of communication rather than its radical rupture. Within this space of exchange, a relation of agreement or congruity traditionally emerges, thus enabling subjects to maintain a kind of proximity or closeness despite their separation. Most importantly, by actively engaging the other's message, the writing subject marks his/her participation in a mode of communication based on mutual recognition and consideration. For the sender, the fantasy of the return letter lies in its potential to correspond with the terms set forth in the original address. However, in *Lettres portugaises*, it appears that there is no point of correspondence that structures the lovers' discourse, only the unbearable knowledge of the officer's irremediable absence and indifference. Consequently, for the heroine, the scene of writing constitutes an event that is in many ways more traumatic than the actual abandonment.

In this chapter, I will show that Mariane's letters do not enter into an economy of exchange for she can neither compel the officer's return nor locate her position as beloved in his return address. While the protagonist hopes to discern the truth of her position vis-à-vis the officer, my contention is that she upholds these return letters only to perceive a darkened image, the place absented by the officer and subsequently her non-presence or erasure. This problem leads me to examine how the letter enables Mariane to both negotiate the terms of their

relationship and to envisage eventually an existence that is not solely predicated in relation to her departed lover. For Mariane, the letter as a space of negotiation gives rise to the following conflicts. On the one hand, the heroine posits hyperbolic scenarios to gain the recognition that she so fervently desires. On the other hand, she reproaches and interrogates the officer's infidelity and lack of interest to limit her perceived involvement and desire for his recognition. And finally, I will discuss how the letters bear witness to the constant repositioning of a subject who endeavors to abandon, in quite problematic terms, the circuity of exchange that has hitherto dominated and defined her existence.

I. The Work of (Self)-Addressing

> Il y a des gens si remplis d'eux-mêmes que, lorsqu'ils sont amoureux, ils trouvent moyen d'être occupés de leur passion sans l'être de la personne qu'ils aiment.
>
> —La Rochefoucauld, *Maximes et réflexions diverses*

In the novel, Mariane's letters destabilize and undermine many elements of the structure proper to epistolary correspondence. The heroine composes unaddressed and unsigned letters that are enigmatic, riddled with digressions, baseless conjectures, and contradictions. Rather than tend toward a kind of transparency between addresser and addressee, her address, often explicitly self-referential, constitutes an aporia, a discursive impasse that neither the addressee nor the reader can resolve. That is to suggest that instead of orientating the reader by clearly inscribing her position within the text, the poetic voice resists such inscription, preferring instead to espouse an often enigmatic discourse. Most notably, in the first letter written shortly after her lover's departure, Mariane appears to address not her lover but love personified. I would argue that the

ambiguous structure of her address contributes to the indeterminacy of her position as well as her relation to the officer. This occurs, I believe, because superimposed upon the address intended for the recipient is Mariane's reproachful and desolate self-address. An internal division thus permeates the first letter for her address is in fact double: the opening address shifts from the familiar subject pronoun *tu* to its more formal counterpart *vous*. This grammatical shift has led many to suggest that Mariane first addressees, in an informal manner, her own love (mon amour) before formally addressing her departed lover (mon amant). [14] The difficulty of this reading is further compounded by the fact that her five letters contain neither a superscription nor a signature. Without these textual markers, the reader encounters an address without an address and from this absence emerges a textual lacuna that no one can properly resolve.

The first letter opens with the following appeal: "Considère, mon amour, jusqu'à quel excès tu as manqué de prévoyance. Ah! malheureux! tu as été trahi, et tu m'as trahie par des espérances trompeuses" (Guilleragues 147). The subject of her address is not, as one might expect, an absent recipient, but her love personified. The figuration of love as the scorned interlocutor (tu) marks a splitting for that which was previously constitutive of the subject is now, at least discursively, externalized (tu/mon amour). By constituting herself as the object of her own thoughts, Mariane writes herself as other and then proceeds to reproach this passionate self now addressed as *tu* and *mon amour*. It follows that the burden of guilt lies with the excesses to which her love was prone and not with the officer or herself. Following the heroine's logic, her love was betrayed and subsequently betrayed her with false hopes: "Une passion sur laquelle tu avais fait tant de projets de plaisirs, ne te cause présentement qu'un mortel désespoir qui ne peut être comparé qu'à la cruauté de l'absence qui le cause" (Guilleragues 147). In the wake of such a betrayal, nothing can compare to her love's despair except for the cruelty of the absence

that caused such despair in the first place. The heroine identifies this pain as her own and at the same time she states that not even the ingenuity of her pain can appropriately qualify this absence: “Quoi? cette absence, à laquelle ma douleur, tout ingénieuse qu’elle est, ne peut donner un nom assez funeste…” (Guilleragues 147). What accounts for Mariane’s pain is perhaps the inability to assign this absence a fatal enough signifier. Her pain stands outside or against language, thus escaping discursive representation. One could also argue that Mariane writes in response to this failure, to her inability to qualify, at least discursively, this absence.

Despite the indeterminacy of the opening address, J.M. Pelous argues that it is befitting to first address her love as personified before addressing her lover: “Mais si l’on veut admettre l’amour de l’amour comme l’un des traits fondamentaux de la passion, il devient moins étrange que le premier interlocuteur de Mariane ne soit pas, comme il semblerait naturel, son amant, mais son amour personnifié, c’est-à-dire une sorte de double d’elle-même dont l’existence n’est peut-être pas seulement rhétorique” (“La Figure” 83). By occupying the double position of subject of enunciation and interlocutor, Mariane will bear witness, perhaps more effectively than anyone else, to her own suffering. Inscribed within her first letter is the strange mark of a self-referential testimony, the means by which she scorns her love’s lack of foresight and impetuous projects.

Following the opening apostrophe, Mariane proceeds to describe this absence as that which now constitutes a source of deprivation. In particular, this unnamable absence divests the heroine of the other’s gaze (the unnamed officer) or of the opportunity to look into those eyes in which she saw so much love and in turn experienced complete and utter fulfillment:

> cette absence, à laquelle ma douleur, tout ingénieuse qu’elle est, ne peut donner un nom assez funeste, me privera donc pour toujours de regarder ces yeux dans

> lesquels je voyais tant d'amour, et qui me faisaient connaitre des mouvements qui me comblaient de joie, qui me tenaient lieu de toutes choses, et qui enfin me suffisaient? (Guilleragues 147)

At first glance, this ocular exchange suggests that she is recognized by this other; however, I would argue that seeing is not merely about subjective individuation, but about how the other's desire functions as the precondition by which the subject articulates herself. In the letters, Mariane first articulates herself as a subject (je voyais tant d'amour) in relation to the other's loving eyes (ces yeux). It thus appears that this encounter upholds the construct of her fantasy for these eyes return her image as beloved. Rather than express her desire and risk rejection, she writes herself into this position and wholly invests in the officer's unifying gaze. To be sure, she occupies, at least linguistically, a particular position in relation to this gaze. Under the guise of passivity, Mariane's rhetoric is arguably emblematic of a desire to further entrench her position in relation to the other, the yet to be named French officer. Figured as the object (me*)* of its actions, she is literally acted upon in this passage— *me* faisaient, *me* comblaient de joie, *me* tenaient lieu, *me* suffisaient. The primacy accorded to this encounter seems to occur because of a narcissistic desire for absolute unity and closure. Between the lovers, the specular play of gazes, given and received, creates an interminable exchange within a closed system. In her analysis of *Lettres portugaises,* Peggy Kamuf examines the unifying force of the lover's gaze. She posits that "this adequacy of visual reflection from eye to eye—from source of light to mirror and back again—is closed upon itself in a silent exchange. The nostalgia for that brief moment of the unbroken circle is marked in the inadequacy of the exchange that takes it place—through words which always fall short" (*Fictions* 57). Kamuf also points out that "by breaking the silence, her letters disturb the reflection and reveal cracks in the mirror. The more she writes, the more she

reads in her lover's continued lack of response a declaration which accuses the very notion of *suffisance*" (*Fictions* 58). When the scene of recognition ruptures, writing emerges in the space marked by this unnamable absence. Unfortunately for Mariane, since language is an inadequate intermediary, her address will never succeed in reconstituting this circle of *suffisance*.

Mariane is further compelled to rebuke this absence since it also impairs her sight. Following the officer's departure, the heroine looks no more for tears continually fill her eyes. "Hélas! les miens sont privés de la seule lumière qui les animait, il ne leur reste que des larmes, et je ne les ai employés à aucun usage qu'à pleurer sans cesse, depuis que j'appris que vous étiez enfin résolu à un éloignement qui m'est insupportable, qu'il me fera mourir en peu de temps" (Guilleragues 147). As this passage suggests, the officer's gaze constitutes the singular source of light that animates her eyes. From Mariane's position, the officer's eyes refract, much like a mirror, a light that illuminates her own gaze. Accordingly, his departure marks the loss of this light and her subsequent return to a kind of figurative darkness or blindness. For Thérèse Lassalle-Maraval, this break in exchange marks her painful return to alterity:

> Si dans l'échange de regards, une fusion s'opère— de l'autre à soi, et même de soi à soi— qui fait accéder au sentiment de plénitude qu'exprime le verbe '*suffisaient*', la fin de cet échange rétablit l'altérité exprimée d'abord par la distinction entre '*ces yeux'*—où le déterminant ajoute un effet de mise à distance— et '*les miens*, aggravée pour Mariane de la privation, dans son propre regard, de la '*seule lumière qui les animait*', conséquence de ce retour à l'altérité. Ainsi être privé du regard de l'autre— celui qui vous regarde, celui que vous regardez, et plus encore celui que vous regardez vous regarder dans un jeu spéculaire qui donne une idée de l'infini… (284)

As Lassalle-Maraval points out, the officer's gaze inaugurates a play of specularity (an exchange of gazes given and received) from which she apprehends a notion of the infinite. That is to suggest that his loving gaze offers the promise of absolute coincidence with this projected image of self as beloved. What is perhaps most dangerous about this construct is the following: the force of this projected image becomes a constitutive element of the subject's ego by giving rise to a particular representation of self. As a result, it could be argued that Mariane's perception of selfhood is inextricably bound to this primary identification—the image that she apprehends of herself as object of the officer's desire. Despite the primacy accorded to this encounter, it will become evident that the letter is symptomatic of the impossibility of sustaining this fiction, of coinciding with this particular image of self.

In an attempt to mitigate the pains of unrequited desire, Mariane sends her sighs in search of the officer. Her sighs constitute, in contrast to written discourse, an inarticulate and unmediated form of expression. By generating a new mode of expression or communicative framework, Mariane seeks to overcome the inherent inadequacy and immobility of her position. Whereas the beloved is mobile, perpetually leaving, and abandoning; the lover is figured as sedentary, immobile.[15] Confined to the convent, Mariane vainly attempts, through her sighs, to locate the officer: "J'envoie mille fois le jour mes soupirs vers vous. Ils vous cherchent en tous lieux…" (Guilleragues 147-8). Much to her dismay, these sighs do not reach or mingle with the other and return instead as vacuous sounds, a deafening reminder of his absence. In "Unguarded Hearts: Transgression and Epistolary Form in Aphra Behn's *Love-Letters* and the *Portuguese Letters*," Warren Chernaik contends that the lover's complaint must remain unfilled to survive and that absence is not an impediment to love, but its necessary condition: "the forsaken maiden has long been a staple of literature. By its nature, the lover's complaint, whether spoken by a

man or a woman, must be unrequited and, in a real sense, unheard: it is a message that fails to reach its destination" (13). It is interesting to note that her sighs remain unrequited, and yet a message returns that is destined for her:

> …et ils ne me rapportent, pour toute récompense de tant d'inquiétudes, qu'un avertissement trop sincère que me donne ma mauvais fortune, qui a la cruauté de ne souffrir pas que je me flatte, et qui me dit à tous moments: Cesse, cesse, Mariane infortunée, de te consumer vainement, et de chercher un amant que tu ne verras jamais; qui a passé les mers pour te fuir, qui est en France au milieu des plaisirs, qui ne pense pas un seul moment à tes douleurs, et qui te dispense de tous ces transports, desquels il ne te sait aucun gré. (Guilleragues 148)

It could be contended that the self-referential nature of this message further fragments her address while at the same acting as an internal narrative, a kind of meta-commentary that reveals a truth that she has hitherto denied: his non-return. Despite the force and clarity of this narrative, Mariane continues to write, to deny the truth that is inscribed, from the very beginning, in her address.

Rather than accept defeat, Mariane takes up arms and invests in the performativity proper to epistolarity: the letter as an act of communication. Peter Brooks qualifies the letter as a speech act, "as an instrument, even as a weapon, as a linguistic artifact that does not so much reflect reality but create it" (540). Unable to escape the realm of language, the writing subject is therefore "intent on creating a reading situation that is itself part of the story, that itself will further the erotic action" (Brooks 541). For instance, Mariane invents a narrative at the expense of the truth: "Je vois bien que vous demeurez en France sans de grands plaisirs, avec une entière liberté; la fatigue d'un long voyage, quelque petite bienséance, et la crainte de ne répondre pas à

mes transports vous retiennent…" (Guilleragues 165). Upon receipt of the letter, the officer finds himself entrenched in a constructed reality which most likely bears little to no resemblance to his current situation. In effect, the officer receives a letter in which his conduct is clearly scripted from without, determined by Mariane according to her own desire.

By virtue of its mobility, the letter serves as the missing link between the correspondents, the imagined connection that unites them. It is precisely this virtual or imagined connection that compels the writer to take up arms, to write in order to overcome the difference upon which epistolary correspondence is predicated. Brooks also observes that "we may sense here that beyond the alterity implied by, necessitated by, epistolary exchange, there is an ideal of fusion that two lovers would become one, the barriers between discrete beings would be broken down, and the burden of self-consciousness and egotism momentarily lifted" (541). Though the destiny inscribed within Mariane's address is one of absolute fusion (*suffisance*) between the lovers, I would argue that this fantasy constitutes a veritable death sentence. In other words, such a fantasy ultimately betrays itself by leading to the destruction or dissolution of bodies, of two differentiated subjects. From this perspective, there is no future proper to this fantasy for such a meeting with being produces death, the irremediable destruction of two previously discrete entities.

In truth, despite Mariane's desire for such plenitude, the happiness of being lies in the necessary distance between the subject and itself, the subject and another. Hence, the subject will only remain a subject on the condition that it fails to possess or to appropriate its being. As Branka Arsić notes, "'without' is the only way to be 'with.' … 'With' is another name for distance, the distance between me and me, me and another, me and things in the world, me and the world" (287). As readers, we recognize that this is precisely what Mariane does not know.

She writes to the officer so that she may again disappear into his gaze, to coincide with the projected image (beloved) and in doing so collapse the distance between self and other. One could therefore argue that Mariane is not asking the officer to send her himself, but to send her that which she does not have: herself (Arsić 284). Just as Mariane desires his return and by extension the return of herself, there is an undeniable knowledge of his non-return that permeates her correspondence.

II. Forget-Me-Not

> Si les portraits de nos amis absents nous sont doux, s'ils ravivent leur souvenir, et vaine et trompeuse consolation, allègent le regret de leur absence, combien plus douces sont les lettres qui nous apportent l'empreinte véritable de l'ami absent.
>
> —Seneca, *Lettres à Lucilius*

In a letter addressed to Lucilius, Seneca refers to the signifying capacity of epistolary correspondence. For Seneca, the letter's potential lies in its ability to capture the indelible imprint of one's image, to revive the portrait of an absent friend. The letter accordingly functions as a veritable site of transmission responsible for resuscitating the cherished memory of a departed companion. Though this device provides temporary respite or consolation from the pains of separation, how does one secure this arguably indelible imprint of the absent friend within the letter? Or, does the letter, by virtue of its mimetic form, preclude the apprehension of a singular image of the referent? As I will show in the following pages, Mariane's correspondence attests to the difficulty of securing the officer's position within the text. Whereas she conceives of her letters as artifacts of remembrance, the material instantiation of their brief

affair, the officer's correspondence only further obscures his position vis-à-vis the couple. Upon receipt of his letters, Mariane will find no indelible imprint or portrait of her departed lover. In an analogous manner, the reader, without access to the officer's correspondence, participates in the reconstruction of such memories from an uninformed and thus disadvantaged position. As Janet Altman notes, the reader occupies a double role as witness and detective insofar "as voyeuristic witnesses of one side of this private conversation we are both drawn into its intimacy and distance by its elliptical nature; as audience we must engage in an intellectual exercises (filling in the situational context and the other's lovers half of the dialogue) while overhearing an intensely emotional discourse" ("Portuguese" 164).

Though the reader does not have access to the officer's letters, one can imagine, based on her reproaches, that his prose is devoid of genuine or singular expression. While Mariane seeks to convey both the devastation of abandonment and the depravity of her current condition, the officer writes commonplace declarations, impersonal statements that only further underscore the limited nature of his involvement. Not surprisingly, Mariane speaks out against the injustices of this position: "vous demeurez dans une profonde indifférence, sans m'écrire que des lettres froides, pleines de redites; la moitié du papier n'est pas remplie, et il parait grossièrement que vous mourez d'envie de les avoir achevées" (Guilleragues 164). Rather than reflect the specificities of their love, his letters are purportedly filled with vacuous declarations that fail to convey the singularity of his feelings. Although the officer strips epistolary exchange of any sense of intimacy or specificity, Jean-Michel Racault calls attention to the fact that Mariane never responds to his civil letters: "Révélatrice est à cet égard la brutalité avec laquelle Mariane disqualifie le message de l'autre, renvoyant à l'insignifiance des lettres qu'elle se refuse à considérer comme de 'vraies' lettre et auxquelles—l'a-t-on remarqué ? – elle ne *répond* jamais"

(103). As Racault notes, Mariane, in refusing to respond to his messages, perpetuates the very cycle that she is repeatedly condemning. Given her position as the abandoned woman, could she ever address him from a position radically different from her current one? I would argue that the officer is not interested in receiving a response that mirrors his polite exchange of civilities. Rather, for the officer, epistolary correspondence is a matter of courtesy and does not reflect a genuine investment on his part.

Since Mariane cannot ultimately abandon her position in order to mirror the officer's generic expression of civility, she condemns his frequent recourse to trite and clichéd remarks: "Ne remplissez plus vos lettres de choses inutiles…" (Guilleragues 149). Rather than respond in earnest to her original address, the officer breaks the circuitry of exchange by sending letters filled with civil pleasantries and prosaic statements. Implicit in his address, I believe, is a kind of refusal or denial to uphold the other's image as such. Contrary to Mariane's desire for the return letter as that which discloses the truth of her original address, to correspond with the sentiments and terms set forth therein, the officer's letters forget or annihilate the original address. To a certain extent, polite and courteous letters leave no address, are destined for no one in particular and therefore for anyone. By addressing Mariane from this position, it could be concluded that the officer refuses to view addressing as a relation. In truth, Mariane writes to a recipient who cannot meet the demands of her letters, who refuses to recognize her difference or singularity as such. Given the presence of divergent sentiments, the sender and the recipient are operating within different affective registers, and it follows that their language bears the marks of this difference. Each sender is thus faced with the difficult task of receiving an address whose content does not match his/her sentiments.

The heroine then proceeds to condemn the officer's appeal to remember him: "…ne m'écrivez plus de me souvenir de vous. Je ne puis vous oublier, et je n'oublie pas aussi que vous m'avez fait espérer que vous viendriez passer quelque temps avec moi" (Guilleragues 149). As this passage demonstrates, the very impossibility of forgetting the officer encounters an appeal to memory as a generic and empty construct. In the officer's address, there is presumably no discernible referent and, therefore, such an appeal constitutes a call to forget him as well as the heroine. That is, the officer's disingenuous request is predicated on its own undoing for he refuses to participate in writing as the means by which he invokes the memory of the other. To a certain extent, as his indifferent and civil tone suggests, he writes himself out of these memories, abandons the frame that Mariane implores him to inhabit.

Mariane's reproach also discloses the following dynamic: for the officer, the other is without difference and thus not worthy of recognition or interest. I would argue that the officer's response symbolically denies her subjective position and in doing so effaces her scriptural presence. What is perhaps more painful is the realization that such a lack of concern persists despite his presumed knowledge of her current state. Mariane writes: "…mais votre indifférence m'est insupportable; vos impertinentes protestations d'amitié et les civilités ridicules de votre dernière lettre m'ont fait voir que vous aviez reçu toutes celles que je vous ai écrites, qu'elles n'ont causé dans votre cœur aucun mouvement, et que cependant vous les avez lues" (Guilleragues 171). In spite of the vulnerability of her position, there is no point of recognition in the officer's address, no point to which Mariane can appeal to gain the consideration and recognition that she so fervently desires. Moreover, by responding to her letters in such a manner, the officer assumes the position of interlocutor only to turn away, to regard her suffering with total apathy and unconcern. Interestingly enough, since there is no consideration for the

individual as such, jealously and anger are preferable to the vacuity of indifference: “Hélas! j’ai souffert vos mépris, j’eusse supporté votre haine et toute la jalousie que m’eut donnée l’attachement que vous eussiez pu avoir pour une autre, j’aurais eu, au moins quelque passion à combattre, mais votre indifférence m’est insupportable” (Guilleragues 170). His hatred, although not favorable, marks an engagement with the other. In contrast, indifference precludes any notion of relation. It is for this reason that Mariane would prefer to be the referent of his animosity than a meaningless abstraction.

The heroine may indeed write of the impossibility of forgetting the other, but how does she remember the other? And, what are the implications of this remembering? As the letters demonstrate, one’s subjective position and desire necessarily mediate the construction of memory: “Comment se peut-il faire que les souvenirs des moments si agréables soient devenus si cruels? et faut-il que, contre leur nature, ils ne servent qu’à tyranniser mon cœur?” (Guilleragues 148). Throughout her narrative, Mariane claims certain memories as her own, as possessions that either condemn or reaffirm her position as beloved. Claudio Guillén considers the ways in which the letter propels the sender toward the inventiveness and transformation of facts, a phenomenon that consequently leads to the ambivalence of this product (4-5). In his insightful analysis, he argues that “it is in the imaginary impulse connecting the writer with the addressee that we find the particular equivocation of the letter. The ambiguity of references to the everyday environment in which the communication takes place is surpassed by the blurred identity of that psychic presence, that second person, to and for whom the letter is written” (7). As Guillén notes, the imaginary impulse that unites the writer and the sender invariably permeates the scene of writing (the inscription of memories). This leads Mariane to invent, perhaps at the expense of the

truth, a history that is narcissistically reassuring, and an address in which she scripts her position for fear of its barely distinguishable presence in the mind of the recipient.

Most notably, in the fourth letter, Mariane recalls a story that illustrates this tendency toward the invention and transformation of lived experience. She reconstructs their first meeting as a curious scene of seduction, a violent recollection that causes her to spend the remainder of the day in tears. [16] According to her narrative, she first noticed the officer while standing on the balcony of the convent. At the threshold between the interior of the convent and the exterior world, the officer's position is just beyond the limit of her experience. For this reason, vision mediates their encounter or more precisely her perception and interpretation of his actions:

> j'étais sur ce balcon le jour fatal que je commençai à sentir les premiers effets de ma passion malheureuse: il me sembla vous vouliez me plaire, quoique vous ne me connussiez pas, je me persuadai que vous m'aviez remarquée entre toutes celles qui étaient avec moi, je m'imaginai que, lorsque vous vous arrêtiez, vous étiez bien aise que je vous visse mieux, et j'admirasse votre adresse et votre bonne grâce, lorsque vous poussiez votre cheval… (Guilleragues 164)

Unable to substantiate his affections for her, Mariane appropriates his voice to guarantee her position of center. From the liminal position on the balcony, Mariane determines that it is the officer who wants to please *her,* who notices *her,* and who wants to be seen by *her*. Here, we witness the extent to which Mariane displaces her role as subject to become the object of his desire. As Andreas Illner notes in his reading of this scene: "Maintenir la position d'objet procure cependant un avantage: là, où un aveu d'amour aurait pu rencontrer la limite possible du refus de l'autre, la souffrance peut se perpétuer interminablement et sans limites, élaborer les conditions de sa servitude sans restrictions" (65). It thus appears that Mariane radically limits the

risk involved with expressing one's desire by assuming the role of object to diminish or negate any problems that might arise where the officer to express contrary emotions.

Following this fatal day, Mariane willingly succumbs to the passion that *his* love and *his* recognition engendered in her. With this knowledge she can then disclose her passion for him: "enfin je m'intéressais secrètement à toutes vos actions, je sentais bien que vous ne m'étiez point indifférent, et je prenais pour moi tout ce que vous faisiez" (Guilleragues 164-5). Where one might expect to find two mutually compatible subjects, one finds a closed dynamic in which the subject subsumes the other. This seems to occur because the structure of the couple is such that the sole referent of the officer's desire is Mariane. In *Narcisse Romancier: essai sur la première personne dans le roman*, Jean Rousset examines the discursive disclosure that Mariane's narrative attempts to effect. He argues that " …tout ce qui n'est pas *je* et *vous* n'a pas droit à l'existence et se trouve littéralement exclu de ce circuit clos formé par une passion qui ne connait rien en dehors d'elle-même" (63). The letter provides Mariane with a space in which she can recount a story that is narcissistically reassuring for, from her position on the balcony, she presents a scene that effects a closure for it determines her privileged role as object of the officer's desire.

Mariane's memory of their first encounter represents the fulfillment of her desire, but it cannot be sustained, I believe, when confronted with reality. Namely, Mariane claims to have prefigured the officer's departure and his intention to abandon her all along. It is thus difficult to situate, at least temporally, the scene of abandonment since she claims that his departure was always already inscribed in his arrival. "Je m'apercevais trop agréablement que j'étais avec vous pour penser que vous seriez un jour éloigné de moi. Je me souviens pourtant de vous avoir dit quelquefois que vous me rendriez malheureuse..." (Guilleragues 152). From the beginning, his

conduct is suspect and yet she acquiesces. Rather than reproach his duplicitous claims, she finds pleasure in abandoning herself to him and in assuming the role of abused lover: “Je prenais plaisir à vous les sacrifier, et m’abandonner à l’enchantement et à la mauvaise foi de vos protestations” (Guilleragues 152). Mariane claims that she takes pleasure in sacrificing herself to him, in becoming sensible to his charms, and yet the notion of enchantment seems to suggest otherwise. Enchantment denotes submission, ostensibly against one’s will, to another. According to Mariane, the officer enchanted her, exerted a kind of charm over her in order to seduce her.

Despite the implicit violence of enchantment, Mariane refrains from condemning his conduct for fear of severing their relationship completely. Instead, she writes in defense of the man whom she adores and vindicates his actions to entrench further her relationship to him. “Mais non, je ne puis me résoudre à juger si injurieusement de vous, et je suis trop intéressée à vous justifier: je ne veux point m’imaginer que vous m’avez oubliée” (Guilleragues 148). As this passage demonstrates, her position is not a disinterested one for she maintains his innocence so as to defend against being forgotten and in turn forgetting the self (“vous ne devriez pas me maltraiter comme vous faites, par un oubli qui me met au désespoir”). Following the logic of the text, the officer cannot, in good conscience, forget the woman who continues to fiercely justify his actions. Moreover, in view of her fear of being forgotten, Mariane presents the officer with a challenge: “Je vous défie de m’oublier entièrement” (Guilleragues 153). By summoning the officer to contest this declaration, she seeks to maintain the tenuous connection that exists between them. That is, she presents a challenge whereby evidence of his victory (his forgetting of her) must necessarily arrive in the form of a letter, a return response that undermines his very claim to success.

Although Mariane writes in defense of being forgotten, she envisages, albeit in problematic terms, an existence that is not solely predicated in relation to the officer. In the third letter, she first hypothesizes taking the necessary efforts to recover from her passion were she to know for certain that the officer had forgotten her: "J'avais même pensé à quelques faibles projets de faire tous les efforts dont je serais capable pour me guérir, si je pouvais connaître bien certainement que vous m'eussiez tout à fait oubliée…" (Guilleragues 155). This hypothetical clause reveals that Mariane's recovery is contingent on the officer's disavowal of their affair and by extension her very existence. Beyond a simple lapse in memory, the heroine seeks irrefutable proof that the officer has forgotten her. However, in pursuit of certainty, doubt and ambiguity are constitutive elements of her rhetoric. Most notably, the subordinate pluperfect subjunctive clause (que vous m'eussiez tout à fait oubliée) indicates a state of unreality for this action (that of forgetting the other) will remain unrealized. Such a statement engages the other in an impossible task for were she to gain evidence of such a forgetting, how would this occur? Any instance of this—the denial of one's memory of the other—seems to constitute a contradiction in terms. If the officer is able to disavow consciously the other's existence, does this not suggest the contrary: that the officer remembers her? Can there ever be an address without memory? Can the officer address Mariane and maintain a posture of disavowal and forgetting? Read in this manner, a return address, regardless of its contents, would preclude Mariane's recovery and further perpetuate a dynamic, albeit a tenuous one, between the lovers. In effect, there is no evidence that can appropriately satisfy the terms set forth in her hypothesis. In pursuit of undeniable proof of such forgetting, Mariane posits a hypothetical scenario that ironically precludes the apprehension of such knowledge.

Despite the pretense for leading us nowhere, Mariane's hypothesis is arguably emblematic of a desire for closure in view of the fact that the officer's silence and tepid declarations are not definite marks of such a forgetting. I would contend that that which truly devastates the heroine is his indifference for it creates a space of unbearable indeterminacy. Elizabeth Berg contends that "his indifference is a function of her indifference—her lack of delineation—in his mind. One might go a step further and suggest that what the letter shows her is precisely a vision of herself *as* uncertainty, as a confused image, as undifferentiated in the mind of heart of the only person whose perception matters, the only source of images" (216). Rather than simply refrain from responding to her, the officer sends an address in which Mariane apprehends herself as a murky, undifferentiated image, a representation that thrusts her position into crisis. There where Mariane expects to encounter her image as differentiated, she meets a vision of herself that is unrecognizable and indistinct.

III. The Tragic Heroine

> She only said, 'My life is dreary,
> He cometh not,' she said;
> She said, 'I am aweary, aweary,
> I would that I were dead!'
> …….
> Then, said she, 'I am very dreary,
> He will not come,' she said;
> She wept, 'I am aweary, aweary,
> Oh God, that I were dead!'
>
> —Tennyson, "Mariana"

In an attempt to elicit a genuine response from the officer, Mariane posits several hypothetical scenarios in which she will willingly die in the name of absolute devotion to the other. However, the threat of death is not unconditional for it is dependent on the following: she

will either commit suicide or die if given proof that his suffering is equal in magnitude to hers. Here, her letters disclose an unrelenting desire for symmetry of affect. In particular, the heroine charges the officer with mirroring her state, with serving as a perfect reflection of her current condition. Unable to bear the weight of her grief, Mariane's narrative tends toward the satisfaction of the following fantasy: estranged from the outside world, the grief-stricken officer leads a deplorable existence and continuously laments her absence. "Je me tuerais, ou je mourrais de douleur sans me tuer, si j'étais assurée que vous n'avez jamais aucun repos, que votre vie n'est que trouble et qu'agitation, que vous pleurez sans cesse, et que tout vous est odieux…" (Guilleragues 156). In the event that Mariane gains confirmation of the officer's passion, this moment would not lead to reconciliation between the lovers. Rather, such confirmation, perhaps in the form of a return letter, marks a break in the symmetry of the couple in the form of her death, her commitment to take her own life. Simply put, death or suicide signals both the fulfillment of her desire (knowledge of the officer's grief and agitation) and the very impossibility of reconciliation with the officer (her death). The heroine posits a logic whereby her absence (death) is a necessary condition for his presence (confirmation of his passion). Her death also guarantees the officer's continued suffering, his position of interminable grief for the woman whom *he* first abandoned. It is important to note that Mariane's reasoning collapses the structure proper to the couple for the officer (the one who abandons) is called to occupy her position as the one who is abandoned. For the officer, the outside world would thus become an inconsequential abstraction, an impoverished space that contains only harsh reminders of her absence.

Mariane closes the third letter with a similar proposition in which the officer would effectively inhabit her position following her death:

> Adieu, promettez-moi de me regretter tendrement, si je meurs de douleur, et qu'au moins la violence de ma passion vous donne du dégout et de l'éloignement pour toutes choses; cette consolation me suffira, et s'il faut que je vous abandonne pour toujours, je voudrais bien ne vous laisser pas à une autre. (Guilleragues 158)

Inscribed within her closing statement is an imperative ("promettez-moi") that demands the execution of certain terms in the event of her death. The obligatory nature of this farewell is all the more problematic for it engages the officer in a promise (to regret her absence) whose terms he cannot negotiate in the event of her death. However, I would contend that the notion of consolation ("cette consolation me suffira") undermines the apparent finality of this closing statement. That is to suggest that an instance of consolation implies a return letter, continued correspondence that either confirms or denies the officer's involvement or complicity as such. Moreover, where she to receive such a mark of consolation, she could then abandon the officer, confident that he would remain faithful to her memory. Following the heroine's logic, death enables her to abandon, once and for all, the officer and to ensure *his* position of suffering. In the fantasy presented here, rather than pursue other woman, the officer withdraws from the outside world in favor of dedicating himself to her cherished memory.

Interestingly enough, the manner in which Mariane qualifies the officer's suffering is structurally analogous to her current situation. She writes: "Je suis sans cesse persécutée avec un extrême désagrément par la haine et par le dégout que j'ai pour toutes choses; ma famille, mes amis et ce couvent me sont insupportables; tout ce que je suis obligée de voir, et tout ce qu'il faut que je fasse de toute nécessité, m'est odieux" (Guilleragues 163). In reaction to the experience of abandonment, the subject's hostility, first projected onto the outside world, is later transformed into a loss of self: "Qu'est-ce que je deviendrai, et qu'est-ce que vous voulez que je fasse?"

(Guilleragues 155). It is evident that Mariane is in search of a response to the following question: "Who am I?" Much like her predecessor Héloïse, Mariane anticipates the answer to this question in the form of a return letter. In her reading of Abélard and Héloïse's correspondence, Branka Arsić discusses the address as that which has the potential to give the addressee back to herself: "address the letter to me, address me, *constitute me into an object*. When you write for me that I am for you an object, you will actually be writing to me that I am for myself a subject; when you write to me what kind of object I am for you, you will be writing what kind of subject I am for myself, you will be answering the question: 'Who am I'…" (284). Mariane hopes to receive confirmation of her role as object in order to become a subject for herself, and yet there is no answer to this question, only the deafening silence of the officer's indifference.

Without this confirmation, Mariane becomes a destination without an address, a subject bereft of identity. The following confession reveals the depravity of her existence, or more accurately, her non-existence: "Je ne sais ni ce que je suis, ni ce que je fais, ni ce que je désire: je suis déchirée par mille mouvements contraires" (Guilleragues 156).[17] Figuratively torn asunder and unable to reconstitute her identity, the fragmented subject becomes other to herself. In the wake of his departure, "she is left with nothing in which to mirror herself" (Berg 215). One could therefore argue that the officer's letter has the potential to save her, to address her and in doing so give her back to herself. However, in this text, where one expects to meet the return of one's image as beloved, one encounters the generic address, a device that provides the semblance of remembering only to forget, to reduce the heroine's presence to an abstraction.

Since the officer refuses to participate in the circle of addressing (the address, the sender, and the recipient), Mariane recasts the purpose of the letter to now serve as a sign of her betrayal. She accomplishes this by presenting death as the ultimate symbol of devotion, and in turn her

letters (proof that she continues to live) betray her pledge to die for the other, to die in the name of a singular passion. While writing she loses consciousness, a kind of momentary death, and reawakens only to experience the gravity of her betrayal: "…je me défendis de revenir à une vie que je dois perdre pour vous, puisque je ne puis la conserver pour vous; je revis enfin, malgré moi, la lumière, je me flattais de sentir que je mourais d'amour" (Guilleragues 148). In effect, she must take her own life to prove her devotion to the officer. In the logic presented here, life as an act of conservation constitutes a grave betrayal against the officer: "Je vis, infidèle que je suis, et je fais autant de choses pour conserver ma vie que pour la perdre" (Guilleragues 157). Before the other who does not respond to her mournful complaint, Mariane poses the following question: "si je vous aimais autant que je vous l'ai dit mille fois, ne serais-je pas morte il y a longtemps? Je vous ai trompé, c'est à vous à vous plaindre de moi" (Guilleragues 157). Blame now lies with the heroine who has failed to provide irrefutable proof of her love in the form of death.

Since her life now functions as a sign of betrayal, it thus follows, according to Mariane, that her disloyalty demands punishment. One could argue that such a demand discloses a violent desire to engage the officer in an inextricable bind, to position him at the center of a spectacular act of sacrifice: "Je vous ai trahi, je vous en demande pardon. Mais ne me l'accordez pas! Traitez-moi sévèrement! Ne trouvez point que mes sentiments soient assez violents! Mandez-moi que vous voulez que je meure d'amour pour vous! Et je vous conjure de me donner ce secours, afin que je surmonte la faiblesse de mon sexe…" (Guilleragues 158).[18] She begs him to accord her this final aid so that she may once and for all rectify her former transgressions as well as surmount the weaknesses of the feminine sex. This troubling passage discloses a construct in which the officer, the subject of enunciation, utters a performative address whose response

arrives in the form of her death: "Mandez-moi que vous voulez que je meure d'amour pour vous!" His address would effectively perform that which Mariane has been unable to realize: her own death. In this scenario, the officer intervenes to deliver an address that engages the passionate subject in a deadly experience. In his analysis of this passage, Jean-Michel Racault underscores the paradoxical function of her perverse request: "L'appel masochiste à la souffrance infligée s'inverse ici en un mouvement sadique: l'entier renoncement à soi est aussi le moyen de réduire l'autre à sa merci, le masque paradoxal d'un impérialisme du moi…" (103). By according absolute power to the officer, Mariane relinquishes her agency in hopes of convincing him to participate in a perverse struggle to prove one's devotion through death. Moreover, the heroine maintains her guilt so that the officer will deliver the final sentence, and she can then derive a sadistic pleasure from executing the terms set forth herein. It thus appears that her letters are the not-so-polite means by which she attempts to realize his submission to her perverse will and to implicate his presence in this final act of sacrifice.

Although Mariane does not ultimately take her own life, she posits a tragic end as that which will preserve the officer's memory of her: "Une fin tragique vous obligerait sans doute à penser souvent à moi, ma mémoire vous serait chère, et vous seriez, peut-être sensiblement touché d'une mort extraordinaire" (Guilleragues 158). As this passage reveals, it is only through death that Mariane can secure, once and for all, her position vis-à-vis the officer. Moreover, it could be argued that the heroine's recourse to a spectacular death discloses the reality of her current situation: she writes to a man who has ostensibly forgotten her in pursuit of another. In the fourth letter, Mariane claims that he no longer remembers her except when sacrificing her for some new passion: "Vous avez connu le fond de mon cœur et de ma tendresse, et vous avez pu vous résoudre à me laisser pour jamais, et à m'exposer aux frayeurs que je dois avoir, que vous

ne vous souvenez plus de moi que pour me sacrifier à une nouvelle passion" (Guilleragues 163). For Mariane, to sacrifice the other to another implies both a remembering and a forgetting of one's former lover. Here, the new lover takes the place of the old and in doing so appears to efface the former's existence. It is for this reason, I believe, that Mariane appeals to death for it promises to immortalize her, to ensure her symbolic and continued presence in the officer's life. Simply put, death would accord Mariane the status of beloved and tragic heroine that she could not have otherwise attained in life.

Though Mariane never attains this status, the figure of death continues to foreground her relation to the officer. The text itself suggests that writing constitutes the sole conduit through which Mariane can defer the other's radical absence as a kind of symbolic death. Confined to the convent and unable to remediate her situation, Mariane writes in order to distort and manipulate the unbearable absence that frames her existence. As Barthes notes, "cette mise en scène langagière éloigne la mort de l'autre. … Manipuler l'absence, c'est allonger ce moment, retarder aussi longtemps que possible l'instant où l'autre pourrait basculer sèchement de l'absence dans la mort" (22). The abandoned and immobile subject writes to keep the other alive, to postpone the fatal moment of the other's death or radical disappearance. Before the imminent threat of this loss, Mariane writes, invests in the destination inscribed within the address as the final attempt to reach the officer. Unfortunately, as I have shown above, her pleas encounter his unyielding indifference, an affect that will sustain no relation, no connection with the woman whom he abandoned. How does one write a letter when the addressee refuses to view addressing as a relation? I would argue that his indifference effectively annihilates the structure proper to letter writing while calling into question the very means by which Mariane seeks to express her love. For this reason, the destination (the officer as addressee) inscribed within her address precludes

its return. In other words, Mariane writes to the officer, but she will not receive in return the other's confirming response. Her threats and her pleas therefore follow a single, non-returnable trajectory whose destiny is neither to arrive nor to return.

IV. The Passivity of Passion

In response to Mariane's precarious situation, the nuns, her cherished confidents, assign her the position of portière. Acting as an agent that determines entry and exit, Mariane contends that the nuns must be as mad as her to have assigned her such a responsibility. "L'on m'a fait depuis peu portière en ce couvent; tous ceux qui me parlent croient que je suis folle, je ne sais ce qui je leur réponds et il faut que les religieuses soient aussi insensées que moi, pour m'avoir crue capable de quelques soins" (Guilleragues 153). The significance of this post evidently escapes Mariane's comprehension. Though the portière resides at the threshold between the interior and the exterior, she is asked to act as an agent that determines entry and exit into the convent. It seems then that the nun is symbolically offered a position whose implied agency differs from her current passivity within the space of writing. While Mariane will later come to understand the letter as a space in which she can voice her own desire, her present resistance to this position attests to the pervasive nature of her passivity. Here, the passionate subject must suffer itself, experience itself as other. It is for this reason, I believe, that Mariane explicitly rejects the position of portière for it presents an image of herself ("capable de quelque soins") that is diametrically opposed to her current passivity ("je ne sais ni ce que je suis, ni ce que je fais, ni ce que je desire"). Unable to do otherwise, the passionate subject resides within the liminal space of writing, a space consecrated to the unbridled expression of suffering and mourning.

In the wake of the officer's departure, Mariane finds herself unaddressed, the forgotten recipient whose suffering remains unacknowledged and unmediated. For fear of suffering in vain, there where no one bears witness to her agony, she closes the first letter with the following appeal: "Adieu, je n'en puis plus. Adieu, aimez-moi toujours; et faites-moi souffrir plus de maux" (Guilleragues 150). In a curious turn of phrase, Mariane presents two apparently divergent conditions: love me and make me suffer. In loving me, make me suffer more; address me as the one whom you want to suffer, the victim of your cruelty. I will remain and willingly sacrifice myself to your command to suffer your absence, to suffer myself, to suffer my passion. Mariane is not asking the officer to return, but to position himself at the origin of her suffering and to perpetuate the following scriptural dynamic: addresser/addressee, persecutor/victim, and lover/beloved.

Later in her correspondence, the passionate subject frames her suffering in terms of remaining useful to the other: "Je vous conjure de profiter de l'état où je suis, et qu'au moins ce que je souffre pour vous ne vous soit pas inutile!" (Guilleragues 166). In her mind, the officer will profit from her suffering, derive some kind of benefit or service from her pain. In truth, what Mariane seems to say is: profit from my current condition so as to save me from utter and total uselessness, both for another and for myself. Profit from my suffering, and therefore save me from the image of myself as useless. Mariane's demand reveals something quite telling about the logic of epistolary exchange: by addressing me, present me with an image of myself that I do not in fact possess. In other words, she writes to the officer so that she may receive, in return, an image of herself that would otherwise remain inaccessible: the image of the self that resides with the other or, more specifically, the self as the beloved recipient of the officer's address. In the

event of such confirmation, the heroine would again find herself addressed and rescued from the pain and anonymity of uselessness.

Unable to overcome this sense of powerlessness, Mariane posits scenarios that further entrench her loss of connection to self. In particular, she blindly seeks to attach herself to even the most destructive of arrangements for want of some kind of connection. “Il y a des moments où il me semble que j’aurais assez de soumission pour servir celle que vous aimez…” (Guilleragues 166). It could be argued that the heroine conforms to this perverse modality of existence (serving the officer’s mistress) so as to deny the nothingness that pervades her life. She will therefore offer no resistance to relinquishing her agency, to becoming subject to an external force whose presence guarantees her continued suffering. As we have seen, she will willingly suffer the other, be it the officer or the mistress, in order to belong to someone else.

The possibility of relinquishing one’s passion is subsequently met with the terror of unbearable emptiness. In this context, passion saves the heroine from the silence and vacuity of nothingness. She will therefore gladly remain sensible to the violence of this affect rather than return to a tranquil state of existence. “Pourrais-je survivre à ce qui m’occupe incessamment, pour mener une vie tranquille et languissante? Ce vide et cette insensibilité ne peuvent me convenir” (Guilleragues 163). It is interesting to note the manner in which she qualifies this return. For Mariane, the passivity of passion does not preclude a kind of vitality and violence of existence. Rather, the promise of a return to tranquility is met with languor and insensibility, a total loss of vigor and intensity. It is for this reason that she will not relinquish the violent movements of her passion, but instead expresses gratitude for their presence: “Je vous remercie dans le fond de mon cœur du désespoir que vous me causez, et je déteste la tranquillité où j’ai vécu avant que je vous connusse” (Guilleragues 159). Though the writing subject is figuratively

"déchirée par mille mouvements contraires," she willingly suffers her passion by remaining attached to those misfortunes of which he was and is still the cause: "Cependant il me semble que j'ai quelque attachement pour des malheurs dont vous êtes la seule cause: je vous ai destiné ma vie aussitôt que je vous ai vu et je sens quelque plaisir en vous la sacrifiant" (Guilleragues 147).

Whereas the emptiness of non-passion constitutes a limit, this mode of existence is effectively without limit. Without the imposition of such limits, Mariane dwells in a register in which the intensity of pain resembles pleasure. In effect, this coupling constitutes a discovery, a disclosure of the unknown : "…je ne me plains point de toute la violence des mouvements de mon cœur, je m'accoutume à ses persécutions, et je ne pourrais vivre sans un plaisir que je découvre, et dont je jouais en vous aimant au milieu de mille douleurs" (Guilleragues 162). Unlike the absent other, she can engage her passion for it is an affect that does not fail to constantly disclose new pleasures. Moreover, the excesses of this passionate mode far surpass the officer's feigned affections: "Vous êtes plus à plaindre que je ne suis, et il vaut mieux souffrir tout ce que je souffre, que de jouir des plaisirs languissants que vous donnent vos maîtresses de France" (Guilleragues 153). Here, passion acquires a primal value for it far surpasses the languor of mediocre love. "Pourriez-vous être content d'une passion moins ardente que la mienne? Vous trouverez, peut-être, plus de beauté, mais vous ne trouverez jamais tant d'amour, et tout le reste n'est rien" (Guilleragues 149). Although she cannot in the end secure his presence, she is confident that he will never again find a love equal in fervor and intensity to hers. He may encounter a less ardent passion than hers, but this will neither suffice nor guarantee love in absolute terms.

The problem however remains that the passionate subject cannot escape her current position in order to rectify, once and for all, the wrongs committed against her. I would argue that this mode of existence commits her to a never-ending search for restitution in the form of the officer's return or confirmation of his love. She nonetheless pledges to remain unconditionally faithful to the him: "… je suis résolue à vous adorer toute ma vie, et à ne voir jamais personne…" (Guilleragues 149). Similar to her resolve to love forever the officer, Mariane adores his portrait with the same level of fervor and conviction. Interestingly enough, both declarations are structurally analogous. That is to suggest that in both instances Mariane resolves to adore an image, whether conceived through ideation or art. The heroine's confession reveals the complex function of adoration: "je sors le moins qu'il m'est possible de ma chambre, où vous êtes venu tant de fois et je regarde sans cesse votre portrait, qui m'est mille fois plus cher que ma vie" (Guilleragues 154). Her room, the space in which they presumably consummated their love, now serves as a site of reenactment. Whereas the officer's presence was previously a necessary condition for the lovers' amorous exchange, the portrait stands in for the officer and mediates this reenactment.

Perhaps more problematic is the fact that Mariane privileges the image of the officer over and above her own life. In this sense, the passivity of passion constitutes a threat against her life because the officer's life becomes more important than her own. The portrait inaugurates a curious exchange for her gaze, in contrast to their first meeting recounted in the opening passage, will not encounter the specular return of her image as beloved. [19] It is also worth nothing that Mariane's adoration symbolically effaces the one whom she loves. That is, the structure of adoration is such that the other is reduced to nothing more than an image and can only ever

appear as such. For the mournful heroine, the allure of the portrait lies in its ability to present an immutable and unchanging image of the other in which she can wholly invest.

So that Mariane may once again find herself in possession of something, she asks for supplemental materials by which she can gain insight into his affections and desire. Most notably, she entreats the officer to send her his possessions, specifically a portrait of and letters from the woman with whom he is presumably involved. She yearns to posses these objects, and yet her demand underscores the impossibility of his return and her status as beloved illusory: "Envoyez-moi son portrait avec quelqu'une de ses lettres, et écrivez-moi tout ce qu'elle vous dit!" (Guilleragues 166). Mariane yearns for an intimacy that these items cannot ultimately supplement. Her request also discloses a desire to inhabit the position of voyeur, an overt observer of a private, closed dynamic. Like the officer, where she to receive such items, Mariane would gaze upon the portrait of the woman and read the letters addressed to the officer. And, written in the officer's hand, she would also have an account of what the mistress said and wrote to him. Except for those letters addressed to his mistress, nothing would escape the nun's purview. In contrast to her correspondence with the officer, these particular objects ostensibly bear witness to an unbroken circle of desire, an exchange between lovers.

Mariane also requests portraits of the officer's brother and sister-in-law. "Je voudrais aussi avoir le portrait de votre frère et de votre belle-sœur; tout ce qui vous est quelque chose m'est fort cher, et je suis entièrement dévouée à ce qui vous touche…" (166). Her request is problematic for several reasons. First, her interest lies not in the depiction of the referent's semblance, but the portrait as a material instantiation of their relationship. A relay between subjects, the circulated portraits would confirm, for Mariane, the continuation, and not the radical rupture, of their relationship. Second, under the guise of devotion to the other, Mariane

seeks to collapse the difference that exists between self and other. In other words, her request discloses a desire for a kind of exacting correspondence with regards to that which enters into the officer's purview. In his absence, Mariane desires to gain ownership of all that the officer holds dear (letters, portraits, written accounts of conversations). However, the officer presumably refuses to participate in such an exchange and by doing so mitigate her suffering. Without such an intervention, her suffering remains unmediated, a wounded self to which the other will not attend.

V. Le Droit à l'oubli?

The closing lines of the fourth letter mark the reorientation of Mariane's address in which she confesses that "j'écris plus pour moi que pour vous, je ne cherche qu'à me soulager…" (Guilleragues 168). Here, writing no longer functions with respect to an economy of dependency inasmuch as Mariane figures as the addresser and addressee of her letters. The space of writing appears therefore to constitute a transitional space within which Mariane can inhabit various positions as she learns how to articulate and negotiate her own desire. As David E. Highnam notes, "Mariane is curbing her object-oriented passion, interiorizing it, and establishing a justification for its existence *regardless* of the nature of the object which brought it into being" (375). The written address undergoes a process of disassociation to the extent that it is no longer destined for an external recipient. Despite such a reorientation, the close of the fourth attests to the dreadful prospect of renunciation:

> Adieu, j'ai plus de peine à finir ma lettre, que vous n'en avez eu à me quitter, peut-être, pour toujours. Adieu, je n'ose vous donner mille noms de tendresse, ni

> m'abandonner sans contrainte à tous mes mouvements: je vous aime mille fois plus que ma vie, et mille fois plus que je ne pense ; que vous m'êtes cher! et que vous m'êtes cruel! … Adieu, pardonnez-moi! je n'ose plus vous prier de m'aimer; voyez où mon destin m'a réduite! Adieu. (Guilleragues 167-8)

As this passage demonstrates, Mariane perceives the necessary end of correspondence, and yet she remains unrestrained in speech, an action that threatens to eclipse her repeated farewells. In truth, the thought of abandoning the officer, of bidding him a final farewell is met with the unbearable knowledge of her disappearance as addressee: "Vous ne m'écrivez point, je n'ai pu m'empêcher de vous dire encore cela…" (Guilleragues 168). The heroine may indeed write more for herself than for the officer, but this is not to suggest that the officer's response is any less vital or important. On the contrary, her repeated farewells demonstrate her resistance to abandoning the dialectic proper to epistolary exchange.

The fifth letter marks the cessation of her correspondence, the last letter that she will address to the officer. However, as H. Porter Abbott points out, an array of conflicting emotions pervade this final missive: "her desire to repudiate her lover once and for all and her desire to have him back; her desire to be left free to invent her life and the necessity of hiding that motive; her desire to find in her love alone a sufficient source of self-esteem and the necessity of masking the implications of sterility and egocentrism inherent in such an enterprise" (38). Abbott's observation underscores the ambivalence that accompanies her resignation, an affect that alternates between rebellion and deference toward the other. For instance, Mariane cannot abandon, of her own accord, their epistolary exchange. Rather, persuaded that he no longer loves her, she must therefore no longer love him nor write to him: "Je vous écris pour la dernière fois, et j'espère vous faire connaitre, par la différence de mes termes et de la manière de cette lettre,

que vous m'avez enfin persuadée que vous ne m'aimiez plus, et qu'ainsi je ne dois plus vous aimer" (Guilleragues 169). While Mariane writes of the difference of terms that frame her correspondence, the officer remains, in large part, the privileged referent of her discourse. Most notably, the road to recovery is a perilous venture for a pronounced sense of obligation pervades her last letter. Mariane believes that she is indebted to the officer for he revealed to her that which would have otherwise remained hidden: her beauty and charms. "Il me semblait que je vous devais les charmes et la beauté que vous me trouviez, et dont vous me faisiez apercevoir, j'entendais dire du bien de vous, tout le monde me parlait en votre faveur, vous faisiez tout ce qu'il fallait pour me donner de l'amour…" (Guilleragues 176). By locating and revealing the existence of these favorable qualities, the officer plays an integral role in the heroine's subjective formation.

Although the fifth letter marks the end of their correspondence, Mariane feels nonetheless compelled to provide evidence of her return to a more tranquil state in the form of a letter addressed to the officer: "Je veux vous écrire une autre lettre, pour vous faire voir que je serais peut-être plus tranquille dans quelque temps…" (Guilleragues 176). As this passage demonstrates, Mariane struggles to abandon the epistolary dynamic that has hitherto defined her existence. In the event that she leads a more tranquil existence, this letter would provide evidence of her improved condition while supplanting, in part, her claim to do so. Moreover, Mariane envisages a future moment during which, no longer affected by his unjust conduct, she will take pleasure in reproaching him and in speaking of his betrayal with indifference: "...que j'aurai de plaisir de pouvoir vous reprocher vos procédés injustes après que je n'en serai plus si vivement touchée, et lorsque je vous ferai connaitre que je vous méprise, que je parle avec beaucoup d'indifférence de votre trahison…" (Guilleragues 176). Mariane aspires to assume a

position that is, in theory, structurally analogous to the officer's, and yet this confession exposes the ambivalence that prevents her from maintaining a posture of absolute indifference in relation to him.[20] Unlike the officer, Mariane cannot conceive of a position that is radically other than her current one. Her passion, whether a faint memory or a violent affect, will forever inform her existence.

There are, however, moments during which Mariane perceives the impossibility of proliferating further the roles of addressee/addresser. Most notably, she entrusts a package, which contains a portrait of the officer, a bracelet, and some letters addressed to her, to Dona Brites, a trusted confidant, who will intervene and mediate this final farewell. "Je vous renverrai donc par la première voie tout ce qui me reste encore de vous. Ne craignez pas que je vous écrive; je ne mettrai pas même votre nom au-dessous du paquet; j'ai chargé de tout ce détail Dona Brites..." (Guilleragues 169). All that remains of him, save a few letters, will reenter into circulation to return to its point of origin—the officer. What is perhaps most interesting about this scene is that Mariane charges Dona Brites with addressing the package. Whereas the five letters contained neither a superscription nor a signature, the package will bear an address. However, the addresser is not, as one might expect, Mariane, but Dona Brites. There where one expects to find the heroine's handwriting, one encounters an unknown script, the hand of Dona Brites. Although this break in correspondence is ultimately the responsibility of another (Dona Brites), Mariane's absence is necessarily inscribed in this final act of renunciation for she is neither present in writing nor in person. In other words, by refusing to address the package, Mariane vindicates her right to oblivion, to relinquishing her role as addresser. The package thus constitutes a curious site of (non)-inscription insofar as Dona Bites writes the address in the

absence of the (true) sender. Written in the confidant's hand, this address bears witness to Mariane's absence as well as her refusal to address him.

Before making the necessary arrangements to return these items, Mariane writes of her previous intention to burn and destroy them. "Je veux cependant que vous sachiez que je me sens, depuis quelques jours, en état de brûler et de déchirer ces gages de votre amour…" (Guilleragues 169). She ultimately refrains from doing so for she contends that he would not have thought her capable of such an act: "…mais je vous ai fait voir tant de faiblesse, que vous n'auriez jamais cru que j'eusse pu devenir capable d'une telle extrémité…" (169). In this passage, there is no referent of the officer's love, no indication that these items were symbolic of *his* love for *her* ("ces gages de votre amour"). Although Mariane figures the destruction of these items as extreme, the returned package is emblematic of an arguably more radical impulse. What Mariane is really expressing to the officer is: I have these objects because I do not have you and therefore I have nothing. In being without you, all that remains of you is nothing and this nothingness is what I am sending back to you. Rather than destroy these tokens of *your* love, I am sending you back your love. Upon receipt of these items, you will again find yourself in possession of that which was never given to me for I was never the true recipient of your desire. An earlier passage underscores the narcissistic nature of his desire: "Vous aviez fait de sens froid de m'enflammer, vous n'avez regardé ma passion que comme une victoire, et votre cœur n'en a jamais été profondément touché" (Guilleragues 156). According to Mariane, the officer, insensible to her passion, regarded their affair as an obstacle of which her seduction was the ultimate prize. In this sense, these tokens were nothing more than the mark of his victory over her. And, consequently, the officer will soon find himself in possession of items that were nothing more than a narcissistic reflection of his sexual conquests. In the end, by returning these

tokens of *his* love, Mariane takes the first step toward abandoning the circuity of exchange that has hitherto dominated and defined her existence.

Despite the fifth letter's inconsistencies, Mariane claims her right to oblivion over receiving a letter that will only further confirm the despondency of her position and the officer's absolute lack of disregard for her. She will therefore ask the officer to no longer address her, a request that constitutes a refusal to occupy henceforth the position of addressee: "Sachez que je m'aperçois que vous êtes indigne de tous mes sentiments, et que je connais toutes vos méchantes qualités. Cependant, si tout ce que j'ai fait pour vous peut mériter que vous ayez quelques petits égards pour les grâces que je vous demande, je vous conjure de ne m'écrire plus…" (Guilleragues 171). For the writing subject, the notion of abandonment is confined to a purely discursive space. Since there is no change of local, no space to which she can flee, Mariane can only imagine abandonment in terms of taking leave of the paper, of ceasing to address the officer through writing. She prefers instead to remain ignorant of his feelings in order to nourish her passion: "Que ne me laissiez-vous ma passion? Vous n'aviez qu'à ne me point écrire; je ne cherchais pas à être éclaircie…" (Guilleragues 171).

At the close of the letter, the following confession punctuates her address: "mais je ne veux plus rien de vous, je suis une folle de redire les mêmes choses si souvent, il faut vous quitter et ne penser plus à vous, je crois même que je ne vous écrirai plus; suis-je obligée de vous rendre un compte exact de tous mes divers mouvements?" (Guilleragues 177). Here, Mariane denies her relation to the officer ("je *ne* veux *plus* rien de vous; *ne* penser *plus* à vous ; je *ne* vous écrirai *plus*") only to maintain a tenuous link by closing with a question ("suis-je obligée de vous rendre un compte exact de tous mes divers mouvements?"). Her position seems paradoxical for she abandons the frame (scene of writing) only to posit a question that resists absolute closure.

The text thus permits, in the form of a question, for a remainder, the forever unanswered question that detaches from its point of origin (Mariane) to never return. Since Mariane previously asked the officer to no longer write to her, her query will remain unanswered, will follow a single, non-returnable course whose point of origin is no longer accessible. [21] In spite of the structure of her final address, this interrogative nominates a receiver: the officer. Most notably, the principal function of the interrogative utterance is to produce an answer, to engage the other in dialogue. Marie-Christine Pais-Simon theorizes the interrogative sentence as follows: "l'interrogation est un autre moyen d'annuler l'absence: en effet, une interrogation suppose une réponse, c'est donc une autre façon de reproduire la présence" (53). Though Mariane vacillates between an address intended for the officer and one whose destiny is self-referential, the imagined space of writing remains more or less figured in relation to the officer. Even at the end, the protagonist struggles to abandon this construct in which the love letter renders present a loss presence (the officer): "Hélas ! il n'est pas en mon pouvoir de m'y résoudre, il me semble que je vous parle, quand je vous écris, et que vous m'êtes un peu plus présent…" (Guilleragues 167).

Despite the ambiguity of this closing passage, the figure of the remainder pervades Mariane's entire project. Since her correspondence does not enter into an economy of reciprocity, her letters are sent in search of a response only to remain forever unanswered. *Lettres portugaises* thus bear witness to the impossibility of reconciling these two positions for the officer refuses to engage her, to respond to her in earnest, and thereby recognize or validate her existence. Throughout the letters, it is apparent that his return address does nothing to assuage the pain of her condition for she receives a letter that neither completely remembers nor forgets her. She thus finds herself at once addressed (the recipient of his letters) and not addressed (the recipient of civil pleasantries). It thus appears that silence is preferable to the

continued angst of reading an address that does not acknowledge the other as such. It is for this reason that Mariane ends the exhausting work of addressing. By relinquishing her role as addresser, the protagonist steps out of the frame as the only way to envisage a different existence. In the end, a questioning subject emerges, not in order to posit some autonomous and purely present notion of subjectivity, but as that which infinitely defers its desire to the extent that epistolary exchange can neither reconstitute the delirious circle of *suffisance* nor reinstate her privileged place in the field of vision of the other.

CHAPTER TWO

The Daughter Under Erasure: Silence and Ambivalence in Sévigné's *Correspondance*

> Les signes de cette passion risque de l'étouffer l'autre. Ne faut-il pas alors, *précisément parce que je l'aime*, lui cacher combien je l'aime? Je vois l'autre d'un double regard: tantôt je le vois comme objet, tantôt comme sujet; j'hésite entre la tyrannie et l'oblation. Je me prends moi-même dans un chantage: si j'aime l'autre, je suis tenu de vouloir son bien; mais je ne puis alors que me faire mal: piège: je suis condamné à être un saint où un monstre: saint ne puis, monstre ne veux: donc je tergiverse: je montre *un peu* ma passion.
>
> —Roland Barthes, *Fragments d'un discours amoureux*

Within a few decades of the publication of her *Correspondance* (1725), Marie de Rabutin-Chantal, the marquise of Sévigné, was widely regarded as an ideal paragon of maternal devotion.[22] From March 1646 to April 1696, Madame de Sévigné pens one thousand twenty letters, seven hundred and sixty-four of which are addressed to her daughter, Françoise-Marguerite de Sévigné, the countess of Grignan; each serve as an exemplary testament to maternal love and passion. However, in recent decades, her place as maternal paragon has fallen subject to increased scrutiny and suspicion in view of the fact that Madame de Simiane, her granddaughter and Madame de Grignan's daughter, intentionally destroyed the letters that her mother addressed to the marquise. Why did Mme de Simiane feel compelled to suppress her mother's half of the exchange? This question has led many scholars to venture into the troubling lacuna that pervades Mme de Sévigné's text and to re-envision the traditional profile of the epistolière as maternal paragon. Recent criticism cites Mme de Simiane's decision to silence her mother's voice as evidence of the discernible tension between her grandmother and mother. [23]

Consequently, the traditional estimation of Mme de Sévigné recedes and in its place emerges a more complex and nuanced picture of the mother-daughter relationship.

For the modern reader, the problem nevertheless remains of reconstructing the profile of the silenced addressee, the beloved daughter. In effect, the only way to access the daughter is through the mother's writings. This detour of sorts results in the never ending search, both on the part of the mother and the reader, for the lost love object. Consequently, in the absence of symmetry that orders a correspondence, the reader is called to supplement, either through inference or invention, the addressee's viewpoint (Farrell 21-22). Despite the inherent difficulty of this task, this study considers the position of the silenced daughter, especially in view of the mother's often domineering and aggressive rhetoric. By lending a voice to the daughter, we can perhaps begin to discern the truth of their relationship and to reevaluate the mother's position in relation to her most beloved correspondent.

In this chapter, I would first like to focus on those moments during which the correspondents struggle to construct a space of shared and reciprocal exchange. I endeavor to show that letter writing often appears as a one-sided transaction insofar as the domineering mother silences the daughter by scripting her position according to her own will. During Mme de Sévigné's lifetime, her correspondence, especially those letters addressed to her daughter, was widely circulated, copied, and read aloud in the salons. During this time, epistolary correspondence does not function as a private, closed exchange between two predetermined parties. This reading of *Correspondance* therefore argues that Mme de Sévigné frequently subverts the addressee's position in favor of writing to posterity, of crafting semi-public documents that are destined for a larger audience. Read in this manner, we can perhaps better

understand the ambivalence and antagonism that pervades their relationship and undermines the letter's potential to foster a sense of mutual recognition and correspondence.

The problems of correspondence and recognition then lead me to examine the figure of filial obligation as it gives rise to a construct in which the daughter is forever indebted to her loving mother. Despite the emotional burden placed on Mme de Grignan, she is obliged, time and time again, to repay her debt, to love the mother with the same fervor and passion that she loves her. Following the maternal logic, the daughter's gift is nothing more than the mother's gift in return: a perfect coincidence of the women's love for one another. I will demonstrate that this charge marks a shift from the letter as a communicative device to a transactional mechanism. The maternal address symbolically purloins the function of the letter and in doing so appears to supplement the daughter's absence while supplanting her position as addressee. Finally, I propose reading the lack of confidence that pervades the correspondents' relationship as emblematic of a defensive strategy, on the part of the daughter, against maternal domination. Rather than function as a point of correspondence between the women, the letter often reveals the conflict that pervades their relationship while attesting to the difficulty of initiating and sustaining a sense of shared exchange and genuine intimacy.

I. The Maternal Address

> Il est déjà fort doux d'être aimée comme je le suis, mais la perfection serait d'être aimée à ma manière, vous auriez très peu d'efforts à faire pour y arriver et ce serait bon à vous: il s'agirait de m'écrire un mot chaque jour et alors je supporterais l'absence…
>
> —Valentine de la Trémoïlle, in a letter addressed to her son [24]

In the seventeenth-century, the letter emerges from a marginal literary form to an important instrument for codifying and instantiating social relations and positions. In her study of the Sévigné correspondence, Michèle Longino Farrell understands the attention to appropriate epistolary etiquette and content as emblematic of a more general social concern: "the preoccupation with codifying relations generated by a pronounced movement toward more complex differentiation and stratification, encouraged under Louis XIV, and of particular concern to the traditional elite as well as to the newly aspirant meritocracy, is reflected in these texts devoted to letter writing" (28). In letter writing manuals and *secrétaires* of the period, the manner in which the writer addresses the recipient is consequently a matter of prescription.[25] To reflect accurately the hierarchical relationship of the correspondents, the writer must recognize her position while employing the appropriate style and address in accordance with the existent social stratification.[26] There is perhaps no address that more accurately captures the writer's desire to exercise influence over the addressee than those letters destined for Mme de Grignan. In my view, Mme de Sévigné enters into communication with her daughter and assumes, often to the daughter's determinant, the prerogatives of age, experience, class, and motherhood.[27]

In spite of the marquise's desire to exercise a kind of scriptural authority over her daughter, she often encounters a recipient unwilling to yield to her imperatives, to conduct

herself as directed. Consequently, numerous letters addressed to Mme de Grignan attest to the marked absence of correspondence or agreement between the women. For instance, Mme de Sévigné reproaches her daughter's reserved and cold response following her tender marks of maternal love: "…il me semble que vous faites tout ce que vous voulez. Et tout d'un coup, alors je vous aimerai le plus tendrement, je vous trouverai toute froide et toute reposée. Ma bonne, ne venez pas me donner de cette léthargie en arrivant en Provence: j'aurais grand regret à mon voyage, si j'y trouvais de telles glaces" (*Correspondance* 1:483). As this passage demonstrates, the domineering mother will not tolerate the daughter's uninhibited and inappropriate behavior, especially in view of her affection. Rather than simply reproach the daughter's distant posture, she posits it in relation to her tender marks of love. From this perspective, the daughter's behavior constitutes a grave offense against the mother and love for that matter. [28]

Mme de Sévigné's recourse to forceful directives attests, I believe, to the absence of symmetry that governs and informs their relationship. Whereas the mother is prone to demonstrations of excessive tenderness and maternal affection, Mme de Grignan does not share her mother's often despondent and melancholic inclination. Most notably, over a year before Francoise-Marguerite's departure for Provence, Mme de Sévigné composes a letter to her daughter during a separation of minor consequence. She writes: "Il faut, ma bonne, que je sois persuadée de votre fond pour moi, puisque je vis encore. C'est une chose bien étrange que la tendresse que j'ai pour vous: je ne sais si contre mon dessein j'en témoigne beaucoup, mais je sais bien que j'en cache encore davantage. Je ne veux point vous dire l'émotion et la joie que m'a donnée votre laquais et votre lettre" (*Correspondance* 112). As this opening address indicates, Mme de Sévigné struggles to formulate a discourse of love that is linked to the maternal voice. This difficulty is due, in large part, to the limited number of available models of

mother-daughter affection, many of which were authored by men.[29] The strangeness of this tenderness serves as a genuine indication of the absence of a larger network of meaning through which to decipher and situate her feelings. And it is for this reason that she proceeds with trepidation, preferring instead to conceal the truth of her passion.[30] Within the space of letter writing, the maternal figure encounters a kind of discursive impasse that she cannot yet resolve and with which her daughter cannot identify. [31]

Rather than validate the mother's excessive mode of expression, Mme de Grignan allegedly identifies this sentiment as a source of weakness: "Je vous prie de ne me point parler de mes faiblesses; mais vous devez les aimer, et respecter mes larmes qui viennent d'un cœur tout à vous" (Sévigné, *Correspondance* 1:200). The sentiments expressed in this passage disclose the violence of the maternal address in two notable ways. First, the price for exposing (parler) the mother's weaknesses arrives in the form of an interdiction against speech: "Je vous prie de ne me point parler de mes faiblesses…" Instead of engaging Mme de Grignan's hurtful comments, Mme de Sévigné collapses the reciprocity proper to written exchange; before the wounded mother, the daughter is not permitted to expose the truth of this infatuation now figured as a weakness. Unwilling to admit the potential for difference between the women, the mother condemns her recipient to silence.[32] What is perhaps more troubling is that the mother's rhetoric ("vous devez…") demands obedience to her will. Mme de Grignan must embrace and respect the mother's lachrymose disposition. Since such behavior is deemed transgressive, Mme de Grignan *must* henceforth refrain from injuring her superior.

In contrast to fostering a sense of shared experience, Mme de Sévigné insists on the exceptional and perhaps inimitable quality of her maternal love. That is, no one, not even the daughter, can understand the excesses to which maternal love is prone. As this passage reveals,

the mother's love exists to the exclusion of all others: "Vous ne comprenez point encore trop bien l'amour maternel: tant mieux, ma fille. Il est violent, mais à moins que d'avoir des raisons comme moi, ce qui ne se rencontre pas souvent, on peut à merveille se dispenser de cet excès" (Sévigné, *Correspondance* 2:149-50). On the side of knowledge resides the mother; whereas, the daughter remains ignorant of that which Mme de Sévigné is only too happy to exclude her from: the violence of maternal love. Furthermore, unless one has reason like Mme de Sévigné, which does not occur that often, one is best to avoid the excesses of this violent emotion. In truth, her love separates her from all others and elects her as the one who understands only too well the violent pains of such devotion. It is also interesting to note that this violence is linked to maternity for such an indictment is traditionally situated within the context of erotic love.

On the surface, the mother is expressing a desire to protect or spare her daughter from the pains of maternal love. However, the figure of exclusion may belie the apparent candor of the mother's declaration. It is first important to look at the conditions surrounding the violence to which she lays claim. It could be argued that the daughter's absence is a necessary condition of the mother's knowledge. This is to suggest that the mother experiences the violence of maternal love only in the event of the daughter's absence. Violence is not intrinsic to maternal love, but is reflective of a desire, on the mother's part, to fictionalize her love as a source of dramatic action. The mother resides at the center of the drama and casts herself in the role of the supreme victim of maternal love. Moreover, the figure of exclusions plays an integral role in further elucidating this point. For instance, although Mme de Grignan was already a mother when this letter was composed in 1671, Mme de Sévigné addresses her not as a mother, but as a daughter. In other words, this letter is not addressed to Mme de Grignan as the daughter who has become a mother

herself, but to the daughter who remains the mother's child. And as such, the child's ignorance supports the mother's claim to this exclusive and self-sacrificial position.

For fear of being displaced in love by the rivalry of another, Mme de Sévigné casts her love for Françoise-Marguerite as unrivalled in nature and denies her daughter's own motherhood. Most notably, the maternal discourse appears to reprise tropes of erotic love: the jealous lover claims possession over the absent beloved. She writes: "Ma bonne, croyez que vous ne sauriez être aimée de personne, tout aimable que vous êtes, si véritablement que vous l'êtes de moi" (*Correspondance* 1:513).[33] Rather than admit the potential for such an event, the mother discounts the existence of a rival through a variety of rhetorical moves. To begin, the mother positions the daughter as the passive recipient of her imperative discourse. A negative proposition in the conditional follows her command: "vous ne sauriez être aimée de personne…" While this tense denotes a proposition whose validity is dependent on a condition, Mme de Sévigné negates any sense of contingency or uncertainty associated with this grammatical mode. Namely, the negative particle (ne) undermines the presence of a possibly counterfactual proposition: the daughter could be loved/is able to be loved as truly by someone else. To that end, the daughter is not to worry for no one could ever love her more than her mother. Despite the force of the mother's rhetoric, I would argue that this assertion is emblematic of a failure to secure her position as object of the daughter's desire. The daughter is both the subject of the mother's letters and the object of her desire, but what the mother really yearns for is to read the return address in which Mme de Grignan nominates her as the unique source of her love.

In the wake of the marquise's statement, the daughter, for an unknown reason, forgets to respond in accordance with the regular number of letters sent and addressed during a week's time. This is not to imply necessarily a casual relationship between the mother's statement and

the forgotten letter, but to underscore the ambivalence that pervades their correspondence: "Vous ne m'avez point écrit le dernier ordinaire; vous deviez m'en avertir pour m'y préparer. Je ne vous puis dire quel chagrin cet oubli m'a donné, et de quelle longueur m'a paru cette semaine: c'est la première fois que cela vous est arrivé" (Sévigné, *Correspondance* 1:545).[34] Did she forget? Or, did she refrain from responding to her mother's letter because of other obligations? Instead of attributing the non-arrival of the letter to an external force, Mme de Sévigné concludes that the daughter forgot to write her. Such a forgetting incriminates the absent daughter who cannot, in the face of such a conjecture, defend herself. She is now responsible for the mother's *chagrin* and the unbearable length of this week without letters. Moreover, since the non-arrival of a letter constitutes an interruption in their bi-weekly correspondence, Mme de Grignan must alert her, presumably in writing, in the event of such a lapse in correspondence. The mother's complaint reveals an unbearable truth: the daughter further absents herself by failing to respond in writing. Here, Françoise-Marguerite temporarily abandons the discursive frame that her mother charges her with occupying.

In response to the daughter's silence, the mother often redoubles her efforts to guarantee her inclusion in the daughter's life. However, the manner in which she does so is quite troubling. Namely, the ungrateful daughter threatens the mother's narcissism and is thus subject to her animosity and ambivalence. In response to the daughter's decision to share some of her letters, Mme de Sévigné writes: "Mais vous êtes bien plaisante, Madame la Comtesse, de montrer mes lettres. Où est donc ce principe de cachoterie pour ce que vous aimez?" (*Correspondance* 1:181). With regards to the writing project, this passage is problematic for several reasons. First, as common practice during this period, letters are often read aloud and circulated among friends. The scene of reading therefore involves the presence of external parties, an audience attentive to

the contents of the letter as well as to the particular dynamics of correspondents' relationship. It is evident that the mother espouses a logic wherein she equates love with discretion. If the daughter loves her, then she will conceal or keep their correspondence private. Second, the mother attempts to exercise possession over that which is destined for Mme de Grignan: her letters. I would argue that her reproach is symbolic of an underlying anxiety concerning the reception and dissemination of her address in view of the daughter's ambivalence or resistance to mirroring the mother's profuse expression of love.

Despite the fact that Mme de Sévigné admits to circulating her daughter's letters, she proceeds to take vengeance on her ingrate of a daughter:

> Vous pensez m'apaiser par vos louanges, et me traiter toujours comme *la Gazette de Hollande*; je m'en vengerai. Vous cachez les tendresses que je vous mande, friponne; et moi je montre quelquefois, et à certaines gens, celles que vous m'écrivez. Je ne veux pas qu'on croie que j'ai pensé mourir, et que je pleure tous les jours, *pour qui*? *pour une ingrate*. (*Correspondance* 1:181-2)

Mme de Sévigné's disdain signals the daughter's resistance to addressing her as she sees fit. According to the mother, the daughter's address compromises the inimitable nature of her role as well as their relationship. Consequently, why should the mother sacrifice herself in the name of a daughter who fails to express the appropriate sentiments, to reciprocate the signs of her tender affection for the woman who loves her more perfectly than anyone else? Since we do not have access to the daughter's address, we are called to rely on the mother's representation of her daughter's insufficiency. The marquise then shifts the focus of her attack to the manner in which others perceive her position vis-à-vis the countess. Unfortunately for Mme de Sévigné, she finds herself unwillingly projected into view and unable to control whose gaze meets this particular

figuration of self. In turn, she fears that others will witness her as the one in need of the daughter's love and recognition.

The humiliated mother continues her attack: "Je veux qu'on voie que vous m'aimez, et que si vous avez mon cœur tout entier, j'ai une place dans le vôtre. Je ferai tous vos compliments" (*Correspondance* 1:182). It is apparent that Mme de Sévigné is more concerned with the projection of her image as beloved mother than with the daughter's address. Given the common practice of circulating letters, Mme de Sévigné is intent on receiving confirmation of her privileged role in the daughter's life. Therefore, the letter must clearly instantiate the daughter's abiding affection for the mother. In truth, what Mme de Sévigné is really expressing is: write me as the object of your desire. Inscribe my position as beloved within your address so that others can see what kind of object I am for you. I can then turn to the other and receive confirmation of this shared knowledge or the fact that you love me. I am therefore not alone in my feelings for the other affirms your love for me. Mme de Sévigné is not merely concerned with sharing intimate, private details between herself and the recipient. Rather, epistolary correspondence is a public, shared endeavor in which an unintended recipient ("on") and later the public at large gain confirmation of the daughter's love for her.[35]

In spite of Mme de Sévigné's desire for the daughter's recognition, there are moments when the marquise explicitly violates the reciprocity proper to written correspondence. Specifically, she composes "lettres de provision" or letters written out of turn insofar as they do not await the other's response. Traditionally, the sender writes a letter and only responds upon receipt of the other's address. However, these letters suggest a more temporary or provisional arrangement that occur in the place of regular correspondence. In the following passage, the letter fulfills a consolatory function: "Si vous étiez ici, ma chère bonne, vous vous moqueriez de

moi; j'écris de provision." (Sévigné, *Correspondance* 1:173) She then continues: "[c'est] que j'aime à vous entretenir à toute heure, et que c'est la seule consolation que je puisse avoir présentement. Je suis aujourd'hui toute seule dans ma chambre, par l'excès de ma mauvaise humeur. Je suis lasse de tout; je me suis fait un plaisir de dîner ici, et je m'en fais un de vous écrire hors de propos…" (*Correspondance* 1:174). As Mme de Sévigné notes, this provisional letter is "hors de propos" or out of place with regards to their regular correspondence. Given the consolatory function of her letters, it could be argued that the true recipient of the letters is the mother. In contrast to the languor of her existence, writing constitutes an active and pleasurable pursuit in which she inscribes her position as central subject.

Although letters mediate the women's relationship, the mother's actions disclose the extent to which epistolary correspondence functions, at times, independently of the recipient. In particular, Mme de Sévigné privileges the act of writing which necessarily implies the daughter's absence: "J'admire comme je vous écris avec vivacité, et comme je hais d'écrire tout le reste du monde. Je trouve, en écrivant ceci, que rien n'est moins tendre que ce que je dis: comment? j'aime à vous écrire!" (*Correspondance* 2:579). In her analysis of this passage, Cécile Lignereux underscores the risk associated with such an avowal: "Or au moment d'exprimer le plaisir d'écrire qu'elle ressent, Mme de Sévigné ne peut que ressentir les risques inhérents à un tel aveu: celui d'apparaitre égoïste et narcissique, davantage préoccupée par son propre plaisir que par sa destinataire— danger redoutable pour une épistolière perpétuellement désireuse de s'attirer de la part de sa fille un surcroît d'amour" ("Plaisirs" 93). An object of admiration, the letter is narcissistically reassuring for it captures the mother's natural disposition for vivacious or lively expression. In other words, the letter as material artifact bears witness to the mother's epistolary acumen, the dynamism and exceptional character of her prose.

The process of writing also gives rise to a knowledge that would not otherwise be accessible: the tenderness of her love and sincerity. From the exclamation "j'aime à vous écrire!" Mme de Sévigné deduces the following: "c'est donc signe que j'aime votre absence, ma fille: voilà qui est épouvantable" (*Correspondance* 2:579).[36] Much to the mother's surprise, the daughter's absence serves as a conduit for discovering the pleasures of writing. No longer merely a source of deprivation, her absence initiates the mother's birth as a writing subject. One could therefore argue that the daughter's absence is a necessary condition for the mother's emergence as an author. When the daughter recedes from the foreground, the mother writes unimpeded while discovering the tenderness of her feelings toward her daughter as well as the pleasures associated with writing.

As a sign of maternal tenderness, Mme de Sévigné frequently addresses her daughter as "ma bonne." Although a term of endearment, the mother's address is often read as troubling the hierarchy proper to the mother-daughter relationship. As her *bonne*, the daughter is called to occupy two seemingly incompatible positions as caretaker and child. Appointed to the role of guardian, the daughter is symbolically charged with the care and well-being of the mother. As Farrell observes, this particular mode of address makes it such that the mother (child) is at once superior and inferior to her daughter (bonne/nursemaid):

> The mother-child relies on the good services of the daughter as nursemaid to guide her through her coming to self in writing. It is as if the little girl-mother stood at her mirror (her writing) rejoicing in her image, with the watchful *bonne* on the side of the mirror, or just behind her, or next to her, wherever she is needed (and this the *bonne* is charged to know), to facilitate the coming to self of her charge. The little girl-mother, although dependent, governs the situation and

> enjoys the right to say whether the *bonne* is performing a good job. … Thus while the child indulges in the necessary act of self-construction, the *bonne* stands by, attentive and responsive to her needs, doing her job. (127)

This term of endearment presents the reader with a number of interpretative challenges. On the surface, this address elects the daughter as the privileged recipient of the mother's tender affections. However, on another level, this term implicates both the mother and the daughter in a complex reversal of positions. The daughter is at once called to guide and to attend to the mother-child while remaining subject to the child's approval. Similarly, the mother-child depends on the *bonne* for guidance and for her subjective formation. She does, however, possess the right to evaluate the *bonne's* performance, to assess her ability to meet the requirements that such a position demands. Mme de Grignan consequently finds herself the recipient of an address whose paradoxical quality contributes to the indeterminacy of the women's positions within the space of writing.

Interestingly enough, Mme de Sévigné appears to benefit from such incongruities for she articulates a loss of protection following the daughter's departure only to exercise the right to reproach the daughter when she sees fits. "Pour comprendre quelque chose de l'état où je suis pour vous, joignez, ma bonne, à la tendresse et à l'inclination naturelle que j'ai pour votre personne, la petite circonstance d'être persuadée que vous m'aimez, et jugez de l'excès de mes sentiments. Méchante! pourquoi me cachez-vous quelquefois de si précieux trésors?" (Sévigné, *Correspondance* 1:160). For the marquise, the letter constitutes a site of transmission, a space within which the correspondents enter into dialogue with one another.[37] It is for this reason that the sender enjoins the other to respond, to remain faithful to the circuity of exchange proper to letter writing and in doing so perpetuate their relationship. However, the mother indicates that

the daughter is either unable or unwilling to fully disclose the truth of her sentiments for her. The marquise therefore submits her behavior to scrutiny in order to accomplish the following: to stress the natural and excessive nature of maternal love and in doing so oblige the daughter to respond in kind. One could add that the breakdown in communication threatens the mother's narcissism by introducing the potential for Mme de Grignan's psychic independence. In analyzing Mme de Sévigné's desire to radically limit her daughter's conduct, Marie-Chantal Killeen makes the following observation: "… Françoise laissée à elle-même risque de pratiquer une brèche dans le miroir lisse qui confond les deux femmes dans l'indistinction totale. À coup sûr, la voix de la fille est voie potentielle d'individuation et donc d'arrachement à Mme de Sévigné" (127). Here, the daughter's silence reveals the cracks in the mother's mirror—the reflected image of the daughter as a distinct and differentiated subject.

The problem of coincidence is not merely limited to the manner in which the two women love one another. Rather, Mme de Sévigné imagines the daughter's response in such a way as to conflate the difference between self and other. In a letter addressed to Mme de Grignan, Mme de Sévigné consults with her daughter and imagines the encounter as follows: "Je vous consulte intérieurement, et il me semble que vous me dites: 'Oui, ma bonne, c'est ainsi qu'il faut faire, vous ne sauriez vous conduire autrement'" (*Correspondance* 3:318). I would argue that this shift in address (Grignan addresses her as "ma bonne") enables Mme de Sévigné to effect a reversal of positions. Namely, the mother occupies the daughter's position and finds herself loving addressed as the daughter's *bonne*. This reversal is not inconsequential for it becomes the means by which Mme de Sévigné garners validation for her actions. To the mother's delight, Mme de Grignan's (imagined) response legitimates her conduct for she encounters the return of her *own* address or the daughter who loves her as she loves her. In effect, the mother meets the return of

her speech as that which confirms her privileged place in relation to the other. [38] Why is this address so important to Mme de Sévigné? The answer perhaps lies in the mother's need for recognition for, as Jessica Benjamin observes, "it includes not only the other's confirming response, but also how we find ourselves in that response. We recognize ourselves in the other…" (21). Benjamin presents a construct in which the subject depends on the other for recognition. However, in this context, Mme de Sévigné seeks recognition not in the other's confirming response, but in the return of her own loving address—*ma bonne*. The daughter is arguably reduced to silence for her only purpose is to return the loving address to its point of origin—the mother. This passage is perhaps one of the most salient examples of the speculative dynamic that dominates their relationship for we realize the extent to which the daughter is but a mirror image of the mother, the one called to return the maternal address to its origin.

II. The Ties that Bind

> Il vaut mieux ne pas prier (demander)
> que de sacrifier trop (aux dieux):
> Un cadeau donné attend toujours un cadeau en retour.
> Il vaut mieux ne pas apporter d'offrande
> que d'en dépenser trop.
> —"L'Havamál," l'un des vieux poèmes de l'Edda scandinave [39]

On the second of February 1671, two days prior to Mme de Grignan's first departure for Provence to join her husband, François Adhémar de Monteil, the count of Grignan, a transaction takes places between the women: the return of a box to Mme de Grignan. Rather than simply comply with the daughter's request, Mme de Sévigné complicates this transaction: "Puisque vous voulez absolument qu'on vous rende votre petite boîte, la voilà. Je vous conjure de conserver et de recevoir, aussi tendrement que je vous le donne, un petit présent qu'il y a

longtemps que je vous destine. J'ai fait retailler le diamant avec plaisir, dans la pensée que vous le garderez toute votre vie" (*Correspondance* 1:149). In this passage, the mother's emphatic language underscores the daughter's insistence on reclaiming a box of which she is in possession. However, before acquiescing to Mme de Grignan's demand, the mother includes in the box a gift that serves to bind the recipient to the giver: a diamond ring. This gift marks not the completion of a transaction, but its continuation.

Within an economy of exchange, the gift is traditionally given without an explicit agreement for future compensation. It thus follows that the only pure gift is that which is given while expecting nothing in return. In contrast, Mme de Sévigné's gift implicates the receiver in a contractual agreement: "Je vous en conjure, ma chère bonne, et que jamais je ne le voie en d'autres mains que les vôtres. Qu'il vous fasse souvenir de moi et de l'excessive tendresse que j'ai pour vous, et par combien de choses je voudrais la pouvoir témoigner en toutes occasions, quoi que vous puissiez croire là-dessus" (*Correspondance* 1:149). The marquise bestows this gift upon her daughter only to retain certain rights over its use ("…que jamais je ne le voie en d'autres mains que les vôtres"). Subject to certain conditions, the gift does not permit the receiver to act with complete freedom. Rather, the binding character of this gift demands the daughter's compliance in two ways: she is the only one to wear the ring and it serves as a symbolic reminder of the mother's excessive tenderness and love. And, like an alliance, it binds her to the mother as her property. Perhaps more troubling is that this gift seems to both mimic and counter the bonds of marriage.

In fact, less than a week later, Mme de Sévigné capitalizes on the return of her investment which arrives in the form a letter: "Je reçois vos lettres, ma bonne, comme vous avez reçu ma bague; je fonds en larmes en les lisant; il semble que mon cœur veuille se fendre par la moitié…"

(*Correspondance* 1:151). Whether or not Mme de Grignan intends to do so, she satisfies the mother's demand for reciprocity by bestowing upon her the gift of writing. The mother now finds herself the recipient of the daughter's address which brings her to tears. It appears that epistolary correspondence resembles a contractual exchange in which each party, regardless of one's willingness to do so, is implicated. Furthermore, because of the structure of debt that the mother initiates, Mme de Grignan's letters are perceived as a form of compensation. Most notably, the mother delights in her position as recipient and recognizes herself as loved in the daughter's address: "…vous m'aimez, ma chère enfant, et vous me le dites d'une manière que je ne puis soutenir sans des pleurs en abundance…" (*Correspondance* 1:151). In *Donner le temps: la fausse monnaie*, Jacques Derrida argues that the very conditions of gift giving (the circulation of goods implies payment and the discharge of a debt) lead to the destruction and annulment of the gift. Therefore, for the gift to remain a gift it must not be recognized as such: "Pour qu'il y ait don, il faut qu'il n'y ait pas de réciprocité, de retour, d'échange, de contre-don ni de dette. Si l'autre me *rend* ou me *doit*, ou doit me rendre ce que je lui donne, il n'y aura pas eu don, que cette restitution soit immédiate ou qu'elle se programme dans le calcul complexe d'une différance à long terme" (Derrida, *Donner* 24). Following this logic, Mme de Sévigné destroys the gift as such for the receiver is obliged to adhere to the terms set forth in the transaction. Upon receipt of this *gift*, Mme de Grignan finds herself in possession of that which indebts her to the marquise by placing her henceforth in a symbolic cycle of restitution (letters given and received).

Not surprisingly, the mother's counter-gift will arrive in the form of a letter in which she extols the daughter's natural talents for writing. Mme de Sévigné praises the daughter's inclination toward a tender and natural mode of expression. According to the epistolière, the noble simplicity with which the countess composes her letters is a sure sign of the authenticity

and veracity of the sentiments expressed therein. Mme de Sévigné opens her letter with the following rejoinder:

> Elles sont premièrement très-bien écrites, et de plus si tendres et si naturelles qu'il est impossible de ne les pas croire. La défiance même en serait convaincue. Elles ont ce caractère de vérité que je maintiens toujours, qui se fait voir avec autorité, pendant que la fausseté et la menterie demeurent accablées sous les paroles sans pouvoir persuader; plus elles s'efforcent de paraître, plus elles sont enveloppées. Les vôtres sont vraies et le paraissent. Vos paroles ne servent tout au plus qu'à vous expliquer et, dans cette noble simplicité, elles ont une force à quoi l'on ne peut résister. (*Correspondance* 1:154-5)

It is evident that the marquise cannot maintain a neutral or disinterested position vis-à-vis her daughter's correspondence. Rather, it could be argued that the figure of evaluation plays a formative role in the mother's response. This is to suggest that Mme de Sévigné assigns a positive or negative value to the presented evidence (daughter's letters). The mother requires the letters as evidence of a sentimental economy while reserving a space for herself as the sole interpreter of their meaning and value. The act of valuation endows Mme de Sévigné with a sense of authority and situates her at the center of the daughter's epistolary practices. By ascribing either a positive or negative value to that which corresponds to her vision of exceptional and natural writing, Mme de Sévigné asserts a kind of scriptural authority over her daughter's writings.

The structure of debt is not merely limited to the exchange of gifts between the correspondents. Rather, in exchange for maternal love, the daughter must agreeably receive all that her mother says to her: "Je crois, ma bonne, que l'amitié que j'ai pour vous, et l'intérêt que je

prends à tout ce qui vous touche, vous doit faire recevoir agréablement ce que je vous dis. Mandez-moi si je me trompe" (*Correspondance* 1:487). As recipient of the mother's interest and affections, the daughter finds herself indebted to the giver. Here, compensation arrives in the form of a readiness to comply with the mother's advice. Mme de Sévigné again places her daughter in an inextricable bind for maternal love obliges or indebts the recipient to the giver. What is perhaps more troubling is that this gift demands the receiver's silence or complicity, to offer no resistance to the mother's speech. And as such, Mme de Grignan's agency or volition is of little to no concern before the mother intent on bestowing upon her the binding gift of love.

Mme de Sévigné's letters disclose an unrelenting effort to maintain a sense of proximity to her daughter despite their separation. Such proximity often manifests itself as a fear concerning the changes that will inevitably occur in the daughter's life (physical appearance and well-being).[40] The daughter may indeed take leave of her mother, but not without receiving the charge to return exactly as the mother left her. Catherine R. Montfort reads this charge as symbolic of an erotic desire for symbiosis with her daughter, an impulse that leads her to consider "the mother-daughter bond more fundamental than the conjugal bond and her love for her daughter superior to conjugal love" (207). In my view, the mother's charge also discloses an exacting desire for permanency as well as her need to possess absolute knowledge of the absent daughter. For instance, Mme de Sévigné writes: "… je veux vous louer de n'être point grosse, et vous conjurer de ne la point devenir. Si ce malheur vous arrivait dans l'état où vous êtes de votre maladie, vous seriez maigre et laide pour jamais" (*Correspondance* 1:554). The mother's recourse to the dangers of pregnancy (Mme de Grignan suffered numerous miscarriages during her marriage) is certainly a valid concern; however, in the event of another pregnancy, Mme de Sévigné contends that Mme de Grignan would further endanger her health and possibly her

physical appearance. Mme de Sévigné presents a logic wherein she praises her daughter for not being pregnant only to recast another pregnancy in ultimately depreciative terms ("malheur"). By positioning herself on the side of knowledge, the marquise vindicates her right both to praise the daughter and to condemn her behavior in the event of another pregnancy.

Although Mme de Sévigné's concern in not entirely unfounded, the following confession undermines her case: "Donnez-moi le plaisir de vous retrouver aussi bien que je vous ai donnée, et de pouvoir un peu trotter avec moi, où la fantaisie nous prendra d'aller" (*Correspondance* 1 :554). This passage discloses the presence of apparently competing interests: concern for the daughter's well-being and the mother's desire to find her daughter unchanged, just as she was prior to her departure.[41] It is also important to note the manner in which Mme de Grignan departs: the mother gives her to someone else, presumably M. de Grignan ("je vous ai donnée"). Unfortunately for the daughter, such a transaction implies the exchange of her person, given and taken, in order to satisfy the terms of the marriage contract. In spite of the marital duties to which the countess is bound, Mme de Sévigné hopes that her daughter will reenter into her possession unchanged. As Katharine Ann Jensen points out, the daughter's body "is the grounds for a battle between a husband who needs to appropriate it to produce his heirs and a mother who needs to reappropriate it to produce an imperative reflectivity, which is meant to protect the daughter from illness and the mother from the daughter's psychic autonomy" ("Mother-Daughter" 241). In the fantasy presented here, the mother regains her daughter, and for the two reunited women the outside world is of little to no consequence: "de pouvoir un peu trotter avec moi, où la fantaisie nous prendra d'aller." [42]

The daughter's continual struggle with physical illness and depression, undoubtedly due to her six pregnancies and the venereal disease that she contracted from her husband, entitles

Mme de Sévigné, as Farrell notes, "to flood her with advice, to exercise authority from a position of maternal strength" (212). In December 1679, during a period of acute illness, Mme de Grignan receives a gift from her mother: a writing desk. Mme de Sévigné opens her letter with the following confession: "Vraiment oui, ma fille, je vous la donne, cette jolie écritoire, et ç'a toujours été mon intention. … Ce sera donc *l'écritoire de ma mère*; elle est assez jolie pour me donner l'ambition que vous la nommiez ainsi, et d'autant plus que vous m'assurez que vous n'en faites point un poignard" (Sévigné, *Correspondance* 2:754). Much like the diamond ring, this gift is not given freely. Rather, compensation arrives in the form of a nomenclature: *the writing desk of my mother*. This nomination in turn creates a dynamic in which the giver retains, in part, ownership over that which now belongs to another. Moreover, as this passage suggests, the potential for death threatens the apparent beauty of this gift. That is, Mme de Sévigné fears that the practice of writing will exacerbate her daughter's already delicate condition and send her to an early grave.

In recognition of the potentially harmful nature of the desk, Mme de Sévigné repeatedly instructs the daughter to spend less time engaging in the exhaustive and dangerous practice of letter writing. Additionally, as a sign of maternal goodwill, the marquise will write less so as not to burden the daughter with the task of writing her back. In spite of this, Mme de Sévigné is aware of the potential risk involved in bestowing this gift upon her frail daughter:

> Hélas! ma chère enfant, tout épuisée, toute accablée, n'en pouvant plus, une douleur et une sécheresse de poitrine épouvantables – et moi, qui vous aime chèrement, je puis contribuer! Je puis me reprocher d'être cause de cet état douloureux et périlleux! Moi qui donnerais ma vie pour sauver la vôtre, je serais cause de votre perte, et j'aurai si peu de tendresse pour vous que je mettrai

> en comparaison le plaisir de lire vos lettres, et les réponses très-agréable que vous me faites sur des bagatelles, avec la douleur de vous tuer, de vous faire mourir! Ma très-chère, cette pensée me fait frissonner. S'accommode qui voudra de cet assassinat; pour moi, je ne puis l'envisager. … Laissez, laissez un peu la vôtre toute jolie qu'elle est; ne vous disais-je pas bien que c'était un poignard que je vous donnais? (*Correspondance* 2:777-8)

In the opening sentence, I would argue that the repeated references to Mme de Grignan's ailing condition betray the mother's professed sympathies. Why did the mother not wait until the daughter's recovery to send her the desk? In this scene, Mme de Sévigné watches as her daughter, seated at the writing desk, literally wastes away while responding to her letters. In my opinion, one cannot simply ignore the implicit violence of such references, especially given the fact that the writing desk, which the mother compares to a dagger, arrives in the form of a gift.

This scene is often read as symptomatic of the mother's aggressive desire to destroy her daughter as writing partner. Most notably, Jensen interprets her gift as symbolic of an underlying maternal fear: "Sévigné fears depending on a daughter with autonomous desires—with her own writing ambition in this case—who could therefore thwart Sévigné's own wish for writing supremacy. So Sévigné has to punish the daughter she fantasizes as having sufficient power to overwhelm her own writing desires by aggressively killing off Mme de Grignan" (*Uneasy* 194). In her writings, Mme de Sévigné indeed espouses a mode of interaction which encourages dependency on the mother and subsequently a lack of autonomy of the daughter's part. However, in the event that Françoise-Marguerite expresses autonomous desires, is the mother really interested in killing her off, in writing her out of their correspondence? For without the daughter as addressee, there is also no sender. The daughter's death would necessarily signal the end of

their writing project. Instead, it could be reasoned that the mother's fear is a reaction to the limited scope of her power; she cannot simply intervene in order to remedy the situation and in doing so protect her daughter from the deleterious practice of letter writing.

The mother then proceeds to present herself as the sole conduit through which the daughter can conserve her health. One could argue that maternity is here ascribed to the ability to give and take life. As a sign of maternal altruism, Mme de Sévigné implores her daughter to radically limit her correspondence. She must therefore refrain from passing hours seated, pen in hand, at the desk-dagger. Later that month, in response to a lengthy letter from her daughter, Mme de Sévigné writes the following appeal: "Ma très-chère fille, figurez-vous que je suis à genoux devant vous, et qu'avec beaucoup de larmes, je vous demande, par toute l'amitié que vous avez pour moi et par toute celle que j'ai pour vous, de ne me plus écrire comme vous avez fait la dernière fois" (*Correspondance* 2:777-8). Here, the sender insists that her correspondent limits her letters to the bare minimum—a one page account of health or personal matters. Less pressing household news then falls under the charge of a secretary. As evidence of the mother's authority, she threatens to terminate their correspondence if the countess violates these prescribed limits: "…je vous jure et vous proteste que si vous m'écrivez plus d'une feuille et que, pour les nouvelles, vous ne vous serviez de Montgobert, de Gautier, ou d'Anfossy, je vous jure que je ne vous écrirai plus du tout. Et le commerce rompu de mon côté me donnera autant de chagrin que j'aurai de soulagement si vous en usez comme je vous le dis" (*Correspondance* 2:777). By inscribing writing as deleterious to Mme de Grignan's health, the marquise controls the scene of writing, those moments spent at the writing desk. The daughter thus finds herself estranged from letter writing as an independent and solitary practice. Instead, it might be

concluded that this activity demands the daughter's compliance to the prescribed limits under threat of the end of correspondence.

Shortly thereafter, Mme de Sévigné further constrains Mme de Grignan's participation in their epistolary exchange. Whereas the scope of the mother's contribution is without limit, the daughter is more or less reduced to silence: "Ne m'écrivez pas qu'une demi-page, ma chère bonne. Laissez-moi vous conter tout ce qui me vient. … Voilà tout ce que je désire, et que vous vous portiez mieux que vous ne faites. J'écris à plusieurs reprises, je n'écris qu'à vous, je vous dis tout ce que j'apprends; je dois écrire des volumes, et vous trois mots" (*Correspondance* 2:824). For Mme de Sévigné, since writing is essential or obligatory in nature (devoir), she feels compelled to write volumes to the daughter whose discursive expression is limited first to half of a page then to three words. Jensen argues that "by curtailing her daughter's agency as the writer of her own texts, Mme de Sévigné stands out by contrast as the superior writer, for, enjoying robust health, she fully controls ever part of her epistolary texts" (*Uneasy* 191). Before the other who is barely permitted to write for fear of worsening her frail condition, Mme de Sévigné compensates for the daughter's (forced) silence by recounting everything that has happened to her. Mme de Sévigné's correspondence in turn functions independently of the addressee's engagement with the original address. To that end, there is no need to await Mme de Grignan's three words which could not possibly constitute a response to her mother's voluminous work. And as such, the daughter's non-responsiveness is arguably a precondition for the work of authorship.

Aside from receiving the shortest and most succinct account of Mme de Grignan's health, is Mme de Sévigné really interested in entering into dialogue with her daughter? Or, is she writing more for herself? [43] Within the space of writing, I would argue that the daughter's barely

discernible presence attests to Mme de Sévigné's desire for autonomy as a writer. For instance, Mme de Sévigné informs Mme de Grignan of the needlessness of responding to ever point addressed in her letters: "Je vous conjure tendrement de ne point tant écrire, et de ne me point répondre sur toutes les bagatelles que je vous écris. Écoutez-moi…" (*Correspondance* 2:782). In recognition of the superfluous content ("les bagatelles") of her own letters, Mme de Sévigné directs Mme de Grignan not to address such points. However, what are the implications of this directive? It first appears that Mme de Sévigné is merely writing to write, to recount trivial events that do not require the other's response. Mme de Grignan finds herself the recipient of a letter only to encounter the mother's unyielding imperative not to write, not to enter into dialogue with her. As a result, the countess is prohibited from engaging the mother's address and from the possibility of asserting her own autonomy as writer. [44]

To further undermine Mme de Grignan's role as writer and to guarantee that nothing escapes her purview, Mme de Sévigné charges her dame de compagnie, Mademoiselle de Montgobert, with the following: confirm, in writing, the contents of Mme de Grignan's letters and recount any relevant details that she fails to disclose. Despite Mme de Grignan's temperament which is "peu communicatif," the commerce of friendship demands the circulation of information as a sign of confidence and sincerity: "Vous pouvez m'apprendre bien des choses, ma bonne, mais pour la confiance et la sincérité dans le commerce de l'amitié, je ne recevrai des leçons ni de vous, ni de personne. Voyez-vous bien sur quel ton je le prends? Je ne suis que trop sincère, et je serais incapable de vous cacher une incommodité, si je l'avais" (Sévigné, *Correspondance* 3:39). Since the marquise will not tolerate the daughter's negligence or inability to comply with the terms set forth in the epistolary contract, she turns to Montgobert. "J'ai recu de Montgobert des consolations extrêmes. Elle m'a confirmé ce que vous disiez, et m'a

quelquefois redressée, en sorte que j'ai pris une entière confiance dans ce qu'elle en a dit" (Sévigné, *Correspondance* 3:39). From the mother's perspective, the daughter as recipient cannot be trusted to fulfill the demands proper to written commerce. In place of the closed feminine couple (addresser/addressee, mother/daughter) resides a third party (Montgobert) charged with confirming and correcting the daughter's address. Called to supplement Mme de Grignan's deficient address, Montgobert appears to satisfy the mother's desire to possess knowledge of her daughter without remainder.

I would argue that the maternal address is in search of that which Montgobert cannot validate once and for all: the daughter's love for her mother. Over the course of twenty-three years, this search punctuates, at numerous points, her correspondence and reveals the ambiguity that plagues her position. As evidenced by hypothetical clauses, doubt is a constitutive element of the mother's discourse: "Si vous m'aimez, comme je le crois, je suis trop bien payée" (*Correspondance* 3:1037). In 1694, less than two years before her death, Mme de Sévigné appeals to the daughter for evidence of filial love: "Vous me donnez une grande joie en me parlant de celle que vous avez, et de l'amitié que vous avez pour moi; si elle ressemble à celle que j'ai pour vous, ah! ma bonne, que j'ai sujet d'être contente!" (*Correspondance* 3:1040). Additionally, an appeal to love often arrives in the form of a command: "ma chère Comtesse, aimez-moi toujours!" and "Ainsi, ma chère enfant, redressez vos pensées, et ne songez à moi que pour m'aimer…" (*Correspondance* 2:140; 3:838). What the mother desires is to locate, in Mme de Grignan's address, a love that coincides with hers. Or, I want you to love me as I love you. I want you to love me in the image of my love, a love that corresponds to my desire. Following this logic, the mother would receive in return the daughter's love which would actually be her own love. It could be argued that this construct collapses any sense of an outside. For Mme de

Sévigné, to love differently marks a failure to coincide with the maternal imperative: love me as I love you.

III. Abandoning the (Wounded) Mother

Shortly following Mme de Grignan's first departure for Provence, Mme de Sévigné emphatically denies the claim that she eclipses her daughter's presence. Ironically, the mother's response only further confirms the validity of the daughter's argument. "Mais je ne veux point que vous disiez que j'étais un rideau qui vous cachait. Tant pis si je vous cachais; vous êtes encore plus aimable quand on a tiré le rideau. Il faut que vous soyez à découvert pour être dans votre perfection; nous l'avons dit mille fois" (Sévigné, *Correspondance* 1:155).[45] In this curious scene of concealment and disclosure, the mother denies the validity of the daughter's accusations and then expresses a marked lack of sympathy ("tant pis") toward her.[46] Perhaps more troubling is that the writer silences the recipient ("je ne veux pas que vous disiez") only to disregard the pain that such concealment might imply ("tant pis si je vous cachais"). Mme de Sévigné then reframes the daughter's accusations to clear herself of any wrongdoing: the daughter is even more amiable when the curtain is pulled back.

Though the marquise addresses the daughter's perfection and amiability, this occurs, I would argue, at the daughter's expense. Concealed behind the curtain, the daughter (object) remains to be discovered ("à découvert") in all of her perfection. But, it is the mother (curtain) who reveals the daughter in just such a state. Here, the curtain both obstructs the onlooker's view and provides the necessary means of access to that which it conceals: the daughter. Jensen observes that "…since Grignan has agreed that she must be out from under her mother's shadow

to be fully lovely, now that the daughter is exposed, she should feel only glad to be displaced in her perfection—not upset about having been hidden. Mme de Sévigné thus asserts her supremacy by making it Grignan's filial obligation to deny her own feelings about having been eclipsed" (*Uneasy* 173). It is only when the daughter escapes, comes out from behind the curtain (mother), that she can be viewed. In effect, the mother's absence (the pulling back of the curtain) reveals the daughter's finest qualities.

Since the mother (curtain) derives its meaning from that which it hides/obscures (daughter), what happens when she is relegated to the sidelines? One possible reading is that the pulled back curtain falls out of view and is only barely perceptible from the sidelines. Mme de Sévigné constructs this shift as a loss of self: "Pour moi, il me semble que je suis toute nue, qu'on m'a dépouillée de tout ce qui me rendait aimable" (*Correspondance* 1:155). In a complex reversal of positions, the mother who used to cover the daughter now finds herself uncovered and deprived of all that makes her likable (the daughter). The daughter is thus to blame for stepping into view. In other words, from out behind the curtain, she leaves the mother with nothing to cover herself. Mme de Sévigné finds herself projected into view for she can no longer hide the daughter and in doing so feel protected. There is a sense that the undrawn curtain (mother), like that which it conceals, remains more or less invisible, undetected. It is not until the curtain is drawn that the mother becomes aware of her vulnerability and nudity.

She now finds herself with nothing to cover and thus uncovered, monstrous: "Je n'ose plus voir le monde, et quoi qu'on ait fait pour m'y remettre, j'ai passé tous ces jours-ci comme un loup-garou, ne pouvant faire autrement. Peu de gens sont dignes de comprendre ce que je sens. J'ai cherché ceux qui sont de ce petit nombre, et j'ai évité les autres" (*Correspondance* 1:155). Mme de Sévigné compares herself to a werewolf who must avoid the light of day, hide herself

from the outside world for fear of letting others discover her monstrousness.[47] The daughter's visibility necessitates the mother's invisibility, concealment ("Je n'ose plus voir le monde"). The price for the daughter's exposure: the wounded mother recoils into the darkness of obscurity. It thus appears that their relationship is predicated on a mutual incompatibility for the daughter can only be present when the mother is absent and vice versa.

During a period of reunion in Paris, which was unexpectedly cut short due to Mme de Grignan's illness, Mme de Sévigné again finds herself naked and alone following the daughter's return to Provence: "Adieu, ma très chère. Je me trouve toute nue, toute seule, de ne vous avoir plus" (*Correspondance* 2:462). Though a rather serious illness precipitates the countess' departure, Mme de Sévigné's remorseful adieu does not take this fact into account. Once again, the daughter's departure can only be understood in terms of an unbearable loss for the mother. In not having the daughter, the mother "feels wounded and aggressed, as though a very part of herself has turned against her…" (Jensen, *Uneasy* 172). And, it is for this reason, I believe, that Mme de Grignan finds herself subject to the mother's animosity. The object of the mother's retaliation, Mme de Grignan's absence threatens the mother's identity for she now finds herself figuratively stripped naked and imperfect. For the mother, the experience of the daughter's absence is not limited to the realm of affect. Rather, their separation affects the maternal body in the form of physical pain and suffering: "Ah! ma bonne, que je voudrais bien vous voir un peu, vous entendre, vous embrasser, vous voir passer, si c'est trop que le reste! … Je sens qu'il m'ennuie de ne vous plus avoir; cette séparation me fait une douleur au cœur et à l'âme, que je sens comme un mal du corps" (Sévigné, *Correspondance* 1:162).[48] Unfortunately for Mme de Sévigné, the only remedy capable of counteracting her suffering is the daughter, the one whom she identifies as both "le plaisir et la douleur de ma vie" (*Correspondance* 1:154).

Although the daughter is the privileged referent of the mother's address, I would argue that the true focal point of the maternal address is the wounded *moi,* the mother bereft of identity in the wake of the daughter's departure. Before the close of a letter, Mme de Sévigné appeals to Mme de Grignan's love for her: "Si vous pouvez, aimez-moi toujours, puisque c'est la seule chose que je souhaite en ce monde pour la tranquillité de mon âme. Je souhaite bien d'autres choses pour vous. Enfin tout tourne ou sur vous, ou de vous, ou pour vous, ou par vous" (*Correspondance* 1:198-9). As this passage suggests, the daughter serves as the pivotal point around which Mme de Sévigné structures and organizes her life. However, what are the implications, for the daughter, of this apparently privileged position? A recurrent theme throughout her correspondence, the mother's appeal to the daughter for her love discloses the truth of her position: address me as the object of your desire. In other words, the wounded mother addresses the daughter so that she may receive, in the form of a return letter, confirmation of her position as object of the daughter's desire. It is also important to examine the manner in which Mme de Sévigné qualifies this relationship. According to the epistolière, the recipient serves as the point of origin for all (tout) matters and is therefore implicated, despite her absence, in everything that involves the mother's lived experience. The primacy accorded to the daughter at first appears to affirm both the mother's love and the daughter's continued presence in her life. However, upon closer examination, I would argue that the marquise covertly maintains her position of center by casting filial love and devotion as an obligation.

At numerous points in her correspondence, Mme de Sévigné expresses an acute preoccupation with Mme de Grignan's ailing health. Much to the mother's dismay, the daughter apparently refuses to follow the doctor's orders and prescriptions. In theory, the daughter's health condition takes precedence over all other issues. However, in what follows, the mother

exploits the daughter's illness in order to exercise influence and authority over her. Specifically, she recasts self-care in terms of love for the mother, of caring for oneself to assuage maternal anxiety. "Si vous m'aimiez, vous auriez un peu plus de pitié de moi. Quand je songe à tout ce je fais pour vous plaire uniquement, et comme je m'en vais attaquer courageusement et de bon cœur une santé parfaite, par la seule envie de mettre votre esprit en repos, et que je ne puis pas obtenir de vous de suivre les avis de votre médecin, je me perds dans cette pensée. (Sévigné, *Correspondance* 2:549). Here, filial love is figured as caring for oneself so that the mother remains in possession of her daughter. What is perhaps most striking about this passage is the shift in attention from the daughter back to the mother. Although the Mme de Grignan is the object of the mother's discourse, I would contend that the true focal point is the mother. And especially, the mother on whom the daughter should take pity because she takes countless steps to please her, to convince her to follow the doctor's orders. It is the mother who shows true courage in the face of the daughter's illness and the one to whom the daughter is consequently indebted.

The daughter's frail condition is not the only source of maternal angst. On the contrary, Mme de Sévigné regains her central position by returning to the scene of abandonment. As if to further illustrate the despondency of her position, Mme de Sévigné recounts the following scene after the daughter's first departure for Provence in 1671: in the street, before the departing carriage, she bears witness to the daughter's abandonment and her role as abandoned. "La pensée que vous aviez de vous éloigner toujours, et de voir que ce carrosse allait toujours en delà, est une de celles qui me tourmentent le plus. Vous allez toujours, et, comme vous dites, vous vous trouverez à deux cents lieues de moi " (Sévigné, *Correspondance* 1:156). Although the daughter's departure foregrounds this scene, the maternal presence is arguably the focal point of

the abandonment. In the wake of her departure, only the mother remains, the one called to suffer the anguish of the daughter's absence now figured as a betrayal. Nathalie Freidel reads the mother's return to the scene of abandonment as an attempt to render present this absence through writing: "À la distance réelle va donc s'ajouter la prise de distance par le langage. Dans une mise en abîme digne des procédés du théâtre baroque, l'épistolière ne cesse rejouer la scène de la séparation, de re-présenter l'absence. Car les séparations ne se répètent pas mais s'ajoutent en quelque sorte les unes aux autres, dans une fascinante stratification" (644).

To mitigate the anguish of abandonment, Mme de Sévigné posits various conjectures wherein she retains a sense of proximity to the absent daughter. However, upon closer examination, the mother's narrative reveals the presence of an incompatible dynamic: she is at once present and abandoned before the moving carriage: "Je suis toujours avec vous. Je vois ce carrosse qui avance toujours et qui n'approchera jamais de moi. Je suis toujours dans les grands chemins. Il me semble même que j'ai quelquefois peur qu'il ne verse. Les pluies qu'il fait depuis trois jours me mettent au désespoir." (*Correspondance* 1:152). Despite the impotency of her position, the mother affirms her presence alongside the traveling daughter: "J'ai une carte devant les yeux; je sais tous les lieux où vous couchez. Vous êtes ce soir à Nevers, et vous serez dimanche à Lyon, où vous recevrez cette lettre" (*Correspondance* 1:152). Sitting before the map, the mother retains, I believe, an abiding sense of mastery as she charts the daughter's course. Maps like letters represent a space that make meaning of form and one's movement within a defined landscape. Though this course is subject to contingencies such as inclement weather and accidents, the mother positions herself on the side of absolute knowledge ("je sais tout les lieux…"). Moreover, the simple future tense ("serez" and "recevrez") presents these upcoming events as though they have already occurred. In Mme de Sévigné's mind, the daughter has

already arrived in Lyon and has already received her letter. The mother's field of knowledge seems limitless in nature, and her word serves to guarantee the consistency and truth of such knowledge. In the end, the abandoned mother reenters center stage to suggest that nothing escapes her purview, an assertion that occurs because she positions herself at the center of the representational field of which she is the sole author.

Rather than accept the injustices of abandonment, Mme de Sévigné proposes to take leave of her home in Paris: "Alors, ne pouvant plus souffrir les injustices sans en faire à mon tour, je me mettrai à m'éloigner aussi de mon côté..." (*Correspondance* 1:156). In this passage, the marquise presents her departure as structurally analogous to the countess'. However, there appears to be one missing element that collapses this scenario: there is no abandoned person called to witness the mother's departure. Unlike the mother, the daughter is not subject to the tormenting scene of the departing carriage. In addition, the mother's final destination is a rather telling component of her travel plans: "… et j'en ferai tant que je me trouverai à trois cents. Ce sera une belle distance, et ce sera une chose digne de mon amitié que d'entreprendre de traverser la France pour vous aller voir" (*Correspondance* 1:156). As a gesture befitting her friendship and love for Mme de Grignan, the mother will travel to Provence to visit her. In what Domna C. Stanton calls an ambivalent reversal, this "oneiric torment prompts the (infantile) desire not only to imitate the daughter's abandonment, but to make the love object suffer an even greater disconnection…" (217). My contention is that the mother-become-daughter reenacts the scene of abandonment only to stress her maternal devotion (trip to Provence) and in doing so render the absent daughter all the more guilty.

Following a nineteenth month stay in Provence, Mme de Sévigné returns to Paris in October of 1673 and the women subsequently return to the commerce of letter writing. In the

space between the women dwells the letter, the material artifact that appears to overcome the distance that separates them. “Adieu, ma chère enfant, aimez-moi toujours: hélas! nous revoilà dans les lettres” (Sévigné, *Correspondance* 1:594). As the preposition “dans” suggests, letter writing constitutes a space within which the women enter into commerce. However, within this space, there is a sense of private, yet shared solitude. The mother writes: “Ma lettre sent la solitude de notre forêt, mais dans cette solitude, vous êtes parfaitement aimée” (*Correspondance* 2:383). The marquise often refers to the space of writing as a forest that both women occupy. Similar to their actual situation, she awaits her daughter’s arrival within this imaginary space. On one morning in September 1676, Mme de Sévigné awakens and recounts the devastation of missing or not finding her daughter in the forest: “Je n’ai pas trop bien dormi, mais je me porte bien, et je m’en retourne seule dans ma forêt, avec une impatience et une espérance de vous voir, qui font continuellement les deux points de mon discours, c’est-à-dire de ma rêverie… ” (*Correspondance* 2:392). Interestingly enough, the forest as an imagined space of communion remains subject to missed encounters and waiting. In search of her daughter, the mother awaits her arrival only to leave alone and to awaken to the deafening silence of her absence.

To protect herself from the anguish of abandonment, the marquise invests in an image of her daughter as faithful companion. Whereas the daughter takes leave of the suffering mother, the daughter as memory remains by her side and accompanies her during moments of solitude:

> Ainsi, ma bonne, me voilà toute seule avec votre cher souvenir; c’est assez. C’est une fidèle compagnie qui ne m’abandonne jamais, et que je préfère à toutes les autres. Il y fait très-parfaitement beau, et vous croyez bien qu’il n’y a point d’endroit où je ne me souvienne de ma fille, et qui ne soit marqué tendrement

> dans mon imagination, car je n'y vois plus rien que sur ce ton. (Sévigné, *Correspondance* 2:688)

At the moment of abandonment, the mother's memory supplements this loss with an enduring and unchanging image of the daughter. It is perhaps for this reason that this memory remains her most cherished companion. The daughter as image coincides perfectly with the mother's desires, a tender memory to which she turns in moments of loneliness and which protects her from the alienating effects of the daughter's absence. As I have shown above, this encounter differs significantly from the antagonism that pervades their relationship. The mother arguably delights in this image because it confirms her privileged position vis-à-vis the daughter. This cherished memory offers no resistance to the domineering mother; rather, it serves to uphold a fantasy that she could not otherwise maintain: the daughter as an ever-present and faithful companion.

Interestingly enough, at other points in her correspondence, the mother constructs an image of her daughter that bears little resemblance to that of cherished and faithful companion: "Je repasse tous les temps: nous étions comme à cette heure à Livry, et ainsi de toutes les saisons. L'amitié que j'ai pour vous ne cause pas une paix bien profonde à un cœur aussi dénué de philosophie que le mien: il faut passer sur ces endroits sans y séjourner. Vous me voyez, ma bonne, et je vois que vous vous moquez de moi" (*Correspondance* 2:34). Alone, the mother returns to those places and moments spent together. However, she continues on her way, unable to return to the site of past, shared experiences which now constitute a source of anguish. The marquise paints a particular image of herself only to suggest that the daughter witnesses her grief by responding with contempt: "je vois que vous vous moquez de moi." For the wounded mother, the daughter's derisive gaze further entrenches the despondency of her position. Since there is no evidence to suggest that Mme de Grignan responds in such a manner, we are perhaps compelled

to question the mother's motivation. One possible answer is that this depiction is symptomatic of the mother's underlying aggression and ambivalence. Upon receipt of the mother's address, the countess perceives the perverse role that she is called to occupy. To that end, letter writing becomes a space of retribution in which Mme de Sévigné exacts a kind of scriptural vengeance on the absent daughter.

The mother often finds herself in correspondence with an addressee who refuses to meet her in this space of shared, reciprocal exchange that constitutes the epistolary project. That is, Mme de Sévigné encounters the daughter's resistance to honor the terms set forth (by the mother) in the epistolary contract. Although we do not have access to the daughter's letters, the maternal discourse attests to the continual negotiations that frame their correspondence. In particular, Mme de Sévigné addresses her daughter's threats to no longer read her lengthy letters. Mme de Grignan's statement is due, in part, to a concern for the mother's frequent bouts of rheumatism. However, in the event that Mme de Sévigné is unable to write due to inflammation in her hands, she dictates her letters to a *petite personne*, her secretary. One could therefore contend that, for the daughter, epistolary correspondence (composing and reading letters) more closely resembles a task than a voluntary source of pleasure. Mme de Sévigné responds as follows: "Vous ne voulez pas, ma chère fille, que je vous écrive de grandes lettres. Pourquoi donc? c'est la chose du monde qui m'est la plus agréable quand je ne vous vois point. Vous me menacez de me les renvoyer sans les lire…" (*Correspondance* 2:405).

Why not simply discard or neglect to read the mother's letters? It thus appears that the daughter is interested in doubling the mother's pain: to limit her correspondence and to return them unread if the mother fails to observe such limitations. The daughter threatens to violate the trajectory proper to epistolary correspondence by returning that which is destined for her to the

mother. In the event of such a return, the mother would find no point of recognition in the addressee, the one who is charged with reading and responding to her letters. Rather, the mother would become the recipient of her own gift, an unread and returned letter that annihilates the circuity proper to letter writing. The letter would return to its point of origin, destined to remain unread and thus untransformed by the addressee, Mme de Grignan. While there is no evidence to suggest that the countess ever follows through on this threat, her ambivalence is perhaps a response to the mother's over-indulgent tendencies. Melanie Klein finds that the over-indulgent mother "tends to increase feelings of guilt, and moreover, does not allow enough scope for the child's own tendencies to make reparation, to make sacrifices sometimes, and to develop true consideration for others" (319). As a sign of retaliation, the daughter threatens to radically limit or event temporally suspend their correspondence by returning her letters unread.

IV. Cruel Intentions

> …Cette indifférence aux souffrances qu'on cause et qui, quelques autres noms qu'on lui donne est la forme terrible et permanente de la cruauté.
>
> —Marcel Proust, *Du côté de chez Swann*

During periods of prolonged separation, letters provide the singular means by which the women stay in contact with one another. The prospect of an upcoming visit elicits, on the part of Mme de Sévigné, much anticipation and impatience. During moments of reunion, there is a silence that punctuates the letters as the women suspend their correspondence. In turn, the reader does not have access to those potentially intimate moments when the women are in one another's company. Excluded from the intimacies of one-on-one contact, the reader awaits the moment of

separation as that which signals their return to letter writing. There are, however, a few letters, penned during Mme de Grignan's visit to Paris in 1679, that rupture this silence only to reveal the presence of friction between the women. Mme de Sévigné opens a letter with the following grievance: "J'ai mal dormi. Vous m'accablâtes hier au soir; je n'ai pu supporter votre injustice" (*Correspondance* 2:665). Shortly thereafter, Mme de Sévigné positions herself as the victim of Mme de Grignan's unjust accusations:

> Je serais bien fâchée qu'on pût douter que vous aimant comme je fais, vous ne fussiez point pour moi comme vous êtes. Qu'y a-t-il donc? C'est que c'est moi qui ai toutes les imperfections dont vous vous chargiez hier au soir, et le hasard a fait qu'avec confiance, je me plaignis hier à Monsieur le Chevalier que vous n'aviez pas assez d'indulgence pour toutes ces misères, que vous me les faisiez quelquefois trop sentir, que j'en étais quelquefois affligée et humiliée. Vous m'accusez aussi de parler à des personnes à qui je ne dis jamais rien de ce qu'il ne faut point dire. Vous me faites, sur cela, une injustice trop crainte; vous donnez trop à vos préventions… (*Correspondance* 2:665)

The mother's complaint reveals the complex nature of their relationship. First, as evidenced by the opening address, the mother can no longer support the daughter's unfair treatment. Second, Mme de Sévigné worries that others might doubt the extent of her love for Mme de Grignan. Third, the permanence of her complaint in writing arguably contributes to verifying her portrait of the daughter as difficult and unloving and, by extension, her own self-portrait as an idealized loving mother.

This passage also attests to the fundamental role that others play in reflecting a particular image of maternal love back to Mme de Sévigné. Simply put, the marquise looks to others for

confirmation of her exemplary love for her daughter. The potential for doubt incites the mother's anger and compels her to betray the daughter by confiding in Monsieur le Chevalier. A curious dynamic ensues for Mme de Grignan is at once addressed (the recipient of Sévigné's letter) only to perceive the presence of another interlocutor: the mother's confidant. The marquise addresses the recipient only to inscribe her position within the text as the object of her compliant. Whereas Monsieur le Chevalier is presumably a more sympathetic interlocutor, Mme de Grignan will not indulge the mother's grievances.

In this scene, the mother excises her beloved daughter from the role of confidant only to address her through writing. Upon receipt of the letter, the addressee finds herself projected into view, the object of the mother's disdain. The letter bears the indelible marks of the mother's antagonism toward a daughter who will never coincide with her expectations of what constitutes an appropriate interlocutor. For the mother, there therefore exists the need to confide in another while making her daughter painfully aware of her need to do so. It is also interesting to note that Mme de Grignan refrains, at times, from taking the mother into her confidence.[49] In effect, neither woman can entrust, in an unconditional manner, her sentiments to the other. Mme de Sévigné writes:

> Il est vrai que je suis quelquefois blessée de l'entière ignorance où je suis de vos sentiments, du peu de part que j'ai à votre confiance; j'accorde avec peine l'amitié que vous avez pour moi avec cette séparation de toute sorte de confidence. Je sais que vos amis sont traités autrement. Mais enfin, je me dis que c'est mon malheur, que vous êtes de cette humeur, qu'on ne se change point. (*Correspondance* 2:668) [50]

From this peripheral position, the mother attributes this lack of confidence to the daughter's temperament (*humeur*) and knows that she will not change. However, I believe that the daughter's lack of confidence in her mother is a defensive strategy against maternal domination.[51] Jensen argues that Mme de Sévigné's desire to control her daughter by turning her into a second self precludes the possibility of genuine intimacy between the women: "a mother, by treating her daughter as a second self, by expecting her to fulfill maternal wishes rather than have any of her own, would not be able to recognize the daughter as a person in her own right. The maternal ego is the only standard of value" ("Mother-Daughter" 238). If mutual recognition implies that each individual recognizes the other as a differentiated subject, the mother's desire for mother-daughter reflectivity actually precludes any sense of intimacy. By failing to recognize her daughter as a distinct, autonomous individual, the mother pays the ultimate price: she falls out of the daughter's confidence.

What does it mean to entrust one's message to another, to communicate something in confidence to another? For both correspondents, there is a marked lack of reliance on the other's fidelity or ability to receive the message as intended. To a certain extent, this lack of confidence is due to the fact that the daughter's letters circulate and enter into the semi-public domain of the salons. Epistolary correspondence does not operate within a closed system between two, predetermined parties. Instead, to address the other is to acknowledge the presence of a third, unknown party. Consequently, neither the sender nor the recipient can determine the letter's destiny in view of this larger audience. In contrast, Marcel Gutwirth underscores the confidential and confessional nature of her letters: "Or tout l'art de Mme de Sévigné, dans ses lettres, consiste en ceci: réussir à écrire comme l'on parle, avec la liberté, le naturel, le décousu même avec la conversation. Conversation qui, avec sa fille, adopte bien souvent le caractère de la confidence,

parfois même de la confession" (134). Indeed, Mme de Sévigné privileges a freedom and simplicity of expression that more closely resembles conversation than written communication. However, as mentioned above, there are moments that attest to the lack of confidence that each correspondent places in the other. What each correspondent seems to say is: I cannot trust that you will receive and respond to my message in a manner that confirms my desires, my needs. I will therefore withhold certain information to protect myself from your inadequacy, from your inability to receive and engage my message as I see fit. Each correspondent then writes the other out of this circle of confidence. [52]

Aware of her marginal position in relation to the daughter's confidants, Mme de Sévigné nonetheless awaits her daughter's response. However, she is not interested in receiving confirmation of the daughter's confidence in her, but of her love for her. "…et plus que tout cela, ma bonne, admirez la faiblesse d'une véritable tendresse, c'est qu'effectivement votre présence, un mot d'amitié, un retour, une douceur, me ramène et me fait tout oublier" (*Correspondance* 2:668). The mother seeks not to ingratiate herself with the daughter, to position herself as a trusted and faithful confidant, but to receive marks of filial love. Before the daughter who will never change ("on ne se change point"), the mother's only point of recourse is her appeal to Mme de Grignan's filial affections. Once again, we witness the shift away from the daughter back to the mother. One could argue that the violence of the maternal discourse lies in the lack of concern with the issue at hand (Sévigné's ignorance of her daughter's sentiments) in favor of indulging the suffering mother. In place of the daughter's confidence, the mother asks for that which is narcissistically reassuring: filial love. By receiving confirmation of her position as beloved, the mother forgets ("me fait tout oublier") the original source of conflict: the daughter's refusal to confide in her. To that end, the marquise symbolically forgets the daughter, the

silenced other who cannot disclose her truest sentiments. Instead, the dutiful daughter must participate in the return of her mother's image as beloved.

Under the guise of addressing the daughter, the mother manages to shift, time and time again, the focus back to herself. At times, this turn away from the other toward the self is explicit: "Mais je quitte ce discours pour revenir un peu à moi" (Sévigné, *Correspondance* 2:668). Most notably, the second in a series of three letters written during Mme de Grignan's visit to Paris, Mme de Sévigné discounts the daughter's cruel accusations from the previous evening and then proceeds to return to herself as the primary focus of her address:

> Vous disiez hier cruellement, ma bonne, que je serais trop heureuse quand vous seriez loin de moi, que vous me donniez mille chagrins, que vous ne faisiez que me contrarier. Je ne puis penser à ce discours sans avoir le cœur percé et fondre en larmes. Ma très-chère, vous ignorez comme je suis pour vous si vous ne savez que tous les chagrins que me peut donner l'excès de la tendresse que j'ai pour vous sont plus agréables que tous les plaisirs du monde, où vous n'avez point de part. (*Correspondance* 2:668)

By setting the daughter's accusations in conflict with the truth, Mme de Sévigné acquits herself of any wrongdoing. In other words, the mother qualifies her daughter's statement as cruel to discredit the potential validity of her assertion. Blame now lies with the daughter who ignores the excesses of maternal passion and tenderness. As the recipient of such an infatuation, Mme de Grignan cannot maintain her case, cannot cast the mother as desirous of her absence. The marquise repeatedly exercises her authority by denying the daughter's subjectivity and presenting maternal love as entirely above suspicion and therefore safe from reproach.

Following Mme de Grignan's return to Provence, the problem of the daughter's unjust conduct resurfaces in the mother's letters. Subject to the daughter's cruel treatment, the mother responds by appealing to the tenderness and goodness of her love: "Vous m'avez bien fait de petites injustices, et vous en ferez toujours quand vous oublierez comme je suis pour vous. Mais soyez-en mieux persuadée, et je le serai aussi de la bonté et de la tendresse de votre cœur pour moi" (*Correspondance* 2:680). In this passage, the violence of the maternal discourse lies in the mother's disregard for the potential validity of the daughter's "petites injustices." Rather than inquire into the cause or source of such acts, the mother dismisses them as signs of the daughter's forgetting of her love. Following this logic, when the daughter forgets the mother's love, she subjects her to unwarranted accusations. It is for this reason that Mme de Sévigné tries to persuade Mme de Grignan of the tenderness and magnanimity of her love both to curb her conduct and to receive confirmation of the daughter's love. As we have seen, the mother ensnares the daughter in a bind so as to negate any sense of resistance on the daughter's part. Consequently, the primary source of her "petites injustices" disappears and in its place stands the daughter guilty of forgetting her mother's love. As the recipient of such tender love, the daughter, lest she forget, should not again feel compelled to launch such accusations against her mother. In effect, the mother's love saves all, excuses all from past transgressions or moments of forgetfulness.

When the daughter fails to disclose previously requested information, Mme de Sévigné suffers the daughter's silence as an offense. For the wounded mother, it thus follows that her transgression demands punishment. However, in view of the distance that separates the correspondents, retribution is limited to the realm of discourse:

> Quoi! vous pensez m'écrire de grandes lettres, sans me dire un mot de votre santé; je pense, ma pauvre bonne, que vous vous moquez de moi. Pour vous punir, je vous avertis que j'ai fait de ce silence tout le pis que j'ai pu; je compris que vous aviez bien plus de mal aux jambes qu'à l'ordinaire, puisque vous m'en disiez rien, et qu'assurément si vous vous fussiez un peu mieux portée, vous eussiez été pressée de me le dire. Voilà comme j'ai raisonné. (Sévigné, *Correspondance* 2:709)

In return for omitting details concerning her health, Mme de Grignan receives an address that eclipses the truth in favor of assuming the worse: her worsening leg condition. Rather than accord Mme de Grignan the right to remain silent, Mme de Sévigné interprets her silence as a mark of her worsening health. Regardless of the veracity of her claims, the mother exercises her right to possess absolute knowledge of the daughter. For the domineering mother, there is nothing that should escape her purview, because such knowledge is vital to her well-being: "Mon Dieu, que j'étais heureuse quand j'étais en repos sur votre santé!" (*Correspondance* 2:709). Whether or not Mme de Grignan consents to the (implicit) terms set forth in the epistolary contract, she is expected to respond to the mother's demands, to disclose that which the mother desires to know: "Mandez-moi donc désormais l'état où vous êtes, mais avec sincérité" (*Correspondance* 2:710). It is interesting to note that Mme de Sévigné's punishment does not ultimately enable her to surmount the pains of ignorance. Before the other who refuses to disclose the truth of her situation, the mother's threats follow a single trajectory and encounter the daughter's resistance.

In response to the daughter's silence, the mother recasts her position within the text, a configuration that confounds the position that she has hitherto occupied as addressee.

Specifically, in a letter addressed to Mme de Grignan, Mme de Sévigné refers to her daughter in the third person and attributes her absence to an unnamed, external force: "J'ai beau chercher ma chère fille, je ne la trouve plus, et tous les pas qu'elle fait l'éloignent de moi. Je m'en allai donc à Sainte-Marie, toujours pleurant et toujours mourant. Il me semblait qu'on m'arrachait le cœur et l'âme, et en effet, quelle rude séparation!" (*Correspondance* 1:149). By referring to Mme de Grignan in this manner, I would argue that Mme de Sévigné elides, in part, her daughter's presence as addressee to stress the gravity of her absence. Though the countess is the explicit recipient of this letter, she encounters herself as the mother's scriptural daughter (elle), a third person subject. Farrell posits that "the object of the search, the daughter is transformed into the object of the mother's discourse and is denied, by this withholding of recognition *(vous)* her own place of center as subject. The writing mother invents a textual daughter in the letter, often at the expense of the real one, and the subject of the mother's discourse is most often *je*" (92). One could add that this pronoun undermines any sense of proximity between the mother and the daughter. By introducing a third term (elle), the mother underscores the fact that she has already looked for her daughter to no avail and now realizes the gaping distance that separates them. Though Mme de Grignan was obliged to leave Paris to join her husband in Provence, Mme de Sévigné does not disclose the source responsible for this "rude separation." Rather, the addresser attributes agency to an impersonal "on", the one responsible for tearing her heart and her soul away from her. Bereft of her dearest companion, the mother remains steadfast in her conviction to await the daughter's return. In contrast to the fleeing daughter, the mournful mother endures the daughter's absence as a sign of her exceptional love and devotion.

Although the reader does not have access to the daughter's half of the correspondence, there are a few moments during which Mme de Sévigné directly quotes her daughter's letters.

Integrated into the mother's text, we are granted access to the daughter's voice, to the otherwise silent referent of the mother's address. In a letter composed on the tenth of August1677, Mme de Sévigné refers to the final words of the daughter's last letter, which she characterizes as "assommants": "'Vous ne sauriez plus rien faire de mal, car vous ne m'avez plus: j'étais le désordre de votre esprit, de votre santé, de votre maison; je ne vaux rien du tout pour vous'" (*Correspondance* 2:521). Following the daughter's logic, the mother is no longer able to cause harm because she no longer has her. The mother's ability to commit injurious acts ostensibly directed at the daughter is contingent on the daughter's presence. As if to further complicate this dynamic, the daughter conceives of her role in ultimately depreciative terms. A source of constant angst and disorder in the mother's life, the daughter believes that she is worth nothing to her mother. Without the necessary context from which this passage is taken, one struggles to fully determine the meaning of Mme de Grignan's statement. However, what this passage discloses is the daughter's ambivalence as a desire to wound her mother. The daughter's lack of worth is a sign that the mother has failed her. Blame consequently lies with the mother who fails to provide sufficient signs of her love and in doing so prove the daughter's worth.

Not surprisingly, Mme de Sévigné does not acknowledge these accusations, but underscores instead her dissatisfaction with her daughter: "Quelles paroles! comment les peut-on penser? Et comment les peut-on lire? Vous dites bien pis que tout ce qui m'a tant déplu, et qu'on avait la cruauté de me dire quand vous partîtes" (*Correspondance* 2:521). Her exclamatory response serves, I believe, to radically discredit the daughter's statement. And moreover, the rhetorical questions underscore the ridiculous nature of such claims. Mme de Sévigné refuses to engage the daughter's address, preferring instead to deem this accusation worse than anything that she has previously said to displease her. Rather than acknowledge the potential validity of

the daughter's statement, Mme de Sévigné lays blame upon the daughter. It is not the mother who is to blame, but the daughter for having expressed such cruel and unjust statements. In my view, the mother assigns blame to the daughter to defend against the violence of the daughter's ambivalence.

In search of consolation, Mme de Sévigné often reads and rereads her daughter's correspondence. However, rather than admit the potential for conflict between the women, she rewrites the past by distorting the truth of the daughter's sentiments: "Vos lettres aimables font toutes ma consolation; je les relis souvent. Et voici comme je fais: je ne me souviens plus du tout ce qui m'avait paru des marques d'éloignement et d'indifférence; il me semble que cela ne vient point de vous, et je prends toutes vos tendresses, et dites et écrites, pour le véritable fond de votre cœur pour moi" (*Correspondance* 2:683). As the writer revisits her daughter's letters, she literally forgets that which previously appeared to her as signs of the daughter's distance and indifference. Moreover, the mother can no longer attribute such signs of disagreement to her daughter. In place of the daughter's indifference now reside her tender writings, that which confirm her love for Mme de Sévigné. We realize the extent to which the scenes of reading and rereading tend toward the satisfaction of the mother's desire. Her reading enacts an erasure of earlier conflicts in favor of confirming the tenderness of filial love. In his analysis, Roger Duchêne foregrounds the liberties that the writer feels compelled to take: "C'est pourquoi le fait d'écrire comporte aussi un danger: loin de l'interlocuteur on est tenté de soutenir davantage son point de vue et l'on se risque plus facilement à adopter une attitude que ses réactions immédiates empêcheraient de prendre en sa présence. La lettre est non seulement occasion, mais encore tentation de liberté (*Réalité* 173). And this is precisely what Mme de Sévigné does. In private, she takes full advantage of the interlocutor's absence and reinterprets previous signs of

indifference as filial tenderness. Consequently, any sense of resistance falls under erasure before the mother intent on inscribing her position as the daughter's beloved.

Near the end of Mme de Sévigné's life, the letters destined for her daughter reveal a marked decrease in conflict between the women. Much to the mother's delight, she receives written confirmation of the daughter's tender affections for her: "Bon Dieu! de quel ton, de quel cœur (car les tons viennent du cœur), de quelle manière m'y parlez-vous de votre tendresse?" (*Correspondance* 3:591). In December of 1690, Mme de Grignan writes a letter to her cousin, Monsieur de Coulanges, in which the reunited correspondents delight in one another's company: "Oui, nous sommes ensemble, nous aimant, nous embrassant de tout notre cœur, moi ravie de voir ma mère venir courageusement me chercher du bout de l'univers et du couchant à l'aurore; il n'y a qu'elle au monde capable d'exécuter de pareilles entreprises et d'être auprès de son enfant…" (Sévigné, *Correspondance* 3:954). Although this letter is not addressed to Mme de Sévigné, we are granted access to the daughter's voice and to a decidedly different view of the mother-daughter relationship. Most noticeably, the daughter lovingly welcomes her mother who courageously traveled to the end of the universe to find her. We encounter a daughter who offers no resistance to her mother and who recognizes her sacrifice as an unwavering desire to remain by her child's side.

As we witness this moment of mutual recognition and correspondence between the women, we may indeed wonder: was the daughter there all along? Did the mother's desire for filial devotion and recognition eclipse the individual as such? If so, is the daughter's ambivalence perhaps symptomatic of the untenable position that her mother calls her to occupy? When Mme de Sévigné recedes into the background, we perceive the daughter called to suffer the charge to coincide perfectly with the maternal presence. However, by failing to recognize the

daughter as an autonomous, differentiated subject, the mother perpetuates a dynamic in which it becomes exceedingly difficult to cultivate emotional intimacy and mutual affirmation between the correspondents. Much like the curtain whose purpose is to conceal that which remains behind it, the mother obscures her daughter by scripting her position within the text and by failing to recognize the potential for the daughter's need for independence. Without the daughter's half of the exchange, we can only ever witness momentary glimpses of Mme de Sévigné's most beloved correspondent, a recipient who constantly evades our grasp and is forever escaping the discursive frame that attempts to capture her image, to render her position intelligible.

CHAPTER THREE

Ruptured Encounters: Problems of Address in *La Princesse de Clèves*

From the opening pages of *La Princesse de Clèves* (1678), Marie-Madeleine de Lafayette engages her readers in the invariably public and communal world that constitutes the court of Henri II. We encounter the court as a closed space within which all elements (narratives, intrigues, and bodies) freely circulate for no discursive act is confined to the moment of enunciation. Consequently, no image, message, or position is safe from subversion, from that which would ultimately undermine its meaning. As critics have observed, this framework both mediates and prohibits social interaction or the ways in which characters understand themselves in relation to others and to themselves.[53] Though ways of knowing traditionally rely on shared experience, the novel emphasizes the underlying antagonism that frames social interaction and exchange at court. Read in this manner, the plot presents a markedly pessimistic view of the negotiations that make up the social order. Rather than lead to a mutually affirmative exchange between people, such negotiations underscore the lack of recognition and intimacy that permeate human relations at court. While the various modes of interaction present at court have elicited much critical debate, I endeavor to approach the question of human interaction somewhat differently by examining the reoccurring figure of silence as it structures and governs intersubjective exchange and communication.[54]

In this chapter, I focus on moments of exchange during which the interlocutor is at once recognized (the recipient of an address) and denied such recognition (interdiction against speech). In the wake of such encounters, one is often left to occupy an unbearable position—most often as silenced recipient—as determined by the other. This analysis therefore aims to interrogate those moments during which characters cannot claim, in the form of speech, their role

as subject of enunciation. Perhaps more problematic is that the recipient is often left with a message whose destiny is never to return to its point of origin, whose single direction signals an irreducible rupture between self and other. In view of this particular dynamic, I am also interested in how the silenced interlocutor negotiates the terms of such an encounter given the implied impotency of his/her position. To that end, I will attempt to demonstrate that the contexts in which communicative events occur appear to undermine any pretense for shared experience or understanding. Throughout the novel, characters endeavor to know other selves both with respect to their individual positions and the social and political structures in which these interactions coalesce. However, as we shall see, the lack of intersubjective recognition plagues almost all of the relationships in the novel, thus leading to a profound sense of alienation both in relation to self and other.

While individuals respond in varying ways to the unbearable nature of this posture, there are those who take possession of certain objects in an effort to mobilize and decipher their position within the larger network of courtly relations. In particular, a purloined portrait and a lost letter both structure and limit the sphere of human interaction. Given and taken, the object enters into circulation and functions as an instantiation of courtly relations and affiliations. This is to suggest that these objects both mediate and orientate public and private exchange. At first glance, these objects provide the illusion of proximity in relation to the other and one is thus compelled, by any means necessary, to take into possession the esteemed item. However, upon closer examination, I would like to show that the episodes involving the portrait and the letter present the reader with several interpretative challenges. First, interposed between silenced and constrained bodies, these objects initiate a secret relay between characters and speak when one cannot. In turn, they constitute a kind of material support, the tenuous link that exists, often

surreptitiously, between individuals. Second, despite the privilege accorded to these material artifacts, my contention is that they can neither secure meaning nor foster a sense of mutual recognition nor correspondence between the involved parties. Finally, I will discuss how these objects, whether visual or graphic, are accorded a certain truth value although their representational status precludes any such determination.

I. Subversive Encounters: Addressing the Other

The opening pages of the novel detail the dominate relations and affiliations of Henri II's court in which "la magnificence et la galanterie n'ont jamais paru en France avec tant d'éclat que dans les dernières années du règne de Henri second" (Lafayette, *La Princesse* 69). The court constitutes a deleterious space in which constantly shifting and ambiguous political and social alliances undermine any pretense for stability or permanency: "L'ambition et la galanterie étaient l'âme de cette cour, et occupaient également les hommes et les femmes. Il y avait tant d'intérêts et tant de cabales différentes, et les dames y avaient tant de part que l'amour était toujours mêlé aux affaires et les affaires à l'amour" (Lafayette, *La Princesse* 80-81). Under the constant scrutiny of the court, the courtier is called to master the language and gestures of civility in order to guarantee his position.[55] In *Les Caractères,* La Bruyère's description underscores the fundamental role of dissemblance at court: "Un homme qui sait la cour est maître de son geste, de ses yeux et de son visage; il est profond, impénétrable; il dissimule les mauvais offices, sourit à ses ennemis, contraint son humeur, déguise ses passions, dément son cœur, parle, agit contre ses sentiments" (164). Although one's appearance and comportment are skillfully constructed according to the rules of propriety and civility, this coded language (word, image, and gesture)

remains nonetheless subject to appropriation and resignification. In effect, those in attendance at court can never fully secure nor master their position, and this in turn gives rise to an anxiety over the dissemination and reception of one's image and position at court.

In response to the dangers present at court, Madame de Chartres, the protagonist's mother, predetermines an image of conduct toward which her young daughter, Mademoiselle de Chartres, must always strive. [56] A description of the singular conditions in which Madame de Chartres educates her daughter precedes her first appearance at court. In virtual isolation, she cultivates an acute mistrust of appearances and privileges the inimitable image of woman as devout and virtuous wife. Rather than instruct by omission, her pedagogical method finds its force in speaking the unspeakable. Cautionary narratives thus serve as the cornerstone for her daughter's education and from these descriptions the young girl must deduce an image of *une honnête femme*:

> La plupart des mères s'imaginent qu'il suffit de ne parler jamais de galanterie devant les jeunes personnes pour les en éloigner. Madame de Chartres avait une opinion opposée; 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 apprenait de dangereux; elle lui contait le peu de sincérité des hommes, leurs tromperies et leur infidélités, les malheurs domestique où plongent les engagements; et elle lui faisait voir, d'un autre côté, quelle tranquillité 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, que par une extrême défiance de soi-même et par un grand soin de s'attacher à ce qui peut seul faire le bonheur

> d'une femme, qui est d'aimer son mari et d'en être aimée. (Lafayette, *La Princesse* 76)

Here, one can perhaps locate the effectiveness of the mother's instruction in the inclusion of sexual pleasure, not in its exclusion. Since Madame de Chartres is solely responsible for her daughter's knowledge of love, she controls this scene of initiation by inscribing sexual pleasure as dangerous. We can thus sense that the mother's narrative serves as the only point of entry or contact with the outside world. As Peggy Kamuf notes in her analysis, though the young girl might desire something beyond the mother, the double function of the maternal presence both compensates for and denies this longing as absence. Kamuf contends that "the absence of men from this initiation scene is negated inasmuch as the mother represents—both transitively and intransitively—an object for her daughter's desire, which is already to be found within the closed feminine couple" (*Fictions* 71). It thus appears that the power of the maternal discourse lies in the mother's ability to supplement this absence while denying its very existence. Moreover, by positioning herself at the intersection between the internal and external world, the mother becomes indispensable to the daughter's comprehension of that which lies outside of the maternal construct.

Madame de Chartres introduces her daughter to the court at the age of sixteen. In an attempt to control her daughter's courtly persona, she insists upon full disclosure from the young girl. A constant fixture, the mother attempts to maintain absolute proximity in relation to her daughter. Moreover, the mother acts as a kind of filter through which all knowledge is vetted to preserve the daughter's virtue: "Madame de Chartres, qui avait eu tant d'application pour inspirer la vertu à sa fille, ne discontinua pas de prendre les mêmes soins dans un lieu où ils étaient si nécessaires et où il y avait tant d'exemples si dangereux" (Lafayette, *La Princesse* 80).

In order to resolve any conflict that might arise if the daughter confides in another, the mother becomes the other as friend. "[Elle] voyait ce péril et ne songeait qu'aux moyens d'en garantir sa fille. Elle la pria, non pas comme sa mère, mais comme son amie, de lui faire confidence de toutes les galanteries qu'on lui dirait, et elle lui promit de lui aider à se conduire dans des choses où l'on était souvent embarrassée quand on était jeune" (Lafayette, *La Princesse* 81-82). As this passage demonstrates, the maternal function subsumes the outside world inasmuch as the daughter's experiences fall under the scrutiny of the ever-present mother.

Despite the force of her pedagogical imperatives, Madame de Chartres cannot ultimately save her daughter from the violence that governs and informs human interaction and relations. I would argue that the mother's discourse is emblematic of a fundamental anxiety concerning the impossibility of securing one's image and position at court. That is to suggest that beneath her pedagogical method, which privileges the dangers of adulterous engagements and the duplicitous nature of men, lies knowledge of the court as a site of unbearable alienation and mutability. Most notably, the day after the heroine's first appearance at court, a chance encounter with Monsieur de Clèves, a courtier, serves as an illustrative example of this phenomenon. Unaccompanied by her mother, Mademoiselle de Chartres encounters him while at an Italian jeweler. Though he cannot identify the young girl, he is overcome with admiration and interprets her appearance and attendants as signs of her noble condition. "Monsieur 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" (Lafayette, *La Princesse* 77). Though her position is in fact illegible given her anonymity, Clèves appeals to external signs of nobility to identify that which he cannot name. It would seem then that her first appearance is rather a non-appearance insofar as seeing, for M. de Clèves, is not about subjective

individuation, but about inscribing her position within a semiotic system to which she does not yet belong.

While in the jeweler's shop, Monsieur de Clèves proceeds to address the young girl and in doing so attempt to secure her position nominally (Madame). This gesture is however is met with great embarrassment: "sa jeunesse lui faisait croire que c'était une fille, mais, ne lui voyant point de mère, l'appelant Madame, il ne savait que penser, et il la regardait toujours avec étonnement" (Lafayette, *La Princesse* 77). Unable to negotiate the terms of this encounter, the young girl falls reticent: "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, *La Princesse* 77). Rather than take pleasure in being looked at, her embarrassment serves to deflect meeting the other's intrusive gaze. For the first time, the young heroine finds herself unwillingly projected into view and the object of inquiry. In her reading of *La Princesse de Clèves,* Julia Douthwaite argues that the princess is first described in a passive, reactive mode: "the heroine's first role in the novel is that of an object—observed, scrutinized by others" (114). Since the heroine does not yet know how to engage the suitor's admiring glances, she promptly takes leave of this public space as the only means by which she can control the reception of her image. Though vision appears to serve as a conduit for knowledge about the other, this encounter remains more or less unintelligible for M. de Clèves since he can only qualify the young woman in vague terms: "[Il] se consola de la perdre de vue dans l'espérance de savoir qui elle était; mais il fut bien surprise quand il sut qu'on ne la connaissait point" (Lafayette, *La Princesse* 77-78).

In an attempt to learn her name, M. de Clèves later recounts his meeting to the king's sister who discounts his story as someone of such beauty would undoubtedly be known. Her disregard for the validity of his account is most likely predicated on the notion that no subject or

event escapes the court's infinite purview. Rather than admit the potential for such an oversight on the part of the court, that which cannot be named fails, in effect, to exist: "Madame lui dit qu'il n'y avait point de personnes comme celle qu'il dépeignait et que, s'il y en avait quelqu'une, elle serait connue de tout le monde" (Lafayette, *La Princesse* 78). It seems then that her comments are predicated on a kind of blindness insofar as that which stands outside of the court's purview will remain unknown and therefore nonexistent. Sylvère Lotringer calls attention to the paradoxical function of the name in and outside of the court: "Tout ce qui est étranger à la cour est interchangeable parce qu'anonyme; nous en venons pourtant à ce paradoxe que tout ce qui appartient à la cour est interchangeable *parce que nommé.* Si les roturiers sombrent dans l'anonymat, les nobles ne font que contraster par des titres et attributs divers un même mérite qui est l'apanage de leur rang, non d'une quelconque individualité" (499). At court, we might conclude that the name (titles and attributes) is not a mark of individuality but of one's participation in a larger system. To a certain extent, the noble is reduced to anonymity as he/she is only recognizable according to the title or rank conferred by a sovereign entity. What is perhaps most striking is that the figure of anonymity is operative both in and outside of the court. In other words, given her recent introduction at court, Mademoiselle de Chartres stands at the intersection between two worlds and remains more or unless unknown to a system which will later name her, inscribe her position within the larger courtly network and by doing so render her position legible, knowable.

Many suitors will later take interest in Mademoiselle de Chartres; however, M. de Clèves reminds her that he was the first to admire her at the Italian jewelers. Following Clèves' logic, his admiring gaze rescued her from the anonymity of her first appearance by according her the privilege and esteem to which she was apparently entitled: "Il s'approcha d'elle et il la supplia de

se souvenir qu'il avait été le premier à l'admirer et que, sans la connaitre, il avait eu pour elle tous les sentiments de respect et d'estime qui lui étaient dus" (Lafayette, *La Princesse* 79). Following this appeal, one has the impression that the act of seeing, figured as admiration, is not a disinterested position. Rather, I would suggest that Clèves' address is problematic for several reasons. First, he vindicates the primacy of their encounter to situate himself at the origin of her initiation into courtly life. Unaccompanied at the jewelers, she will first encounter the return of her image in Clèves' admiring gaze. In order to mobilize or secure *her* relationship to him, Clèves reminds her that he was the first to return her image of self as admired. In short, his gaze is the means by which she apprehends a particular image of self. Second, my contention is that his comments are emblematic of a desire for recognition on his part. Unfortunately for Clèves, sight will not converge in a moment of recognition since Mademoiselle de Chartres does not reciprocate his admiring glances and by doing so participate in the circuity of desire: "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" (Lafayette, *La Princesse* 77). Here, we witness the extent to which Clèves invests in the illusory reciprocity of this exchange which is in fact no more than a projection of his desire onto the other. It will later become clear that his appeal to Mademoiselle de Chartres only further entrenches the instability and indeterminacy of his position in relation to her.

Madame de Chartres shortly thereafter arranges her daughter's marriage to M. de Clèves although the young girl is evidently indifferent to him. Neither troubled nor touched by his person, "elle l'épouserait même avec moins de répugnance qu'un autre, mais qu'elle n'avait aucune inclination particulière pour sa personne" (Lafayette, *La Princesse* 87). When he laments her tepid declarations, she invokes the conventions of propriety to which she must ultimately

conform: "'Il y a de l'injustice à vous plaindre, lui répondit-elle; je ne sais ce que vous pouvez souhaiter au-delà de ce que je fais, et il me semble que la bienséance ne permet pas que j'en fasse davantage'" (Lafayette, *La Princesse* 87). She then falls silent, unable to respond to his accusations in order to dissimulate the truth of her feelings. "Mademoiselle de Chartres ne savait que répondre, et ces distinctions étaient au-dessus de ses connaissances" (Lafayette, *La Princesse* 88). In response to her silence, Clèves comes to the following realization: "[il] ne voyait que trop combien elle était éloignée d'avoir pour lui des sentiments qui le pouvaient satisfaire, puisqu'il lui paraissait même qu'elle ne les entendait pas" (Lafayette, *La Princesse* 88). What is perhaps most striking about this passage is that Clèves attributes, in part, the failure of this conversation to a misunderstanding. He enters into dialogue with an interlocutor who cannot hear, in the sense of understanding, the terms set forth in his argument. The absence of mutual understanding constitutes an interruption, thus preventing the couple from continuing their exchange.

Following this encounter, the princess confides in her mother and recounts the pain that Clèves' affliction caused her. In the place of Clèves, the mother becomes the recipient of the daughter's story. In spite of the sincerity of her avowal, Madame de Chartres, an unsympathetic interlocutor, doubles her efforts to ensure their marriage. "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 avait témoignée en la préférant à tous les autres partis dans un temps où personne n'osait plus penser à elle" (Lafayette, *La Princesse* 88-9). Unlike the previous scene in which Clèves attributes the princess's silence to a misunderstanding, Madame de Chartres understands all too well the implications of the daughter's narrative. Consequently, rather than address her daughter's marked indifference, Madame de Chartres reframes their relationship in order to ingratiate Clèves with his future wife.

According to the mother's logic, Monsieur de Clèves rescued her from anonymity, and she is consequently beholden to him. This reframing of their relationship enables the mother to recast her daughter's position as the dutiful and grateful wife whose desire is of little to no concern. Rather than provide her daughter with the opportunity to assert her own will, the mother invokes an economy of indebtedness for which the only appropriate form of compensation is marriage. Recast in this manner, the daughter is under obligation to the prince and must therefore respond accordingly. Additionally, it is interesting to note that the marriage occurs immediately after the mother's intervention: "Ce mariage s'acheva, la cérémonie s'en fit au Louvre; et le soir, le Roi et les Reines vinrent souper chez Madame de Chartres avec toute la Cour, où ils furent reçus avec une magnificence admirable" (Lafayette, *La Princesse* 89). The text itself seems to suggest that there is no space for the daughter's reply, for that which might threaten the mother's arrangement.

Later in the novel, the figure of avowal remerges at a crucial moment and enables the mother to secure, once and for all, her presence in her daughter's life. However, such an inclusion will occur, as we shall see, at the daughter's expense. Despite the mother's request for complete transparency, the princess fails to disclose her passion for Monsieur de Nemours, a courtier of incomparable beauty and excellence. Despite the heroine's reticence, Madame de Chartres is well aware of her daughter's illicit desire for Nemours.[57] However, before the daughter now eager to avow her desire, the mother delivers, from her deathbed, a speech in which the daughter is not permitted to respond. [58] In this scene, the ailing mother appropriates her daughter's voice by speaking that which the daughter has not yet dare to avow—her passion for Nemours. [59] "'Vous avez de l'inclination pour M. de Nemours; je ne vous demande point de me l'avouer; je ne suis plus en état de me servir de votre sincérité pour vous conduire'"

(Lafayette, *La Princesse* 108). Rather than ask her daughter to avow her passionate inclination, the mother speaks in the place of the silenced other by articulating that which is not properly her own—the daughter's desire. Furthermore, in what appears to be an attempt to further entrench the impotency of her daughter's position, the mother refrains from discussing this matter with her for fear that the young girl would have discerned the truth of her *own* desire. She continues: "'Il y a déjà longtemps que je me suis aperçue de cette inclination; mais je ne vous en ai pas voulu parler d'abord, de peur de vous en faire apercevoir vous-même'" (Lafayette, *La Princesse* 108). A purveyor of truth, the mother appropriates the daughter's desire and the right to disclose or identify it as such. Since the daughter is prohibited from disclosing her feelings, we are obliged to consider the mother's perspective without knowing if this version bares any resemblance or correspondence to the daughter's narrative. In the place of the daughter emerges the mother who presents herself as the sole conduit through which the daughter can access the truth of her own desire.

She then proceeds to deliver her final testament in which the heroine's conduct is clearly scripted: "'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, *La Princesse* 108). The mother's final utterance, in part, derives its force from the menacing image of the fallen women, a descent that would annul her inimitable character and thrust her into the darkness of the same: "'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 doit vous arriver, je reçois la mort avec joie, pour n'en être pas le témoin'" (Lafayette, *La Princesse* 109). This passage underscores

the mother's willingness to die rather than to bear witness to her daughter's adultery. In truth, what the mother seems to suggest is: in the unlikely event that this occurs, I do not want to be present to the moment when you disclose your adulterous acts. I will not be the recipient of your address, the object of enunciation called to receive the truth of your betrayal. I will therefore gladly receive death as the ultimate defense against knowledge of such things.

Madame de Chartres then turns away, refuses to see her daughter again, and dies shortly thereafter. "Elle 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. … Elle vécut encore deux jours, pendant lesquelles elle ne voulut plus revoir sa fille, qui était la seule chose à quoi elle se sentait attachée" (Lafayette, *La Princesse* 109). She may indeed feel attached to her daughter, and yet by turning away I would argue that she positions herself as indifferent. Her primary interest lies not in receiving her daughter's avowal, but in transmitting a message that undermines the reciprocity implied in intersubjective communication for, as Emile Benveniste notes: "c'est cette condition de dialogue qui est constitutive de la *personne*, car elle implique en réciprocité que je deviens *tu* dans l'allocution de celui qui à son tour se désigne par *je*" (260). The linguistic markers *je* and *vous* provide the appearance of symmetry; however, the mother blocks the return of the *je* as *vous* and the *vous* as *je*. [60] In other words, the daughter remains the object of the mother's discourse, the *vous* prohibited from articulating itself as *je*. Consequently, the moment of allocution is not predicated on symmetry, and in turn the daughter will never become, at least in the presence of her mother, the subject of her own discourse. Additionally, I would argue that this encounter is one of intense alienation for the daughter cannot reclaim, in the form of speech, her role as subject.[61] For the mother, there is no other as subject. Rather, under her tutelage, the mother/daughter dyad is marked by a mirroring, and the reflected image is

not of an unknown other, but of a doubled self. We therefore witness an interlocutor who is not granted the linguistic status of person, but of internalized object of the mother's discourse.

Following Madame de Chartres' death, only the daughter, the addressee, remains in the wake of this loss. Death annihilates once and for all the poles of address for the daughter can never transform her position into that of addresser in order to respond to her mother. In other words, her position can only be understood in terms of the one who receives and is called to execute the terms of the message. Why did Madame de Chartres take such measures to block the return of her address in the form of a response? Would a response compromise the original address? Though the address is a particular modality of communication predicated on reciprocity, the mother's message will not enter into such an economy. Indeed, the mother is not interested in the daughter's avowal, but in transmitting a message that follows a single, non-returnable trajectory. Death therefore enables her to secure the terms of this address, to deliver an ideal message that retain its force and intelligibility by annulling the reciprocity implied in communication. Moreover, this final address remains unmediated, untransformed by the silenced recipient. It will later become clear that neither the passage of time nor the mother's death compromise the intensity of this message.

Shortly following the mother's death, the princess learns of another message in which death annihilates the poles of address and reveals the mutability and ambiguity of courtly relations. During a conversation with M. de Clèves, the Comte de Sancerre reveals the extent to which his unfaithful lover, Madame de Tournon, maintained certain appearances to dissimulate the details of her infidelity. According to Sancerre, Madame de Tournon, recently deceased, was secretly planning to marry his friend, Estouteville. It is only after her death that he discovers the details of her infidelity. "'Madame de Tournon m'était infidèle et j'apprends son infidélité et sa

trahison le lendemain que j'ai appris sa mort…'" (Lafayette, *La Princesse* 118). In particular, her infidelity confounds the image that he has hitherto retained of her: "'Mon âme est remplie et pénétrée de la plus vive douleur et du plus tendre amour que l'on ait jamais senties; dans un temps où son idée est dans mon cœur comme la plus parfaite chose qui ait jamais été, et la plus parfaite à mon égard'" (Lafayette, *La Princesse* 118). Though death appears to provide a space within which he can secure a stable and enduring image of the beloved other, knowledge of her infidelity undermines her esteemed image and reveals the impossibility, even in death, of securing his relationship to her. Moreover, the possibility of her return is haunted by the knowledge that the desired relation, that of lover, would inevitably be occupied by another. As Sancerre notes, "'Si elle revenait, elle vivrait pour Estouteville'" (Lafayette, *La Princesse* 120).

Unwilling to find consolation in her death despite her infidelity, Sancerre does not know how to mourn this loss. Death silences the lover's discourse and reduces his condition to that of unbearable ambiguity: "'Je ne puis ni haïr, ni aimer sa mémoire; je ne puis me consoler ni m'affliger'" (Lafayette, *La Princesse* 121). In the wake of her absence, Sancerre is also deprived of the possibility of taking vengeance upon her: "'Si elle vivait, j'aurais le plaisir de lui faire des reproches, et de me venger d'elle en lui faisant connaitre son injustice'" (Lafayette, *La Princesse* 120). Rather, death annihilates the circuity of the address for the point of origin (Madame de Tournon) becomes inaccessible. Subsequently, there is no point of return to which Sancerre can address his grievances or redress his position. Perhaps more problematic is that the recipient is left with a message whose destiny is never to return to its point of origin, whose direction signals an irreparable rupture between self and other. In the end, this particular structure condemns Sancerre to the interminable position of recipient, the one called to carry the unbearable weight of her betrayal.

II. Purloined Images

> Mais pour mieux comprendre encore de quelle sorte l'homme pourrait être forcé de se voir lui-même par les objets qui sont hors de lui, et ce qu'il fait pour s'en garantir, il faut considérer qu'il ne se regarde pas moins selon un certain être qu'il a dans l'imagination des autres, que selon ce qu'il est effectivement, et qu'il ne forme pas seulement son portrait sur ce qu'il connaît de soi-même, mais aussi sur la vue des portraits qu'il en découvre dans l'esprit des autres.
>
> —Pierre Nicole, *Essais de morale*

During a portraiture sitting, Madame de Clèves again finds herself silenced, unable to negotiate the terms on an encounter with Monsieur de Nemours. [62] In this scene, Madame la Dauphine commissions miniature portraits, destined for the queen, Catherine de Médicis. "La Reine Dauphine faisait faire des portraits en petit de toutes les belles personnes de la Cour pour les envoyer à la Reine sa mère" (Lafayette, *La Princesse* 135). Although the reproduction of courtly portraitures is conventional in nature, unproblematic vis-à-vis the privilege accorded to the visual arts, this scene is arguably emblematic of a greater problem concerning the meaning of the image. In Harriet Stone's incisive reading of economies of exchange in *La Princesse de Clèves*, she calls attention to official court portraitures, those commissioned by the king, "which reflect the hierarchy of relations because they extend from the king, the unifying sign behind all the portraits that circulate in the novel" (49). Contrary to the bourgeois economy in which reproductions devalue the original object, the reproduction and dissemination of official court portraitures render visible and reinforce royal power. The king's symbolic presence is pervasive; within the aristocratic economy, he is the principal image maker from whom all images emanate.

However, as we shall see, not even the king can save the portrait from the fate of representation, from following a course which is not proper to it.

After the princess's portrait is completed, Mme la Dauphine and other members of the court gather to discuss and correct the commissioned painting. She asks M. de Clèves to bring a miniature portrait of his wife in order to compare the new portrait to his portrait.[63] The princess, among others, instructs the painter to correct her hairstyle in the original portrait: "Tout le monde dit son sentiment de l'un et de l'autre; et Madame de Clèves ordonna au peintre de raccommoder quelque chose à la coiffure de celui que l'on venait d'apporter" (Lafayette, *La Princesse* 136). What is perhaps most striking about this scene is the triangulation that occurs between the princess and the portraits. She stands before the portraits, referential objects which bear her image, and she is presented anew or represented back to herself. In particular, when the painter makes adjustments to Clèves' portrait, the referent itself (the princess) is not the point of reference, but the reproduction or representation (new portrait) of the referent.[64] Moreover, given the presence of two portraits and the modifications made to the original, it is apparent that the self is not an ideal unity from which one can derive a singular image.[65] Rather, the portrait always bears this mark of difference, of the very impossibility of securing a singular representation of the self. In *Pascal et Port-Royal,* Louis Marin argues that the concept of self is constructed according to an economy of representation. In fact, one could argue that reality or that which is empirically given or present does not in fact exist outside of the order of representation. Hence, because the self first appears through/in representation, there is an irremediable distance between the self and itself. Marin contends that "le portrait du moi ne peut être que celui d'un spectre. C'est le portrait de l'absence du Moi à soi-même; ou plutôt c'est le portait qui constitue le moi comme pure représentation en représentation" (272). The portrait

presents both an image of the self and the self as an image, as always already belonging to the order of representation.

Moreover, the unveiling stages the convergence of many gazes involved in the construction and reconstruction of one's image. As this scene suggests, a multiplicity of gazes mediate the princess's encounter with these pictorial representations of the self. In effect, as Marin suggests, one's image of self is necessarily mediated by another: "En effet ce fantôme-portrait-comme-Moi est constitué de la représentation que les autres ont de moi. L'homme se regarde selon un certain être qu'il a dans l'imagination des autres: image anaclastique qui apparaît au croisement des regards étrangers, mais image elle-même vue par d'autres regards…" (272). In the novel, the mother is the first to present just such an image of self to the daughter. [66] What the mother perhaps fails to understand is that since the construction of one's image is predicated on the presence of another, there is no way to ever fully secure this image. In other words, one's image is derived from without and therefore can never be fully secured or possessed from within. In spite of this, the mother charges her daughter with the impossible task of possessing that which was conceived from without and therefore never properly her own. As we shall see, one's image, whether conceived through verbal or artistic representation, is always already subject to appropriation.

Following the embellishments made to the commissioned portrait, the princess bears witness to her own disappearance, to the image of herself as purloined, possessed by another man. After the painter removes the original portrait from its box, Nemours, also present at the unveiling, conspires to steal the original portrait.[67] Aside from his interest in possessing a portrait of the princess, the theft is also conceived as a transgression or direct assault against the husband. He seeks both to divest Clèves of his portrait and of his position as beloved husband. "Lorsqu'il

vit celui qui était à Monsieur de Clèves, il ne put résister à l'envie de le dérober à un mari qu'il croyait tendrement aimé; et il pensa que, parmi tant de personnes qui étaient dans ce même lieu, il ne serait pas soupçonné plus qu'un autre" (Lafayette, *La Princesse* 136). By taking possession of the portrait, Nemours believes that he is usurping the position of the husband as the one who loves and is loved in return. However, unbeknownst to him, the husband does not in fact occupy this position in relation to his wife. This possession nonetheless enables him to establish, albeit in theory only, a secret dynamic or relation to the princess.

In stark contrast to the public unveiling of the newly commissioned portrait, the theft of the original portrait eludes the detection of all but the princess. In this scene, the half-closed drapes create a space in which one sees without being seen. She peers through the drapes which both obstruct and frame her viewpoint:

> Madame la Dauphine était assise sur le lit et parlait base à Madame de Clèves, qui était debout devant elle. Madame de Clèves aperçut par un des rideaux, qui n'était qu'à demi fermé, M. de Nemours, le dos contre la table, qui était au pied du lit, et elle vit que, sans tourner la tête, il prenait adroitement quelque chose sur cette table. Elle n'eut pas de peine à deviner que c'était son portrait… (Lafayette, *La Princesse* 136)

Her perspective is singular in nature as she is the only one to witness the theft during which he becomes the object of her gaze. In other words, the princess occupies an interesting position within the field of vision for she watches as that which bears her image falls into the possession of another. The princess (subject) sees Nemours (object) as he purloins a portrait of her (object). Nemours turns and catches her in the act of watching him: "Monsieur de Nemours se tourna à ces paroles; il rencontra les yeux de Madame 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, *La Princesse* 136). This turn toward the other breaks the subject's field of vision in which she is recognized in the act of watching Nemours. Here, sight converges in a violent moment of recognition during which he suppresses her voice by speaking so that she may not: "Monsieur de Nemours, qui remarquait son embarras, et qui en devinait quasi la cause, s'approcha d'elle et lui dit tout bas: 'Si vous avez vu ce que j'ai osé faire, ayez la bonté, Madame, de me laisser croire que vous l'ignorez; je n'ose vous en demander davantage.' Et il se retira après ces paroles, et n'attendit point à sa réponse" (Lafayette, *La Princesse* 137). Nemours' abrupt departure, like the mother's turning away on her deathbed enacts a double loss. First, the modality of Nemours' address is such that the object (the princess) represented in speech cannot reclaim her role as subject of enunciation. Second, in view of Nemours' abrupt departure, no one remains to receive her response.

Rather than openly denounce the theft and in doing so risk revealing her passion for Nemours, she accords him a favor by remaining silent:

> La raison voulait qu'elle demandât son portrait; mais, en le demandant publiquement, c'était apprendre à tout le monde les sentiments que ce prince avait pour elle, et, en lui demandant en particulier, c'était quasi l'engager à lui parler de sa passion. Enfin elle jugea qu'il valait mieux le lui laisser, et elle fut bien aise de lui accorder une faveur qu'elle lui pouvait faire sans qu'il sût même qu'elle la lui faisait. (Lafayette, *La Princesse* 136-137)

It would thus appear that her silence constitutes a mark of complicity. However, given the risk involved in a public denunciation, does she have any other option but to remain silent? Philippe Desan considers this question by framing the theft according to an economy of exchange and the

princess's potential entrance into a system in which people are exchanged much like objects. Desan contends that "there is no way out of such a situation: exposing M. de Nemours is an acknowledgement that she exists as an object of desire for another (and therefore for *all* others); disclosing her passion is tantamount to defining herself as an integral component in the market of love, an object capable of being possessed" (112). Furthermore, he contends that "either admission would erase her carefully maintained difference from other women, other circulating objects in the court's economy of love" (112). The princess will therefore remain silent and in doing so continue to differentiate herself from those around her who participate in the economy of exchange that dominates courtly relations.

Nemours interprets her complicity in the theft as a mark of affection and the portrait as a material instantiation of their passion for one another. "Il sentait tout ce que la passion peut faire sentir de plus agréable; il aimait la plus aimable personne de la Cour; il s'en faisait malgré elle, et il voyait dans toutes ses actions cette sorte de trouble et d'embarras que cause l'amour dans l'innocence de la première jeunesse" (Lafayette, *La Princesse* 137). During the unveiling, rather than look at the princess, Nemours diverts his gaze for fear of arousing suspicion.[68] However, in private, he may now consummate his desire through the act of looking at her portrait. "Il y avait longtemps que Monsieur de Nemours souhaitait d'avoir le portrait de Madame de Clèves. … Monsieur de Nemours alla se renfermer chez lui, ne pouvant soutenir en public la joie d'avoir le portrait de Madame de Clèves" (Lafayette, *La Princesse* 136-137). In her analysis of this scene, Brigitte Roussel argues that the theft is double to the extent that "en emportant le portrait, il emporte à la fois le secret de leur passion commune et une satisfaction narcissique dans le mesure où le portrait, en lui donnant l'image de celle qu'il aime et qui l'aime en retour, lui renvoie une image de lui-même" (52). As Roussel notes, the portrait serves a double function by

instantiating their secret passion and inaugurating a circular exchange whereby Nemours receives his image in return as beloved.

Despite the circuity of exchange that this portrait appears to inaugurate, how can we understand the pleasure derived from detaining her portrait? Simply put, what is the source of Nemours' joy? I would argue that his delight, which remains adequately to be understood, pertains less to the portrait itself than to the position that Nemours desires to occupy: that of beloved husband. Nemours does not purloin the newly commissioned portrait; rather, as the text tells us, he takes possession of Clèves' portrait to usurp symbolically the position of the husband as the one who loves and is loved in return. One could argue that what Nemours is really purloining is the image of himself as the beloved husband. In private, the (false) husband gazes into his (purloined) portrait in hopes of occupying a privileged place in relation to the princess as wife. Here, the portrait discloses a complex economy of desire: as the beloved husband, I receive the image of myself as desired by you. I possess the image of you as I want to love you and to be loved in return. However, what Nemours fails to understand is that no one, not even Clèves, occupies this position in relation to his wife. The portrait presents an image of himself (beloved husband) that neither man will succeed in realizing or securing.

The purloined portrait incites a careful search of the property and reveals that which was accidentally left behind—the box in which the portrait was stored. "Le soir, on chercha ce portrait avec beaucoup de soin; comme on trouvait la boîte où il devait être, l'on ne soupçonna point qu'il eût été dérobé, et l'on crut qu'il était tombé par hasard" (Lafayette, *La Princesse* 137). The box remains where it was supposed to be (où il devait être) while the portrait is thought to have fallen by accident or to have been misplaced. Madame de Clèves falls reticent in the face of her husband's conjectures as to the whereabouts of the portrait although, earlier that day, she

saw M. de Nemours take the portrait. Interestingly enough, the text suggests that the theft of the portrait constitutes a loss for the husband, to whom the portrait belongs, and not so much as a loss for his wife. "Monsieur de Clèves était affligé de cette perte et, après qu'on eut encore cherché inutilement…" (Lafayette, *La Princesse* 137). The husband jokingly suggests that a lover must have stolen it for no one else would be content with the portrait without the box: "… il dit à sa femme, mais d'une manière qui faisait voir qu'il ne le pensait pas, qu'elle avait sans doute quelque amant caché à qui elle avait donné ce portrait, ou qui l'avait dérobé, et qu'un autre qu'un amant ne se serait pas contenté de la peinture sans la boîte" (Lafayette, *La Princesse* 137). Only a lover would have found value in the portrait without its box.

In contrast, the husband esteems the portrait, in part, because of the box in which it belongs. The portrait can be purloined whereas the box appears to be a permanent, undeviating object. It might be concluded that the portrait and the box emblematize M. de Clèves and the princess's relationship. This is to suggest that Clèves does not deviate from his prescribed position as faithful husband; whereas, the princess cannot master her role as virtuous wife. Though Clèves attempts to script his wife's conduct, he cannot prevent those moments when he is divested of her image and finds her there where she should not be: "'Je vois le péril où vous êtes; ayez du pouvoir sur vous pour l'amour de vous-même et, s'il est possible, pour l'amour de moi'" (Lafayette, *La Princesse* 180). The empty box bears the trace of that which it once contained—the portrait—or the virtuous wife as missing from the image she is charged with inhabiting and preserving. [69]

M. de Clèves' allusion to an unknown lover now in possession of the painting greatly disturbs the princess. The narrator underscores the husband's lack of suspicion and yet the princess cannot deduce the true meaning of his statement following her complicity in the theft of

the portrait. It is evident that he is joking and yet his observation carries with it the slightest grain of truth which the princess does not fail to perceive. In effect, the apparent levity with which he delivers his statement is equal in devastation to a direct accusation of infidelity. "Ses paroles, quoique dites en riant, firent une vive impression dans l'esprit de Madame de Clèves. Elles lui donnèrent des remords; elle fit réflexion à la violence de l'inclination qui l'entraînait vers Monsieur de Nemours; elle trouva qu'elle n'était plus maitresse de ses paroles et de son visage…" (Lafayette, *La Princesse* 137). Here, the passionate body betrays the subject by threatening to expose the truth of her desire. However, it is worth noting that the threat lies not in exposing her passion to Clèves but to Nemours: "… Elle se trouvait dans une grande extrémité et prête à tomber dans ce qui lui paraissait le plus grand des malheurs, qui était de laisser voir à Monsieur de Nemours l'inclination qu'elle avait pour lui" (Lafayette, *La Princesse* 138).

The princess's first inclination is to depart for Coulommiers; however, she realizes that she does not have the liberty to do so. This realization prompts her to reflect upon her mother's final words of counsel. "Elle se souvenait de tout ce que Madame de Chartres lui avait dit en mourant et des conseils qu'elle lui avait donnés de prendre toutes sortes de partis, quelque difficiles qu'ils pussent être, plutôt que de s'embarquer dans une galanterie" (Lafayette, *La Princesse* 138). By invoking the mother's precepts as the ultimate defense against committing adultery, we realize the extent to which this message retains its force and intelligibility in spite of her absence. One could argue that the mother's death constitutes an event during which the ideal message is delivered for it is unmistakably unequivocal in meaning. Madame de Clèves is in turn left with the mother's script in which her conduct is clearly predetermined.

III. The Unintended Recipient

> C'est que le déplacement du signifiant détermine les sujets dans leurs actes, dans leur destin, dans leurs refus, dans leurs aveuglements, dans leurs succès et dans leur sort, nonobstant leurs dons innés et leurs acquis social, … et que bon gré mal gré suivra le train du signifiant comme armes et bagages, tout ce qui est du donné psychologique.
>
> —Jacques Lacan, *Écrits*

Much like the events surrounding the stolen portrait, the princess again finds herself implicated in a complex intrigue in which the movement of a lost letter initiates a secret relay between characters and discloses the impossibility of securing one's position in relation to the other. Until recently, the scene involving the lost letter has received little critical attention. Most notably, recent scholarship focuses on the function of the letter independent from its material support or content.[70] While these readings inform my analysis, I will endeavor to highlight the tension that occurs when various individuals take possession of the letter for it appears to refract, much like a mirror, the truth of private commerce and affiliations. However, given the letter's anonymity and circuitous path, the reader encounters the letter as an impasse, a technical device whose framework resists the disclosure of such truths.

In this scene, an anonymous "lettre de galanterie" falls from the Vidame de Chartres' pocket during a game of tennis. Chastelart, the Reine Dauphine's devoted servant, retrieves the letter and mistakenly informs her that the letter fell from M. de Nemours' pocket. Unable to retire from public view to read the letter in private, she charges Madame de Clèves with its reading and informs her of the letter's provenance, erroneous information that frames her interpretation. "'Allez lire cette lettre, lui dit-elle; elle s'adresse à Monsieur de Nemours et, selon

les apparences, elle est de cette maîtresse pour qui il a quitté toutes les autres. Si vous ne la pouvez lire présentement, gardez-la; venez ce soir à mon coucher pour me la rendre et pour me dire si vous en connaissez l'écriture'" (Lafayette, *La Princesse* 142). Madame de Clèves then takes leave of the Reine Dauphine in order to read the letter in private. Trembling, she believes that she holds the material instantiation of an amorous relationship, the indelible trace of Nemours' involvement with another woman, the letter's addresser. "L'impatience et le trouble où elle était ne lui permirent pas de demeurer chez la Reine; elle tenait cette lettre avec une main tremblante; ses pensées étaient si confuses qu'elle n'en avait aucune distincte; et elle se trouvait dans une sorte de douleur insupportable, qu'elle ne connaissait point et qu'elle n'avait jamais sentie" (Lafayette, *La Princesse* 143-144). Even though the Reine Dauphine incorrectly identifies the letter's recipient, this passage demonstrates the extent to which the letter carries with it a kind of tragic force. By virtue of its form, even the unopened and unread letter appears to serve as evidence of Nemours' betrayal, the material instantiation of his affections for another woman.

Rather than interrogate the events surrounding the retrieval of this anonymous letter and the falsely attributed addressee, Monsieur de Nemours, the princess blindly invests in the letter as irrefutable proof of his betrayal. Herein lies the danger of this scene for the princess appropriates the address and determines its logic based on her subjective position. Though an anonymous letter ultimately resists any such determination, she apprehends a dynamic, a secret relation that is not solely predicated on the contents of the letter. As if to further complicate the princess's reading, the letter is noticeably generic insofar as its contents are neither particularly remarkable nor memorable. It is for this reason, I believe, that the poles of address (addresser/addressee) remain unrecognizable to her. As Elizabeth C. Goldsmith notes "the

discourse of passion is neither unique nor inimitable, but generic and eminently transferable" (51). Where one expects to encounter the singular expression of one's love, one encounters the reductive tenets of the lover's complaint. For instance, in the opening lines of the letter, the author attributes her recent indifference to her lover's alleged involvement with another woman: "… j'appris que vous me trompiez, que vous en aimiez une autre et que, selon toutes les apparences, vous me sacrifiiez à cette nouvelle maîtresse" (Lafayette, *La Princesse* 143). Here, the addresser reproaches her lover (Nemours) following news of his involvement with another woman (Madame de Clèves). Despite the generic nature of the woman's address, the princess believes herself to be implicated in an intrigue in which she is the unnamed woman: cette nouvelle maîtresse.

In "L'écriture de soi," Michel Foucault argues that the letter constitutes a medium through which one necessarily opens oneself up to the gaze of others: "Écrire, c'est donc 'se montrer', se faire voir, faire apparaître son propre visage auprès de l'autre. Et, par là, il faut comprendre que la lettre est à la fois un regard qu'on porte sur le destinataire (par la missive qu'il reçoit, il se sent regardé) et une manière de se donner à son regard par ce qu'on lui dit de soi-même" (16-17). In theory, written correspondence is predicated on reciprocity, a mutual exchange in which the letter enables one to project oneself into view. However, as this scene demonstrates, to offer oneself to the gaze of the other is a precarious venture, for one cannot control whose gaze reads this self. To show oneself is necessarily to imply that one's presence might fall under the gaze of anyone. Here, the addresser offers herself to the gaze of a particular addressee; however, this self falls under the gaze of an unintended recipient—the princess.

Her reading is further complicated by the fact that Madame de Clèves reads herself there where she does not want to be—in the position of mistress, the woman for whom Nemours

allegedly betrayed the addresser. While reading the letter, the princess also finds herself projected into view, under the disdainful regard of the addresser. In other words, the reader encounters herself as other, *une autre femme.* When the addresser scripts the princess's position from without, she realizes the impossibility of controlling one's figuration of self. In the end, as the site of an unbearable inscription, the letter bears the (false) mark of her illicit involvement with Nemours.

For the princess, to determine the letter's meaning perhaps provides the illusion of knowledge in the face of unbearable betrayal and dispossession. "Elle voyait par la fin de cette lettre que cette personne se croyait aimée…" (Lafayette, *La Princesse* 145). Her reading cannot, however, reconcile the presence of two disparate temporalities—the past affair and the scene of reading. In other words, the letter is the unsigned and unaddressed trace of a past whose course can never be made fully present. Her confusion bears witness to the impossibility of reconciling these two temporalities in order to discern the truth of their relationship: "Madame de Clèves lut cette lettre et la relut plusieurs fois, sans savoir néanmoins ce qu'elle avait lu" (Lafayette, *La Princesse* 145). However, a few lines later, the following determination eclipses her former confusion: "Elle voyait par cette lettre que Monsieur de Nemours avait une galanterie depuis longtemps" (Lafayette, *La Princesse* 146). The letter seduces the reader by presenting a (false) sense of proof, a graphic and enduring image of Nemours' lengthy involvement with another woman. Despite the referential force of the letter, the princess encounters the letter as an impasse, a device that will never entirely substantiate her jealous suspicions.[71] Since the jealous operation precludes perception, the reader clings to the letter as a trace, the illusive and single remainder of that which is otherwise confined to the past and therefore inaccessible.

What is perhaps most devastating for the princess is that Nemours' betrayal subverts the unity of the couple and devastates the image of self as reinforced by the other. In other words, this letter signals a rupture in the fiction perpetuated between self and other for she no longer occupies the privileged position in relation to Nemours. She is not in fact the woman for whom Nemours has abandoned all others. Rather, the letter marks a break in the imaginary duality or symmetry of the couple. Within the couple, as Barbara Johnson observes, the illusion of symmetry can "either be narcissistically reassuring (the image of the other as reinforcement of my identity) or absolutely devastating (the other whose existence can totally cancel me out)" (469). The unidentified woman triangulates the couple (Clèves/Nemours) and ruptures the circuity of desire. Accordingly, the princess concludes that his behavior was merely the effect of his passion for this other woman: "elle voyait par la fin de cette lettre que cette personne croyait aimée; elle pensait que la discrétion que ce prince lui avait fait paraitre, et dont elle avait été si touchée, n'était peut-être que l'effet de la passion qu'il avait pour cette autre personne à qui il craignait de déplaire" (Lafayette, *La Princesse* 145-6). The princess misreads the signs of his passion and believes that their encounters were inhabited or rather haunted by a third person, the letter's addresser.

The princess's pain is further compounded by Nemours' presumed knowledge of her love for him. "Si Monsieur de Nemours n'eût point eu lieu de croire qu'elle l'aimait, elle ne se fût pas souciée qu'il en eût aimé une autre" (Lafayette, *La Princesse* 145). This realization subsequently gives rise to the horrors of jealousy: Mais elle se trompait elle-même; et ce mal, qu'elle trouvait si insupportable, était la jalousie avec toutes les horreurs dont elle peut être accompagnée" (Lafayette, *La Princesse* 145).[72] Here, jealousy is important in terms of the loss of mastery in relation to the other and the belief that the other woman at one time gained true possession of

Nemours. For fear of being displaced in love by the rivalry of another, I would argue that her jealousy is symptomatic of a desire to conserve the other as possession.[73] Unfortunately, the letter as artifact of betrayal reveals her radically limited knowledge of the other. In *Book of Addresses*, Peggy Kamuf contends that jealousy is "always an experience of one's own finitude" for the princess can never fully know the other as an infinite being (64). The princess's reading is both revelatory and devastating in as much as "what jealousy knows is that it knows nothing" (Kamuf, *Book* 64). The letter appears to provide substantial evidence of his betrayal, but her jealousy functions, I believe, as a device of blindness for the truth of the letter eludes the princess. It seems then that her reading cannot ultimately supplement the loss of mastery and knowledge in relation to the other woman or to Nemours.

Rather than suffer the horrors of jealousy, Madame de Clèves resolves to avow the truth of her passion to Monsieur de Clèves. Her decision is not out of character for she has, in the past, turned to her husband for support: "Elle se trouvait malheureuse d'être abandonnée à elle-même, dans un temps où elle était si peu maitresse de ses sentiments et où elle eût tant souhaité d'avoir quelqu'un qui pût la plaindre et lui donner de la force" (Lafayette, *La Princesse* 109).[74] She therefore calls upon her husband as defense against her passion for Nemours: "Elle trouvait qu'elle aurait fait de la découvrir à un mari dont elle connaissait la bonté, et qui aurait eu intérêt à la cacher… " (Lafayette, *La Princesse* 146). Furthemore, the princess believes that through this avowal she will be freed from her illicit desire: "tout ce qui la consolait était de penser au moins qu'après cette connaissance, elle n'avait plus rien à craindre d'elle-même, et qu'elle serait entièrement guérie de l'inclination qu'elle avait pour ce prince" (Lafayette, *La Princesse* 146).[75] Clèves will therefore become the recipient of her address, the one called to both hide that which should have remained disavowed and to free her from her fear of self. In contrast to Madame de

Chartres and Nemours, Clèves, an ideal witness, is called to receive silently her speech. However, it will later become clear the Clèves is not an ideal witness insofar as he undermines the princess's attempt to frame her avowal as a non-address, as that which will sustain no relation with the addressee.

The scene of avowal is however deferred as the princess finds herself embroiled in a scheme to deceive the queen and to protect the identity of the letter's true addresser, Madame de Thémines, and its addressee, the Vidame de Chartres. Fearful of betraying his pledge of fidelity to the queen as well as the woman whom he currently loves, Madame de Martigues, the Vidame asks Nemours to identify himself as the letter's rightful owner. [76] The Vidame recounts to Nemours the details of his sordid affair involving three woman: Madame de Thémines, the queen, and Madame de Martigues. Motivated by a desire to conceal her involvement with the Vidame, Madame de Thémines requests the return of her letter. In view of her request, we are perhaps compelled to ask: to whom does the letter belong? Does the letter belong to the sender or to the recipient? If one can rightfully demand the return of a sent letter, it would thus appear that the sender retains rights over his/her address. I would argue that her demand is due, in part, to language's appropriative character. In other words, one can never properly claim possession over the material signifier and it is therefore always subject to appropriation and resignification. [77] And, moreover, there is no "law" of the letter within the lawless circulating discursive system of the court. In *La Carte postale: de Socrate à Freud et au-delà*, Jacques Derrida examines the letter as a particular modality of communication and argues that the letter as signifier is not bound to its origin (scene of writing), and as a result neither the author of the letter nor anyone else can determine its meaning. For this reason, neither the sender, nor the receiver, nor any subsequent readers can claim a relation to the letter based on possession or ownership. "Il y a

détention mais non propriété de la lettre. Celle-ci ne serait jamais possédée, ni par son émetteur ni par son destinataire… " (Derrida, *La Carte* 450). As Derrida notes, one may detain the letter, but such a detention does not denote possession. Despite those who attempt to possess the material signifier, the letter will inevitably enter, to borrow Norman Bryson's term, into independent life.[78]

Although no one can, strictly speaking, possess the letter, Madame de Thémines as well as the Reine Dauphine believe that they retain certain rights over this material artifact. Most notably, the Reine Dauphine reproaches Madame de Clèves for having given the letter to Nemours: "Vous avez tort d'avoir rendu cette lettre à Monsieur de Nemours; puisque c'était moi qui vous l'avais donnée, vous ne deviez point la rendre sans ma permission" (Lafayette, *La Princesse* 164). Her reproach underscores the facility with which one appropriates the letter and posits a relation to it based on ownership. In her analysis of this scene, April Alliston observes that the Reine Dauphine's claim is authorized by her rank within the court hierarchy: "In blaming the princess for allowing the original to go back to its author, the dauphine implies a feudal ethic of destination, in which the most powerful reader displaces both the letter's private addressee and its author as legitimate destinataire of the letter" (51). Despite the Reine Dauphine's claim to legitimacy, unbound from its point of origin and destination given its anonymity, the letter is in fact the property of no one and thus the property of anyone. In effect, this anonymous correspondence radically undermines any pretense for ownership. It will later become clear that those who come into contact with the letter will suffer for they are implicated in the Vidame's betrayal.

Although the letter is eventually returned to Madame de Thémines, this return is haunted by the impossibility of containing the dissemination of meaning produced during its movement.

Neither limited to a single destiny nor function given its circuitous path, the letter becomes a figure of excess for its meaning is not merely limited to its content. Derrida observes that "[la lettre] n'a aucun sens propre, aucun contenu propre qui importe, en apparence, à son trajet. Elle est donc structurellement volante et volée" (*La Carte* 450-451). Most notably, before the letter is returned to Madame de Thémines, the queen gains knowledge of the letter's existence and inquires into its whereabouts during a conversation with her daughter-in-law. Fearful that the sender's handwriting will be recognized and that the Vidame's pledge of fidelity to the queen betrayed, the princess and Nemours, per the Reine Dauphine's request, craft from memory a copy of the letter. In this scene, the contents deemed *proper* to the letter are purloined, put aside. "Ils s'enfermèrent pour y travailler. … Elle en avait une joie pure et sans mélange qu'elle n'avait jamais sentie" (Lafayette, *La Princesse* 165). Both Madame de Clèves and Nemours indulge their desires at the expense of the letter's contents: "… quand Madame de Clèves voulut commencer à se souvenir de la lettre, et à l'écrire, ce prince, au lieu de lui aider sérieusement, ne faisait que l'interrompre et lui dire des choses plaisantes" (Lafayette, *La Princesse* 165). The result is a poorly crafted letter that bears little resemblance to the original, authentic document. Whereas the princess's presence was inscribed in the original address as the unnamed mistress, her passion now compromises her proximity to this new address for she is neither fully invested in nor present to the task at hand.[79]

It is also worth noting that the Reine Dauphine charges the princess with an impossible task for the truth of the original address is always already inaccessible The structure of the address is such that the letter is inherently divided between the self-address and the address intended for the recipient. When composing the letter, the sender writes herself into the letter and thus constitutes herself, at least discursively, as an object of her own thoughts. In turn, the

recipient receives an incomplete letter for he cannot access the truth that the sender addressed to herself. Branka Arsić argues that "by addressing his letter to another he is also addressing this letter to himself; he sees in what he intends for the gaze of another that which the addressee will never see, just as the gaze of another sees in this letter that which has escaped the gaze of the sender, and which has not arrived at his address" (289). Her reading underscores the loss that frames both the scene of writing and reading insofar as the truth of the letter eludes both the sender and the recipient. I believe that this occurs because inscribed within the address is a kind of blind spot that neither the sender nor the recipient can resolve or overcome. In effect, the address, that which promises to disclose a message, carries with it the impossibility of its realization in the form of a complete truth. Although the princess finds herself in a situation from which she is doubly estranged (she is neither the letter's author nor recipient), the Reine Dauphine's demand suggests that the princess as reader can produce a copy whereby the message effectively arrives, to quote Arsić, at its address. Simply put, the reader, despite the impotency of her position, is called to transcend both the sender and the recipient's insensibilities in order to transcribe and capture that which escapes them. However, in her attempt to produce a facsimile, the princess annihilates both the letter's point of origin and destination by composing an address whose provenance and direction are but a ruse, a vain construction intended to deceive the queen. It appears then that the princess can only ever write from without, as outside, and thus radically estranged from the position that she is effectively called to appropriate and to inhabit as author of the (counterfeit) letter.

As one might expect, the counterfeit copy retains its referential force for the queen easily discerns the truth of the Vidame's betrayal. She apprehends a dynamic, a private relation between the sender and the recipient that is not predicated on the contents of the letter. The

queen condemns the Vidame as well as the Reine Dauphine for their proximity to the letter necessarily implies their involvement:

> [la lettre] était si mal, et l'écriture dont on la fit copier ressemblait si peu à celle que l'on avait eu dessein d'imiter qu'il eût fallu que la Reine n'eût guère pris de soin d'éclaircir la vérité pour ne la pas connaitre. Aussi n'y fut-elle pas trompée: quelque soin que l'on prît de lui persuader que cette lettre s'adressait à Monsieur de Nemours, elle demeura convaincue, non seulement qu'elle était au Vidame de Chartres, mais elle crut que la Reine Dauphine y avait part et qu'il y avait quelque intelligence entre eux. (Lafayette, *La Princesse* 165-6) [80]

No imitation, however painstakingly crafted, can suppress the copy as copy for it bears the indelible trace of its own reproduction. Despite Madame de Clèves and Nemours' attempt to produce a copy that is absolutely equivalent to the original so as to sufficiently mislead the queen, it is ultimately the network of relations both created and disclosed by the movement of the letter, and not the letter itself, that leads to the Reine Dauphine and the Vidame's downfall.

After Monsieur de Nemours takes leave of the princess, she is left to contemplate the events of the preceding day. The letter falls into her possession, and yet, as Lacan observes, it is the letter that ultimately possesses the subject for it determines her movements and behavior. To fall into possession of the letter implies a kind of suffering on the part of the subject who cannot forget its contents. For the princess, the letter and its effects endure in spite of Nemours' innocence: "Mais, ce qu'elle pouvait moins supporter que tout le reste, était le souvenir de l'état où elle avait passé la nuit, et les cuisantes douleurs que lui avait causées la pensée que Monsieur de Nemours aimait ailleurs et qu'elle était trompée" (Lafayette, *La Princesse* 167). Even more troubling is the realization that the letter as signifier transforms her to the point that "elle ne se

reconnaissait plus elle-même" (Lafayette, *La Princesse* 166). This loss of recognition prompts her to interrogate her own relation to self : "Elle trouva qu'il était presque impossible qu'elle put être contente de sa passion. Mais quand je le pourrai être, disait-elle, qu'en veux-je faire? Veux-je la souffrir? … Veux-je me manquer à moi-même?" (Lafayette, *La Princesse* 167).[81] Most notably, the princess's internal narrative frames the potential realization of her passion not in terms of articulating her own agency, but in terms of a passive, interminable suffering. Here, passion implies the presence of an outside, external cause that subsumes her power and relation to self. Branka Arsić contends that "[it] is a modus of the other, an affect of the other, in the place of that I: there where the I used to be is now the not-I" (304). Read in this manner, the passionate subject fails to realize or actualize her own subjective position or relation to self: "Je suis vaincue et surmontée par une inclination qui m'entraîne malgré moi. Toutes mes résolutions sont inutiles; je pensais hier tout ce que je pense aujourd'hui et je fais aujourd'hui tout le contraire de ce que je résolus hier" (Lafayette, *La Princesse* 167). In the end, it is precisely the impossibility of reconciling the indeterminacy of her position that compels her to take permanent leave of the court.

IV. Return to Sender: Structures of Non-Correspondence

Following her encounter with the letter, Madame de Clèves departs for her country estate in Coulommiers there where she will avow her desire to M. de Clèves. There she delivers a devastating message during which she attempts to negotiate the terms of its reception. Unlike Madame de Chartres, the princess cannot predetermine or control her husband's engagement with her avowal. Although her message is highly equivocal in meaning (she withholds the name

of her lover), the princess tries to frame her message in a similar manner to the mother's deathbed speech. That is, she delivers a message that demands the interlocutor's silence and complicity. The heroine cannot, however, prevent the return of her address in order to structure her confession as non-correspondence. "'Je vous supplie de ne me le point demander, répondit-elle; je suis résolue de ne vous le pas dire, et je crois que la prudence ne veut pas que je vous le nomme'" (Lafayette, *La Princesse* 172). This evasive posture frames her avowal in which she delivers an address that names without naming, signifies without reference to a fixed signified. The truth of her avowal is thus predicated on words that enter into an endless deferral of signification. Though her message constitutes a source of anxiety for Clèves, she refuses to provide the remedy—the name of her lover. Moreover, the princess reproaches Clèves' interrogations and makes an appeal to the sincerity of her avowal as well as to the integrity of her conduct. "'Il me semble, répondit-elle, que vous devez être content de ma sincérité; ne m'en demandez pas davantage et ne me donnez point lieu de me repentir de ce que je viens de faire. … Fiez-vous à mes paroles; c'est par un assez grand prix que j'achète la confiance que je vous demande'" (Lafayette, *La Princesse* 173).

She then assures Clèves that her actions do not bare the mark of her passion for another, and consequently one would not suspect her of such affections. "'Contentez-vous de l'assurance que je vous donne encore qu'aucune de mes actions n'a fait paraître mes sentiments et que l'on ne m'a jamais rien dit dont j'aie pu m'offenser'" (Lafayette, *La Princesse* 173). Following the princess's logic, her passion is unmarked and thus cannot be identified or distinguished as such. Although she posits her speech as a mark of fidelity, a verbal guarantee of her virtuous conduct, her body reveals the truth of her passion. That is to suggest that the passionate body betrays her speech for it bears the mark of her desire. As evidence of this breach, Clèves references her

behavior following the search for the stolen portrait. "'Je me souviens de l'embarras où vous fûtes le jour que votre portrait se perdit. … Vous n'avez pu cacher vos sentiments; vous aimez, on le sait; votre vertu vous a jusqu'ici garantie du reste'" (Lafayette, *La Princesse* 173). Contrary to her initial intentions, the princess witnesses the return of her address in the form of an accusation that calls into question the singularity of her avowal while revealing the perilousness of her situation.[82]

Unbeknownst to the Monsieur de Clèves and his wife, this scene of avowal is triangulated by the presence of a third party—Nemours. During this time, Nemours arranges to visit his sister, the Duchess of Mercœur, who lives in the country not far from the princess's residence in Coulommiers. While deer-hunting he loses his way and takes the path to Coulommiers, resolved to make an appearance at Madame de Clèves' country estate. Upon his arrival, he takes refuge in a room near the flower garden and sees the couple engaged in conversation. Unable to escape without being seen, he overhears the most intimate details of their conversation and subsequently of her avowal. Similar to the structure of the letter, this dialogic encounter involves two interlocutors, a conversation from which Nemours is clearly excluded. Upon hearing her avowal, Nemours experiences contradictory emotions for in her address he perceives her love as well as the very impossibility of its realization:

> Ce qu'avait dit Madame de Clèves de son portrait lui avait redonné la vie ne lui faisant connaître que c'était lui qu'elle ne haïssait pas. Il s'abandonna d'abord à cette joie; mais elle ne fut pas longue, quand il fit réflexion que la même chose qui la venait d'apprendre qu'il avait touché le cœur de Madame de Clèves le devait persuader aussi qu'il n'en recevrait jamais nulle marque, et qu'il était

> impossible d'engager une personne qui avait recours à un remède si extraordinaire. (Lafayette, *La Princesse* 175)

It is interesting to note that Nemours, although excluded from this address, is better equipped to understand the terms of her message than her husband. In contrast, Clèves does not trust that his wife will remain faithful to him either in speech or in action. Nemours appears to anticipate the end in which the mark of her passion is also its negation for her duty "[lui] defend de penser jamais à personne, et moins à [Nemours] qu'à qui que ce soit au monde, par des raisons qui [lui] sont inconnues" (Lafayette, *La Princesse* 229). Nemours will nevertheless appropriate the princess's confession, her address to Clèves, so that it may serve as evidence of her passion for him.

Nemours extrapolates from her message that which satisfies his desire and later relays, albeit in veiled terms, it to the Vidame. [83] "Ce prince était si rempli de sa passion, et si surpris de ce qu'il avait entendu, qu'il tomba dans une imprudence assez ordinaire, qui est de parler en termes généraux de ses sentiments particuliers et de conter ses propres aventures sous des noms empruntés" (Lafayette, *La Princesse* 175). Nemours' presence violates the privacy traditionally accorded to the confessional mode. And as such, her private address, reframed as an anonymous confession, is destined for circulation. The Vidame relates this story to others and the princess, to her horror, becomes the recipient of her own address upon which numerous accounts have been superimposed.

The Reine Dauphine then publically recounts this unprecedented example of confession. "… Mais c'est de savoir que cette femme qui aime Monsieur de Nemours ne lui en a jamais donné aucune marque, et que la peur qu'elle a eue de n'être pas toujours maîtresse de sa passion a fait qu'elle l'avouée à son mari, afin qu'il l'ôtât de la Cour. Et c'est Monsieur de Nemours lui-

même qui a conté ce que je vous dis" (Lafayette, *La Princesse* 182-3). In this scene, the princess occupies an unbearable position as the subject of enunciation, the instance of discourse to which the "I" was present (scene of avowal) as well as the recipient of a third-person narrative (recounting of the avowal). For fear of exposing the true provenance of this narrative, the princess cannot reclaim her role as subject of enunciation in order to control the meaning of her confession. The Reine Dauphine narrates the story of which "she has appropriated it with all the confidence of an author" and the princess is called to judge its veracity and determine its origin (DeJean 896). Not surprisingly, the princess questions the veracity of her narrative as it hardly seems plausible: "'Cette histoire ne me paraît guère vraisemblable, Madame, répondit-elle, et je voudrais bien savoir qui vous l'a contée'" (Lafayette, *La Princesse* 183). It is for this reason that the princess will maintain its status as fiction, a mere invention intended to illustrate feminine weakness. Given the private setting in which this avowal occurred, if such a story were true, how could it become known? The princess echoes this thought: "'Il n'y a pas d'apparence qu'une femme capable d'une chose si extraordinaire eût la faiblesse de la raconter; apparemment son mari ne l'aurait pas racontée non plus, ou ce serait un mari bien indigne du procédé que l'on aurait eu avec lui'" (Lafayette, *La Princesse* 186). According to her logic, the avowal occurs within a closed space and constitutes a singular moment in which one's words are forever entombed in secrecy and silence. The avowal is precisely that which cannot enter into circulation; however, she discovers that no narrative is safe from appropriation, from following a course which is not proper to it.

While the princess struggles to discount the validity of such an unprecedented avowal, it becomes increasingly evident that Monsieur de Clèves cannot maintain a disinterested or unaffected position vis-à-vis his wife. This position contrasts sharply with a previous assertion.

In an earlier episode, in response to Sancerre's lamentable situation following knowledge of his mistress's betrayal, Clèves offers the following advice: "'Je vous donne, lui dis-je, le conseil que je prendrais pour moi-même; car la sincérité me touche d'une telle sorte que je crois que si ma maîtresse, 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 le conseiller et pour la plaindre'" (Lafayette, *La Princesse* 116-117). Clèves asserts that he could relinquish the role of husband/lover for that of advisor/confident. However, following the princess's avowal, he cannot occupy the latter role in order to best counsel and protect his wife: "'Vous avez attendu de moi des choses aussi impossibles que celle que j'attendais de vous. Comment pouviez-vous espérer que je conservasse de la raison? Vous aviez oublié que je vous aimais éperdument et que j'étais votre mari?'" (Lafayette, *La Princesse* 204). Clèves' reproach undermines his previous assertions and demonstrates the impossibility of occupying a position other than that of husband/lover. In the end, as evidenced by his untimely death, Monsieur de Clèves, called to occupy the intolerable position of recipient, does not succeed in negotiating the terms of his wife's illicit address.

Following her husband's death, Madame de Clèves, compelled to fulfill her duty which "[lui] défend de penser jamais à personne," resolves to withdraw from court (Lafayette, *La Princesse* 229). But before doing so, she arranges a final meeting to speak privately with Nemours. This exceptional moment during which she addresses the other will find no evidence beyond the moment of enunciation. In other words, her declaration of love is limited to verbal representation and will not find expression elsewhere. In *Open Secrets*, Anne-Lise François characterizes the princess's final confession as an open secret, "a retractive mode of expression" in which one's secrets "need not mean hidden or unstated but simply unavailable, untouchable,

nonpossessable, implying a relation to the beloved that neither appropriates nor denies" (81). Consequently, Madame de Clèves' confession functions according to an economy of nothingness insofar as her secret will never produce any "direct, empirical evidence" (François 76). In order to guarantee this final exchange as such, she delimits the scope of her message by framing it, in part, as non-correspondence: "Car enfin, cet aveu n'aura point de suite, et je suivrai les règles austères que mon devoir m'impose" (Lafayette, *La Princesse* 228). Nemours' return address may reach her, and yet his profession of love cannot defend against the symbolic death of the couple. Her duty marks an irremediable obstacle between the couple, one that not even the most violent passion can bridge.

The force of this duty is due in part to the realization that she cannot secure her position in relation to Nemours. During this encoutner, she confesses the following: "La certitude de n'être aimée de vous comme je le suis me paraît un si horrible malheur que, quand je n'aurais point des raisons de devoir insurmontables, je doute si je pourrais me résoudre à ce malheur" (Lafayette, *La Princesse* 230). Surrounded by deceptive appearances, that which remains certain is the very impossibility of permanently occupying the role of beloved. The princess refers to the lost letter as evidence of the mobility of the lover. According to the princess, Nemours could just as easily occupy the position of lover in relation to another woman as he did in relation to her:

> Je vous verrais pour une autre comme vous auriez été pour moi. J'en aurais une douleur mortelle, et je ne serais pas même assurée de n'avoir point le malheur de la jalousie. Je vous en ai trop dit pour vous cacher que vous me l'avez fait connaitre et que je souffris de si cruelles peines le soir que la Reine me donna cette lettre de Madame de Thémines, que l'on disait qui s'adressait à vous, qu'il

> m'en est demeuré une idée qui me fait croire que c'est le plus grand de tous les maux. (Lafayette, *La Princesse* 229)

The memory of his alleged infidelity, although falsely attributed, pervades her present discourse for she is convinced that Nemours' passion will inevitably come to an end.

Conversely, during their conversation, the princess argues that Monsieur de Clèves was the only man capable of conserving his love for her. "'Monsieur de Clèves était peut-être l'unique homme du monde capable de conserver de l'amour dans le mariage. Ma destinée n'a pas voulu que j'aie pu profiter du bonheur; peut-être aussi que sa passion n'avait subsisté que parce qu'il n'en aurait pas trouvé en moi'" (Lafayette, *La Princesse* 231). As she notes, Clèves' passion persisted because it was unrequited. As Nietzsche argues, whether or not his love is reciprocated, the lover willingly suffers his *passion* rather than succumb to the neutrality or inactivity of indifference. [84] Clèves' final words to his wife echo this logic: "'Je vous adore, je vous hais, je vous offense, je vous demande pardon; je vous admire, j'ai honte de vous admirer. Enfin il n'y a plus en moi ni de calme, ni de raison'" (Lafayette, *La Princesse* 204). Since Clèves vacillates between two contrary states of being that he cannot ultimately reconcile, death represents the only form of respite from the incoherency of unrequited love.[85]

It is also interesting to note that the figure of dispossession, or more specifically unrequited love, is predicated on a kind of certainty. That is to suggest that the princess remains certain of Clèves' fidelity precisely because of his constant desire to experience his love as reciprocated, to experience the role of beloved husband. [86] One could argue that it is the non-return of his love that ensures the constancy of his passion and devotion to the princess. And moreover, even after his death, this particular dynamic prevents the widowed Madame de Clèves

from consummating her passion for Nemours. Haunted by the image of the faithful husband, it is the princess who cannot abandon her role as virtuous wife.

Rather than suffer the jealousy of eventual betrayal, the princess, in spite of the difficulty of this enterprise, entreats Nemours to no longer pursue her. She then abruptly takes leave of Nemours and forbids any future communication. "'Adieu, lui-dit elle; voici une conversation qui me fait honte: rendez-compte à Monsieur le Vidame; j'y consens, et je vous en prie.' Elle sortit en disant ces paroles, sans que Monsieur de Nemours pût la retenir" (Lafayette, *La Princesse* 233). The princess's final avowal annihilates the circuity of the address for the point of origin (Madame de Clèves) becomes inaccessible. Only Nemours remains, the silent witness called to suffer her absence. Unfortunately for Nemours, there is no point of return to which he can address his grievances or redress his position. He is therefore left with a message whose destiny is never to return to its point of origin, whose single direction marks an irreducible rupture between self and other.

Despite the princess's request, the Vidame includes, in his correspondence to his niece, letters from Nemours. "Monsieur de Clèves écrivit Madame de Clèves, à la prière de Monsieur de Nemours, pour lui parler de ce prince; et dans une seconde lettre qui suivit bientôt la première, Monsieur de Nemours y mit quelques lignes de sa main" (Lafayette, *La Princesse* 235-6). The Vidame's letter serves as a pretext by which Nemours can secretly include his correspondence. The address within an address, were it to enter into circulation, would inevitably reveal their past affiliation. It is for this reason that Madame de Clèves advises the Vidame to suppress any references to Nemours and to no longer include his letters. Even Nemours advocates for the erasure of his own name so that the Vidame's correspondence with her is not adversely affected: "Mais Madame de Clèves, qui ne voulait pas sortir des règles qu'elle s'était

imposées, et qui craignait les accidents qui peuvent arriver par les lettres, manda au Vidame qu'elle ne recevrait plus les siennes, s'il continuait à lui parler de Monsieur de Nemours; et elle lui manda si fortement que ce prince le pria même de ne le plus nommer" (Lafayette, *La Princesse* 235-6). Per the heroine's request, Nemours disappears again into the oblivion of anonymity, the unnamed referent of her passion.

Although Nemours now recognizes the impossibility of the princess's return to court, he ventures one last time to see her at the convent, but she sends a third party in her place to mediate the encounter. Madame de Clèves entrusts her final message to a person of merit for she is fearful that Nemours' presence will destroy her alleged indifference for him: "… qu'elle le priait de ne pas trouver étrange si elle ne s'exposait point au péril de le voir, et de détruire par sa présence des sentiments qu'elle devait conserver; qu'elle voulait bien qu'il sût qu'ayant trouvé son devoir et son repos s'opposaient au penchant qu'elle avait d'être à lui, les autres choses au monde lui avaient paru si indifférentes qu'elle y avait renoncé pour jamais…" (Lafayette, *La Princesse* 238). It is evident that her passion undermines her feigned indifference for all that concerns the external world, especially her desire for Nemours. Upon his arrival, Nemours begs the messenger to return to the princess so that he may find some way to see her. "Monsieur de Nemours pensa expirer de douleur en présence de celle qui lui parlait. Il la pria vingt fois de retourner à Madame de Clèves, afin de faire en sorte qu'il la vît; mais cette personne lui dit que Madame de Clèves lui avait non seulement défendu de lui aller redire aucune chose de sa part, mais même de lui rendre compte de leur conversation" (Lafayette, *La Princesse* 238-9).

Though her final confession is framed as both the enunciation and renunciation of her desire, Nemours believes that he can somehow possess her through his words. I would argue that the double function of the confession enabled the princess at once to assume, at least

discursively, the position of lover and to move beyond it. As evidenced by her departure, the heroine now resides outside of the frame, her position barely perceptible by those who remain at court.[87] Interestingly enough, this is perhaps the only instance when she successfully negotiates the reception of her address, and yet it is a moment to which she cannot and never will be present. Here, the messenger speaks in the name of the other and provides the illusion of proximity to the princess. However, there is no return address, no point to which Nemours can address his message. The princess transmits a message that denies its return in the form of a response, and soon thereafter death will provide the impenetrable barrier against the return of any and all messages.

The novel closes with a brief description of the final years of her life. "Madame de Clèves vécut d'une sorte qui ne laissa pas d'apparence qu'elle pût jamais revenir. Elle passait une partie de l'année dans cette maison religieuse et l'autre chez elle; mais dans une retraite et dans des occupations plus saintes que celles des couvents les plus austères" (Lafayette, *La Princesse* 239). An unequivocal message is left in the wake of her death: "et sa vie, qui fut assez courte, laissa des exemples de vertu inimitables" (Lafayette, *La Princesse* 239). In effect, the trace of her existence, inimitable examples of virtue, is precisely that which cannot be reduced to the realm of imitation or representation. Madame de Chartres took extreme measures to perpetuate her own message to the future, to script her daughter's conduct as a testament to her own precepts and education. Her virtuous conduct is therefore singular in form and appears to satisfy the mother's initial demands: "Madame de Chartres joignait à la sagesse de sa fille une conduite si exacte pour toutes les bienséances qu'elle achevait de la faire paraître une personne où l'on ne pouvait atteindre" (Lafayette, *La Princesse* 89). However, as we have seen, the mother compromises the futurity of her message by condemning her daughter to an impossible

image of conduct. As a result, the daughter as the mother's letter falls out of circulation, returns to its origin, and thus appears to complete the course proper to it. In the novel, the heroine is perhaps the mother's privileged address to the world, a letter which no one can properly possess, whose course no one can limit or contain. Both unattainable and inimitable, the daughter disappears, leaving behind a notion of virtue whose manifestation also marks its extinction.

Madame de Lafayette's novel offers a rich reflection on problems of address both on the level of word and image. Though the courtly system constitutes a site of invariable exchange, indifference and silence most often annul the reciprocity implied in interpersonal communication. To address the other is to enter into a precarious venture for the reciprocity implied in communication is often violated in favor of protecting one's own public or private interests. In particular, the interlocutor awaits the other's confirming response only to receive in return that which condemns him or her to silence. Consequently, the violence that permeates human relations precludes any sense of intimacy or mutual recognition between subjects. Rather than lead to a sense of shared or collective experience, social intercourse and exchange reveal the impossibility of securing one's position in relation to others. The princess's departure is, in part, emblematic of a refusal to occupy such a position, to no longer bear witness to those instances when her position is violently determined from without. One can thus interpret her death as the ultimate departure from the frame, either discursive or figural, in which she so often found herself depicted. In *La Princesse de Clèves*, death is figured as the only promise of respite from the ambiguity and inconstancy of courtly relations, the point of no-return that dwells just beyond the court's purview.

CONCLUSION

> The material letter reinforces the absence of bodily contact, the virtual email, arriving instantaneously, emphasizes a non-bodily intimacy … The instantaneity of email, that it arrives so quickly after it was sent, something which provides a sense of closeness, of an immediacy that suggests presence, is heightened by the lack of the apparatus that goes with letter writing … The most intimate letters are handwritten because they involve the body directly, and handwriting has an individualized quality. Email can only use the computer keyboard, this decreases the bodily involvement, and the bodily intimacy.
>
> —Jon Stratton, "Not Really Desiring Bodies"

During the Classical period, the practice of letter writing appears to undermine philosophical definitions of the self emerging at the same time which are predicated on the centrality of the self and a lack of necessity for the other. The selected works of Guilleragues, Madame de Sévigné, and Madame de Lafayette reveal the extent to which one's subjective position is formed in relation to another as well as the writer's desire to locate him or herself in the other's return address. As spaces of constant negotiation, the scenes of writing and reading attest to the difficulty of constructing an exchange based on mutual adaptation and congruity. In particular, the return letter neither discloses the truth of the original address nor confirms the subject's position in relation to the absent other. There where one endeavors to discern the truth of this relationship, one upholds the letter only to perceive a darkened image, the place absented by the other and subsequently one's symbolic erasure or non-presence. As we have seen, the marked absence of correspondence that structures epistolary exchange reveals the unbearable indeterminacy that plagues the writer's position.

While this dissertation situates epistolary correspondence within a specific historical and literary context, it is particularly urgent and resonant given the prevalence of technological devices that have effectively replaced the written signifier. Today, more than ever, we are inundated with new media technologies (email, list serves, blogs, and social networking) which have redefined the limits of correspondence for we communicate almost instantaneously regardless of space or time constraints. The lure of this medium is perhaps the transparency and immediacy with which messages are composed, sent, delivered, and received. To abolish such constraints suggests that these technologies have the potential to mobilize and to neutralize those dynamics proper to interpersonal communication. However, new literary genres such as novels composed of text messages and emails reveal the difficulty of transmitting and securing meaning. The extent to which letters work or fail as communicative acts is a central preoccupation of these novels. Similar to the material letter, electronic messages remain subject to delay, deletion, non-arrival, and misinterpretation. In contrast, the digitally generated message, a disembodied address, no longer bears the mark of the addresser. Instead, the word processor, a technical prosthesis, produces a virtual script that enters into a network before arriving at the recipient's terminal. Consequently, the other's absence is not as readily interrogated in light of the immediacy upon which electronic correspondence is predicated.

The perimeters that inform and govern virtual communication also serve as an important focal point for many on-line communities. Most notably, *Cybermind*, an internet mailing list, interrogates the ambiguities of digital communication, the construction of community, and the paradoxes of public/private selves. In recent years, literature within the field of digital culture examines the construction of identity inasmuch as users construct, edit, and reinvent a virtual self or selves. To this extent, cyberspace enables users to recast, often at the expense of lived reality,

identity in terms of multiplicity and flexibility. From this now commonplace practice emerges a decentered and disembodied subject for digital data (images, posts, tweets) appear to eclipse the individual as such. It is evident that the manner in which we communicate with one another and construct a sense of self and other has become increasingly mediated by virtual and conceptual tools. In turn, many of these communities cast a critical view of the inordinate privilege granted to on-line communication and to the construction of virtual identities or personas.

In much the same way that the internet serves as a space of intersection between the private and the public, the letter mediates interpersonal communication and appears to refract the truth of the correspondents' relationship. As I have shown, the letter as a space of negotiation bears witness to difficulty of securing one's position in relation to the absent other. In view of this dynamic, the writing subject eventually abandons the exhausting work of addressing. In the end, the protagonist steps out of this discursive frame for silence is preferable to the angst of reading an address that does not acknowledge his or her position or role as such. One's departure is ultimately emblematic of a refusal to occupy such a position, to no longer bear witness to those instances when one is subjected to the pains of indifference and ambivalence.

NOTES

[1] Eramus' *Literary and educational writings* or *De Conscribendis Epistolis formula* (1552) is considered to be the most comprehensive Renaissance manual of epistolography. Similar to Classical writing manuals, there are several overarching principles that inform the practice of letter writing. In spite of these similarities, Erasmus advises the letter writer never to sacrifice the unique and specific contents of his letter. It thus follows that the style of the letter mutates in accordance with the topic in question while taking into account the relationship between the sender and the recipient: "[it] will not only conform to the topic, but, as befits any good go-between (for a letter performs the function of a messenger), it will take account of times and persons; it will not speak of the same subject on all occasions or to all persons alike; it will present itself in one guise to the old, in another to the young" (Erasmus 19).

[2] In "The Politics of Epistolary Art," Janet Altman attributes the shift in epistolary practices between the sixteenth and seventeenth-centuries to the repressive and hierarchical view of society under the rule of the absolute monarchy:

> …between 1539 and 1789 hundreds of real correspondences and letter-writing manuals were published in France, each purporting in some way to offer a model for writing. During this period two major shifts occurred in the type of writing promoted as a cultural ideal. In the 1620s "familiar," "personal," egalitarian, and potentially dissident forms of letter writing—inspired in large part by Erasmus' theories in his influential *De Conscribendis Epistolis* (1522; *On the Writing of Letters*)—were repressed in favor of "courtly" models supporting a hierarchical view of society and an absolute monarchy. (416)

[3] The desire for a kind of discursive or affective symmetry between the correspondents well precedes the Classical formulations present in letter-writing manuals. Madeleine and Catherine Des Roches' private correspondence, *Les missives* (1586), serves as an illustrative example. In her second missive, Madeleine praises "un destinataire inconnu" for his excellent opinion of her which makes him all the more virtuous and courteous in her eyes: "O combien j'ayme le souvenir que vous avez de moy, lequel produit tant de beaux discours honorables, tesmoins de vos excellences en vertu, doctrine, et courtoisie" (91). The opening lines of this letter bear witness to the circular exchange of letters; the unknown male recipient sends, at least discursively, Madeleine back to herself or the image that she has fashioned for herself. In response, she praises the memory that he has of her, a consideration that in turn reveals the virtuous and honorable nature of his character.

[4] Descartes problematizes the hybrid composition of scientific discourse and underscores its estrangement from truth and certitude: "Et ainsi je pensai que les sciences des livres, au moins celles dont les raisons ne sont que probables, et qui n'ont aucunes demonstrations, s'etant composes et grossies peu à peu des opinions de plusieurs personnes, ne sont point si approchantes de la vérité que les simples raisonnements que peu faire naturellement un homme de bons sens…" (*Discours* 85).

[5] Dalia Judovitz observes that Descartes ventures to establish a new language for philosophy devoid of its representational value and thus of illusion:

> Descartes's overt condemnation and fear of illusion, in the *Praeambula*, the Regulae, and the *Discours* is the figure of his refusal to consider the problematic nature of the relation between knowledge and representation. Descartes's search for certitude represents the search for an ideal language, one where truth can be

> equated with propositional correctness and where language itself ceases to exist materially as discourse. (*Subjectivity* 20)

[6] In *Marges de la philosophie,* Derrida considers the question of signification and argues that since words can never fully signify that meaning is derived through appeal to additional words. This appeal in turn creates a deferral or postponement in signification or an endless play of signifying references. In spite of this, one writes to regain the differed presence as well a relation to the impossible present, an irreparable loss of presence itself. Derrida posits that "qu'il s'agisse de signe verbal ou écrit, de signe monétaire, de délégation électorale et de représentation politique, la circulation des signes diffère le moment où nous pourrions rencontrer la chose même, nous en emparer, la consommer ou la dépenser, la toucher, la voir, en avoir l'intuition présente" (*Marges* 9). When the actual thing (*chose*) is not present, we use the sign, a detour, which is therefore "la présence différée" (*Marges,* Derrida 9). As Derrida observes, the sign defers presence, and yet it is only figured in relation to the presence that it defers and in view of the deferred presence that one tries to reappropriate. Following this logic, the sign is both a substitution for the thing itself and a reminder of the deferred and lost presence.

[7] Barthes also notes that the sender's address cannot reach the other, only the space where he or she is not. The scene of writing is predicated on the absence of the other, and yet there is no way to traverse this space *là où tu n'es pas* in order to arrive *là où tu es.* In effect, the subject finds himself or herself caught between two disparate temporalities: le temps de la référence et le temps de l'allocution (Barthes 22). The referential time is confided to the past, to the scene of abandonment; whereas, the time of allocution marks an unbearable present for the abandoned subject. And as such, the other is only present as the absent interlocutor or as the once-having-been-there referent:

> L'autre est absent comme référent; présent comme allocutaire. De cette distorsion singulière naît une sorte de présent insoutenable; je suis coincé entre deux temps, le temps de la référence et le temps de l'allocution; tu es parti (de quoi je me plains), tu es là (puisque je m'adresse à toi). Je sais alors ce qu'est le présent, ce temps difficile: un pur morceau d'angoisse. (Barthes 22)

[8] Madame de Lafayette's *La Princesse de Clèves* is often credited as the first novel in French literature. Thomas DiPiero argues that the novel's incorporation into the canon of French literature occurs at the expense of its oppositional and innovative features:

> Because it is generally placed either at the beginning or at the end of linear stories of the French novel, it is used to constitute a precarious boundary separating archaic and modern modes of fiction. Modernist accounts of the development of French prose fiction conscript the work to serve as a benchmark in their unilinear narratives, but construing the novel as a narrative element in a literary history endowed with its own expressive causality whose teleological purpose is to predict the development of realism strips the work of its own distinctive features (132).

[9] During the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, the majority of readers celebrated the nun's spontaneous and unbridled expression of love. For most commentators, this work served as a clear example of the ingenuity of feminine epistolary expression. However, Jean-Jacques Rousseau, in *Lettre à M. d'Alembert sur les spectacles* (1758), argued in favor of a male author since women lack the literary genius that would enable them to produce such a work:

> Les femmes en général n'aiment aucun art, ne se connaissent à aucun, et n'on aucun génie. Elles peuvent réussir aux petits ouvrages qui ne demandent que de la

> légèreté d'esprit, du goût, de la grâce, quelquefois même de la philosophie et du raisonnement. … Mais ce feu céleste qui échauffe et embrase l'âme, ce génie qui consume et dévore, cette brulante éloquence, ces transports sublimes qui portent leurs ravissements jusqu'au fond des cœurs, manqueront toujours aux écrits des femmes… (239)

In a footnote, Rousseau proceeds to bet the world that a man was the author of *Lettres portugaises*: "Je parierais tout au monde que les *Lettres portugaises* ont été écrites par un homme" (240). As if to further complicate the question of authorship, the original title page does not indicate an author. In response to claims that he was indeed the novel's author, Guilleragues firmly maintained his role as the letters' translator. The preface to the first edition "Avis au lecteur" contains a reference to the "original translation." For analyses of this prefatory address to the reader, see MacArthur 96-99 and Kauffman 98-100. It is not until the 1960s when scholars such as Leo Spitzer, F.C. Green, and Frédéric Deloffre attribute full authorial credit to Guilleragues; see Green 159-167 and Spitzer 94-135. For several prefatory essays in which Frédéric Deloffre and Jacques Rougeot deem the question of authorship finally resolved, see their 1972 edition of *Chansons et bons mots, Valentins, Lettres portugaises*. For a comprehensive examination of the work's long and complex reception history, see McAlpin 27-44. Her reading also elucidates the critical debate that ensued during the 1980s between feminist theorists, Peggy Kamuf and Nancy K. Miller, regarding the value of the feminine signature. See Kamuf "Writing Like a Woman" 284-299 and "Replacing Feminist Criticism" 42-47; and Miller 48-53.

[10] In her introduction to *Lettres portugaises et suites*, Anne-Marie Clin-Lalande concludes in favor of the work's authenticity: "Considérer l'œuvre comme une pure fiction de Guilleragues soulève plus de questions qu'elle n'en résout, entraîne des invraisemblances, et

mène à des affirmations fausses … L'hypothèse de lettres authentiques 'traduites' nous semble préférable" (42). See also Schröder 283-299.

[11] According to Philippe Sellier, at the end of the trajectory resides no one, an indistinct interlocutor in whom Mariane is fully invested: "Le tragique surgit du fait que l'interlocuteur ne répondra jamais. A l'extrémité du trajet, il n'y a… personne. Le destinataire est un médiocre, un jouisseur superficiel. L'ironie tragique réside en ce qu'une femme aussi absolue aime précisément… ça. Cet enfermement monodique rapproche la lettre du monologue intérieur ou du *lamento* statique de certaines tragédies grecques" (514). Susan Lee Carrell defines the letters as "un discours qui, monologue par essence, est condamné d'avance au solipsisme, malgré les efforts précaires de la communication" (45). For readings that closely align themselves with Muratore, Spitzer, and Carrell, see Barnett 23-30 and Mallinson 31-47. Clin-Lalande presents a decidedly contrary position with regards to Carrell's reading: "Il semble abusif, au vu de ces chiffres, de parler, comme on tend à le faire, de soliloque, de mode réfléchi. Rappelons que le soliloque, tel que le définissent les dictionnaires de Furetière et de l'Académie, est un raisonnement ou une réflexion que l'on fait avec soi-même, ajoutant que le terme s'emploie exclusivement à propos de saint Augustin" (56).

[12] Much like Madame de Clèves' confession to her husband, which Gerard Genette terms extravagant, the nun's comportment marks a radical divergence from the prescribed norms of the period:

> ce qui définit le vraisemblable, c'est le principe formel de respect de la norme, c'est-à-dire l'existence d'un rapport d'implication entre la conduite particulière attribuée à tel personnage, et telle maxime générale implicite et reçue. Ce rapport d'implication fonctionne aussi comme un principe d'*explication*: le générale

> détermine et donc explique le particulier, comprendre la conduite d'un personnage (par exemple), c'est pouvoir la référer à une maxime admise et cette référence est reçue comme une remontée de l'effet à la cause. (Genette 7)

[13] Muratore considers the consequences of breaking the work's epistolary structure only to dismiss this very paradigm in an article entitled, "The Imaginary as Protagonist: Les *Lettres portugaises*." Before doing so, she provides a subtle reading of the consequences of performing just such an interpretation:

> We are carried along by the spaces left by the explicit silence of the interlocutor. To theorize the interlocutor as contrivance, then, is not to fill the heedless ellipses, but to efface them. That is, the spaces between segments, spaces to have been swamped with significance by the intentional, cruel, significant refusal of the lover to respond, become meaningless and make, then, of the text, one long diatribe divided reiteratively and deconstructively into five artificial entities. The ontology and epistemology of absence are no longer functional: all that remains is the single voice relaying and replacing the same monolithic melody and complexifying the dichotomy between fact and fiction by exponentializing fictional fictions and in the end by basing a work on a level of untruth once removed. ("The Imaginary" 138)

[14] The opening apostrophe has generated critical debate in recent decades. Frédéric Deloffre contends that Mariane addresses, not her love, but her lover. Wolfgang Leiner, among others, disagrees with Deloffre's analysis and argues that Mariane addresses herself. J.-M. Pelous and Philippe Hourcade note that the divergence of opinions long precedes recent debates. Hourcade references a contemporary of Guilleragues, Du Plaisir. In *Sentiments sur les lettres*

(1683), Du Plaisir interprets the opening apostrophe as an invocation addressed to love personified. Read from a different perspective, Thérèse Lassalle-Maraval attributes the retrospective or retroactive structure of this opening apostrophe to Mariane's complete lack of psychic disorganization: "On peut donc estimer que cet ensemble d'énoncés— ou ce mode particulier d'énonciation de la douleur— manifeste un désarroi, au sens premier de '*désorganisation complète*' de l'être qui éclaire rétroactivement l'apostrophe initiale comme figure inaugurale de cet éclatement et non comme adresse à l'autre de la relation" (285)

[15] In Barthes' *Fragments d'un discours amoureux*, the figure of absence foregrounds the lover's relation to the beloved: "L'autre est en état de perpétuel départ, de voyage; il est, par vocation, migrateur, fuyant; je suis moi qui aime, qui par vocation inverse, sédentaire, immobile, à disposition, en attente, tassé sur place, *en souffrance*, comme un paquet dans un coins perdu de gare" (19).

[16] "Dona Brites me persécuta ces jours passes pour me faire sortir de ma chambre, et, croyant me divertir, elle me mena promener sur le balcon d'où l'on voit Mertola; je la suivis, et je fus aussitôt frappée d'un souvenir cruel qui me fit pleurer tout le reste du jour…" (Guilleragues 164).

[17] Later in her correspondence, Mariane (je) constitutes herself as an object (moi-même) in order to convey the fact that she is no longer in possession of herself: "…je ne me suis laissé aucune disposition de moi-même" (Guilleragues 166).

[18] Roxanne Decker Lalande reads Mariane's role-playing as a "form of dramatic improvisation" in which she assumes the "dual roles of victim and seducer, creating a verbal dialectic through which she can better comprehend her lover's behavior" (152).

[19] "Quoi? cette absence, à laquelle ma douleur, tout ingénieuse qu'elle est, ne peut donner un nom assez funeste, me privera donc pour toujours de regarder ces yeux dans lesquels je voyais tant d'amour, et qui me faisaient connaitre des mouvements qui me comblaient de joie, qui me tenaient lieu de toutes choses, et qui enfin me suffisaient?" (Guilleragues 147).

[20] Just as he has forgotten her, she hopes someday to be able to remember him only when compelled to do so: "…que je ne me souviens de vous que lorsque je veux m'en souvenir" (Guilleragues 176).

[21] Mariane also expresses her desire to remain ignorant of the arrival of this package: "…je ne veux point savoir le succès de cette lettre" (Guilleragues 170).

[22] Francine du Plessix Gray makes the following observation: "The final irony of Sévigné's correspondence is that within a few decades of her death, this most prominent and pathological of maternal infatuations was virtually sanctified in France as a paragon of maternal emotion" (135). See also Catherine R. Montfort's essay "Mme de Sévigné: Seventeenth-century Feminist?" in which she challenges the interpretation of Mme de Sévigné as a paragon of motherhood. Montfort argues that this particular figuration "arose from the patriarchal desire to interpret her love as the norm at a time when motherhood was exalted" (204). Later in the eighteenth-century and throughout the next, Mme de Sévigné was received as an epitome of motherly love. For instance, in the introduction to her published correspondence, *Lettres de Madame de Sévigné: de sa famille et de ses amis*, Paul Mesnard writes that "Madame de Sévigné a été mère avant tout" (75). Stéphanie Félicité, the countess of Genlis, an eighteenth-century writer and educator, extols the mother's virtues and wonders why the daughter does not reciprocate her affections:

> Toutes les lettres de madame de Sévigné, qui prouvent avec tant de charme son affection pour sa fille, attestent aussi la tendresse de madame de Grignan pour elle. On ne conçoit pas pourquoi l'on a prétendu généralement que madame de Grignan, si vertueuse, si spirituelle, élevée avec tant de soins, aimée d'une manière si touchante, n'avoit pas pour une telle mère tous les sentimens qu'elle lui devoit. (188)

However, in the twentieth-century, interpretations of the letters vary more widely, many of which cast Mme de Sévigné's love in a more negative light. Roger Duchêne, in his extensive corpus devoted to her work, and Jacqueline Duchêne, in her biography of Mme de Sévigné, view her as an excessive, even abusive mother. Bernard Bray and Harriet Ray Allentuch also consider the question of the maternal Sévigné; see bibliography.

[23] See, for instance, Michèle Longino Farrell, *Performing Motherhood: the Sévigné Correspondence*, and Katharine Ann Jensen, *Uneasy Possessions: the Mother-Daughter Dilemma in French Women's Writings*.

[24] Quoted in Grassi, "Mères et filles au miroir de leur lettres" (64).

[25] Jean Puget de La Serre published one of the most widely read and circulated manuals for letter writing during the seventeenth-century, *Le Secrétaire de la cour* (1625), later republished as *Le Secrétaire à la mode* (1640). A predecessor of La Serre, Estienne du Tronchet, a secretary to Catherine de Médecis, published a collection of original missives entitled *Lettres missives et familières* (1569). Intended to support the hierarchical view of social relations, du Tronchet writes that "le style de la lettre, en effet, doit être adapté à la situation sociale de l'expéditeur et à celle du destinataire" (qtd. in Des Roches 22).

[26] According to François Flahault, within the relational space of correspondence, a hierarchy establishes itself between the correspondents thus implicating each participant's place or position in accordance with the dominant power relations. See, for instance, the fifth chapter entitled, "Quatre registres pour la détermination des rapports de places."

[27] See also Jürgen Siess' article in which he argues that hierarchical relations play a determinant role in how each correspondent constructs an image of him or herself. The other's scriptural gaze both informs and governs the manner in which the subject conceives of his or her own image and position.

[28] The women's divergent temperaments are often a topic of conversation. The daughter's *mauvaise humeur* serves as a point of contention between the women, especially for the mother intent on affirming her daughter's tenderness and friendship: "Je ne sais, ma fille, comment vous pouvez dire votre humeur est un nuage qui cache l'amitié que vous avez pour moi; si cela était dans les temps passés, vous avez bien levé ce voile depuis plusieurs années, et vous ne me cachez rien de la plus tendre et de la plus parfaite amitié qui fut jamais" (*Correspondance* 3:378). Contrary to Mme de Grignan's assertion, Mme de Sévigné revels in her role as the recipient of the daughter's tender love and friendship.

[29] In *L'Honnête fille où dans le premier livre il est traité de l'esprit des filles* (1639-40), François de Grenaille outlines appropriate mother-daughter relations.

[30] In a chapter entitled "Lunettes noires," Barthes begins with a reference, in the margins, to Mme de Sévigné. Interestingly enough, he places this gloss in dialogue with the text which is a meditation on concealment (cacher):

> 1. X…, parti en vacances sans moi, ne m'a donné aucun signe de vie depuis son départ : accident? grève de la poste? indifférence? tactique de distance? exercice

Mme de Sévigné

d'un vouloir-vivre passager ('Sa jeunesse lui fait du bruit, il n'entend pas')? ou simple innocence? Je m'angoisse de plus en plus, passe par tous les actes d'un scénario d'attente. Mais, lorsque X… resurgira d'une manière ou d'une autre, car il ne peut manquer de le faire (pensée qui devrait immédiatement rendre vaine toute angoisse), que lui dirai-je? Devrai-je lui cacher mon trouble— désormais passé ('*Comment vas-tu?*')? Le faire éclater agressivement ('*Ce n'est pas chic, tu aurais bien pu'*) ou passionnément ('*Dans quelle inquiétude tu m'as mis*')? Ou bien, ce trouble, le laisser entendre délicatement, légèrement, pour le faire connaitre sans en assommer l'autre ('*J'étais un peu inquiet…'*)? Une angoisse seconde me prend, qui est d'avoir à décider du degré de publicité que je donnerai à mon angoisse première. (51)

[31] In contrast, the mother portrays her daughter as a markedly rational, reserved, and at times ambivalent individual. As Virginia Woolf observes, the mother's intense emotions give rise to numerous conflicts between the women: "from the daughter's point of view it was exhausting, was embarrassing to be the object of such intense emotion; and she could not always respond. … Her mother was ignoring the real daughter in this flood of adoration for a daughter who did not exist. It was inevitable that Madame de Sévigné, with her exacerbated sensibility, should feel hurt" (52). In effect, both women suffer the mother's passion. Within the letter, the daughter finds herself unwillingly projected into view, subject to the mother's exhausting adoration. However, as Woolf notes, such esteem obscures the individual as such. Before the daughter "[who is] different; colder, more fastidious, less robust," the vengeful mother asserts her authority by demanding the daughter's complicity (Woolf 52).

[32] Marianne Hirsch calls attention to the fluid relationship between mother and daughter, one in which ego boundaries are only loosely defined: "To study the relationship between mother and daughter is not to study the relationship between two differentiated individuals, but to plunge into a network of complex ties, to attempt to untangle the strands of a double self, a continuous multiple being of monstrous proportions stretched across generations, parts of which try to separate and delineate their own boundaries. It is to find continuity and relationship where one expects to find difference and autonomy" (73).

[33] The superlative quality of maternal love is a recurrent theme in Mme de Sévigné's correspondence:

> Adieu, ma très chère et très aimable bonne. Que ne vous dirais-je point de ma tendresse pour vous si je voulais me lâcher la bride? Croyez, ma bonne, en un seul mot, que vous ne pouvez jamais être plus parfaitement aimée, ni plus véritablement estimée, que vous l'êtes de moi, car il y a de tout dans l'amitié que j'ai pour vous; mille raisons confirment mes sentiments. Je n'avais pas dessein d'en tant dire, mais on ne peut pas toujours s'en empêcher. (*Correspondance* 2:63)

[34] On other occasions, Mme de Sévigné accuses her daughter of purposefully neglecting to write her. Despite the unfavorable weather conditions, the arrival of the mail supports her accusations: "Je n'ai point reçu de vos lettres. J'en suis triste et fâchée, sans en être surprise; je le suis bien plus, quand je vois arriver les courriers par un si effroyable temps" (Sévigné, *Correspondance* 3:822). It is interesting to note Mme de Sévigné's lack of astonishment which suggests that she is more or less accustomed to the daughter's neglectful habits regarding epistolary correspondence.

[35] For an analysis of the specific uses of the indefinite pronoun *on*, especially when it replaces the first-person pronoun, see Constance Cartmill, "Lorsqu'un on vaut un je: emplois du pronom indéfini chez Mme de Sévigné."

[36] According to Marie-Françoise Guittard-Maury, a desire to maintain the distance that separates the correspondents threatens the structure proper to epistolary correspondence: "Mais la correspondance peut aussi tenir un rôle tout à fait contraire à sa vocation (mettre en relation) et paradoxalement tenir à distance ou même accroître la distance. Dans ce cas, la perversion sous-jacente à toute correspondance se manifeste avec une autre gravité" (596). Mme de Sévigné's revelation serves as an illustrative example of just such a perversion inasmuch as the daughter's absence provides her the opportunity to discover the pleasures of writing.

[37] Geneviève Haroche-Bouzinac contends that the scene of reading more closely resembles a dialogic encounter for the letter transmits a kind of sensibility to the recipient: "… on croit entendre la voix de son correspondant lorsqu'on parcourt sa lettre: le destinataire écoute, tout autant qu'il lit. Cette métaphore est l'image sonore du dialogue. Elle correspond à la réalité sensible de la personne du correspondant" ("Quelques Métaphores" 250).

[38] In the fantasy presented here, the return of the maternal address ("ma bonne") presents Mme de Sévigné with an image of herself as a loving and endearing mother. As Melanie Klein points out, when the mother realizes the limited role that she plays in her children's lives, she "may find some satisfaction in keeping her love prepared for them whenever it is needed. … At the same time she is also identified with her own children: she is, in her phantasy, as it were, again a child, and shares with her children the possession of a good and helpful mother" (319-20). The mother positions herself as the child who receives the daughter's loving address, a term

of endearment that both confirms her position as beloved as well as her role as good and loving mother.

[39] Quoted in Derrida's *Donner le temps: la fausse monnaie* (60).

[40] At numerous points in their correspondence, the mother posits self-care as a sign of one's love or fidelity to the other: "Mais conservez votre santé si vous m'aimez, si vous nous aimez, si vous voulez que nous nous portions bien. Il semble que ma santé ne songe qu'à vous plaire tant elle est de suite et parfaite" (*Correspondance* 3:490). Consequently, to neglect oneself constitutes a transgression against the mother more so than against the self.

[41] For the jealous mother, Monsieur de Grignan threatens the closed, feminine couple. For fear of being displaced in love by the husband, the mother's jealousy is symptomatic of a desire to converse her daughter as possession. However, her threatening letters reveal the impotency of her position and the impossibility of returning to this closed construct. As Jacques Brengues observes, the love letter attempts to recuperate a dynamic rendered impossible by distance:

> C'est dans cette dialectique entre deux univers (celui qu'elle crée, celui qu'elle nie) que se situe la lettre d'amour. Elle est tentative de reconstituer par l'écriture une dynamique duelle rendue impossible par la distance. On y peut cependant repérer la plupart des schémas relationnels, plus ou moins pervertis, de toute dynamique groupale même réduite au couple: mécanisme de défense, résistance au changement, agressivité, expression conflictuelle, transfert, homéostase qui tend à maintenir constantes les conditions d'existence, dans une recherche du compromis, de l'équilibre, de l'harmonie mis à mal par la séparation. (71)

[42] To resolve any conflict that might arise if the daughter refuses to oblige the mother, she frames her threat as a compliment: "M. de Grignan vous doit donner, et à moi, cette marque de

sa complaisance. Ne croyez donc pas que vos belles actions ne soient pas remarquées; les beaux procédés méritent toujours des louanges. Continuez, voilà tout" (Sévigné, *Correspondance* 1:554).

[43] In a letter addressed to Montgobert, her daughter's secretary, Mme de Sévigné writes the following: "Ma chère Montgobert, je vous conjure de faire une légère réponse à tout ce volume, et empêchez toujours bien ma fille de m'écrire. Son écriture me donne du chagrin, mais la cause n'est pas médiocre. Mandez-moi, ma chère, des nouvelles de sa santé, et si elle se conserve toujours, et si elle se nourrit comme je lui ai conseillé" (*Correspondance* 2:825).

[44] "Gardez-vous bien, ma fille, de répondre à toutes mes lettres. Bon Dieu! je ne le prétends pas. Je cause avec vous sans fin et sans mesure; il ne faut point de réponse à tout ceci. Je n'écris qu'à vous; je fais ma seule consolation de vous entretenir. Ne soyez pas si simple que d'y répondre…" (Sévigné, *Correspondance* 2:691).

[45] The metaphor of the curtain reappears throughout their correspondence and attests, I believe, to the constant sense of negotiation (concealment/exposure) that characterizes their relationship. Elsewhere in her letters, Mme de Sévigné instructs the daughter to pull back the curtains that prevent her from seeing or conceiving of the mother as she really is: "Redressez donc votre imagination, ma chère Comtesse, et tirez les rideaux qui vous empechent de me voir…" (*Correspondance* 3:180).

[46] As this passage demonstrates, the mother-daughter relationship is not a guarantor of a shared sense of sympathy or understanding. Contrary to her view, the mother cannot always understand or validate the child's position: "Ma bonne, je comprends tous vos sentiments mieux que personne. Vraiment oui, on se transmet dans ses enfants, et, comme vous dites, plus

vivement que pour soi-même: j'ai tant passé par ces émotions!" (Sévigné, *Correspondance* 3:184).

[47] What is particularly interesting is that her monstrosity is impermanent. If she takes the loup-garou for her example, it is important to note that this creature is half-human, half-beast only for a short duration of time and subject to a kind of curse.

[48] Geneviève Haroche-Bouzinac contends that the letter cannot ultimately supplement the intimacy of conversation: "Dans l'ordre amical et affectif, la lettre est *moins* qu'une conversation, elle n'est qu'un succédané de dialogue, un faux-semblant d'entretien, elle n'est que compensation" ("La lettre" 186).

[49] Nathalie Freidel considers the paradoxical notion of confidentiality, especially with regards to committing that which should remain undisclosed to writing. In spite of this paradox, she describes the letter, within the collective imaginary of the seventeenth-century, as "[un] dépositaire du secret des cœurs, elle est le lieu privilégié des confidences et des aveux, suscitant la curiosité des indiscrets" (561).

[50] La Rochefoucauld underscores the constraining nature of taking another into one's confidence: "La confiance ne nous laisse pas tant de liberté, ses règles sont plus étroites, elle demande plus de prudence et de retenue, et nous ne sommes pas toujours libres d'en disposer: il ne s'agit pas de nous uniquement et nous intérêts sont mêlés avec ceux des autres" (171).

[51] The daughter revendicates her right to remain silent or as Barthes observes "… avec mon langage, je puis tout faire: même et surtout, ne rien dire" (54).

[52] As Cécile Lignereux points out, the intersubjective consequences of epistolary exchange are of far greater concern than the transmission of information. Consequently, what she

terms a veritable exchange only occurs in the wake of an interaction, a shared space of mutual recognition and reciprocity in which the correspondents' interactions coalesce:

> En effet, le mot de *communication* met l'accent moins sur l'activité langagière que sur ses conséquences intersubjectives, pensées en termes d'intelligence et de familiarité. …. D'autre part, saisi, à la lumière de l'approche interactionnelle, dans le sens de l'activité exigeant coopération des partenaires qui sont en relation de détermination réciproque, le terme de *communication* réfère cette fois au processus grâce auquel peut advenir une construction discursive commune. Pourtant, elle n'en orchestre pas moins des mécanismes d'influence mutuelle: ce n'est au prix des correspondantes que peut se construire un véritable échange, fût-ce par lettres… (*À l'origine* 69)

[53] See, for instance, Philippe Desan's article, "The Economy of Love in *La Princesse de Clèves*." Desan understands courtly relations according to an economic model in which value is determined according to the demand for exchange. In the market economy of the court, people are exchanged like objects and, as Desan notes, "an object's use is determined only after its confrontation with the other objects having the same potential use. The intrinsic superiority of one object over another can be ascertained only in accordance with its continued demand" (108). Peter Shoemaker addresses courtly relations from a different, yet nonetheless significant perspective. He argues that confidential ties play a determinant role in how characters navigate the social universe in which they live. As he observes, within the social universe of the court, the networks of confidences contaminate the confidant's "supposedly privileged and exclusive role" (50).

[54] Anne-Lise François' persuasive and original reading of *La Princesse de Clèves* echoes the pessimistic view of courtly relations and, in particular, underscores the chastening or passive modes of interaction that characterize human relations. By providing an alternative to the common moral framework in which leaving what you know unsaid constitutes dishonesty and acting on what you know constitutes denial, the novel, according to François, "suggests that *right*, morally free knowledge between humans demands just this kind of avoidance" (83). For instance, the princess's secret (her desire for Nemours), which freely circulates among the members of the court, is not "hidden or unstated but simply unavailable, untouchable, nonpossessable" (François 81). As she observes, the princess is not a hypocrite, nor does she withhold her feelings; rather, this "open secret" permits for a "strangely passive, all but agentless and guiltless, exchange between people (81).

[55] According to Ralph Albanese, the courtier's problematic role stems from the obligation to remain on public display, and consequently dissemblance is an integral part of maintaining his position: "Hence, the emergence of the courtly ideal of self-observation intimately linked to that of self-mastery, notably in the areas of body and verbal language" (92).

[56] The importance of the mother-daughter relationship has received much critical attention since the early 1980s, especially within the realm of feminist theory. In Katharine Ann Jensen's reading of *La Princesse de Clèves*, she argues that the daughter's adulterous desire calls into question the mother's formerly sovereign position. She observes that "in the mother's world of absolutes, her daughter can only be either erotically inaccessible or forever fallen; either the mother has an exclusive emotional authority over her or she has nothing" ("Making" 73). Additionally, Peggy Kamuf and Marianne Hirsch subordinate the traditional love story to the mother-daughter relationship. By repositioning this traditionally submerged narrative as the

dominant formative influence in female development, La *Princesse de Clèves* remerges as a story about a young woman and her mother. See Hirsch 67-87 and Kamuf, *Fictions of Feminine Desire: Disclosures of Héloïse*. See also Goode 398-406 and Scanlan 23-32.

[57] "Madame de Chartres ne le voyait que trop, aussi bien que le penchant que sa fille avait pour lui. Cette connaissance lui donna une douleur sensible; elle jugeait bien le péril où était cette jeune personne, d'être aimée d'un homme fait comme M. de Nemours, pour qui elle avait de l'inclination" (Lafayette, *La Princesse* 100).

[58] "Elle alla le lendemain matin dans sa chambre pour exécuter ce qu'elle avait résolu; mais elle trouva que Madame de Chartres avait un peu de fièvre, de sorte qu'elle ne voulut pas lui parler" (Lafayette, *La Princesse* 105).

[59] The narrator notes the following in the wake of the princess's passion for Nemours: "elle n'avait encore osé se l'avouer à elle-même" (Lafayette, *La Princesse* 105). Albert Camus argues that the avowal of one's desire threatens the mother's prescribed image of conduct for "cette passion met l'être en péril" (1898).

[60] Benveniste emphasizes the fundamental importance of this reciprocity inasmuch as "le langage n'est possible que parce que chaque locuteur se pose comme *sujet*, en renvoyant à lui-même comme *je* dans son discours. De ce fait, *je* pose une autre personne, ce qui, tout extérieure qu'elle est à 'moi', devient mon écho auquel je dis *tu* et qui me dit *tu*" (260).

[61] I use 'subject' here in the sense of one's linguistic status as person or, to borrow Benveniste's definition, the emergence of the subject as it first occurs in and through language: "la 'subjectivité' dont nous traitons ici est la capacité du locuteur à se poser comme 'sujet'. … Est 'ego' qui *dit* 'ego'. Nous trouvons là le fondement de la 'subjectivité', qui se détermine par le statut linguistique de la 'personne'" (259-60).

[62] Although the scope of this chapter is limited to the theft of the portrait of Madame de Clèves, a second scene involving a portrait of Monsieur de Nemours is not without importance. In this scene, Nemours surreptitiously watches as the princess, guided by the light of a torch, gazes at a painting of the Siege of Metz in which he is pictured. In virtual isolation, the princess consummates her desire through the act of looking and Nemours watches as "elle s'assit et se mit à regarder ce portrait avec une attention et une rêverie que la passion seule peut donner" (Lafayette, *La Princesse* 209). Nemours receives visual confirmation of her love for him and aspires therefore to enter the room and to speak to her directly. "Poussé néanmoins par le désir de lui parler, et rassuré par les espérances que lui donnait tout ce qu'il avait vu, il avança quelques pas, mais avec tant de trouble qu'une écharpe qu'il avait s'embarrassa dans la fenêtre, en sorte qu'il fît du bruit" (Lafayette, *La Princesse* 209-210). Although she barely perceives his presence in the dim light, she abruptly leaves the room for fear that he may indeed be outside her window. This exceptional moment, although it serves to validate the truth of her passion for Nemours, is confined to the imaginary, to the intimate reveries of a solitary encounter with an image. I would argue that her abrupt departure underscores the necessity of maintaining a distance between the image as loved and the man as loved. Michel Butor calls attention to the single noise that breaks the frame and marks a violent irruption of the real into the imaginary: "Il a dû avoir conversation, scène amoureuse, alors que tout s'est déroulé dan le silence, interrompu seulement par le bruit d'effraction que nous pouvons imaginer à notre gré, froissement, déchirure, coup sur la vitre, à l'intérieur du rêve de la princesse, soudain cette irruption du réel…"(78). See also Delacomptée 63-68 and Weinberg 191-205.

[63] "Madame la Dauphine demanda à Monsieur de Clèves un petit portrait qu'il avait de sa femme, pour le voir auprès de celui que l'on achevait" (Lafayette, *La Princesse* 136).

[64] Eric Van Der Schueren also calls attention to the difference that this adjustment introduces into the scene: "Cette retouche vient accuser la distance qui sépare le soit trop humain de l'embellissement de l'être *imaginaire* et, autre face de la vanité instituée en médaille, la négligence très peccable de l'être *véritable*" (122).

[65] In the fall of 1691, in a letter addressed to Ménage, Madame de Lafayette refuses his demand to paint her portrait and problematizes the figuration of the self in this medium:

> Vous me faites trembler, de me parler de faire mon portrait. … Vous ne pourriéz me peindre que telle que j'ay esté; car, pour telle que je suis, il n'y auroit pas moyen d'y penser; et il n'y a plus personne en vie quy m'ait veue jeune. L'on ne pourroit croire ce que vous diriéz de moi, et en me voyant, on le croiroit moins encore moins" (*Correspondance* II: 197).

[66] The mother's instruction relies heavily on representation: "elle faisait souvent à sa fille des peintures de l'amour" (Lafayette, *La Princesse* 76). Dalia Judovitz underscores the violence of the maternal discourse which subverts the destabilizing character of representation by positing virtue as a pure difference within the world. By becoming a figure of unparalleled virtue and absolute uniqueness, the mother constructs an image for her daughter which finds no precedent and thus constitutes an exception. Judovitz contends that:

> the self here emerges as nothing more than an image sustained by its sheer will to define itself exceptionally, as totally different. … The mother's advice represents the violence of the effort required to stabilize the relationship between human conduct and the world, by attempting to master the arbitrary and destabilizing character of representation. Virtue is the proposed solution to the crisis in the order of things and of language. ("Aesthetics" 1041)

[67] It is also important to note that neither of the portraits belongs to the princess. That which bears her image is never properly her own but the property of someone else (the queen, M. de Clèves, or M. de Nemours).

[68] "Il ne laissait échapper aucune occasion de voir Madame de Clèves, sans laisser paraitre néanmoins qu'il les cherchât. […] 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, *La Princesse* 135).

[69] Jean-Michel Delacomptée argues that the abandoned box marks a splitting between the feminine body as it belongs to different social and juridical registers: "Ne laisser que la boîte, réceptacle vide, c'est emporter l'âme de l'épouse, en abandonner au mari le corps légal, simple *soma* sans souffle ni désir, une sorte de tombeau. En ne dérobant que le portrait de l'amant extrait de l'image de la femme, qu'il isole de son cadre juridico-moral" (42).

[70] In order to address questions of legibility, representation, and perspective, Catherine Labio considers this episode in relation to six works by Johannes Vermeer, a Dutch painter, in which woman reading, writing, or receiving a letter are of central concern. Labio contends that this comparison is mutually illuminating insofar as the letter, in both its literary and artistic incarnations, exists independently of its material support. "Though we are given its contents, the letter in the novel is in fact no more readable than the epistles in Vermeer's paintings, which can be looked at, but not read, either because their contents are invisible or…" (9). See also John Lyons and Susan Tiefenbrun who examine the letter according to its structural function within the novel. For Richard G. Hodgson, the letter constitutes an example of a mise en abyme, the point around which the entire novel is structured.

[71] According to Jacques Derrida, jealously subsists on traces insofar as "ne pas voir ce qu'on voit, voir ce qu'on ne peut pas voir et qui ne peut pas se présenter, telle est l'opération jalousie. Elle a toujours affaire à de la trace, jamais à de la perception" (*Glas* 240).

[72] For Barthes, the suffering of the jealous person is manifold: "comme jaloux, je souffre quatre fois: parce que je suis jaloux, parce que je me reproche de l'être, parce que je crains que ma jalousie ne blesse l'autre, parce que je me laisse assujettir à une banalité : je souffre d'être exclu, d'être agressif, d'être fou, d'être commun" (173).

[73] Descartes defines jealousy in the following terms:

> une espèce de crainte, qui se rapporte au désir qu'on a de se conserver la possession de quelque bien; et elle ne vient pas tant de la force des raisons qui font juger qu'on le peut perdre, que de la grande estime qu'on en fait, la quelle est cause qu'on examine jusqu'aux moindres sujet de soupçon, et qu'on les prend pour des raisons for considérables. (*Passions* 255)

Descartes does, however, ascribe a positive value to the desire for self-possession as this kind of jealousy denotes a zealous defense or preservation of one's reputation or good character: "une honnête femme n'est pas blâmée d'être jalouse de son honneur, c'est-à-dire de ne se garder pas seulement de malfaire, mais aussi d'éviter jusqu'aux moindre sujets de médisance" (*Passions* 255). As we have seen, the princess is a figure par excellence of this honest woman, esteemed for zealously guarding her honor and reputation. Following the mother's instruction, she must defend her reputation with great zeal and guard against any wrongdoing that might jeopardize her position.

[74] Marianne Hirsch notes that:

> the complete honesty between mother and daughter is not interrupted by the marriage to Clèves, but is actually bolstered by it: the three protagonists coexist in a triangular relationship. … She is the product of her mother's educational plan and depends on the presence of her mother to function publicly and privately. Her husband provides her with a change in status, thus constituting not as much an adjustment as an additional support. (76)

[75] This proposed solution to her passion is, following the mother's precepts, a fervent attachment to one's husband which constitutes a diversion, a calculated movement away from oneself. Before her death, the mother underscores this particular relation to self: "Mais elle lui faisait voir aussi combien il était difficile de conserver cette vertu, que par une extrême défiance de soi-même et par un grand soin de s'attacher à ce qui peut seul faire le bonheur d'une femme, qui est d'aimer son mari et d'en être aimée" (Lafayette, *La Princesse* 76).

[76] Another letter, addressed to the Vidame, both exonerates Nemours and identifies the Vidame as the recipient of the first letter. Nemours shows this second letter to the princess to clear his name: "'Voilà un billet de Madame d'Amboise, qui est amie de Madame de Thémines, et à qui elle s'est fiée de tous les sentiments qu'elle a eus pour moi. Par ce billet, elle me redemande cette lettre de son amie que j'ai perdue; mon nom est sur le billet; et ce qui est dedans prouve sans aucun doute que la lettre que l'on me redemande est la même que l'on a trouvée'" (Lafayette, *La Princesse* 159).

[77] In his analysis of Edgar Allan Poe's "The Purloined Letter" Lacan considers the indeterminate status of the letter with rights to ownership: "La lettre sur laquelle celui qui l'a envoyée garde encore des droits, n'appartiendrait donc pas tout à fait à celui à qui elle s'adresse? ou serait-ce que ce dernier n'en fût jamais le vrai destinataire?" (27).

[78] See Norman Bryson's *Word and Image: French Painting of the Ancien Régime*. In his discussion on the insertion of the discursive onto the figural within art, he argues that "the inscription guarantees closure: the image must not be allowed to extend into independent life" (4).

[79] In her analysis of this scene, Joan DeJean contends that the princess becomes an author of women's fiction and traffics female passions as literature by recopying the letter. Feminine expression thus becomes an exchangeable commodity, an article of courtly commerce. She argues that the "princess's compassionate involvement with this text is temporarily suspended when she allows herself to be turned into a powerful imitation of the 'Guilleragues' of her day, authors whose literary genius was measured by their ability to trick readers into accepting sometimes plagiarized fictions of female desire as genuine documents" (895-6).

[80] Despite evidence to the contrary, the queen remains convinced of her daughter-in-law's involvement with the Vidame. "Elle crut que la Reine Dauphine y avait part et qu'il y avait quelque intelligence entre eux. Cette pensa augmenta tellement la haine qu'elle avait pour cette princesse qu'elle ne lui pardonna jamais et qu'elle la persécuta jusqu'à ce qu'elle l'eût fait sortir de France" (Lafayette, *La Princesse* 166).

[81] This process, as Dalia Judovitz observes, is one in which the princess becomes a story for herself. "We find that at every crucial confrontation with passion the heroine resorts to a process not only of interpretation of external events or narratives, but also of self-interpretation" ("Aesthetics" 1046).

[82] "Elle se demandait pourquoi elle avait fait une chose si hasardeuse, et elle trouvait qu'elle s'y était engagée sans en avoir presque eu le dessein. La singularité d'un pareil aveu, dont elle ne trouvait point d'exemple, lui en faisait tout le péril" (Lafayette, *La Princesse* 174).

[83] In the end, the princess reproaches Nemours for his lack of discretion and realizes that he is not in fact a man of singular and exceptional merit. Additionally, this realization also threatens the image that she has hitherto maintained of herself: "'C'est pourtant pour cet homme, que j'ai cru si différent du reste des hommes, que je me trouve comme les autres femmes, étant si éloignée de leur ressembler. … Je serai bientôt regardée de tout le monde comme une personne qui a une folle et violente passion'" (Lafayette, *La Princesse* 191).

[84] In *Daybreak: Thoughts on the Prejudices of Morality*, Nietzsche argues that for the lover his unrequited love is indispensible to him "which he would at no price relinquish for a state of indifference" (184).

[85] "'Je mourrai, ajouta-t-il; mais sachez que vous me rendez la mort agréable, et qu'après m'avoir ôté l'estime et la tendresse que j'avais pour vous, la vie me fait horreur. Que ferais-je de la vie, reprit-il, pour la passer avec une personne que j'ai tant aimée, et dont j'ai été si cruellement trompé…'" (Lafayette, *La Princesse* 217).

[86] The figure of possession is of particular importance for Monsieur de Clèves in relation to his wife. Clèves may have secured his relation to his wife at least nominally for she carries his last name, but she remains unaffected by his desire. Following their marriage, the narrator notes that "la qualité de mari lui donna de plus grands privilèges; mais elle ne lui donna pas une autre place dans le cœur de sa femme" (Lafayette, *La Princesse* 89). Although Monsieur de Clèves may enjoy certain privileges as her husband, "[il] ne trouva pas que Mademoiselle de Chartres eût changé de sentiment en changeant de nom" (Lafayette, *La Princesse* 89). For this reason, "…il avait toujours quelque chose à souhaiter au-delà de sa possession; et, quoiqu'elle vécût parfaitement bien avec lui, il n'était pas entièrement heureux. Il conservait pour elle une passion violente et inquiète qui troublait sa joie" (Lafayette, *La Princesse* 89). A figure of dispossession

consequently pervades their relationship and precludes, for Clèves, any lasting notion of happiness or contentment within marriage: "'Est-il possible, lui disait-il, que je puisse n'être pas heureux en vous épousant! Cependant, il est vrai que je ne le suis pas…" (Lafayette, *La Princesse* 87). When she later avows her passion to Clèves, he again invokes the notion of possession: "'Vous m'avez donné de la passion dès le premier moment que je vous ai vue: vos rigueurs et votre possession n'ont pu l'éteindre; elle dure encore'" (Lafayette, *La Princesse* 171-2). Clèves may claim possession over his wife, and yet this claim does not satisfy or extinguish the violence of his desire. According to Anne-Lise François', Clèves' death "materializes the nonpossessive relation he *should* have maintained toward Mme de Clèves in life…" (79). She also adds that Clèves, though quit belatedly, comes to embrace "an ethic of recognition premised on accepting and acknowledging, above all, the limits to what we can claim to know or have the right to know of one another" (79).

[87] In her reading, April Alliston frames the novel as a problem of transmission, specifically the daughter who becomes a conduit for patrimonial transmission though she is excluded from playing an active role in this transmission. According to Alliston, the princess's retirement marks the establishment of a new "state" within which "women have the power to determine the meaning of their own plots within the terms of a private exchange of personal narratives that are recognizable as true because freely offered, not subject to a prior demand that would predetermine their meaning in patrilineal terms" (73).

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