Princess Of Cleves Essay, Research Paper

Although Dangerous Liaisons and The Princess of Cl ves are extremely similar in both plot and theme, many differences in the two novels are apparent to the reader. Both stories describe a virtuous woman tempted by the love of a man to forsake her doctrine, but while each tells of a woman who thinks her “resolutions can hold out against a man who adores [her]” (de La Fayette 156), there is a definite divergence in the tone used to relay the message. These differences stem from the inevitable biases resulting from the genders of the authors. While The Princess of Cl ves, being written by the hostess of an important literary salon, Marie de La Fayette, has an underlying feminine tone, a masculine voice prevails throughout Dangerous Liaisons, written by a Frenchman almost one hundred years later.

In Dangerous Liaisons, the male author Choderos De Laclos portrays an action packed climax in which the main character of the story, the Vicomte de Valmont is violently killed in a duel over a girl whose honor he had sullied. Although he allows himself to be beaten, he still suffers a brutal, bloody defeat. With this act, it seems as though the author is permitting Valmont to redeem himself on his deathbed. Declaring that he never would have known happiness if he had not known her, he confesses his love for Madame de Tourvel, prior to which had been too painful for him to admit even to himself. In The Princess of Cl ves, despite the sentimental attachment to the morals her mother instilled in Madame de Cl ves, her husband becomes ill with fever at the mere idea that his virtuous wife might be unfaithful to him. Since he was “robbed of the love and esteem [he] felt for [her]” (148), these thoughts eat away at him so much that he quietly dies of a broken heart.

The Princess of Cl ves is more of a romantic love story than Dangerous Liaisons. The characters in de La Fayette’s novel are seeking a mutually passionate relationship. Her ideal marriage involves partners who are truly in love with each other during a time when the only romances were usually adulterous romances. The idea of wedded bliss was an almost unheard of concept in the sixteenth and seventeenth century French reality, where “love was always mingled with politics, and politics with love” (78). Yet Monsieur de Cl ves futilely hopes his princess would grow to love him, as does the Duke de Nemours. In Dangerous Liaisons, however, the characters of Valmont and Marquise de Merceuil are scheming, malicious creatures solely interested in the control over people their sexual conquests could procure. The three main characters of de La Fayette’s novel are well intentioned and gentle. While the Duke de Nemours is profoundly upset if he inadvertently offends Madame de Cl ves, Valmont seems to intentionally antagonize Madame de Tourvel, if only to see exactly how much he can get away with and still have her want associate with him. Valmont finally triumphs over the morals of Tourvel, boasting the physical victory of his “greatest challenge” to the Marquise, but the extent of eroticism in The Princess of Cl ves is the simple, innocent act of gazing at a portrait of the beloved one, or perhaps the slightly more dangerous exploit of making eye contact across a room. Although more was desired, this passive attitude is much more typical of a female author than the dangerous, powerful physical seductions that occur in Dangerous Liaisons.

Perhaps the most obvious clue revealing the genders of the authors is given away by the ultimate decisions made by the Princess of Cl ves and Madame de Tourvel. De La Fayette preserves the honesty and unfaltering virtue of her heroine by the princess’s unwillingness to submit to her desires. Because it would compromise her principles, she denies herself the happiness of true love in order to remain faithful to her husband, even after his death, and lives a long and honorable life. In Dangerous Liaisons, Madame Tourvel falls prey to Valmont’s evil plan, physically and emotionally giving herself to a man who does not even respect her, and her husband is merely away on business. De Laclos does not establish a heroine in his novel, and certainly if there was any hero at all, it would have to be the scandalous Valmont, who manages to regain a shred of human decency as he dies. The male perspective of Dangerous Liaisons depicts the female as a weak figure who cannot retain her values under emotional pressure and physical temptation, and eventually dies because of this, and illustrates a powerful man (albeit wicked nonetheless) who dominates women for his personal advantage. De La Fayette’s unwavering standards of how a righteous female should behave are readily apparent in her work, as the princess proudly but politely declares in her ultimate t te- -t te with the duke, “You have seen that my feelings did not guide my actions” (154).

The genders of the authors of both stories play a key role in the development of the plots and the inevitable fates of their characters. The subtle chauvinistic prejudices with which the authors treat their protagonists allow the reader sympathetic feelings towards these characters, despite their imperfections. The wicked Marquise of Dangerous Liaisons explains to a na ve Cecile de Volanges that women can have affairs with as many men as they like, whenever they like, however they like, so long as they take the necessary precautions. She paints another ruthless picture of herself for Valmont as she reveals how she “created” herself. De La Fayette justifies Madame de Cl ves’s need to protect herself and remain chaste as her mother warns her “how insincere men are, how false and deceitful” (76). With such presumptuous statements about the opposite sex, it is almost impossible for the authors to keep their genders unknown.