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Imagining Girlhood in Seventeenth-Century Female-Authored Fairytales

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Abstract: Over two-thirds of the fairytales published in late seventeenth-century France were authored by female conteuses who recount the births of beautiful and virtuous princesses. Although little is known about these authors' personal lives, their portrayals of girlhood reveal glimpses of their individual ideas and experiences. Applying Robert Darnton's cultural approach to fairytales, I situate these tales and their tellers within their historical context. In each story, the girls' virtue or vice are not developed over time, but are embedded at birth, demarcated by beauty or ugliness. This entwining of beauty and virtue is typical of late seventeenth-century salon and educational writings. However, the conteuses' girl characters also challenge gendered stereotypes, playing assertive roles and holding authority over older male characters. The conteuses *crafted their conceptions of girlhood in dialogue with individual and cultural influences, culminating in a shared conception of noble girls as virtuous, beautiful, and capable individuals.*

"In those happy days when the fairies were alive, there reigned a king who had three daughters. They were beautiful and young, and they were good but the youngest was the most lovable and the most beloved."[1] These are the opening lines of Madame d'Aulnoy's fairytale "The Ram," published in 1698, in which she introduces her protagonist, Merveilleuse. Beautiful, young, and virtuous characters like Merveilleuse were common heroines in late seventeenth-century fairytales, especially those written by women. While d'Aulnoy was the first woman to publish fairytales in France, she was not the only one. In fact, women initially dominated the genre. Two-thirds of the one hundred tales written between 1690-1715 are attributed to a small

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[1] Marie Catherine Baronne d'Aulnoy, "The Ram," *The Fairy Tales of Madame d'Aulnoy*, translated by Annie Macdonell and Miss Lee, illustrated by Clinton Peters, http://www.surlalunefairytales.com/authors/daulnoy.html (accessed Oct. 4, 2014). Since I accessed digital versions of d'Aulnoy's tales, there are no page numbers available. Instead I have provided the title of the tale.

group of elite female authors, also known as *conteuses*.[2] The opening lines of many of these tales, like "The Ram," introduce the protagonist as a young child and the tales tend to revolve around the girlhood adventures of these characters. Typically, these young female protagonists were not only beautiful and virtuous, as was expected for elite women in late seventeenth-century France, but they were also intelligent, brave, and heroic. In the *conteuses'* minds, girls could be the heroes of their own stories. Therefore, the *conteuses* combined socially acceptable feminine traits with more audacious characteristics in attempts to challenge patriarchal views of girlhood.

Literary and historical scholars have long examined the *conteuses'* tales as proto-feminist works interacting with the highly patriarchal context of late-seventeenth century elite French society. [3] However, these studies tend to focus on the gender of the tales' protagonists, rather than their age. Girlhood studies, a field that focuses on the unique constraints of youthful femininity in a world dominated by adults and men, offers an interdisciplinary set of analytical tools that enriches discussions of the *conteuses'* works.

Historians of girlhood and childhood argue that age, like gender, is "imbued with cultural assumptions, meaning, and value."[4] Indeed, the categories of age are constructed differently in every culture and are associated with a set of power relationships. Conflicting notions about age and power existed simultaneously in seventeenth-century France. For example, the church identified sixteen as the age of

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[2] The term "*conteuse*" is French for a female storyteller. This definition is included in *Le Dictionnaire de l'Académie Française* published in 1694 and the word continues to hold the same meaning today. Scholars of fairy tales and folklore often use the term "*conteuse*" to refer to the vogue of female fairy tale writers in late seventeenth-century France. "Dictionnaire de l'Académie Française, 1st ed. (1694): Conteur, Conteuse," The ARTFL Project, *Dictionnaires D'Autrefois*, (2010), http://artflsrv02.uchicago.edu/philologic4/publicdicos/navigate/3/4256/. Lewis Seifert, *Fairy Tales, Sexuality, and Gender in France 1690-1715* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 84.

[3] Marina Warner, *From The Beast to the Blonde: On Fairy Tales and Their Tellers* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1994); Patricia Hannon, *Fabulous Identities: Women's Fairy Tales in Seventeenth-Century France* (Atlanta: Rodopi, 1994); Seifert, *Fairy Tales, Sexuality, and Gender in France*; Elizabeth Wanning Harries, *Twice Upon a Time: Women Writers and the History of the Fairy Tale* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001).

[4] Steven Mintz, "Reflections on Age as a Category of Historical Analysis," *The Journal of the History of Childhood and Youth* 1, no. 1 (2008), 93.

reason, while legally, twenty-five was the age of majority.[5] Therefore, young women falling somewhere in the nine years between these ages were caught in an ambiguous stage. They were legally defined as children and subject to their parents' authority, yet the church permitted them to choose religious life and get married against their parents' will. Interestingly, many of the young female protagonists in the *conteuses'* tales fall between these years. The *conteuses* were fascinated with this stage of life, during which girls' identities were particularly fluid. Adolescent girls were no longer little children, but were not yet wives. An examination of youthfulness, alongside gender, offers an interpretive lens that enriches historical discussions of the *conteuses'* proto-feminism.

Historical inquiry into cultural constructions of youth began with Philippe Ariès' work *L'enfant et la vie familiale sous l'ancien regime*, in which he identified modern sentiments towards children and then argued that these did not exist prior to the eighteenth century.[6] For the next decade, historians of childhood relied heavily on educational treatises written by moralists, sources that fostered characterizations of early modern childhood as harsh and loveless.[7] More recently, historians have challenged these assumptions using legal and notarial documents to reveal affectionate ties between family members and a diversity of family structures.[8] These historians have successfully argued that childhood did exist before the eighteenth century, and have opened avenues for research on the intersections between age and other constructed categories.

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[5] René Pillorget, "Vocation religieuse et état en France aux XVIe et XVIIe siècles," in *La vocation religieuse et sacerdotale en France* (Angers: Université d'Angers, 1986), 12; Barbara Diefendorf, "Give Us Back Our Children: Patriarchal Authority and Parental Consent to Religious Vocations in Early Counter-Reformation France," *The Journal of Modern History* 68, no. 2 (1996), 286.

[6] Philippe Ariès, *Centuries of Childhood* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1962).

[7] Lloyd de Mause, *The History of Childhood* (New York: Harper and Row, 1974); Edward Shorter, *The Making of the Modern Family* (London: Basic Books, 1976); Lawrence Stone, *The Family, Sex and Marriage in England 1500-1800* (New York: Harper and Row, 1977).

[8] Barbara Hanawalt, *Growing Up in Medieval London* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993); Kristin Gager, *Blood Ties and Fictive Ties* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996); Julie Hardwick, *Family Business: Litigation and the Political Economies of Daily Life in Early Modern France* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009); Matthew Gerber, *Bastards: Politics, Family, and Law in Early Modern France* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012).

Cultural History and the Interpretation of Tales

My study of the *conteuses* tales, particularly with its focus on gender and age, is inspired by cultural historical approaches to fairy tales. However, there are two other schools of interpretation, psychological and social, that also warrant mentioning, since the cultural historical approach developed in response to these earlier movements. The psychological approach, pioneered by Erich Fromm and Bruno Bettleheim, assumes that tales are timeless and explain essential truths about human nature.[9] Fromm ignores the historical context of symbols, arguing that their meanings are universal and embedded in the shared language of human nature.[10] As a child psychologist, Bettleheim removes fairy tales from their historical context, interpreting them through Freudian assumptions, and applying his findings to modern child development.[11] Bettleheim assumes that fairy tales are always intended for a young audience, which is not the case for the *conteuses'* tales since they were read by adults to an adult audience in a salon setting. Although Fromm and Bettleheim's approaches may inform discussions about human nature, dissociating the tales from their historical context obscures their meaning and creates "a mental universe that never existed."[12] Therefore, psychological interpretations of fairy tales often tell more about the interpreter than about the tale.

Social approaches to fairy tales assume that tales are historically constructed through the interactions of tellers and audiences who are embedded in socio-economic classes. As a social historian of fairy tales, Jack Zipes is interested in the movement of written tales from Italy to France through court and elite networks, and the movement of oral tales between villages and nurseries.[13] Zipes argues that "tales are reflections of the social order in a given historical epoch, and, as such, they symbolize the aspirations, needs, dreams and wishes of common people in a tribe, community, or society."[14]

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[9] Bruno Bettleheim, *Uses of Enchantment: The Meaning and Importance of Fairytales* (New York: Vintage Books, 1977); Erich Fromm, *The Forgotten Language: As Introduction to the Understanding of Dreams, Fairy Tales, and Myths* (New York: Open Road Integrated Media, 1957).

[10] Fromm, *The Forgotten Language,* 7.

[11] Bettleheim, *Uses of Enchantment,* 7, 39.

[12] Robert Darnton, *The Great Cat Massacre and Other Episodes in French Cultural History* (New York: Basic Books, 1984), 11; Harries, *Twice Upon a Time,* 15.

[13] Jack Zipes, *Breaking the Magic Spell* (Lexington, KY: The University Press of Kentucky, 2002), 10.

[14] Ibid., 7.

Therefore, tales reveal past social systems, material conditions and group identities. Ruth Bottigheimer also takes a social approach to the history of fairy tales, as she differentiates between the storytelling structures of various classes.[15] According to Bottigheimer, folk tales and fairy tales evolved in separate literary spaces. Folk tales circulated in cheap print literature amongst the lower classes, and fairy tales developed in elite circles of court entertainment and novella writing.[16] Bottigheimer argues that there is little evidence that the two social spheres intersected before the eighteenth century.[17] This social approach is vital for situating fairy tales in their historical contexts. Indeed, the tale-writing vogue of the late seventeenth-century did not appear at random, but was connected to earlier genres, especially the novel.[18]

The cultural approach to the history of fairy tales, like the socio-historical approach, assumes that tales are historically situated, but its lens of analysis is culture rather than class. This approach is exemplified in the work of Robert Darnton and Lewis Seifert, who argue that fairy tales reveal the mental universe of their tellers.[19] These scholars apply the tools of anthropology, seeking to understand the culture in which the tales were told. However, unlike an anthropologist, historians cannot use their five senses to take in the dynamic storytelling scene.[20] Therefore, Darnton argues that historians should look for common themes, recurring motifs and standard plot lines and be wary of drawing conclusions based on obscure symbols as is common in the psychological approach.[21] These overarching similarities reveal cultural patterns and group identities.[22] For example, the seventeenth century *conteuses'* tales are the product of a narrow cultural elite, which flourished at the French court and in urban

[15] Ruth Bottigheimer, ed., *Fairy Tales Framed: Early Forewords and Critical Words* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2012), 9.
[16] Ibid., 6, 11, 101.
[17] Ibid., 7.
[18] d'Aulnoy and L'Héritier's tales in particular, because of their length and complex characters, bare many similarities to the form and structure of novels. Tatiana Korneeva, "Rival Sisters and Vengeance Motifs in the contes de fées of d'Aulnoy, Lhéritier and Perrault," *MLN* 127, no. 4 (September 2012), 751.
[19] Darnton, *The Great Cat Massacre*, 11; Lewis Seifert, *Fairy Tales, Sexuality, and Gender in France 1690-1715* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 175.
[20] Darnton, *The Great Cat Massacre*, 18.
[21] Ibid.
[22] Ibid., 46

salons.[23] Most of their plot lines are based on contemporary, medieval or classical myths, but even these are altered significantly to suit the cultural preferences of their elite audiences.[24] Cultural interpretations of fairy tales are valuable for understanding the historical process of constructing ideas about gender and age. Indeed, through the lens of cultural history "social categories once treated as if they were firm and fixed, now appear to be flexible and fluid."[25] Challenging essentialist assumptions about the categories of age and gender enhances both historical and current discourses on girlhood.

Applying the cultural approach to fairy tale analysis, I will examine the images of girlhood in the tales of five *conteuses*: Marie-Catherine d'Aulnoy, Marie-Jeanne L'Héritier, Catherine Bernard, Marie-Jeanne de Murat, and Charlotte-Rose de La Force.[26] First, I will examine a selection of each of these *conteuses'* tales to determine each author's personal conception of girlhood. This approach is guided by Jonathan Dewald's argument that nobles construct their identity in their writing.[27] Secondly, I will examine the *conteuses'* portrayals of girl characters in light of their cultural context in elite French society.[28] Their shared conception of the beautiful, virtuous, and capable princess is rooted in seventeenth-century girls' education literature, but their images of active and politically engaged princesses exceed their culture's girlhood norms. In the *conteuses'* tales, girls are often capable individuals who exceed gendered stereotypes in their familial and political contexts.

Noble Individuality and Unique Conceptions of Girlhood

Jonathan Dewald argues that in the seventeenth-century French nobles began to establish themselves as individuals.[29] Through their writing, both men and women expressed affection, secured political alliances,

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[23] Domna Stanton and Lewis Seifert, eds., *Enchanted Eloquence: Fairy Tales in Seventeenth Century French Women Writers* (Toronto: Iter, 2010), 5.
[24] Seifert, *Fairy Tales, Sexuality, and Gender in France,* 62, 219.
[25] Peter Burke, *What is Cultural History*, 2nd ed. (Malden, MA: Polity, 2012), 83.
[26] I chose these five because they were the most prolific female fairy tale writers of the late seventeenth-century and because their works are easily accessible in English translation.
[27] Jonathan Dewald, *Aristocratic Experience and the Origins of Modern Culture* (Berkley: University of California Press, 1993), 174.
[28] Stanton and Seifert, eds., *Enchanted Eloquence*, 7.
[29] Dewald, *Aristocratic Experience*, 174.

and challenged moral norms.[30] Even highly structured genres such as letters and novels reveal the personal identities of their writers.[31] As noble and upper bourgeois women, the *conteuses* also defined themselves in their writing.[32] Seifert argues that "the unreal and the implausible—in short, the marvelous—can explore the potentially real and plausible realms of different gender identities."[33] In fact, the employment of magic and the marvelous gives the *conteuses* creative freedom to express their individual and shared gendered identities.[34] Little is known about the girlhoods of seventeenth-century *conteuse*s. However, the information that was recorded about their families, educational experiences, motherhoods, and salon contexts reveals individuals with a unique set of experiences. These experiences shaped their individually and culturally constructed conceptions of girlhood.

Madame d'Aulnoy was the most prolific of the seventeenth-century *conteuses*. She published eight novels and twenty-five fairy tales under one of the most prestigious publishers of the period, Claude Barbin.[35] She held her own salon and was active in those of other women, possibly attending the famous salon of Anne-Thérèse.[36] She was born into an aristocratic family, married at age fifteen and gave birth to six children.[37] Her first two, a boy and a girl, died in infancy, but her next four daughters lived through to adulthood. She published her first novel when her youngest daughter was thirteen and her collections of fairy tales soon after in 1697 and 1698.[38] Her tales are longer than those of the other *conteuses*, and it is likely that she developed her story lines and characters during the girlhoods of her daughters.

In d'Aulnoy's tales, births of daughters are much more common than that of sons, perhaps reflecting her own experience. But most significantly, the birth of a daughter, even if she is the only child, is always greeted with kingdom-wide celebration.[39] This attitude contrasts with the French court's strict preference for sons over

[30] Dewald, *Aristocratic Experience*, 176.
[31] Ibid., 192.
[32] Harries, *Twice Upon a Time,* 14.
[33] Seifert, *Fairy Tales, Sexuality, and Gender in France,* 175.
[34] Hannon, *Fabulous Identities,* 14.
[35] Stanton and Seifert, eds., *Enchanted Eloquence,* 97.
[36] Ibid.
[37] Ibid., 98.
[38] Ibid.
[39] d'Aulnoy, "The Bee and the Orange Tree," "The Good Little Mouse," "Babiole," "The Green Serpent," "The Hind in the Woods," and "Princess Mayblossom."

daughters.[40] Indeed, according to Salic law only boys could inherit the French crown, and royal midwives were often paid more for the delivery of sons.[41] d'Aulnoy uses the tense atmosphere of a succession crisis to set up several of her tales. But in these stories, instead of hoping for sons, queens celebrate the births of daughters, even eating foods that were thought to encourage the conception of girls.[42] As a mother of four daughters, d'Aulnoy has a special understanding of the social values and personal emotions surrounding the birth of a girl. Her stories of royal births indicate that, to her, a daughter was worth just as much as a son.

Catherine Bernard was born in 1663, in Rouen, to a Protestant merchant family.[43] Growing up in the lively intellectual atmosphere of Rouen, she had access to literary culture early on. She made her way to Paris sometime before her twentieth birthday, and converted to Catholicism at the age of twenty-two, an event that was published in *Le Mercure Galant*.[44] This conversion was against her Protestant family's wishes, but it was an important step if she hoped to pursue a literary career in Catholic-dominated Paris.[45] Bernard never married, and her tales reflect this disenchantment with romance, as she aimed to "only show unhappy lovers so as to combat as much as I can our penchant for love."[46] In both "Prince Rosebush" and "Riquet with the Tuft," parents play controlling roles in their children's access to romantic love. Both the widower king and the widowed queen in "Prince Rosebush" are emotionally wounded by their past love lives.[47] These parents try to control their children's romances, the queen parades her chosen suitors before the princess, and the king locks up his son. Similarly, in "Riquet with the Tuft," the king and the queen try to protect their daughter when they realize that her intelligence is attracting less than ideal suitors.[48] Bernard shows disapproval in an

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[40] Holly Tucker, *Pregnant Fictions: Childbirth and the Fairy Tale in Early-Modern France* (Detroit: Wayne University Press, 2003), 84.
[41] Ibid., 79.
[42] d'Aulnoy, "The Doe in the Woods," "The Orange Tree and the Bee," "White Cat."
[43] Stanton and Seifert, eds., *Enchanted Eloquence,* 48.
[44] Ibid.
[45] Ibid.
[46] Catherine Bernard, as translated and quoted by Stanton and Seifert, eds., *Enchanted Eloquence,* 49.
[47] Bernard, "Prince Rosebush," in Stanton and Seifert, eds., *Enchanted Eloquence,* 52.
[48] Catherine Bernard, "Riquet with the Tuft," *Beauties, Beasts and Enchantments: Classic French Fairy Tales,* ed. and trans. Jack Zipes (New York: New American Library, 1989), 95.

aside to the reader: "but prohibiting a young and pretty person from loving is like preventing a tree from bearing leaves in May."[49] In her personal life, Bernard made decisions from a young age to pursue a literary career, by leaving her hometown and abandoning her parents' religion. Therefore, her decisions as a young woman and her depictions of parental control reveal a notion of girlhood that is independent and contests the bounds of parental authority.

Marie-Jeanne L'Héritier de Villandon was the most involved in salon culture of all of the *conteuses*. Her salon met about twice a week, and there is some indication that d'Aulnoy, Bernard, and Murat were guests.[50] She was the daughter of Louis XIV's historiographer and a close relative of the renown fairy tale writer, Charles Perrault.[51] In fact, L'Héritier's tale "Marmoisan" is dedicated to Perrault's daughter—one of her second cousins. During her youth, these family connections offered L'Héritier access to educational opportunities unavailable to other girls of her time. This education is evident in the countless historical, geographic, and scientific references made in her tales. For example, two of her tales, "Marmoisan" and "The Subtle Princess," are set in medieval France.[52] In each tale, L'Héritier establishes herself as a historian, indicating her sources and explaining contextual details such as medical practices, torture techniques and political climate. She also references both real and fictional historical figures including the Roman consul Regulus and Count Ory.[53] In "The Subtle Princess" the king locks his three daughters in a tower to protect their chastity, but L'Héritier assures the reader that they received food and "documents designed to keep them well informed."[54] She assumes the princesses are literate, and that it is natural for girls to take an interest in political events. L'Héritier's conception of girlhood encompasses the possibility that girls are interested in pursuing knowledge and that family can facilitate this pursuit.

Henriette-Julie de Castelnau, Comtesse de Murat, was born into an aristocratic family, married at age twenty-three, and had one

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[49] Bernard, "Riquet with the Tuft," 96.
[50] Stanton and Seifert, eds., *Enchanted Eloquence,* 62.
[51] Ibid.
[52] Stanton and Seifert, eds., *Enchanted Eloquence*, 63; Marie-Jeanne L'Héritier de Villandon, "Marmoisan," in Stanton and Seifert, eds., *Enchanted Eloquence,* 73; Marie-Jeanne L'Héritier de Villandon, "The Subtle Princess," in *Wonder Tales,* trans. Gilbert Adair and ed. Marina Warner (New York: Straus and Giroux, 1996), 69.
[53] L'Héritier, "The Subtle Princess," 76.
[54] Ibid., 73.

son. She was active in salon circles and knew both d'Aulnoy and L'Héritier. Unfortunately, nothing is known about her experience of girlhood, therefore her conceptions of female youth are only revealed in her adult writings. Every time Murat mentions youth it is associated with beauty, joy, and delight. In "Little Eel," a fairy gives Princess Plousine the choice between beauty and intelligence. When she chooses intelligence, the fairy marvels at the princess's wisdom beyond her years, as surely most young girls would have chosen beauty. As a reward for her maturity, the fairy grants her beauty as well, allowing her to choose from the features of any Greek goddess. Plousine selects Hebe, the goddess of youth, since she believes that young beauty is superior to all other manifestations.[55] This close association between youth and beauty means that in Murat's stories the delights of girlhood also fade with age. For example, in "Wasted Effort," Murat writes the story of a "daughter whose beauty was extraordinary from the moment she was born."[56] In any of the other *conteuses*' tales, particularly those of d'Aulnoy, this beauty would set the girl up for a virtuous and rewarding life. However for Murat, beauty only entails a happy life up to the age of about fifteen. After this time, the protagonist in "Wasted Effort" is subjected to repeated rejections from lovers, and eventually her mother leaves her in the Land of Love's Injustice, where she can live with other lonely and unhappy people.[57] Murat's association between aging, ugliness, and unhappiness is most clearly evident in her tale "Young and Beautiful," in which an aging fairy struggles to maintain her husband's affection.[58] For Murat, beauty and its rewards fade with youth.

Compared to the other *conteuses*, Charlotte-Rose de Caumont de La Force was the most active at court. She was born into a noble Protestant family and was probably related to Murat. She began her first service position at age sixteen and served as lady-in-waiting for Queen Marie-Thérèse, the *duchesse* de Guise, and the *dauphine*, Marie-Anne-Victoire de Bavière.[59] At court, she quickly gained a scandalous reputation for allegedly possessing pornographic novels

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[55] Murat, "Little Eel," in Stanton and Seifert, eds., *Enchanted Eloquence,* 239.

[56] Henriette-Julie de Castelnau, Comtesse de Murat, "Wasted Effort," in Stanton and Seifert, eds., *Enchanted Eloquence,* 270.

[57] Ibid., 281.

[58] Henriette-Julie de Castelnau, Comtesse de Murat, "Jeune et Belle," *Les Contes de Fées du XVIIe Siècle*. https://www.lescontesdefees.fr/contes-et-auteurs/mme-de-murat/jeune-et-belle/. (Accessed 17 May 2016).

[59] Stanton and Seifert, eds., *Enchanted Eloquence,* 190.

and participating in romantic affairs. She was married at age 17, but it only lasted two years since she successful petitioned for an annulment. In an autobiographical piece, La Force reflects on her personal life admitting: "I banish constraints...my mind is quite libertine."[60] La Force also refused to conform to stereotypical patterns when writing her plotlines and characters. For example, her heroines were not always young princesses, but were also older queens and adult women. In addition, while many of her girl characters are heroic and brave, in some tales, like "The Enchanter," girl characters are silent and objectified.[61] This variety shows that girlhood was not always La Force's focus, and in fact Marianne Legault argues that La Force was more interested in discussing female intimacy and eroticism.[62] So La Force's tales remind us that even though the *conteuse* often featured girl characters, we should recognize that these authors also had interests beyond girlhood.

Shared Conceptions: The Virtuous, Beautiful, and Capable Girl

While each *conteuse* portrays girlhood differently according to their experiences and interests, there are also similarities that bind the tales together and reveal a shared conception of youthful femininity. The most common image of girlhood between these authors' tales is the virtuous, beautiful and capable princess. This recurrent motif of girlhood reflects some of the luxuries of elite life, the discussions of salon society, and the ideals found in elite education manuals, but the *conteuses'* conceptions of girlhood also challenge and exceed these cultural influences.

As elite women, the *conteuses* were involved in two competing cultural milieus particular to seventeenth-century France—the court and the salon. Many of the *conteuses* worked at or visited court and almost all of their tales are about royal families. The *conteuses'* lives were immersed in material wealth and Murat describes them as "beautiful, young, with a good figure, fashionably and richly

[60] As translated and quoted in Marianne Legault, *Female Intimacies in Seventeenth-Century French Literature* (New York: Routledge, 2016), 183.
[61] Charlotte-Rose de Caumont de La Force, "The Enchanter," in Stanton and Seifert, eds., *Enchanted Eloquence,* 196.
[62] Legault, *Female Intimacies,* 210.

clothed and housed."[63] In fact, d'Aulnoy addressed her first book of tales to Charlotte-Elisabeth of Bavaria, Louis XIV's sister-in-law, and Murat addressed two of her books of tales to the Dower Princess Marie-Anne de Bourbon, who was one of Louis XIV's natural daughters.[64] While some of the *conteuses* frequented court, their more immediate cultural circle was the Parisian salon. This was a unique social and cultural space in early modern France in which women hosted discussions and acted as arbiters of literary taste. Domna Stanton argues that "the salon threatened dominant gender relations," and offered new opportunities for women to access knowledge and intellectual engagement.[65] Yet women's rational capacity was not uncontested in these spaces. The men and women who attended Paris's salons continued to participate in the *Querelle des Femmes,* a debate dating back to the fifteenth century about women's nature and capacity for reason.[66] These debates were particularly lively on the topic of girls education.

Over the course of the seventeenth century, education opportunities for girls of all social classes increased, with the opening of 500 new teaching convents and the publication of treatises on girls' education by François de Salignac de la Mothe Fénelon and Jacques Du Bosc.[67] Teachers of elite girls, like Madame de Maintenon, were quick to implement the advice of these writers in these new schools. Girls of the lower nobility and upper bourgeoisie, like the *conteuses*, especially benefited from these changes, as the new educational curriculum was designed to equip them for successful interactions at court or in the salons.

In 1687, Fénelon published a treaty on the education of girls, encouraging the development of moral purity, chastity, self-constraint, and humility.[68] These virtues are embodied in many of the *conteuses'* princesses. In Murat's "Little Eel" and La Force's "Green and Blue,"

[63] Henriette-julie De Castelnau, Comtesse de Murat, "To the Modern Fairies," in Bottigheimer, ed. *Fairy Tales Framed*, 203; Stanton and Seifert, eds., *Enchanted Eloquence,* 6, 8.
[64] Bottigheimer, ed., *Fairy Tales Framed*, 168, 199.
[65] Domna Stanton, *The Dynamics of Gender in Early Modern France: Women Writ, Women Writing* (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2014), 96.
[66] For a brief overview of this 400 year history see Joan Kelly, "Early Feminist Theory and the 'Querelle Des Femmes,' 1400-1789," *Signs* 8, no. 1 (1982): 4–28.
[67] Elizabeth Rapley, "Fénelon Revisited: A Review of Girls' Education in Seventeenth Century France," *Social History* 20, no. 40 (1987), 301.
[68] Seifert, *Fairy Tales, Sexuality, and Gender in France*, 204.

the princesses are naturally compassionate, kind, and modest.[69] Even though Bernard's princesses never get happy endings, their girlhood virtue is still celebrated, as her girls are typically charming and joyful.[70] Almost all of d'Aulnoy's princesses are virtuous, and even when one acts contrary to her gender, like the cross-dressing Belle-Belle, she too is described as modest and humble.[71] Just as noble girls in Madame de Maintenon's school learned to "live inside the narrow intellectual and occupational limits that society assigned to them," many of the *conteuses'* virtuous princesses bring joy to their parents and end up with ideal marriages to perfect princes.[72]

Fénelon contrasts his list of virtues with a list of vices such as vanity, dishonesty, long-windedness and seductiveness. The juxtaposition of virtuous and vicious female characters is a common trope in some of the *conteuses'* tales, especially those of L'Héritier. In both "The Subtle Princess" and "Marmoisan," the older sisters exhibit all of Fénelon's vicious categories, and the youngest sisters are purely virtuous. In "The Subtle Princess," the oldest two sisters are known by their nicknames, Lackadaisy and Loquatia. Lackadaisy is lazy, fat, frumpy, and speaks with a lisp. She only wears slippers because "she found the wearing of shoes unutterably fatiguing."[73] Loquatia is just as idle as her older sister, occupying her time with gossip and trying to seduce the court's young men.[74] In contrast to her sisters, Finessa—the youngest—is clever, forgiving, wise, and chaste. Similarly, in "Marmoisan" the oldest sister is a nagging critic, the second oldest an indolent gambler, and the third a lavish partygoer. In opposition, the youngest is pleasant, clever, and knows "how to rule her passions."[75] The contrasting of virtues and vices is a common theme in the *conteuses* tales, indicating that girlhood was considered a transparent life stage, and revealed each young woman's natural inclination.

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[69] La Force, "Green and Blue," in Stanton and Seifert, eds., *Enchanted Eloquence,* 214, 220; Murat, "Little Eel," in Stanton and Seifert, eds., *Enchanted Eloquence*, 238, 239.

[70] Stanton and Seifert, eds., *Enchanted Eloquence,* 55.

[71] Some of the more typical virtuous girls in d'Aulnoy's tales include: Gracieuse in "Gracieuse and Percinet," who is described as humble, happy, obedient and modest and when she is punished she suffers "as meekly as a lamb." Joilette in "The Good Little Mouse" who is described as obedient and good, as she does not cry like most newborns, but only smiles.

[72] Rapley, "Fénelon Revisited," 304.

[73] L'Héritier, "The Subtle Princess," 66, 72.

[74] Ibid., 67.

[75] L'Héritier, "Marmoisan," 89.

In the *conteuses'* tales, virtue is often synonymous with beauty. This is the correlation drawn by another influential seventeenth-century writer, Jacques Du Bosc, in his well-received publication, *L'Honneste Femme*.[76] In this manual he argues that it is possible to determine girls' natural inclination towards virtue based on their God-given beauty.[77] The *conteuses* tend to comply with this assumption, providing detailed descriptions of each girl's appearances at birth. For example, in La Force's "Green and Blue," the baby princess's features reveal "grandeur, nobility, and pride worthy of her blood line," accentuated by her beautiful blue eyes and ceaseless smile.[78] Girls such as Gracieuse, Goldilocks, Mayblossom, Rossette, Joliette, Merveilleuse, Belle-Etoile, and Belle-Belle were declared the most beautiful princesses at their births.[79] d'Aulnoy's tale "Blue Bird" provides one of the best examples of beauty in the predetermination of virtue. The king's daughter, Florine is described as "fresh, young and beautiful," her hair is adorned with flowers and she is clothed in taffeta and jewels, while her step-sister, has opposite physical characteristics.[80] She is given the name Truitonne because "her face had as many red spots as a trout. Her black hair was so dirty and greasy that you could not touch it, and oil oozed out from her yellow skin."[81] These physical characteristics, assigned in their youth, are direct indications of the characters' virtue. Florine attracts the love of Prince Charming effortlessly, while Truitonne employs trickery and ends up uglier than she began. The correlation of beauty with virtue in these *conteuses'* tales indicates that in the elite imagination, girls' physical appearance was an indicator of their morality.

The *conteuses'* girl protagonists are more than beautiful and virtuous. In fact, although the *conteuses* agree with some of Fénelon's ideas about girls' virtues and vices, they have different ideas about girls' intellectual and social abilities. On these topics, the *conteuses'* portrayals of young female figures are more in line with authors, like Du Bosc, who subscribe to the popular seventeenth-century notion of

[76] Fitzgerald, "To Educate or Instruct? Du Bosc and Fénelon on Women," in *Women's Education in Early Modern Europe,* ed. Barbara Whitehead (New York: Garland Publishing Inc., 1999), 162, 173.
[77] Ibid., 170.
[78] La Force, "Green and Blue," 213.
[79] d'Aulnoy, "Gracieuse and Percinet," "Blue Bird," "Fair Goldilocks," "Princess Mayblossom," "Princess Rossette," "The Good Little Mouse," "The Ram," "Belle-Belle," and "Princess Belle-Etoile."
[80] d'Aulnoy, "Blue Bird."
[81] Ibid.

honnêteté. The term *honnête* according to Joan DeJean is "among the most frequently used adjectives in seventeenth-century French prose from this period and one of the most difficult to translate."[82] In practice, an *honnête* person was well read in classical literature, able to control their natural impulses, inclined to rational discourse, attuned to social propriety, and most of all, adept at conversation. Therefore, *honnêteté* was not achieved through status, but required education and constant work. While most seventeenth-century literature on *honnêteté* concerned adults, the *conteuses* believed that young girls should also aspire to this fashionable ideal.

The frequent inclusion of maxims in the *conteuses*' tales is an indication of virtuous education that is specific to salon culture. When discussing salon society in a letter, L'Héritier explains the importance of proverbs, which were popular in seventeenth-century salons.[83] She praises her friends' knowledge of several maxims in a number of languages.[84] The *conteuses* often place these maxims in their female protagonists' mouths, situating girls as active and wise educators. When Lackadaisy is about to be raped in "The Subtle Princess," she speaks in a maxim saying "it is no use locking the bedroom door if the thief is already under the bed."[85] In one of d'Aulnoy's tales, Gracieuse reminds Percinet to control his passions with a witty saying: "Discretion adds a grace and charm to wooing; then tell your love not in the world's ear, lest, as a cruel judge your joys pursuing, it makes their harmlessness as crimes appear."[86] In La Force's "Green and Blue" the princess scolds herself, saying, "physical beauty is nothing without the ornaments of the mind and the qualities of the soul."[87] The repeated placement of wise words in the mouths of young and virtuous girls idealizes the image of the witty and well-spoken girl. Girls not only transparently reveal virtue through their beauty, but also actively participate in teaching and advising those around them.

Several tales also highlight the importance of intelligence for young girls. These tropes are a product of salon culture's emphasis on intellectual and witty conversation. In Bernard's "Riquet with the Tuft"

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[82] Joan DeJean, *Against Marriage: The Correspondence of La Grande Mademoiselle* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002), 29.
[83] Marie-Jeanne L'Héritier de Villandon, "Letter to Madame D.G.," in Stanton and Seifert, eds., *Enchanted Eloquence*, 286.
[84] Ibid., 287.
[85] L'Héritier, "The Subtle Princess," 75.
[86] d'Aulnoy, "Gracieuse and Percinet."
[87] La Force, "Green and Blue," 217.

she describes the young princess as "so stupid that her naturally beautiful features only served to make her appearance distasteful."[88] While the *conteuses* celebrate youthful beauty in their girl protagonists, they value intelligence just as highly. Princess Blue in La Force's "Green and Blue" is born beautiful, but also intelligent and rational.[89] In Murat's "Little Eel," the young princess receives gifts of wit and beauty from a fairy, but she is recognized and celebrated most for her intelligence.[90] In all three cases beauty is an important companion to the more useful quality of intelligence. Nevertheless, d'Aulnoy and Murat assume that girls are most likely to choose beauty over intelligence, thus both of their stories didactically encourage a reverse prioritization. In d'Aulnoy's "Belle-Etoile" the princess pursues beauty, but then realizes that it is nothing without wit, while in "Little Eel" the princess chooses intelligence, and Murat explains that this choice is uncharacteristically wise for such a young girl.[91] Therefore, the *conteuses* celebrate the beauty of girlhood, but they also criticize girls' tendency to naively choose beauty over intelligence.

The *conteuses* were not entirely in agreement with Fénelon's conception of girlhood. In fact, they challenged his ideas on girls' roles in the household. According to Fénelon, girls' education should teach correct pronunciation of words, legible handwriting, proper spelling, Latin for religious purposes, and some music.[92] All of these subjects should be applied practically to household duties such as instructing servants, taking care of accounts, educating children and cultivating religious devotion.[93] Madame de Maintenon's school at St-Cyr implemented this curriculum, educating elite girls in religious morals, household handiwork and noble comportment.[94] While it is unlikely that any of the *conteuses* went to St-Cyr, they would have been educated with similar ideals, which are evident in some of their depictions of girlhood education. In d'Aulnoy's "Babiole," the newborn princess receives an education that follows Fénelon's standards. She is taught to walk gracefully, speak eloquently, play the

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[88] Bernard, "Riquet with the Tuft," 95.
[89] La Force, "Green and Blue," 213.
[90] Murat, "Little Eel," 236.
[91] Ibid., 239.
[92] Fitzgerald, "To Educate or Instruct?" 180.
[93] Karen Carter, "'Les garcons et les filles son pêle-mêle dans l'école:' Gender and Primary Education in Early Modern France," *French Historical Studies* 31, no. 3 (2008), 421.
[94] Ibid.

harpsichord, and express her affection modestly.[95] These skills are used to entertain the queen and increase the prestige of the household. However, the *conteuses'* references to girlhood domesticity are not so straightforward. For example, L'Héritier makes sarcastic reference to Fénelon's instructions in "The Subtle Princess" when she describes Princess Finessa's competence in household duties. She explains that Finessa not only aided her father in running the kingdom, but was also accomplished in "the finicky little tasks of the hand, which are reputed to divert those of her sex." [96] In this case, L'Héritier shows awareness of cultural norms of girlhood, yet shows a disdain for their limits.

While Fénelon restricts girls' activities to household spaces, du Bosc encourages young women to engage in more public spaces such as the salon. He argues that virtuous women have the capacity to "outstrip conventional or archetypical male leaders."[97] However, du Bosc intends this argument to apply only within a confined conversational setting, rather than as a permanent subversion of patriarchal norms. Nevertheless, the *conteuses*' take his idea beyond its intended limits in their depictions of girls' interactions with their fathers and brothers. In both d'Aulnoy's "Belle-Belle" and L'Héritier's "Marmoisan," daughters convince their fathers to comply with their plans to cross-dress as warriors.[98] Both fathers are easily convinced. The daughters not only manipulate their father's will, but also trick other authoritative men. Marmoisan leads a military campaign for several years, using her authority to reform violent military practices and encourage compassion rather than violent pillaging of conquered territories.[99] She even takes on a masculine chivalric role when she attacks two of her soldiers who are about to rape a girl. In d'Aulnoy's "Belle-Etoile," the young female protagonist dresses as a man to save her cousin Chéri. In the process, she also rescues her three brothers and several other kings and princes, who "all threw themselves at her feet, calling her the saviour of kings."[100] In all three of these tales, girls subvert the patriarchal order of the household, proving their dominance over their fathers and brothers.

One of the most politically influential girls in this set of tales is Finessa, in L'Héritier's "The Subtle Princess." Finessa manages the

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[95] d'Aulnoy, "Babiole."
[96] L'Héritier, "The Subtle Princess," 67.
[97] Fitzgerald, "To Educate or Instruct?" 164.
[98] d'Aulnoy, "Belle-Belle;" L'Héritier, "Marmoisan," 93.
[99] L'Héritier, "Marmoisan," 94.
[100] d'Aulnoy, "Belle-Etoile."

king's household, disciplining dishonest officers, and interceding in foreign affairs. The entire kingdom knew that "young as she was," Finessa "had cleverly discovered, in a treaty that was just about to be signed, that a perfidious foreign ambassador had laid a cunning trap for the king, her father."[101] L'Héritier recognizes gendered expectations, yet emphasizes Finessa's youth in the extraordinary nature of these accomplishments. At the time of these tales' publishing, late seventeenth-century France was enjoying the stability of Louis XIV's adult reign. Yet not long before this period of calm, France's political situation was far more precarious, in part due to the age and gender of its ruler. When Louis was a young boy, the nobles rebelled against royal authority, sparking the tumultuous years of the Fronde. Prior to this, the regencies of Catherine de Medici, Marie de Medici, and Anne of Austria, proved the instability of female rule. Therefore, the troubles of young or female rulers were instilled in collective memory, and would have been common knowledge for the *conteuses*. Nevertheless, L'Héritier's protagonist, Finessa, combines both stereotypical traits of a weak ruler: she is not only female, but she is also young. L'Héritier's use of historical sources in her writing proves that she must have been aware of this historical pattern and wished to use Finessa's character to challenge cultural assumptions about effective rulers. The *conteuses* depict their girl protagonists as powerful and intelligent, able to overcome the limitations of their gender and age and subvert patriarchal authority.

Conclusion

As elite authors, the *conteuses'* writings reflect their individual identities and their shared cultural context. d'Aulnoy and Murat craft positive images of girls, celebrating the births of daughters and idealizing the naivety of girlhood, while La Force's conceptions are ambiguous, encompassing a range of young female identities from independent to objectified. Bernard and L'Héritier's conceptions are also unique, as Bernard depicts girls acting in defiance to parental authority, while L'Héritier sees families as facilitators of girlhood education. Amidst these various portrayals, one motif of girlhood prevails in all five of the *conteuses*' tales. Each of these taletellers discuss girlhood virtue, denoting protagonists as virtuous and antagonists as vicious from a young age. The qualities of virtue and

[101] L'Héritier, "The Subtle Princess," 68.

vice are not developed over time, but are embedded in the essential identities of the girls at birth, demarcated by beauty or ugliness. The *conteuses* celebrate beauty as an indicator of virtue, but argue that only intelligence can make these qualities useful. Therefore, active and assertive roles are given to beautiful, virtuous, and intelligent girls. Despite the constraints placed on girls' activities in seventeenth-century educational treatises, in the *conteuses'* imaginations, girls could assert authority beyond their years. Therefore, the *conteuses'* tales not only spoke to ongoing debates about women's nature in early modern France, but also made a strong statement about female youthfulness. Girls caught in that ambiguous stage between sixteen and twenty-five could be brave, intelligent, and even more powerful than adult men.

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