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The willing suspension of belief in the French seventeenth century fairy tale.¹

Abstract

*All is rarely as it seems in French seventeenth century artistic activity. The spirit of *préciosité*, the art of exploiting, playfully, all the implications of a chosen topic, found a perfect vehicle in the fairy tale. The games played with the genre in that artistic climate focus on marvellous literature's profoundest paradox: to believe, or to disbelieve.*

1. Introduction

Although written fairy tales are found in earlier French literature, it can be said that the fairy tale came of age as written text in France in 1696 when a vogue was launched that continued until at least 1730. At one level of reading, French fairy tales of that time reveal both of the functions usually considered to characterise the fairy tale genre: pleasurable escapist involvement and the capacity to exert an existential influence on the reader. It must be presumed that without the ability to influence the reader in the usual ways, the tales could not, as they have done, dominate the tradition of written fairy tales across three cultures, Anglophone, German and French, for 300 years. It is the intention of this study to show that while the seventeenth century avatar of the fairy tale exerts the same two universal functions, a second level of reading, perceptible to the initiated readers of the time who shared the author's socio-esthetic norms, enriches both functions and even contradicts the action of one.

2. Traditional functions

Of the two functions referred to, the capacity to exert an existential influence can be moralistic, therapeutic, ideological, or apt to institutionalise socio-cultural norms. This

¹ This title is, of course, a subversion of the well-known phrase "willing suspension of disbelief" used by S.T. Coleridge in his *Biographia Literaria* (1960 (1817), 14:169).

Please note that all translations from French in the present study are those of the author. Titles remain in French; all other French words are translated, unless the original word will clarify a point being made.

action can be overt or covert, deliberately cultivated or unconscious. The variation is due to the fact that not all these influences operate in all stories. A narrator or writer inevitably adapts his writing to suit the tastes of his public, the climate of his age or whatever message it is that he wishes to convey, while a reader will react the most strongly to things having relevance for his present condition (see Bettelheim, 1986: *passim* and Zipes, 1986:9-62). In the seventeenth century versions, as 'everyone knows' (every critic cited evokes these), Tom Thumb's good fortune comforts children who feel abandoned, Red Riding Hood's fate is a dreadful warning against disobeying one's mother, Cinderella proves the rewards of virtue and so on. And messages of this type and this level are multiple and also subject to differences of opinion, which seems to prove the contention that the reader perceives what is meaningful for him. Zipes (1989), for instance, sees an effort in Perrault's work to emphasise gender roles in a male dominated society while Welch (1983) sees the presence of a feminist rebellion.

The tales' capacity for the second universal characteristic, escapism, is not just multiplied, it is contradicted at a second level of reading. The phenomenon of escapist reading, the fact that a genre dealing with flagrant fantasy can provoke temporary belief in the reader, appears paradoxical when one stops to think about it. Todorov insists that the fairy tale does accomplish "that impossible union by which a reader believes without believing" (1970:88), and "takes the marvellous literally" (174). Butor's writing suggests how this happens. The fairy tale acts as a persuasive autonomous world because its "very structure (...) isolates it" (1973:352). That structure is built from conventions that equate to the laws of a land. These are signalled for the reader from the beginning by markers such as the formulaic "once upon a time", or the triplication that multiplies tasks (350-52) and so on. The reader accepts that character of 'otherness' and the distance from his own world, sets aside the criteria he would use in real life or even in other types of literature, and willingly suspends his disbelief. We shall show that the authors of the seventeenth century tale, by means of a self-conscious system of auto-referentiality, disrupt that distancing effect of 'otherness' on which belief in the fairy tale depends.

By tradition, fairy tales are outside time and space, or at least so old that when their adventures took place, "hens had teeth" (Brekilien, 1973:162). An uninitiated reader could easily miss the specific seventeenth century character of the tales under consideration here. Anachronisms abound, like the 'gophered cuffs' on a dress, the exotic luxury implied in serving 'China oranges' (tangerines) at a ball in Perrault's work, or the *précieux*² dialogue and accents ("Time and obstacles did not detract from the intensity of his lover-like impatience", says Mme de Murat of her hero in "La Princesse Camion" - Anon., 1988:91). For the modern reader, these seem part of the archaic vagueness of the fairy tale in general. But they are elements chosen from the context of their first readers, and they were inserted with a view to a particular effect.

² French *préciosité* has a more precise sense than the equivalent English term, and did not, in its origin, have the suggestion of affectation implicit in English. It meant, "a cult of refined language and manners that established itself in French high society of the 1670's" (*The Concise Oxford Dictionary of Literary Terms*, 1990). For this reason, the French word, and the adjective *précieux* will be used.

3. Seventeenth century society

It is indispensable to recall that, all appearances to the contrary, the fairy tale was not written for a juvenile public. Children's literature as such was barely beginning (see *Enfance et littérature*, 1991). The target audience, the intended reader of the written fairy tale was a sophisticated adult. That adult had a very particular collective, socio-esthetic code. (For a fuller discussion, see Godwin, 1985.) The following points may be taken as representing the essence of that society and as having left traces on every aspect of life at the time, other genres of fiction, and other arts.

Consisting mainly of the leisured aristocracy, that society had the hallmarks of an exclusive club. Adherence to prevailing norms was all - to be a member, it was necessary to embrace the codes for dress, speech, ethical matters, artistic preferences and current preoccupations endorsed by the group. Paradoxically, being distinctive, bringing surprise and a subtle difference to those codes, what in rhetoric is called *varietas*, was a cultivated art. The chief preoccupation of that leisured caste was a search for diversion, and the public persona of its members was playful. Real games were regularly played, and techniques deploying ambivalence, disguise and surprise were favoured. The category of intellectual play included enigmas, emblems, allegories and symbols, with the rhetorical device of the conceit³ being characteristic.

3.1 Seventeenth century prose fiction

Prose fiction within that group presents four aspects that affect the treatment of the fairy tale, and permit the reader to comprehend the ways in which techniques of literary illusion are eclipsed or deformed. These are: a persistent nostalgia for the complex, obsolete baroque novels; the desire to ring the changes on the story types in circulation; the theoretical relegation of all fiction to the status of frivolous diversion;⁴ and a preoccupation with literary verisimilitude.⁵

³ "Conceit. An unusually far-fetched or elaborate metaphor or simile presenting a surprisingly apt parallel between two dissimilar things or feelings ... Conceits often employ the devices of hyperbole, paradox, and oxymoron" (Ibid).

⁴ The immense enthusiasm for all forms of fiction is not surprising in a society with so much leisure, and the numbers of books published and the wide circulation they enjoyed contradict the official status of that fiction as negligible. That official status was due to the opposition expressed by the church to 'untruths' and to the critical hesitations caused, on the one hand, by the lack of precedents for the genre in the classical hierarchies, and on the other hand, by the lack of 'rules' codifying the genre. It was to be a long time before the essential liberty of fiction genres was recognised.

⁵ The word used is *vraisemblance*, and although it had not yet been liberated from constraints of *bienséance* (socio-moral codes) and a rigid application of literary conventions, the meaning implied by its direct translation of 'seeming true' was gaining more and more ground. It is an elusive concept. The clearest exposition available is that of Kibedi-Varga (1990).

3.2 Disassociation and apology

The prevailing attitudes to fiction were of paramount importance for the fairy tale genre. It is probably the most frivolous of all story types, and it rarely appears without some kind of apology expressed in the paratext⁶ or a framing narrative explaining that they were part of an unserious, broader amusement. Of six volumes examined for this study, three take the form of a frame novel, a genre that was reactivated in response to the nostalgia for the complexity of the baroque works (see Godwin, 1990). The framing story is the pretext for an amusement motif: a group is in search of diversion. Bernard's *Inès de Cordoue* (1979) includes two fairy stories, which are told by young women who compete politely to amuse in the company of the queen. In Lenoble's *Le Gage touché* (1980) first published in 1697, a game of forfeits leads to a series of narrations, whose register runs from the scatological to the courtly, and includes two fairy tales. In *La Comtesse de Mortane* (1699) by Bedacier, a man tells a fairy tale to two ladies to fill an idle moment in a garden. The writer in each case thus claims to be a transcriber rather than an author, disclaiming responsibility for the tales, and is seemingly uninterested in the recognition due to the artist.

Not only is there a conformity to prevailing fashion here regarding the global structure of the works, it is quite obvious that a search for variations, ludism and a conventional apology for indulging in fiction are all brought into operation. And the playfulness operates at more than one level; the authors are playing with the notion of play. Reproducing an amusing activity within the description of an entertainment is a form of *mise-en-abyme*;⁷ this is doubled by its parallel in real life, for games of forfeits, the telling of stories, and polite competition figure among the daily social activities of the aristocracy. Such insistence on the context of the telling would have acted to some extent to distract the reader from a purely escapist reading by drawing his attention to the manner as well as the matter of his work.

Many works of the time open with prefaces, 'notices to the reader' or dedications which disclaim any serious intention on the part of the author. There is firstly the insistence on the notion of frivolous pastime, often referred to as a 'bagatelle' and often accompanied by a reminder of underlying didactic intentions⁸ as in the case of Perrault who writes that his stories are "not simply bagatelles, but contain a useful moral" (*Préface*, 1967:3).⁹ The ambiguity here, of course, depends on the fact that fiction - amusement - was a very serious aspect of polite society, while the attention to detail, and the quality of the work prove that it was far from being the product of a careless moment. So, once again, the initiated reader

⁶ The term is Genette's. He designates as paratext "those elements which transform a text into a book [including] prefaces [etc]" (1987:7-8).

⁷ "Mise-en-abyme ... internal reduplication of a literary work or part of a work ... Chinese box effect." (*The Concise Oxford Dictionary of Literary Terms*, 1990.)

⁸ The plea that fiction was 'moral' and exemplary was one of the defenses regularly offered by writers and readers of fiction at the time.

⁹ Note that the Garnier edition of Perrault used here is still considered to be amongst the best texts available and was re-issued in 1981. Two other excellent editions have subsequently appeared. The first, edited by J.-P. Collinet, appeared in 1981 in the Gallimard *Folio* series; in paperback, it combines economy with editorial quality. The second, edited by R. Zuber, was issued by the prestigious *Imprimerie Nationale* of France in 1987 and is both scholarly and luxurious.

of the seventeenth century would have recognised the game; he would have suspended his belief.

4. A genre for children?

There is a similar association of the tales with children which is rarely sincere. The intended *reader* was not a child but an adult. The oral tradition does recognise children as the intended public, and associating the tale with children was firstly a homage to tradition. But it was also, secondly, the source of playful ambiguity, and thirdly, an added means for underplaying the seriousness of the author's intention.

Bernard dedicates her work to the prince of Dombes,¹⁰ and hopes it "will amuse [him] during his childhood". But all is rarely what it seems, in seventeenth century writing, and this dedication (unpaginated), contains a further play on words, which is unlikely to have meant much to a baby prince. Bernard continues by expressing the hope that if the prince happens to learn to read from her book, thus "seeing [his] own name in a book for the first time, [she] will have the honour of having provided him with a novel pleasure (*un plaisir d'une espèce toute nouvelle*)". There are four meanings in play. The word *nouvelle* has both meanings of the English word 'novel': new, and a style of book. The pun thus promises the prince firstly the new experience of seeing his name in print and secondly the pleasure procured by the reading of a novel. Thirdly, the reference to the style of book called *nouvelle* is charged with meaning and is tantamount to an undertaking to provide a work faithful to the exigencies of improved verisimilitude,¹¹ a promise fulfilled in the framing story, though not, of course, in the included fairy tales. Fourthly, there is undoubtedly also a subtle allusion to the fact that at the date of publication of the book, written fairy tales of the type included were still a novelty, Bernard's carrying the earliest date (1696) for any written text of the current vogue. This witty proliferation of meanings exploits, once again, the question of belief and disbelief.

Another extra-textual method of associating a fairy story with a childish audience is to attribute it to a childish narrator. Lenoble does this in his *Le Gage touché*. Two of the pledges requiring a story as forfeit are "a doll's toy" (1980:231) and "a tiny ivory ball" (254), and the ages of the narrators are given as fourteen and eight. At the end of the second fairy tale, the reader is reminded that the narrator is a little girl when the audience praises her memory and her intelligence. Perrault goes even further, printing the name of his third son, Pierre d'Armancour, as author in one of his books. This is universally held to be a spurious attribution. Even in the case of a story supposedly told to grown women, in Bedacier's *La Comtesse de Mortane*, one of the ladies is credited with saying "Ah, I love

¹⁰ Of interest is the fact that almost all writing was dedicated explicitly to an influential member of the French Court, usually in the expectation of future services or a pension. The Prince of Dombes was the son of the Duke of Maine. The latter was one of the children born during Louis XIV's liaison with Madame de Montespan. He was legitimised towards 1675 and married to one of the king's nieces. It must be assumed that the compliment implicit in the dedication was aimed, in the short term, at winning the approval of the baby prince's parents and grandparents. The covert way in which this is accomplished constitutes a fifth level of play in the dedication.

¹¹ The shorter, more realistic works that succeeded the multi-volume baroque novels were mostly called *nouvelles*.

fairy tales as much as if I were still a child" (1699, 11:224). She is expressing the typical ambiguity of the age: a fondness for fiction shared by all, and an embarrassed acknowledgement that such a preoccupation was not really considered fit for responsible adults.

The texts themselves can exacerbate the ambiguity of the intended audience by adopting a childish tone and register. This is the case for Mme d'Aulnoy's "Finette Cendron" whose heroine is the youngest of three little sisters. Their squabbles are reported with an authentic-sounding acrimony that includes the epithet "baboon" (Anon., 1988:63); Finette addresses her horse as *gentil dada*, in English "nice horsie" or even "gee-gee" (58); when her sisters need her help, they try to bribe her with offers of their "pretty dolls, their little silver dishes, their other toys and their sweets" (60). The superlatives that form a convention of all fairy tales take on a particularly childish tone in the narration of this story, "so far, so far that ..." (58) as do the ideophones, like the "ting ting ting" of the horse's harness (73). This should not fool the reader; the story was composed for the adult ladies of the salon and the appearance of artlessness would have delighted them.

Perrault's tales are well known for their ambiguity of register. Their (surface) universality, the presence of moral values suited to children won the approval of two educationalists of his time, Mme de Maintenon who established a school at St Cyr, and Fénelon, tutor to the dauphin (Zipes, 1986:12). Perrault's prefatorial claims that he is writing for children are thus half serious, yet also a game. It becomes what Loskoutoff (1986) terms a *surenchère*, 'an overbid', a case of protesting too much. For other aspects of Perrault's tales are not intended for children. He deploys a vocabulary rich in double meanings and sexual innuendo (see Chupeau, 1986) which has nothing to do with the psycho-analytical approach of other schools of criticism. To name just one example, the expression *to have seen the wolf* has the general idiomatic meaning of undergoing an unpleasant experience when applied to a man, but a specifically sexual connotation when applied to females. The application to "Little Red Riding Hood" is obvious.

Perrault also appends moral verses at the end of his tales whose message is never limited to the superficial moral lesson. There are either two verses, or one which develops two different messages, and one of the messages is always cynical and worldly (see Malarte, 1968, 1990 and Brody, 1968). The sophistication of these verses acts retrospectively to produce a second interpretation of the text. It is interesting that modern children's books, concerned with the surface message of Perrault's tales, usually omit the moralities.

5. Subversion of illusion

Fairy stories devoid of ambiguity seem to be the exception rather than the rule at the time. Excluding Perrault's, only one of 38 stories examined for this study "Incarnat, blanc et noir" (Anon., 1988) by an anonymous author, is that simple. The other 37 reveal some form of self-conscious manipulation which disrupts the processes of illusion either periodically, or by permitting a simultaneous reading at two levels.

5.1 Verisimilitude as pastiche

A reader is struck, firstly, by an almost universal reappropriation of the rules in force for realistic writing. It has already been stated that verisimilitude was an important preoccupation at the time. The reactivation of a genre as blatantly marvellous and unbelievable as the fairy tale is almost a paradox in that climate. But the way recognised techniques of *vraisemblance* are applied - as pastiche - together with an understanding of the importance accorded to ludism and variation, shows that a playful, highly conscious juxtaposition of antithetical literary trends was well-suited to prevailing esthetics.

A rapid parenthesis will recall the situation prevailing regarding realist writing. Publication of the huge, multi-volume baroque novels simply stopped around 1660, and for good reasons. Those novels are anything but plausible, being filled with what were called by most, 'absurdities'. Charles Sorel, one of many who use this term, enumerates them in his *De la Connoissance des Bons Livres* (1981), first published in 1671. The gist was a recognition of the need to narrow the gulf separating reader and text, and the greatest cause of this rift was the attribution of French seventeenth century mores to heroes of other nationalities and other times. This was a result of exclusiveness and homogeneity of the readers, who simply had no interest in anyone outside their 'club'. Even a Cleopatra, queen of Egypt, had to appear to embrace the prevailing social codes of the readers when given a role in a novel by La Calprenède. The difficulties were resolved, little by little, by francisation, modernisation and an attention to the correspondance of cause and effect that brought the characters and their experiences effectively closer to those of the reader.

Du Plaisir lists the techniques used for the new style of *vraisemblance* in his *Sentiments sur les Lettres et sur l'Histoire* of 1682, in the form of a description of the new novel, usually called *nouvelle*, that had replaced the baroque novel. These techniques include a reduction in length, and in the number of protagonists and of adventures attributed to them, and a linear exposition of the plot. These are implemented in many fairy tales, although others, whose authors preferred perhaps to pander to the nostalgia for the baroque, redeploy techniques such as the convoluted plots beginning *in medias res* followed by retrospective narrations (one example is Mme d'Aulnoy's "La Chatte Blanche", 1988:19-56). The new structures represent a search for reason and an attempt to establish, in the reader's mind, an impression of the existence of a real world referent. So Du Plaisir advises an author to give a precise spatial and temporal setting, to mention which king was currently reigning, and to indicate, at the start of a story, the character trait of a protagonist which will motivate the ulterior developments of the plot.

These are the techniques that commonly appear in the form of pastiche in the seventeenth century fairy tale. The story included in Bedacier's *La Comtesse de Mortane* begins "There was once, long ago, a fairy in Asia ... widowed, with a daughter in whom was seen, from the start, a penchant for pleasure which surprised all those who approached her" (1699: 225). The heroine is named, significantly, Lubantine (the French word *lubie* means caprice, whim). Her inclination for pleasure is accompanied by a refusal to be hindered in its pursuit, and this will be the direct cause of multiple deaths at the end. But the rationalism of this combination of cause and effect is undermined by the magic at her disposal in her search for pleasure. Then, the precision and the realism of the spatial "in Asia" and the

temporal "long ago" are mere illusions, and are also contradictory. Fairies live in fairy land, not in Asia, which is a vast continent consisting of many countries "Long ago" implies the greatest possible vagueness which is contradicted by the spurious precision of a geographical referent. Even more whimsical is the start of "Prince Sincere" of Mme de Lintot:

Once upon a time in the land of the Zinzolantins lived a king who had an extreme passion for silkworms; he spent days on end in his gardens plucking mulberry leaves for their food; and he shut himself in his study the rest of the time in order to watch the little insects working ... (Anon., 1988:187).

The silkworms, it might be added, play no further role in the story!

Such a parody of verisimilitude, naturally, has the opposite effect from that of a serious application of the techniques (as they were successfully implemented, for instance, in the *nouvelle*). So far from encouraging an illusion of reality, of making the reader want to suspend his disbelief, the parody increases the distance between reader and text, and his awareness of that distance, by insisting on the contrast between real and unreal, and drawing attention to the difference by the ironic deployment of rules which normally serve to give fiction the colours of reality.

5.2 Conventions overturned

This process can be considered a playful tampering with contemporary preoccupations; literary convention, as much as the marvellous character of the story, is the butt of the irony, or perhaps one should say the target of a witty variation. Parody is firstly an acknowledgement of prevailing norms, and secondly a consciously ludic divergence from them. This subverting of prevailing norms of *realism* by applying them to a genre in which they cannot accomplish their effect is also a subversion of the norms for *marvellous* literature. Establishing an impression of distance, of 'otherness', is a necessary precondition for the functioning of the marvellous tale, as was made clear by Butor's statement concerning the 'isolation' of the fairy tale world. This is patently not the intention of the authors here. They subvert that impression of distance even while it is apparently being re-established by the parody of realism. The subversion is operated by the evocation of elements of the reader's own world, in this case the naming of a continent he knows, and by the very contemporary style of ludism. This leads the reader back to that fundamental 'absurdity' of seventeenth century fiction, the attributing of contemporary, nationalistic mores to protagonists of other times and other places. It is almost as though the fairy tale, the least serious of the sub-genres within the already frivolous genre of prose fiction, legitimised the reprise of the absurdities of the baroque novels that were still read and spoken of with affectionate nostalgia. The aristocratic literate society, once again, preferred to contemplate its own image, regardless of the plausibility of the context, but in a ludic mode that attenuates, by its ambiguity, the gravity of infringing the latest codes for *vraisemblance*.

6. Auto-referentiality

6.1 Anachronisms

Ludic treatment of the type just seen constitutes a link with the seventeenth century context. Anachronisms are another, like the tangerines and gophered cuffs seen at the start of this study, to which could be added technological novelties like "a sort of trumpet that broadcasts the voice" and "an excellent magnifying glass [telescope]" (Mme d'Aulnoy, 1988:47,48). Another frequently used technique is intertextual allusion: Mme d'Aulnoy, in the moral verse she appends to her version of Cinderella, called "Finette Cendron", readopts the less worldly of the two morals of Perrault's Cinderella, notably that coals of fire (kindness in return for ill treatment) constitute the best form of revenge (1988:75). Such homage to a direct precursor would not have been made at random; intertextual allusions were a consecrated part of the literary playfulness in fashion and a way of associating the tales with the context of their telling rather than their origins.

6.2 Feminism

Most fairy tales do not merely emphasise the themes of marriage, constancy and dalliance that were the major topic of books and discussion in France; they treat them from a contemporary feminist point of view. Formulae such as "I know many others in our own century...", and "In our century, this type of union is frequent" (D'Aulnoy, 1988:103-104, 139) are common. The majority of these writers are women, and it is women who set the tone of the social groups of the time. A particularly anti-sexist current had been born in the salon of Mlle de Scudéry, where favourite topics for discussion were the double standards applied to men and women, and the unhappiness of women in arranged marriages. The striking theme of Bernard's "Riquet à la houppe" is summed up by the cynical maxim "lovers turn into husbands in the long run" (1979:72). Mme d'Aulnoy's "Blue Bird" ends with a verse that affirms that it would be better to be a bird of any species, even an owl, than to marry and have a person you hate permanently before your eyes (1988:139). Welch (1983) cites this one, and many other examples to support her thesis that this is a common theme among the women fairy tale writers of the time.

Welch's view of these works contradicts that of Zipes (1986:41), who believes that the tales of the period are meant, with their happy endings, to encourage girls to conform and accept male domination, and to behave with "reserve and patience" (1986:41) in a society where even a married woman remained a minor in the eyes of the law. Welch, on the contrary, sees an affirmation of libertinism (and it is true that outside Perrault's works, the heroines frequently enjoy what Mme d'Aulnoy's "White Cat" calls "receiving [the hero] as husband"). The heroines are also independent, full of initiative and strength. It is perhaps significant that where Perrault's Tom Thumb is male, Mme d'Aulnoy's Finette Cendron, who has similar adventures, should be a girl. Perrault is a male author, and Zipes is mainly considering Perrault's tales. Mme d'Aulnoy is an authoress, being interpreted by a woman. Welch (1983:53) points out that "the importance accorded to conjugal bliss but in a magical context in which dreams can come true, emphasises the lack of hope in the authors of these tales that such a condition could be realised". Welch (1983:57) also affirms that it is the

"supernatural ambience that permits the distortion of the prevailing moral codes". Such an insistence on contemporary reality by means of showing the opposite in an impossible (marvellous) context is a function of the traditional tale,¹² but the significance of the title of the present study is again evident. Feminine readers were being encouraged to suspend, not their disbelief, but their belief so that for the time of a dream, they could inhabit an utopia with customs they would have loved to follow.

6.3 Political ideology

The tales reflect contemporary socio-ideological norms by their blatantly aristocratic perspective. Time could be spent on the exploration of details like clothing, menus, the terminology for functions of domestic service like 'chamberlain', and even the description of palaces and gardens which differ from the obligatory *topos* of the more 'serious' *nouvelles* only in the use of precious stones instead of the more common marble, and the use of materials that lack the necessary robustness for building in real life (butterflies' wings, for example). But it is the exclusive character, and the indifference to the realities of other social strata, that signal the overriding ideology of these tales.

Perrault invokes the popular origins of his tales in his prefaces, but a careful reading of his stories shows that this was simply another game. Welch (1990) notes examples proving that any people of lower class that appear are used more as a counterfoil to emphasise the nobility of the heroes than anything else. She also confirms the impression left by the reading done for this study, namely that the lower classes are virtually invisible. Writers other than Perrault rarely invoke the peasant origins of the tales, and simply ignore the realities of the life of those outside court circles. Even the famine of around 1695 - which today would provoke a world-wide aid programme - is ignored, except in the glancing, disapproving reference to the parents of Tom Thumb who so cruelly decided to abandon their children. Admittedly other critics like Zipes believe that that particular episode does constitute a criticism of an aristocracy which could make a tenant farmer wait for payment. Even so, such low key, isolated criticisms hardly weigh against the overriding perspective of privilege that marks the tales.

Welch (1990:224-225) suggests that the rustic setting of seventeenth century fairy tales - and this is admittedly as frequent or more frequent than a setting in some splendid palace - is to be compared to the ethos which dictated the vogue for the pastoral novel that disappeared around 1630. It served the prevailing taste for exoticism, and disguise, and flattered the nostalgia for pastoral novels. This is a very persuasive thesis, for D'Urfé's pastoral novel, *L'Astrée*, still figured regularly in the literary games of disguise and metamorphosis in the salons, and was still used as a model for dalliance and debate. It is at any rate clear that the exclusivism and preoccupation with their own caste on the part of the literary public led to another form of the contamination of the fairy tale by contemporary values.

¹² That is the way Butor (1973:53-54) interprets the politico-ideological message of traditional fairy tales for the peasant class. The fact that a goose girl could marry a prince, for example, underlines the unlikelyhood of such a happy change of status in real life.

6.4 *Précieux* style

Reference to the contemporary context also sees a deployment of the style characteristic of seventeenth century gallantry, which implies the use of emblems and conceits, and the addition of literary ornaments called, for part of the century, *préciosité*.

The use of emblems is seen in the choice of names like Prince Sincere or Princess Desires. These are sometimes accompanied by an explanation of their symbolic value: Desires affirms that she "was considered the most charming thing possible, everyone loved [her] and wished to possess [her] ... all wishes were subject to [her] will, and [she] had a place in every heart", a statement which is no less than a definition of the notion of *desire* (Mme de La Force, Anon., 1988:13). The same type of conceit is to be read on artefacts in the stories. The prince who loves Desires exerts his magical powers to help her with the impossible task leaving a permanent inscription on tidal sands. A bronze plaque appears, embedded in the sand, engraved with the following verse:

The faith of ordinary lovers,
Their ardour and their oaths,
Are written on shifting sands,
But what is felt for your beautiful eyes,
Is inscribed in the firmament in letters of starry fire;
They can never be erased (18).

The embellishment of the story by a poem, the choice of the theme of inconstancy, the way the theme is developed through antithesis, the use of astral imagery and the conceit itself, are all characteristic of the *précieux*.

7. Departure from the folklore tradition

The tales, as should be evident at this stage, acquire a certain ambivalence from the fact that they are both like, and unlike, the tales of the oral tradition from which they sprang. Only one author (of those read for this study) abandons all pretence of transcribing a consecrated tale and accentuates, on the contrary, the act of inventing. Bedacier (1699:230) makes her narrator portray his heroine with features that his audience recognise immediately as those of his mistress. She is part of his audience, and he invites her to furnish the portrait of the hero according to her personal preferences (229-30). This is a rupture with the usual processes of illusion whereby the protagonists are real people with, for example, a physiognomy that the writer must *report*, not create. The audience expresses its surprise at what they call a "Saint Bartholomew's Day Massacre" in a fairy tale which ought to end "happily ever after". The narrator then admits that he had "not known a single word of his story when [he] began it" (292-4).

The narrator has valid reasons for shaping his story in a particular way, that stem from the development of the frame story. Making included story and frame story correspond is another technique that results from the playful ethos of *précieux* society, and Catherine Bernard, at least, uses the same technique in *Inès de Cordoue*. Her included stories match

the temperament of their narrators in tone and mood, while the dénouements foreshadow their destinies.

8. Conclusion

It is thus impossible to believe that writers of fairy tales around 1700 intended only to provoke a normal degree of escapist reading. The techniques identified here are too foreign to the framework of the traditional tale, too elegant, too witty, too perfectly suited to the ethos of the age and too obtrusive for one to believe they were random or unintentional. The authors have displaced the reader's attention from the matter to the manner of telling, and they do this in a deliberately transparent disruption of the fundamental characteristics of a genre. The plot and the destinies of the characters were not the real centre of interest for the seventeenth century reader. The fairy tale's supernatural, marvellous elements were valued, but never allowed to attain the élan of sustained literary illusion. Instead, the impossible, marvellous characteristics were intensified; they were made even more impossible by a juxtaposition with seventeenth century realities.

The reader, always an accomplice, was given a new role. To participate fully, he had to suspend, not his disbelief, which would have allowed him, as Todorov phrases it, "to take the marvellous literally". He was required to concentrate on other aspects of the telling, to recognise and enjoy the deployment of a collective literary esthetics he himself had had helped to found and to propagate. To do this, he willingly suspended his belief.

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