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Playing the Game of Frivolity: Seventeenth-Century *Conteuses* and the Transformation of Female Identity

Anne-Marie Feat

When Marie-Catherine d'Aulnoy published the first literary fairy tale of the French tradition in 1690 with the interpolated tale "L'île de la Félicité" in her novel *L'Histoire d'Hypolite, comte de Duglas,* she did more than introduce the fairy tale as a literary genre; she also pioneered a new publication technique combining novel and tales that would soon become prevalent in France. More than thirteen authors, many of them women, contributed to this literary trend from 1690 to 1715.[1] Seventeenth-century France, as a result, has often been considered what Carolyn Lougee called in the title of her 1976 book on salon culture "Le Paradis des Femmes." Scholars such as Faith Beasley and Benedetta Craveri see in the salon the site of women's fostering of their creative and intellectual development. The writing and sharing of fairy tales was a preeminent feature of these salons, and tales were meant to translate noble taste and the ideals of *mondain* culture into literary form. Elizabeth Wanning Harries, in her article "Fairy Tales about Fairy Tales," stresses the preeminence of aristocratic women writers as the "original" fairy-tale writers (153). And France was, as Joan DeJean points out in *Tender Geographies,* the only country where "the written transcription of fairy tales was not totally controlled by men" (233). As a result, most of the studies about seventeenth-century *contes* have focused on "the practice of writing fairy tales [as] an exercise in freedom" (Jones 56), since this new literary genre allowed women "to challenge those restricted options of plot through the exercise of the right to phantasize contracted in the practice of the fairy tale as genre" (Farrell 52). As Louis XIV

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attempted to subordinate art and literature to his official ideology, through his numerous *Académies,* literary fairy tales written at the end of the seventeenth century often indeed carried subversive messages behind their simple appearance. Despite the subversive nature of the fairy-tale genre as a whole in terms of politics and the representation of authority, I argue, however, that women-written ones are subversive in a different way. Framing narratives functioned as clandestine signals of women writers attempting to reclaim the voice that society from Boileau to Perrault himself was hoping to suppress.

This article proposes to challenge the usual conception of seventeenth-century *contes* as either the transcription of folk oral tales or as a mere game for eloquent, learned *précieuses.* I hope to show that behind the staging of storytelling as a *mondain* entertainment,[2] the storytellers' "politics of frivolity" subverted critiques leveled at women writers by redefining the terms of aesthetic value. The results often are parodies of the very genre that women writers have initially helped popularize. These parodies reflect attempts at creating a new powerful authorial feminine persona highlighting a new form of female solidarity. The relationships articulated in the *contes* form a model of "matrilinear" mentoring and mutual admiration that are the basis for understanding a new form of female creativity based on a kind of learned—but also relational—eloquence.

As Faith Beasley's work on French salons, *Salons, History, and the Creation of Seventeenth-Century France: Mastering Memory* (2006), has shown, the eighteenth-century salon has overshadowed our collective understanding of seventeenth-century salons. In the seventeenth-century salon, women enjoyed far greater autonomy and agency than their successors, whose main role was that of hostess. The greater autonomy gave a form of public voice to aristocratic ladies. The salon not only authorized and staged female conversation; it also functioned as a site of exemplary female engagement. The seventeenth-century salon was a female-controlled environment, and such scholars as Carolyn Lougee and Joan DeJean have also shown that salon women, though often married, did not favor their roles as wives and mothers and were opposed to the

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compulsory connection of womanhood with family duty. Within this feminocentric space, there was a new goal: to celebrate exemplary women and craft a new model of female discourse.

Many studies of seventeenth-century tales concentrate on the salons as feminocentric alternatives to Versailles. Anne Duggan emphasizes, for instance, in her study of the link between French opera and fairy tales, "the greatness of so many alternative, salon-like Versailles, and, by extension, that of *mondain* women" (Duggan 307). But this overly idealized image of women's salons as peaceful alternate realities to the abusive hegemony of Louis XIV's culture needs to be slightly nuanced. The end of the seventeenth century shows a shift in salons' structure and interests. And while *précieux* topics and style are still apparent in many *contes,* writers such as d'Aulnoy often poked fun at them as well as at the salons themselves—suggesting new forms of solidarity and alternate sources of power for salon women who had, by the end of the seventeenth century, been time and time again ridiculed.

Fairy tales of the late seventeenth century are often linked to the modernist tradition of the famous *Querelle des Anciens et des Modernes*. Author and theorist of the genre, Marie-Jeanne L'héritier de Villandon, connects her work to a new national tradition when she addresses her tale "Les enchantements de l'éloquence" (1696) to the Duchesse d'Epernon: "Contes pour contes, il me paraît que ceux de l'antiquité gauloise valent bien à peu près ceux de l'antiquité grecque, et les Fées ne sont pas moins en droit de faire des prodiges que les dieux de la fable" ("When comparing tales with tales, it seems to me that those of ancient Gaul are as worthy as those of ancient Greece and that the Fairies are no less entitled to do wonders than gods of the fable"; L'héritier 227).[3] This connection to the "antiquité gauloise" should not be mistaken, however, for a real praise of the French folk patrimony. Bernard Magné in his thesis *Crise de la littérature française sous Louis XIV,* shows that this lineage is questionable and that claims of national origins mostly meant to legitimate a new form of literature. Apart from Charles Perrault perhaps, when fairy-tale writers mentioned folk origins, it was usually with contempt and derogatory comments: the narrator

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of d'Aulnoy's *conte* "Fortunée" mentions, for instance, the folk origins of Lucile's story but praises the storyteller for being able to make an enjoyable tale out of "sterile" "bagatelles":

> Lorsque Lucile eut fini sa romance, Juana et ses nièces la remercièrent du plaisir qu'elle leur avait fait :
>
> _ La délicatesse de votre esprit paraît en toutes choses, lui dirent-elles, et jusqu'à un petit conte, qui est de soi fort stérile, vous l'avez fait valoir infiniment.
>
> _ Il est vrai, ajoute Don Louis, qu'il est des génies brillants, qui tirent tout de l'obscurité et qui font valoir les moindres bagatelles. (*Contes* I: 419)
>
> [When Lucile had concluded her romance, Juana and her nieces thanked her for the pleasure she had caused them:
>
> _ The delicate nature of your mind is apparent in all things, they told her, and even a small tale, which is in itself very sterile, you have managed to improve.
>
> _ It's true, Don Louis added, that there are brilliant geniuses who can move everything out of obscurity and who improved the lesser trifles.]

Frame narratives often give us insight on the status of storytelling and writing in the period. Narrators in d'Aulnoy's frame narratives thus frequently mention the supposedly naïve and childish dimension of Mother Goose tales. While Perrault praises the latter in his introduction to his collection, d'Aulnoy and L'héritier seem to belong to another, more aristocratic and *mondain* school: the salons. Their tales reflect this *mondain* origin in many ways. The characters painted positively in *contes* tend to be aristocrats, and the recurrent topics are the popular ones in *précieux* salons such as luxury and love. Even when placed in rural settings, d'Aulnoy's and L'héritier's characters are closer to Versailles and Parisian *précieuses* than any popular folk characters. Peasants—when attractive—almost always

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are princes and princesses in disguise: the young peasant girl at the beginning of d'Aulnoy's "Fortunée," for instance, is described in a positive light and surprises onlookers with her gracious manner (*Contes* I: 409-10).

Similarly, Henriette-Julie de Castelnau de Murat tries to distance her characters from "lowly" peasant ones when she stresses their difference in her "Dédicaces aux fées modernes" in *Les Histoires sublimes et allégoriques* (1699):

> Les anciennes fées, vos devancières, ne passent plus que pour des badines auprès de vous. Leurs occupations étaient basses et puériles, ne s'amusant qu'aux servantes et aux nourrices [. . .]. C'est pourquoi tout ce qui nous reste de leurs faits et gestes ne sont que des contes de ma mère l'Oye. Elles étaient presque toujours vieilles, laides, mal vêtues et mal logées [. . .]. Mais pour vous, Mesdames, vous avez bien pris une autre route : vous ne vous occupez que de grandes choses, dont les moindres sont de donner de l'esprit à ceux et celles qui n'en ont point, de la beauté aux laides, de l'éloquence aux ignorants, des richesses aux pauvres et de l'éclat aux choses les plus obscures. Vous êtes toutes belles, jeunes, bien faites, galamment et richement vêtues et logées, et vous n'habitez que dans la Cour des rois ou dans les palais enchantés. (Murat 2-5)
>
> [The ancient fairies, your predecessors, are fools compared to you. Their occupations were low and childish and only entertaining to maids and nannies. That's why all we have left of them are the Mother Goose's tales. They almost always were old, ugly, poorly dressed and poorly housed. But you, Ladies, you have taken another path. You are only interested in big things—the smallest of which are to give wit to those who don't have it, beauty to the unattractive, eloquence to the ignorants, riches to the poor, and light to the darkest things. You are all beautiful, young, agreeable, gallantly and richly dressed and housed, and you only live in the court of kings or in enchanted palaces.]

Seventeenth-century *contes* thus reflect the *précieux* salons' culture—with "la Cour des rois" and the "palais enchantés"—and salons' aspirations to some extent. While we often see contemporary fairy tales as meant for children's entertainment, seventeenth-century tales were meant for a privileged—adult—audience. Their characters are not described in a realistic way. Rather, they tend

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to reflect social and class prejudices; a world where, even when they look like peasants, aristocratic ladies are meant to have social authority: "il suffisait de la voir pour juger qu'elle était plus faite pour commander que pour obéir" ("It was sufficient to see her to be satisfied that she was more fit to command than to obey"; D'Aulnoy, *Contes* II: 30; D'Aulnoy and Planché 354). Aristocrats in d'Aulnoy's and L'héritier's *contes* are beautiful and polite, and the few true peasant characters—mostly intended as foils for the protagonists—usually are unfortunate-looking, rude, and amoral, such as Bedou in d'Aulnoy's "Fortunée." Beauty, merit, and *esprit* here are the seventeenth-century salons' ideals—physically, morally, and intellectually. In a sense, as Raymonde Robert pointed out, the world of fairy tales functions as a mirror for a social group in quest of identity (383-84).

The frame-narrative that is d'Aulnoy's *Nouveau Gentilhomme Bourgeois* sets the action in a room where *précieuses* and idle aristocrats converge to entertain La Dandinardière and take his mind off his injury. Even though d'Aulnoy's characters read tales that they have previously written down—the intellectual and creative dimension being emphasized in the numerous references to their "cahier"—exchanging stories to entertain a bedridden friend is here as well mostly presented as a way to pass the time. The salons were "not seen as places where writing is fostered or even seriously critiqued, but where manners are formed" (Beasley 3). This light-hearted dimension was to be reflected in the style of the *contes*. Frame narratives often contain discussions among the characters about creating and telling *contes*. Mélanie, one of the main female characters in d'Aulnoy's *Don Gabriel Ponce de Leon,* discusses for instance the "appropriate" style for "romances": "Il me semble [. . .] qu'il ne faut les rendre ni ampoulés ni rampants, qu'ils doivent tenir un milieu qui soit plus enjoué que sérieux, qu'il y faut un peu de morale et surtout les proposer comme une bagatelle où l'auditeur a seul droit de mettre le prix" ("It seems to me that they should be neither ostentatious nor vulgar, a middle ground which would be more amusing than serious, they need a little morals and especially they should be offered as a trifle on which the reader only can put a

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price"; D'Aulnoy, *Contes* I: 362). This idea of "bagatelle" is recurrent in narrators' and authors' comments about fairy tales. If telling tales was just a salon game, then composing them could not be seen as any kind of work—the rejection of the notion of work actually being another example of the aristocratic nature of the storytellers, keen to distance themselves from professional writers whose social status was bleak at the time. Frame narratives of women's tales especially stage the act of storytelling as a social game and the tale itself as a mere "bagatelle." One of the most frequent claims in the prefatory texts by *conteuses* seems clearly dismissive of their work: it is "mediocre" (Murat, "Avertissement"), "feeble and not well done" (Murat, "Aux Fées Modernes"), or poorly written: "une plume aussi faible que la mienne" (D'Aulnoy, qtd. in Jones 57). Narrators constantly declare the poor quality of their texts, and some of the writers themselves deliberately cultivated that image when it came to their reputation. Madame de Murat, for instance, notes that Madame d'Aulnoy never worked hard at composing but only seemed to give in to easy inspiration: "Elle écrivait comme je fais par fantaisie, au milieu et au bruit de mille gens qui venaient chez elle, et elle ne donnait d'application à ses ouvrages qu'autant que cela la divertissait" ("She wrote, as I do, by fancy, amidst the noise of a thousand people who were visiting her, and she only concentrated on her books as long as she found it entertaining"; qtd. in Storer 24).

This representation of a woman only entertained by childish "bagatelles" and seemingly incapable of serious work is one of the main stereotypes women writers had to face in seventeenth-century France. Both "friends" and "enemies" of the woman writer then agreed to praise her "natural" and her naïve mind. In such a context, the allegedly "childish" genre of fairy tales allowed women writers the opportunity to embody—and transform from the inside—the notion of the "natural" and frivolous woman. The prevalence of such dismissive claims in a difficult context suggests that by insisting on the supposed mediocrity of their work, the *conteuses* were actually reclaiming a rhetoric that had, so far, been used against them. While mainstream culture demeaned women's writing as frivolous

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and trivial (Schacker), frivolity itself soon became an aesthetic principle in their texts. Seventeenth-century women writers faced much opposition to their intellectual and artistic efforts, but these dismissive claims suggest that somehow *conteuses* had come to terms with the notion that their texts would not be considered "significant or edifying in a traditional sense. Instead, they recast notions of frivolity and triviality, reclaiming a charged discourse that had long been used against women tellers and innovative thinkers" (Jones 58).

This "charged discourse" criticized both the "ignorance" of women and their knowledge. La Bruyère attributed female ignorance to explained female ignorance by women's physical inability to concentrate on serious studies (La Bruyère and Benda 121-22). Contrarily, many female heroines in female-authored *contes* are presented as avid, intellectual readers. The main protagonist in L'héritier's *Les Enchantements de l'éloquence* is, for instance, a keen reader. The tale is about a young lady, Blanche, who, after her mother's passing, has fallen on hard times when her father remarries a rich—but difficult—bourgeois stepmother. The latter dotes on her own daughter while exploiting the sweet and polite young Blanche. When she is not doing menial housework, Blanche has a passion for books—a trait that makes her resemble many seventeenth-century *mondaines*—and spends all of her spare time reading, even at the expense of her sleep:

> Elle amassa un grand nombre de romans ; je ne sais de quelle manière [. . .] Mais quoiqu'il fallût retrancher de son sommeil pour avoir le temps de lire, cela ne l'empêchait pas: elle croyait se reposer en lisant, et quand elle pouvait dérober de jour quelques moments, elle retournait avec empressement à ses livres. (L'héritier 178-79)
>
> [She collected a large quantity of novels; I am not sure how. And even though she had to forgo sleep in order to have time to read them, it did not stop her: she believed she was resting when she read and when she could steal a few moments in daylight, she quickly returned to her books.]

As a result of her reading, Blanche's natural inclinations toward

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politeness and intellectual pursuits[4] have made her an unusually eloquent young lady (L'héritier 185). Similarly, Charlotte-Rose de Caumont de La Force's fairies are not "naturally" magical but rather rely on the study of books to transmit their knowledge, "ce qui suggèrent que le pouvoir des fées résulte d'une étude sérieuse et non de dons" ("which suggests that the fairies's power was the result of serious studying rather than of gifts"; Souloumiac 53).

This knowledge had however, by the end of the seventeenth century—with Molière's 1659 *Les Précieuses Ridicules* and his 1672 *Femmes Savantes*—become objects of popular ridicule. *La Querelle des femmes,* with its two leaders, Boileau (and his *Satire X*) and Perrault (*L'Apologie des Femmes*), meant that seventeenth-century *conteuses* were immersed in the controversial philosophical and social debates over woman's nature. Charles Perrault, despite his writing of *L'Apologie des femmes* (1694), joins "the other side" with the notion that knowledge and intellectual life have a negative impact on women. In his tale "Griselidis" (also published in 1694), Parisian women are mocked for being unable to control their intellectual passions: they are excessive and irrational when it comes to intellectual topics:

> L'une d'humeur chagrine, et que rien ne récrée,
> Devient une Dévote outrée,
> Qui crie et gronde à tous moments;
> [. . .]
> Celle-ci des Beaux Arts follement curieuse,
> De tout décide avec hauteur,
> Et critiquant le plus habile Auteur,
> Prend la forme de Précieuse. (Perrault 185)
>
> [One morose, and not finding anything amusing
> Becomes an outraged bigot,
> Who screams and growls all the time;
> [. . .]
> This one is wildly curious about Fine Arts,
> She makes every decision haughtily,
> And criticizing the most able of authors,
> She takes the form of a *Précieuse.*]

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Their loss of self-control—their "esprit d'orgueil enivré" ("mind drunk with pride"; Perrault 183)—in the public sphere, their excessive and frivolous activity, lead the prince to long for a "natural" woman, which, for him, equates to a young woman with no will of her own. The protagonist's ideal woman is embodied by a young shepherdess, Griselidis, who engages in domestic activities such as spinning and watching over her flock and is willing to submit her will to that of her husband: "Il faudrait me jurer que vous n'aurez jamais / D'autre volonté que la mienne" ("You must swear to me that you will never have a will apart from my own"; Perrault 193-94). This divide between "cultured" and "natural" women also appears in the choice of narrators in the tales. Whether written by men or by women, most fairy tales still featured a female narrator. Mother Goose's tales—popularized by Charles Perrault—often presented a simple peasant nursemaid seemingly passing on to her young charges the ancient stories inherited from folk tradition. In doing so, she was speaking—not writing—whereas most female narrators in female-authored texts tend to equate writing and reading with power and socioeconomic advancement. When Perrault appropriates a female voice—that of the elderly peasant nurse—in his tales, he presents his stories as fundamentally "feminine" endeavors. Perrault's texts as a result undercut the authorial status of his contemporary female fairy-tale writers as they reinforce the stereotypes of women as incapable of writing. In their introduction to *The Madwoman in the Attic,* Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar note that culture and literature have connected to make women passive objects rather than active participants in literary endeavors. Charles Perrault's female narrators certainly exemplify such attempts to suppress the female authorial voice while pretending to praise a characterological one. Perrault's narrative cross-dressing, rather than praising the female distinctive voice, further discredits his fellow *conteuses.* Perrault's tales were not about *mondain* culture, since he kept insisting on the—alleged—folk origin of his stories. And even to this day, "it is widely assumed that French fairy tales originated in oral compositions told by peasant storytellers and that those peasants transmitted their tales to upper-class authors via peasant nursemaids resident in upper-

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class households" (Bottigheimer 18). Female servants—originating from the peasantry—seemed the perfect link between the peasants and the aristocrats. However, Bottigheimer's study has shown that the image of the simple nursemaid passing on oral lore while wet-nursing upper-class babies is nothing but a myth, since wet-nursing meant that the wealthy sent their infants to the countryside to be cared for for several years by peasant women; female nursemaids therefore were not present in aristocratic households. That is not to say that no one told stories to French children, but Bottigheimer goes on to point out that storytellers, while indeed probably female (a mother, a grandmother, possibly an unmarried aunt), were most likely educated women, passing on the stories they had read in collections such as Straparola's: "Historical evidence points in the direction of real print rather than imagined nursemaids as the precise route of fairy-tales' journey from their documented beginnings in northern Italy to their adoption in France" (Bottigheimer 20).[5] In insisting on the peasant origin of his female storyteller, Perrault thus created an illusion of "folklorality," suggesting that he was only transcribing stories that had been handed down from nursemaid to children for hundreds of years; as if he were simply "putting into print" a long-standing spoken tradition. Jack Zipes argues in *The Rise of the French Fairy Tale and the Decline of France,* however, that Perrault's appropriation of a women's genre and folk style was in service of a dominant patriarchal ideology. Perrault's Mother Goose[6] is decidedly unsophisticated, and the association of old women's tales with ignorance and foolishness has been commonplace since Antiquity, as Marina Warner stresses in *From the Beast to the Blonde.*[7] As a result, the tradition seems to be that uneducated women "tell" stories they have heard from their ancestors, while men "write" these stories down (Verdier 482)—such a notion devaluing the authority of the female teller—since she is not the actual "author" of the story but is just repeating what she has heard before. As a consequence, having attributed this voice to a woman, the male-authored narrator reclaims for himself the controlling power of literary creation. T. S. Eliot, in "The Three Voices of Poetry," describes the special bond between an author and his or her their narrator—a bond that

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is, according to Eliot, not necessarily restricted by age, gender, or personality (93-94). With this claim, Eliot creates a gender-neutral—or perhaps more appropriately a male—category collapsing the "cultural construction of gender as a category that distinguishes and divides [. . .] making persona virtually synonymous with the Eliotic definition of the 'third voice,' the poet's speaking through a dramatic character" (Harvey 3). Perrault's use of female narrator pretends to reproduce a female voice, but this appropriation is motivated by his own purpose. This contributes as well to the recurrent representation of women as unable to write: "The story teller is female, but the story writer is male" (Harries, "Simulating Oralities 111"). Perrault's use of the female peasant narrator thus undercuts the status of female authority and consequently his contemporary *conteuses.*

Women writers, however, match this alleged "feminine essence" with subverted writing. Most prefatory texts place a great emphasis on attempting to imitate natural expression, since "the teller of the tale was to make it 'seem' as though the tales were made upon the spot and did not follow prescribed rules" (Zipes, "Origins" 21). This emphasis on simple speech is linked to "a discursive register associated with a conversational but sophisticated 'naturalness of expression'" (Schacker 386). As Lewis Seifert explains in his 1991 study, *Tales of Difference,* writers of this era referred to this style as "naiveté, simplicité, and enjouement, all [of which] reflect the 17th century esthetic ideal of negligence—a refinement designed to give the appearance of being innate, effortless, and aristocratic" (185). This aesthetic of "Négligence" was thus viewed as an artistic achievement. Admittedly, Perrault may, to some extent, have shared this "esthétique de la négligence" with his female counterparts; but the *conteuses* offered distinctive interpretations of the "négligent" aesthetics. Storytelling for them was not about pretending to repeat the naïve stories of simple folks; rather it was a true cultural event, and the appearance of simplicity in the style actually was "a constructed and carefully pruned version of actual speech" (Harries, "Simulating Oralities" 108). In adopting this appearance of simplicity, female narrators in frame narratives can be connected with Madeleine de Scudéry's Sapho, who insists that naivety and "natural" sensibilities

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in women are not the result of ignorance but rather the opposite:

> Ce n'est pas que celle qu'on n'appellera point savante, ne puisse savoir autant et plus de choses que celle à qui on donnera ce terrible nom : mais c'est qu'elle se sait mieux servir de son esprit, et qu'elle sait cacher adroitement ce que l'autre montre mal à propos.
>
> [It isn't that a lady who is not called learned may not know many things, more things perhaps than she who is branded with that terrible name, but the woman I describe knows how to use her mind, she knows how to hide her wit cleverly, not to display it tastelessly] (Scudéry 44-45).

For Sapho, the ideal scholarly woman is a woman who is not only learned in facts but also learned in how to hide this knowledge. The ideal woman knows not only what to learn but, more importantly, how to hide her learning. Mainil, concentrating on d'Aulnoy, dubs this kind of writing "a seditious ironic fairy writing" with respect to both its genre and the content of the tales (220). For Mainil, irony plays itself out in d'Aulnoy's *contes* both intratextually (in the tale's relation to the frame-narrative), and intertextually (in the parody of source texts). For instance, in d'Aulnoy's first published tale, "L'île de la Félicité," d'Aulnoy's irony plays itself in the relation of the tale to the novel in which it is enunciated, *L'Histoire d'Hypolite, comte de Duglas* (1690). The tale is told by the protagonist, Hypolite, who is trying to trick the abbess of the convent in which his beloved Julie is confined. For his plan to work, he must entertain the abbess but guesses that the latter may not respond well to the happy ending of a love story. He thus tells her a story that concludes with the death of the hero—which contrasts with the novel ending happily in the reunion of the lovers.

Humor is also present in the tales themselves. Another of d'Aulnoy's tales, "Chatte Blanche," is set in a cat wonderland, the use of animals heightening the satiric effect of the representation of aristocratic activities. In this tale, there is a hunt the master of which is a monkey who brings the white cat an eagle's nest so that she can "disposer à sa volonté des petites altesses aiglonnes" ("[have] at her mercy their little highnesses the eaglets"; *Contes* II: 172; D'Aulnoy and Planché 440). When the young hero returns on his third quest,

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Chatte Blanche orders a naval battle between her cats and some neighboring rats. The rats seem to be in the lead until the admiral makes a decisive move: "Minagrobis, amiral de la flotte chatonnique, réduisit la gent ratonnienne dans le dernier désespoir. Il mangea à belles dents le général de leur flotte" ("Minagrobis, admiral of the feline fleet, reduced the rattish race to the greatest despair. He devoured the general of their forces"; *Contes* II: 183; D'Aulnoy and Planché 449). Adjectives such "chatonnique" and "ratonnienne" add to the satiric effect of the whole war. The choice to emphasize the animal nature of the characters sets d'Aulnoy's apart from the salon tradition. As Linda Timmermans has shown, Jacques Olivier's *L'alphabet de l'imperfection et malice des femmes* (1617) defined women as *Bestiale barathrum,* literally an "abyss of stupidity" (Timmermans 244). Misogynous writers repeatedly linked women with animals in order to explain their lack of reason and justify their domination by men. Salon women embraced a philosophy that allowed them to distance themselves from the "animal" nature of their bodies. Although d'Aulnoy can be situated within the trend of salons' *précieuses,* her repeated staging of women-as-animals and her frequent mentions of "crude" events also distinguish her from this trend. Her parody of usual *précieux* topics and plots suggests a growing distance from the idealized salon culture. Similarly, d'Aulnoy's "La Princesse Printanière" displays an unsophisticated, almost puerile, style. Young characters are called "poupards" (*Contes* I: 160) and play with "joujoux" (160). Princesse Rosette, in d'Aulnoy's eponymous tale, has been thrown at sea during the night, and feeling her wet bed childishly fears being scolded: "sentant de l'eau, elle eut peur d'avoir fait pipi au dodo et d'être grondée" ("Feeling the water, she was afraid of having wet her bed and of being scolded"; *Contes* I: 194). She also has a—green—dog, who, like in a children's book, speaks by "onomatopées."[8] While most *salonnières* try to distance themselves from crude "natural" events, d'Aulnoy seems here to embrace them.

D'Aulnoy's narrators subvert expectations about style but also form: the author pokes fun at her characters when she stresses the clumsiness of her heroine in *L'Oranger et l'Abeille.* As the

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two main characters are running away from the ogre, the narrator interrupts:

> Hélas! quel moyen d'aller assez vite pour se garantir d'un tel coureur ? On s'étonnera qu'avec la baguette d'ivoire ils n'allaient pas encore plus vite que lui. Mais la belle princesse était bien neuve dans l'art de féerie : elle ne savait pas tout ce qu'elle pouvait faire avec une telle baguette, et il n'y avait que les grandes extrémités qui pussent lui donner des lumières tout d'un coup. (*Contes* I: 263-64)
>
> [Alas! How was it possible to fly fast enough to escape from such a runner? You may be surprised that with the ivory wand they did not go faster than he did; but the beautiful Princess was a novice in Fairy art; she knew not all she could do with such a wand; and it was only in extreme cases that a sudden light broke upon her. (D'Aulnoy and Planché 187-88)]

This humor can be read as a form of distancing, which can also be seen in d'Aulnoy's refusal to abide by the usual "happy ending" of fairy tales. In "Le Nain Jaune," the protagonist seems well on the path of the happily ever after. He has surmounted all the obstacles with the magical sword when he suddenly drops it—only for Le Nain Jaune, who is hiding under some lettuce, to grab it and kill him and the princess (*Contes* I: 508-9). Similarly, in "Le Mouton," the beautiful princess falls in love with le Mouton, and her love should be able to transcend his beastly appearance. However, upon her return to her father's kingdom, she forgets her promise to meet with le Mouton again. The latter tries to visit her and is refused entrance into the kingdom and dies by the city's entrance—all because of the princess's tardiness (*Contes* I: 345).

Usual fairy-tale conventions are subverted in d'Aulnoy's tales—suggesting a parody of the genre. This redefinition of the genre makes the *contes de fées* part of a "highly self-conscious, self-reflexive literary genre" (Stedman 108), a genre that marks the transition between oral and print culture. Despite the variety of content, in strengthening the position of the female storyteller/writer, the *conteuses* "were the first women in the literary history of Western prose fiction to present feminist ideas, to articulate a

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women's viewpoint, which they cast in opposition to the dominant ideological voice of misogyny" (Donovan 947). Seventeenth-century tales by *conteuses* thus suggest the creation of a new, more powerful creative female identity. Analyses of the difference between Perrault's and d'Aulnoy's frontispieces (Verdier, Harries, Jones) show that the *conteuses* framed their tales as an aristocratic educated endeavor, while Perrault was surrounding his own tales with elements supposed to point to their humble folk origins. Whereas Perrault's storyteller is represented as a peasant nurse telling a story to children, d'Aulnoy's storyteller reminds us more of a scholar with her book and her glasses. The emphasis is placed on her reading, as "her mouth is closed, so there is no clear indication that she is reading to the two children standing with her, but the glasses signify that if she were to tell a story, she would read it" (Verdier 486). She does have an audience and is to that extent similar to Perrault's storyteller, but she is mostly presented as a reader and, potentially, a writer, embodying a new model of femininity: the one who creates her own stories. D'Aulnoy's frontispiece thus suggests the possibility of a more powerful authorial female figure. This strengthening of an educated female identity is also linked to the strengthening of the female characters' position in these tales. In her first fairy tale, "L'île de la Félicité," d'Aulnoy creates a female-centered world, strangely reminiscent of Versailles, but a "carnivalesque, feminocentric" version of it. The beautiful gardens and countless rooms lead Adolphe to the "souveraine," who is sitting on an impressive throne, described using many references to the Sun, also reminiscent of Louis XIV's rhetoric. This is not to say that "L'île de la Félicité" is necessarily trying to reinstate the elitist salon structure of the earlier seventeenth century. Rather, I argue that it suggests the evolution from a collective private endeavor—the salons—to an individual quest for sociocultural power.

D'Aulnoy's *Le Nouveau Gentilhomme Bourgeois* questions these elitist salons—which, according to Raymonde Robert, d'Aulnoy was trying to legitimate in her tales. The protagonist is a foolish bourgeois, visited by a wide variety of ridiculous *précieux* characters. In this frame-narrative, d'Aulnoy parodies the condition

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of her tales' production, which brings Jean Mainil to reject Raymonde Robert's claim that d'Aulnoy wrote her *contes* in order to legitimate an elite group of storytellers. Instead, d'Aulnoy's tales suggest a new form of female solidarity, individual rather than collective, and, most especially, without men. The myth of a country forbidden to men appears in many stories, such as d'Aulnoy's "Le Prince Lutin."[9] The fairies are able to escape male domination until the princess's mother upsets the social order when she falls for a "certain prince" (*Contes* I: 132). Love for this man causes an imbalance in the social order. Eventually, the prince tires of the mother as "il était naturellement opiniâtre et libertin" ("He was naturally stubborn and libertine"; *Contes* I: 132). This betrayal prompts the restoration of the initial order: the disappointed mother recreates a feminocentric kingdom where men are forever banned:

> Dès qu'elle fut de retour, elle transporta son palais, elle en chassa les gardes et les officiers ; elle prit des femmes de race d'Amazones, elle les envoya autour de son île pour y faire une garde exacte, afin qu'aucun homme n'y pût entrer. Elle nomma ce lieu d'Ile des Plaisirs tranquilles : elle disait toujours qu'on n'en pouvait avoir de véritables, quand on faisait quelque société avec les hommes. Elle éleva sa fille dans cette opinion. (*Contes* I: 133)
>
> [The moment she reached home, she transported her palace to an island; turning out of it all the guards and officers, and taking into her service women of the Amazonian race,—whom she set to watch the shores of the island so strictly that no man could possibly enter it. She named this spot the Isle of Peaceful Pleasures, asserting constantly, that it was impossible to enjoy such in the society of the male sex. She brought up her daughter in this opinion. (D'Aulnoy and Planché 84-85)]

The individual female quest for identity in women-written *contes* suggests a new form of female solidarity. While men are kept at bay (on those female islands), older women take on the mentoring of younger women, intellectually but also sexually, as in Mlle de La Force's tales, which frequently mention lesbianism. In "Plus belle que Fée" (1698),[10] for instance, the fairy and her protégée "s'endorment après un entretien assez long qu'elles interrompaient agréablement

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par les charmantes caresses qu'elles se faisaient" ("fall asleep after a lengthy discussion that they pleasantly interrupted by the charming caresses they gave each other"; La Force 26). Conversation plays a large part in their relationship. La Force's biographer thus notes that, "Chez Mlle de La Force, l'éros devient l'agent principal de développement psychologique et social de la femme" ("With Mlle de La Force, eros becomes the principal agent of psychological and social development of women"; Souloumiac 50).

In prefatory texts, narrators look for similar mentoring connections when addressing the intended recipients of the tales as well as when mentioning the "origins" of their story. The *conteuses* do not claim to be part of a folk heritage; rather they claim an almost matrilinear connection to medieval women storytellers. They also make great use of intertextual references and somehow have no compunction about paraphrasing contemporaries, if only to give a new take on their stories. Allison Stedman analyzes the epistolary component to these tales, dubbing this mix of the frame-narrative and the fairy tale a "fairy tale hybrid" situating the fairy tale in a specific intradiegetic context while also preparing the reader for a different type of literary experience (110). L'héritier's "Les Enchantements de l'éloquence" is framed by a letter to the Duchesse d'Epernon in which the narrator is particularly keen on distancing herself from the now considered "classic" tradition of the fairy tale, supposedly based on oral folktale. She claims instead a medieval heritage—"qui viennent apparemment en droite ligne des conteurs ou troubadours de Provence, si célèbres autrefois" ("which are apparently coming straight from the storytellers and troubadours of Provence, who were so famous once"; L'héritier 163-64)—and she wants to stress that "Les Enchantements de l'éloquence" is an altogether more elegant and educated affair than a mere "bagatelle." The narrator claims having heard the story, not from some nurse or hag, but rather from a scholarly lady:

> Une dame très instruite des antiquités grecques et romaines, et encore plus savante dans les antiquités gauloises, m'a fait ce conte quand j'étais enfant, pour m'imprimer dans l'esprit que les honnêtetés n'ont jamais

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> fait de tort à personne, ou, pour parler comme le vieux proverbe que beau parler n'écorche point langue. (L'héritier 164-65)
>
> [A lady, very knowledgeable in Greco-Roman antiquities, and even more knowledgeable in Gallic ones, told me this tale when I was a child, to impress upon me that civility has never harmed anyone, or, to use the old adage, that speaking - well does not flay the tongue.]

This mentoring creates strong relationships between women and allows them to assume positions of power: female characters in female-authored *contes* are powerful women in charge of politics and justice—among others. Chatte Blanche, for instance, in d'Aulnoy's eponymous tale, acts as an absolute sovereign, leading the hunt, and scaring the neighborhood mice (*Contes* II: 171). She upholds law and order in her kingdom and refuses to be intimidated by the old king, who does not want to give up his throne: "Seigneur, lui dit-elle, je ne suis pas venue pour vous arracher un trône que vous remplissez si dignement ; je suis née avec six royaumes : permettez que je vous en offre un et que j'en donne autant à chacun de vos fils" ("My Liege," she said to him, "I come not to deprive you of the throne you fill so worthily. I was born the heiress to six kingdoms; permit me to offer one to you, and to give one to each of your eldest sons"; *Contes* II: 207; D'Aulnoy and Planché 469).

Similarly, in frame narratives, female narrators, such as La Baronne in *Le Nouveau Gentilhomme Bourgeois,* connect intellectual knowledge—knowing Latin in this occurrence—with political power:

> Les femmes sont à présent aussi savantes que les hommes. Elles étudient et sont capables de tout. C'est trop de dommage qu'elles ne puissent être dans les charges : un Parlement composé de femmes serait la plus jolie chose du monde. (*Contes* II: 374)
>
> [Women are by now as knowledgeable as men. They study and are able to do anything. It is too bad that they cannot be in politics: a Parliament made of women would be the prettiest thing in the world.]

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These new powers are almost always linked to intellectual knowledge and eloquence. In recounting the story to entertain seventeenth-century ladies such as the Duchesse d'Epernon, L'héritier's narrator subverts the notion that fairy tales are only meant to be found in the nursery. This degree of cultural sophistication suggests a new form of female creativity—evident both in the tale itself and in its frame-narrative. The young heroine-turned-fairy becomes, in the light of the frame-narrative, a metaphor for a new figure of a woman writer, capable of "enchanting" her audience through literary creation. This first becomes evident when Blanche meets an educated gentleman while on an errand for her stepmother in the forest. The young gentleman is hunting and when chasing a wild boar somehow injures Blanche. Despite the injury, the young woman is so gracious and eloquent that she seems to cast a spell on him, and he falls silent in admiration (L'héritier 196-97). Blanche's command of language is so mesmerizing that the young prince decides to take her to see his fairy godmother. The latter attempts to heal Blanche's injury with a magical balm but is also soon charmed by Blanche's eloquence and decides to bestow a gift upon her:

> Dulcicula ne cessait point d'admirer en elle-même la douceur et les autres belles qualités qu'elle voyait jointes à tant de beauté, et cette admiration produisit un bon effet. La fée tenait un bâton sur quoi elle semblait s'appuyer; mais c'était la baguette enchantée dont elle se servait à faire tous les prodiges de son art. Elle toucha Blanche de cette baguette, comme par hasard, et lui fit un don d'être toujours plus que jamais douce, aimable, bienfaisante, et d'avoir la plus belle voix du monde. (L'héritier 207-8)
>
> [Dulcicula never ceased to admire the sweetness and the other fine qualities she saw attached to so much beauty, and this admiration had a good consequence. The fairy was holding a stick on which she seemed to be leaning; but it was the enchanted wand she used to do all the wonders of her art. She touched Blanche, as if by chance, with this wand and gave her the gift to be ever more gentle, kind, benevolent, and to have the most beautiful voice in the world.]

This gift makes Blanche's eloquence even more appealing, and

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the pattern of older, more experienced women helping Blanche improve her natural abilities starts to emerge. This "guiding" by the Prince's fairy godmother also suggests a departure from the *mondains* salons' models of group discussions and the apparition of a more individualized "tutoring" model. This pattern is particularly evident when, on the following day, the young lady meets the fairy Eloquentia Nativa herself while out on another errand in the forest. The fairy is also soon charmed by Blanche's words and gives her another "Don," that of having precious jewels falling from her mouth whenever she uses her eloquence (L'héritier 214-15).

This pattern of older women helping Blanche—but also learning from her—suggests a matrilinear fashion which would create an alternate reality to that of Perrault's tales; a new realm where women could be strong, powerful intellectuals, "thus enabling the reader to better identify the fairies of today—in this case, 'modern fairies' like the women writers of the late seventeenth-century *mondain* literary community" (Stedman 118). In writing artful *contes,* seventeenth-century women writers create a new take on the fairy-tale genre and also create a new form of feminine authorial persona, succeeding in the "poïetics" of the feminine.

While not necessarily "feminist" in the modern sense of the word, seventeenth-century women-authored fairy tales and their "techniques of camouflage" (Raynard)—such as pseudo-frivolous writing—incited fellow women to reflect on their own condition. Some of the most subversive examples tackled social codes and absolutism through a utopian impulse to create an "insula feminarum" in which women would finally hold political and cultural power. Immersed in the controversial philosophical and social debates over woman's nature, seventeenth-century French women writers made use of the relative "freedom" allowed in salon culture and what was then perceived as the frivolous "minor" literary genres of fairy tales and novels to craft new autonomous female identities. Masked as a form of light entertainment for aristocratic women, the practice of writing fairy tales became an indirect way for women to explore new forms of identity and to attain literary and social influence. In reclaiming for themselves cartesian subjectivity, and breaking with

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restrictive expectations regarding their place in society (Hannon 80-81), women writers were finally able to exercise their own voices and articulate their literary and social ambitions in a more autonomous way. Seventeenth-century women writing thus appears as a fertile ground for the apparition of a new autonomous feminine persona, contrasting with their representation in male-dominated writings and even in the fairy tales of fellow *Moderne* Charles Perrault. Seventeenth-century women authors' writing highlights the subversive potential of writing for women and, to this day, holds a special place in the evolving discourse of female identity at times of cultural transition.

Luther College

Notes

1. We can mention authors such as Marie-Catherine d'Aulnoy, Louise de Bossigny d'Auneuil, Catherine Bernard, Abbé Bignon, Abbé de Choisy, Catherine Bédacier Durand, Thomas-Simon Gueulette, Marie-Jeanne L'héritier, François-Augustin Paradis de Moncrif, Henriette-Julie de Murat, Eustache de St-Georges, Paul-François Nodot, and Charles Perrault as well as several anonymous writers.

2. Seventeenth-century accounts of the creation of tales link it to a game, a form of entertainment for idle aristocrats. As Madame de Sévigné pointed out in an August 1677 letter, *contes* were quite a popular pastime in Versailles. The verb "mitonner" she uses in her letter suggests trifling puttering; and the idea of entertainment also appears in La Fontaine's "Le Pouvoir des Fables."

3. Unless otherwise indicated, translations are my own.

4. "On ne peut pas nier que les romans bien faits n'apprennent le monde et la politesse du langage" ("One cannot deny that well-made novels teach about the world and language's politeness"; L'héritier 183).

5. Roger Chartier confirms this print origin of French fairy tales, linking the trend to the rise of the book trade in France (Chartier 98).

6. He did not, however, really invent Mother Goose—who can be found in the Italian literary tradition (Boccaccio, Basile, and Straparola).

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7. See especially page 47.

8. "Son petit chien, appelé Frétillon, qui était vert comme un perroquet, qui n'avait qu'une Oreille & qui dansait à ravir, allait devant elle, faisant jap, jap, jap, avec mille sauts & milles cabrioles" (D'Aulnoy, *Contes* I: 189).

9. This kingdom where men are banned also appears in d'Aulnoy's "L'Oranger et l'Abeille":

> Le bois où l'oranger était servait de promenade à une princesse qui demeurait dans un palais magnifique. Elle avait de la jeunesse, de la beauté et de l'esprit, on l'appelait Linda. Elle ne voulait point se marier, parce qu'elle craignait de n'être pas toujours aimée de celui qu'elle choisirait pour époux. Et comme elle avait de grands biens, elle fit bâtir un château somptueux et elle n'y recevait que des dames et des vieillards plus philosophes que galants, sans permettre qu'aucuns autres cavaliers en approchassent. (*Contes* I: 270)
>
> [The wood in which the orange tree was situated was the favourite promenade of a princess who lived hard by in a magnificent palace. She was young, beautiful, and witty: they called her Linda. She would not marry, because she feared she should not be always loved by the person she might chose for a husband; and as she was very wealthy, she built a sumptuous castle, and received there only ladies, and old men (more philosophers than gallants), permitting no young cavalier to approach it. (D'Aulnoy and Planché 193)]

10. La Force wrote her tales in 1692, but they were not published until 1698.

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