

A Fairy Godmother of her own  
in 17<sup>th</sup> Century France: Subversive  
Female Agency in Madame  
d'Aulnoy's "The White Cat"

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## A Fairy Godmother of her own in 17<sup>th</sup> Century France: Subversive Female Agency in Madame d'Aulnoy's "The White Cat"<sup>1</sup>

**M**agic and metamorphosis always go hand in hand in wonder tales: Cinderella's rags are changed into a marvellous ball gown complete with magic glass slippers courtesy of Fairy Godmother, Snow White and Sleeping Beauty plunge into a deep sleep intended to kill them through black magic, the Little Mermaid exchanges her tongue for a pair of shapely legs through a magic potion... The examples from well-known tales by Charles Perrault, the Brothers Grimm or Hans Christien Andersen are endless. However, when we come to consider less celebrated tales by the French women writers who were Perrault's contemporaries, it would be more accurate to say that magic and metamorphosis go paw in hand: these women writers favoured the mythological theme of animal metamorphosis in which a lover who had been turned into a beast would only become human again after long years of patient suffering. The literary motif of metamorphosis served a particular purpose, which can only be fully comprehended if the specific time and place of the writing, as well as the gender roles ascribed to that historically located context, are taken in due consideration. In other words, I will anchor my analysis of a wonder tale by Marie-Cathérine d'Aulnoy, the writer whose production far surpassed any other during the twenty-five-year height of the genre, in the

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<sup>1</sup> This article is a much more expanded version of my paper "Change your princesses, change thyself: magic and metamorphosis in Madame d'Aulnoy's wonder tales and wondrous life in 17<sup>th</sup> century France". This was published as a position paper in the e-Book *(Re)Presenting Magic, (Un)Doing Evil: Of Human Inner Light and Darkness* (Ed. Alexandra Cheira, Oxford, Inter-Disciplinary Press, 2012, 3-10, <http://www.inter-disciplinary.net/publishing/id-press/>), which collected papers from the 13<sup>th</sup> Global Conference Perspectives on Evil and the 3<sup>rd</sup> Global Conference Magic and the Supernatural, held in Prague in March 2012.

specific historical context it was written, as well as in its author's personal life, which was in itself a perpetual tale of wonder. D'Aulnoy's "The White Cat" will show how, in order to be happy, the eponymous female animal lover had to suffer first until she met the man who fell in love with her still in her animal form because she was beautiful, learned and pleasant: only after they proved themselves worthy of each other was the evil spell broken and human form restored to its victim.

Marie-Cathérine le Jumel de Barneville was born in 1650 or 1651 in Normandy.<sup>2</sup> The daughter of a noble family, she had been placed in a convent for her education when, according to her colourful *Memoirs of the Court of Spain*, she was abducted at the tender age of sixteen by François de la Motte, Baron d'Aulnoy, a Parisian nobleman thirty years her senior. She claimed this charming transaction, which stemmed from the arranged marriage that was to follow, was performed with the help, and to the financial profit, of her father. Three years and three children later, rumour had it that Marie-Cathérine d'Aulnoy was a flirtatious adulteress who was not exactly in love with Baron d'Aulnoy, an abusive husband by some accounts, to the point she became enmeshed in a juicy scandal: due to the testimony of two noblemen, her husband was accused of high treason against the king and thus incarcerated in the Bastille waiting to be executed. He was spared capital punishment when it was discovered, by the harsh persuasion of torture, that the two men had been lying — and that both Marie-Cathérine d'Aulnoy and her mother, the Marquise de Gadagne, were implicated as fellow conspirators. Because the men were believed to be their lovers, the whole episode was deemed a skilful, carefully planned arrangement to do away with Baron d'Aulnoy once and for all. A twenty-year separation — there was no possibility of divorce — from her husband and from Paris ensued and Madame d'Aulnoy was, not surprisingly under these circumstances, cut from her husband's will when

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<sup>2</sup> For a detailed account of Madame d'Aulnoy's life and writing career, see Marina Warner, *From the Beast to the Blonde: On Fairy Tales and their Tellers* (London: Vintage, 1995, 161-170) and Introduction to *Wonder Tales: Six Stories of Enchantment* (London: Vintage, 1996, 3-17); see also Patricia Hannon, *Fabulous Identities: Women's Fairy Tales in Seventeenth-Century France* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 1998, 78-121).

he died in 1700. Although recorded, these twenty years remain somewhat obscure: according to one account, mother and daughter fled Paris for Madrid, where they lived for some years; a more fanciful version has it that they were bestowed a royal pardon on condition they worked as spies for the French in England, but this voyage has yet to be confirmed. The established fact in her *Memoirs* is that, whereas her mother remained in Madrid, Marie-Cathérine d'Aulnoy returned alone to Paris around 1685. Five years later, aged forty, she would publish her two-volume *Memoirs of the Court of Spain*, a very popular, if arguably fictional, travel narrative which enjoyed a wide readership in France, England and Italy. Between 1690 and 1695, she also published her three-volume *Account of the Voyage to Spain*, her *Memories of the Court of England* and the historical novel *History of Jean de Bourbon, Prince of Carençy*. Although in her time history was not deemed a chronological record of significant events documented by textual evidence and her "historical" writings were valued for their enticing unfamiliarity rather than for their factual scrupulousness, they played a leading role in her writing career: they earned her a reputation as a historian and a story keeper of tales outside France, a membership at the Paduan Accademia dei Ricovatri and the nickname Clio, in honour of the Muse of History.

However, even before she was known for her writings, she had long been reputed a prominently fashionable and leading figure in the literary scene of Paris, a woman who could boast of congregating around her the élite of writers and thinkers of her time. Despite, or because of, her notoriety, she became a renowned *salonnière*, an aristocratic and highly educated woman who, much like her foremothers the *précieuses* in the first half of the seventeenth century, hosted gatherings where accomplished men and women wittily yet seriously discussed art, literature, morality, metaphysics or politics. George Eliot would praise the *salons* and, by extension, the *précieuses*, a century later when commenting on what she regarded as a sad state of affairs as far as some literature written by women in England was concerned:

Those famous *habitués* of the Hôtel de Rambouillet did not, apparently, first lay themselves out to entertain the ladies with grimacing "small-talk", and then take each other by the swordknot to discuss matters of real interest in a corner; they

rather sought to present their best ideas in the guise most acceptable to intelligent and accomplished women. And the conversation was not of literature only; war, politics, religion, the lightest details of daily news — everything was admissible, if only it were treated with refinement and intelligence. The Hôtel de Rambouillet was no mere literary *réunion*; it included *hommes d'affaires* and soldiers as well as authors, and in such a circle, women would not become *bas bleus* or dreamy moralizers, ignorant of the world and of human nature, but intelligent observers of character and events. (Eliot 13-14)

Far from being a gynoeceium enlivened only by topics close to the *salonnières'* own hearts, such as their cherished female freedom or love and marriage, the *salons* were the elected space where learned women matured a unique style of talking which celebrated the innate gifts that distinguished them from ordinary individuals. They did that so as to criticise and reform social customs but also because they reclaimed the right to be treated more consistently as intellectuals by their male peers, whose reaction was polarised into admiring and gallantly defending them or vehemently attacking and satirizing them as “the ridiculous *précieuses*” or “the sage women”. Thus had the *précieuses*, fifty years before the Enlightenment, fought long and hard for more independence for aristocratic women, only to be faced by ever-growing restrictions on women’s legal rights which, as Patricia Hannon points out in *Fabulous Identities: Women’s Fairy Tales in Seventeenth-Century France*, “accompanied absolutism’s strengthening of patriarchal authority”. (16)

Borrowing from the universe of the wonder tale, it could be said that the *conteuses*, the aristocratic women storytellers who gave birth to the literary fairy tale in the *salons* in late seventeenth-century France, refused the traditional but socially accepted status of the submissive Cinderella Perrault had created in his 1697 *Tales and Stories of the Past with Morals*. A passive object to another’s will who waited patiently for her release at the hands of Prince Charming, Cinderella did not fit in the *conteuses'* definition of femininity: they had nothing to do with sweet, lachrymose, domestic(ated) heroines, either in their life or in their tales, as Henriette-Julie de Murat made clear in the introduction to her 1699 *Sublime and Allegorical Stories*, explicitly dedicated to her fellow “modern fairies”:

The old fairies, your predecessors, were just gossips compared to you. Their occupations were low and childish, amusing only for servants and nurses. All they did was to sweep the house well, put the pot on the fire, do the washing, rock the children and put them to sleep, take care of the cows, churn the butter, and a thousand other little things of that kind... That is why all that remains today of their deeds and actions are only tales of Mother Goose. (Murat quoted by Harries 57)

Instead, they demanded for themselves the subversive role of Fairy Godmother, endowed with the agency of metamorphosis — both their own and their heroines', their fictional alter egos, in a changing society. "My fairy ladies", as they called themselves, forged new identities for themselves in the tales they told in the *salons* in which, as Patricia Hannon argues, "a more complex notion of aristocratic identity that involves both ambition and an interest in exploring the nature of the autonomous self" (14) can be found. Murat's words are, once again, unequivocal regarding her conception of the "modern fairies":

But you, my ladies, you have chosen another way: you occupy yourselves only with great things, the least of which are to give wit to the men and women who have none, beauty to the ugly, eloquence to the ignorant, riches to the poor, and luster to the most hidden things. You are all beautiful, young, well formed, nobly and richly dressed and housed, and you live only in the courts of kings, or in enchanted palaces. (Murat quoted by Harries 57)

The meaning of this deliberate construction of the *conteuses* as fairies is even furthered by looking closely at the etymology of the word as the Latin feminine of fate:

The word "fairy" in the Romance languages indicates a meaning of the wonder or fairy tale, for it goes back to a Latin feminine word, *fata*, a rare variant of *fatum* (fate) which refers to a goddess of destiny. The fairies resemble goddesses of this kind, for they too know the course of fate. *Fatum*, literally, that which is spoken, the past participle of the verb *fari*, to speak, gives French *fée*, Italian *fata*, Spanish *hada*, all meaning

“fairy”, and enclosing connotations of fate, fairies share with Sybils knowledge of the future and the past, and in the stories which feature them, both types of figure foretell events to come, and give warnings. (Warner, *From Beast to Blonde* 14-15)

Metamorphosis equalled magic, the ultimate power to shift the shape of the *conteuses*' lives by changing their heroines'; it was both a metaphor for their own lives and a textual strategy which empowered them, as Jack Zipes remarks in *When Dreams Came True: Classical Fairy Tales and Their Tradition*:

[S]ince the majority of the writers and tellers of fairy tales were women, these tales displayed a certain resistance toward male rational precepts and patriarchal realms by conceiving pagan worlds in which the final “say” was determined by female fairies, extraordinarily majestic and powerful fairies. (34)

Thus did personal life become deeply embedded in the tales, with some of the *conteuses* at the end of the seventeenth century — Gabrielle-Suzanne Barbot de Villeneuve, Jeanne Marie Leprince de Beaumont, Marie-Jeanne L'Héritier de Villandon, Henriette-Julie de Murat and Marie-Cathérine d'Aulnoy — becoming notorious for both their subversive wonder tales and their unconventional lives. Their tales impart most tellingly their authors' search for magic in their own lives, marked by undisguised rebellion against the marriage mores of their time and further spiced up by the scandalous taints of adultery, political conspiracy against unwanted husbands, lesbianism or openly questioning Louis XIV's ruinous wars and blatant love affairs — all of which grievous transgressions against the state and religion were severely punished by the King himself.

Telling fairy tales to amuse and instruct the audience was thus a common practice in the *salons*. These intellectual games played orally as a symbolic means of rendering personal experience by favouring spontaneity and spur-of-the-moment inventive skills were, we know now, anything but unplanned: these apparent improvisations were actually sophisticated constructions which the *conteuses* carefully prepared long before they set foot in the *salon*. As Elizabeth Wanning Harries points out in *Twice Upon a Time: Women Writers and The History of the Fairy Tale*,



Their *contes*, in fact, are often self-referential, “fairy tales about fairy tales”... or mises-en-abyme. (...) [T]he *conteuses*’ tales tend to make self-conscious commentaries on themselves and on the genre they are part of. In d’Aulnoy’s “La Chatte Blanche”, for example, a prince lost in the woods finds a castle covered with scenes from her own earlier tales and from Perrault’s. In another of d’Aulnoy’s tales, “Le Pigeon et la Colombe”, the good fairy ... read the stars with the same ease that one now reads the many new tales that are being printed every day. In her 1698 story “Anguilette”, Murat gives her hero an ancestor who comes from one of d’Aulnoy’s tales. (32)

The *conteuses* drew on literary sources such as Greek romances, medieval legends (namely Mélusine, Tristan and Iseult or Merlin), Boccaccio’s *Decameron*, Straparola’s *Le Piacevoli Notti*, Basile’s *The Pentameron* and — Marie-Cathérine d’Aulnoy’s own favourite — the classical love story of Eros and Psyche, liberally seasoning their tales with topsy-turvy, grotesque and overtly erotic elements. Taking into account the widespread oral circulation and popularity of the fairy tales in the *salon*, their written rendition was to be expected. It was thus in 1690 that the *salonnière* widely acclaimed as the Queen of Fairies — none other than Marie-Cathérine d’Aulnoy herself, who had also coined the term “fairy tales” to describe her narratives — pointed her magic wand-cum-quill at a blank sheet and hey presto, magic was done: amidst the black indistinct ocean of ink, the waves gained the shape of words in which rose “The Happy Isle”, the first literary fairy tale ever published in France as an embedded narrative in her novel *Hippolytus, Earl of Douglas*. In the seven years that followed, d’Aulnoy wrote novels, travel narratives and probably pseudo-autobiographical memoirs; highly successful in all these literary endeavours, it was the immediate success of this particular fairy tale, however, which would spur her on to publish in the genre she truly excelled at, and for which she is still best known nowadays. Fairy d’Aulnoy turned the magic wand at herself and liberally sprinkled the magic dust of enduring good fortune over her 1697 four-volume *Fairy Tales*: it earned her such a huge readership that it was swiftly followed the subsequent year by another four-tome volume, entitled *New Tales, or Fairies in Fashion*. These would firmly place her in the limelight until she died, in 1705, and carved out for her the same

niche where she could have power and express herself that she had granted her princesses.

Actually, d'Aulnoy was the most prolific writer in the group of *conteuses* who authored seventy-four of the one hundred and fourteen tales published between 1690 and 1715, not only on account of the twenty-five fairy tales she penned but especially by the sophisticated playfulness and self-reflexive penchant her wonder tales convey. Herself the victim of an unhappy arranged marriage, d'Aulnoy was highly critical of forced marriages, so much so that her tales seriously commented on love, courtship and marriage in a characteristic witty combination of social criticism of an oppressive present with a utopian dimension. D'Aulnoy's buoyant wonder tale "The White Cat", a retelling of the myth of Eros and Psyche, is a perfect example of this exquisite blending of fiction and personal experience: on the one hand, d'Aulnoy glorified female intellect by upholding her princess's reading and writing against her devotion to domestic chores; on the other, this tale portrayed unhappy lovers who were reunited only after they had proved their nobility and tender feelings for each other through great tribulations, not because their relationship had been arranged.

Published in 1697, "The White Cat" opens with a thinly veiled reproach to absolutism in the person of a king who lures his three sons out of the kingdom for fear they might dethrone him: he thus sends them on year-long quests, whose satisfactory resolution will grant the highest accomplisher the king's throne — although the king has no intention whatsoever of relinquishing the throne. Following the time-honoured tradition of favouring the youngest son over his brothers, the narrative focuses on his adventures: he is described as perfection itself in mind and body, with a strong emphasis on his noble character. Nobility is always twofold in d'Aulnoy's tales: on the one hand, it signals her characters' — and her own — social belonging to the aristocracy; on the other, it calls attention to a group of qualities such as gallantry, generosity and courage which her characters — and, by extension, herself and her fellow *salonnières* — are endowed with.

The Prince's first quest — bringing his father the most beautiful little dog alive — brings him to a glittering fairy tale castle which bears witness to both the world of fairies and to the genre by the use of self-reference and the allusion to a shared literary culture:

[T]he castle walls were of translucent porcelain in which various colours were mingled, and on which was depicted the history of all the fairies, from the creation of the world down to the present: the famous adventures of [Perrault's] Peau d'Ane, of Finessa [the main character in Marie-Jéanne d'Héritier Villandon's "The Subtle Princess"], of the Orange Tree [d'Aulnoy's "The Bee and the Orange Tree"], of Graciosa [d'Aulnoy's "Graciosa and Percinet"], of [Perrault's] the Sleeping Beauty, of [d'Aulnoy's] the Great Green Worm, and of a hundred others, were not omitted. (21)

D'Aulnoy uses the same describing techniques in her fairy tales which had made her famous for bringing a place to life in her travel narratives: close attention to minute detail is profusely evinced in this description of the palace by the striking emphasis given to the tasteful aristocratic surroundings conveyed in adjectives such as "splendid", "elegant", "magnificent", "superb" (21-23), as well as in the liberal mention to rich dressing and ornamental materials such as "porphyry and lapis", "cloth-of-gold", "gold studded with carbuncles", "diamonds", "mother-of-pearl" and "tiny emeralds" (21-23). Wonder at such sumptuous palace is enhanced by magic: "he saw naught but a dozen hands that floated in the air, each holding a torch" (22). These disembodied hands, which are the first visible evidence of magic in the tale, guide the youngest prince through sixty exquisitely decorated and preciously furnished rooms to "a large easy chair, which moved all by itself close to the hearth [and] at the same time the fire lit itself" (22); there they busy themselves undressing and clothing the Prince anew with more costly apparel, powdering, curling, perfuming, decking out, tidying up and generally rendering him "more handsome than Adonis" (23). Then the hands lead him to a salon decorated all around with the histories of famous cats, such as La Fontaine's Rodillardus from the fable "The Rats' Council" and Perrault's "Puss in Boots".

These references to the salon and to Puss in Boots are meaningful subtexts early on in the story: the gathering of the musical cats, the select supper, the after-dinner dancing entertainment and the fact that "the beautiful Cat would even compose verses and ditties in a style so passionate that one might have thought her in love" (28) all point out to the elegant gatherings in the *conteuses'* salons, with the difference this particular

one is presided by an animal female muse, a White Cat who had once been human. The outside glitter of the palace comes thus a metaphor for the White Cat's inner brilliance: her intellect is set off by her elegant surroundings, like a jewel in a case. Then again, d'Aulnoy cleverly inverts Perrault's story, so much so that what started to be a story about the prince's quest quickly twists into the story of the learned and beautiful White Cat — something Puss in Boots could not boast of, but then he was not a female cat. As Lewis Seifert has remarked, gender plays here a central role since “‘La Chatte Blanche’ is first and foremost about the power of female storytelling” (Seifert, “Female Empowerment” 24). Elizabeth Harries substantiates this thesis when she remarks that “the cat is a writer herself, although her works are unknown” (40), and suggests that the fact the Cat's poems are impossible to read is due to the fact they were written down by the imperfect paw of a feline male scribe. According to Harries, d'Aulnoy is here implying that female language, either written as the poems or oral as the female cats' orchestra, will only be understood by a male audience when they have learnt to interpret rather than judge it (40-41). If we accept this reading, d'Aulnoy strikingly anticipates by almost three centuries the feminist discussion on women's writing, which ever since the 1970s leading French theorists Hélène Cixous, Monique Wittig, Luce Irigaray and Julia Kristeva have led towards the inscription of the female body and female difference in language and text.

The Prince is so charmed by his delightful companion that the White Cat has to remind him that the year his father had granted him to fulfil his quest is almost at an end. Such is the Prince's despair that he wishes to be turned into a cat, or she into a girl, because he loves her so dearly. This is the first intimation that the Prince is falling in love with the White Cat because she is beautiful, learned and pleasant — despite not being human. The first hint at metamorphosis is carried out when the White Cat offers to help the Prince successfully complete his enterprise: she hands him a tiny acorn which encapsulates an even tinier dog and gives him the use of a magic wooden horse which will cover five hundred leagues in less than twelve hours. Magic and metamorphosis have broken down the typological barriers between human beings and animals in the anthropomorphic White Cat, animals and plants in the acorn-cum-dog, biological life and inorganic matter in the wooden horse, and have also enhanced the

powerful allure of miniature: a normal-size dog, however beautiful it might be, could never surpass the fascination the diminutive dog holds for the Prince, his father (however much reluctantly) and the readers.

The youngest Prince is thus the undisputed winner of the quest but his father wishes to test his sons' cleverness a bit further before he keeps his word, an euphemism for the king's unwillingness to part with his crown: the task he now sets them to carry out is finding a piece of cloth so fine that it passes through the eye of a Venetian lace-maker's needle. This reference to Venetian lace in particular has a threefold purpose: it epitomizes the King's refinement because it was a very expensive kind of lace; it shows d'Aulnoy, who also belonged in the aristocracy, was aware that France was one of the major markets for Venetian lace ever since the sixteenth century; finally, it is also a narrative device in which a future event worms its way into the sequential flow of the story. In fact, after the Prince has returned to the White Cat's court and stayed there for a whole year in the same manner of amusements as before, he is sent home by the White Cat in resplendent glory, in a flame-coloured enamelled gold barouche escorted by a hundred eight-horse coaches filled with magnificently clad noblemen and a thousand foot soldiers "whose uniforms were so densely embroidered that the cloth could not be seen underneath" (34) — embroidery being one of the delicate types of handiwork carried out by Venetian lace-makers. Such splendour, which displays the White Cat's portrait everywhere "like a new order of merit that had just been bestowed" (34), is to make sure that, this time, the Prince's father will not be able to refuse him the crown he deserves, as the White Cat explains while she gives the Prince a walnut containing the piece of cloth the King had requested. As Elizabeth Harries points out,

D'Aulnoy again turns the details of her tale into an allegory of writing, justifying her own ways of telling a story. The structural complexities of the tale and its elaborate descriptions are not mere excess or self-indulgent play, but rather subtle guides for reading it. (43)

The Prince is almost overwhelmed with emotion by such tender interest in himself that he nobly tells the White Cat, "Adorable Blanchette (...) I confess I am so saturated with your kindness, that if you cared to consent,

I would prefer spending my life with you to all the grandeurs that I have reason to anticipate elsewhere” (34). Absolutism in general, and Louis XIV in particular as the ruling monarch at d’Aulnoy’s time, stand rebuked by the White Cat’s reply to this: “King’s son, I am persuaded of your goodness of heart, it is a rare piece of merchandise among princes, they want to be loved by everyone and to love nothing; but you are proof that the general rule has its exception” (34). The White Cat’s words, which can be applied to herself as well, thus stress the gendered difference between a court ruled by a King who loves no one and another one ruled by a Queen who is loved by her subjects. This gracious female monarch extends her leniency even to proven guilty parts — quite the opposite of Louis XIV, who is implicitly denounced as a tyrant who never forgives or forgets an offense (he banished Comtesse de Murat from Paris only because she had written a tale which exposed too clearly an illicit love affair of his). Moreover, these words deepen the gap between Louis XIV’s stifling ceremonial court and the pleasant *salons* ruled by the *conteuses*, mirrored in the reception the Prince has at his father’s court and at the White Cat’s: his father, ever the absolute king, is concerned with holding power as long as he can under the guise of testing his sons; less fond of his offspring than he is of his crown, he is really relieved when his sons depart, whereas the White Cat is described as positively dejected when the Prince first leaves her.

Magic and metamorphosis fuse in the next scene: in order to show his cloth, the Prince cracks the walnut which had been given him by the White Cat only to find inside it — much to his growing confusion and his father’s malicious excitement — a hazelnut, which contains a cherry stone, which has a solid kernel, inside which is a grain of wheat, which encloses a millet seed inside which is accommodated “a piece of linen four hundred ells long” (36) with magnificent embroideries of natural beauties and reigning sovereigns with all their entourage. Much against his will, the king only acknowledges the superiority of his youngest son’s cloth after it has been passed through the needle six times, to declare at last that he will set his sons a final task which will admit no further postponement of the promised crown: “whoever returns at the end of the year with the most beautiful maiden shall wed her and be crowned king on his marriage” (37). The Prince returns to the White Cat’s court, who receives him with flowers strewn on the road, a thousand blazing incense-burners and celebratory

festivities which include a lively naval battle between the White Cat's lieges and their enemies the rats. This scene emphasises both d'Aulnoy's unconventional sadistic humour and her belonging in a specific literary culture by having the rat general be devoured by Minagrobis, the cat admiral who echoes La Fontaine's almost eponymous feline hero Raminagrobis. At the same time, the White Cat's political expertise is praised in that she does not allow the total destruction of the rat fleet for fear "her subjects would lapse into a state of idleness which might be detrimental to their well-being" (38).

After a year has elapsed in similar amusements — added emphasis to the White Cat's skill as a chess player — the time is come for the Prince to return home with his crown-winning maiden. Now the White Cat, who has never said a word about how she became a cat despite the Prince's constant wonder at her condition, much to the Prince's dismay entreats him to cut off her head and tail and throw them to the fire directly — but offers no explanation for such bizarre request. The Prince evinces his nobility and tenderness of heart — always a must in the *conteuses'* tales — by having tears in his eyes at the mere thought of complying with the White Cat's request, loudly protesting he could never be such a barbarian as to slay his love and exclaiming such request is no doubt a test on his love and gratitude for the lovely Blanchette. She replies that she knows his worth but when he does as she bids him each of them will begin to know happiness: until then, they cannot control their destiny in this affair. In the end, because no matter how hard he tries to dissuade her she only replies she wishes to die at his hands, the Prince tremblingly draws his sword and with an unsteady hand cuts off her head and tail. And now, lo and behold, to the Prince's utter astonishment, the "most charming metamorphosis imaginable" takes place before his very eyes: "White Cat's body grew tall, and suddenly changed into a girl" (40). And, by all means, not just any ordinary girl either:

It would be impossible to describe how perfect she was in every detail, how superior to all other maidens. Her eyes delighted all hearts, and her sweetness gave them pause: her form was regal, her manner noble and modest, her nature affectionate, her manners engaging; in a word, she towered above all that was most lovable in the world. (40)

No wonder this hyperbolic description of instantly apprehended perfection leaves the poor Prince stunned and speechless, even more so when before his very eyes all the cats in the kingdom parade in their human form with their cat's fur thrust over their shoulders and, kneeling before their Queen, voice their delight at seeing her again in her natural state. And now, after the Queen has received all the rapturous manifestations of her subjects "with tokens of kindness which bore ample witness to the goodness of her heart" (40), it is time for her own story to unravel like the piece of cloth she had given the Prince. As Elizabeth Harries remarks,

The White Cat's story is embedded in the story of the prince, just as her gifts to the prince's father are all embedded in something tiny (...) The tale-within-a-tale is mirrored in the fantastic forms of the tiny encapsulated objects. (42)

And here are, indeed, hints of at least two other wonder tales within the White Cat's story: Charlotte-Rose de Caumont de La Force's 1698 "Persinette" (adapted in 1812 as "Rapunzel" by the Brothers Grimm) and Gabrielle-Suzanne Barbot de Villeneuve's "Beauty and the Beast". The fact that de La Force's tale was published the very same year "The White Cat" made its appearance in d'Aulnoy's collection *New Tales, or Fairies in Fashion*, testifies to the *conteuses'* shared literary culture as well as to their hearing one another's tales in the *salons*: in fact, the first literary traces of these tales come from Giambattista Basile's 1637 *The Pentamerone* and, more specifically, from the tale "Petrosinella". Basile's heroine's name is derived from "petrosine" for parsley, just as de la Force's Persinette is also named for parsley and the Grimms' Rapunzel is named for a vegetable delicacy. As Jack Zipes points out in his analysis of Basile's tale in *The Great Fairy Tale Tradition: From Straparola and Basile to the Brothers Grimm*,

Basile's tale about a pregnant woman who is desperate for a certain vegetable delicacy (parsley, cabbage, rapunzel) was one of the most popular tales in the oral and literary tradition. (474)

Zipes links both de la Force's and d'Aulnoy's tales directly to Basile's "Petrosinella" and considers them important retellings which prove the *conteuses* were well acquainted with Basile's tale. As for Villeneuve's



"Beauty and the Beast", it was only published in 1740, thirty-five years after Marie-Cathérine d'Aulnoy had died. This leads us to speculate whether d'Aulnoy, whose influence Villeneuve acknowledged, was the first *conteuse* ever to conceive of an unfortunate person who, being the victim of an evil spell which metamorphosed her into an animal along with her entire court, would only become human again after a worthy lover returned her love — only the heartless male Beast is metamorphosed, in d'Aulnoy's rendition, into a tender female White Cat. This could well be the case, especially if we take into due account d'Aulnoy's gendered explorations of women's political and artistic power, so much so that, as Harries points out, "D'Aulnoy has transformed a tale about a wandering prince into a tale about a powerful princess, whose storytelling, both written and oral, is part of her power" (43).

This is quite apparent in the White Cat's mother's story: a Queen who loved travelling (clearly a wink at d'Aulnoy's own personal experience), during one of her many journeys through foreign lands she once contemplated from afar the tastiest fairy fruits ever conceivable which were quite out of her urgent wish to savour though. The Queen, who was pregnant, fell dangerously ill until she promised "a little old woman, ugly and decrepit" (41) — a fairy in disguise — her baby in return for the fruit she so desperately craved; her child would be endowed with all the virtues, charms and sciences imaginable but she, the mother, would not see her daughter again until the girl's wedding day. According to Zipes,

The motif of a pregnant woman who has a strong craving for an extravagant dish or extraordinary food is very important. In many peasant societies, people believed that it was necessary to fulfil the longings of a pregnant woman; otherwise, something evil like a miscarriage or bad luck might occur. Therefore, it was incumbent on the husband and other friends and relatives to use spells or charms or other means to fulfil the cravings. (Zipes, *Great Fairy Tale Tradition* 474)

However, in d'Aulnoy's tale it is the pregnant woman herself who fulfils her craving unbeknownst to her husband: when the Queen returned to her palace, laden with all the fruit she could carry, she only told the King the bargain she had struck with the fairy after many contradictions and just before her child was due. The King, appalled at what he deemed a lack

of love for him because he so wanted the baby, locked his wife up in a tower guarded on all sides and refused to see her even after their daughter was born. When he declined to hand the child to the fairies' ambassadors on account of their hideousness, the fairies grew furious to the point of showering all the King's six kingdoms with devastating ills before they unleashed a dragon whose venomous breath destroyed all fauna and whose appetite was only appeased by human flesh. At last, the King decided to follow his old fairy advisor's counsel and gave the fairies his daughter because his fairy godmother made it quite clear that it was his own fault the situation had turned up so badly. She also stressed the fact that her powers were only as great as her sisters' and it was but very rarely they acted against each other. The Queen, released from her high tower, reproached herself for this sad outcome and beseeched the King, to no avail, not to deliver their daughter into the hands of the fairies.

History — or, more to the purpose, her-story — repeats itself when the baby is taken away by the fairies: the daughter of a Queen who had been tricked by the fairies into exchanging her unborn baby for some magical fruit she craved, she lives in magnificent splendour inside a tower built expressly for her, where she is clad in regal clothes, taught everything suitable to her age and rank and cherished by the fairies until the day she disobeys them. However, she has unknowingly traded her personal freedom for a golden cage: there is no door to the tower and the windows are so high up that her only visitors, the fairies, always enter astride the furious dragon which had devastated her father's kingdom. Her freedom is even more impaired when the fairies decide for her whom she will be married to. Nevertheless, unbeknownst to the fairies, she has fallen in love with, and was secretly married to, the first man she has set eyes upon, a young knight who discovered the tower by chance. The fairies were not informed because on top of hating mortal men they already have wedding plans for her. These include their chosen bridegroom, a frightful-looking scarecrow of a dwarf king as he is described by one of the White Cat's talking animal companions, Sinbad the parrot. However much this name brings to mind the celebrated sailor in *The One Thousand and One Nights*, it is a fact that the first Western translation of *The One Thousand and One Nights* was carried out by French Orientalist Antoine Galland between 1704 and 1717, so it could not have been the source for this reference in a tale which

had been published seven years before. It is possible, then, that d'Aulnoy might have been acquainted with La Fontaine's 1679 *The Fables of Bidpai*, a version of the much older Sanskrit collection of tales *Panchatantra* in which this particular name might have appeared, since these tales have had a major influence on the shaping of *The One Thousand and One Nights*.

To return to the description of the White Cat's intended bridegroom and especially of the abduction of the unwilling bride with the connivance of the fairies, this is a well-aimed satire at d'Aulnoy's own husband and her own abduction so long ago, aided and abetted by her father. Herself the victim of an unhappy arranged marriage, d'Aulnoy was highly critical of forced matrimonies and seriously commented on love, courtship and marriage in a characteristic witty combination of social criticism of an oppressive present with a utopian dimension. Absolute power, be it male or female like the fairies' of this tale, is to be chastised by rebellion, even if the outcome is not always happy: the price that the White Cat has to pay for adamantly refusing her arranged bridegroom is to witness her loved husband be devoured by the fierce dragon and herself be turned into a white cat along with all her retinue so as to be made to suffer more lingering torments for daring to disobey the fairies' supreme power. It is curious that the animal which the princess metamorphosed into should be a cat, given this animal ambivalent symbolism which "varies widely from beast of good to beast of evil omen, explicable simply in the terms of the combination of the gentle and the sinister in the creature's appearance." (*Dictionary of Symbols* 162) Thus, whereas the Kabbalah and Buddhism regard the cat as an emblem of sin and the misuse of the good things in this world,

In Ancient Egypt the cat-goddess, Bastet, was worshipped as the guardian and benefactress of mankind (...) In this respect cats are symbols of their own natural strength and agility, which a tutelary deity places at the service of mankind to enable it to overcome its hidden enemies. (*Dictionary of Symbols* 163)

The fact that this particular cat is white lends credence to this latter interpretation, moreover if the detailed description of the White Cat's first appearance is taken into account: "[The prince] perceived the most beautiful White Cat that ever was or ever will be. She appeared to be very

young and very sad; she began to miaow so gently and sweetly that it went straight to his heart” (d’Aulnoy 24). This introduction leads the reader to conclude that this could not be a ghoulish character as the spectral symbolism of white might otherwise suggest: white is here “the colour of ‘passage’ in the sense in which the word is used in ‘rites of passage’ and it is rightly the preferred colour for those rites through which changes in existence take place on the classic pattern of all initiation, through death and rebirth.” (*Dictionary of Symbols* 1105) In fact, that is precisely what the Princess’s metamorphosis into a white cat entailed for her, a rite of passage between the death of her first husband and a new life as the wife of the only man who could ever break this spell. Thus, she is told that this evil spell will only be broken by a prince who perfectly resembles in person and character the one who died to defend her from the combined charge of the fairies, the dragon and the dwarf king.

In the end, however, being true to one’s heart weighs far more than bowing one’s head in the face of injustice: the spell is broken and the White Cat earns the youngest Prince’s father’s crown for him. Her nobility is once more emphasised when she refuses to deprive the King of his throne and grants him one of the six kingdoms she inherited from her late parents, while at the same time she bequeaths the youngest Prince’s brothers a kingdom each. She asks for the King’s friendship and states that having the Prince as her husband is the sole reward she wishes, and is “immortalised as much for her kindness and generosity as for her rare merit and her beauty” (62).

D’Aulnoy’s “The White Cat” shows how, in order to be happy, an animal lover had to suffer first until she met the one who fell in love with her still in her animal form because she was beautiful, learned and pleasant. And then, only after they had proved themselves worthy of each other, would the evil spell be broken and human form restored to its victims. For d’Aulnoy, magic is indeed the creative power to change both her and her heroines’ life by overcoming great odds, as well as the Circean power of metamorphosis bestowed on some of her unfortunate lovers as a metaphor for social criticism; it is both a coping mechanism and a powerful tool of change.

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**ABSTRACT**

Magic and metamorphosis always go hand in hand in wonder tales. I argue that in Marie Cathérine d'Aulnoy's wonder tales, however, it would be more accurate to say that magic and metamorphosis go paw in hand: I will analyse d' Aulnoy's wonder tale "The White Cat" in order to illustrate the way she favours the mythological theme of animal metamorphosis. Herself the victim of an unhappy arranged marriage in seventeenth-century France, Madame d'Aulnoy was highly critical of forced marriages, so much so that her tales seriously commented on love, courtship and marriage. D'Aulnoy's buoyant tales tell their author's search for magic in her own life, marked by scandal and rebellion against the marriage mores of her time from a very early age on. She is Fairy Godmother to her heroines, granting them happiness after sore trials and tribulations, and to herself, by refusing to be a passive object submitted to another's will and reclaiming instead the agency of changing her life.

**KEYWORDS**

Magic; Metamorphosis; Wonder Tales; *Conteuses*; Social Criticism

**RESUMO**

Magia e metamorfose andam sempre de mãos dadas nos contos de encantar. Defendo, contudo, que, nos contos de Marie Cathérine d' Aulnoy, seria mais correcto dizer que magia e metamorfose andam de patas dadas: irei analisar o conto "The White Cat" para ilustrar o modo como d'Aulnoy favorece o tema mitológico da metamorfose animal. Ela própria vítima de um infeliz casamento por conveniência na França do século XVII, Madame d' Aulnoy tinha uma posição extremamente crítica relativamente a casamentos forçados, de tal modo que os contos faziam um comentário crítico ao amor, à corte amorosa e ao casamento. Os vivazes contos de d'Aulnoy contam a história da sua busca de magia na sua própria vida, marcada pelo escândalo e pela rebelião contra os códigos maritais do seu tempo desde tenra idade. D'Aulnoy é a Fada Madrinha das suas heroínas,

concedendo-lhes um final feliz depois de duras provas e tribulações; é também a sua própria Fada Madrinha, ao recusar ser um objecto passivo submetido à vontade de outrem e reclamando, em vez disso, o direito a ser o agente da sua própria vida.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE

Magia; Metamorfose; Contos de Encantar; *Conteuses*; Crítica Social

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