

**Gracieuse vs. Grognon,
Or How to Tell The Good Guys From the Bad
in the Literary Fairy Tale**

by

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As my title suggests, telling the good guys from the bad in the literary fairy tale is usually a pretty simple matter. For one thing, when the characters have a name, that in itself can be a dead giveaway: Gracieuse vs. Grognon, Florine vs. Truitonne, Léandre vs. Furibon. The names are based on positive or negative qualities, recall a deity or a repulsive animal: Florine, “qui ressemblait à Flore,” Truitonne because “son visage avait autant de taches de rousseur qu’une truite” (d’Aulnoy, “L’Oiseau bleu,” *NCF* 3: 64) and who at the end is turned into “une truie.”¹ The onomastic code for good and bad fairies follows the same system, forming names on glorious or grotesque moral or physical features: Benevolent fairies are called Bénigne, Favorable, Lumineuse; malevolent ones, Suffio, Mordicante, Carabosse, Nabote, etc. The genre itself requires easy classification of the characters into categories of good and evil. Among its constituent features are, according to Raymonde Robert, “les assurances explicites de la réparation du méfait.” and “la mise en évidence du destin exemplaire du couple héroïque” (26); the heroic couple and the perpetrators of the misdeed must be readily recognizable.

In the shorter tales, usually male-authored, the name or in its absence a title, for example “la princesse,” is accompanied by the most general and stereotyped description: “une princesse plus belle que l’astre du jour” (Mailly, “Le Prince Roger,” *NCF* 6: 35). “La Belle au bois dormant” is described by Perrault as follows: “On eût dit un ange tant elle était belle . . . ses joues étaient incarnates, et ses lèvres comme du corail” (99). The only long description by a *conteur* in my corpus is Mailly’s flattering page-long portrait of “le

grand roi,” quite obviously Louis le Grand (“L’Ile inaccessible,” *NCF* 6: 171-72). Ugliness, however, is more particularized than beauty. Witness the portraits of Riquet à la Houppe, and the daughters of the Ogre in “Le Petit Poucet”: “Ces petites Ogresses avaient toutes le teint fort beau, parce qu’elles mangeaient de la chair fraîche comme leur père; mais elles avaient de petits yeux gris et tout ronds, le nez crochu et une fort grande bouche avec de longues dents fort aiguës et fort éloignées l’une de l’autre” (193), a description that functions to justify their own sorry fate.

In longer tales, introductory descriptions² are reinforced by notations inserted in the narrative in the manner of the *roman* but often with more concrete detail. The already signifying name in fairy tales (as opposed to most names in realist fiction) is linked to a “série de lieux particulièrement ‘pleins’ de sens, des stéréotypes et des clichés,” as Philippe Hamon defines the literary “portrait” (104). Because of their hyperbolic character, descriptive signs in fairy tale portraits can easily be classified into grids that reveal the ideological presuppositions underlying the value system of the classical period.³ Politically correct they are not; they manifest flagrant aristocratic bias, racism, ageism, “lookism” and discrimination against the physically challenged.

To begin with, beauty is usually equated with virtue, ugliness with vice, yet the canon of beauty very much corresponds to class status. Let us examine the parallel portraits of Gracieuse and Grognon in Mme d’Aulnoy’s first tale, “Gracieuse et Percinet,” in her first collection, *Contes des fées* (1697).

[GRACIEUSE] Il y avait une fois un roi et une reine, qui n’avaient qu’une fille. Sa beauté, sa douceur & son esprit, qui étaient incomparables, la firent nommer Gracieuse. Il n’y avait point de matin qu’on ne lui apportât une belle robe, tantôt de brocard d’or, de velours ou de satin. Elle était parée à merveille, sans être ni plus fière ni plus glorieuse. Elle passait la matinée avec des personnes savantes, qui lui apprenaient toutes sortes de sciences; et

l'après-dîner elle travaillait auprès de la reine. Quand il était temps de faire collation, on lui servait des bassins pleins de dragées, plus de vingt pots de confitures aussi disait-on partout qu'elle était la plus heureuse princesse de l'univers (*NCF* 3: 1) . . . Elle s'habilla aussitôt d'une robe verte à fond d'or; elle laissa tomber ses blonds cheveux sur ses épaules, flottants au gré du vent, comme s'était la mode en ce temps-là; & elle mit sur sa tête une légère couronne de roses & de jasmins, dont toutes les feuilles étaient d'émeraudes. En cet état, Vénus, mère des amours, aurait été moins belle; (3: 6)

What constitutes Gracieuse's incomparable *beauté*, *douceur* and *esprit*? Youth, long blond hair, white skin, pink cheeks (when Grognon slaps her "ses joues blanches et incarnates devinrent bleues et jaunes" [*NCF* 3: 29]), rich fashionable clothes, and of course, lots of jewelry. Eating delicacies such as "dragées" and "confitures" is also a sign of aristocratic wealth and taste, especially in d'Aulnoy, who has quite a sweet tooth. The only feature that is out of the ordinarily perfect in Gracieuse is that she spends her mornings with learned people and studies the sciences. Heroines in fairy tales by women tend to engage in more intellectual pursuits than their beautiful but empty-headed counterparts in male-authored tales.

Grognon's grotesque, bestial ugliness, on the other hand, is described with much greater precision.

[GROGNON] Il y avait dans cette même cour une vieille fille fort riche appelée la duchesse Grognon qui était affreuse en tout point: ses cheveux étaient d'un roux couleur de feu; elle avait le visage épouvantablement gros, & couvert de boutons; des deux yeux qu'elle avait eus autrefois, il ne lui en restait qu'un chassieux; sa bouche était si grande, qu'on eut dit qu'elle voulait manger tout le monde: mais comme elle n'avait point de dents, on ne la craignait

pas; elle était bossue devant et derrière, et boiteuse des deux côtés. Ces sortes de monstres portent envie à toutes les belles personnes. (*NCF* 3: 2)

She is old, red-haired, has dark, acned skin, one bleary eye, a flat nose, a big crooked mouth, ("son nez plat et sa bouche de travers" [*NCF* 3: 10]) no teeth, is hunched, back and front, limps on both sides, and is therefore evil: "Ces sortes de monstres portent envie à toutes les belles personnes."

Dress is another indicator of character and worth and Gracieuse's rich wardrobe enhances her natural beauty and goodness. But Grognon uses clothes to conceal physical deformity; the enumeration of her various prosthetic devices only serves to call attention to her deformities and illustrate her deceptive and vainglorious nature:

. . . cette laide créature était bien occupée à se parer. Elle se fit faire un soulier plus haut de demi-coudée que l'autre, pour paraître un peu moins boiteuse; elle se fit faire un corps rembourré sur une épaule pour cacher sa bosse; elle mit un œil d'émail le mieux fait qu'elle put trouver, elle se farda pour se blanchir; elle teignit ses cheveux roux en noir; puis elle se mit une robe de satin amarante, doublée de bleu, avec une jupe jaune & des rubans violets. Elle voulut faire son entrée à cheval, parce qu'elle avoit ouï dire que les reines d'Espagne faisaient ainsi la leur. (*NCF* 3: 6-7)

In keeping with the rest of her characterization, Grognon has terrible taste and no sense of color, mixing purple, blue, yellow and violet, which is about as attractive as bruised flesh. If Gracieuse is more beautiful than Venus, even when she is forced to dress like a peasant,

Gracieuse partit avec ses sabots, son habit de toile & son capuchon de laine; ceux qui la rencontraient disaient: Voilà quelque déesse déguisée; car elle ne

laissait pas d'être d'une beauté merveilleuse. (NCF 3: 26)

Grognon in her finery looks like a pile of dirty laundry ("Elle ressemblait à un paquet de linge sale" [NCF 3: 10]) and even worse, is "plus laide et mal bâtie qu'une paysanne" (NCF 3: 9).

The mixed system of comparisons, deities for the good guys and peasants for the bad, albeit duchesses, results in amusing iconographical incongruities. Illustrations in fairy tale collections consist most often of modest engraved headpieces which do not allow for much detail. Unfortunately, the first edition of d'Aulnoy's *Contes des fées* is lost, but they were probably also illustrated by Raymond who etched the headpieces of her *Contes nouveaux ou les Fées à la mode* (1698).⁴ Noble characters in contemporary finery, with *fontanges* and *perruque*-like locks appear in the same image as others dressed à l'*antique*, recalling the mythological comparisons (for example, *Suite* 1: 166; 2: 33). Although Perrault, a programmatic Modern, scrupulously avoided references to mythology, the engraver Clouzier's headpiece for "Cendrillon" shows the heroine in a fancy Louis XIV ballgown while the prince is dressed in a tunic, breast-plate and plumed helmet, like some Roman god or emperor —or Louis XIV at the Carrousel (reproduced in Rouger, ed., 152) On the other hand, to bring out how passé Sleeping Beauty's hundred-year-old gown is (although the "collet monté" mentioned by Perrault is hardly visible) the Prince is represented wearing the latest fashion in *perruque* and *justaucorps* (92).

The eclectic system is also evident in the full-page engravings of Mlle de la Force's *Contes des Contes* (1697). The allegorical characters of "Le Pays des Délices," named Amour and Jouissance and resembling Cupid and a bare-breasted goddess, make a spectacular entry in a splendid seventeenth-century carriage (in 1707 ed.: facing page 294). Enhancing the decor so that no one mistake the nobility —and virtue —of the characters can be seen in the illustration for "La Bonne femme." The noble woman who leaves the court to lead a simple pastoral life is represented with her three

foundlings (who turn out to be princes) against a building resembling a wing of Versailles even though the text specifies that she lives in a “maisonnette” (*NCF* 7: 166; 1707, illustration between pages 254 and 255).

If portraits of bad guys are developed in so much detail in the text, their visual representation is less frequent and quite disappointing. Only one of the eight small engravings in La Force's collection show an evil fairy, Nabote, getting into her chariot drawn by two winged moles. In the illustration her “vêtements simples” (“Plus belle que fée,” *NCF* 7: 3) take on a rather peasanty look and she is given a humped back, whereas the young girls accompanying her seem more like nymphes than ladies in a European court (1707: frontispice). The illustrations in the 1785 *Cabinet des fées* tend to represent only the heroes and heroines in the most flattering poses. Rather than Grognon, whose portrait occupies so much textual space, we see Percinet declaring his love for Gracieuse. (*NCF* 3: frontispice). It is hard to believe that the heroine of d'Aulnoy's “Serpentin vert,” Laidronette, is still “affreuse” when she shines the fatal light on her heretofore invisible husband, so much does she resemble Psyche (*NCF* 4: facing page 188). The engravings thus offer a simplified version of the valorizing sign system in fairy-tale portraits, but one that avoids the ugly and cannot render such important signifying elements as color.

The following classification of essential features emerges from portraits and descriptive markers in the texts by Perrault, Mailly, d'Aulnoy, Murat and La Force. In addition to *jeune, beau, bien fait, charmant, grand air*, portraits of heroines and heroes most often mention the coiffure and color of skin, hair and costume. The color hierarchy is not uniquely *grand siècle*, of course, but is associated with age-old symbolism. Sun-like blond is best, the worst is red hair, impure and infernal. Hair “blackier than ebony” is beautiful as long as it brings out the whiteness of the skin. Brown hair, mixing red and black, is sad in its earthtones and infrequent, except in the tales of Mme de Murat, who probably was a brunette. Most important of all, both heroine and hero must have long and curly locks, high on top. Next to red, the worst is straight, black greasy

hair, which characterizes, for example, both Furibon and Truionne, whose “peau jaune distillait de l’huile” (*NCF* 3: 64). White hair, not infrequent, signals old people on the side of the protagonists; good fairies often appear as cute little old ladies, deposed kings or good enchanters are “vénérables vieillards.” The good guys dress in gold, white, blue, green and light yellow; red is an ambivalent color and when associated with black, usually means trouble. Although bad fairies are often old and afflicted with osteoporosis, they can also change their appearance. Both the bad fairy Formidable, and the good, Lumineuse, are “grandes et majestueuses” although up close the prince can see that Formidable is no longer young and beautiful. But what really gives her away is her color scheme. Her costume and interior decoration are consistently “rouge et noir”; she sits on a ruby throne and is surrounded by twelve Mooresses, dressed in red and gold gauze (Murat, “L’Heureuse peine,” *NCF* 2: 406). Lumineuse’s kingdom, on the other hand, is a symphony of white.

It goes without saying that all physical deformities, the worst of which are humped backs and crooked legs, and even certain facial features such as a flat nose and a big mouth are signs of evil and/or lower class status. The exceptions, such as Laidronette, are due to a fairy’s curse but these confirm the paradigm. For example, Prince Torticoli and Princesse Trognon are paragons of goodness and nobility under their grotesque physical appearance. Thanks to virtue, however, their bodies will be metamorphosed to match their spirit. As Torticoli becomes Sans-pair, he loses his “bosse plus haute que la tête” grows three feet and a fabulous head of hair, “qui tombaient par grosses boucles sur ses épaules” (d’Aulnoy, “Le Rameau d’or,” *NCF* 3: 263). The legless cripple Trognon, “la peau écaillée comme une morue, les sourcils joints, le nez plat et large, la bouche proche des oreilles” (3: 265) at the fairy’s touch, feels “croc, croc dans tous ses os, ils se ralongent .. elle se lève, elle est grande, elle est belle, elle est droite, elle a le teint plus blanc que du lait, tous les traits réguliers, un air majestueux et modeste, une physionomie fine & agréable” (3: 274). Renamed “Brillante,” she is dressed all in white lace and roses. D’Aulnoy sums up the ideal body image of her time in “L’Oiseau

bleu” when she imagines a gigantic magic mirror in which all see themselves as they wish to appear: “La rousse y paraissait blonde, la brune avait les cheveux noirs, la vieille croyait être jeune, la jeune n’y vieillissait point.” Men, too, consult the mirror; “il faisait paraître aux uns de beaux cheveux, aux autres la taille plus haute et mieux prise, l’air martial et meilleure mine” (*NCF* 3: 107-8). But who are we to cast aspersions, we who have made the fortunes of the Clairols and the Jack LaLannes?

Do blondes really have more fun in the seventeenth-century fairy tale? Not really, at least not until the last paragraph and the “happily ever after.” The narrated action details the trials, tortures and mutilations they endure at the hands of gleeful red, brown and black-haired persecutors, who may come to a sorry end but have a jolly good time getting there.

What I have been able to present here, however, is only half of the story. Fortunately for readers of fairy tales, the stereotypes and easy classification of characters are challenged by metamorphoses which become increasingly weird as authors play with the conventions. What, for instance, in the initial description of the repulsive Serpentin —“il a des ailes verdâtres, son corps est de mille couleurs, ses griffes d’ivoire, ses yeux de feu & sa tête hérissée de longs crins” (4: 171)— would make us conclude that he is an enchanted prince? Of course, his perfectly galant speeches and long, amorous *soupir*-like hisses. Noble comportment belies the basest physical signs. But comportment can also be ambiguous and revelation retarded until the end of the tale. Mlle de Lubert’s “Princesse Camion” (c. 1743; *NCF* 15: 184-255) —“camion” as in “très petite épingle,” not “poids lourd” — spends her days as a rather sinister needle-sized enamel doll and her nights as the amorous, but ungainly “Princesse Baleine,” a whale from the waist down, to the utter bafflement of Prince Zirphil and the reader. Among their adventures, they battle the *hommes-poissons*. Who would guess at first sight that “Tête-de-brochet” is the good deposed king and “Tête-de-merlan” the evil usurper?

When they are turned into insects, reptiles or aquatic animals the good guys and the bad become hard to differentiate indeed. Not only does fantasy makes fairy-tale descriptions more fun, it also displaces the static and ideologically correct portrait. Although in the end beauty, birth and worth triumph and “true” identity is reestablished, in the textual space separating the expository portrait and the *dénouement*, metamorphosis often succeeds in confusing the categories so that appearance and reality no longer correspond. The extent to which metamorphoses in fairy tales may subvert the value system of Classicism remains to be explored.

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NOTES

¹The citations of tales by d'Aulnoy, Murat, La Force, Mailly and Lubert refer to *Nouveau cabinet des fées* (abbreviated *NCF*), a partial reprint of the 1785 *Cabinet des fées*. Spelling is modernized. The illustrations discussed appear in early editions, listed in the bibliography.

²Philippe Hamon defines the “portrait” as follows: description focalisante et en même temps foyer de regroupement et de constitution du “sens” d’un personnage . . . lieu où se fixe et se module dans la mémoire du lecteur l’*unité* du personnage, le personnage étant lui-même l’élément focal, central de tout énoncé narratif “classique-lisible” (105).

³What Hamon calls “grilles logiques de classement et idéologiques de valorisation” (104).

⁴Only the first volume of the 1698 *Contes nouveaux, ou les fées à la mode* is extant. But the same engravings by Raymond are found in the *Compagnie des libraires* re-edition (1715). Raymond engravings also illustrate the second volume, of the collection re-edited by the Compagnie under the title *Suite des contes nouveaux ou des Fées à la mode* (1711), from which my examples are taken.

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