The Meaning of Fairy Tale within the Evolution of Culture

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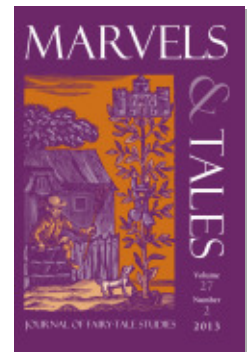
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Fairy Tale signifies belief in the supernatural, not the suspension of belief. We all believe in the extra-ordinary of Once Upon a Time. We need to believe. We breathe through our tales.

—Vincenzo di Kastiaux

Think of a gigantic whale soaring through the ocean and swallowing each and every fish of any size that comes across its path. The marvelous and majestic whale had once lived on land 54 million years ago and had been tiny. Part of a group of marine mammals now known as cetaceans, the land whale eventually came to depend on other fish for its subsistence and to thrive on the bountiful richness of the ocean. To grow and survive, it constantly adapted to its changing environment. The fairy tale is no different.

The wondrous fairy tale emanated from a wide variety of tiny tales thousands of years ago that were widespread throughout the world and continue to exist in unique ways under different environmental conditions. The form and contents of the fairy tale were not exactly what they are today, for as a simple, imaginative oral tale that contained magical and miraculous elements and was related to the belief systems, values, rites, and experiences of pagan peoples, the fairy tale, also known as the wonder or magic tale, underwent numerous transformations before the invention of print led to the production of fixed texts and conventions of telling and reading. But even then the fairy tale refused to be dominated by print and continued to be altered and diffused throughout the world by word of mouth up to the present. That is, it shaped and was shaped by the interaction of orality and print and other technological mediations and innovations, such as painting, photography, radio, film, and so on. In particular, technological inventions enabled it to expand in various cultural domains,

even on the Internet. Like the whale, the fairy tale adapted itself and was transformed by common nonliterate people and by upper-class literate people from a simple brief tale with vital information; it grew, became enormous, and disseminated information that contributed to the cultural evolution of specific groups. In fact, it continues to grow and embraces, if not swallows, all types of genres, art forms, and cultural institutions; and it adjusts itself to new environments through the human disposition to re-create relevant narratives and through technologies that make its diffusion easier and more effective. The only difference between the whale and the fairy tale is that the tale is not alive and does not propel itself. It needs humans—and yet at times it does seem as though a vibrant fairy tale can attract listeners and readers and latch on to their brains and become a living memetic force in cultural evolution.

Almost all endeavors by scholars to define the fairy tale as a genre have failed. Their failure is predictable because the genre is so volatile and fluid. As Donald Haase has remarked in one of the more cogent descriptions of the struggle by intellectuals to pin down the fairy tale:

> Despite its currency and apparent simplicity, the term "fairy tale" resists a universally accepted or universally satisfying definition. For some, the term denotes a specific narrative form with easily identified characteristics, but for others it suggests not a singular genre but an umbrella category under which a variety of other forms may be grouped. Definitions of "fairy tale" often tend to include a litany of characteristics to account for the fact the term has been applied to stories as diverse as "Cinderella," "Little Red Riding Hood," "Hansel and Gretel," "Jack and the Beanstalk," "Lucky Hans," "Bluebeard," and "Henny-Penny." (1: 322)

The difficulty in defining the fairy tale stems from the fact that storytellers and writers never used the term *fairy tale* until Marie-Catherine d'Aulnoy coined it in 1697 when she published her first collection of tales. She never wrote a word about why she used the term. Yet it was and is highly significant that she chose to call her stories *contes de fées,* literally "tales about fairies."[1] The very first English translation of d'Aulnoy's collection *Les contes des fées* (1697–1698) was published as *Tales of the Fairies* in 1707,[2] but it was not until 1750 that the term *fairy tale* came into common English usage.[3] Since this term—*fairy tale/conte de fées*—has become so troublesome for scholars and does not do justice in English to the "revolutionary" implications of its inventor, d'Aulnoy, in this essay I explore its historical significance in greater depth by discussing the role of the fairies in d'Aulnoy's works, especially in "The Isle of Happiness," "The Ram," and "The Green Serpent." In the process I also discuss how fairies were part of a long oral and literary tradition in French culture

and how d'Aulnoy's employment of fairies in her tales owes a debt to Greek and Roman myths, the opera, theatrical spectacles, debates about the role of women in French society, and French folklore. At the conclusion of the essay I explore how a cultural evolutionary approach to the rise of French fairy tales may help us understand how and why the elusive term *fairy tale* has spread as a meme and become so whale-like.

How the Term *Conte de Fées* Became Viral

The most striking feature of the most important foundational period of the literary fairy tale in Europe, 1690 to 1710, was the domination of fairies in the French texts. Up until this point, the literary fairy tale was not considered a genre and did not have a name. It was simply a *conte, cunto, cuento, skazka,* story, märchen, and so on. No writer labeled his or her tale a *fairy tale* in print until d'Aulnoy created the term. If we recall, the title of Giovan Francesco Straparola's collection of stories, which contained a few fairy tales, was *Pleasant Nights* or *Le piacevoli notti* (1550/1553), and Giambattista Basile called his book, written in Neapolitan dialect, *The Tale of Tales* or *Lo cunto de li cunti* (1634). The Italians were among the early writers of vernacular fairy tales in print, and there were some fairies or *fate* in the Italian tales, but they were not singled out for attention and did not play the prominent role that they were assigned by the French seventeenth-century women writers, also known as *conteuses* and *salonnières*.

When Marie-Catherine d'Aulnoy included the fairy tale "The Isle of Happiness" in her novel *Histoire d'Hippolyte, comte de Duglas* in 1690, she was not aware that she was about to set a trend in France that became epidemic among her acquaintances and other readers of her class. Though the nymphs in this tale were not called fairies, their resemblance was clear. Moreover, the princess whom they served was definitely a fairy, and the paradisiacal island represented an ideal fairy realm or utopia. (It should be noted that after Adolph, the protagonist, foolishly abandons this island, he is murdered by Father Time and happiness is lost forever. D'Aulnoy's tales thereafter mark what is lacking in the mundane world and depict how fairies must intervene to compensate for human foibles.) Within six years after the publication of "The Isle of Happiness," the *literary* fairy tale, which heretofore had been a simple oral folktale or a printed *conte* or *cunto,* became the talk of the literary salons, or what had been the talk in these salons now came to print. Orality was, as numerous French critics have recently demonstrated, inseparable from print fairy tales and defined them in many diverse ways.[4] D'Aulnoy promoted the cause of fairy tales in the Parisian salons, where she recited them. Storytelling, riddles, and other parlor and salon games had been common in Italy, Spain, England, and France

since the sixteenth century.[5] D'Aulnoy's tales were part of a creative explosion that became contagious and featured powerful and precocious fairies in Marie-Jeanne Lhéritier's *Oeuvres meslées* (1696); Catherine Bernard's *Inès de Cordoue* (1696), a novel that includes "Les enchantements de l'eloquence" and "Riquet à la houppe"; Charlotte Rose Caumont de La Force's *Les contes des contes* (1698); Charles Perrault's *Histoires ou contes du temps passé* (1697); Mme d'Aulnoy's *Les contes des fées,* 4 vols. (1697–1698); Chevalier de Mailly's *Les illustres fées, contes galans* (1698); Henriette Julie de Murat's *Contes de fées* (1698); François Nodot's *Histoire de Mélusine* (1698); Sieur de Prechac's *Contes moins contes que les autres* (1698); Catherine Durand's *La Comtesse de Mortane* (1699); Mme de Murat's *Histoires sublimes et allégoriques* (1699); Eustache Le Noble's *Le gage touché* (1700); Louise de Bossigny, Comtesse d'Auneuil's *La tyrannie des fées détruite* (1702); and Mme Durand's *Les petits soupers de l'été de l'année 1699* (1702). It was only after d'Aulnoy had introduced the phrase *contes des fées* in 1697 or before in the salons that other writers began using the term, which signified much more than "tales about fairies." The usage of the term was a declaration of difference and resistance. It can be objectively stated that there is no other period in the Western literary history when so many fairies like powerful goddesses were the determining figures of most of the plots of tales written by women—and also by some men.

There are several reasons why marvelous tales became chock-full of omnipotent fairies and why so many writers labeled their tales *contes de fées,* a term that has stuck in French and English to the present day. These reasons also may help us understand why today we fail to recognize or understand the term's immense significance when we use or try to define *fairy tale.* To begin with, we must recall that the French women writers were all members of literary salons where they told or read their tales before having them published. These private salons afforded them the opportunity to perform and demonstrate their unique prowess at a time when they had few privileges in the public sphere. The fairies in their tales signal their actual differences with male writers and their resistance to the conditions under which they lived, especially regulations that governed manners and comportment in their daily routines within the French civilizing process.[6] It was only in a fairy-tale realm, not supervised by the Church or the dictates of King Louis XIV, that they could project alternatives that stemmed from their desires and needs. As Patricia Hannon has remarked:

> It is widely recognized that the seventeenth-century public demarcated fairy-tale writing as women's domain, inseparable from the feminocentric salons that nurtured it. Both modernist advocates of women's tales such as the *Mercure,* and detractors such as the clergymen Villiers, un-

derstood the fairy tale to be a female genre . . . Thought to have been transmitted by grandmothers and governesses, the fairy tale was an eminently female genre in the seventeenth-century consciousness. Yet, the era expanded its delineation of women's role to encompass the composing of tales in addition to their mere recitation. (171)

Other scholars, such as Anne Duggan and Holly Tucker, have also emphasized how important salon conditions were for stimulating the female writers of fairy tales.[7] It was in the salons that they shared their tales, forged alliances, exchanged ideas, and came to look upon themselves as fairies. For a short period in their lives, they delighted in embracing a fairy cult without establishing a specific code. Their tales spelled out new diverse standards of behavior that were intended to transform the relationships between men and women, primarily of the upper classes.

In short, French women writers wanted to live their tales as specially gifted artists and created and called upon the fairies they created to arbitrate on their behalf. But their fairies were not always just; they could also be witch-like and had supernatural powers that they used to test or contest ordinary mortals. In the case of d'Aulnoy, Jacques Barchilon remarks:

Madame d'Aulnoy loved to tell tales, and imagination was what she lacked the least. She qualified her characters in terms not only evocative of their appearances, but even more with a picturesque sonority. Here are some examples. First, the evil fairies: Stiff Neck (Torticolis), Thick-Set (Ragotte), Grumbler (Grognette), Runt (Trognon), and Dirty One (Sousio), which means squalid in Spanish (*soucio*). Let us not forget the ogres Ravage (Ravagio) and Torment (Tourmentine). And now the more "sympathetic" fairies: Cod Fish (Merluche), Flower of Love (Fleur d'Amour), and Beauty of the Night (Belle de Nuit). (33)

In general the awesome fairies, with their kind and nasty personalities, stood in opposition to the court of Louis XIV and the Catholic Church, and they were the antithesis of the pietistic Madame de Maintenon, Louis's morganatic wife, who insisted on introducing a reign of strict piety at the court and preached against secularism and worldliness. As Lewis Seifert and Domna Stanton write:

Nonetheless, in the context of a pietistic *fin de siècle,* the fairy tale constituted a defense of fashionable secular society. Its portrayal of earthly luxury and happiness and its reliance on the supernatural powers of fairies, sorcerers, and other "pagan" figures obviously run counter to a Christian world view. And yet, as a narrative form associated with

children and the lower classes and championed largely by women writers, this defense of secular culture appeared largely innocuous, at least if the lack of extended critiques is taken as any indication. Still, the unsettled political and social climate of the time partially explains the appeal of the genre. (9)

Opera and Féerie

The fairy worlds conceived by the French women writers were spectacular, absurd, and amoral. As Duggan points out, d'Aulnoy "especially celebrates the privileged *mondain* spectacle of the late seventeenth-century France, opera, by incorporating and mimicking aspects of it in her tales" (216). Duggan emphasizes correctly that the impact of the opera on the fairy-tale writers, especially the extravagant spectacles that were imported from Italy in the seventeenth century, has not been given sufficient scholarly attention. This is especially true in light of the development of the unusual entertainment (*divertissement*) or melodramatic play/ballet called *féerie*. In his highly informative study, *La féerie,* Paul Ginsty states:

> The origin of the *féerie* can be found in the court ballets of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, inspired in their action by stories and the marvelous. The Italian ingénues, summoned by Catherine de Médici, were the first to introduce the *féerie*. These graceful people were the great disseminators of the marvels. The court of the grand duke of Florence had been the school of intricate machine makers and decorators, Timante Buonacorsi, Baldassare Lancia, Nicolo Tribolo—they excelled in the offering of complicated and luxurious entertainments. Catherine de Medici placed Baltazarini in charge of the ballets, and this man of imagination responded to the confidence placed in him by calling the king's painter, Jacques Patin, the musicians Beaulieu and Salmon, and the royal poet La Chesnaie to collaborate in producing the ballet *Circé*. He hardly had enough money, for the ballet cost two hundred thousand ecus. (12)

Ginsty forgets to mention that this *ballet comique de la reine* was five hours long and danced by Queen Louise and the women of the court. Moreover, there were other developments in sixteenth-century Italy that may have influenced Catherine de Médici's penchant for the arts, such as the reciting and enactment of fairy tales and myths at different courts.[8] In all the court entertainments in Italy and France during the Baroque period, the spectacle was of utmost importance, and it consisted of magnificent displays based on myths and fairy tales that celebrated the glory and power of the court, which was

likened to some kind of enchanted fairy realm. These ballets, masques, and operas were taken seriously at various courts in Europe; they often consisted of ten to fifteen tableaux or scenes; the stories were danced and sung by gifted actors and acrobats; machines and traps were invented and used to create illusions; and characters such as fairies, witches, wizards, gnomes, gods, ghosts, devils, and noble protagonists were involved in plots that demanded the intervention of some good higher power, either a fairy, god, or goddess.

It should also be noted that at the same time that these artful and serious spectacles were being cultivated, there were also comic representations that contained fairy-tale characters and themes and were influenced by the *comedia delle arte*. By the time of Louis XIV's reign in the latter part of the seventeenth century, it became common for the court to hold gala spectacles that certainly could be called *féeries* and for writers such as Pierre Corneille, Molière, and Jean-Baptiste Lully to write plays based on myths and fairy stories. As Duggan notes:

> Louis XIV grew up listening to fairy tales, a genre that later, as Mainil contends, would define the nature of royal fetes, . . . consisting of forms of entertainment like equestrian games, ballets, and theater, referred to as *divertissements* . . . The spectacular/specular nature of the marvelous as performed in royal festivals would be integrated into opera, whose *divertissements,* the term also used for operatic interludes of song and dance, recall those of the royal fête . . . As its precursor, opera marks the tale of d'Aulnoy in very specific ways, including: 1) the use of supernatural means of movement borrowed from the opera's machinery; 2) the inclusion of choruses; 3) the incorporation of sung verse into her tales; and 4) inscriptions of Versailles or Versailles-like palaces. (225)

From the very beginning, d'Aulnoy and the other *salonnières* saw the subversive potential of the fairy-tale operas and the supernatural attributes of fairies that could be woven into their tales to comment on the narrow religiosity of Louis XIV's court and its misogynist tendencies.

Magical Midwives

There are two other profound reasons why fairies were so important to the *salonnières*. The first involves the role that midwives, nannies, and childbirth played in the lives of the women writers—a role that is more or less designated for fairies. As Holly Tucker writes:

> In oral and literary *contes de fées,* fairies are also no strangers to the drama of royal births. Fairies do more than attend the birth scene;

they also orchestrate every stage of reproduction. They predict conception and, if angry, cast spells of infertility. They determine the circumstances and outcome of pregnancy by providing—or withholding—aid to the mother-to-be. Following labor, they attend to the needs of the newborn and dictate the child's path in life through their gifts, beneficent or malevolent. And, in true fairy-tale fashion, woe to those who forget or refuse to offer adequate compensation to the fairies' contributions to these rites of childbirth. (56)

It is important to note that d'Aulnoy gave birth to four children while she was still a teenager and depended greatly on the help of midwives and other women. Her husband was a depraved scoundrel, and with her mother's help, she participated in a scheme to have him executed for an offense against the king. It failed, and she spent some time in jail while she was pregnant. D'Aulnoy was thoroughly aware of the intrigues, corruption, and decadence of the nobility, courtiers, and priests in and around Louis XIV's court by the time she was twenty, and it is not by chance that she assigns the role of midwife or protector to fairies in her tales. It is not the Christian God or Church that her queens and princesses call upon to grant them a child or assist them in childbirth but the fairies. Though some of the fairies can be malevolent, as I have already indicated, there is a sense in her tales that only the fairies can clean house, so to speak—that is, only they can put an end to deceit and abusive treatment. "The Green Serpent" begins this way: "Once upon a time there was a great queen who, having given birth to twin daughters, invited twelve fairies who lived nearby to come and bestow gifts upon them, as was the custom in those days. Indeed, it was a very useful custom, for the power of the fairies generally compensated for the deficiencies of nature. Sometimes, however, they also spoiled what nature had done its best to make perfect, as we shall soon see" (Zipes, *Beauties* 477). As midwives and godmothers, the fairies often cross swords with one another, just as the Greek and Roman goddesses did. They make their presence known in the French tales and orchestrate the plots. Endowed with supernatural power that harks back to Greco-Roman mythology and to French customs and beliefs in regard to childbirth and rearing, the fairies in the tales of the conteuses had real relevance to the women writers as shown in the manner in which they represented them.

The Importance of the Morgan and Mélusine Fairies in d'Aulnoy's Tales

If d'Aulnoy and the other conteuses of the late seventeenth century chose the fairies over the Virgin Mary, Jesus, and Christian saints—and here we have the

second reason why fairies were profoundly important to these writers—it was because they were steeped in the lore of fairies and appealed to them out of protest against the Church and the state. This is not to say that the cultivated writers believed in folklore and the rites and superstitions of the common people. In fact, as Barchilon, Raymonde Robert, Nadine Jasmine, Jean Mainil, and other scholars have demonstrated, their perspective on folktales was ironic, and their complex tales were often carnivalesque and mocked folklore. Nevertheless, they fondly embraced fairy lore in order to veil their critiques of Church and state, which are portrayed either as decadent or impotent in their tales.

It is impossible to overestimate the significance of d'Aulnoy's embrace of the Morgan and Mélusine fairy tradition and folklore in France, not to mention how this embrace was welcomed by other French conteuses. In her magisterial study of all aspects of d'Aulnoy's works, Nadine Jasmin devotes an entire chapter to the author's knowledge and use of medieval materials and folklore.[9] She notes: "Remarkably eclectic, the conteuse (d'Aulnoy) did not in effect deny herself any source of inspiration. Her rejection of literary discrimination and bias led her quite naturally to borrow from the most diverse categories. Also she is coherently remarkable. Much less scattered than would appear at first view, the intertextual references form a notable *modern* literary constellation, characterized by the integration of the most recent forms and genres at the heart of a culture resolutely *mundane,* even better, *galant*" (194). To grasp how profound and significant her amalgamation of diverse sources is for the defining movement of the *conte de fées* in 1690 and most of the fairy tales written between 1690 and 1710, I now summarize some of the major theses in Laurence Harf-Lancner's superb study *Les fées au Moyen Âge: Morgane et Mélusine; Naissance des fées.* Like many other reliable scholars who have written on the origins of the fairies, such as Louis Ferdinand Alfred Maury,[10] Harf-Lancner views the Greek and Roman myths about the Moirae (Greek fates) and Parcae (Roman fates) as forming the foundation of Western beliefs in fairies. In the Greek tradition their basic function was to prophesy the destiny of a newborn. Eventually the Romans endowed the goddess Fauna with some of these qualities as the goddess of fertility and prophecy, and tales circulated about her as the Bona Dea, or the good goddess, who had her own cult and came to be associated with wild nature and eroticism because she was deemed to be the force of life. There is an informative historical synopsis of Fauna on the website O.G.O.D., The Obscure Goddess Online Directory:

> Fauna is an old Roman Goddess of Prophecy and Fruitfulness, with ties to the forest and fields and the animals found there. She is closely related to the God Faunus; She is variously his wife, sister, or daughter. Her name, like Faunus's, is from the Latin *faveo,* "to befriend, support,

or back up," from which we get our "favor"; an alternate etymology is from *fari,* "to speak, talk, or say," referring to Their powers of prophecy. Her name then could be variously translated as "She Who Favors," "the Friendly One," "the Speaker," or even "She Who Has Your Back." She was identified with the prophetic Goddess Fatua, again meaning, "the Speaker," but with additional meanings of "She Who Speaks Prophecy," or "the Oracle." ("Fauna")

Like many goddesses or divinities, Fauna had a split image and was often associated with courtesans and free sex. At the same time, she was known to be a model of chastity and modesty and rarely left her domain. John Scheid points out how many of the good characteristics of Fauna, as an antecedent of the fairy, were fused with the bad qualities of the witch:

> According to the founding myth of the Bona Dea, the goddess herself was ambiguous. Bona Dea was supposedly the divine name of Fauna, wife of the archaic Faunus. In one version of the story, Fauna is beaten with myrtle branches and tortured for drinking undiluted wine. In another version she refuses, even though drunk and battered, to give in to the incessant advances of her father, Faunus, who has his way with her after assuming the form of a serpent. In short, all the sources portray the cult of Bona Dea as an upside-down world. But this world was not only upside-down. It was also, like the Roman view of feminine chastity, deeply ambiguous. The seemingly contradictory attitudes of Bona Dea and her matrons toward wine, sex, and men are somewhat reminiscent of the ambiguous status of the Vestals. The matrons both accept and reject undiluted wine and sex, signifying am ambivalence of masculine and feminine, active and passive. The role of women in the cult was portrayed in both ritual and exegesis as an exception. Women did what they did in secret, at night, in a private residence, and in disguise. . . . Note that the mythographers placed the origin of Bona Dea and her cult among the Fauna, legendary inhabitants of the woods surrounding what would become the city of Rome. (392–93)

During the early Middle Ages, the images of the Greek and Roman fates were changed by different groups of people in popular culture throughout Europe; the fates became fantastic or supernatural creatures and circulated in marvelous stories associated with divine powers of prophecy and love. As other figures and divinities were created, such as sirens, nymphs, sylphs, mermaids, and nixies, they were given different names. Leslie Ellen Jones remarks:

The names of fairies vary from locale to locale. Perhaps the most fa-
mous are the Irish Tuatha Dé Danann (Tribes of the Goddess Danu)
or people of the *sidh*. In Wales they are the Tykwyth Teg (the Fair
Tribe) or Plant Rhys Ddwfn (Children of Rhys the Deep). English
fairies have more names than can be listed in one breath: boggarts,
brownies, greenies, pixies, knockers, lobs, hobs, and lubberkins. The
French call them *fées,* the Bretons *Korrigans*. In Sicily there are the
donas de fuera (ladies from outside). In the Balkans the main word is
vila; in Russia *rusalka*; in Greece the classical *nereid,* originally a water
sprite, has expanded to cover all fairylike beings. (128)

The social-cultural context in a particular time period must always be
taken into consideration when trying to grasp the symbolic function of a fairy
and tales about fairies. What is striking in the changing image of the figure that
eventually was called a *fée* in France is that she was depicted with just as many
similarities in other cultures as with differences. As Harf-Lancner notes:

The Middle Ages knew two types of fairies: the fates (parcae), whose
classical image had been profoundly transformed by that of the pop-
ular tradition, and the ladies of the forest, whose path often crossed
with that of mortals. The latter became the "fairies" upon their en-
trance into learned culture (*culture savante*) in the twelfth century
with the gradual severing of the word "fairy" from the personage of
the fate. Moreover, the two folkloric types, primitively distinct, con-
tinued in the thirteenth century to merge at the same time into a new
figure, appropriately literary—an enamored goddess and a mistress of
destiny. After the Middle Ages the fairies will no longer have any
other visage but that, and the fairies of our popular tales often sub-
mitted to the influence of this creation of romantic literature. (42)

Harf-Lancner studies Latin and vernacular texts, romances, stories, and
lais recorded by clerics and learned scholars to demonstrate how the transfor-
mation of stories about the classical Greek fates led to two types of plots that
involved powerful fairies. The stability of the medieval plots indicates for Harf-
Lancner the popularity of the tales about fairies and their dissemination among
the common people during the early Middle Ages, and how the fairies more or
less erupted into the literate culture and formed the basis of numerous ro-
mances and lais by the twelfth century. The first distinct tale type is based on
the adventures of the famous fairy Mélusine and involves an enamored fairy
who enters into the world of mortals,[11] and the second concerns the notorious
fairy Morgan le Fay and a hero who enters into her realm.[12] The pattern of the

Mélusine texts has three parts to it: (1) the encounter—a mortal discovers a fantastically beautiful fairy, generally in a forest, and falls in love with her; (2) the pact—the hero proposes to wed the fairy, and she accepts upon the condition that he agrees to respect a prohibition; and (3) the violation of the pact—the hero is either persuaded to break the prohibition by jealous siblings, or he makes a wrong and fateful decision and loses his wife and happiness. In some of the romances and tales there is a recovery or reconciliation. But the dominant tale types do not provide for a happy end.

The pattern of the Morgan le Fay texts has certain similarities to the Mélusine stories, but there are distinct differences. The plot of this tale type consists of: (1) journey to another world—the hero seeks out a nymph or fairy in an enchanted world, separate from the world of mortals; (2) long residence in a supernatural realm—the hero spends an indefinite amount of time in a state of bliss without realizing how fast time passes; (3) permission and prohibition—the hero becomes bored or longs for a return to his home and asks permission from the fairy to visit his world of mortals, and the fairy grants him permission providing he respect a prohibition; and (4) violation of the prohibition—the hero breaks his promise or violates the prohibition in some way, and consequently is banished from the enchanted world of faerie and dies.

D'Aulnoy, Greco-Roman Myths, and Fairy Lore

Though there is no documentary evidence that d'Aulnoy knew tales about Mélusine and Morgan le Fay, there is sufficient proof in her fairy tales that she had some knowledge of either printed texts or oral tales. We must also bear in mind that she was born and raised in Normandy, where the Celtic tradition of fairies was very strong.[13] There is also clear indication that d'Aulnoy was familiar with a wide array of Greco-Roman myths that were also performed as ballets or plays at Louis XIV's court. Seifert and Stanton remark:

> Intent on affirming their own social status, the *conteuses* disguised and transformed whatever they borrowed from lower-class tales with an abundance of literary and cultural references. Indeed, the wide variety of intertexts woven into their *contes de fées* shows a sophistication that defies the stereotypical simplicity of the fairy-tale genre. Notwithstanding their modernist affiliations, allusions to Greek and Roman mythology recur throughout the texts of the *conteuses,* sometimes alongside more traditional folkloric characters. In many of d'Aulnoy's tales, for instance, Cupid makes an appearance as either an ally or an enemy of the fairies. More often mythology is used as a conventional rhetorical trope. The stories in Ovid's *Metamorphoses,* ex-

tremely popular throughout early modern Europe, were particularly useful to the *conteuses,* especially for the concept of metamorphosis and the plot situations it could generate. However, their tales also evoke motifs and characters reminiscent of medieval romance, with such figures as the fairy and such topoi as the maiden imprisoned in a tower. (20)

A good example of the manner in which the women writers worked is d'Aulnoy's very first tale, "The Isle of Happiness," which weaves elements and motifs of French folklore, medieval romance, and Greco-Roman mythology into a plot that fits Harf-Lancner's "Morgan le Fay pattern": journey to another world; long residence in a supernatural realm; permission and prohibition; violation of prohibition. D'Aulnoy disguises her borrowing and use of intertextual references by setting the story in Russia. The hero, Adolph, loses his way in the woods while hunting a bear, and he encounters the mother of the Greek four winds in a cave. When all the winds return to the cave, Zephir, the west wind, talks about the fairy Princess Felicity on the Isle of Happiness, and Prince Adolph becomes so enchanted by Zephir's description of the princess that he asks Zephir to carry him there. Zephir agrees and gives him a cloak that makes Adolph invisible to protect him from the guards of the isle, who are monsters. When Adolph arrives, he is stunned by the magnificence of the island and the grottos. At one point he comes across the grotto of Cupid, which is inscribed with the words: "Love is the greatest of all blessings. Love alone is able to fulfill our desires. All other sweet things of life become dull if they are not mixed with love's attractive charms" (Zipes, *Beauties* 303). When he accidentally exposes himself before Princess Felicity, whose beauty is so perfect that she seems to be a daughter of the heavens, she believes that he is the bird Phoenix, because she has never seen a human before. Then he tells her the truth—that he has come to admire her divine beauty. They fall in love and stay young by drinking from the Fountain of Youth. Adolph spends three hundred happy years with Princess Felicity without realizing it. Once he learns how long he has been on the island, he complains that he has neglected his duties and lost glory and honor. Consequently, he wants to return to his kingdom. Princess Felicity is upset and disappointed in him, especially because he places his honor and ambition over their love. So she regretfully gives him a magnificent horse named Bichar and marvelous weapons and tells him that the horse "will take you wherever you must go to do battle and triumph. But don't place your foot on the ground no matter what happens in your country, for the fairy spirit that the gods have given me enable me to prophesy that if you neglect my advice, Bichar will not be able to extricate you from your trouble" (307). After Adolph promises to obey her, he departs but is tricked by Father Time to

touch the ground, whereupon he is smothered to death. When Princess Felicity learns about his fate, she closes her palace doors forever, and this is also why human beings will never find perfect happiness.

D'Aulnoy's first fairy tale begins the "modernist" re-creation of oral folklore, French medieval literature, and Greco-Roman mythology to celebrate fairies and their high standards of love and secular morality. Her tale is indeed a tale about fairies first and foremost—about their beauty, their generosity, and their glorious realm, which harbors eternal youth and true love. D'Aulnoy re-assembles motifs from folklore (hero lost in the woods, helpers, invisible cloak, Fountain of Youth, magic horse, Father Time) and from Greco-Roman myths (the four winds, Cupid) and Torquato Tasso's *Jerusalem Delivered* (reference to the sorceress Armida) to create her own version of a Morgan le Fay tale. It is a jarring dystopian narrative because the gift of a fairy is unappreciated and a prince pays for his violation of a promise with his life. From this point on in her writing about fairies, d'Aulnoy imbues her tales with a proto-feminist spirit, and she endeavors to articulate and maintain the mundane or secular position that educated, upper-class women took against the pietistic restrictions and outdated manners and social codes of the ancien régime. Her aim was to rewrite the civilizing process through the representation of modern fairies, who strived to introduce new customs and moral behavior into narratives and who reutilized the stuff of Greco-Roman mythology, folklore, and medieval romances.

Two other tales, "The Green Serpent" and "The Ram," which were strongly influenced by Apuleius's "Cupid and Psyche" in *The Golden Ass*; Lafontaine's version of the same story, *Les amours de Psiché et de Cupidon* (*The Loves of Cupid and Psyche,* 1669); and the Mélusine cycle of romances and tales, demonstrate how experimental and sophisticated her fairy tales were. In the Mélusine tradition, there is generally an encounter with a supernatural creature in a forest, a pact that entails a promise and prohibition, and a violation of the promise/prohibition. In d'Aulnoy's two tales there is a gender reversal. That is, normally the hero meets the extraordinary Mélusine or a supernatural creature in a forest. D'Aulnoy's tales, however, depict a young princess who encounters a male transformed into a supernatural beast, who leads her to an idyllic realm. In the beginning of "The Green Serpent," Laidronette is cursed to be ugly by the malicious and powerful fairy Magotine at birth and is troubled by her ugliness during her youth. At one point she encounters the Green Serpent, a king, who has also been cursed by Magotine and transformed into a serpent. He wants to help her, but she is frightened by him. Later, when stranded on the magnificent island of Pagodia, she is impressed by the splendor and culture of the pagods, tiny elflike creatures, who serve an invisible king, the Green Ser-

pent. Eventually she agrees to marry the invisible king, who makes her promise never to look upon him until he has completed the seven-year curse. However, curiosity gets the better of her. She breaks her promise and is punished by Magotine. However, with the help of the Fairy Protectrice, Laidronette completes three difficult tasks and is changed into Queen Discrete. Her transformation into a discrete queen leads Magotine to have a change of heart and allow Laidronette to join the Green Snake, transformed into a handsome king, and to live on the utopian island of Pagodia.

"The Ram," which has echoes of the King Lear story, concerns a princess named Merveilleuse, who is condemned to death by her father because she has allegedly insulted him. However, a captain of the guards lets her escape into the forest, where she meets a talking ram, who was once a handsome prince. Unfortunately, he has been cursed because he did not return the affection of the ugly fairy Ragotte, who turned him into a ram for five years. This King of the Rams takes Merveilleuse through a cave to his magnificent underground realm, where all the animals, former humans, can talk and act with great civility and culture. She is impressed by what she sees and experiences. However, after some time, she asks permission from the Ram to return to her father's kingdom to participate in the marriage of one of her sisters. The Ram, who is desperately in love with Merveilleuse, sadly complies, providing that she promises to return to him. Otherwise, he will die. She agrees and returns, but another sister has a wedding, and Merveilleuse asks again to attend the marriage. This time she reconciles herself with her father and forgets about the Ram King, who searches for her in her father's royal palace. Denied entry, the Ram King dies outside the palace gates.

Together these tales form a critical dialogue or meditation about proper behavior and the responsibilities that love requires. In both tales the fairies set the conditions under which the protagonists, princesses and princes, interact. With references to "Cupid and Psyche" in both tales, d'Aulnoy places great emphasis on love within the courtly civilizing process. It is through love filled with empathy that men become gallant and women become virtuous and precocious. For instance, when Laidronette arrives on the island of the pagods, she hears a voice singing to her:

> Let Cupid make you now his own.
> Here he rules with gentle tone.
> Love with pleasure will be sown.
> On this isle no grief is known.
> (Zipes, *Beauties* 481)

When Laidronette breaks her promise to the Green Serpent, she is exiled from the island and must prove herself by acquiring the qualities that will distinguish her with the name Queen Discrete. Along the way, she is assisted by the Fairy Protectrice, and it is through love that she becomes more diligent, trustworthy, and courageous. When Discrete/Laidronette must travel to Pluto's underworld to liberate her lost husband, the Green Serpent, she calls upon Cupid to help her. And it is Cupid who accompanies the reunited couple back to earth, where Magotine is so inspired by their love for each other that she restores the kingdom of Pagodia to them.

In contrast to the utopian ending of "The Green Serpent," "The Ram" is a tragic fairy tale, because love is denied. When Princess Merveilleuse is given refuge at the King Ram's sylvan court, she does not fall in love with the Ram. Her neglect allows the malevolent fairy Ragotte to gain revenge. The Ram dies when Merveilleuse breaks her promise, and d'Aulnoy comments sarcastically about the fate of the Ram in the moral to this tale:

> In truth he should have had a better fate,
> For spurning a sordid Hymen's chains;
> Honest his love—unmakes his hate—
> How different from our modern swains!
> Even his death may well surprise
> The lovers of the present day:
> Only a silly sheep now dies,
> Because his ewe has gone astray.
> (Zipes, *Beauties* 399)

Though all of d'Aulnoy's fairy tales take place in some unknown realm and indefinite time, they concern the contemporary social and political conditions in her own time. The fairies are all power brokers, whether they be gentle or witchlike. (There is an unusual likeness with the great Russian witch Baba Yaga, who can be cruel or kind.) D'Aulnoy consciously endowed fairies with most unusual powers and also gave them the responsibility to uphold an alternative to the civilizing process of King Louis XIV's court. An interesting passage in "The Green Serpent" reveals d'Aulnoy's ideological concept of the fairies. In this instance, a canary, who had once been a man who loved too much, tells Queen Discrete:

> You should know, madam, that several fairies were distressed to see various persons fall into bad habits on their travels. At first they imagined that they needed merely to advise them to correct themselves,

but their warnings were paid no heed. Eventually the fairies became quite upset and imposed punishments on them. Those who talked too much were changed into parrots, magpies, and hens. Lovers and their mistresses were transformed into pigeons, canaries, and lapdogs. Those who ridiculed their friends became monkeys. Gourmands were made into pigs and hotheads into lions. In short, the number of persons they punished was so great that this grove has become filled with them. Thus, you'll find people with all sorts of qualities and dispositions here. (Zipes, *Beauties* 495)

The theme of transformation runs through all of d'Aulnoy's tales as well as most of the tales about fairies written by the other conteuses of her time. They were propelled to take and transform the cultural materials at their disposal—literature, opera, ballet, folklore, mythology—to create new or modern tales that they designated as "tales about fairies." Their personal identification with their fairies, which varied according to their dispositions, imbued their narratives with a depth that one does not encounter in the fairy tales written in France, Europe, and America from 1750 to the present. After this major wave of *conte de fées,* the narratives called fairy tales have tended to lack a passionate belief in and identification with fairies. It is not until the late 1960s and 1970s that women writers were motivated to re-create tales and to identify with the extraordinary power of fairies and witches. What is interesting about all the changes and transformations of fairies and the term *fairy tale* from the Greco-Roman period to the present is that they reflect key moments in cultural evolution and reveal the memetic power of the term *fairy tale* or *conte de fées.*

The Cultural Evolution of the Fairy Tale

In a highly stimulating book, *Creation of the Sacred: Tracks of Biology in Early Religions,* which deserves more attention than it has received, the renowned scholar of Greek mythology and cult Walter Burkert uses concepts and hypotheses from sociobiology to explain the origins of religion and its persistence up to the present. Unlike many orthodox Darwinians, Burkert's notions about the historical and cultural evolution of religion are based on interdisciplinary methods and judicious analysis. In a long passage worth quoting, he stakes out his position:

The process of *semeiosis,* the use of signs and symbols, operates within the whole sphere of living organisms and was evidently invented long before the advent of man. This does not mean that genes prescribe culture—clearly, they do not. But it could be said that they give recommendations that become manifest in the repetition of like

patterns, "the kinds of memories most easily recalled, the emotions they are most likely to evoke." The biological makeup forms preconditions or "attractors" to produce phenomena in a consistent fashion, even if these patterns are created and recreated afresh in each case. Scientific proof of such connections by means of statistics or experiment will remain impossible; what can be shown is the near-universality and persistence of patterns through place and time, and the existence of certain analogies or even homologies in structure and function in animal behavior. This suggests that details and sequences in rituals, tales, works of art, and fantasies hark back to more original processes in the evolution of life; they become understandable not in isolation nor within their different cultural contexts, but in relation to this background. (22)

Burkert's emphasis on studying patterns in cultural artifacts to understand the evolution of a particular "strand" or "strain" of culture has great implications for the study of folklore and fairy tales. At one point he dedicates an entire chapter, "The Core of a Tale" (56–79), to examining how tales can be related to basic human needs, rituals, customs, and the resolution of problems in human adaptation to changing environments. He interprets Vladimir Propp's structural analysis of the folktale in a very original way by indicating how the sequence of functions in Propp's morphology of the folktale is related to biological necessities: "The organizing principle of a tale, the soul of the plot, is found to operate at the level of biology. The tale is created as a necessary sequence of 'motifemes,' and it has the pragmatic function of solving a problem. In other words, the quest is established as the means for problem-solving, and it is represented and communicated through the tale" (65). Aside from discussing the significance of the quest tale, he also elaborates on the shaman's tale and other tale types. Most important are his remarks about the initiation tale, which he subtitles "the maiden's tragedy," and which he relates to Apuleius's "Amor and Psyche." According to Burkert, this tale type differs from the Proppian pattern of the quest tale. The key functions that set a pattern related to female experiences are (1) an eruption in a young girl's life that causes her to separate from family and home; (2) seclusion for a certain period in an idyllic setting that can be an island, forest, or temple; (3) a catastrophe that drives the young girl from the idyllic setting due to her violation of a promise or her being violated; (4) a period of wandering in which she suffers and must atone for her mistakes; and (5) accomplishment of tasks or rescue that brings about a happy ending. Burkert cites how popular "Amor and Psyche" became—and of course we have seen how d'Aulnoy and other writers re-created this tale in diverse ways—and he takes issue with Detlev Fehling's study that

purports to prove that all the known variants of "Amor and Psyche" are dependent on Apuleius's literary text and not on an oral tradition: "Fehling's thesis leaves us with the problem of where Apuleius got his tale from; that he simply invented his story is hardly an answer. It is quite difficult to invent a tale; even a new creation will inevitably merge with the stream of tales heard before, and thus become a variant of what has already been around."[14]

As we have seen, d'Aulnoy's tales about fairies merge with a long and profound stream of tales, heard and read, that stem from Greco-Roman myths and may even have more ancient roots. We must remember that a supernatural creature like a fairy may have been called something else and may have existed in the minds and ritual practices of humans as well as stories for thousands of years. D'Aulnoy's invention or coinage of the term *conte de fées* only indicated a pronounced emphasis on the significance of fairies that informed the tales she wrote and told as well as many other tales by the conteuses and male writers of her time. She was using information about fairies with which she was familiar in a particular French sociocultural context.

In her most recent book, *Cultural Evolution,* Kate Distin remarks: "Cultural evolution has taken off precisely because of this unique human ability to extract information from one context and manipulate it in another, which brings with it the possibility of new species emerging from the convergence of old ones. We can see this in the evolution of languages, of genres in literature and music, and in any other cultural area you care to mention" (209). The terms *fairy* and *fairy tale* are units of cultural information otherwise known as memes that d'Aulnoy had inherited and was in her time passing on to other receivers of her tales with great innovation. Again Distin is most helpful in enabling us to grasp why d'Aulnoy's efforts were so relevant in developing the genre of the fairy tale so that it attracted a large readership in France and beyond the cultural borders of France:

> Where humans do differ most strikingly from other creatures, however, is in the extent to which we are capable of acquiring information and the extent to which we are prone to sharing it. The motivation to share information with conspecifics is dependent not only on membership of an essentially cooperative species but also on the metarepresentational knowledge that one has information worth sharing. The ability to acquire information from conspecifics is dependent on the capacity to discretize information in the same form as that in which its originator is offering: only once a species has a steady supply of members that share the same method of representing information can that information be exchanged. And only once a species is able to reflect on the information that it is sharing, and on its method of

representation, can there be evolution in both the information itself and its representational system or the metarepresentational ability to develop one, making humans unique in our ability to exchange cultural information with sufficiently persistent and differential heredity to support cultural evolution. (224)

In d'Aulnoy's case, she inherited information that she wanted to share discretely with her conspecifics (*salonnières,* male and female readers and writers of her social class, and eventually readers in other languages in which her tales were translated). Once prompted by d'Aulnoy, they all shared in re-creating tales about fairies that informed the narrative tradition in unusual and extraordinary ways that expanded the meaning of *fairy tale* so that it grew and became more encompassing in the eighteenth century. D'Aulnoy wrote in an artefactual language that had to be learned and appreciated by her conspecific conteuses. Artefactual language must be distinguished from natural language that is biologically determined. Again quoting Distin:

> The cultural evolution of natural language was accelerated by the biological advantages of enhanced communication among members of a cooperative species. As a consequence, natural languages are important markers of social identity, and they exclude outsiders from a social group as effectively as they define which individuals count as insiders and facilitate communication between them. Artefactual languages, on the other hand, evolved under adaptive pressure for more effective representation, and one of their representational advantages over natural language is that they can be detached from their human originators. This enables information not only to be disseminated over much greater expanses of time and space than the content of speech but also to shed the social associations of its human originators. (224–25)

The terms *fairy tale, conte de fées,* and *fairy* are discrete units of information that emanate from and depend on artefactual language. And thanks to artefactual language, *fairy tale* has successfully detached itself from its human originators and has been spread by human receivers/producers throughout the world, often in the English language, but also in similar terms in other languages. Disseminated as a unit of information (meme), it has assumed so many different meanings and associations that it has almost become meaningless. Certainly, the *conte de fées* that had a profound cultural significance for the *conteuses* and other conspecifics in French society of the late seventeenth century is not the same fairy tale as it is today. However, to say that it is meaningless would be to misunderstand the mechanics and processes of cultural evolution. If anything, like the whale, fairy tale has grown immensely in significance and

has "swallowed" or consumed other genres so that it has become more complex and more difficult to define. While the Disney Corporation has sought in the twentieth century to completely commercialize and dominate fairy tale with its latest banal filmic series of "Fairies,"[15] fairy tale has spurred numerous more innovative experiments in literature, opera, theater, film, television, and the Internet that expose the hypes and frauds of corporate productions. Like Herman Melville's White Whale, its essential truth will never be captured or defined. The irony of its cultural evolution is that it originated out of human necessity, and we are still trying to determine why fairy tale is still so necessary.

Notes

1. For a thorough discussion of this term, see Jasmin 447–51.
2. See Palmer and Palmer, "The French *conte de fées* in England" and "English Editions of French contes de fées in England."
3. There is a crucial difference in French between *conte de fées* (tale about fairies) and *conte féerique* (fairy tale). The *conte de fées* purports to tell about the actions and deeds of fairies, while the *conte féerique,* a term that was not used by French writers, describes the narrative form.
4. See Defrance et Perrin, *Le contes en ses paroles.* In particular, see the essays in that volume by Lewis Seifert, Jean-Paul Sermain, Christine Noille-Clauzade, Sophie Raynard, Jean Mainil, Françoise Gevrey, Anne Defrance, Julie Bloch, Raymonde Robert, and Christelle Bahier-Porte.
5. See Crane 263–322, 480–504; and Seifert and Stanton 6–12.
6. For a full discussion of the role of the fairy tale within the civilizing process, see my book *Fairy Tales and the Art of Subversion.*
7. See also Marin; Seifert; and Zipes, "The Rise of the French Fairy Tale and the Decline of France."
8. See Rak.
9. See the chapter titled "Matière folklorique, matière médiévale" in Jasmin 81–124.
10. See Maury, *Les fées du Moyen Âge* and *Croyances et légendes du Moyen Âge.*
11. There were numerous tales about Mélusine from the thirteenth century through the nineteenth. For a good summary of the most significant medieval version by Jean d'Arras, see Foubister.
12. As was the case with Mélusine, there were many tales about the Fay Morgan in the Middle Ages. For a good summary of her significance, see Rise.
13. For a thorough discussion of d'Aulnoy's knowledge and use of French folklore, see the chapter on "Madame d'Aulnoy et le Folklore: Le Puzzel des Motif Populaires" in Robert 108–21.
14. Burkert 70. See also P. G. Walsh's comments in his introduction to *The Golden Ass*: "The basic themes of the beautiful girl with two jealous sisters, her courtship by an enchanted suitor reputed to be a monster, the enforced separation from him because of the breaking of a taboo, the oppression by a witch who imposes impossible trials upon her, and the ultimate reconciliation with her lover, can all be paralleled in widespread versions of folklore tales; the existence of a North African version is of particular interest. It was Apuleius's brilliant achievement to convert

this *Märchen* into a *Kunstmärchen* for his special purpose of illuminating the career of Lucius" (xl-xli).

15. See the Wikipedia entry "Disney Fairies." The films, books, and games in this latest of series from Disney are particularly insipid and deplete all meaning from the term *fairy*. See Weiss, who remarks: "Yet something important is lost when a child's introduction to fairy tales comes in such whitewashed form. It's not just Rapunzel: In toys, movies, and books, the old fairy tales are being systematically stripped of their darker complexities. Rapunzel has become a lobotomized girl in a pleasant tower playroom; Cinderella is another pretty lady in a ball gown, like some model on 'Project Runway.'"

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