Thinking Through Things: Magical Objects, Power, and Agency in French Fairy Tales

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The wonder evoked by magical things, the spell cast by the vital, lively objects that talk and move and exercise a subjectivity rivaling that of their human users—these are important elements in establishing the marvelous setting of the fairy tale.[1] The appearance of objects with supernatural powers is a sign to the reader that they are entering a realm where the rules of everyday life do not apply; the only limit on what might happen is the ability to imagine it. In the fairy tales written by Marie-Catherine d'Aulnoy, Marie-Jeanne L'Héritier, and Henriette-Julie de Murat, objects animated by magic exceed their ordinary form and function. Water brings youth and beauty but also sleeping death; eggs are broken to reveal bizarre curiosities; glass distaffs shatter when daughters act contrary to their honor; and the items in a prince's bedchamber speak to him of tender sentiments. Like the tales in which they appear, magical objects invite readers into a marvelous world in which the rules of reality are suspended. The imaginative power of objects that transform the physical body of a heroine or the circumstances in which she finds herself allow d'Aulnoy, L'Héritier, and Murat to open up spaces for reimagining patriarchal narratives of powerful, active heroes and disempowered, passive heroines.[2]

Feminist scholarship on fairy tales written by women in late-seventeenth-century France emphasizes the sociopolitical agenda of their tales, arguing that women writers shaped the genre as distinctly feminine by using a marvelous setting to disrupt gender norms.[3] This scholarship highlights the emancipatory potential of active heroines who embody both masculine and feminine qualities. The *conteuses*' active heroines subvert patriarchal gender norms by

exercising a level of control over their existence normally associated with heroes.[4] The ability of the *conteuses*' heroines to shape their destiny is closely associated with the transformative properties of the marvelous. Marina Warner's *From the Beast to the Blonde* (1994) illustrates the *conteuses*' use of the marvelous to challenge prejudices and practices that confined and defamed women. In *Fairy Tales, Sexuality, and Gender in France* (1996), Lewis C. Seifert also analyzes the *conteuses*' subversive creativity and interrogates their use of the marvelous to reimagine norms of sexuality and gender.

As scholars such as Allison Stedman, Anne E. Duggan, and Elizabeth Wanning Harries have shown, the salon tradition is critical to our understanding of the historical significance of the *conteuses*' tales. Love, in particular its ideal form and effect on the lives of women, is a key theme in both salon conversations and the *conteuses*' tales. Their promotion of female independence, equality between the sexes, and marriage as a personal choice based on love identify the *conteuses*' tales with the protofeminist politics of love and marriage developed in mid-seventeenth-century literary salons.[5] The relationship between the *conteuses*' tales and the collective mode of salon literary production has recently been reexamined in Stedman's *Rococo Fiction in France* (2013). According to Stedman, the *conteuses*' writing transformed salon interaction from an oral-collective mode of literary production to textually mediated exchanges. Within this context, the literary communities created by d'Aulnoy, L'Héritier, and Murat provide different perspectives on the ability of women writers to negotiate changes in the socioliterary field at the end of the seventeenth century (Stedman, *Rococo Fiction*, 127–65).

I draw on Patricia Hannon's argument that aristocratic women used the fairy-tale genre to adapt to social change by exploring alternative constructions of female identity and on Sophie Raynard's identification of stylistic differences in the *conteuses*' representation of feminine perfection to argue that the magical objects created by d'Aulnoy, L'Héritier, and Murat function as a metaphor for the agency of seventeenth-century women. The objects imagined by d'Aulnoy, L'Héritier, and Murat allow each author to present different models of female agency. The differences between each model are illustrated by the ways in which d'Aulnoy, L'Héritier, and Murat use magical objects to aid, challenge, and constrain their heroines. Each author creates her heroines according to a different model of femininity, and each heroine uses magical objects differently according to the limits imposed on her capacity to use those objects to control her destiny. I read differences in the representation of the power and properties of magical objects as a reflection of differences in the ideological positions of d'Aulnoy, L'Héritier, and Murat with respect to the agency of seventeenth-century women.

I focus specifically on the magical objects that heroines use to pursue their preferred lover and reject the advances of less worthy suitors. Although other types of magical objects appear in tales written by d'Aulnoy, L'Héritier, and Murat, this particular type of magical object provides insight into the social power—real and imagined—of seventeenth-century women.[6] The central importance of love in the *conteuses'* tales leads their heroines, with the exception of L'Héritier's Finette, to turn to magical objects for aid in affairs of the heart.[7] In d'Aulnoy's tales these objects serve as appendages to the heroine's agency that help d'Aulnoy's heroines achieve their romantic goals by increasing their capacity to actively pursue, or end their separation from, the men they love. However, the agency of d'Aulnoy's heroines is limited by the social hierarchy in which they operate. Magical objects do not help d'Aulnoy's heroines attain their goals without assistance from more powerful figures. L'Héritier's resourceful heroines exercise active control over their destiny, and their agency exceeds that of their magical objects. The objects that L'Héritier's heroines possess test their moral virtue; they do not enhance their agency. For their part, Murat's ill-fated heroines are unable to use magical objects to achieve a happy ending, nor can they achieve such an ending on their own. The marvelous properties of magical objects, even when used to advance the interests of Murat's heroines, cannot avert predestined misfortune. The agency of Murat's heroines and their magical objects is limited by fate.

Magical Objects and the Imagination of Alternative Realities

The magical objects created by d'Aulnoy, L'Héritier, and Murat invite the reader to imagine an alternative reality in which material things have the power to affect the lives of their human users. This reality multiplies the social meanings inscribed on objects by their human creators. According to Arjun Appadurai, the power of objects comes from their role as "things-in-motion that illuminate their human and social context" (5). Objects, including magical ones, do not have any meaning outside the social context in which they are produced and exchanged, and it is by analyzing the circumstances in which objects circulate that such meaning becomes accessible.[8] The agency of objects is meaningful because it is the action of objects within their social context, their role as "things-in-motion" that illustrates the values and beliefs inscribed on them. The agency of magical objects conveys meaning beyond the literal material form of objects because magical objects do not act in accordance with our assumptions about their proper form and purpose. As animate things with the power to speak and act of their own accord, magical objects disguise their powers, shape-shift, and play tricks on us.[9] By surpassing the boundaries of their inanimate nature and creating new identities that straddle the divide

between inert material ciphers and fully actualized human consciousness, the agency of magical objects illustrates the ideological perspectives of their creators about the limits on human subjectivity.

The imaginative potential of magical objects comes from their ability to subvert the structures of ordinary life. The magical objects imagined by d'Aulnoy, L'Héritier, and Murat destabilize seventeenth-century gender norms in distinctly different ways. Each author affords different powers to the magical objects she creates, and each heroine uses magical objects differently according to the degree of agency she is allowed to possess. The *conteuses'* magical objects are, to use Sherry Turkle's phrase, "evocative objects" (309). They are material things invested with emotional power that d'Aulnoy, L'Héritier, and Murat use to invent and reinvent seventeenth-century gender identities. The emotional power of magical objects comes from their ability to challenge the distinction between (animate) people and (inanimate) things. As Warner argues in *Stranger Magic*, the active narrative interventions of objects enchanted by the supernatural blur the distinction between human subjects and inanimate objects because they allow magical objects to exercise an agency ordinarily associated with human subjectivity. The vital consciousness of magical objects means that they cannot simply be possessed or controlled by their human users; they possess a life of their own and the power to influence the life of their human user (Warner, *Stranger Magic*, 197–200). When a magical object acts on behalf of or at the request of a heroine, the distinction between active humans and passive objects is displaced. The supernatural animation of inert things evokes an alternative reality in which power is vested in ordinarily passive subjects.

Despite their ubiquitous presence in marvelous tales, surprisingly little has been written about the agency of magical objects. The narrative importance of magic mirrors, rings that grant wishes, seven-league boots, and other enchanted objects has been well documented by the Aarne-Thompson-Uther (ATU) catalogue and Stith Thompson's *Motif-Index of Folk-Literature*. These systems of classification focus on the identification and categorization of magical objects; they do not examine the social meanings inscribed on those objects. The ATU index, which classifies tales based on their narrative structure, provides each tale type with a number, title, and description. ATU tales 560–649 are tales featuring magical objects, and the presence of such objects is the reason these tales are identified as a distinct group within the overarching category "Tales of Magic" (ATU 300–749). The descriptions of ATU tales 560–649 do not, however, examine the role of magical objects beyond their significance as an identifying feature of the tale type (Uther 328–54). Thompson's *Motif-Index*, which is cross-referenced in the ATU catalog, provides more detail about the characteristics, function, and purpose of magical

objects. The *Motif-Index* catalogs hundreds of magic objects and the circumstances in which they are acquired and used by folktale and fairy-tale characters (motifs D800–D1699). However, this index, like the ATU catalog, simply outlines what magical objects do to their human users; neither list analyzes the consequences of this agency.

The helper-opponent axis of power outlined in A. J. Greimas's expansion of Vladimir Propp's functions into the actantial model (172–80) offers one possible method of examining the agency of fairy-tale objects.[10] In Propp's thirty-one functions of Russian fairy tales, the functions fulfilled by magical objects emphasize the narrative consequences associated with the loss, acquisition, and retrieval of magical objects.[11] Although Propp acknowledges that magical objects exercise the same agency as living things, he interprets this agency as the performance of functions associated with the helper sphere of action. Magical objects are "nothing more than a particular form of magical helper" (Propp 82). Greimas's actantial model also focuses attention on the narrative function of magical objects as supernatural things that help or hinder the progress of the protagonist. This model conceptualizes the agency of magical objects as either an extension of or a restriction on the agency of the subject. Subjects who acquire a magical object obtain a powerful material thing that helps them pursue their desired relationship with the object. When subjects successfully exercise control over a magical object, they harness its power to advance their own interests. When a magical object acts against the interests of a subject, it opposes or restricts the agency of that subject.

In the tales written by d'Aulnoy, L'Héritier, and Murat, the agency of magical objects does more than simply help or hinder the narrative progress of the heroine. Their magical objects are encoded with social meanings about the limits of human subjectivity. The imaginative potential of these objects disrupts the relationship between human protagonists and material things, a disruption that metaphorically illustrates each author's perspective on the agency of seventeenth-century women.

D'Aulnoy's Ambiguous Reflections on Female Agency

D'Aulnoy is credited with publishing the first French literary fairy tale, "L'île de la Félicité," in her 1690 novel *Histoire d'Hypolite, comte de Duglas*. Focusing on d'Aulnoy's preferred theme of love and the impediments to it, this tale illustrates the possibilities of and limits to seventeenth-century female agency. The magical objects that appear in this tale (and those that appear in d'Aulnoy's "La Belle aux Cheveux d'Or," "La Princesse Printanière," and "L'Oiseau Bleu") illustrate the ambiguous position of women in seventeenth-century France. The agency exercised by d'Aulnoy's heroines is enhanced by the magical objects

they possess, but they do not successfully achieve a happy ending without assistance from other members of their social group. As Stedman suggests, d'Aulnoy's tales recreate a collaborative model of salon sociability in which individual creativity is supported by salon interaction. This emphasis on the relationship between salon writing and salon conversation highlights the role of the salon community as a social network supporting seventeenth-century women writers (Stedman, *Rococo Fiction*, 130–38). D'Aulnoy's tales emphasize the connection between female agency and social networks by creating salonlike communities around her heroines.

"L'île de la Félicité" begins with Prince Adolphe's transportation to the island of happiness by Zephir, the youngest son of Eole, god of the winds. This island is a feminine paradise echoing the conversational milieu of the mid-seventeenth-century salon and is ruled by the charming and beautiful Félicité: "her beauty was so perfect that she seemed to be a daughter of Heaven; with an air of youth and spirit and a majestic aura capable of inspiring love and respect" (d'Aulnoy 139).[12] Despite her perfection, Félicité is unable to prevent her lover from leaving their utopian paradise in search of honor, glory, and fame.[13] The lure of worldly success is ultimately more important to Adolphe than the perfect happiness of his life with Félicité. It is at this point that Félicité's magical objects appear. Félicité gives Adolphe magnificent arms and the most beautiful horse in the world but warns him that he must not set foot on the ground before returning to the island. If Adolphe fails to follow this directive, Félicité's gifts will not be able to protect him from harm. Despite his faithful promises, Adolphe forgets Félicité's warning and is captured by Father Time.

Félicité's magical gifts are powerless in the face of Adolphe's determination to seek glory, and her attempt to protect Adolphe fails because the power of her magic is limited by Adolphe's actions. Félicité's gifts cannot protect Adolphe because he does not use them in accordance with her instructions. It is Adolphe's desire to conform to masculine codes of honor that puts him beyond the reach of Félicité's magic. He is neither content to remain with her nor able to heed her advice to secure his safe return, thus bringing disaster on them both. The moral of this tale, "that no-one escapes Father Time and that perfect happiness does not exist" (d'Aulnoy 145),[14] emphasizes the limited agency of magical objects to change the nature of human existence. Félicité's magical objects cannot shield Adolphe from Father Time, the symbol of human mortality, and the perfect love they share in her matriarchal fairy paradise cannot be realized in the human world. Félicité's power as the ruler of her kingdom and the possessor of magical objects is defeated by male agency, namely, Adolphe's determination to seek glory, and Father Time's determination to capture him.

In "La Belle aux Cheveux d'Or" the eponymous heroine falls in love with an ambassador sent to woo her on behalf of a neighboring king. Belle aux Cheveux d'Or, who initially resists the idea of marriage to any man, finally agrees to marry the king after his ambassador, Avenant, completes three impossible tasks: finding a ring that had been lost in a stream, slaying a giant, and obtaining a vial of water from the fountain of health and beauty. The magical properties of this water are particularly important in this tale. As the name of the fountain suggests, water from it gives youth and beauty to those who wash with it.[15] After her marriage to the king, Belle aux Cheveux d'Or's vial of this marvelous water is accidentally broken by her chambermaid, who then replaces it with the king's vial of sleeping death, which he uses to execute criminal princes and noblemen. The king, who is unbearably jealous of his wife's obvious affection for Avenant, unknowingly rubs the deathly water on his face in an effort to become handsome enough to win her love. The king's misidentification of this magical object punishes his vanity and insecurity by bringing about the event he dreaded most: the union of Avenant and Belle aux Cheveux d'Or. Here d'Aulnoy does not allow magical objects the ability to influence the emotional relationship between the king and his wife. Belle aux Cheveux d'Or is not in love with her husband, and his attempt to make her fall in love with him by magical means results in his death rather than a change in her heart. Love cannot be created by magical objects, and the king's mistake in selecting the wrong magical object illustrates the complicated relationship between humans and objects. Objects, even magical ones, do not act without the intervention of human agency; but once magical objects are activated, their actions cannot always be controlled by their human users.

In both "L'île de la Félicité" and "La Belle aux Cheveux d'Or" use of the heroine's magical objects is subject to male agency; neither heroine has absolute control over her own destiny. Belle aux Cheveux d'Or, who was a queen in her own right before her marriage and who set Avenant three impossible tasks before consenting to that marriage, is not able to procure her own happiness. She tells Avenant en route to the king's capital city that he is her preferred husband: "If you had wanted, I would have made you king, and we would not have to leave my kingdom" (d'Aulnoy 185).[16] But when Avenant's loyalty prevents him from betraying his master, Belle aux Cheveux d'Or marries the king instead. By accepting a loveless marriage, Belle aux Cheveux d'Or creates unhappiness in her life that is remedied only by her husband's fatal error. Her independent wealth and ability to decide whether and to whom she marries identify her as a figure with more power than much of her seventeenth-century audience, yet she is unable to exercise this power to her own advantage. Moreover, the magical object she possesses limits her power to her physical beauty.[17] The water of beauty enhances Belle aux Cheveux d'Or's

feminine charms by allowing her to stay young and beautiful forever, but it emphasizes her role as a desirable object rather than an active subject, although it must be noted that male beauty is also important in d'Aulnoy's tales.[18] This type of magic can help Belle aux Cheveux d'Or attract and retain male admirers, but it does not empower her to choose the one she prefers. Her fate is determined by accident. Although she is eventually united with her preferred husband, Belle aux Cheveux d'Or does not actively influence the events leading to this union.

In "La Princesse Printanière" d'Aulnoy's rebellious, headstrong heroine exercises independent agency in her choice of partner, but this choice has an unfortunate outcome for Printanière. Like Charles Perrault's "La Belle au bois dormant," the tale begins with the birth of a princess who is showered with gifts by fairies invited to her christening and then cursed by a malevolent fairy. In addition to the gifts of perfect beauty and a wonderful singing voice bestowed on Perrault's heroine, d'Aulnoy's Printanière is blessed with charming wit and a talent for writing prose and verse. It is Printanière's wit and creativity—qualities prized in the salon milieu that d'Aulnoy's tales recreate—that lead her to first fulfill and then escape the curse that she would be unlucky for the first twenty years of her life. Printanière uses her wits to elope with the ambassador of her intended husband, taking with her, seemingly by chance, a magical object in her mother's *couvre-chef* (a kind of head covering). When the ambassador proves to be an untrustworthy lover, Printanière uses this object, a stone with the power to make the wearer invisible, to reproach the ambassador for his ingratitude and then to defend herself from his murderous advances. After killing the ambassador, Printanière is rescued by a fairy who returns her to her parents' court. The tale ends with Printanière's marriage to a prince unaware of her premarital adventures.

Florine, the heroine in d'Aulnoy's "L'Oiseau Bleu," actively pursues union with the partner of her choice, but, like Printanière, she relies on assistance from others to achieve her happy ending. A princess by birth, Florine does not become queen without the intercession of her subjects, who rise up against her wicked stepmother after the death of her father. When Florine is unjustly separated from her beloved Charmant, she depends on magical assistance from a fairy to reunite with him. The fairy gives Florine four marvelous eggs, which, when broken, provide Florine with useful objects.[19] After using the objects produced by the first two eggs (golden mountain-climbing clamps and a chariot flown by pigeons) to travel to Charmant's kingdom, Florine bargains the wonders produced by the remaining two eggs (a coach drawn by six green mice and a rose-colored rat carrying puppets who sing and dance, and a pie containing six singing, fortune-telling birds) for entry into the cabinet of echoes beneath Charmant's bedchamber. This cabinet is a small room cleverly

constructed so that even the quietest whisper in it can be heard in Charmant's bedchamber. Florine uses her time in the chamber to reproach Charmant for his inconstancy: "You have forgotten me, you love my unworthy rival!" (d'Aulnoy 217).[20] Unfortunately, Charmant does not hear Florine's lamentations because of the nightly dose of opium he takes to forget his love for her. Florine is unaware of this obstacle until she is enlightened by one of Charmant's servants, whom she then bribes to withhold the drug. Neither Florine nor her magical objects are powerful enough on their own to overcome the obstacles that prevent her reunion with Charmant. Florine's success is due to her ability to use her wits to determine how to best use her magical objects to achieve her objectives.

In each of the tales just discussed, d'Aulnoy's heroines obtain an object already imbued with magical properties, and this object acts in accordance with its properties. These magical objects are given to the heroine by a fairy (Florine), acquired by accident when the heroine takes another object from her mother (Printanière), obtained for the heroine by a suitor acting under her orders (La Belle aux Cheveux d'Or), or, in the case of Félicité, appear without explanation as to their origin.[21] The agency of Printanière and Florine is enhanced by their magical objects, but their success ultimately depends on assistance from fairies[22] and their ability to use violence and bribery to their advantage. Magical objects have a limited effect on the agency of Belle aux Cheveux d'Or and Félicité; neither heroine is able to harness the power of magical objects to directly influence her fate. The limits that d'Aulnoy imposes on the agency of these objects reflect the social constraints imposed on all seventeenth-century individuals, such as strict parental consent requirements for marriage and codes of honor, reputation, and status (Hanley 9–11, 21–27). Masculine codes of honor are particularly important in determining the fate of Félicité and Belle aux Cheveux d'Or. The agency of their magical objects is shaped by the way in which their lover or husband interacts with their magical objects. Félicité's lover ignores her wishes and the marvelous properties of her magical gifts;[23] Belle aux Cheveux d'Or's husband inadvertently frees her from their marriage by selecting the wrong magical object to alter his appearance. D'Aulnoy's heroines are not powerful enough on their own, even when their agency is enhanced by magical objects, to determine their fate.

L'Héritier's Magical Tests of Character

L'Héritier's representation of her heroines is markedly different from d'Aulnoy's. Rather than endowing her heroines with blessings or gifts from fairies, L'Héritier makes them responsible for cultivating their own talents. As Raynard observes, both authors identify beauty and wit as crucial elements of feminine

perfection, but L'Héritier requires that beauty be accompanied by sweetness and mastery of courtly language (225–33). In L'Héritier's tales, magical objects are given to heroines by powerful male figures to test their character. In "L'Adroite Princesse ou Les Aventures de Finette" Finette's father asks a fairy to create a magical measure of his daughters' virtue: three enchanted glass distaffs that will shatter if the owner of the object acts contrary to her honor. A disguised demon is the source of the magical wand used by Rosanie in "Ricdin-Ricdon." Tricked into entering into a Faustian pact, Rosanie eagerly accepts the gift of a magical item with the power to solve her problems, heedless of the risk to her liberty should she fail to fulfill the condition attached to the gift. Unlike the magical objects used by d'Aulnoy's heroines, the magical objects in L'Héritier's tales do not enhance the agency of her heroines. The objects given to Finette and Rosanie threaten to curtail their freedom by making them subject to the authority of a more powerful male figure.

Finette, the resourceful heroine in "L'Adroite Princesse," is a model illustration of the heroic femininity idealized in L'Héritier's tales. Finette's adventures begin with her father's departure to wage war against the infidels during the First Crusade. Mistrustful of his elder daughters' idleness and ignorance, whose character flaws are reflected by their names Nonchalante and Babillarde,[24] he locks all three princesses in a tower and provides them with the enchanted glass distaffs he commissioned to monitor their conduct. The king's suspicions are well-founded. Despite strict instructions not to allow anyone to enter the tower, Nonchalante and Babillarde are soon tricked into admitting "a poor woman dressed in torn rags, who cried to them of her misery most pathetically . . . [and who] promised to serve them with the utmost fidelity" (L'Héritier 98).[25] The unfortunate wretch, in fact a disguised enemy of their father, Riche-Cautèle, dupes Nonchalante and Babillarde into sleeping with him, and their glass distaffs shatter. Unlike her witless sisters, Finette sees through Riche-Cautèle's deception and saves herself from his mischievous plans: she tricks him into falling into an underground sewer, pushes him into a spiked barrel, and smuggles his illegitimate sons born to her sisters into his father's court.

Finette does not rely on magic or assistance from a more powerful figure to rescue her. It is her self-reliance and independence that protect her from Riche-Cautèle's schemes, and her enchanted distaff remains intact. This magical object does not exercise any influence over Finette. It is her actions that have the power to trigger its magical properties, and she uses her intelligence, courage, and virtue to evade Riche-Cautèle's deviousness and create her own happy ending: "she had sound judgment and such a wonderful presence of mind that she immediately found a solution to all types of problems" (L'Héritier 96).[26] Finette's

fate is determined by her actions, and her agency is not subject to the vicissitudes of love or destiny.

Whereas Finette relies on her wits rather than assistance from a magical object, the future of the beautiful but vacuous Rosanie is threatened by her acceptance of magical assistance. In despair over the impossibility of producing the quantity of yarn expected by the Queen, Rosanie makes a deal with a disguised demon, Ricdin-Ricdon. He provides her with his magic wand, which turns flax and hemp into spun thread, on the condition that she remember his name and say: "Take it Ricdin-Ricdon, here is your wand" (L'Héritier 150) upon his return.[27] Rosanie, after satisfying her vanity by requiring that the wand also have the power to transform her coiffure and toilette into the fashionable style of the court, agrees to Ricdin-Ricdon's terms and then promptly forgets his name.

Ricdin-Ricdon's wand is not the only magical object influencing the fate of the characters in this tale. The Queen's son, who fell in love with Rosanie's rustic natural beauty and artless manners when she first appeared at court, is given a magical ring of truth that allows him to see through deception by sorcerers and demons. The prince receives this ring as a reward for his fidelity to Rosanie in response to efforts by a demon to seduce him using the illusion of a beautiful princess. While wearing the ring, the prince stumbles across a witches' sabbath, where he overhears Ricdin-Ricdon bragging that "I have already entrapped a great number of beautiful girls under this name [Ricdin-Ricdon]" (L'Héritier 175).[28] When the prince recounts his adventures to Rosanie, she is overjoyed to be supplied with Ricdin-Ricdon's name and uses this knowledge to successfully return the wand to its demonic owner.

In "L'Adroite Princesse" and "Ricdin-Ricdon" magical objects function as a trap rather than a reward for the heroine; they do not shape her character but test her identity as a virtuous heroine. Both Finette and Rosanie pass this test but in quite different ways: Finette, because her education allowed her to fully embody the role of a heroic, or *honnête*, heroine; and Rosanie, because her natural virtue allowed her to overcome her lack of education. Compared to Finette, whose intelligence and education allow her to actively take charge of her destiny, Rosanie relies on her prince to rescue her. Her natural charms of beauty and grace assist her indirectly, and, like d'Aulnoy's Belle aux Cheveux d'Or, she is saved because she has mastered codes of self-representation that identify her virtuous beauty. Although not as intelligent or as quick-witted as Finette, Rosanie quickly adopts the manners of the court and is praised for her natural charms and good taste that "enchanted the eyes of all who regarded her" (L'Héritier 143).[29] Rosanie's beauty and virtue are rewarded by the faithful love of a worthy suitor who saves her from Ricdin-Ricdon's enchantments.

The virtuous character of L'Héritier's heroines is the reason they evade the threat that magical objects pose to their personal liberty. By embodying the conversational eloquence that L'Héritier transposes from the physical space of the salon to the virtual space of literary texts, L'Héritier's heroines reflect an optimistic view of the potential for women to enhance their agency by engaging in textually mediated salon interaction (Stedman, *Rococo Fiction*, 138–46). This expansion of salon sociability revises the limits on female agency in d'Aulnoy's tales. It is the eloquence of L'Héritier's heroines rather than their possession of magical objects or physical participation in a salon that allows them to achieve their goals.[30] Yet despite this more optimistic view of female agency, love within the bounds of a conventional patriarchal marriage is the reward given to L'Héritier's heroines: Finette ends her heroic adventures in the arms of her husband, and Rosanie exchanges the tedious task of spinning for wifely duties to the prince. The nature of these happy endings simultaneously subverts and reinforces patriarchal gender identities. They are subversive to the extent that L'Héritier's heroines challenge ideas of female weakness and passivity, and yet they are highly conventional insofar as their reward is marriage to a kind and handsome prince.

The Fatal Passion of Love in Murat's Unhappy Endings

In "Peine Perdue" and "Le Palais de la Vengeance" Murat limits the power of magical objects and the agency of the heroines who try to use them to avoid the misfortunes they are destined to suffer. Murat's pessimistic view of individual agency echoes d'Aulnoy's representation of the social constraints affecting the autonomy of seventeenth-century women. However, Murat's pessimism is much more profound than d'Aulnoy's, because she does not allow any augmentation, magical or otherwise, to the agency of her heroines. According to Murat, even the powerful figure of the fairy is unable to alter "the order of destiny."[31] Any attempt by Murat's heroines to use magical objects to avoid their fate is therefore bound to fail. Unlike d'Aulnoy's tales, in which interventions by powerful female fairies support heroines who use magical objects to enhance their agency, the power of Murat's fairies is limited by fate. As Melissa A. Hofmann observes, the limits that Murat imposes on the power of her fairies mirror the limits imposed on the power of female writers in the emerging republic of letters (253). Neither Murat nor her female characters have the power to escape the patriarchal social structures that determine their fate, even if, as Stedman suggests, they do successfully redefine salon interaction within the republic of letters (*Rococo Fiction*, 146–54).

Peine Perdue is a poignant example of the tender suffering experienced by Murat's heroines. Peine Perdue, who is destined from birth to experience

misfortune caused by love, is unable to use magic or magical objects to change this destiny. This lack of agency is encoded in her name, which translates to "wasted effort." Raised on an island enchanted by her fairy mother to prevent the entry of any man, Peine Perdue nevertheless falls hopelessly in love with Prince Isabel after his fiancée, Princess Anarine, visits the island and inadvertently leaves behind his portrait. Upon learning of her daughter's tender passion, Peine Perdue's mother attempts to use her magical powers to make Prince Isabel fall in love with Peine Perdue. These efforts fail, because the powers of Peine Perdue's mother are no match for the superior powers of Princess Anarine's father, the King of Enchanters. The king thwarts the fairy's first attempt to secure Prince Isabel's affections for her daughter by sending a bird of paradise to rescue him from the fairy's forest. His entry into Prince Isabel's bedchamber frustrates the fairy's second attempt by silencing the objects magically animated by her potion to make the prince fall in love with Peine Perdue.

The magical objects that reproach Prince Isabel for not loving Peine Perdue—the enchanted items in his bedchamber that express touching sentiments about his cruelty toward her—are unable to inspire real emotion in the prince. Their power to persuade him that he loves Peine Perdue is illusory because the success of the enchantment depends on no one entering the room until after sunrise the next day. The entry of Princess Anarine's father dissipates the hypnotic spell cast by the clamor of speaking objects before they can become anything more than a strange dream quickly forgotten. The persuasive power of the object-animating potion is no match for Peine Perdue's destiny, which does not allow the potion to work.[32] Unable to make Prince Isabel love her, Peine Perdue ends her days in "the Land of Love's Injustices,"[33] where she finds peace living with other "tender, unhappy, and loyal people" (Murat 403).[34]

The inability of magical objects to dispel or displace love is further explored by Murat in "Le Palais de la Vengeance." In this tale Princess Imis and her beloved Philax, who were made for each other by Cupid himself, face several tests of their love by an enchanter who is determined to separate them. His efforts to seduce Imis are initially thwarted by the enchanted headdress given to her by the fairy of the mountain. The power of this headdress is, like the magic potion in "Peine Perdue," subject to the intervention of human agency because it can only protect Imis as long as she is wearing it. When the headdress is removed by one of her ladies' maids, Imis is magically transported to the palace of her persistent, unsuccessful suitor. Pagan the enchanter, who has power over everyone except Imis, tries to usurp Philax's place in Imis's heart by making her believe that Philax is unfaithful to her. Pagan's attempts to make Imis love him instead of Philax fail, and when he realizes that the constancy of Imis and Philax's love is the reason for this failure, he decides to destroy that love. Pagan achieves his revenge and fulfills the fairy's prophecy

by confining the lovers in an enchanted crystal palace from which they can never escape. Condemned to see each other always, Imis and Philax's love, which Pagan could not destroy by magical means, eventually destroys itself.

The failure of Murat's magical objects to help her heroines overcome their destiny illustrates her views about the dangerous lure of love as a "fatal passion"[35] undermining female agency. Murat's fairies cannot change the fate of her heroines because they, like the magical objects they create, are subject to a force more powerful than magic. The fate of Murat's heroines is determined by emotion, namely, their experience of love (Imis) or their inability to inspire love in another (Peine Perdue). Murat's pessimistic view of individual agency means that her magical objects are unable to inspire real love or help her heroines avoid the suffering caused by love. Love, according to Murat, is a force beyond the control of human and magical characters. Magic cannot displace love, nor can it protect against the suffering caused by love. In identifying love as the agent of destiny in "Peine Perdue" and "Le Palais de la Vengeance," Murat does not, as Hofmann and Geneviève Clermidy-Patard suggest, allow love to challenge patriarchal authority (Hofmann 263–66).[36] Love does not empower Peine Perdue or Imis; it is their pursuit of love that fulfills their respective misfortunes. Love is a source of suffering for Murat's heroines, but it does not achieve this effect unaided. It is the intervention of male enchanters who thwart fairy magic and not the act of falling in love that seals the unhappy fate of Imis and Peine Perdue.

Promoting Female Agency?

Each of the tales examined here presents a different perspective on the ability of seventeenth-century French women to shape their own destiny. D'Aulnoy limits the autonomy of her beautiful, virtuous heroines by making the success of their use of magical objects dependent on intercession by more powerful figures. Belle aux Cheveux d'Or, Florine, and Printanière use the water of beauty, enchanted eggs, and a stone of invisibility to enhance their agency, but they do not obtain a happy ending without assistance, or, in the case of Belle aux Cheveux d'Or, an unfortunate mistake by her jealous husband. Félicité, who lacks support from a powerful benefactor, is condemned to suffer the consequences of lost love. L'Héritier's charming, refined heroines Finette and Rosanie do not rely on the supernatural properties of an enchanted glass distaff and a magic wand to enhance their agency. Both heroines embody an active femininity that emphasizes the possibilities of female intelligence and creativity as a means of escaping attempts to circumscribe their agency, and yet both Finette and Rosanie ultimately marry, thus ending their adventures safely enclosed within a patriarchal framework. Murat's spirited heroines are unable

to harness the power of a protective headdress of lilies or an object-animating potion to escape predestined misfortune. Destined from birth to be made unhappy by love, Princess Imis and Peine Perdue cannot use magical objects to enhance their agency because no woman has the power to escape her fate. Their agency is limited by their destiny, and even the intervention of powerful female fairies cannot avert the consequences of their ill-fated romances.

The different types of female agency presented by d'Aulnoy, L'Héritier, and Murat highlight the complex interplay between ideas about love, power, and gender in early modern France. By allowing some heroines to use magical objects to enhance their agency but also limiting the power of magical objects to challenge patriarchal social structures, d'Aulnoy, L'Héritier, and Murat create heroines who seek to exercise control over their lives but are constrained by the degree of autonomy available to seventeenth-century women. The agency of d'Aulnoy's heroines is constrained by gendered codes of honor and sociability, Murat's heroines cannot avoid the suffering caused by love, and L'Héritier's active heroines ultimately become subject to the authority of their husbands. However, despite the limits that these three authors impose on the agency of their heroines, their use of magical objects opens up spaces for imagining different identities for women. Their tales challenge the active hero/passive heroine dichotomy by creating ambiguous heroines who are both active and passive. This invitation to imagine a broader concept of female identity disrupts seventeenth-century gender norms by reimagining women as active social agents who do not simply accept the gendered identity ascribed to them.

Notes

1. A number of scholars have examined magical objects as a feature of the fairy-tale genre. See, in particular, Seifert ("Marvelous Realities"), Thompson (*The Folktale*, 70–79), and Warner ("Riding the Carpet"; *Stranger Magic*, 195–209).
2. My argument is influenced by Warner's identification of the subversive potential of wonder (*Beast to the Blonde*, xvi–xxi) and Seifert's evaluation of the ambivalent power of active heroines in seventeenth-century fairy tales ("Female Empowerment"). For a different perspective, see Jones (17–22).
3. Catherine Bernard, Charlotte-Rose de La Force, Louise d'Auneuil, and Catherine Durand wrote fairy tales at the same time as d'Aulnoy, L'Héritier, and Murat. A number of scholars have identified a shared politics and aesthetic in their fairy tales. See Hannon; Harries; Raynard; Seifert (*Fairy Tales*; "Female Empowerment"); Seifert and Stanton; and Welch.
4. According to Hofmann, one of the traits shared by the *conteuses*' heroines is a "perfect combination of masculine and feminine qualities" (255), a characteristic also recognized by Jasmin (368–89) and Raynard (337–50). Seifert, however, observes that the political power exercised by *conteuses*' heroines is most often

used to further the love plot, thus reaffirming the patriarchal institution of marriage ("Female Empowerment," 19–22).

5. For an overview of the debates about love and marriage in salon conversations, see DeJean, Lougee (21–38), and Welch (47–57).

6. Magical objects appear in a number of other tales by d'Aulnoy, L'Héritier, and Murat. In some cases magical objects are created or used by heroes, as in d'Aulnoy's "Gracieuse et Percinet," "Le Prince Lutin," "Le Rameau d'Or," and "Le Nain Jaune," and in Murat's "Le Parfait Amour." In L'Héritier's "La robe de sincérité" an enchanted dress is used to illustrate ideas about female fidelity.

7. The central importance of love in the *conteuses*' tales has been recognized by a number of scholars, including Raynard (239–60) and Seifert and Stanton (29–31).

8. This reading of the social meanings embedded in magical objects draws on the methodological tools developed by material culture analysis, in particular, Appadurai, Connor, Daston, Turkle, and Warner's work on the *Arabian Nights* ("Riding the Carpet"; *Stranger Magic*, 195–209).

9. Conner describes the power of magical things in relation to J. J. Gibson's concept of "affordance." He argues that the physical form of all objects invites a particular response from their human users but that magical objects surpass ordinary affordances by offering the possibility of imaginary, indeterminate uses (2–4).

10. Seifert applies this paradigm to his discussion of magic objects in "Marvelous Realities" (140–41). Thompson's identification of a general pattern of acquisition, loss, and retrieval in stories featuring magic objects emphasizes the role of magical objects as appendages to the agency of the protagonist (*The Folktale*, 70).

11. In function 8, one of the harms that might be experienced by the hero is theft of a magical object. Function 14 shows how a hero might be rewarded by acquisition of a magical object, and function 19 resolves the harm in function 8 with restoration of the magical object (Propp 25–65).

12. "Sa beauté était si parfaite qu'elle semblait être fille du Ciel; un air de jeunesse et d'esprit, une majesté propre à inspirer de l'amour et du respect". All translations are mine.

13. On interpretation of Félicité's island as a feminist utopia, see Stedman ("D'Aulnoy's 'Histoire,'" 32–33). See also Duggan (200–203).

14. "Que le Temps vient à bout de tout et qu'il n'est point de félicité parfaite."

15. In d'Aulnoy's "Serpentin Vert" Princess Laidronette's curse of ugliness is broken when she washes her face with the water of discretion.

16. "Si vous aviez voulu, je vous aurais fait roi, nous ne serions point partis de mon royaume."

17. The association of female identity with the body is a key theme in the *querelle des femmes*. For an excellent summary of seventeenth-century treatises on the nature of women, see Hannon (20–45).

18. Avenant is described as "beau comme le soleil" (d'Aulnoy 176), and Belle aux Cheveux d'Or's husband blames his wife's lack of affection for him on his lack of beauty.

19. According to Robert, d'Aulnoy was the first to use the motif of a gift of marvelous eggs that reveal unexpected objects when broken (120).

20. "Tu m'as oubliée, tu aimes mon indigne rivale!"

21. Given Félicité's possession of fairy spirit, it is possible that she created the magical objects she gives to Adolphe.

22. In d'Aulnoy and Murat's tales, fairies are powerful female figures who evoke salon women. The preface to Murat's *Histoires sublimes et allégoriques*, "Aux Fées Modernes," identifies modern fairies as symbolic representations of women writers, namely, herself and her fellow *conteuses*.

23. Duggan analyzes Adolphe's decision as a rejection of the feminine genealogy of Félicité's island in favor of a masculine definition of political power (202–4).

24. Nonchalante is so named because of her indolence, Babillarde because she does not stop talking from the time she wakes until she goes to sleep (L'Héritier 95).

25. "Une pauvre femme vêtue de haillons déchirés, qui leur criait sa misère fort pathétiquement . . . [et qui] leur représentant . . . qu'elle leur rendrait service avec la plus exacte fidélité."

26. "elle avait beaucoup de jugement et une présence d'esprit si merveilleuse qu'elle trouvait sur-le-champ des moyens de sortir de toutes sortes d'affaires."

27. "Tenez, Ricdin-Ricdon, voilà votre baguette".

28. "j'ai déjà acquis un grand nombre de jeunes beautés sous ce nom".

29. "Enchantait les yeux de tous ceux qui la regardaient." Rosanie is not the perfect embodiment of L'Héritier's ideal version of femininity. She struggles to learn to read and write and is bored by serious conversation, although she does learn polite manners and how to assume a modest appearance (L'Héritier 155, 159–60).

30. L'Héritier does, however, acknowledge the need for textually mediated eloquence to be supported by former salon patrons (Stedman, *Rococo Fiction*, 145–46).

31. "l'ordre des destinées". The same phrase appears in "Le Palais de la Vengeance" and "Peine Purdue" (Murat 146, 395).

32. "la destinée de cette charmante fille ne permettait pas qu'elle le pût être" (Murat 402).

33. "le pays des Injustices de l'Amour".

34. "s'étant fait une douce habitude de vivre avec des personnes tendres, malheureuses et fidèles."

35. The compelling force of emotion is explored in detail by Murat in her tale "Anguillette." In this tale, fairy magic, the granting of wishes, and provision of sage advice are no match for the "passion fatale" of love (Murat 91).

36. Although Hofmann is talking specifically about Turbodine, the heroine in Murat's "Le Turbot," she uses Clermidy-Patard's claim that Murat uses love as another term for destiny and subordinates patriarchal authority to love to argue that Murat simultaneously acknowledges and subverts masculine authority (264).

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