

# THE 'CONTES DE FÉES' OF MADAME D'AULNOY: REPUTATION AND RE-EVALUATION

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Towards the end of the seventeenth century, and for much of the eighteenth, the *contes de fées* enjoyed great success, particularly in France and England. While they were to some extent neglected during the intervening period, they have benefited in recent years from the attention of scholars, who have firmly established their typology, structure and thematic affiliations.<sup>1</sup> The most notable beneficiary of this renewed interest in the form has probably been Charles Perrault, though he is only the best known of the many writers who produced such works in France at the time. Among his contemporaries who have received less critical scrutiny is Marie-Catherine Jumelle de Barneville, better known as Mme d'Aulnoy (1650?–1705).

From the standpoint of bibliographical history, however, it might appear surprising that her reputation has suffered such an eclipse. After all, during the eighteenth century, her works were frequently reissued, both in England and in France, and exceeded in popularity those of Perrault himself.<sup>2</sup> Of course, bare bibliographical statistics do not tell the whole story; in addition, for reasons of space, we shall have to confine ourselves to considering Mme d'Aulnoy's reputation as a writer in France alone. Even so, it

<sup>1</sup> For example, Paul Delarue and Marie-Louise Tenèze, *Le conte populaire français*, 3 vols (Paris: Maisonneuve & Larose, 1976); Antti Aarne and Stith Thompson, *The types of folktale: a classification and bibliography*, 2nd edition (Helsinki: FF Communications, 74, 1973); Vladimir Propp, *Morphology of the folktale*, trans. Laurence Scott (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1968).

<sup>2</sup> Perrault's *Histoires ou contes du temps passé* (1697) are known to have been reprinted several times before 1700, as well as in 1761, 1764, 1777, 1778, 1781; other reported editions of 1724 and 1742 remain untraced. Mme d'Aulnoy's *Contes de fées* were first printed between 1696 and 1698, and reissued in 1708, 1710, 1725, 1731, 1742, 1749, 1757, 1774, 1782 and 1785. Her *Contes nouveaux ou les fées à la mode* were first published in 1698; they were reprinted (sometimes with the spurious title of *Suite des contes nouveaux*) in 1711, 1715, 1719, 1725, 1735, 1742 and 1754 (see A. Martin, et. al., *Bibliographie du genre romanesque en France 1751–1800* (London: Mansell, & Paris: France Expansion, 1977)). Translations of Mme d'Aulnoy's fairytales were more popular in England during the eighteenth century than those of any other French author, including Perrault (see Nancy & Melvin Palmer, 'English editions of French *Contes de fées* attributed to Madame d'Aulnoy', *Studies in Bibliography*, xxvii (1984), 227–32).

is clear that the decline in her literary fortunes can be traced back some two hundred years, to the time, indeed, of her greatest popularity.

This paradox is not difficult to understand. It is quite true that the French reading public continued to buy editions of her *Contes*. It is also true that, towards *conteurs* such as Mme d'Aulnoy, many influential eighteenth-century commentators displayed marked and sustained hostility. This sharply unfavourable view, which was widespread in the writing of the time, has coloured her posthumous reputation in a number of ways. It therefore prompts one to ask why, during the Enlightenment, *contes de fées* were treated with an intellectual disdain which contrasted so markedly with their commercial success. The first purpose of this article is to offer some answers to this question.

Self-evidently, however, the diachronic study of Mme d'Aulnoy's literary fortunes is closely bound up with wider cultural issues impinging on her relationship with her own times. The second purpose of this article will, therefore, be to argue that her fairy stories deserve fuller consideration than they have sometimes received. Not only do they possess literary qualities (which are now generally recognized); in addition, they illuminate a number of important contemporary presuppositions, in ways which have sometimes been obscured by the decline in her reputation as a writer.<sup>3</sup>

Like many literary figures of her day, Mme d'Aulnoy did not confine herself to one genre: she tried her hand also at a number of historical works such as the *Mémoires de la cour d'Espagne* of 1690 and novels like the *Histoire de Jean de Bourbon, Prince de Carency* of 1691. There seems to have been some uncertainty as to her importance as a writer even during her lifetime. In his *Dictionnaire historique et critique* (1697), Pierre Bayle acknowledges that she is 'fort connue par ses écrits', but he damns her with faint praise when he writes that her fictional works are 'autant de petits Romans', and that she has also published 'plusieurs *Contes de Fées*'.<sup>4</sup> Half a century later, Voltaire spoke in much the same deprecating terms when he declared that 'Son *Voyage & ses Mémoires d'Espagne & quelques Romans écrits avec légèreté, lui firent quelque réputation*'.<sup>5</sup>

<sup>3</sup> Mary Elizabeth Storer describes her as 'un des auteurs les plus lus et les plus goûtés de son temps, perdant aujourd'hui tout prestige pour ces mêmes ouvrages' (*La mode des contes de fées (1685-1700)*, ([Paris, 1928], Genève: Slatkine Reprints: 1972), 41. Seventeenth-century criticisms of fairytales, which are discussed very fully in her study (209-23), do not impinge on our present concerns.

<sup>4</sup> Troisième édition (Rotterdam: Böhm, 1720, 4 vols), i, 394.

<sup>5</sup> *Essay sur l'histoire générale et sur les mœurs et l'esprit des nations, depuis Charlemagne jusqu'à nos jours* (n.p., 1758, 7 vols), vii, 184. It is now known that the two books mentioned by Voltaire were largely inspired by the work of other writers, though Mme d'Aulnoy was responsible for giving them the form in which they were put before the public. Cf. Storer, 19.

One of the few contemporary voices to be raised in defence of the fairy story, and of Mme d'Aulnoy in particular, was that of the polymath Nicolas Lenglet Dufresnoy. In his *Bibliothèque des romans* of 1734, he argued that her *contes de fées*

sont écrits avec grace, avec legereté, beaucoup de tours & de délicatesse [. . .] Sous l'apparence d'une simplicité, qui n'a rien de niais ni de dégoûtant, on trouve les mœurs & les instructions familières qu'on pouvoit répandre dans ces petits Ouvrages: & quoiqu'on les ait destinés d'abord pour de jeunes personnes, ils ne laissent pas d'amuser quelquefois agréablement ceux qui sont d'un âge mûr & formé.<sup>6</sup>

Lenglet Dufresnoy's vigorous advocacy (to which must be added that of La Porte and La Croix<sup>7</sup> more than thirty years later) proved of little use. Despite such recommendations, and despite the tangible bibliographical evidence of her continuing popularity with the reading public, Mme d'Aulnoy's works were largely ignored by the French literary establishment. Indeed, many historians of literature in the latter half of the century simply fail to mention her at all, as though she had by that time become a woman of no importance.<sup>8</sup>

Even commentators of the time who did trouble to consider her writings were scarcely complimentary. This was partly due, no doubt, to her exclusive interest in the history of princes, kings and queens (to which the titles of her novels testify), and to her unflinching use of courtly settings in the *Contes*. One eighteenth-century critic, Sabatier de Castres, complained that Mme d'Aulnoy had difficulty in distinguishing between fact and fiction even in her ostensibly historical writings. In his *Trois siècles de la littérature française*, he alleges that her *Mémoires d'Espagne* 'sont pleins de faussetés & d'injustice, dans ce qui a rapport à l'histoire & aux mœurs de cette Nation'.<sup>9</sup> This obvious irritation at her failure to observe proper historical standards in her books is typical of the hostility which the French literary establishment had long displayed towards writers of fairy stories; it is worth asking why this was so.

In the first place, the accepted literary theory of the time was based on rational, classical formulæ. As such, it left little place for the fantasy and invention which constituted the essential appeal of

<sup>6</sup> Amsterdam: veuve de Poilras, 280–1.

<sup>7</sup> Cf. Storer, 39.

<sup>8</sup> There is no mention of her in, for example, Palissot's *Mémoires pour servir à l'histoire de notre littérature (Oeuvres complètes* (Liège & Paris: Bastien, 1778)), iv, or in Taillefer's *Tableau historique de l'esprit et du caractère des littérateurs français* (Versailles & Paris: Poinçot & Nyon, 1785, 4 vols). Without referring specifically to the fairytales, Palissot devotes a dismissive and hostile article to Perrault (267–72), who is not mentioned at all by Taillefer. Unlike Mme d'Aulnoy, Perrault is mentioned by the anonymous compiler of the *Encyclopædiana, ou Dictionnaire encyclopédique des arts* (Paris: Panckoucke, 1791), 743, who does not, however, refer to his fairytales. Other eighteenth-century reactions to Mme d'Aulnoy's tales are recorded in Storer, 39–40.

<sup>9</sup> Quatrième édition (La Haye & Paris: Moutard, 1779, 4 vols), i, 60.

the fairy story, or for serious consideration of the art of the *conteur*. This outlook did not change substantially for most of the period. In the article 'Fées', published in the *Encyclopédie* in 1756, Edmé Mallet declares: 'Les fées de nos romans modernes sont des êtres imaginaires que les auteurs de ces sortes d'ouvrages ont employés pour opérer le merveilleux ou le ridicule qu'ils y sèment [. . .] avec ce secours, il n'y a point d'idée folle & bizarre qu'on ne puisse hasarder'.<sup>10</sup> Marmontel was similarly dismissive, as might be expected of an arch-conservative in literary matters, who later became historiographer royal and permanent secretary to the Académie française. In his *Poétique française* (1763), he writes that 'comme la féerie n'a jamais été reçue [sc. by the arbiters of literary taste] elle ne peut jamais être sérieusement employée'.<sup>11</sup> Hence, mavericks such as Lenglet Dufresnoy defended Mme d'Aulnoy's work as offering entertainment and instruction for children and adults alike; at the same time, the literary establishment, on *a priori* theoretical grounds, was unwilling to grant the fairy story any significant place in the cultural pantheon.

This attitude is, in its way, no more surprising than the failure of eighteenth-century critics to cope with the phenomenon of Shakespeare, and for much the same reasons.<sup>12</sup> In both cases, it was an article of faith that one *ought* not to write works of this kind; hence, any which did appear were automatically dismissed as unworthy of serious consideration. Of course, fairy stories (including those of Mme d'Aulnoy) were widely read, not least by the lower classes who purchased *livres de colportage*; their success merely reinforced the view that it was beneath the dignity of self-respecting critics to spend time examining them.<sup>13</sup> However, this theoretically-based prejudice against the fairy story not only impaired the appreciation of their true qualities (at which Lenglet Dufresnoy's remarks had hinted); it was also inconsistent with other manifestations of contemporary 'rational' taste.

In the first place, Mme d'Aulnoy's use of metamorphosis recalls what we find in Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, a work which, during the eighteenth century, was frequently reprinted, and much praised.<sup>14</sup> There seems no obvious reason in principle to

<sup>10</sup> *Encyclopédie, ou Dictionnaire raisonné des sciences, des arts et des métiers* (Paris & Neuchâtel, 1751–80, 35 vols), vi, 464.

<sup>11</sup> Paris: Lesclapart, 1763, 2 vols. i, 426.

<sup>12</sup> Shakespeare's reputation in eighteenth-century France is summarized by Theodore Besterman in his *Voltaire* (London: Longman, 1969), 125–52.

<sup>13</sup> Editions of individual *contes* by Mme d'Aulnoy continued to be published regularly well into the nineteenth century in the *Bibliothèque bleue*, which was widely sold by hawkers and pedlars. See Alfred Morin, *Catalogue descriptif de la Bibliothèque bleue de Troyes* (Geneva, 1974).

<sup>14</sup> The Bibliothèque nationale catalogue lists twenty-three editions of Ovid in French published between 1700 and 1800, plus a number of others in Latin.

discriminate between them. In one of her *Contes* entitled *L’oiseau bleu*, king Charmant is deceived into promising marriage to Truitonne, an ugly princess who is protected by the fairy Soussio. When he refuses to honour his promise, he is transformed into the blue bird of the title:

ses bras se couvrent de plumes et forment des ailes; ses jambes et ses pieds deviennent noirs et menus; il lui croît des ongles crochus; son corps s’apetisse; il est tout garni de longues plumes fines et déliées de bleu céleste; ses yeux s’arrondissent et brillent comme des soleils; son nez n’est plus qu’un bec d’ivoire; il s’élève sur sa tête une aigrette blanche qui forme une couronne [. . .] (i, 53).<sup>15</sup>

In the *Métamorphoses*, Fable VIII of book II tells how Nyctimene was changed into an owl for having fallen in love with her father, and sought the darkness in shame at her crime. The sumptuously-illustrated edition of the work published in four volumes between 1767 and 1771 contains a plate showing this transformation half completed: Nyctimene already displays the face and wings of an owl, but still has the body of a woman.<sup>16</sup> In *Le rameau d’or*, princess Brillante is turned into a grasshopper by a wizard who claims that he has already enticed princes to his castle, where ‘je les ai métamorphosés en chats et en souris’ (i, 171). The choice of this word puts one in mind of similar episodes from Ovid, in which, for example, Actaeon is transformed into a stag (iii, 3), Ceres is changed into a lynx (v, 8) and ants become men (vii, 6).

The commentators who readily found fault with Mme d’Aulnoy’s use of the supernatural were not averse to admiring it in Ovid, or indeed to using it in their own works. In Voltaire’s *La Pucelle*, first published in 1755, Joan of Arc is helped in her fight against the English by the gift of a winged horse;<sup>17</sup> in *Le taureau blanc* of 1774, princess Amaside holds a conversation with a serpent. The difference between them, of course, was that while Ovid was an accepted classic, and Voltaire a supreme arbiter of taste in matters of literature, Mme d’Aulnoy was merely a writer of despised *contes de fées*.

As René Bray has shown in studying the genesis of classical literary doctrines in France, theorists were for the most part opposed to the use of magic in serious works of literature.<sup>18</sup> The general acceptance of this doctrine therefore suggests a second, related, reason why her stories were neglected, even during her lifetime. It is true that a few writers, such as Chapelain, were prepared to tolerate the intrusion of magic into literature. Yet even

<sup>15</sup> *Madame d’Aulnoy: les contes des fées* (Paris: Mercure de France, 1956, 2 vols). All references are to this edition.

<sup>16</sup> *Les métamorphoses d’Ovide, en latin et en françois* (Paris: Barrois, 1767–71, 4 vols), i, 142.

<sup>17</sup> N.p., 1762, 29.

<sup>18</sup> *La formation de la doctrine classique en France* (Paris: Nizet, 1966), 236.

he insisted that it should not offend against 'la vraisemblance' or the limits imposed by nature; the inconsistency of this view seems to have escaped his notice.<sup>19</sup>

Opinions like these inevitably worked to the detriment of the *Contes*, which rely heavily on the use of magic to produce their distinctive charms. In *L'oiseau bleu*, a magician protects king Charmant, while princess Truitonne is protected by her godmother, the fairy Soussio. In the interests of their respective protégés, each performs supernatural feats, which include the use of magic eggs to provide money, horses, jewels, etc. In *L'oranger et l'abeille*, queen Trusio is 'savante dans l'art de la féerie' (i, 203). In *Fortunée*, a poor woman is changed into a chicken by a wave of a fairy's wand (i, 259), etc.

During the eighteenth century, then, the emphasis on magic was one of the chief reasons why the fairy tale was so comprehensively despised. Yet this view was not based solely on literary theory, but also on what might be called philosophical factors. In his *Philosophie de l'histoire* (1765), Voltaire defined magic as 'le secret de faire ce que ne peut faire la nature; c'est la chose impossible; aussi a-t-on cru la magie dans tous les tems [. . .] toutes ces extravagances, ou ridicules, ou affreuses, se perpétuèrent chez nous; & il n'y a pas un siècle qu'elles sont décréditées'.<sup>20</sup>

At exactly the same time, Polier de Bottens was writing on 'Magiciens' in the *Encyclopédie*. Here, he declared that 'ce fut dans les siècles de barbarie ou d'ignorance, un assez bon métier, mais la Philosophie, & sur-tout la Physique expérimentale, plus cultivées & mieux connues, ont fait perdre à cet art merveilleux son crédit & sa vogue'.<sup>21</sup> It is clear, therefore, that in the mid-eighteenth century, serious writers were unwilling, on literary and on philosophical grounds, to tolerate the concept or the use of magic; for this reason, they condemned the very notion of magical occurrences as typical of an age of barbarism from which France had not long emerged.

This view derives fundamentally from a third factor which helps to explain why Mme d'Aulnoy's work was so widely neglected by critics after her death. There is little to indicate that the *Contes* are set in any specific historical period, and most begin with the standard formula 'Il était une fois'. None the less, there are occasional hints of a vaguely medieval background. There is, for example, a reference to king Merlin in *La princesse Printanière*; *Babiole* contains a description of a jousting tournament (i, 281), while another *conte* is entitled *Belle-Belle ou le chevalier Fortuné*. Slight though they are, the medieval elements which the stories

<sup>19</sup> Ibid.

<sup>20</sup> N.p., 1765, 213, 216.

<sup>21</sup> *Encyclopédie*, ix, 950.

contain were sufficient to allow classically-minded commentators to find them guilty by association. In his *Art poétique* of 1674, Boileau asserts that the earliest period of French literature was characterized by anarchy, and by an absence of rules which led only to confusion:

Durant les premiers ans du Parnasse François,  
Le caprice tout seul faisoit toutes les loix.  
La rime, au bout des mots assemblez sans mesure,  
Tenoit lieu d'ornemens, de nombre & de césure.  
Villon sut le premier, dans ces siècles grossiers,  
Débrouiller l'Art confus de nos vieux Romanciers.<sup>22</sup>

Boileau's attitude to the 'siècles grossiers' obviously anticipates that of Polier de Bottens ninety years later. Each of them points to the ignorance characteristic of earlier centuries, which cultivated men of their own day could only despise. This persistent contempt for the 'vieux romanciers' engendered the belief that chivalry, the customary subject of such romances, was symptomatic of the general inferiority of medieval prose fiction. In 1759, for example, the anonymous author of the *Avertissement* to the *Mémoires sur l'ancienne chevalerie* of Lacurne de Sainte-Palaye complained that many of his contemporaries regarded chivalry as 'un système bizarre, imaginé par nos anciens Romanciers, & qui sert de fondement à des fictions aussi monotones qu'insipides'.<sup>23</sup>

In the fourth place, this fastidious distaste for the allegedly uncivilized helps also to explain why the eighteenth century regarded the actions of characters in *contes* as barbarous. Critics were especially hostile to the fact that such characters are frequently to be found inflicting quite horrible cruelties on one another. In *Gracieuse et Percinet*, queen Grognon has princess Gracieuse repeatedly flogged by four furies wielding sticks (i, 15); in *La belle aux cheveux d'or*, the approaches to prince Galifron's chateau are strewn with the remains of men he has torn to pieces (i, 38). In *L'oiseau bleu*, the prince who has been transformed into a bird attempts to reach the tower in which his love is imprisoned, only to find that it is surrounded by sharp instruments: 'lorsqu'il vint à tire-d'aile s'abattre dessus, ces armes meurtrières lui coupèrent les pieds; il tomba sur d'autres qui lui coupèrent les ailes; et enfin, tout percé, il se sauva avec mille peines jusqu'à son arbre, laissant une longue trace de sang' (i, 64). These and many other similar descriptions are of a kind rarely found in the cultural products of the eighteenth century. The doctrine of the *bienséances*, formulated by the theorists of the classical era, militated against any overt display of cruelty.

<sup>22</sup> *Chant I*, 113–18. *Oeuvres* (Amsterdam: Mortier, 1718, 2 vols) i, 275.

<sup>23</sup> Paris: Duchesne, 2 vols, i, viii. D'Alembert's article 'Chevalier' in the *Encyclopédie* (iii, 309), which dates from 1753, is similarly dismissive.

Indeed, the dramatic works of Crébillon *père* were sometimes criticized on these grounds for exemplifying unacceptable theatrical practice. In defiance of all convention, he showed the most bloodthirsty events taking place on stage, as when, in *Atrée et Thyeste* (1707), Atrée offers the blood of the murdered Plisthène to Thyeste (v, 6). Dramatic scenes of this kind stood out precisely because they were the exception, and not the rule.

Such descriptions were frowned on in prose fiction as well. It would be difficult to find any major eighteenth-century French novelists (at least before the Revolution) who allow detailed accounts of physical cruelty to enter into their writing. It is, of course, the stuff of fiction to delineate what might be called psychological suffering, as when lovers are separated, or unable to live in the bliss to which they aspire. Any number of novels and stories featuring such miseries saw the light of day throughout the century, as they had done before. Even so, there is a clear distinction between the depiction of mental anguish and the representation of physical suffering of the kind we frequently encounter in the works of Mme d'Aulnoy. What is more, the very comprehensive bibliography of the novel prepared by Lenglet Dufresnoy contains the rubric 'Contes et nouvelles amoureuses, satiriques et tragiques'; no contemporary French titles are listed in this category.<sup>24</sup> That the taste of the time was decidedly against such explicit depictions of physical anguish must be yet another reason why, after her death, the *Contes* of Mme d'Aulnoy fell out of favour with some sections of the reading public.

The factors which tended to make eighteenth-century French writers hostile to the *contes de fées* all derive from what might be called the literary and philosophical outlook of the time. But there were also other forces at work, of what might be called a sociological kind. These, too, played their part in creating, in some minds at least, an attitude unfavourable to the kind of work which Mme d'Aulnoy had bequeathed to later generations.

Foremost among these sociological factors is the question of social rank, which, without playing a large part in her *Contes*, is nevertheless presented in a consistent fashion. In all the stories where there is any threat to the preservation of a rigid social hierarchy, Mme d'Aulnoy makes clear her disapproval of any such danger to the stability of society. In *Gracieuse et Percinet*, Gracieuse is approached by Percinet who, dressed as a page, declares his feelings for her: 'Quoi! un page, s'écria la princesse, un page a l'audace de me dire qu'il m'aime! Voici le comble de mes disgrâces' (i, 12). In *La princesse Printanière*, the king's ambassador Fanfarinet elopes with the princess, only to reveal his selfishness and

<sup>24</sup> Op. cit., 309-22.



indifference to her sufferings when they are alone on a desert island (i, 125–6); he is duly punished with death for his temerity, and the princess marries her prince. In *Le rameau d'or*, the ugly princess Trognon is transformed into a beautiful young shepherdess; even this welcome improvement in her looks cannot compensate for her loss of social rank, which 'ne laissait pas de lui être sensible' (i, 163). In *Le pigeon et la colombe*, princess Constancia is also dressed as a shepherdess, but her true status is not in doubt; 'rien ne s'accordait plus mal avec la simplicité de ses habits et l'état de bergère' (ii, 197. Cf. ii, 248).

This adherence to the clear distinctions between the classes is at odds with the tenor of French novels published during the greater part of the eighteenth century. It is at this period that novelists, reflecting perhaps the larger social and economic changes taking place in contemporary France, begin to show an increasing preoccupation with the *parvenu*, the *picaro*; typically, the career of such a man takes him from anonymity among the peasantry to a place of wealth and distinction in the society of the day.<sup>25</sup> The archetypal heroes of this kind are to be found in memoir-novels such as Le Sage's *Gil Blas* (1715–35) and Marivaux's *Le paysan parvenu* (1734). Even in *Manon Lescaut* (1731), there is an ambiguity about the eponymous leading lady. Despite having been condemned to transportation as a common prostitute, she appears to the narrator to be of so noble a bearing that 'en tout autre état je l'eusse prise pour une Princesse'.<sup>26</sup>

Such examples indicate that, whether consciously or not, French novelists of the eighteenth century were gradually moving away from the fixed social hierarchy of the previous century. Instead, they tended increasingly towards the more fluid, flexible social milieu which was to develop as the century wore on. It is not, perhaps, surprising that the ordered rigidities which form the backbone of Mme d'Aulnoy's stories should have made her seem somewhat old-fashioned to certain readers of the next generation.

It is possible, then, to identify some reasons why Mme d'Aulnoy's fame suffered a critical eclipse in France. In particular, it is apparent that the cultural perspective of the eighteenth century helps to explain why her stories found little favour with the literary establishment of the day. However, in the interests of balance and of a better understanding of the significance of the *Contes*, this approach needs to be complemented by some consideration of the complex ways in which they reflect the wider society of the period at

<sup>25</sup> As Vivienne Mylne points out, heroes of this kind had figured in French novels even in the 1620s, although they became more frequent after 1730 (*The eighteenth-century French novel*, Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1965), 32, 42–3).

<sup>26</sup> *Suite des mémoires et aventures d'un homme de qualité qui s'est retiré du monde* (Amsterdam: aux dépens de la Compagnie, 1733, 2 vols), i, 5.

which they were composed. That is to say, we need also to look synchronically at what they can tell us about their own times, and about the broader cultural outlook of the day.

No reader of the *Contes* can fail to be struck by their vital, original literary appeal, and especially by their imagination and inventiveness. Yet, as Lenglet Dufresnoy hinted, they also display other qualities which make them something more than fascinating fairy stories. Perhaps the most fundamental of these qualities, underpinning everything else, is their in-built historical dimension, which is only partly visible on the surface.

In the first place, they offer us a very particular kind of world. We see not the everyday life of the bourgeoisie, still less that of the peasantry (even the shepherdess in *Fortunée* turns out to be a princess) but that of the courtier. Virtually all the *Contes* have as their setting a royal court, usually in an unnamed country, and at an unspecified period. But we need not look far for parallels in the actual courtly life of the time; Mme d'Aulnoy's *Mémoires de la cour d'Espagne* (1690) offers a number of similarities with the life of the courts and courtiers depicted in the *Contes*.<sup>27</sup>

The importance accorded to physical description in both the *Mémoires* and the *Contes* demonstrates that she had a gift for evoking vividly the most striking features of her characters. In the *Mémoires*, the duchesse de Terranova is described as 'une femme maigre & pâle; elle a le visage long & ridé, les yeux petits et rudes, & elle est une fort dangereuse ennemie'.<sup>28</sup> In *Gracieuse et Percinet*, the duchesse Grognon is presented in these terms:

elle avait le visage épouvantablement gros et couvert de boutons; de deux yeux qu'elle avait eus autrefois, il ne lui en restait qu'un chassieux [. . .] Ces sortes de monstres portent envie à toutes les belles personnes; elle haïssait mortellement Gracieuse [. . .] (i, 9. Cf. i, 114, 173).

Without insisting overmuch on the parallels between the two passages, we can see that the germ of the second is to be found in the first, with its emphasis on the coexistence of physical ugliness and an unpleasant nature. In such instances, Mme d'Aulnoy follows the prevailing fashion for making a connection between physical appearance and inner character. This belief in the inherent correspondence of character and appearance had a history dating back to ancient times. It had been popularized in the seventeenth century by the drawings of Le Brun, and was widely accepted in the eighteenth. One typically robust defence of such views can be found

<sup>27</sup> On other aspects of Mme d'Aulnoy's realism, see J. Barchilon, *Le conte merveilleux français* (Paris: Champion, 1975), 46–7.

<sup>28</sup> Paris: Barbin, 1690, 2 vols. i, 154.

in the *Lettres philosophiques sur les physionomies* of Pernetti (1746), who maintains

que les hommes ont dans leur Physionomie (sans comparaison avec les autres êtres) une preuve claire & animée de ce qu'ils sont en effet; que, par leur extérieur, on peut juger de leur intérieur; que l'assemblage de ce qui forme leur visage suffit sans d'autre recherche pour assurer quelle est leur âme.<sup>29</sup>

Yet Mme d'Aulnoy is not so simplistic as to assume that this correlation is an absolute one. In the *Mémoires* she describes how Don Carlos d'Aragon, a cousin of the duchesse de Terranova, is deceived as to her true nature: 'il connut son ambition; mais comme les mauvaises qualitez de son esprit étoient parées de tous les dehors fastueux d'une dévotion apparente, il ne comprit pas qu'elle étoit aussi maline qu'elle étoit' (i, 155).<sup>30</sup>

From other stories in the *Contes*, it is clear that Mme d'Aulnoy refuses to follow rigidly this simplistic line. In *Le rameau d'or*, prince Torticoli calls this direct correlation into question: 'Rien n'égalait son esprit, sa douceur, sa magnificence et sa capacité; mais il avait les jambes tordues, une bosse plus haute que sa tête, les yeux de travers, la bouche de côté; enfin c'était un petit monstre, et jamais une si belle âme n'avait animé un corps si mal fait' (i, 149). In *Le dauphin*, prince Alidor is polite and intelligent 'quoiqu'il fût d'une laideur qui n'était pas supportable' (ii, 319).

In allowing this discrepancy to exist between physical appearance and true character, Mme d'Aulnoy is adopting a decidedly 'modern' attitude to the question of physiognomy. She anticipates in this respect the views which the chevalier de Jaucourt set out in the *Encyclopédie* article 'Physionomie' of 1765:

comme l'âme n'a point de forme qui puisse être relative à aucune forme matérielle, on ne peut pas la juger par la figure du corps, ou par la forme du visage. Un corps mal fait peut renfermer une fort belle âme, & l'on ne doit pas juger du bon ou du mauvais naturel d'une personne par les traits de son visage; car ces traits n'ont aucun rapport avec la nature de l'âme, ils n'ont aucune analogie sur laquelle on puisse seulement fonder des conjectures raisonnables.<sup>31</sup>

This sceptical attitude towards the value of physiognomy as an approach to understanding others provides an essential key to Mme d'Aulnoy's view of her characters. She operates within the conventions of the fairytale, in which stock figures such as the young lovers, the evil stepmother and the good fairy recur from one *conte* to another. At the same time, she emphasizes their

<sup>29</sup> La Haye: Néaulme, 1746, 6.

<sup>30</sup> Cf. *ibid.*, i, 212, for the portrait of a man, le comte Doropesa, whose appearance is at variance with his character.

<sup>31</sup> *Encyclopédie*, xii, 538.

individuality, and is not hampered by the constraints of the form. This preference for specificity over convention is typical of what might be called the concreteness of the *Contes*, with their emphasis on realistic details rather than on generalized abstraction.

Her realism is apparent, for example, in their cruelty. As we have seen, references to such conduct did not please classically-minded eighteenth-century readers. It was not, however, entirely unrelated to the life which Mme d'Aulnoy witnessed at the court of Spain. There, as the *Mémoires* record, such barbarities as the public burning of heretics were routinely sanctioned (ii, 99–102). In the same work, she recounts how the wife of the Marquis d'Astorgas took revenge on a woman with whom her husband had fallen in love:

sa femme ayant pris une implacable jalousie contre une fille admirablement belle qu'il aimoit, elle fut chez elle bien accompagnée, elle la tua, elle lui arracha le coeur, & le fit accommoder en ragoût; lors que son Mary en eut mangé, elle luy demanda si cela lui sembloit bon [. . .] & aussi-tôt sa tête toute sanglante qu'elle avoit cachée [. . .] (i, 203).<sup>32</sup>

Such reports make it easier to accept incidents such as that in *Gracieuse et Percinet* in which Grognon exults at the flaying of Gracieuse by four furies (i, 15). In addition, they account for the intended cruelty of Rousse who, in *La princesse Belle-Étoile et le prince Chéri*, proposes to revenge herself on her sisters by making a fricassee of their children (ii, 241).

The point is not that the *Mémoires* need be regarded as the 'source' of such episodes.<sup>33</sup> The numerous cruelties inflicted by characters in the *Contes* reflect, rather, a mentality with which Mme d'Aulnoy was familiar. As the *auto-da-fé* episode shows, some, at least, of the incidents which she relates had a factual basis; they were not mere literary embellishments, or pre-Freudian anticipations on her part of what we now call sado-masochism.<sup>34</sup>

The cruelties which she encountered, and which she incorporates for dramatic effect into her stories, are symptomatic of a more generalized disinclination to believe overmuch in the goodness

<sup>32</sup> This particular example of cruelty was in fact a commonplace of popular literature, and Mme d'Aulnoy may simply have borrowed it from other sources for her *Mémoires*. See David Blamires, 'Konrads von Würzburg "Herzmaere" im Kontext der Geschichten vom gegessenen Herzen', *Jahrbuch der Oswald von Wolkenstein Gesellschaft*, v (1988–89), 251–61. See also Storer, 26.

<sup>33</sup> Other incidental points of comparison between the *Mémoires de la cour d'Espagne* and the *Contes* are:

- a. Descriptions of precious jewels: *Mémoires*: i, 246–47; *Contes*: i, 10, 226; ii, 35, 73, etc.
- b. A queen who has no money: *Mémoires*, ii, 75; *Contes*: ii, 235.
- c. Characters taken prisoner by corsairs: *Mémoires*, i, 385; *Contes*, ii, 244.

<sup>34</sup> Cf. Barchilon, 45. For a lucid rebuttal of Freudian interpretations of the fairytale, see Robert Darnton, 'Peasants tell tales: the meaning of *Mother Goose*' [in] *The great cat massacre and other episodes in French cultural history* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1984), 18–21.

of human beings. In *Gracieuse et Percinet*, for example, the protagonists apparently have the opportunity to be happy together, and Gracieuse needs only to agree to flee from her imprisonment with Percinet who claims to love her. Her reluctance to do so is explained by her fear that his feelings for her may change: 'je veux que le temps me confirme vos sentiments' (i, 24). Nor is it only men who are accused of fickleness. At the end of *Le prince Lutin*, the author herself, following her custom, sums up in rhyme the moral of the story:

Hélas! sur le fait des maîtresses,  
Heureux qui peut être ignorant;  
Telle vous comble de caresses,  
Qui n'a qu'un amour apparent (i, 112. Cf. i, 205).

Such remarks are the signs of the disabused realism of the *Contes*. It sets them in a somewhat different perspective from the supernatural elements that play so large a part in the world they evoke.

There is, too, another kind of realism to be discerned in the *Contes*, and it derives not so much from precise comparisons with the *Mémoires* as from the influence of French *mores*. Mme d'Aulnoy is not averse to drawing from her stories moral lessons which can be read as criticisms of contemporary practices, especially as they affected women. One such custom was the arranged marriage, an example of which can be found in *L'oiseau bleu*. The verses appended to the text make clear her strong hostility to the idea:

En ces sortes d'hymen notre siècle est fertile.  
Les hymens seraient plus heureux  
Si l'on trouvait encore quelque enchanteur habile  
Qui voulût s'opposer à ces coupables noeuds,  
Et ne jamais souffrir que l'hyménée unisse,  
Par intérêt ou par caprice,  
Deux cœurs infortunés, s'ils ne s'aiment tous deux (i, 77).

Both civil and ecclesiastical law stated firmly that a marriage contracted without the free consent of both parties was invalid;<sup>35</sup> even so, arranged marriages were in fact commonplace, as the literature of the time indicates. Molière's *L'école des femmes* typifies the attitude summed up by a recent commentator with the remark that, in such cases, 'la soumission aux volontés parentales semble tellement aller de soi qu'aucun enfant ne songe à s'y opposer ouvertement'.<sup>36</sup>

<sup>35</sup> See Jean Pontas, *Dictionnaire des cas de conscience* (Paris: Le Mercier: 1715, 2 vols), who summarizes Church doctrine on consent in marriage with these words: 'si [la femme] ne consent pas intérieurement, le mariage est absolument nul' (Article 'Mariage', cas ii). Cf. the article 'Mariage' in the *Encyclopédie*, x, 103 (1765).

<sup>36</sup> Isabelle Brouard-Arends, 'Vies et images maternelles dans la littérature française du dix-huitième siècle', *Studies on Voltaire and the Eighteenth Century*, ccxc (1991), 251.

It was also common at the time for parents to have recourse to convents as useful places in which to sequester girls for whom they could not afford a dowry. This is a second aspect of the contemporary oppression of women which is reflected in the *Contes*. In *Le prince Lutin*, Léandre learns of a young girl in precisely this situation, who is to enter a convent against her will (i, 90); he rescues her and, with a magic rose, ensures that she and her lover will be rich. Yet the most significant aspect of this episode is not the magical escape from misery, but the reminder it affords that many girls were in reality condemned to such a fate; they had no hope of being saved by the intervention of fairies waving magic wands. Indeed, Diderot's *La religieuse* (1760) indicates that, even decades later, the practice was by no means at an end.<sup>37</sup>

These unusually dramatic and disquieting aspects of Mme d'Aulnoy's realism are important indicators of her views on her own day. At the same time, the *Contes* reflect, often incidentally, what must have been the equally harsh facts of ordinary daily life for many French people in the seventeenth century. There is mention, for example, of the dangers for women of travelling alone (*Le rameau d'or*, i, 168), or of being robbed in a forest (*La princesse Belle-Étoile et le prince Chéri*, ii, 235). If such terrors are, to a degree, counterbalanced by innocuous references to contemporary Parisian shops and to activities such as gaming, they remain in the mind as a backdrop even to the less overtly realistic of the stories.<sup>38</sup>

The *Contes* can therefore be related in a number of ways to the life which Mme d'Aulnoy herself experienced both at the court of Spain and in France, no less than to the more mundane aspects of contemporary existence. Their realism could no doubt be appreciated at this level by most readers, whether adults or children.<sup>39</sup> And yet, they presuppose in other respects a degree of intellectual and literary sophistication which would appeal, rather, to a more mature audience; indeed, in some ways they require an acquaintance with the contemporary world which children were unlikely to possess.

In the first place, in assessing the supernatural element of the *Contes*, we need to recall that many adults in seventeenth-century France believed implicitly in the power of magic to effect changes in the order of nature. If the age of Louis XIV was the period of French classicism, it was also a time when books on alchemy, or 'hermetic philosophy', were published in considerable numbers. Indeed, though the period of their greatest popularity had passed,

<sup>37</sup> For factual evidence of this practice, see Georges May, *Diderot et 'La religieuse'* (New Haven: Yale University Press, & Paris: PUF, 1954), 47-97.

<sup>38</sup> Cf. Barchilon, 46.

<sup>39</sup> See Philippe Ariès, *Centuries of childhood*, trans. Robert Baldick (London: Cape, 1962), 95-8.

such works were still being published or reissued as late as the eighteenth century,<sup>40</sup> even while the foundations of modern chemistry were being laid.<sup>41</sup>

While it was not discussed so openly, the use of powers which relied on occult forces was also current. Belief in witchcraft was widespread, and not only among ordinary people. In 1634, the priest Urbain Grandier was burned by the Church as a sorcerer; in 1680 one of Louis XIV's mistresses, Athénaïs de Montespan, was accused of having used sorcery to regain the king's favours and to diminish his interest in one of her rivals.<sup>42</sup> As late as 1725, M. de Saint-André, a physician to Louis XV, denounced the belief in witchcraft in his *Lettres à quelques-uns de ses amis, au sujet de la magie, des maléfices et des sorciers. Où il rend raison des effets les plus surprenans qu'on attribue ordinairement aux démons*. The world of the occult, with its initiates, its polarization of good and evil, and its willingness to call on mysterious forces to achieve some (often ignoble) purpose, is manifestly that of the *Contes*; one need not enumerate their references to magicians, evil fairies, innocent maidens, and unnatural happenings in order to prove the point. These supernatural elements in Mme d'Aulnoy's work doubtless exerted their fascination on children. However, practitioners of the occult flourished at the court of France as in more humble surroundings; the parallels with the *Contes* would not have been lost on older, more worldly-wise readers, evoking associations which conventional, innocuous literary forms left prudently alone.

The occult can exist only in opposition to conventional beliefs, and here too the *Contes* present a *Weltanschauung* which had its significance for a more alert adult readership. In the world which they offer us, events occur which, in other contexts, would be considered miraculous. But the point is that such happenings are brought about by the intervention of fairies, not by God; indeed, we can search the *Contes* in vain for any evidence of a belief in His existence. None of the lessons which they offer is based on the idea that He wishes us to behave in a particular way. Like La Rochefoucauld in his *Maximes* of 1662 (though without his unvarying and predictable cynicism) Mme d'Aulnoy offers a picture of the world from which all mention of God has been carefully excised.

<sup>40</sup> See Lenglet Dufresnoy, *Histoire de la philosophie hermétique* (Paris: Coustellier, 1742, 3 vols); the substantial bibliography in vol. 3 records the publication of such works as the anonymous *Hermeticorum apocalypses* (1683), and the *Universale & particularia* of David Beuther (1718), whom Lenglet describes as an 'Alchimiste fort obscur, & qui vivoit en 1580' (122).

<sup>41</sup> See the article 'Alchemy' in the *Encyclopædia Britannica*, 1950, i, 536.

<sup>42</sup> On Grandier, see Aldous Huxley, *The devils of Loudun* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1952); for the accusations made against Mme de Montespan, see Vincent Cronin, *Louis XIV* (London: the Reprint Society, 1964), 183-7.

This absence of any such references does not allow us to infer anything conclusive about her own religious beliefs.<sup>43</sup> It is noticeable, even so, that her characters experience many emotions – love, hate, jealousy, sorrow – without once invoking the name of God; nor do they behave as though they believe in Him or in the doctrinal tenets of the Christian religion. This absence of any formulaic theological content (which can be paralleled in, for instance, the works of La Fontaine) is the obverse of much writing produced in France during the seventeenth century. It is at variance with, for example, the preaching of Bossuet and the pieties of Mme Guyon and Fénelon. And it is all the more striking when one remembers that even such classically-trained writers as Racine and Boileau readily expressed their attachment to the idea of a Christian God.<sup>44</sup> In their tacit godlessness too, then, Mme d'Aulnoy's stories would have appealed to less conventional minds among contemporary readers.

The sophistication which the *Contes* presuppose in their audience is not limited to the cultural or philosophical associations which they evoke. It can be seen also in the self-questioning, or even self-mockery, in which Mme d'Aulnoy indulges on occasion.<sup>45</sup> This device often takes the form of calling in question the fairy-tale element of the story by drawing attention to its unreality. The following passages illustrate the point:

Lorsque cette marâtre la vit revenir, elle se jeta sur la fée, qu'elle avait retenue; elle l'égratingna, et l'aurait étranglée, si une fée était étrangeable (i, 27);

'[. . .] sans vous je serais morte, et vous m'avez sauvée; je vous le revaudrai'. Après ce petit compliment, elle s'enfonça dans l'eau, et Avenant demeura bien surpris de l'esprit et de la grande civilité de la carpe (i, 34);

[. . .] il manquait beaucoup à la satisfaction de Lutin, puisqu'il n'osait ni parler, ni se faire voir; et il est rare qu'un invisible se fasse aimer (i, 103).

It may also be present as an apparently innocuous aside, which, by its absurdity, points up the artificiality of the assumptions underlying the scene. Hence, in *Le prince Lutin*, an adder is described as 'faisant toutes les petites mines et les airs gracieux dont une couleuvre est capable' (i, 81).

Such authorial comments are incidental, interrupting the narrative only momentarily. They do, however, undermine the unity

<sup>43</sup> In the *Mémoires de la cour d'Espagne*, when describing the burning of heretics and Jews by the Inquisition, she does refer to 'les veritez de notre Religion' (ii, 99). However, her sympathies are unquestionably with the victims of religious persecution, for whose bravery in the face of death she feels undisguised admiration (ii, 102).

<sup>44</sup> See Boileau, ed. cit., ii, 172, and Charles Perrault, *Les hommes illustres qui ont paru en France pendant ce siècle* (Paris: Dezallier, 1696–1700, 2 vols); here it is stated that Racine died 'avec des sentimens de pieté très-vifs & très-édifians' (ii, 82).

<sup>45</sup> Cf. Ruth Capasso, 'Madame d'Aulnoy and the comedy of transformation', *Papers on French Seventeenth-century Literature*, xiv (1987), 575–88 (586).



of the fantastic vision created by the fairytale ambience of the *Contes*; in doing so, they breach the implicit bargain made by the reader of such works that nothing said in the story will be subject to sceptical or rational doubt. These authorial interventions belong to a different *diégèse* from the fairytale itself. They hint at the sophisticated complicity expected of at least some readers of the *Contes*, breaking the consensus on which such stories need to operate if they are to be taken on their own terms. For the reader accustomed to this burlesque self-mockery, there is a parallel with such works as Scarron's *Roman comique* of 1651; here, too, is an author who makes fun of the pretentious language prescribed for novelists of the time, and thus calls in question the conventions to which the genre was supposed to adhere.<sup>46</sup>

Yet the literary awareness which they presuppose serves only to emphasize more strongly the tension created within the stories. In each, we find the opposition and coexistence of the factual and the fantastic, the concrete and the ethereal. The world which the *Contes* ostensibly depict is that of magical fantasy, where nothing is impossible. Here, even the most astonishing transformations are accomplished. Money, jewels and precious objects are available in endless quantities; dragons are slain, fish talk, castles are built of flawless crystal, and so on. Evil constantly threatens the happiness of the good or the innocent. And if virtue and beauty do eventually triumph over all obstacles, both human and superhuman, their success is brought about by the use of supernatural magic, not by conventional religion.

At the same time as we are offered these (literally) unbelievable tableaux, the background of the stories is recognizably connected to the real world of the time at which they were written. The moral lessons they teach apply to this world, and are conveniently summarized in the verses with which each of them concludes. This tension inescapably leads one to ask what the relationship may be between the fairy story, with its fantasy and invention, and the world in which Mme d'Aulnoy's readers actually lived, where happenings such as those related in the *Contes* did not occur.

The prime function of fantasy is to serve as a sugar coating, so to speak, on the moral pill which readers are offered in the closing lines of each *conte*. It makes the stories more alluring, more likely to retain the interest of those who read them or to whom they were read. The verse homilies with which they conclude are evidence of the link between literature which is intended, in part at least, for diversion, and literature as moral instruction. In this respect at least, the *Contes* have something in common with such celebrated works

<sup>46</sup> Classical French literary theory held that the novel should obey much the same rules as the epic (see Bray, 347-9).

as La Fontaine's *Fables* (1668–94) and Fénelon's hugely-successful *Les aventures de Télémaque* (1699), which became perhaps the greatest publishing success of the following century.<sup>47</sup>

Yet for all their use of fantasy, imagination and invention to inculcate their moral teachings, the *Contes* (like the *Fables* and *Télémaque*) were not intended exclusively for children, or at least would not have been fully appreciated by them. In acknowledging the central importance of fantasy in the *Contes*, we should not be tempted to correlate it too closely with a juvenile readership.<sup>48</sup> The scepticism and worldliness which they ally to magic and invention mean that we ultimately have to choose. We can see in the fairytale either an escape from reality, or an ironic commentary on the true misfortunes of human beings, who have to live their lives without the assistance of magic, religious or otherwise. It is this openness to interpretation, rather than any one-dimensional didactic purpose, which perhaps chiefly characterizes the modernity of the *Contes*.

Within the limited compass of one article, it is not possible to explore the many complexities surrounding the reception and subsequent fate of the *Contes* of Mme d'Aulnoy. Yet it does seem that the disdain which many eighteenth-century critics felt for her work (and indeed for that of other writers of fairy stories too) can be explained by the intellectual and cultural outlook of the time. It is not to be ascribed to any obvious deficiency in her writing, to the quality of which her more recent popularity bears witness. The views widely canvassed during the Enlightenment inevitably obscured the appreciation of her tales in pre-Revolutionary France. From the standpoint of our own times, however, there is much in them which deserves attention, and which we ought to value in a human as well as a historical perspective when we look beyond the apparently innocuous designation of the *conte de fées*.

<sup>47</sup> As the *Catalogue général* of the Bibliothèque Nationale testifies, several hundred editions of *Télémaque* were published between 1699 and the end of the nineteenth century. Many were expensive, sumptuously-illustrated folios and quartos, which could not have been intended (primarily, at least) for children.

<sup>48</sup> Cf. Storer, 36, and Barchilon, 38 ff.