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# Simulating Oralities: French Fairy Tales of the 1690s

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". . .we must give up the fiction that collects these sounds under the sign of a 'Voice,' of a 'Culture' of its own—or of the great Other's. Rather, orality insinuates itself. . .into the network—an endless tapestry—of a scriptural economy."

Michel de Certeau,
*The Practice of Everyday Life*, 132

Fairy tales and orality seem intimately connected. We think of written tales as transcribing stories handed down orally for hundreds of years, as simply "putting into print" the traces of that long-standing tradition. Most writers of fairy tales have done their best to reinforce that impression: Charles Perrault's alternative title, "Tales of Mother Goose," suggests a traditional, spoken origin; the Grimm brothers work hard to create a simple and naive narrative voice; Hans Christian Andersen's stories often begin with formulae like "now then, here's where we begin" that imitate oral story-telling. I don't mean to deny that many fairy tales had been (and continue to be) part of an ongoing oral, popular culture, but I do want to show that our sense of access to that culture through reading fairy tales is an illusion—an illusion carefully and deliberately created by many fairy tale collectors, editors, and writers.

We can become conscious of that illusion by looking at another strand in the history of written fairy tales—the tales written by women in the 1690s in France. Unlike



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*Figure 1. Frontispiece, Charles Perrault,* ***Histoires ou contes du temps passe*** *(Paris: Chez Claude Barbin, 1697). Courtesy of Houghton Library, Harvard University.*

Perrault, their contemporary, these women only occasionally appealed to the oral, popular tradition and never attempted to imitate an illiterate or uneducated voice. Rather, they simulated a different kind of orality—the conversation that animated the salons of the later seventeenth century. Most of the long, elaborate tales they wrote are set within a conversational frame, a frame that reproduces the milieu and the carefully formulated repartee that was part of salon culture.[1]

The frontispiece of the 1697 edition of Perrault's *Contes*—a frontispiece that has become so familiar to us that we no longer see its full implications—defines one conception of the oral story-telling situation. Let's look at it again: the frontispiece gives us, in miniature, a version of what the traditional story-telling situation is traditionally thought to be. [Figure 1] The frontispiece shows a fireside scene: three fashionably-dressed children seated by a fireplace, listening to a simply-dressed older woman, perhaps a nurse, tell a story.[2] The fire and the candle suggest that the story-telling is taking place in the evening, as in the traditional *viellée*; the lock on the door and the cat by the fireplace underscore the intimacy and the comforting domesticity of the scene. The older title of the collection, the title that Perrault had used for an earlier manuscript edition of the *Contes* in 1695, appears as a placard affixed to the door in the background, just above the spindle that is traditionally associated with women's story-telling: *Contes de ma Mere Loye* [Stories of Mother Goose].[3] The writing on the placard is rather irregular and clumsy, compared to the elegance of the type used on the title-page, just as the title on the placard contrasts with the more elaborate and distanced formal title: *Histoires ou Contes du temps passé, avec des Moralitez* [Stories of Times Past, with Morals]. In the physical set-up of the first edition, there is a subterranean tension between appeals to the aristocratic audience Perrault hoped to reach (as in the dedication to Louis XIV's niece, with its elaborate coat of arms) and appeals to a peasant story-telling tradition.

As Catherine Velay-Vallantin has pointed out, the frontispiece suggests the fictive reading situation that Perrault and his publisher wanted to prescribe, a



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*Figure 2. Frontispiece, Marie-Catherine d'Aulnoy,* ***Suite des contes moureaux*** *(Paris: Compagnie des Libraries, 1711). Courtesy of the Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley*

simulation of oral tale-telling, or what she calls "factitious orality" (130).[4] In his prose tales, Perrault mimes the voice of the peasant story-teller, always elegantly walking the line between the practices of writing and the supposed "oral" transmission "within a culturally more aristocratic mode of reading" (132). The frontispiece also suggests that the voice that Perrault is simulating is female. Women are often supposed to be tellers of tales: those anonymous, lower-class nurses and grandmothers who taught and entertained children by telling them stories. The murky legend of "Mother Goose" is an instance of this belief; Madame de Sévigné's letter of October 30, 1656, refers to it casually, as if this were part of the well-known lore about fairy tales:

> Et si, Mademoiselle, afin que vous le sachiez, ce n'est pas un conte de ma mère l'oie,
> Mais de la cane de Montfort
> Qui, ma foi, lui resemble fort.
>
> [And if, Mademoiselle, you must know, this is not a tale of Mother Goose, but of the drake of Montfort, there are strong resemblances between them.]

Perrault's frontispiece confirms the prevailing myth about the appropriate role for women in the transmission of fairy tales: as patient, nurturing conduits of oral culture or spinners of tales.

This belief has not really faded. As Trinh Minh-ha says, "The world's earliest archives were the memories of women. Patiently transmitted from mouth to ear, body to body, hand to hand. . . . Every woman partakes in the chain of guardianship and of transmission" (121).[5] Trinh still imagines oral culture as literally handed down by women, in a particularly physical, intimate way ("from mouth to ear, body to body, hand to hand"). Women are still said to be the guardians of tradition, passing on to their children and grandchildren the stories of their culture. But, as folklorists like Linda Dégh have shown, women are and were not the only, or even the primary, story tellers in most oral cultures.[6] The myth of the anonymous female teller of tales, particularly strong in the legend of Mother Goose, is just that: a myth—but a myth that has several important functions and corollaries. If women are the tellers of



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tales, story-telling remains a motherly (or grand-motherly) function, tied (to use the language of the French feminist critics) to the body and nature, as we see in the quotation from Trinh. Stories are supposed to flow from women like milk and blood. And if women are thought of as *tellers* of tales, it follows that they are not imagined as the collectors or writers of tales. As fairy tales moved from oral tales to "book tales" (*Buchmärchen*, or tales that have been written down) to written, invented tales (*Kunstmärchen*), women were subtly relegated to the most "primitive" stage. Perrault's frontispiece may have been an attempt to etch his female writing competitors out of existence.

The frontispieces of volumes of tales the women wrote in the 1690s tales often seem to be designed to contest the ideological force of Perrault's. In the frontispiece of early editions (1698 and 1711) of Marie-Catherine le Jumel de Barneville, Baronne d'Aulnoy's *Contes nouveaux* (reproduced in Gabrielle Verdier's recent article about the *conteuses* [Figure 2]), a woman dressed as a sibyl is writing the title of one of Aulnoy's tales, "Gracieuse et Percinet," in a large folio or book, again with children as her audience, but children dressed in rather the same way and probably of the same class as the story-teller. The story-teller is *not* represented with a spindle, but rather with the flowing robes and turban-like headpiece usually associated with a sibyl. There's a fireplace, but the fire is out. Instead of the locked door, there is a window opening out on a summer country scene. Instead of the domestic cat, there is an exotic monkey—again perhaps a reference to one of Aulnoy's tales, "Babiole"). This mirror effect—the reflection of some of the tales in the introductory picture—heightens the conscious articiality of the scene and of the tales that follow.

The frontispieces of a 1725 Amsterdam edition of Aulnoy's *Nouveaux contes des fées* also work against the image of the woman as lower-class story-teller. The frontispiece of Volume I shows a fashionably dressed women seated on an elevated dais, gesticulating as she speaks to an audience, similarly dressed, that seems to be primarily adult. [Figure 3]. Far from an enclosed, domestic, fireside scene, this is a large room with classical columns and an open window

*Figure 3. Frontispiece, Marie-Catherine d'Aulnoy,* ***Nouveaux Contes des Fees,*** *Vol. I (Amsterdam: Chez Estienne Roger, 1725). Courtesy of the Pierpont Morgan Library, New York (PML 84636).*



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*Figure 4. Frontispiece, Marie-Catherine d'Aulnoy,* ***Nouveaux Contes des Fees,*** *Vol. II (Amsterdam: Chez Estienne Roger, 1725). Courtesy of the Pierpont Morgan Library, New York (PML 84637).*

that looks out on a faintly classical landscape with obelisks and a tower. The decorative *rocaille* around the title at the top of the page underscores the aristocratic milieu of this story-teller. The frontispiece of Volume II again represents a woman writing [Figure 4]: we see a woman with a helmet on her head—probably Pallas Athena, since she is accompanied by an owl—writing on a large tablet with a quill and apparently speaking at the same time. In the foreground there is an audience of fashionably dressed adults, in the background a scene that might represent, in miniature, the plot of one of Aulnoy's tales. The frontispieces used for the *conteuses*' tales, then, usually represent them as sibyls, or aristocratic story-tellers, or as Greek goddesses, not as spinning peasant women.[7] In another paradoxical illustration of the interweaving of the oral and the written, they often are represented as "writing to an audience," inscribing words on a tablet or folio in front of a listening group.

Because women have been perennially associated with the telling of tales—in nurseries, in spinning and weaving circles, in quilting bees, by the fireside—it has been difficult for them to think of themselves, and to be thought of, as fairy-tale writers. As Joan DeJean points out in *Tender Geographies*, France was the only country where "the written transcription of fairy tales was not totally controlled by men" (233n), at least until the nineteenth century. It was not primarily the traditional passivity of most female protagonists of fairy tales that made it difficult for women to take the active step of writing them down and inventing them, but rather the pervasive notion that women were the designated oral transmitters of those tales. But the women who wrote tales in the 1690s chose frontispieces and created narrative structures that contested this limiting prescription. The tales the women wrote—again in contrast to Perrault's—are full of references to a feminine, aristocratic, listening audience: "Perhaps you are going to think, Madame..."; "Isn't it true, Countess, that..."; "I'm sure you have heard, Madame. . . ." The typographical forms in which their tales were printed rarely reflect any interest in suggesting popular origins for the tales; rather



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they tend to be identical to those forms in which the many novels and "nouvelles" of the late 1600s were printed. Perrault's tales in his 1697 volume always have a crude illustrative engraving on the first page; the tales in the women's collections usually have only the same decorative stylized headpieces that they use for their other writing. The tales embedded in the women's novels are sometimes not set off from the rest of the text at all, as in Aulnoy's "Ile de la félicité" (usually considered to be the first written fairy tale in France, included in her 1690 novel *Hipolyte, Comte du Duglas*); sometimes they are separated by a chaste and simple border of florets. The *conteuse's* words do not appear "in costume" to delight children or to simulate popular orality;[8] their fairy-tales are primarily documents of an ongoing (though perhaps fading) salon practice.[9]

II

To trace the tales written in the 1690s by women, then, is to trace a practice based on a very different conception of the "oral" from Perrault's dominant model. The *conteuses* do sometimes write stories based on traditional material; they also occasionally echo traditional formulae that seem to define women as the oral conduits of popular culture. For example, both Perrault, in his verse tale "Peau de l'âne" (1694), and his niece Marie-Jeanne L'Héritier, in her tale "Les enchantemens de l'éloquence" (1696), include almost identical verses:

> Ils ne sont pas aisez à croire;
> Mais tant que dans le monde on verra des enfants.
> Des meres & des mere-grands,
> On en gardera la memoire.
>
> [These stories are not easy to believe, but as long as there are children, mothers, and grandmothers in the world, they will be remembered.][10]

These lines, and other similar ones, occur once in a while in the women's tales, linking the written stories to an ongoing tradition of story-telling and marking that tradition as transmitted by women to children. But, much more often, and usually simultaneously, the *conteuses* place their tales in the complex and playful ambience of salon conversation. The "oral" for them is not primarily naive and primitive, but rather a highly-charged, high-cultural event.

We still tend to identify the oral with peasant, illiterate, or "folk" culture; like the Grimms, we tend to think of the oral as coming before the written, or as part of the origins of culture. But, as Alan Dundes has pointed out, there are many different kinds of "folk" and illiteracy is not a requirement.[11] Walter J. Ong has pointed to a different kind of orality: the residues of ancient rhetorical practices that continued to be taught in schools for boys throughout the seventeenth century.[12] In his book *Orality and Literacy*, Ong makes an interesting guess about women's leading role in the invention of the novel:

> A great gap in our understanding of the influence of women on literary style and genre could be bridged or closed though attention to the orality-literacy-print shift...early women novelists and other women writers generally



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> worked from outside the oral tradition because of the simple fact that girls were not commonly subjected to the orally based rhetorical training that boys got in school....Certainly, non-rhetorical styles congenial to women writers helped make the novel what it is: more like a conversation than a platform performance. (159-60)

It seems to me, however, that Ong's guess about the relationship of early women writers to orality is off the mark, at least in France. Or rather, his primary conception of secondary orality (orality that persists after the introduction of writing) is in fact a very narrow, academic, and elite one —and not very "oral" at all. The women who wrote fairy tales were interested in simulating another kind of oral transmission, a practice that Ong never mentions. He suggests, at the end of the passage I've quoted, that women's writing tended to be based on "conversation" rather than on platform rhetoric—but he never acknowledges that conversation, including the ritualized conversation of the salons, is after all an oral practice, too. In his laudable attempt to think about women in relation to orality and writing, he in fact defines the oral tradition in a way that excludes them.

I think we need to develop more nuanced categories of the oral—categories that will permit us to see the ways oral practices that do not derive from the ancient techniques of rhetoric taught in schools continue to leave their traces in written texts. The nostalgia for the oral that permeates most written narratives can take on very different forms. The orality that has left its marks in many fairy tales is rarely the disputational "harangue" of Ong's school-based oratorical rhetoric, and not always the pseudo-folk situation that is sketched in Perrault's frontispiece. Rather the women of the 1690s attempted to reproduce the conversational ambience of the salons that had formed them as writers. As Joan DeJean has shown in *Tender Geographies*, "the conversational style...is originally a female concept, invented in the salons and reinscribed in prose fiction when, following Scudéry's example, women found a new power base in the republic of letters" (47). While her claim seems too broad, forgetting the conversational basis of earlier texts like Plato's dialogues or the *Decameron*, DeJean rightly emphasizes the importance of conversation in women's writing of the later seventeenth century in France.

Like the earlier novels by Scudéry or Villedieu, the *conteuses'* tales grew out of the competitive, scintillating dialogues that were an integral part of the salons. First fairy tales were a diversion in the salons, one of the many collaborative "divertissements" that formed part of salon culture, like riddles, metamorphoses, portraits, and "maximes d'amour"; then they were written down. But both practices seem to have continued simultaneously throughout the 1690s; as Roger Chartier has said, "the opposition of oral and written fails to account for the situation that existed from the sixteenth to the eighteenth century when media and multiple practices still overlapped" (170).[13] This was true in popular culture, where evening tale-telling coexisted with the publication of fairy tales in chapbooks and *colporteur* literature. And, I believe, it



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was equally true in the aristocratic practices of the salons. Tale-telling and tale-writing went on simultaneously, as many of the frontispieces suggest.

Like all oral cultures, the culture of the salons is difficult to recover. We know much more about it than about many other oral cultures, because the participants were literate; they wrote about what went on at the salons in their letters, memoirs, even novels. But it was fluid, ephemeral, constantly changing. The evidence we have of the ways stories were told and received is spotty and unreliable—found mostly in letters like Sévigné's and novels like Segrais's *Les Nouvelles françaises ou les divertissements de la princesse Aurélie* (1656), about the group around the Grande Mademoiselle during her exile at Saint-Fargeau, or La Force's *Jeux d'esprit* (1701), about the "divertissements" that the Princesse de Conti promoted during her exile at Eu in the early seventeenth century. Madame de Sévigné, in her letter of August 6, 1677, suggests all the artificiality and the incongruities of a fairy-tale-telling scene at court—as well as its links with the opera—in order to establish the oral situation in which it took place:

> Mme de Coulanges, qui m'est venue faire ici une fort honnête visite qui durera jusqu'à demain, voulut bien nous faire part des contes avec quoi l'on amuse les dames de Versailles: cela s'appelle les *mitonner*. Elle nous mitonna donc, et nous parla d'une île verte, où l'on élevoit une princesse plus belle que le jour; c'étoient les fées qui souffloient sur elle à tout moment. (August 6, 1677: 320)
>
> [Mme de Coulanges, who has come here to pay me a gracious visit that will last until tomorrow, wanted to acquaint us with the stories that are currently amusing the ladies of Versailles: that is called *cajoling* them. She cajoled us then, and told us about a green island, where a princess more beautiful than the day was being brought up; it was the fairies who breathed on her at every moment.]

Sévigné, with her usual clear-eyed irony, is not much amused by the fantastic fairy-tale, which lasts "une bonne heure" [a good hour]. She makes use of the neologism *mitonner* in order to mock the tone and flavor of the storytelling.[14] In 1677, neither Mme de Coulanges, her court source, or Mme de Sévigné herself thinks of fairy tales as written, but rather as part of a concrete social milieu—far from the homely, domestic milieu sketched in Perrault's frontispiece.

Recently several writers have attempted to look at the conversation of the salons in its relationship to French intellectual and artistic life in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.[15] While acknowledging its elusiveness, they have brought out some of its crucial features: the allusive word-play, the emphasis on repartee and collaborative exchange, the emphasis on improvisation, the absence of weighty "sujet." Erica Harth believes that the salons became "a discursive dead end for women" (17)—and, if one is primarily interested in women becoming recognized as philosophers, this is probably true. But I see the discourse or, to use a less weighty term, "talk" of the salons



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as a literary proving ground—not only for the novel, as DeJean has shown, but also for fairy tales. Just as salon talk influenced the suggestive brush-strokes of Watteau's canvases, it also provided the airy framework for the castles and enchanted islands that were staples of the fairy tales women wrote.

And here I mean "framework" in a rather literal way. Though Perrault often used the dialogue form in his more "serious" works — the *Parallèle des anciens et des modernes* (1692), for example — he abandoned it when he wrote his *Contes*, preferring to create the naive, solitary voice of "Ma Mère Loye" [Mother Goose]. His women contemporaries, however, saw in the give and take of salon dialogue a useful way to introduce and frame the stories they were writing. Though they may not have collaborated on individual stories (I have found no evidence that they did), they situated themselves and their stories in this sparkling, collaborative interchange. Both Raymonde Robert and Lewis Seifert argue that the framing device was primarily to give a nostalgic illusion of "social cohesion" or class solidarity.[16] I want to argue here, however, that the frames had another, narrative function.

Reading tales like L'Héritier's "The Adroit Princess" (1696) in their original form, in fact, we discover that most later editions and translations have wrenched her tales out of their conversational frame. "The Adroit Princess" is dedicated to Mme de Murat and begins as if L'Héritier were carrying on a dialogue with her:

> Vous faites les plus jolies Nouvelles du monde en Vers; mais en Vers aussi doux que naturels: je voudrois bien, charmante Comtesse, vous en dire une à mon tour; cependant je ne sai si vous pourrez vous en divertir: je suis aujourd'huy de l'humeur du Bourgeois-Gentilhomme; je ne voudrois ni Vers, ni Prose pour vous la conter: point de grands mots, point de brillans, point de rimes; un tour naif m'accomode mieux; en un mot, un récit sans façon et comme on parle. . . .(229-30)
>
> [You create the most beautiful "nouvelles" in the world in verse, but in verse as sweet as natural: I would like, charming Countess, to tell you one in my turn; however, I'm not sure it will amuse you: today I feel like [Molière's] Bourgeois Gentilhomme; I don't want to use verse or prose to tell it to you: no grand words, no startling effects, no rhymes; a naive tone suits me better; in a word, a story ["récit," which retains the aura of the oral] told without any ceremony and as one speaks....]

There are lots of interesting things here, particularly L'Héritier's claim that she has used a language that's simple and "naive," a language that is not formal but rather is written "as one speaks." Simplicity, a key word for both Perrault and these women writers when they talk about the language of their tales, is never a pure transcription, but rather a constructed and carefully pruned version of actual speech. Like Perrault, L'Héritier is creating a special, stripped-down language for her tales. Unlike Perrault, however, she does not claim to be reproducing the voice of a peasant story-teller. Rather, she is interested in recapturing the elegant simplicity of the language current in the salons, always characterized as "naive" even at its most artificial and constructed. In



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his recent chapter, "Origins of the Fairy Tale," Jack Zipes describes the rhetoric of the *conteuses* this way: "they placed great emphasis on certain rules of oration such as naturalness and formlessness. The teller of the tale was to make it 'seem' as though the tale were made up on the spot and did not follow prescribed rules" (21). This assumed "naiveté" and simplicity is a crucial feature of the language promoted in the salons.

And we do not hear this language as a monologue, the uninterrupted voice of a single story-teller. L'Héritier speaks of telling a story *in her turn*; that is, she conceives of story-telling as an exchange. She imagines a situation rather like the situation in the *Decameron* or in Marguerite de Navarre's *Heptaméron*, or in Basile's *Pentamerone*, in which the characters in the frame tell stories. This seems to have been the way fairy-tales played a role in the salons: members of the group took turns, often adding to and elaborating on the tales others had just told. L'Héritier echoes this reciprocal, sometimes competitive, sometimes collaborative story-telling (a version of what Joan DeJean calls "salon writing") in her written tales.[17]

In the earliest novels that included fairy tales—Aulnoy's *Hipolyte, Comte de Duglas* (1690) for example— the tale is always told by a character in the novel, sometimes in very contrived situations. The hero of Aulnoy's novel tells the tale of the "Ile de la Félicité" to an abbess to distract her while her portrait is being painted. He is in disguise as the painter's assistant; his beloved Julie is quasi-imprisoned in the abbey. The tale—a long story that mingles classical references and motifs that the hero remembers from the "contes des fées" he has heard on his travels—seems in part to be a retarding moment, designed to build up the suspense that leads to the lovers' reunion. But it also establishes the convention that many of the later writers of fairy tales follow (though significantly *not* Perrault): the creation of a conversational frame for the tales.

At the height of fairy-tale production, five years later, the tales become a more motivated and "natural" part of the action. In Catherine Bernard's novel *Inés de Cordoüe* (1696), two contrasting fairy tales are told by rival ladies at the Spanish court of the late sixteenth century, each trying to outdo the other. Since the Queen of Spain, Elizabeth, is French—a point that the novel underlines—she has preserved the custom of holding "conversations" for four or five hours a day, and is always thinking up new amusements for the group that gathers in her "cabinet" (6-7). Bernard carefully establishes Elizabeth's salon as the place where the court could escape the legendary severity of Philip II, a retreat to French "galanterie" and arts.[18]

In this milieu, the heroine Inés tells the story of "Le Prince Rosier," a story that features appearances of fairies in miniature chariots of ivory and princes transformed into rosebushes, but that is essentially about the impossibility of unchanging true love. Her rival Leonor responds by telling the story of "Riquet à la Houppe," a story that Perrault also retold; this is also, unlike Perrault's, a tale in which no one lives "happily ever after." Like "Le Prince Rosier," her version of the tale runs counter to the form we expect fairy tales to take. Both



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women tell stories that are marked by the marvelous: in "Le Prince Rosier" a guardian fairy and miraculous transformations; in "Riquet à la Houppe" fairies and a subterranean realm occupied by gnomes. Though the decor is fantastic, the emotional climate is in fact quite grimly realistic: in both "le mariage, selon la coustume, finit tous les agrémens de leur vie" (43) [marriage, as is the custom, ended all the pleasures of their lives].

These stories suggest some of the distinctiveness of the tales the women wrote, their tendency to work against the "happily ever after" we now expect as an ending. But, in the context Bernard provides for them, they also show us the way the tales grew out of salon culture, its diversions and rivalries. Inés's tale, for example, is praised by the Queen and many other members of the court; her rival Leonor, however,

> fit à Inés plusieurs questions sur ce conte avec autant de malice que d'aigreur. Inés y répondit avec une douceur qui acheva de la faire paroistre une personne parfaite.
>
> Le lendemain Leonor se prepara à conter une Fable, & n'oublia rien pour l'emporter s'il se pouvoit sur Inés. . . .(45)
> [asked Ines several questions about the story with as much malice as animosity. Ines answered with a sweetness that had the effect of making her seem to be a perfect person.
>
> The next day Leonor got ready to tell a Fable, and did everything she could to make it superior to Ines's. . . .]

To tell a fairy tale well is a way to shine in the salon; Leonor is unable to attract the attention of the Marquis de Lerme, who clearly prefers Inés's story, "Prince Rosier." The entire plot of the novel—incredible though it often seems—is driven by Leonor's jealousy of Inés and her desire for revenge; the tale-telling sessions in the Queen's salon mark the beginning of the conflict between the perfect Inés and her most imperfect competitor.

When they begin writing fairy tales down, then, Aulnoy and Bernard and L'Héritier set them in an oral situation, but an oral situation that is far from the supposed Ur-situation that Perrault evokes in his frontispiece. Aulnoy continues to frame her tales; in the *Nouveaux Contes des fées* (1697), for example, the stories are set in a double frame: first a conversational milieu at Saint Cloud, then a Spanish "nouvelle" *Dom Gabriel Ponce de Leon.*) As the Madame D... of the preface (a transparent stand-in for Aulnoy herself) says,

> Voici un cahier tout prêt à vous lire; & pour le rendre plus agreable, j'y ai joint une nouvelle Espagnolle, qui est très-vraye & que je sçai d'original (7)
> [Here is a notebook ready to read to you; and to make it more charming, I have connected to it a Spanish novella, which is very true and also I think original.]

The fictionalized "author" of the tales, after being visited by a nymph, offers to *read* her tales aloud to her listeners; again reading and orality are explicitly invoked together. The conception of the oral that pervades the tales written by women is not the "factitious orality" that Perrault created, the simula-



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tion of the supposed stripped-down language of the "folk." And their tales were even less designed for children than Perrault's. Rather their written fairy tales grew primarily out of an aristocratic oral culture, a culture that, though often in opposition to the official culture of the court, always distinguished itself from the culture of the "menu peuple" as well.[19]

III

This leads to a final series of paradoxes: Perrault in his *Contes* manipulates conventions of the book, both typography and illustration, in order to create the illusion of "folk orality"— in the frontispiece, on the title-page, and in the crude illustrative headpieces of the tales. L'Héritier and the other women writers of the earlier 1690s, on the other hand, rely on the apparent transparency or neutrality of current print practices to carry on what seems to have been a living oral tradition. Instead of surrounding their tales with all the typographical signals of folk origins, they frame them in a conversational setting, a setting that marks their tales as part of an aristocratic and highly literate milieu.

Perrault, like the king in the *Arabian Nights*, pays apparent homage to the skills and cultural power of the female story-teller. He pretends to reproduce her voice, in a peculiar kind of narrative cross-dressing. But he appropriates that voice and that female figure for his own purposes—and, at the same time, represents her as unable to write.[20] The story-teller is female, but the story-writer is male.

Perrault attempts to create the illusion that he is reproducing story-telling as it existed in the oral popular culture of his day; his simulation of its practices became the dominant style and ideology of the fairy tale, as we see in the Grimms' prefaces and most writing on the fairy tale up to our time. But the women who also participated in the invention of the written fairy tale in France created a very different illusion — the illusion that the story is told within the conversational space of the salons. All these writers try to give the impression that the stories are being told aloud. They all simulate oralities, but the oralities they simulate are radically different and their methods of producing the illusion of orality even more so. Perrault simulates the oral by imitating (or inventing) the language and world of the folk and the image and voice of the woman tale-teller. Aulnoy, L'Héritier, and Bernard, however, reject the models of orality and of femininity that Perrault both accepts and promotes. By framing their tales with traces of salon conversation, they represent their tales as part of an aristocratic oral culture. By writing their tales down, they contest the notion that women can only tell the tales that men transcribe and transmit. And, in a final paradox, these women include traces of the oral as part of their attempt to create a new model of femininity: the woman who not only talks—by the fireside to children or in the salon— but also writes.[21]



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## ENDNOTES

[1]Marina Warner's book *From the Beast to the Blonde*, which pays considerable attention to these women writers, appeared only after this article was completed. I haven't been able to take full account of her arguments—and my disagreements—here. But I think she is wrong to say that writers like Aulnoy ever assumed the persona of "the lowerclass older woman" (166).

[2]See Maria Tatar's discussion of various imitations of this scene in Germany and England in the nineteenth century, and the accompanying illustrations (Figures 8-14), in *The Hard Facts,* 106-114. She notes that the middle-class grandmother replaced the lower-class nurse in later illustrations, and that she is sometimes represented then as reading from a book. *Caveat*: the frontispiece in Marina Warner's new book is said to be the Perrault 1697 frontispiece. But it isn't; it must be from a later edition.

[3]For a particularly interesting instance of this traditional association, see the discussion of *Les évangiles des quenouilles* [The Gospel of the distaffs], a fifteenth-century MS divided into *viellées,* about the tale-telling and talk of an exclusively lower-class women's group, in Danielle Régnier-Bohler's "Imagining the Self: Exploring Literature." (See also Warner 36-39 and *passim.*)

[4]See her essay "Tales as a Mirror," particularly 95-97 and 128-32. Louis Marin's analysis of the frontispiece, in "Les Enjeux," also suggests the ways it plays into Perrault's literary strategies in designing his collection. See also Verdier's article, "Figures de la conteuse."

[5]Trinh's chapter "Grandma's Stories" is a remarkable treasure-trove of myth about female story-telling. But see also Karen E. Rowe's "To Spin a Yarn: The Female Voice in Folklore and Fairy Tale," in which she explores—and accepts as a cultural given—the association between women's spinning, weaving, and story-telling. Her argument is more nuanced than many, however, since she recognizes that many stories allegedly told by women are controlled by male "editors" and collectors.

[6]See Dégh's *Folktales and Society*, particularly Chapter 6.

[7]Occasionally, as in the volume of tales by La Force in the same edition, the publishers use Perrault's frontispiece for tales by the *conteuses*. It seems impossible to determine who chose the frontispieces—publisher or author—and why. But I think that Perrault's frontispiece became a kind of counter or default position—if you can't find another frontispiece, slap it on any collection of tales—while the other, more unusual frontispieces I have discussed above were consciously selected to show a different kind of tale transmission.

[8]On words "in costume" and the effects of the materiality of print in literature for children, see Jeffrey Mehlman, *Walter Benjamin for Children: An Essay on his Radio Years* 6.

[9]Gabrielle Verdier, in her "Figures de la conteuse," has studied the frontispieces of later works by Aulnoy in order to show that she rejects the model of the story-telling woman with the spindle in favor of a Sibyl-like figure. But her contention that these frontispieces show women writing seems too simple. (They often seem to be writing and speaking at the same time.) And she does not discuss the traces of salon conversation and practices that are present in the tales written by women.

[10]See Perrault, *Contes* 75, and L'Héritier, *Oeuvres meslées* 163-4 (also reprinted in Perrault, vol. 239.

[11]See his essay "Who are the Folk?" in *Interpreting Folklore* and Roger Chartier's analogous redefinitions of "popular culture."



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[12]In his essay "Latin Language Study as a Renaissance Puberty Rite," Ong makes it clear that "oral memory skills" and Latin were taught almost exclusively to boys. But, as far as I can tell, he does not see how narrow—and by the seventeenth century, how un-oral—his definition of "orality" is.

[13]See also Ruth Finnegan in *Oral Poetry*: "In practice, interaction between oral and written forms is extremely common, and the idea that the use of writing *automatically* deals a death blow to oral literary forms has nothing to support it" (160). She gives examples from British and American balladry, Irish songs, and American cowboy laments, as well as modern Yugoslavia.

[14]The new word "mitonner" derived from cookery, where it means to simmer slowly. (It's related to the word "mie," the soft part of a loaf of bread, the non-crusty part—a word that was also used in seventeenth-century France for a governess, though that is usually thought to be short for "amie.") The word tends to have connotations of flattery, buttering someone up so that that person will do something for you. (Examples Furetière gives in his *Dictionnaire* of 1693 include "This nephew *mitonne* his uncle, so that he will make his heir," and "this cavalier *mitonne* the old woman, so that she will give him her daughter in marriage.") But the word here seems to have slightly different connotations: the story-tellers at court seem to be treating their audience, the ladies of Versailles, as governesses treat spoiled children, catering to their wishes (perhaps in order to get into their good graces).

[15]These include Erica Harth's study of women in the Cartesian tradition and Mary Vidal's work on Watteau. Benedetta Craveri summarizes their efforts and others' in her essay "The Lost Art."

[16]See Robert 330-335 and Seifert, "Marvelous Realities" 1. Armine Kotin Mortimer also emphasizes the frame primarily as a representation of a closed and exclusive society.

[17]See *Tender Geographies*, 22-24, 71-77. For a brief account of the way these practices affected the transmission of fairy tales, see Jack Zipes's introduction to *Beauties, Beasts, and Enchantment*, particularly 2-4, and his recent "Origins of the Fairy Tale" 20-23. Renate Baader also is helpful in understanding the role fairy tales played in the salons

[18]This may be a camouflaged reference to the function of the salons in the late years of Louis XIV's reign, when he was increasingly influenced by the puritanical practices of Mme de Maintenon. See Dorothy R. Thelander's article, "Mother Goose and her Goslings," for a discussion of the "muffled aristocratic disaffection" (493) that the tales reveal.

[19]In the dedication to Louis XIV's niece, Perrault argues that he has included tales that show what goes on "dans les moindres familles" [in the least important families] to give her and other potential rulers some idea of what the life of their subjects is like. L'Héritier, on the other hand, explicitly distinguishes her tales from popular ones; she says that tales told and retold by the folk must have picked up impurities, much as pure water picks up garbage as it flows through a dirty canal: "if the people are simple, they are also crude (*grossière*)" (*Oeuvres meslées* 312-3).

[20]As Karen Rowe says, often "a male author or collector attributes to a female the original power of articulating silent matter. But having attributed this transformative artistic intelligence and voice to a woman, the narrator then reclaims for himself...the controlling power of retelling, of literary recasting and of dissemination to the folk." (61)



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[21]My thanks to Margaret Higonnet and Ulrich Knoepflmacher, for their encouragement when I began work on these problems, and to Ruth Solie, for her help in bringing them to a conclusion, however paradoxical. I also learned a great deal from the participants in a Guthrie Workshop at Dartmouth on French and Italian fairy tales (March, 1995).

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