

## Female Empowerment and Its Limits: The *Conteuses*' Active Heroines

by  
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What does it mean to write as a woman? What are the differences of women's writing? Through these well-rehearsed questions,<sup>1</sup> feminist criticism has revealed the power of literary canons to exclude writers and of all texts to construct gender identities. Such questions have provoked interest in the works of neglected or underread female authors and, at the same time, encouraged investigations of the ways in which gender is (re)produced discursively. Yet, at the same time as exerting a power within literary establishments during the last decade or so, feminist criticism has not been able to avoid certain phallogentric constructs (eg. the essentialism in its revalorization of motherhood or the very notion of "canon" in its demarginalization of women writers<sup>2</sup>). To more fully grasp the limits on the powers of their own (late twentieth-century) discourses, feminist critics might profitably consider the constraints that define women's writing historically and differentially.

The seventeenth-century fairy tales written by the *conteuses* (Marie-Catherine d'Aulnoy, Louise d'Auneuil, Cathrine Bernard, Catherine Durand, Charlotte-Rose de La Force, Marie-Jeanne Lhéritier de Villandon, and Henriette-Julie de Murat) offer a striking example of the ambivalent powers of a particular corpus of women's writing. These narratives, which represent more than two-thirds of the production of the first *mode des contes de fées* in France (1690-1709<sup>3</sup>), are complicitous with, but also resist patriarchal literary traditions of the period. Both reaffirming and reconfiguring the inequality of relations between the sexes, the tales of the *conteuses* thematize the undecidable identity of women writers and their texts. More specifically, the active heroines in these

*contes de fées* illustrate the extent and limits of women writers' ability to reconstruct gender differences.

### The Powers of the Active Heroine

Active heroines--those whom folkloristic studies define as having a relative control over their own and/or others' existence<sup>4</sup>--figure prominently in the tales of the *conteuses*. Compared to only one-quarter of the fairy tales by the contemporary *conteurs*, one-half of the *conteuses'* plots include active heroines. While the men's tales display a predilection for an active hero who is either the only main character or distinctly more powerful than the heroine (sixty-eight percent overall), the women's feature such a hero less often (thirty-six percent of the time). All in all, the narratives of the *conteuses* valorize the active heroine by distributing power between male and female characters more equally than do the texts of the *conteurs*.<sup>5</sup>

Now the interactions of the fairy-tale hero and heroine with other characters, with supernatural forces, and with each other are determined by relations of power, which can be defined in general terms, following Foucault, as the constant tensions, justifications or contradictions, and strategies that social forces bring to bear on each other. Since power is dispersed unequally among all groups, it cannot be monopolized. "a condition de possibilité du pouvoir," Foucault argues, "...c'est le socle mouvant des rapports de force qui induisent sans cesse, par leur inégalité, des états de pouvoir, mais toujours locaux et instables" (122). In the case of the fairy-tale hero and heroine, this inequality is reflective of the narrative's ideological context. Whether portrayed as more or, on the contrary, as less powerful, the hero and heroine are the quintessential representatives of "good" in the fairy tale: if their activity upholds and defends this ideological stance, even their passivity demonstrates its triumph over "evil."

The relations between the hero and heroine are no less ideological, however. When they struggle together against the outside world or with each other, they are engaged in a power dynamic that determines the fairy tale's normative "masculine" and "feminine" roles. In light of the historical

inequalities between men and women, these gender roles can be expected to be patriarchal constructions in which the hero is most often granted an active and the heroine a passive stance. In fact, recent studies of specific, written versions of folkloric traditions (such as the Grimm's *Kinder- und Hausmärchen*) have revealed that female characters are consistently *disempowered* and male characters *empowered*.<sup>6</sup> When further contrasted with the relatively few active women in French folkloric motifs,<sup>7</sup> the *conteuses'* active heroines are indeed an aberration.

In texts by both the *conteurs* and the *conteuses*, the active heroine's activity is qualitatively different from that of the hero. The heroine, who is almost always a princess, is rarely shown exercising political powers. And while the hero, usually a prince, very often tends to the affairs of his (or his father's) realm, the heroine who *is* granted political power uses it to further the love plot rather than to consolidate her own or her kingdom's interests. In Auneuil's "L'Inconstance punie," for instance, Douceureuse's powers as both a queen and a fairy are devoted to seducing Alcimède, who, as a king in his own right, makes political pronouncements that are unrelated to the love story. Most frequently, the heroine's empowerment is based on her desire for the hero, not on her political authority. When, in Aulnoy's "Serpentin vert," Laidronnette/Discreète sets out to deliver her husband from his metamorphosis, her victory over the "evil" fairies, if not her pursuit, are ensured by her love. To be sure, the hero's power, too, often derives from the quest for his sexual object, but his efforts to overcome the inevitable obstacles more consistently involve military or chivalric feats than do the heroine's. When the active heroine undertakes these "masculine" activities, she is always portrayed as exceptional.

As unusual as they may be in folkloric forms, the active heroines are far less so when compared to the contemporary figure of the empowered, heroic woman, also called the *femme forte*. Prevalent during the first half of the seventeenth century (especially the early part of Anne of Austria's regency, beginning in 1643), this figure finds its most significant expression in panegyric texts

such as the Scudéry's *Les Femmes illustres* (1642), du Bosc's *La Femme héroïque* (1645), and Le Moyne's *La Galerie des femmes fortes* (1647). In such works, heroic women are praised for their energy, resoluteness, constancy, stoic apathy, liberality, and quasi-divine *fortitudo*--qualities all the more astounding because of the misogynistic mistrust of women's "nature" in much of the period's "moralist" writing.<sup>8</sup> But since the *femme forte* overcomes such "female" vices as sensuality and idleness, her powers are predicated on the denial of her sexuality: often unmarried or widowed, she has an aggressive "chastity" and, thus, personifies the Christian heroine. Ultimately, then, these heroic women constitute exceptions that are meant to confirm the "rule" of patriarchal domination of women.<sup>9</sup>

Notwithstanding the conservative portrait of the *femme forte*, many seventeenth-century discourses repress the heroic woman. Compared to sixteenth-century accounts, seventeenth-century historiography generally derides female warriors or elides them altogether (Cuénin). In the aftermath of the Fronde, for example, memorialists such as Motteville and Retz displaced the "disorder" of the civil wars onto the *frondeuses* and thereby reduced their imputed empowerment to reprehensible deviance.<sup>10</sup> In other narrative genres--especially in the second half of the century--the heroine who mediates the hero's *gloire* rather than attain her own plays a prominent role (Cuénin 318 and Hepp). Of course, there are also examples of women, like the Princesse de Clèves, whose heroism does not lie in military valor or physical courage, but in an apparent passivity that effectively undermines patriarchal authority (eg. the Princess's renunciation and refusal of love). Upon comparison, however, the active heroines of the *conteuses* seem to reject the model of the heroine who is devoted exclusively to male privilege or, even, of the woman who resists phallic power through seeming inactivity; they resemble instead the earlier fascination with the *femme forte*. Yet, just as this figure ultimately serves to reinforce the domination of women, so too some of the active heroines are recuperated to support patriarchal relations of power. A discussion of the complicitous heroines will then

better reveal the ambivalences of those who resist male-dominated power.

### Phantasmatic Powers: The Complicitous Heroine

Like the *femme forte*, many of the *conteuses'* active heroines uphold the domination of their gender and, ultimately, attest to women writers' identification with the interests of patriarchal power--their blinded submission to/because of its control. The vast majority of these heroines use their power to ensure their marriage, and thereby reinforce a mythic "closure of satisfaction," in which they fulfill their desire through conjugal union. These active heroines are perhaps best understood as a masculinist phantasm--an imaginary scene representing the fulfillment of an unconscious wish by defensive processes.<sup>11</sup> In this cultural construction, the empowered woman who is *disempowered* in the marriage closure resolves the fears of a male-centered society. Like the satiric reversal that the *précieuse* constitutes in texts of the 1650s, the self-subverting active heroine of the *contes de fées* becomes the displacement of men's anxiety about losing power, which generates the wish to reduce women to unthreatening objects.<sup>12</sup> This anxiety then translates into the heroine's *disempowerment* which, in turn, explicitly valorizes the marriage closure.

In Murat's "Le Sauvage," the heroine's actions are the principal catalyst for the plot, but the closure *disempowers* her to make her the hero's sexual object. Constantine is empowered when she cross-dresses as the knight Constantin so as to avoid her father's decision that she marry "un homme sans biens, sans mine et sans esprit, & auquel il ne pouvoit faire autre avantage que de luy laisser après sa mort le peu de bien qu'il possédoit" (9). Moreover, Constantine is unsuited to this marriage because she combines the qualities of the perfect hero with those of a superlative woman:

...Toutes ses inclinations étoient grandes et nobles, elle montoit parfaitement à cheval, tiroit de l'arc, & manioit une épée avec une adresse merveilleuse; elle

aimoit les Sciences, & ce qui est de plus admirable, c'est que ces occupations héroïques ne l'empêchoient pas d'exceller en toutes les occupations de son sexe. Elle brodoit, elle dessignoit, elle découpoit, & le tout en perfection. Enfin c'étoit un prodige de perfection que la divine Constantine... (7-8)

After arriving in Sicily to seek "his" fortune, the knight Constantin wins the highest admiration of both the king and the princess Fleurianne for "his" "occupations héroïques" as well as the "occupations de son [Constantine's] sexe." Yet, the sole, ostensible purpose of these "masculine" and "feminine" feats is to gain the king's attention and praise and, thus, to achieve the demise of the androgynous hero(ine) in the closure of satisfaction. Forced to flee Sicily after killing Fleurianne's fiancé, Constantin becomes Constantine once again when the "good" fairy Obligeantine promises to end her troubles. Predictably, the fairy fulfills her promise by offering Constantine's hand in marriage to the king of Sicily, and the heroic woman turns submissive bride.

As a phantasmatic figure, Constantine cannot remain powerful in marriage. The threat of her actions prompts a final disempowerment in the tale's closure and denies her an active erotic function. It is precisely to eliminate the "specter" of the empowered woman resisting her role in a phallogentric economy that active heroines such as Constantine are reduced to passive wives. In this respect, they are the reverse of the *femme forte*, who is desexualized because of her heroism.<sup>13</sup> Whether or not the empowered woman marries, this masculinist figure creates a fundamental incompatibility between female heroism and love.

#### Powers of/for Women: The Resisting Heroine

While the complicitous heroines accept their domination in the marriage closure, the resisting heroines retain their position of authority and use it--either directly or indirectly--to vindicate women's activity. These heroines

resist both the "genderedness" and the ends of power by promoting interdependence (and not domination) as a model for sexual and political relations and, more generally, by advocating activity that seeks women's autonomy from men. However, they inevitably reproduce the phantasm of the empowered woman at least partially, since their resistance can only be formulated within existing, hegemonic notions of power. The effectiveness of their resistance can thus only be judged by the relative extent of their submission.

This strategic, but also ambivalent, conjunction of complicity and empowerment is evident in Auneuil's "La Princesse des Pretintailles," in which women-centered activity takes the form of revenge against husbands. In this short tale, the vain heroine, a veritable clotheshorse, fulfills the prediction of her fairy-godmother Bisare according to which "...les Dames enuysées de toutes les nouveautez qui peuvent ajouter quelques graces à leurs beautez, la prendroient pour modelle de leurs ajustemens" (5). But when husbands become outraged at their wives' expenditures on clothing and force the Princesse des Pretintailles to leave,

son départ ne fit pas l'effet que les maris avoient attendus: les Dames au desespoir d'avoir perdu une personne si chere, pour se venger de leurs époux, rencherissent tous les jours sur une si capricieuse mode; et la Fée Bisare pour faire réussir son oracle, leur persuade que leur beauté est attachée au goût de la Princesse des Pretintailles. (10)

Ostensibly creating an etiology for *la mode*, the heroine's departure incites women to action: they avenge themselves by indulging hyperbolically in sartorial whims. But since "pretintaille" can refer to both the ornamental cloth on women's dresses and to futility, the "goût de la Princesse des Pretintailles" they emulate could mean both acts of further vengeance *and* a play on words characterizing women as obsessed with fashion. This tale, then, stages an ambivalence between wives' revenge against their husbands and men's vengeance against rebellious women--a double

meaning which could be interpreted as a (pre)condition for endorsing women's self-determining activity. Although "La Princesse des Pretintailles" attempts to (re)figure a masculinist cliché into an empowering emblem for the female subject, it must necessarily start from a pre-existing (patriarchal) figure: female independence can only be defined by contrasting it to dependence on men and by using the same conflictual notion of power with which men oppress women.

Of all the tales of the *conteuses*, Aulnoy's "La Chatte blanche" perhaps best illustrates the tensions that are played out in the active heroines and, further, in seventeenth-century women's writing. Exerting powers as both a political figure and a storyteller, Chatte blanche effectively and explicitly links the ambivalent existence of the empowered female with that of the woman writer.

"La Chatte blanche" is first and foremost about the power of female storytelling, which is privileged through two competing, but unequal stories. What begins as a tale of three bothers struggling against each other to inherit their father's crown quickly becomes the tale of an active heroine seeking to overcome an "evil" spell. When the youngest prince discovers Chatte blanche's magnificent kingdom, the narrative concentrates on the hero and his life with the anthropomorphic cat, which is revealed to be the predestined conclusion to the heroine's long autobiographical tale. Not only does this embedded story overshadow the hero's adventure but also, and perhaps most telling, the entire tale, since it occupies almost half of the narrative.<sup>14</sup>

Even before she tells her life story, however, Chatte blanche disposes of a narrative power that inscribes the tale in the writing of its time. The narrator's description of the walls protecting Chatte blanche's kingdom, for instance, occasions a reference to some of Perrault's and even Aulnoy's own tales:

...les murs étoient d'une porcelaine transparente,  
mêlées de plusieurs couleurs, qui représentoient



l'histoire de toutes les fées, depuis la création du monde jusqu'alors; les fameuses aventures de Peau-d'Ane, de Finette, de l'Oranger, de Gracieuse, de la Belle au bois dormant, de Serpentin-vert, & cent autres, n'y étoient pas oubliées. (458)

This authorial self-valorization is repeated when the inaccessibility of Chatte blanche's own writing is emphasized:

...souvent même la belle Chatte composoit des vers et des chansonnettes d'un style si passionné, qu'il sembloit qu'elle avoit le coeur tendre, & que l'on ne pouvoit parler comme elle faisoit sans aimer; mais son secrétaire qui étoit un vieux chat, écrivoit si mal, qu'encore que ses ouvrages aient été conservés, il est impossible de les lire. (467)

While reiterating the patriarchal cliché of the autobiographical nature of women's writing, this assessment directs the reader's attention away from these undecipherable texts toward Chatte blanche's actions in the plot and, later, her embedded tale. Moreover, by stating that it cannot reproduce the heroine's writings, the narrative implicitly defers to the narrator-qua-*conteuse*, who overcomes the silence to which the heroine's writings are condemned, who empowers her own storytelling by preserving what is usually lost--the writing of a woman.

In yet another effort to authorize its existence in relation to other (lost and preserved) texts, the tale repeatedly emphasizes the presence of an unrevealed secret in the heroine's being, which gives her the power of suspense over the *cadet* and the reader. As an extension of herself, each gift she offers the *cadet* for his tests to inherit his father's crown is contained in an unusual or worthless object. For the second test, for instance, when the prince is supposed to find a piece of cloth that can pass through the eye of a needle, Chatte blanche gives the *cadet* a nut, which he opens only to find another, smaller nut, then a cherry pit containing an almond, inside of which is a grain of wheat, and, finally, a grain of

birdseed. While everyone at his father's court makes fun of him, the disenheartened prince follows Chatte blanche's orders and opens this shell:

...& l'étonnement de tout le monde ne fut pas petit, quand il en tira une pièce de toile de quatre cens aunes, si merveilleuse, que tous les oiseaux, les animaux & les poissons y étoient peints avec les arbres, les fruits et les plantes de la terre, les rochers, les raretés & les coquillages de la mer, le soleil, la lune, les étoiles, les astres & les planètes des cieux: il y avoit encore le portrait des rois & des autres souverains qui régnoient pour lors dans le monde; celui de leurs femmes, de leurs maîtresses, de leurs enfans & de tous leurs sujets, sans que le plus petit polisson y fût oublié. ...L'on présenta l'aiguille, & elle passa & repassa six fois. (479)

Just as this all-encompassing, and yet infinitesimally fine, cloth emerges from the worthless layers of nuts and seeds, so too does the *conteuse* encapsulate all the world's natural wonders and political and social powers in the devalued, reinfantilizing form of the *conte de fées*. Female storytelling reconciles the powers and resources of the universe with the "smallest," or least important of forms and renders both marvelous. When the reader follows the *cadet's* lead and breaks open the seemingly worthless shell of the fairy tale, s/he too discovers a hidden interior that reveals the unsuspected power of an underestimated creator.

Yet, the heroine's powers are not without their limits. The most significant but also the most ambivalent of Chatte blanche's revelations occurs at the end of the tale when she gives herself to the hero as the young bride he must display before his father. When he brings the de-metamorphosed Chatte blanche to court, the king "...ne put s'empêcher, dans l'excès de son admiration de s'écrier: voici l'incomparable et celle qui mérite ma couronne" (516). Although the king offers his kingdom to the "incomparable" heroine, he is unwilling to abdicate his

throne, and so Chatte blanche resolves the struggle between father and sons, and amongst brothers, by giving away three of her own kingdoms:

Seigneur...je ne suis pas venue pour vous arracher un trône que vous remplissez si dignement, je suis née avec six royaumes: permettez que je vous en offre un, & que j'en donne autant à chacun de vos fils. Je ne vous demande pour toute récompense que votre amitié, & ce jeune prince pour époux. Nous aurons encore assez de trois royaumes. (516-17)

Sharing what remains of her authority with her fiancé ("Nous aurons encore assez de trois royaumes"), Chatte blanche redefines the relations of power between the men in this tale, but within limits. Even though Chatte blanche emphasizes the redistribution of her powers, she does not establish equality among the king, the brothers, and herself since the heroic couple possesses three kingdoms, the king two, and the other brothers one each. Indeed, the narrative's insistence on this disparity suggests that the heroine participates in a patriarchal economy of exchange, in which gain and domination for one mean loss and objectification for the other. In a sense, then, the gift she gives her father- and brothers-in-law also rewards them for their struggle to dominate the others. (The final sentence even lauds the heroine for what amounts to preserving patriarchal relations of power: "Chacun ensuite partit pour aller gouverner ses états; la belle Chatte Blanche s'y est immortalisée, autant par ses bontés & ses libéralités, que par son rare mérite & sa beauté" [517].)

A further constraint on her powers is revealed just before her final intervention when she encloses herself in a piece of crystal, which the *cadet* presents to his father:

Votre majesté verra dans ce rocher une petite Chatte blanche.... Le roi sourit, & fut lui-même pour ouvrir le rocher; mais aussi-tôt qu'il s'approcha, la reine avec un ressort en fit tomber toutes les pièces, & parut comme le soleil qui a été

quelque tems enveloppé dans une nue; ses cheveux blonds étoient épars sur ses épaules, ils tomboient par grosses boucles jusqu'à ses piés; sa tête étoit ceinte de fleurs, sa robe d'une légère gaze blanche, doublée de taffetas couleur de rose... (516).

Recalling portrayals of the birth of Venus, this scene is ultimately ambivalent since it allows her to reorient the power relations between the men of the narrative, but at the same time pedestalizes her as a sexual object. The suspense she holds over the prince and the reader is dissolved into complicity with the domination of women so that she can exercise power at the end of the tale.

The female storyteller/woman writer whom Chatte blanche figures is subject to similar tensions. If she is able to valorize her own creation and, even, to propose it as a wish-fulfillment for female empowerment, it is only at the risk of reinforcing patriarchal clichés of femininity and, more specifically, of the woman writer. Even as she makes a strong defense for women's discursive powers, the inscribed *conteuse* cannot wholly escape playing into the defensive processes of the masculinist phantasm of the empowered female. Moreover, the tensions within "La Chatte blanche" and its portrayal of the powers of female storytelling are evident in the active heroines of the *conteuses* as a heterogeneous whole. Between the *disempowered* position of Constantine and the (albeit equivocally) *empowered* stance of the wives in "La Princesse de Pretintailles" or Chatte blanche, there is a fundamental ambivalence about the role of female power and, by extension, women writers in a male-dominated society.

To read the fairy tales of the *conteuses*--indeed all women's texts--for their simultaneous resistance to and complicity with patriarchal constructions of gender identities and of the writer not only allows feminist critics to grapple with the limits of their own discourses, but also suggests a way of breaking out of the "binary assumption" (Butler 138) in prevailing cultural definitions of anatomical difference. The powers of the active heroines in fairy

tales written by women in seventeenth-century France are resisting); yet, considered as a group, these characters offer no univocal or monolithic definition of the heroine or, for that matter, the woman writer. Reading for the limits of female empowerment may, then, be a means of empowering women (writers), of struggling to overcome these limits.

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### Notes

<sup>1</sup>See Showalter, Miller ("Introduction: Writing Feminist Criticism," *Subject to Change* 1-21), and Culler for comprehensive accounts of the rise of and developments in feminist criticism during the last two decades.

<sup>2</sup>On the risk of essentialism in the feminist valorization of motherhood, see Stanton, "Difference on Trial," and on feminist criticism's problematic relation to literary canons, see Robinson.

<sup>3</sup>See Storer and Robert for an historical overview of the genre.

<sup>4</sup>This admittedly vague definition, which is based on the work of Horn, Koechlin, and von Löwis of Menar, is meant to provide a heuristic tool for exploring the sexual/textual differences between the tales of the *conteuses* and those of their contemporary male counterparts, the *conteurs* (Choisy, Fénelon, Le Noble, Mailly, Nodot, Perrault, and Préchac).

<sup>5</sup>Active heroes appear in approximately sixty-eight percent and active heroines in fifty percent of the *conteuses'* tales as opposed to eighty-five percent and twenty-five percent, respectively, in those of the *conteurs*. I base these calculations on the corpus of seventeenth-

century French fairy tales noted by both Storer and Robert.

<sup>6</sup>See especially Bottigheimer and Tatar on these points. Bottigheimer, for instance, makes an interesting comparative (thematic and statistical) analysis of patterns of violence inflicted on males and females as well as of direct speech by heroes and heroines in various editions of the *Kinder- und Hausmärchen* published during the lifetime of the Grimm brothers. She shows a consistent increase in the level of violence directed at female characters and a decrease in the amount of direct speech allowed them in each revised edition of the tales, while these aspects remain more or less constant where male characters are concerned.

<sup>7</sup>According to my calculations, only about twenty percent of the folklore motifs catalogued by Delarue and Tenèze include active heroines.

<sup>8</sup>For a discussion of the *femme forte* and its relation to the *querelle des femmes* in seventeenth-century France, see Maclean 64-87.

<sup>9</sup>Le Moyne, for instance, carefully states the conservative function he intends for his text by invoking universal law and the rules of nature: "Je ne dispute pas icy contre l'usage universel; ny ne pretens faire casser d'autorité priuée, vn Reglement immemorial, et vne Politique aussi ancienne que la Nature. Encore mais est-ce mon dessein, de publier vn ban, par lequel toutes les Femmes soient appellées à la guerre. Elles se doiuent tenir à la distribution que la Nature et le Droit ont faite, et que la Coustume a receuë: et se contenter de la part qui leur a esté assigné dans l'oeconomie et dans le ménage" (qtd. in Maclean 80). However, such conservative leanings are not entirely evident in the portions of the Scudéry's *Les Femmes illustres* attributed to Madeleine. See, for example, Greenberg.

<sup>10</sup>Stanton notes that "historiographic accounts of the 'events' that culminate in Louis XIV's absolute Fatherhood delineate a ternary structure--order-->disorder-->order--

wherein the middle term is exemplified by the Regency and the Fronde, and associated with female deviation" (125). She further interprets this structure as being homologous to the role of the *précieuse* in satiric texts between 1654 and 1660.

<sup>11</sup>For a discussion of Freud's writings on phantasy (or phantasm), see Laplanche and Pontalis.

<sup>12</sup>I owe this observation to Stanton's reading of the *précieuse* as "...a substitute...for the displaced articulation of anxiety about women aroused in man..." (118).

<sup>13</sup>On the "chastity" of the *femme forte*, see Maclean 83-5.

<sup>14</sup>Her autobiographical tale occupies twenty-seven out of sixty-one pages in the NCF edition.

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