



Early Modern French Feminine Narratives:

Subverting Gender Roles and Sexual Identity in Mme d'Aulnoy's *Beauty or the Fortunate Knight* (1698)

In late seventeenth-century France, the emergence of the literary fairy tale genre constituted a curious phenomenon in that especially the tales written in the 1690s assumed a complex role in the production of meanings within French culture and literature of the time. Investigating the productive context in which these narratives emerged as a literary fashion reveals the complexity of the fairy tale vogue: (1) during the ongoing literary and artistic debate between the Ancients (asserting the authority of classical Greek and Roman models) and the Moderns (advocating the freedom to innovate), the narratives served both as a strategic means and illustration in promoting the modernist conception of literature;¹ (2) the literary appropriation of purportedly indigenous French folktales consisted of creating the stereotypical image of fairy tales as simple and naïve narratives associated with children, women and the folk; (3) yet the marginalization of the genre allowed for exploiting a semantic abundance and producing various shifts in meaning; (4) the tales also reflected the social and cultural ideals of Parisian elite society and valorized the aesthetics, values and ideology shared by its members; and (5) the narratives played an important role as a response to, and compensation for, the conservative religious criticism of women participating in the literary and cultural domain.²

Significantly enough, two-thirds of the literary fairy tales published between 1690 and 1715 were authored by women. The predominance of women among the fairy tale writers indeed attests to the increasingly important role women played in literary production despite increasing conservative criticism of women's activity in the cultural sphere. It is therefore no exaggeration to say that the tales also emerged as a response to the late seventeenth-century hostility toward women's participation in literature. Given the ideal of feminine domesticity, submission and reservedness promoted by influential conservative religious forces, composing, telling and, especially, publishing tales was tantamount to an act of defiance on the part of the women authors. In studying treatises on the subject of women published at the time, such as Fénelon's *De l'éducation des filles*,³ it seems that the censors of the time considered female sociability, including participation in literary salons frequented predominantly by women, as the most corrupted aspect of *mondain* culture. The women authors of literary fairy tales for the most part escaped male censorship only due to the marginalization of the genre. And they used the tendency of male dominated official culture to devalue the fairy tale genre to their advantage by claiming a place for women in the literary and cultural realm.

Just as the literary fairy tales published in late seventeenth-century France served a strategic function in promoting modernist literature, the narratives were of particular significance to female writers.⁴ The fairy-tale narratives written in the 1690s presented, by means of the fictional universe that they created, an enhanced picture of the individuals or the social group that produced them or for which they were intended. By their very

nature, fairy tales present themselves from the outset as an ideal place for complete identification with the character and the world of the protagonists. It is therefore possible to analyze the narratives as a mirror intended to reinforce the self-image that a particular social group (in this case, the female participants in the literary salons) seeks to assert.

As a genre generally considered as inferior to other literary forms, the fairy tales escaped male censorship, which explains the many liberties especially the women authors took in exploiting the various possibilities of the genre. In this context, it is important to consider the collective nature of both the initial production and the telling of the seventeenth-century French tales that took place in the predominantly female circles of the Parisian salons. To be sure, the compensatory elaboration of a fictional, gratifying fairy-tale world occurred, to some extent, as a solitary act of writing and individual reading. Yet, scholars like Catherine Velay-Vallantin⁵ and Raymonde Robert⁶ have pointed out that the intended readers/listeners had an active share in the creation of the tales. Recent scholarship has finally paid critical attention to seventeenth-century women authors and their contributions to French culture and literature of the time. And in researching the productive context of the fairy-tale fashion that lasted well into the eighteenth century, experts have at last given due credit to women's preeminent role in creating and developing the genre.

Given that fairy tales intrinsically allow for satisfying unfulfilled desires and unappeased longings, it seems appropriate to read the tales written by women as feminine narratives

expressing certain wishes and aspirations experienced by female authors of the time. Examining the ways in which several woman writers portrayed their female protagonists reveals unusually strong, intelligent, resourceful and actively engaged heroines who are certainly not in need of being rescued by a prince. And this portrayal of female characters is all the less surprising in the case of Mme d'Aulnoy who, married off to a nobleman thirty years her senior at the age of fifteen, eventually found out about her husband's lack of worth, both financially and morally. After having given birth to six children by the age of twenty-two, she was privileged enough to rid herself of her husband and to spend the rest of her life in relative independence. All in all, she wrote some twenty-five tales, most of which feature women as protagonists.

Mme d'Aulnoy's fairy-tales⁷ show that, while narrative plots have traditionally been classified along gender lines, these boundaries are often mutable. As a case in point, the protagonist of *Belle-Belle, ou le chevalier Fortuné* (translated as *Beauty, or the Fortunate Knight*; the English title, however, lacks the emphasis placed on the adjective as the heroine's alternate name), represents one of most "liberated" female characters of the time. Catalogued as tale type 514, "woman disguised as man," or "gender change," according to the international folktale classification of Aarne and Thompson, this tale features the unlikeliest of female protagonists. Since this tale is some fifty pages long, the following summary will elucidate the unconventional character of both Mme d'Aulnoy's fairy tale and its eponymous heroine.

Due to his advanced age, a count is unable to comply with the summons to join the king's army. His three daughters decide to save the family honor by disguising themselves as men so that they can join the royal army in their father's place. After meeting an old woman who discourages them to continue their pursuits by revealing that their disguise is unsuccessful in concealing their true gender, the two older sisters soon abandon their attempts. The third sister, Belle-Belle, succeeds in her endeavors thanks to the assistance provided by a good fairy, who turns out to be no other than the old woman whom the two older sister had refused to help get her sheep out of a ditch. This old woman/fairy rewards Belle-Belle for her kindness and the physical valor she displayed in rescuing the sheep by providing her with a new name, *chevalier* Fortuné, and a beautiful horse. This horse, so aptly called Camarade, is not only endowed with an extraordinary intelligence but also with the ability to speak so as to pass on its insight to Belle-Belle/Fortuné.

Disguised as the *chevalier* Fortuné, Belle-Belle outperforms all the other soldiers in every athletic and military activity. She proves to be more skilled and intelligent than any male character in the tale. Preferring diplomacy to force, Belle-Belle/Fortuné succeeds in all her exploits, which include killing a dragon and defeating an army hostile to her king, thanks to her intelligent leadership of a small group of men endowed with supernatural talents, whom she hired upon Camarade's advice. By gradually developing her ability to govern and the skills to delegate, Belle-Belle proves to be an effective captain of a small army. In the course of the tale, then, Belle-Belle acquires the capacities she will need to reign one day.

By presenting a female transvestite, a motif that dates back to medieval even classical narratives, the author transcends traditional gender delineation. In describing the many qualities of her heroine, Mme d'Aulnoy emphasizes that Belle-Belle/Fortuné performs all her/his exploits on behalf of the king whom, in turn, the author portrays as much weaker, less gifted and far less qualified for leadership than the heroine. While being the king in name, he is practically powerless against the manipulations of his sister, the dowager queen. In fact, the power of this weak ruler depends almost entirely on Belle-Belle's/Fortuné's strength. Having lost the war against the emperor who seeks to annex his kingdom, the king does not even lead his own troops back into battle. Unable to find a hero to slay the dragon, he certainly does not dare face this challenge himself. And it is the female protagonist of this tale who, by assuming male power, ultimately restores the order that the king failed to secure.

Interestingly, while portraying the king as neither powerful, nor heroic, nor strong, nor even active, thus as the antithesis of Belle-Belle/Fortuné, Mme d'Aulnoy presents his physical beauty as his most important quality. Despite the king's apparent lack of traditional male qualities, Belle-Belle falls passionately in love with him presumably because of his beauty. This aspect of the relationship between the king and Belle-Belle is suggestive of how the author subverts traditionally defined gender roles throughout the tale. Moreover, the juxtaposition of the strong heroine with the weak king reveals the androgyny of both protagonists. The female character, Belle-Belle, is androgynous not

only with respect to her changing of name, clothing and role, but also on a more profound level in that her personality combines qualities typically considered feminine or masculine. At the same time, the way in which Mme d'Aulnoy describes the king is indicative of androgyny as well. The author relegates the king to the traditional female role of waiting at home, while Belle-Belle/Fortuné goes off to war. And the king allows her/him to risk death for his sake, just as the traditional lady allows her knight in shining armor to risk his life on her behalf.

In disguising herself as a man in order to save her family's honor (a task traditionally reserved for men), Belle-Belle displays many qualities that render her male disguise so successful. Belle-Belle/Fortuné's actions attest to her/his physical strength, bravery and courage, as well as her/his skills of diplomacy, decision-making and leadership. These qualities win her/him the admiration of everyone at court. Men and women alike admire him/her not only for his/her beauty but also for his/her refined manners, sophisticated conversation skills and of course, military exploits. Belle-Belle indeed proves more than capable of assuming a masculine role and everybody thinks she is a man. At the same time, the protagonist's androgyny makes him/her appealing to both sexes. While Mme d'Aulnoy repeatedly describes Belle-Belle's secret passion for the king, the author unmistakably alludes to how the king feels "strangely" attracted to Fortuné/Belle.

In addition to Belle-Belle's love for the king, the attraction the dowager queen experiences for the *chevalier* Fortuné merits our attention. The queen's infatuation with Fortuné is all

the more interesting since, at this point in the story, she has nearly caused his/her downfall by manipulating the king into ordering him/her to perform seemingly impossible, and potentially fatal, tasks such as ridding the kingdom of the dangerous dragon or protecting it against the emperor's invading army. The author is careful to emphasize, however, that the dowager queen thinks she is in love with a man. She is attracted to the handsome *chevalier* Fortuné precisely because of the "masculine" qualities demonstrated in the many exploits undertaken on behalf of the king and often instigated by the dowager queen.

The subversion of traditional gender roles takes on a different dimension in Mme d'Aulnoy's detailed description of the dowager queen's attempts to seduce the *chevalier Fortuné*. The ways in which the queen "courts" the *chevalier* subvert the traditional conventions of courtly love in that the woman assumes the active role in the courtship, whereas the "man" continues to repulse the woman's advances. While putting the queen in a "masculine" position of power vis-à-vis the *chevalier*, the author endows her with negative characteristics stereotypically considered as feminine, particularly her penchant for manipulation and scorn. On the other hand, Mme d'Aulnoy provides Belle-Belle/Fortuné with the best of both traditional masculine and feminine qualities, *i.e.*, kindness and charm as well as strength, intelligence and self-confidence, which allow her/him to overcome the obstacles put in her/his way.

Since she does not dare reveal her true sex for fear of being sent home, Belle-Belle sees no other option than fleeing from the queen's advances. In so doing, however, she/he exposes

herself/himself to the "scorned woman's wrath." The dowager queen continues to abuse her position of royal power in persecuting Fortuné/Belle-Belle. The queen, portrayed as an insistent and impolite lover, has Fortuné/Belle imprisoned and sentenced to death. Belle-Belle only narrowly escapes being beheaded because the executioners discover her true sex. It is only after Belle-Belle's male disguise has been revealed that the king finally asserts himself against his sister by halting Belle-Belle's execution. Mme d'Aulnoy's tale provides for a happy end in that the king, who has liked and admired him/her ever since their first encounter, marries Belle who becomes the queen.

A close reading of this tale reveals how Mme d'Aulnoy seeks to create and maintain suspense by deliberately confusing matters concerning gender and sexual desire. Though written in the form of a fairy tale, the narrative's plot essentially revolves around amorous intrigues. The recourse to fairy tale magic does not prevent us from recognizing that the real driving force behind the tale's plot resides in the king's and queen's confusion about Belle-Belle's true gender. The tale actually deals with the dynamics of desire, inevitably altered, if not distorted, by the disguise. Belle-Belle's disguise indeed complicates the various amorous and erotic attachments depicted in this tale, as well as the sexual identity and preferences of the characters.

Significantly enough, research conducted by folklorists and literary scholars has shown that the image of sexuality created in both folklore and literature is far from being monolithic. In fact, many narratives depict emotional bonds between characters of the

same gender. If examined in terms of homosociability, innumerable tales seem to present same-sex affective attachments that are not primarily, yet potentially, erotic. In depicting homosocial relationships, such narratives play on cultural expectations concerning gender-specific behavior by alluding to homosexuality. In particular, narratives featuring cross-dressing characters reveal a homoerotic subtext in which a character feels attracted to the cross-dressed protagonist although s/he appears to be of the same sex. Not surprisingly, however, most of these stories end in a heterosexual marriage after the disguise has been exposed, thereby dispelling the potentially homoerotic attraction.

Mme d'Aulnoy indeed created a subtext charged with lesbian and homoerotic overtones by intelligently playing on issues concerning gender and sexual identity. While the king's admiration for Fortuné/Belle-Belle is ultimately mitigated by the revelation of his/her true sex, the queen's behavior comes up against two social taboos. First, as a woman, she makes sexual advances toward a person whom she considers a man; second, this presumably male person is of a lower social rank. Yet she potentially breaks a sexual taboo as well, since the reader is well aware that the queen experiences sexual feeling for a person who is actually a woman.

A psychoanalytical approach would certainly allow for reading this narrative in terms of a homosexual fantasy. To be sure, the subject of a woman dressing as a man does not necessarily imply homosexual orientation. Yet it is interesting to see how Mme d'Aulnoy

uses the cross-dressing motif to create homoerotic suspense and, at the same time, assert her position on gender equality and sexual identity.

In the beginning, Belle-Belle considers her chances of success in terms of her physical abilities. The tests she has to pass seem to be about excelling in demonstrating qualities traditionally attributed to males. Actually, these characteristics do not suffice to succeed in any of her endeavors. Instead, it is her emotional and moral qualities that guarantee her success. Although the tale's emphasis on Belle-Belle's moral strength corresponds to the fairy tale tradition, it is quite unusual that characteristics most often considered as feminine should allow her to pass as a male.

Moreover, by repeatedly emphasizing the weakness of the father and particularly the prince, it seems as if Mme d'Aulnoy set out to prove that being male is not really anything enviable. In fact the king has completely submitted himself to female power, *i.e.*, to the dowager queen. His lack of power, especially willpower, mostly reduces him to silence. And just as the king acts submissively toward his sister, Belle-Belle has to obey while being disguised as a male. In her female role, however, she possesses far more power. While stressing the weakness of the male sex, the author shows how unhappy Belle-Belle is playing a male role. And it is her female gender, once unveiled, that saves her life and allows her to fulfill her desires. It is to her feminine qualities and to her supposedly masculine merits that she owes her eventual happiness. According to the tale's plot, being a female who temporarily has to disguise herself as a man appears to be far more desirable

than being a male who is a slave to his sister's whims. Mme d'Aulnoy seems to suggest that femininity as such holds the key to happiness.⁸ By presenting a woman capable of being a hero just as well as a man can, the author reverses the traditional conception of gender roles while valorizing the feminine.

Moreover, the author continually stresses the ambiguous charm the woman disguised as a man exerts on persons of both sexes who desire her/him. While the king and Belle-Belle suppress their feelings, the queen and her lady-in-waiting exacerbate their passion. Given that the object of desire is a woman mistaken for a man, the relationships between the characters reveal a potentially homosexual attraction on the part of the queen as well as the king.

On the one level, there is the attraction a woman, the queen, feels for a woman in male disguise. The queen falls in love with the handsome knight immediately upon seeing him/her for the first time. First, the queen seeks to seduce him/her by means of amorous language, which proves to no avail. Thereupon, her advances become more overt. She arranges to see him/her alone, shows up in her nightgown and obliges the king to attach the knight to her service as well. While, in the beginning, the queen feels embarrassed to declare her love for him/her, once she has done so, she feels bitter and angry about his/her indifference, which she considers a punishable offense.

On another level, there is the attraction the king experiences for someone whom he believes to be a man, but who is actually a woman disguised as a knight. In presenting the relationship between the king and the knight as ambiguous for the king and troubling for Belle-Belle, Mme d'Aulnoy exploits the ambiguity between love and friendship. By telling us that Fortuné/Belle-Belle becomes the king's "favori," the author plays on the double meaning of the French noun (favorite knight; but also his favorite lover/mistress). Mme d'Aulnoy also emphasizes that the king seeks to dissuade Fortuné/Belle-Belle from going into battle for fear of losing him/her. Yet, while stressing the attraction the two characters experience for each other, the author allows them to express their feelings only in very ambivalent terms. For instance, when Fortuné/Belle-Belle declares on several occasions to be ready to die for his/her king, his/her words are tantamount to a declaration of love, but Mme d'Aulnoy has the king interpret them as expressing a knight's loyalty to his sovereign.

Furthermore, Mme d'Aulnoy has the king express his great joy about Fortuné's/Belle-Belle's victorious return from battle, after having feared for his favorite's life, by choosing words of endearment that are no doubt open to various interpretations. However, while Mme d'Aulnoy so aptly exploits the homoerotic suspense created by the female transvestite attractive to both male and female characters in the tale, she ultimately makes the relationship between knight and sovereign substitute for the erotic relationship in order to avoid the taboo associated with it. Whatever occasions arise for the king and the knight to declare their feelings, the author immediately reverts to veiled language and

passes their mutual attraction over in silence. Both characters are compelled, as it were, to deny and suppress their feelings.

To be sure, once Belle-Belle's true gender is revealed, the inhibition disappears and the king proposes marriage to her. Yet the turn of events occurs with barely any transition and, thus, too suddenly as to dissipate completely the homoerotic confusion, or "disorder," that the characters experienced during most of the some fifty-page long tale. The tale's length and the self-censorship effected by Mme d'Aulnoy explain the author's approach to keeping her readers in suspense about the characters' sexual identity by means of allusion and ambiguity.

Notwithstanding the character's androgyny, of which the author makes such skillful use in developing the narrative's plot, Belle-Belle admittedly represents the most exceptional heroine among the female protagonists created by Mme d'Aulnoy and her contemporaries. Yet the ways in which the women storytellers portrayed their female characters clearly defied traditional depiction of women in literature and folklore as weak and dependent on male assistance. The female fairy-tale writers indeed took full advantage of the freedom the narrative genre afforded by creating female protagonists who enjoy an almost utopian liberty from socio-culturally imposed gender-specific roles. While the narratives served as an outlet for their desires and fantasies, Mme d'Aulnoy and her fellow storytellers asserted women's importance in cultural and literary production.

To be sure, much of the feminist criticism on the fairy tale's tendency to create, reinforce and perpetuate stereotypically negative characterizations of women is by no means unwarranted. Yet it is necessary to understand that many of these stereotypes are due to modifications and editing efforts made by predominantly male editors, publishers and translators. Over the last three hundred years, they edited the texts in such a way as to meet the expectations and preference of their respective audiences. Especially in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, publishers and movie producers exploited and manipulated some of the most popular fairy tale narratives by insisting on, and thus perpetuating, stereotypical conservative images of female characters and generally deprecatory attitudes toward women. It is therefore imperative to remember that, just as the seventeenth-century French women authors of literary fairy tales defied literary and social conventions, many of their heroines resisted assuming conventional gender roles, thereby rejecting traditional female stereotypes.

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¹ The literary fairy-tale fashion and the Quarrel of the Ancients and the Moderns occurred at the same time and, significantly enough, Charles Perrault (1628-1703), whose *Tales of Times Past* (1697) have since become synonymous with the French fairy tale, was a major protagonist in both developments. The literary and artistic debate of the time was about the meaning and notion of history. By contrasting past and present cultures, it marked a rift in the representation of historical continuum. Rejecting the notion of tradition as evolving at an unchanging pace in favor of a past subordinate in importance to the present, the Moderns opened the way for a concept of time as fragmented and transitory.

² Harold Neemann, *Piercing the Magic Veil* (Tübingen: Narr Verlag, 1999), 173-174.

³ François Fénelon, *Oeuvres complètes, Tome V* (Geneva: Slatkine, 1971).

⁴ Lewis Seiffert, *Fairy Tales, Sexuality, and Gender in France 1690-1715* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 78-81.

⁵ Catherine Velay-Vallantin, *L'Histoire des contes* (Paris: Fayard, 1992).

⁶ Raymonde Robert, *Le conte de fées littéraire en France de la fin du XVIIe à la fin du XVIIIe siècle* (Nancy: Presses Universitaires, 1982).

⁷ Mme d'Aulnoy, *Contes nouveaux ou Les Fées à la Mode* (Paris: Société des Textes Français Modernes, 1997).

⁸ Anne Defrance, *Les Contes de fées et les nouvelles de Mme d'Aulnoy: L'imaginaire féminin à rebours de la tradition* (Geneva: Droz, 1998), 82.