Editors’ Introduction

The Other Voice

Few forms of writing are as closely associated with women and femininity as the fairy tale. The best known fairy-tale characters are women, of course—Beauty, Cinderella, Rapunzel, Sleeping Beauty, Snow White. But in a more important sense, a deeply rooted stereotype in Western and many other cultures holds that women and girls are the primary tellers and audience for these stories. Scenes of mothers, grandmothers, nursemaids, and governesses reading or telling tales to children, chiefly girls, are recurrent in the iconography depicting storytelling.¹ Even if such images tell only part of the story—men and boys have read, told, and watched fairy tales as well, after all—the focus on women and girls has been central to conceptions about the genre. In the commercial arena, for instance, the Walt Disney Company’s (in)famous versions of fairy tales have promoted gender roles and notions of romantic love that have been widely denounced by feminist critics.²

In a well-known exchange about the value of fairy tales for girls and young women in the early 1970s, Marcia Lieberman’s and Alison Lurie’s divergent visions of the genre (Lieberman rejecting it, Lurie defending it) nonetheless converged around the deleterious effects of Disney fairy-tale films.³ In fact, more progressive uses of the

association of women and girls with the fairy tale were inspired by the women's movements of the 1960s and 1970s. Texts transformed stereotypically passive princesses into active heroines and cast doubt on the happiness assured by the seemingly obligatory final marriage. And in literature for English-speaking adults, works by Margaret Atwood, A. S. Byatt, Olga Broumas, Angela Carter, Emma Donoghue, Anne Sexton, and Jane Yolen (among others) attest to the continued resonance the genre holds for women writers.

Associations of the fairy tale with women reach back at least to the prophetic storytelling powers of the sibyls in Greek and Roman legend and the old woman who tells the earliest known version of “Beauty and the Beast” (“Psyche and Cupid”) in Apuleius's *The Golden Ass* (second century CE). Throughout medieval and early modern Europe, oral storytelling was linked to the preeminently female craft of spinning, and the two were regularly depicted together in iconography. In many European languages, the seemingly timeless identi-
Editors’ Introduction

fication of women with folk- and fairy tales is inscribed in the terms commonly used for these stories: old wives’ tales and mother goose tales in English, contes de vieille and contes de ma mère l’oye in French, Ammernärchen in German, cuentos de viejas in Spanish. Contrary to the vagueness of such expressions, a precise genealogy of this association can be uncovered in neglected recesses of literary history. If the names of Charles Perrault (1628–1703), the Brothers Grimm (Jacob [1785–1863] and Wilhelm [1786–1859]), and Hans Christian Andersen (1805–1875) are synonymous with the fairy tale, a comparatively less well known group of seventeenth-century French women writers, now called the contesuses (female storytellers), defined much of what we currently understand to be fairy tales: stories modeled on folktales, with one or two protagonists, magical elements, and a (usually) happy ending.7 In fact, the term “fairy tale” in English is derived from an early eighteenth-century translation of the title of Marie-Catherine d’Aulnoy’s first collection, Les contes des fées (1697–98) and published as Tales of the Fairies in 1707.8

The turn of the eighteenth century in France witnessed the birth of the conte de fées, a genre that quickly became a literary phenomenon. Between 1690 and 1709, nearly two-thirds of the fairy tales published in France were authored by the contesuses:9 Marie-


9. See the Appendix at the end of this volume for a full list of the fairy tales by the contesuses, with the original French titles and English translations. We cite our own English translations throughout. The Appendix is based on the “Index des titres de contes (1690–1709)” for
Editors’ Introduction

Catherine Le Jumel de Barneville, baronne d’Aulnoy (c. 1650–1705), Louise d’Auneuil (?)–c. 1700), Catherine Bédacier, née Durand (c. 1650–c. 1715), Catherine Bernard (c. 1663–1712), Charlotte-Rose de Caumont de La Force (c. 1650–1724), Marie-Jeanne L’Héritier de Villandon (1664–1734), and Henriette-Julie de Castelnau, comtesse de Murat (c. 1668–1716). Although less productive overall, men, too, published contes de fées, including Jean-Paul Bignon (1662–1743), François-Timoléon de Choisy (1644–1724), François de la Mothe-Fénélon (1651–1715), Eustache Le Noble (1643–1711), Jean de Mailly (?–1724), Jean Nodot (?), and Jean de Préchac (1676–?). But the most celebrated male author, whose fairy tales gradually eclipsed those of all the other writers at this time, was Charles Perrault. By the nineteenth century, his “Mother Goose Tales,” as the eight prose tales of Histoires ou contes du temps passé, avec des moralités (Stories or Tales of Yesterday, with Moral Lessons, 1697) came to be known, were taken as the standard to which others—and particularly those by the conteuses—were compared, always unfavorably. Critics have often assumed that Perrault created the genre of the conte de fées in France, and that all authors attempted to imitate him. But, in fact, Perrault and the con-
Editors’ Introduction

teuses developed two divergent models for the genre at more or less the same time. The conteuses never imitated the style, tone, or subject matter of the Stories or Tales of Yesteryear, and more important, it was the female authors who exemplified the conte de fées from the late seventeenth century until the Revolution. Their corpus was both imitated and parodied by the numerous writers who published fairy tales during the genre’s second vogue, in eighteenth-century France.12 Through translations and reprintings in chapbooks and children’s literature, the conteuses continued to exert an influence on the development of the fairy tale in Germany, England, and North America, even if literary history has only recently begun to acknowledge this debt.13 To reread the often neglected tales of the conteuses is both to restore them to their rightful place in literary history and to reassess their role in the cultural associations of women with the fairy tale.

Contexts: Cultural and Literary

From all indications, the conte de fées emerged from parlor games both at court and in the salons of mid-seventeenth-century France. In her correspondence, Marie de Rabutin-Chantal, marquise de Sévigné (1626–1696), alludes to what are clearly fairy tales told at court when


13. See the section of this introduction titled “Reception: Disfavor and Favor.”
she describes women there being entertained (*mitonnées*) with long and intricate narratives derived from simple folk-tale like plots. Although there is little direct evidence, oral storytelling doubtless occurred in Parisian salons as well, since the salons’ documented activities included games that bore striking resemblance to elements of fairy tales, such as the “game of metamorphoses” described by La Force. Under the auspices of prominent women, the salons had served as a springboard for many literary genres, most notably the novel, which was championed by women writers. Most of the *conteuses* likely were members of prominent salons and knew each other through these circles.

If women were at the forefront of efforts to create what was a new genre in late seventeenth-century France, *why* and *how* did they do so? Although motivations and intentions are problematic as the basis for critical interpretations, these questions can still shed light on the significance of the *conteuses’* fairy tales within the context of their time. Several of the *conteuses* were considered to be what Joan DeJean has called “scandalous women” of the period. D’Aulnoy was accused of plotting to have her husband charged with a capital crime; La Force


17. There is some evidence that d’Aulnoy, La Force, L’Héritier, and Murat attended the same salons. See Renate Baader, *Dames de lettres: Autorinnen des preziösen, hocharistokratischen und "modernen" Salons* (1649–1698); *Mlle de Scudéry, Mlle de Montpensier, Mme d’Aulnoy, Romanistische Abhandlungen* (Stuttgart: J. B. Metzlersche Verlagsbuchhandlung, 1986), 229.

was banished from court for “impious” poems; and Murat was imprisoned for political subversion and tribadism (the early-modern term for lesbianism). Not surprisingly, then, early literary historians saw in their fairy tales the escapist desire of scandalous women to retreat into the supposed comfort of innocent fantasy. And yet, apart from these three writers, the other conteuses and conteurs were not particularly controversial figures, and in any event, readers at the time do not seem to have been interested in viewing their fairy tales through the lens of biographical details or rumors.

More compelling by far is a self-awareness as women writers that the conteuses display in their tales. Dedicating stories to each other and alluding to the other conteuses, they frame their contes de fées as a new genre created and dominated by women. Although this framing may be evidence of a group consciousness, it is not necessarily proof of collective solidarity. Murat, for instance, contends her tales are just as original as those of the “ladies who have written in this genre until now.” And L’Héritier, while celebrating her bond of friendship with Murat, nonetheless foregrounds her own particular storytelling.


20. This is especially true of Storer’s study (see, for instance, Storer, Un épisode littéraire, 253).

21. For instance, L’Héritier dedicates her tale, The Clever Princess, to Murat. In addition to dedicating her volume, Histoires sublimes et allégoriques, to the “modern fairies” (by which she means the conteuses), Murat makes a complimentary reference to d’Aulnoy and her tale Princess Little Carp in Little Eel (see Little Eel, n442, in this volume).


then, the conteuses also used their tales to promote themselves as individuals within a growing literary field.24

Women’s predilection for the fairy tale in this period should be understood in a broader social and cultural context. The final decade of the seventeenth century was marked by severe hardship, caused by repeated crop failures, widespread famine, epidemics, and disastrous military campaigns by Louis XIV (1638–1715, r. 1643–1715).25 Against this backdrop, the contes de fées as a whole—by both women and men—indeed do seem to represent something of an escapist fantasy. But the religiosity of the final years of Louis XIV’s reign provides a sharper lens for the sociocultural specificity of the conteuses’ fairy tales. Along with his morganatic wife, Françoise d’Aubigné, duchesse de Maintenon (1636–1719), the king enforced strict piety at court, emboldening ecclesiastical figures to attack what they saw as the worldliness of fashionable society. For these religious critics, literature was a prominent expression of the moral decadence of society, and virulent assaults were mounted against novels and plays in the years immediately preceding the appearance of the conte de fées.26 However, only a few of these critics bothered to condemn the new genre—and even then, usually just in passing.

Nonetheless, in the context of a pietistic fin de siècle, the fairy tale constituted a defense of fashionable secular society. Its portrayal of earthly luxury and happiness and its reliance on the supernatural powers of fairies, sorcerers, and other “pagan” figures obviously run counter to a Christian world view. And yet, as a narrative form associated with children and the lower classes and championed largely


by women writers, this defense of secular culture appeared largely innocuous, at least if the lack of extended critiques is taken as any indication. Still, the unsettled political and social climate of the time partially explains the appeal of the genre. Fairy tales have often appeared in periods of social repression or crisis (for example, Victorian England, the “decadent” period of late nineteenth-century France, and Weimar Germany), and their particular brand of fantasy has been understood not only as escapism but also as critique.  

Both explanations have been applied to the work of the conteuses, who belonged to the fashionable secular society of their time.  

This secularism did not preclude the conteuses—or the conteurs—from attributing ethical value to their stories. What Perrault claimed for his verse tales—that they all contained “a praiseworthy and instructive moral”—was, on the surface, applicable to the entire vogue. A character in d’Aulnoy’s frame narrative, Dom Gabriel Ponce de Leon (1698), calls for “a bit of a moral” when she prescribes rules for stories. Within the literary conventions of the period, this was in no way unusual, and many writers appended final morals, while most others dotted their texts with maxims. Yet, these explicitly stated “lessons” are often at odds with the logic of the narrative as a whole. At the end of La Force’s The Enchanter, the versed moral begins by claiming that both vice and honor lead to happiness; yet the
end of the poem calls out more conventionally to the deity “Fortune” to “crush the wicked with eternal travails” and to “give the virtuous sweetest happiness.”

This conclusion also contradicts the plot, in which neither kidnapping nor attempted patricide is punished. To be sure, La Force’s tale is an extreme case. But fairy tales by both men and women (most prominently, Perrault’s prose tales) privilege “pleasure” and question the “useful instruction” such tales might provide, or in the classic formula, they favor dulce over utile. However, whenever seventeenth-century critics denounced the new genre as lacking in didactic value, they singled out the conteuses as the culprits. Thus, Abbé Pierre de Villiers (1648–1728), who expresses his admiration for Perrault’s tales, nonetheless opines: “if those [women] who undertook to compose them had remembered that fairy tales were created only to formulate an important moral and give it a concrete form we would not have considered them the lot of women and of ignorant men.”

Ultimately, the misogynistic reasoning used by Villiers here exposes a refusal to allow women, as women, to formulate an important moral.” That privilege, so Villiers seems to believe, can only be exercised by men such as Perrault, to whom he credits “the best tales we have.”

Paradoxically, although women writers promoted morals and maxims, they also framed the fairy tale as trivial entertainment, worthy of ironic amusement. This is apparent in the word bagatelle (trifle), frequently used by the conteuses to characterize their fairy tales. Mélanie, one of the characters in d’Aulnoy’s frame story, Dom Gabriel Ponce de Leon (1698), draws out the substantive and tonal consequences of this notion for the contes de fées that would be recited among her friends: “They shouldn’t be either bombastic or crude; they should occupy a middle ground that is more lighthearted than serious; they need to have a bit of a moral; and above all, they should be offered as a trifle [bagatelle] whose worth the listener alone has the right to determine.”

By this standard, fairy tales, situated between

32. La Force, The Enchanter, 212, in this volume.


34. Villiers. Conversations on Fairy Tales, 297, in this volume.

35. Ibid., 309.

lofty and lowly extremes, were to serve a pleasurable function above all else.

But even as trivial entertainment, the fairy tale still allowed women writers to promote individual and collective interests.37 As was typical of the fashionable and nobiliary elites of the time, the conteuses were eager to portray their writing as the product of a leisurely, aristocratic pastime instead of the commercial efforts of bourgeois authors. Describing the sociable gifts of d’Aulnoy, for instance, Murat claims that her friend “did not approach writing with assiduous effort, she wrote as I do by whim, in the midst of the noise of the hordes of people who visited her, and she only applied herself to her works to the extent it entertained her.”38 Murat’s insistence on a leisurely practice of writing only reinforces the lowly status of the fairy tale as a genre. By no means did the conteuses aspire to the lofty heights of such prestigious genres as epic poetry or tragedy, which were dominated by male writers. But they still used the new genre and its great popularity in fashionable society to gain prominence for themselves as writers (at least in their own circles). Indeed, many of their volumes of fairy tales were best sellers in their day.39 Both deliberately marginalized by writers and critics and highly popular among readers, the conte de fées allowed a group of women writers, by definition on the margins of the literary field of seventeenth-century France, a means to what Hélène Cixous and Catherine Clément call “coming to writing,” appropriating as women and for women the ideology that casts men as the only legitimate authors and authorities.40

The work of the conteuses also needs to be placed within the context of what has come to be known as the Quarrel of the Ancients and the Moderns. A long-simmering debate about the relative merits of ancient Greek and Roman versus “modern” mod-

38. Henriette-Julie de Castelnau de Murat, Ouvrages de Mme la comtesse de Murat, 173–74, Bibliothèque de l’Arsenal, B. L. ms. 4371.
39. See the section of this introduction titled “Reception: Disfavor and Favor” and the introduction for each of the conteuses, in this volume.
Editors’ Introduction

eels in the artistic, literary, philosophical, and scientific realms, the Quarrel irrupted with particular virulence during the final decade of the seventeenth century. After public confrontations with Nicolas Boileau-Despréaux (1636–1711), the foremost champion of the Ancients (and author of the infamous Satire X ["Against Women"]), Charles Perrault became the leading advocate for the “modernist” cause, in particular through his Parallèle des anciens et des modernes (Comparison of the Ancients and the Moderns, 1688–94). His fairy tales were also strategic illustrations of his “modernist” agenda, as the preface to his verse tales (1694) makes clear. After comparing ancient Greek and Roman “fables” and French “old wives’ tales,” Perrault asserts: “Seen from the perspective of the moral … my fables deserve to be told more than most of the ancient tales.” Perrault was not alone in using fairy tales to attack Greece and Rome. At the end of her story, The Enchantments of Eloquence, his cousin, L’Héritier, favors an indigenous over a foreign past: “Tales for tales, it seems to me that those from ancient Gaul are just about as good as those from ancient Greece, and fairies are no less able to work wonders than the gods of mythology.” Even if the other conteuses do not explicitly align themselves with Perrault and L’Héritier, their tales bespeak an allegiance to the “modernist” or a nationalist cause. Like Perrault’s Stories or Tales of Yesteryear, their contes de fées are purportedly based on oral folk narratives of France—and not the literature of ancient Greece and Rome. Unlike Perrault, though, the


42. Perrault et al., Contes merveilleux, 104.

43. L’Héritier de Villandon et al., Contes, 91.


conto uses incorporate many features of seventeenth-century literature, including tropes on love elaborated in poetry and novels. By its very nature, then, this corpus illustrates a central tenet of the “modern” conception of literature: writing need not be bound by ancient models and rules, to which women, who had no formal education, did not have access; literary innovation is not only possible but a sure sign of “modern” progress, a notion broadly identified with the reign of Louis XIV. Indeed, not only was the conte de fees viewed as a predominately “feminine” genre within a “modern” literary aesthetics, but for much of the seventeenth century in elite secular circles—though certainly not in moralistic texts or the misogynistic tracts of the querelle des femmes—women were paradoxically also deemed to possess a “natural” or intuitive eloquence that was upheld as a model for men’s conversation and writing. This supposedly instinctive linguistic refinement represented a break from the humanist legacy of classical models. At once the product of women and, supposedly, of indigenous French culture, the contes de fées exemplified “modern” literary tastes as much as any other genre, old or new.


txts: Sources and Rewritings

Stories by the conto uses reveal a sophisticated use of oral and elite literary traditions. Although the fairy tale was (and continues to be) de-

45. La Bruyère provides perhaps the most famous statement of this notion in his (nonetheless ambivalent) caractère on women’s letters (37 [IV]): “If women were always correct, I would dare say that the letters by a few of them would perhaps be the best writing in our language” (Jean de La Bruyère, Les caractères de Théophrastre traduits du grec avec les caractères ou les moeurs de ce siècle, in Oeuvres complètes, ed. Julien Benda [Paris: Gallimard, 1962], 76). See The Doe in the Woods, n270, in this volume. The querelle des femmes, which arguably extends from the beginning of the fifteenth century to the French Revolution—though some would say it continues to this day—and which pitted advocates and proponents of women against their detractors and castigators as descendants of Eve, inevitably inscribes contradictory views that are also reflected in the wider cultural and social debates about women’s status, roles, and practices, here notably their writing practices. On the querelle des femmes, see the Series Editors’ Introduction, available on the Iter website of the University of Toronto.

fined as a literary appropriation of oral wonder tales, the conteuses as a group strove to distance themselves from the popular tradition. In her dedicatory epistle for *Histoires sublimes et allégoriques* (*Sublime and Allegorical Stories*, 1699), Murat draws a clear distinction between lower- and upper-class women storytellers. Deploying the rhetorical figure of syllepsis (the use of a word with both literal and metaphorical meanings), she contrasts the “lowly and childish” occupations of the “ancient fairies,” whose “sole concern is to keep the house well swept, put the pot on the fire, do laundry, rock children to sleep, milk cows, churn butter, and a thousand other lowly things of that sort,” with the “great feats” performed by the “modern fairies,” who are all “beautiful, young, attractive, elegantly and richly dressed and lodged,” and who live in “the courts of kings or enchanted palaces.” Still, try as she may, Murat cannot deny how much the “modern fairies” owe to the “ancient fairies.” Without their “forerunners” (as Murat calls the “ancient fairies”), the “modern fairies” would have had nothing to refine. Theirs was a debt to be disguised, but a debt nonetheless.

Aside from the distance the conteuses put between themselves and the “ancient fairies,” the lack of documentation about popular storytelling at the time makes it difficult to know how much they actually relied on oral folklore. Some, but not all, of their fairy tales bear resemblance to folktales subsequently transcribed by ethnographers. Whether or not the conteuses deliberately rewrote what they knew to be oral wonder tales recounted by lower-class storytellers, several of them were familiar with French translations of the probably pseudonymous Giovan Francesco Straparola’s *Le piacevoli notti* (*The Facetious Nights*, 1550–53), a frame narrative with fifteen wonder tales.

47. The “wonder tale” (or “tale of magic”) is one of the four categories folklorists recognize under the heading, “ordinary tales.” See Hans-Jörg Uther, *The Types of International Folktales: A Classification and Bibliography, Based on the System of Antti Aarne and Stith Thompson*, 3 vols. (Helsinki: Suomalainen Tiedeakatemia, Academia Scientiarum Fennica, 2004). This catalog classifies folktales according to “tale-types,” indicated by the abbreviation “ATU” followed by a number (e.g. “Cinderella” = ATU 510A).


49. See the important discussion of this question, which encompasses both the first and the second vogues, in Robert, *Le conte de fées littéraire*, 77–170. See especially the “Recensement des contes types folkloriques utilisés par les contes de fées littéraires entre 1690 et 1778,” 127–29.