CHARLES PERRAULT'S PARADOX: HOW ARISTOCRATIC FAIRY TALES BECAME SYNONYMOUS WITH FOLKLORE CONSERVATION

Lydie Jean

University of Paris IV Sorbonne

Abstract. At the end of the 17th century, Charles Perrault wrote what would remain his most famous book, and one of the biggest successes of French literature: the *Histoires et Contes du temps passé*. It is commonly thought that Perrault took the matter of his book directly from traditional folklore, in order to preserve its tales. However, studies show that even if he was inspired by folktales, he was not interested in their conservation. But the popularity of Perrault's fairy tales has been so extensive that they finally returned to folklore, became an important part of it and finally helped to preserve it. This process can be explained by successive causes, which all together made it possible. From the very beginning, Perrault's fairy tales were modified to fit cheap publications. When it became a fashion to study folklore, his tales were analysed from a wrong angle. And when more serious studies were made, it was too late: one could no longer tell which tales were original folktales, and which were Perrault's modified versions.

Keywords: Charles Perrault, fairy tales, folklore, *préciosité*, popular tradition, literature

1. Introduction

The first image that usually comes to mind when Charles Perrault is mentioned is a kindly old man listening to a nurse telling children wonderful fairy tales. This nice Mr. Perrault is supposed to have collected those fairy tales to amuse his own children, and eventually to save those stories from oblivion. This widespread idea is called 'the myth of good Mr. Perrault' in this paper. This myth is based on the idea that Perrault wrote his *Histoires et Contes du temps passé*, also called *Contes de ma mère l'Oye*, in a spirit of genuine respect for traditional folklore. Perrault wrote twelve tales in total: *La Patience de Grisélidis* (Patient Griselda), *Les Souhaits* (Ridiculous Wishes), *Peau d'Âne* (Donkeyskin), all written in verse; *Le Petit Chaperon Rouge* (Little Red Riding Hood), *La Belle au Bois Dormant* (The Sleeping Beauty), *Le Chat botté* (Puss in Boots), *Cendrillon* (Cinderella), *Barbe*

Bleue (Bluebeard), *Le Petit Poucet* (Hop o' My Thumb), *Les Fées* (Diamonds and Toads), and *Ricquet à la houppe* (Ricky of the Tuft), all written in prose with a moral at the end. Almost all of those tales have their origins in traditional folklore, but they have been modified by Perrault to fit the audience he was aiming at: the aristocracy.

To think that Perrault was interested in popular culture would be a mistake. This widespread belief can be explained by the fact that his tales did indeed become a part of the folk tradition. Perrault modified the traditional tales to amuse aristocratic audiences but his own work has been modified as well. Popular culture had its tales back again, but Perrault's name remains inseparable from these stories. It is the process of folktales being rewritten by Perrault and thus becoming ascribed to him that this paper will try to analyse.

2. Aristocratic fairy tales

2.1. The fashion of préciosité

Perrault's fairy tales were written between 1694 and 1697, at a time when *préciosité* was fashionable in France, and all over Europe. *Préciosité*, or preciosity, was inseparable from aristocracy. Those who called themselves *précieux* thought that brilliant conversation, spirit, and elegance of the language were means to show their distinction. Aristocrats, *précieux*, valued humour and critical thinking and their writings mostly expressed a lifestyle. Their refined background conditioned their works and they consider the bourgeois way of life as the height of vulgarity.

As a minor literary genre, coming from popular culture and using mainly simple phrases, tales should have been despised by preciosity. But it was all the rage in the salons, and at that time, everybody aiming for literary recognition was writing tales (Storer 1928). They were elaborate versions and cannot really be regarded as popular tales. Even if folktales often inspired *précieux* fairy tales, the writers modified the original versions beyond recognition. The fairy tales written in the salons were usually long, they used an elaborate style and many of them were fully invented: they had no popular roots and did not respect any of the traditional tales' characteristics. Those tales were then a pretext to libertine undercurrent and understanding between cultivated persons: naivety is here anything but innocent.

The *précieux* fairy tale is designed for the entertainment of aristocracy and has almost nothing to do with the popular fairy tale that is the origin of it. It has to be understood that Perrault's fairy tales definitely belong to *préciosité* (Robert 1982). Some of the morals that end the tales and some details in the texts are quite obviously witty remarks to educated people. Those details cannot have been taken from folktales, and even less from children's tales. However, as we will see later on, Perrault kept many things from traditional tales. The blend of preciosity and tradition provided his work with a unique polymorphism that is probably the reason of its success.

2.2. Who is Perrault?

Charles Perrault was born in 1628 into a rich bourgeois family who had entered the royal court. His parents raised him and his seven brothers and sisters in "the hate of popular superstitions". It was a relatively enlightened background for that time. His first works, written with his brothers, reflected the contradictions of the whole bourgeoisie: tempted by an alliance with the lower class, but terrified by the possibility that this ally gets out of control. They jeered at the masses, at their unrefined language: if they used their terms, it was to make the distance between the masses and the reader more obvious.

For twenty years, Perrault was the closest partner of the minister Colbert and as such, he contributed to the implementation and strengthening of absolute royal power. Perrault was in charge of the artistic field: his duty was to create structures to supervise, and thus control the intellectuals. He set up the Academies of painting, sculpture, music, architecture, etc. Being elected to the French Academy in 1671, he participated actively in the creation of the *Dictionnaire*. The purpose of this dictionary was to complete the ruin of regional languages, and to impose an example that established what was vulgar or coarse, and what was good taste: another way to control the writers.

Perrault was a much more modern man than his myth allows to believe, far from the image of a nice bourgeois close to the lower classes. He actively participated in politics and literary work, and was ambitious and firm in his positions. He was the main defender of the Modernism trend and considered that progress was possible only through the Catholic faith. He wrote *Le Parallèle des Anciens et des Modernes en ce qui regarde les Arts et les Sciences* (Parallel between Ancients and Moderns Concerning Arts and Sciences), in four volumes, to defend his theory. His ambitions were political, but he tried many literary styles, such as e.g. gallant.

Charles Perrault published his first fairy tales in 1694: Patient Griselda, Ridiculous Wishes and Donkeyskin were published separately, and then gathered together into a book. In 1696 he published The Sleeping Beauty in the magazine *Le Mercure galant*, and his eight tales in prose the year after. When Perrault wrote his *Contes*, he had lost his position at the Court – Colbert died in 1683 – and had dedicated himself to his children. Writing fairy tales was a way to entertain his children (Collinet 1981), try to return to the Court by following the fashion of the salons, and defend morality through amusing tales. For him it was not a major work, and nobody at that time considered it as such (Storer 1928).

2.3. A polymorphic work

The *Contes* immediately enjoyed a great success: eight reprints and two imitations were published during Perrault's time. It was quite a lot, even if most of those publications were popular and cheap. It should be mentioned that his success was quite uncommon: fairy tales made in the salons were usually not popular

among the lower classes. Perrault's tales definitely belong to the genre of French literary fairy tales; they have all their distinguishing features. On the other hand, Perrault used folktales and did not make drastic modifications in their structure: people easily recognized the stories they knew so well. Later studies of folklorists and literary historians showed that the book was undoubtedly based on a collection of traditional tales. The folklore has been preserved through popular themes, and it also appears through narrative techniques and oral phrases (Soriano 1975). However, fidelity to folktales cannot totally hide the patronising attitude of the grand bourgeois toward the lower classes and their traditions.

We now have a better overview of Perrault's work: it is simultaneously a literary fairy tales compendium, made in the salon fashion; a parody of folktales; and a close rewriting of those tales. That is what makes his work unique. Perrault remade popular style by keeping the structure of the stories and some typical phrases, and he created a sense of belonging with intellectuals and aristocrats by using precious vocabulary and respecting the requirements of the salon's fairy tale writing. But about his real intentions, debate still continues . The polymorphism of the work probably reflects the polymorphism of the man.

3. Process of entrance into folklore

3.1. The Enlightenments

Louis XIV died in 1715, and with him died a lifestyle, a whole frame of mind. His imprint was so deep that when he passed away, an era ended and a new one began. All the achievements of his reign seemed outdated and the literary fairy tales of the *précieux* were quickly forgotten. The severance was even deeper because most of the fairy tales writers died at the beginning of the 18th century – Perrault died in 1703.

In the 18th century, the number of publishing houses was increasing dramatically and the audience was growing very fast. The tales, as an easily accessible type of literature, also widened their audience. The *Contes de ma Mère l'Oye,* though old-fashioned, still enjoyed huge popular success. Only four editions of the book can be found in the 18th century, probably because the success referred to people who could only afford cheap editions, which have all disappeared by now. However, those publications present a problem, which is the lack of respect for the author's work: they usually do not use the exact original text. The *Contes* thereby suffers from many modifications.

After the death of Louis XIV, many things were questioned. Absolute monarchy was disputed, religious debate was strengthening, and new philosophical systems were born. Thereby, writers of the 18th century were above all committed. Though there was at that time an abundance of novels, most of the literary production was related to philosophical and political debate. The spirit of the century did not favour fairy tales, and the values of the time were in almost total contradiction to those of the *Contes*. Perrault helped to reinforce royal absolutism; he defended the primacy

of the Catholic faith, which he considered as the main source of progress and modernism. Progress was also a value of the Enlightenment, but for the philosophers, it was based on reasoning and critical thinking. Napoleon's reign was no more favourable to fairy tales. Though popular success was still considerable, fairy tales, and notably Perrault's tales, had to wait for Romanticism to be again acknowledged by the intellectual elite.

3.2. Brothers Grimm

In the 19th century a trend began, a lot more extensive than any literary current, touching most of the European countries. It could occur as a democratic *élan*, or an arousal of national and patriotic feelings, or even both at the same time. The trend was certainly general, but according to countries, economical conditions and concerned social classes, it occurred earlier or later, consisted of theoretical debates or bloody insurgences, and had a liberal, conservative or revolutionary orientation. In every instance, it was discovered that popular culture is worthy, even if all the countries did not embrace it with the same enthusiasm. Germany was the initiator of this trend, and the brothers Grimm its emblematic figures.

Trying to preserve national folklore, they collected tales, with a deep respect for tradition. The Grimms did not have real collections already published, where they could find the content of their work. They thus directed their efforts toward oral tradition and collected more than two hundred and fifty Germanic tales, which they rewrote trying to keep the style of popular narrators. They published this compendium, *Kinder und Hausmaerchen*, in 1812. It is however interesting to note that they included all Perrault's tales. The case of The Sleeping Beauty, part of Perrault's tales, is quite significant. It is actually a literary tale, which has no traditional or oral roots in any country. It is nevertheless part of the Grimms' book.

Perrault's myth therefore already existed, and his tales were considered an exact reflection of folklore. For that matter, it is true that Perrault is closer to the popular style than most of his contemporaries (Belmont 1986). Moreover, knowing that the structure of tales is the same in different European countries, with only stylistic differences that do not distort the tale's basis, it is not illogical that the Grimms got inspiration from Perrault's work to reproduce tales that also exist in the Germanic tradition.

3.3. Romanticism and interest in folklore

The national awakening in France occurred differently from Germany. National unity was achieved, elites did not have to defend territorial independence and national traditions against a foreign invader, whereas Germany was occupied by France between 1807 and 1815. Thereby, the interest in national traditions in France was more a literary theme than a real demand.

Industrial Revolution, depopulation of the countryside, emergence of the working-class in large numbers who was soon protesting – these were the reasons people could no longer be ignored. Democratisation of reading intensified this trend, and finally literary elites took an interest in the masses. Literature became dissenting, intellectuals claimed to be on the same side with the poor, exploited, unfortunate people, whereas they actually had very few contacts with those they defended. The trend to reflect popular aspirations naturally led to the revaluing of folk texts. However, if romantic analysis was often subtle, it was quite unconcerned toward its subject. Like its interest in the masses, its interest in folklore was real but superficial. Perrault's fairy tales were rediscovered, but his work was analysed in a sentimental perspective, which did not consider its real position in literary history. It was thus 'discovered' that Perrault did not invent his fairy tales, but was inspired by popular oral traditions (Walckenaer 1876). And immediately, the myth was created; Perrault was seen as a nice bourgeois man collecting folktales in the countryside, rewriting them with absolute fidelity. He became the symbol, the precursor of those who wanted to preserve traditional production.

At that time Perrault's *Contes* were at the peak of their popularity. They were tales that people knew since their childhood, and thus touched them deeply. Aware of what popular readership now represented in terms of money, publishers released many editions of the *Contes*, in formats and prices accessible to the masses. Perrault acquired unprecedented popularity, and between 1842 and 1913, there were not less than 233 editions of his fairy tales, by over sixty different publishers. It means an average of three or four publications a year, without including the cheapest editions and translations. Perrault's characters were acknowledged by popular folklore, and they also deeply penetrated into intellectual circles. For instance, the Decadent movement appropriated them and modified their original meaning (de Palacio 1993). This trend showed that Perrault was still very much present in the world of literature. Even more, it showed that his *Contes* were now so famous that even if totally modified, they were still recognized for what they were. They are now part of the common culture.

4. Conclusions

In the 20th century, many folklore specialists analyzed Perrault's work more seriously. They realized that even if the author kept the main structure of folktales, his work could not be considered as an exact reflection of popular tales of that time. Literary historians found literary origins for Perrault's tales. Specialists think that Italian authors, mainly Boccaccio and Straparole, might have inspired him to write The Sleeping Beauty (Soriano 1968). The main written origins for the other tales are probably the cheap booklets called in French *Bibliothèque Bleue*. Perrault mentioned them with disdain, but it is known that he read those booklets, like most of his contemporaries. After the publication of Perrault's book, *Bibliothèque*

Bleue also published his tales, but in most cases the texts did not belong to Perrault. They were modified to fit the tales that people knew, though they were still presented under Perrault's name. Then Perrault's fairy tales finally returned to traditional folklore. Even nowadays, many publications called *Contes de Perrault* are actually adaptations for children. They just keep the main structure of his tales, as Perrault himself did with traditional folktales. What indisputably shows Perrault's influence on folklore is the case of The Sleeping Beauty. This tale is now considered as part of folklore, though it was originally a literary tale. Through Perrault and later the Grimm brothers, it became part of popular tradition.

Before efficiently tackling folklore, specialists had to collect material for their work. This collection was compiled in the first half of the century in Europe, and after World War Two in France. The main tool for French folklorists is *Le Conte populaire français, catalogue raisonné*, from Delarue, continued after his death by Marie-Louise Tenèze (Delarue 1957, Delarue and Tenèze 1964). It is a huge collection of folktales, and from this collection Delarue raises the main question about Perrault: are the collected tales the primitive tales, which have inspired Perrault; or are the collected tales modified versions of Perrault's tales? This shows the deep influence of Perrault's tales on folklore: it is now almost impossible to determine which tales are the original ones, and which are Perrault's own. Perrault's fairy tales were distorted since their first publications, his exact texts are actually forgotten. However, his name and the main structure of his tales have known the biggest success in French literary history. No other book has been as modified, and yet as extensively published and read.

Address:
       Lydie Jean
       Koidula 9-4
       Tallinn 10125, Estonia
Tel.: +372 5612 6868
E-mail: lydiejean@gmail.com

References

Belmont, Nicole (1986) *Paroles Païennes*. Paris: Imago.
Collinet, Jean-Pierre (1981) *Introduction to the Contes de Perrault*. Paris: Folio Gallimard.
De Palacio, Jean (1993) *Les Perversions du merveilleux*. Paris: Séguier.
De Walckenaer, Charles Athanase (1826) *Lettres sur les contes de fées attribués à Perrault et sur l'origine de la féerie*. Paris: Jouaust.
Delarue, Paul (1957) *Le Conte populaire français, catalogue raisonné, tome I*. Paris: Érasme.
Delarue, Paul and Marie-Louise Tenèze (1964) *Le Conte populaire français, catalogue raisonné, tomes II & III*. Paris: Maisonneuve & Larose.
Grimm, Jacob and Wilhelm (1967) *Les Contes*. Translation by Guerne, Armel. Paris: Flammarion. (Original publication: Kinder und Hausmaerchen. Berlin, 1812.)
Perrault, Charles (1980) *Contes*. Genève: Slatkine Reprints. (Original publication: Paris, 1695–97.)
Robert, Raymonde (1982) *Le Conte de fées littéraire en France de la fin du XVIIe à la fin du XVIIIe siècle*. Nancy: Presses Universitaires de Nancy.

Soriano, Marc (1968) *Les Contes de Perrault, culture savante et traditions populaires*. Paris: Tel / Gallimard.

Soriano, Marc (1975) "Charles Perrault". In *Histoire littéraire de la France T. IV 1660–1715*, P. Abraham and R. Desné. Paris: Éditions sociales.

Storer, Mary Elisabeth (1928) *Un épisode littéraire de la fin du XVIIe siècle. La mode des contes de fées (1685–1700)*. Paris: Champion.