

**Concealing Identities, Revealing Stories: Marie-Catherine  
d'Aulnoy's *Relation du voyage d'Espagne*.**

**by  
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The travel narrative is a notably ambiguous genre. Like its correlates, autobiography, historiography, and geography, it purports to report the “real,” to accurately describe people, events, and places. Conversely, like the novel and other fictional discourses, it inscribes the imaginary, mythic, or simply interpretive. It is the *story* of a trip, a necessarily exoticizing account offered to a particular readership: those who have stayed home. This analysis of Marie-Catherine d'Aulnoy's *Relation du voyage d'Espagne* has two purposes: first, to consider the representation in this travel narrative of the relationship between the real and the fictional through an examination of how the author/narrator situates the veracity of her account and negotiates narration of the story of her trip to and stay in Madrid and also to demonstrate how generic expectations of authenticity have influenced reception of this text and caused generations of literary historians to be almost entirely preoccupied with the author's scandalous real-life adventures, attribution of her works, and whether she ever even went to Spain. An analysis of this text reveals the elasticity of generic boundaries at a time when travel narratives and the novel were just beginning to take their modern forms.

Marie-Catherine le Jumel de Barneville, baronne d'Aulnoy (1650?–1705) is best known as the author of fairy tales. She was part of a circle of fairy tale writers in late 17th-century France, among whom Charles Perrault became the most celebrated. Married at fifteen or sixteen to a man three times her age, she was implicated in a plot to be rid of her husband by having him accused of *lèse-majesté*. While this event appears to have been largely instigated by her mother, the scandal caused her to leave France and travel to Flanders, England, and (possibly) Spain. These countries became the inspiration for many of her writings. Her

publications include *Mémoires de la cour d'Espagne* (1690), *Histoire de Jean de Bourbon, prince de Carency* (1692), *Nouvelles espagnoles* (1692), *Nouvelles ou Mémoires historiques* (1693), *Mémoires de la Cour d'Angleterre* (1695), *Contes des fées* (1693–7), *Contes nouveaux* (1698), *Contes nouveaux ou les fées à la mode* (1698) and *Histoire d'Hyppolyte, comte de Douglas* (1708).

The *Relation du voyage d'Espagne*, published anonymously in 1691, is part of a vogue of travel literature, both true and imaginary, that was increasing in popularity in late seventeenth-century France (Atkinson 1–11). D'Aulnoy's choice of Spain as a destination reflects the hold that this country had on the popular imagination at the time. From Corneille to Racine, Spain was used as an exotic setting in which to tell tragic tales of love. Prior to this work, d'Aulnoy had already published her *Mémoires de la cour d'Espagne* cited earlier and Spain was well-established as a destination in other travel narratives in French, including Louis Coulon's *Le Fidèle conducteur pour le voyage en Espagne* (1654), François Bertault's *Le Journal d'un voyage en Espagne* (1664), Balthasar de Monconys's *Journal des voyages de M. de Monconys* (1665–6) and Antoine de Brunel and François de Van Aersen's *Voyage d'Espagne* (1665). D'Aulnoy's narrative of a trip to Spain was a huge success, ten editions were produced between 1691 and 1716 and it was translated into several languages. The *Relation* consists of 9 letters, seven of which are written from cities on the way to Madrid (Saint-Sébastien, Vitoria, Burgos, Lerma, Aranda de Duero, Buitrago, and Saint-Augustin), and two of which are written from Madrid. The narrator addresses her letters to an unnamed female cousin in Paris. She includes descriptions of the geography, social customs, and important events in Spain along with narration of her personal experiences, anecdotes about the people she meets, and in many instances, stories told to her during her trip. Full of precise detail, the exoticizing elements include the expected array of descriptions and comparisons among which language, architecture, food and drink, clothing, social and religious practices, and class and gender distinctions figure prominently. Four of the stories she includes take on fairly long proportions and can be called intercalated novellas. The first-person epistolary form is mixed with dialogue, reported speech,

inserted letters and other documents making this a hybrid text that explicitly highlights the exchange and circulation of stories and questions the concept of truth in narrative discourse. Of particular interest here will be the multiple elements of the narrative that call explicit attention to the narration and even remind the reader of the narrativity of discourse. Even its very title, *Relation*, does just that, by drawing attention to the fact that this is the “telling” of a trip to Spain.

The *Relation* follows fairly conventional paratextual practices that can be found in both fiction and non-fiction of the day. Particularly emphasized here is the veracity of the work. A dedicatory epistle figures after the title page, addressed to the duke of Chartres, brother of the deceased Marie-Louise d’Orléans. Amid the usual flattery and codified language, one finds in this address the claim that the duke is curious to know more about Spain because of his sister’s connection with that country, and also that what will be found in this work is more than what is usually shared with foreigners. The narrator legitimates her claims that she will transmit insider knowledge and understanding of a faraway place not only because she purports to be telling a true story, but because of the intelligence and natural curiosity of her implied reader.

The valorization of the work’s authenticity is further reinforced in a prefatory paragraph that follows the dedication. In the section “To the Reader” (“Au lecteur”) is the claim that everything in the text is true along with a disclaimer against future critics who would find fault with it. A closer reading shows that the paragraph is carefully constructed to provide loopholes, for both the *Relation* and the previously published *Mémoires*, in what Lejeune calls for autobiography, “the autobiographical pact,” the explicitly stated intention on the part of the author/narrator to tell his or her life story truthfully. It begins:

Bien qu'il ne suffise pas d'écrire des choses vraies, mais qu'il faille encore qu'elles soient vraisemblables pour les faire croire, et que cette raison m'ait donné quelque envie d'ôter de ma Relation les Histoires qui y sont, j'en ai été

empêchée par des personnes d'une Naissance et d'un  
Esprit si distingué, qu'il me semble qu'en suivant  
leur lumière je ne peux manquer. (n.p.)<sup>1</sup>

In writing about the distinction between things that are true and things that are verisimilar, d'Aulnoy recognizes one of the requisite measures used to judge the developing novel. Even fictional stories were supposed to conform to believability as the famous debates over the *Princesse de Clèves* confirm. The next part of the sentence justifies inclusion of the intercalated stories (which, one can infer, may be less believable) by claiming that people of high rank and good judgment had told her to keep them in, a common rhetorical move designed to disculpate the author and defer possible criticism by placing blame elsewhere.

In the next sentence of the address to the reader, one finds reference to the earlier *Mémoires* along with further assurances of veracity for both works:

Je ne doute point qu'il n'y en ait d'autres qui ne  
m'accuse d'avoir mis ici des Hyperboles, comme  
l'on a voulu le persuader à l'égard des *Mémoires de  
la cour d'Espagne*, mais celles qui assurent avec le  
plus de véhémence que l'Ouvrage n'est pas juste,  
pourraient être convaincues par leurs propres  
lettres...de la plupart des choses que j'ai recueillies.  
(n.p.)

Citing disparagement of her earlier publication, she states that her critics can verify its accuracy. The interesting word here is the last one, *recueillies*, collected or assembled. She claims to be nothing more than a compiler of information, and even so, affirms that only most of the details in these works are verifiable. She goes on to say that she has written down things she has seen or learned from others and the paragraph ends: "Mais enfin, je me contente d'assurer que ce qui est dans mes Mémoires et ce que l'on trouvera dans cette relation, est très-exact et très conforme à la vérité."](1:155). The choices of *exact* and *conforme à la vérité* are important, as both expressions are open to interpretation: they can

either be understood to mean that in the case of both the *Mémoires* and the *Relation*, the reader is guaranteed the complete truth or something that reads as though it were true. The nuance of this pact that is not one would not have been lost on a contemporary audience, but made all the difference in subsequent criticism.

While the autobiographical pact as elaborated by Lejeune is one part of the currently accepted definition of the genre of autobiography and extended to autobiographical writing in general, another important component is the relationship between the author, narrator, and protagonist of the work. Here again, for both the *Mémoires* and the *Relation*, the results of an examination of this facet of generic expectation are equivocal. Both were published anonymously and in neither work can one find an explicit statement relating the three. For the *Relation*, the narrator mentions neither her own name nor that of her addressee, a female cousin residing in Paris. Furthermore, while it is known that d'Aulnoy's mother was living in Madrid in 1679, the date found at the end of each of the letters, there is only mention of a female relative ("une parente") within the text without any further identification of her either through her name or her relationship to the narrator. She does mention on several occasions that she has a young child with her, her daughter, which can be correlated with verifiable facts about the author's life. However, comparing d'Aulnoy's biography and self-representation in the text is not of the utmost concern here. Let it suffice to say that the author/narrator/protagonist relationship appears to hold for this text, and that d'Aulnoy used this form of writing for particular reasons.

To be sure, the epistolary form creates a relationship between the traveler and her *destinataire* that contributes to the mimetic aspect of the account. The letters the narrator ostensibly sends to her cousin in Paris structure the story and give it an explicit purpose. For instance, the narrator states at the opening of her first letter that her cousin has asked her to write:

Puisque vous voulez être informée de tout ce qui  
m'arrive et de tout ce que je remarque dans mon

Voyage; il faut vous resoudre, ma chère Cousine, de lire bien des choses inutiles, pour en trouver quelques unes qui vous plaisent. (1:1)

The narrator is accordingly able to blame her cousin's request for completeness for any boring parts of the book. Doubling the legitimating move found in the preface, she goes on to use her cousin once again to further emphasize the verisimilitude of her story:

Vous avez le goût si bon et si délicat, que vous ne voudriez que des aventures choisies, & des particularités agréables; je voudrais bien aussi ne vous en point raconter d'autres : mais quand on rapporte fidèlement les choses telles qu'elles se sont passées, il est difficile de les trouver toujours comme on les souhaite. (1:1-2)

One finds such tropes at the beginning and closing of every letter, calling attention to the epistolarity of the narrative, but also repeatedly reinforcing its veracity.

Conceived of as essentially feminine, letter writing was considered to convey meaning in a natural, unpolished state, a fact the narrator calls attention to on several occasions. At the same time, the letters would seemingly undermine the veneer of veracity they confer because of their nature as documents sent to an addressee. However, the fact that they are dispatched to the cousin, and consequently lost to the narrator, who is supposedly publishing them at a later date, is a logistical puzzle that is solved in the very last letter. At the end of letter nine, the narrator requests that her cousin send her letters back to her. She excuses herself, though, asking her cousin to pardon her this liberty, which points to the unusualness of such a request and shows that it is a necessary invention on the part of the author to uphold the authenticity of the work that extends even to the circumstances of its publication (2: 342–3).

The frame narrative is a common device in all of d'Aulnoy's works. Her first novel, *L'Histoire d'Hypolite, comte de Duglas*, contains what is generally considered the first published fairy tale, *L'Isle de la félicité*. Though modern editions of d'Aulnoy's fairy tales often are published without them, all of the fairy tales published by d'Aulnoy are stories told within a framed narrative. D'Aulnoy adapts the model of a group of people telling stories to each other, such as is found in Boccaccio's *Decameron*, or the French example Marguerite de Navarre's *L'Heptaméron*. Just as the narrator addresses her letters to a curious cousin who has asked for an account of all she sees and experiences, the narrator demonstrates her own curiosity at every possible venue, asking those she meets for detailed information about themselves or third parties and includes these stories in her letters. The exchange of stories is highlighted throughout the narrative, as demonstrated by the four framed novellas as well as by shorter tales interspersed throughout all nine of the letters. Moreover, storytelling itself is referenced on numerous occasions. The several types of stories framed in the text all have in common the theme of love. In the first, two Spanish brothers and two young French women are desperate to be together despite family differences. The two brothers are able to convince their uncle to allow them to marry the women they love. In the second, Mira, the beautiful but cold princess, falls in love with the only man who does not return her affections and subsequently dies of a broken heart. The third chronicles the life of a nobleman turned hermit whose life was ruined because he was in love with his cousin's wife, is an account of adulterous feelings punished: the two lovers are found (innocently) together and the cousin kills his wife thinking he has been cuckolded. The last one is a tale of a virtuous young woman who is in love with her poor, young neighbor, but marries the old rich one, torn between love and duty, passion and reason; she makes all the right choices for the wrong reasons and ends up a melancholy widow.

In the *Relation*, how the narrator learns these stories and how she communicates them are at least as compelling as their content, if not more so. To give one example, the story about the two brothers is told in the first letter as something that takes place in

part before the narrator's eyes. The two young French women are in the room next to hers in a hotel in San Sebastien. The narrator states she was able to see into the next room through cracks in the poorly constructed walls. The young women have decided to write letters to their lovers. Upon doing so, they read them to each other, thus providing the narrator the opportunity to find out what is going on. The voyeuristic portion of this tale is amplified when the two brothers burst into the narrator's room thinking it is the room of the women they wish to marry. The narrator thus becomes a participant, keeping her silence while she and the two young men witness the arrival of the irate uncle in the next room. When the two brothers finally enter the room and explain themselves to their uncle, he grants their wish to be married. After his departure, the two couples fall into each other's arms at which point the narrator says she stopped listening to them. She claims to do so out of respect and because certain details cannot be communicated, and states that she buried her head in her pillow so as not to hear them. The following day, the whole cast of characters pays her a visit to excuse their unseemly behavior of the previous night. At her request, the older brother recounts the details of their story, which are in turn reported in a letter to the cousin. The tale of the lovers' choice between passion and family duty and the ultimate happy end is not at all as remarkable as the narration of the story. The desire on the part of the narrator to find out what is going on, learning part of the story through the recitation of the letters in turn inscribed in her own letter, the comic effect of the young men hiding in her room and the three of them peering into the next one, the narrator's demure statement that she stopped her voyeurism at a certain point, and the filling in of the details the next day are so many elements that join together to form a story whose production is highlighted over all else. Blurring the line between frame and narrative, this story is presented as a faithful chronicle of an actual event that took place involving the narrator during her trip.

Yet, the narrator doesn't always take the stories she relates at face value. In the fairy story about Mira, for instance, she questions the reliability of the tale on several levels. The setting for the tale is in the wilderness, as the travelers pass the second ruined castle they have come upon. At the first one, in Guebarra, they were told



that evil spirits lived inside. On approaching this second castle in ruins, the narrator states that they saw, “les restes d’un vieux château antique où l’on ne fait pas moins revenir de Lutins qu’à celui de Guébare” (141). Her skepticism thus affirmed, a man approaches her and says that the story is told in this land of a princess so beautiful, “qu’on la prenoit plutôt pour une Divinité que pour une simple Mortelle” (142). According to the story, her name is where the Spanish derive the word for “to look,” *mirar*. Because she was so beautiful, everyone who saw her supposedly cried out, “Mira.” Such an etymology not only appears fabricated to the modern reader, the narrator herself doesn’t buy this derivation. Supposedly, all who see her fall so in love that they quickly die because of her indifference. Added to the hyperbolic presentation of all the men in the land dying for the love of Mira, the story is pushed further into the realm of the imaginary when the gods and goddesses are angered at her behavior and an Oracle tells her parents to send Mira away to purge the affliction on their kingdom with the prediction that she will do so by losing her serenity and freedom. She agrees to leave and sets out on an epic-style journey around the world. Finally finding herself near the castle in question, Mira falls in love with a woman-hating count by the name of Nios who lives as a wild man in the woods. In describing his unkempt appearance and long hair, the narrator places in parentheses “cette circonstance est du conte,” further underlining its fictionality (145). The count does not reciprocate Mira’s love, she dies of a broken heart, and it is supposedly her cries of sorrow that are still heard from the castle to this day. The narrator continues to recount what she has been told using the past tense and states that young girls would leave food for Mira to console her, but that this custom had been abandoned as a superstition, demonstrating that even the people in the area no longer believe the legend. Regarding her own reaction, the narrator maintains that while she did not believe any of it at all, she took pleasure in the telling of the tale. Subsequently, the narrator complains that her young daughter, affected by the story, wants to leave some red partridges for Mira that have just been purchased for their dinner. Even though she agrees to humor her daughter, she affirms nonetheless, “je compris que je serois plus contente qu’elle [la princesse] d’avoir ces Perdrix à mon Souper” (147–

148). Questioning the reliability of the tale on so many levels while at the same time insisting on the pleasure of hearing it and relating it in turn to her cousin, the emphasis here and in many other places in this work is on narration and circulation of stories as stories.

Communication, however, is not presented unequivocally. While d'Aulnoy can be criticized for the exoticism of her story, by recounting the events of the trip to Spain, language is placed in the foreground as both a means to understanding and possible misunderstanding. Near the border just before crossing into Spain, the first people she mentions in the first letter speak in a dialect that she does not understand (40). They are from a village, and though they entertain her and they all exchange presents, the narrator criticizes their untrained singing voices. The linguistic barrier thus represents class distinction more than anything else in this instance. When she meets Dom Fernand de Tolède, a Spanish nobleman who becomes her traveling companion, they speak in Spanish, even though, as she says, he speaks French perfectly (40). The mutual understanding between the two appears to come not only from their linguistic ability, but also from their common aristocratic background. Even when she states that she is happy to have Dom Fernand with her so he can handle the lackeys in their language, it is once again a class and gender distinction that is implied more than anything else (42). Capable of understanding the language, she characterizes herself as able to grasp the minute details of what is going on around her in spite of the fact that she is in a foreign country. Yet, she questions the reliability of language as a vehicle for communication is questioned in several instances when stories are told and letters or documents are inserted into the text (always in French) that the narrator tells her cousin she has translated for her. The linguistic negotiations necessary for the narrator to relay information in her letters to her cousin such as when she claims that a story sounds better in Spanish, or that a translation necessarily cannot convey meaning accurately further draws attention to the potentially disrupting effect of language in the communication chain.

While it is obvious from even this short analysis that d'Aulnoy's works on Spain blur the lines of generic categories,

early criticism understood both the *Mémoires de la Cour d'Espagne* and the subsequent *Relation du voyage d'Espagne* as historical records and they were used extensively as documentation for histories of Spain. Following the nineteenth-century publication of another *Mémoires de la cour d'Espagne* attributed to the marquis de Villars, doubt was cast on the authenticity of both d'Aulnoy's *Mémoires* and her *Relation*. In the introduction to his 1926 edition of the *Relation du voyage d'Espagne*, Raymond Foulché-Delbosc disproved the theory that the marquis de Villars, ambassador to Spain during the time period in question is the actual author of most of the material in d'Aulnoy's *Mémoires*, but suggests that a third party was responsible for most of the work that d'Aulnoy allegedly rewrote and expanded (Foulché-Delbosc 24). He also argues that approximately one half of the *Relation* is actually a compilation of sources such as histories, geographical treatises, and other travel narratives. He claims that the other half is probably from other sources he was not able to identify (73). His stated goal in this edition is to separate the reality from the fiction. By reality he seems to imply coming from other sources, intimating that anything 'original' on d'Aulnoy's part would be fictional material. Basing his conclusions on the fact of what he calls her 'borrowing,' Foulché-Delbosc further concludes that, "Mme d'Aulnoy n'a jamais été en Espagne" (73). In his separation of the 'reality' and the 'fiction' of the *Relation du voyage d'Espagne*, Foulché-Delbosc made a revealing editorial decision. He cut out the four longest intercalated stories, effectively cutting out the 'most fictional' part of the work. In doing so, he makes it clear that he believes the *Relation* to be of historical interest and sets the stage for a generation of critics interested only in looking for its historical truth.

For some time after Foulché-Delbosc, scholarship on the *Relation* focused almost entirely on d'Aulnoy's trip to Spain. Jeanne Roche-Mazon affirms the authenticity of the work, arguing that there is no evidence that d'Aulnoy did not go to Spain and affirming that the detailed description of things such as clothing and manners is not found elsewhere (736). Paul Courteault undertook extensive research looking for documents of the trip, but found only proof placing her as far south as Bordeaux just before

the ostensible period of the journey to Spain. In the introduction to his 1979 edition of d'Aulnoy's novel *Histoire d'Hypolite, comte de Douglas*, René Godenne reviews the question of what he calls "la ténébreuse affaire du voyage d'Espagne" and offers yet another theory (Preface, v). He claims that while d'Aulnoy may indeed have been to Spain during the years 1679–1681, the publications do not appear until ten years later, in 1690 and 1691 respectively. Thus, he argues, the length of time between her trip and her writing about it may have caused her to look to written sources to help her write the *Mémoires* and the *Relation*. What's more, he adds, her borrowing from other sources may be due to a certain amount of laziness on her part. None of the hypotheses offered thus far is satisfactory, and the question of d'Aulnoy's trip to Spain may never be answered. While the problem of the trip to Spain overshadowed criticism of the *Relation* until very recently, the verifiability of the trip does not appear in the context of this analysis to be a pressing point, other than that it underscores the generic expectation of truth in travel narratives.

The general trend in the latest scholarship has been to either understand the *Relation* as a fictional narrative, or to exclude it from studies of d'Aulnoy's writings altogether. It is either too fictional to be true, or participates too greatly in the real to be considered fiction. Melvin D. Palmer compares the two works on Spain and finds the second a far superior work of fiction. In her recent evaluation of d'Aulnoy's biography and bibliography, Gabrielle Verdier asserts that the use of the first-person female voice in many of her works subverts the third-person male voice of other historically based writing at the time, such as Bussy-Rabutin's *Histoire amoureuse des Gaules*. Part of a wave of texts authored by women aimed at amending history to include a female perspective, these are also the works that have received the most criticism. Yet, Verdier's treatment is unclear. She first calls the *Mémoires* and the *Relation* "non-fictional best-sellers" (398), but then sidesteps the question of veracity by stating that critics "no longer defend the authenticity" of these works (401). Curiously, the most recent book-length study of d'Aulnoy's fiction by Anne Defrance does not mention either of these works, though they are listed in the bibliography.<sup>2</sup> One can only deduce that this author

excluded them from her study because she did not consider them to be fiction enough.

Following Joan Dejean, one wonders if the critical trouble with the *Relation* is that the first-person female narrator has been conflated with its female author (255, n. 9). Still, such an understanding would lock the text into the realm of fiction, separated from the author's experience altogether. Moreover, asking the Barthesian question, "What does it matter who's speaking?" appears to be relevant because so much of the scholarship on d'Aulnoy has concentrated more on her scandalous life than on her literary output, as shown by Verdier.

Despite the fact that most novels at the time were presented as though they were authentic documents, privileging the real was the norm for this work for more than two hundred years after its publication. The *Relation* was taken as a faithful autobiographical account of the trip d'Aulnoy made to Spain. In the last hundred years, critics have either made accusations of plagiarism, or piracy, or they have understood it as wholly fictional. These opposing perspectives make the same mistake. They overlook the fluidity of boundaries between history and fiction, in d'Aulnoy's time certainly, and also in our own. A New Historicist understanding, taking into account the narrativity of discourse, even that which posits itself as real, provides a much more accurate view of this text, which, as we have seen, is neither "pure" history nor "pure" fiction. In the end, the question of fact or fiction so often invoked regarding this text is not as important as the discursively executed interplay of voices revealed and concealed throughout the narrative.

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#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup> This and subsequent translations mine.

<sup>2</sup> Thanks to Lewis Siefert who provided me this reference.

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