

The Rhetoric of *Invraisemblance*:
"Les Enchantements de l'éloquence"

by
Lewis C. Seifert

Several critics have suggested that certain prose genres in the second half of the seventeenth-century maintain an ambiguous relationship to *vraisemblance*.¹ If defined as an ideology, what Genette says is "...un corps de maximes et de préjugés qui constitue tout à la fois une vision du monde et un système de valeurs" (73), it is *vraisemblance* that is questioned by what has been called the "*petit roman*" (that is, various forms of the *nouvelle-nouvelle historique*, *nouvelle galante*, *histoire secrète*, etc.). Writers such as La Fayette and Villedieu, among others, test the generic boundaries separating fiction, the domain of the *vraisemblable*, and history, the domain of the *vrai*, by blending the two into the *nouvelle historique*. Hence, with the general disfavor of both the official histories and the *romans héroïques* after about 1650, the *nouvelle* offered an expanded definition of *vraisemblance*.

Now the seventeenth-century fairy tale, although still largely unknown,² is part of this rewriting, or redefining, of the limits of *vraisemblance*. In the fairy tales written by women (the "*conteuses*": Aulnoy, Auneuil, Bernard, Durand, La Force, Lhéritier, and Murat) between 1690 and 1710, the form of the *conte de fées* is constructed to resemble certain conventions of the *nouvelle historique* (a form that is not nearly as characteristic of the contemporary fairy tales written by men);³ and one particular rewriting of literary *vraisemblance* is evident when the omniscient narrator insistently points out the tale's *merveilleux*. By emphasizing the abundance of fairy magic in the narratives to the point of poking fun at it, the narrator exposes the *invraisemblance* of the plot. Since the term "*invraisemblance*" has two meanings in seventeenth-century usage—to indicate that which is not probable or

realistic, but also that which is not ethical or moral (Genette 72), the narrator's highlighting of the tale's improbability could ambiguously also be a denunciation of the plot's "immorality." However, similar to the fable, the seventeenth-century *conte de fées* adheres, at least formally, to the contemporary ideal of "plaire et instruire" by making the narrative's allegorical "meaning" explicit in the final *moralité*. Following the example of the fable, the "pleasing" *invraisemblance* of the tale supports the "instructive" *vraisemblance* of its *moralité*. But when the *conteuses'* narratives subvert their own *invraisemblance* by highlighting it, what sort of *vraisemblance* does the fairy-tale plot then illustrate through its exemplary characters? To explore some of the consequences of the *conteuses'* rhetoric of *invraisemblance*, I will examine Marie-Jeanne Lhéritier de Villandon's "Les Enchantements de l'éloquence ou les effets de la douceur," (1696) one of the most explicitly self-referential of these tales.

Unlike the heroines in the best known fairy tales, Blanche, the heroine in Lhéritier's tale, is an active character who becomes the *exemplum* by which the narrative demonstrates its *moralité*: that "Doux et courtois langage/Vaut mieux que riche héritage" (240). Blanche is the extraordinarily beautiful daughter of an impoverished marquis who marries a bourgeois widow for her wealth. Blanche's stepmother also has a daughter, Alix, the antithesis of the heroine, "...un monstre en laideur aussi bien qu'en grossièreté (242). True to the fairy-tale stereotype, the stepmother is jealous of Blanche's overshadowing beauty and social grace, and so she fills her stepdaughter's day with menial tasks and refuses to give her clothes that might show off her beauty. In spite of these hardships, Blanche's innate beauty—her physical and intellectual *douceur* (a word which the text uses obsessively to describe her)—shines through and even blossoms. The most important trait of this beauty is her "natural" eloquence, which she cultivates even further by reading novels. One day, while walking through a dangerous stretch of woods to fetch some water, she is mistakenly shot with an arrow by a prince hunting a boar. The

innocent victim charms the hunter with the *douceur* and the *politesse* of her speech and insists on returning home alone to recuperate. The prince, however, sends Dulcicula, one of his fairy godmothers, to heal Blanche. When the fairy meets Blanche, she, too, is charmed by the *douceur* of her speech and touches her with a magic wand to make her "...toujours plus que jamais douce, aimable, bienfaisante, et d'avoir la plus belle voix du monde" (258). When the fairy encounters Alix, she is shocked by her rudeness and so gives her the "gift" of being "...toujours emportée, désagréable et malfaisante." The next day, Blanche is completely healed and returns to the forest to fetch more water for her stepmother. At the fountain, she meets a beautifully-dressed woman who asks for a drink of water. When Blanche obligingly pours her some and charms her with her conversation, the woman, who is actually Eloquentia nativa, another fairy, rewards her with a gift which guarantees that "...il sortirait de sa bouche des perles, des diamants, des rubis et des émeraudes chaque fois qu'elle ferait un sens fini en parlant..." (260). Blanche returns home and astonishes her stepmother with the jewels that pour from her mouth. Immediately, the stepmother urges Alix to go to the fountain and to wait for a richly-dressed woman so she can receive the same gift. When only an old peasant woman (who, of course, is Eloquentia nativa) appears and asks to use her pitcher, Alix flies into a fury prompting the fairy to endow her with the gift "...ou plutôt la punition, qu'à chaque mot qu'elle dirait il sortirait de sa bouche des crapauds, des serpents, et des araignées, et d'autres vilains animaux dont le venin fait frémir tout le monde" (263). Meanwhile, Blanche attracts a considerable audience of people wanting to hear (and watch) her speak. Finally, the prince returns with Eloquentia nativa to ask for her hand in marriage. While Blanche leaves for the prince's court and a life of happiness "ever after," Alix flees her mother's disgust and dies a miserable death under a bush.

Obviously, Blanche's most important quality is the *douceur* of her speech. It is this "natural" eloquence that distinguishes her from her stepsister Alix and for

which she is rewarded by the two fairies. Yet, underpinning her linguistic seductiveness is an ambiguity between parodic and serious intertextual references. The tale shows an ambivalence toward the rhetorical traditions it allegorizes through *Dulcidula* and *Eloquentia nativa*, the two fairies. As Marc Fumaroli has shown,⁴ on one level, *Dulcicula*'s and *Eloquentia nativa*'s names reflect an obvious parody of pedantry.⁵ The name "*Dulcicula*" imitates a "decadent" form of Latin (with the *-ula* suffix) ("*Les Enchantements*" 177, n. 43), and it is thus an example of the text's historically-informed play on its signifiers. Similarly, the narrator explicitly comments on the name "*Eloquentia nativa*" in an aside to her *dédicataire*:

Ce nom paraîtra à quelques gens aussi étrange qu'un nom grec; cependant, charmante Duchesse, vous voyez bien qu'il est très latin; mais latin ou grec, cela ne fait rien, c'est ce nom bourru que s'appelait la fée dont il s'agit et il ne faut pas s'en étonner: toutes les fées avaient toujours des noms hétéroclites (260).

On another level, however, the comic of the fairies' names is not their only function in the tale. Since *Dulcicula* and *Eloquentia nativa* bestow gifts on her, *Blanche*'s own eloquence becomes an extension of the ideals incarnated by her benefactors. But then these positive qualities represented by the fairies would seem to be in tension with the parodic function of their names. Yet I would like to suggest that the comic undercutting of these names is part of the tale's rhetoric of *invraisemblance* in which a pedantic and largely masculine tradition of eloquence is subverted in order to create a feminine rhetoric, the imagining of *Blanche*'s different relation to language.

Part of this rhetoric is evident in *Dulcicula*'s name, which lexically recalls the medieval courtly ideal of *dulcedo*, "good manners" and/or "nobility of character" (Bezzola, 53); and on more than one occasion *Blanche*'s speech upholds these qualities (as when she responds to *Eloquentia nativa*'s request for a drink with a self-

effacing, apologetic modesty: "J'ai bien de la confusion, Madame, répondit agréablement Blanche, de ne pouvoir vous en présenter que dans ce vase que est fort peu commode pour cela" [259]). As Fumaroli indicates "Dulcicula" is perhaps also reminiscent of two rhetorical ideals of *douceur*—*suavitas* and *effoeminatio*. In the erudite tradition of rhetoric, the *suavitas* of eloquence, also called the "*style moyen*" (*medium genus* or *temperatus stylus*), is the prized "sweetness" of oratory that is opposed to the *vehementia* of expression. Most rhetoricians insist on the necessity of *judicium*, the good balance between *suavitas* and *vehementia*, so as to avoid the excessive "sweetness" or "femininity" of language, *effoeminatio* (*L'Age de l'éloquence* 54). In the seventeenth-century, however, the *modernes* valorized the *effoeminatio* of eloquence while imitating what they perceived as women's "natural" link to language ("Les Enchantements" 158-59). In Lhéritier's tale this "feminization" takes on special significance since it is the heroine who incarnates both this *effoeminatio*, the "modernist" ideal, and *suavitas*, the more conventional ideal of *douceur*. The most potentially subversive aspect of the heroine's incarnation of this *douceur*, however, is the fact that the *effoeminatio* in this ideal of eloquence is doubly "feminized." The "feminine" ideal constructed by "modernist" men becomes the heroine's rhetoric.

Another side of Blanche's eloquence is suggested by *Eloquentia nativa*. By her name and her physical presence in the narrative, this fairy embodies the "natural" eloquence which Blanche displays throughout the tale. *Eloquentia nativa* reflects the Ciceronian ideal of *neglegentia diligens*, an eloquence seeking to give the impression of being naturally spontaneously elegant. Even the fairy's physical appearance illustrates this natural beauty: "[elle] n'était pas moins belle avec une simple parure que sous les plus brillants ornements. Au contraire quand elle mettait des ajustements affectés, cela offusquait sa beauté" (262). As a metonymic extension of Blanche's "natural" *douceur*, *Eloquentia nativa* bestows on her the gift of producing pearls, diamonds, rubies, and emeralds every time she

makes a "*sens fini*" while speaking. The "*sens fini*" reflects yet another rhetorical ideal, the *style coupé*, which in the Senecan stylistic tradition of the *humile genus* represents the "virile" force of speech in opposition to the Ciceronian period (Croll, 87). In fact, after receiving her gift from *Eloquentia nativa*, Blanche develops an affinity for the *style coupé*, as the narrator jokingly indicates: "...quoiqu'elle ne fût point intéressée, insensiblement elle prit l'habitude de parler d'un style coupé" (261).

Now in the course of the seventeenth-century the *style coupé* came to be associated with "Attic" prose, a less oratorical style imitating the simplicity and brevity of conversation (Croll, 79). Yet, in addition to this ideal of polite conversation, Blanche's "natural" eloquence maintains the force which the *style coupé* originally designated, for, the *neglegentia diligens* and *style coupé* of her speech serve to defend the aristocratic order that is threatened by her father's weakness and his marriage to the bourgeois widow at the beginning of the tale. For instance, the narrator consistently codes the stepmother and her daughter as the bourgeois antithesis to Blanche's superlative aristocratic example, as when she exposes the widow's motives for marrying the marquis:

...il n'est presque pas possible de voir deux personnes plus populaires et plus rustiques qu'elles étaient. Dans ce caractère. elles ne laissaient pas d'être toutes deux remplies d'une ambition outrée, mais mal entendue: elles avaient des idées si ridicules qu'elles faisaient cent extravagances où l'on voyait à découvert les égarements que leur faste et leur vanité leur inspiraient.

Avec ces dispositions, il est aisé de juger que le père de Blanche, qui portait le titre de marquis, fut écouté de la veuve avec joie, et que l'envie d'avoir un grand nom lui fit faire le mariage en fort peu de jours (241).

Furthermore, in contrast with Blanche's "natural" beauty, the narrator indicates that Alix, "...toute couverte d'or et de pierreries, et avec une coiffure la plus étudiée, faisait peur à tous ceux qui la regardaient; car l'excès de sa parure ne la rendait que plus laide et de plus mauvais air" (244). Against this bourgeois threat, Blanche's "natural" *douceur* reaffirms the legitimacy of noble birth. As a result of reading novels *en cachette*, the only pleasure her stepmother would allow her, the narrator states that:

...cette belle fille joignit en peu de temps une politesse achevée à sa douceur naturelle: on ne peut pas s'exprimer avec plus d'agrément et plus de justesse qu'elle faisait, soit par le commerce qu'elle eut avec les productions de l'esprit, soit par quelque autre raison. Alix ni sa mère n'envièrent point ces nouveaux avantages; elles étaient trop grossières pour sentir la délicatesse de ce qu'elles lui entendaient dire; ainsi elle continuèrent seulement d'être blessées de ses agréments personnels, ...(248).

The stepmother and stepsister, thus, are not endowed with the "natural," aristocratic discernment necessary to appreciate the heroine's qualities. But with the force of its *style coupé*, Blanche's eloquent *douceur*, which is "natural" and spontaneous like the ideal of *neglegentia diligens*, proves the legitimacy of the nobility and the absurd avarice of the bourgeoisie. Rather than the fear and disgust elicited by the gold and jewels of Alix's *toilette*, Blanche's *style coupé* produces pearls, diamonds, rubies, and emeralds that fill all those who see her with amazement:

...les choses brillantes qui sortaient de sa bouche attiraient encore plus de monde que celles qui sortent de la bouche de Mr de ***, toutes belles qu'elles sont. Ce peuple avait raison: n'était-il pas bien plus agréable de voir sortir des pierres

précieuses d'une belle petite bouche comme celle de Blanche qu'il ne l'était de voir sortir des éclairs de la grande bouche de cet orateur tonnante qui était cependant si couru des Athéniens (264).

The first part of this passage marks the aristocratic heroine's victory over the bourgeois antagonists, then the narrator enjoins her readers to see the superiority of Blanche's "*pierres précieuses*" over the eloquence of the two anonymous male orators. The product, so to speak, of her eloquence is equated with her jewels, a metaphor that, earlier in the century, was a *lieu commun* for describing the polite refinement of the mythic *précieuse* (Lathuillère, 243-44). Yet, the jewels that flow from Blanche's mouth are also an indication of the force of her *style coupé*. Not only do the pearls, diamonds, rubies, and emeralds attract hoards of people, they also valorize their creator, the female orator, over the two men to whom she is compared. Moreover, Blanche's difference from these orators is most apparent in the contradictory traditions which compose her eloquence. With the *douceur* of her speech—that is, the *suavitas* (*medium genus*) and *effoeminatio* which are opposed to the vehemence (*vehementia*) of expression, Blanche combines the *style coupé*, the "virile" force which allows her to "speak" jewels and thereby to reassert the authority of the aristocratic order. The apparent contradiction of her eloquence—the combination of her *douceur* with the force of her *style coupé* (which is also the conjunction of two different rhetorical *genera* or "characters": the *medium genus* and the *humile genus*)⁶—is precisely the difference of Blanche's rhetoric. With her "feminine" *douceur* (her *effoeminatio*), Blanche uses an eloquence that sets her apart as a woman, but with her "masculine" *style coupé*, she is able to reassert her social standing—something she could not have done otherwise.

In the eyes of the erudite tradition of rhetoric, Blanche's eloquence is itself *invraisemblable* since it is composed of several antithetical traditions. However, her implausible eloquence is framed and supported by

the tale's larger rhetoric of *invraisemblance*, the narrative's self-conscious adherence to and departure from a number of conventions of the *conte de fées* and the *nouvelle historique*. Between the tale's self-definition as a *conte de fées* and as a *nouvelle historique*, there is an ambivalence that is characteristic of most of the narrator's commentaries on her narrative. In the tale's temporal setting, the narrator alternates between an indefinite past of the fairy tale's "once upon a time" setting and a recent, identifiable past of the *nouvelle historique*.⁷ At the very beginning of the tale, the narrator uses the conventional time frame of the *conte de fées* to exploit its comic potential:

Dans le temps où il y avait en France des fées, des ogres, des esprits follets et d'autres fantômes de cette espèce (il est difficile de le marquer, ce temps-là, mais il n'importe), il y avait un gentilhomme de grande considération qui aimait passionnément sa femme (et c'est ce qui fait encore que je ne puis deviner quel temps c'était) (240).

Acting as an historian, the narrator interrupts her narration to show the impossibility of pinpointing the tale's setting. And in the second aside, the narrator jokingly refers to the *gentilhomme's* fidelity to indicate the tale's mysterious temporal setting (as well as to make a "feminist" statement about the infidelity of contemporary men, of course). Thus, while beginning the traditional narration as a *conteuse*, the narrator immediately also approaches the tale as an *historienne* attempting to delimit the temporal reality of a setting she has posited as fictive. A similar contradiction occurs a few paragraphs later when the narrator refers to the originary *conteurs'* descriptions of Blanche's extraordinary qualities:

Si je voulais, Madame, vous conter cette histoire entièrement dans les termes que les conteurs de Provence l'ont apprise à nos grands-mères, je vous dirais mille particularités

étonnantes de l'adresse de Blanche; mais il est inutile; je vous dirai seulement que par une docilité admirable, bien rare dans une si belle personne, elle avait la complaisance de s'employer à tous les travaux désagréables que sa belle-mère lui prescrivait; que Blanche mettait tout ce qu'elle touchait dans tout son lustre, et que jamais personne n'avait su si bien qu'elle godronner des fraises et dresser des collets montés (242-43).

As a *conteuse* citing her link to a long line of *conteurs*, the narrator reemphasizes the mysterious, fictive time frame; yet in the same moment, she situates Blanche in a specific historical period by mentioning her ability to "...godronner des fraises et dresser des collets montés." The heroine's *fraises* and *collets montés*, the multi-layered collars of sixteenth- and early seventeenth-century garb, place her in a recent past that contradicts the ancient storytelling tradition to which the narrator lays claim. The recent past of these details, a setting linking the narrative to the *nouvelle*, interrupts the indefinite past of the tale told by the "*conteurs de Provence*." In the end, these and other interventions by the narrator create a certain undecidability in the tale's temporal setting. The plot is set neither completely in the fairy tale's mythic past nor entirely in the *nouvelles*'s specified, recent past.

The tale's ambivalent status is also manifested in those instances where the narrator consciously codes herself as both a storyteller and as an historian. At the beginning and the end of the tale, the narrator defends the moral utility of her narrative. In the opening remarks to her *dédicataire*, for example, she uses the conventional flattery of her addressee as a means of proving that fairy tales can be of moral benefit to their readers:

Vous voulez donc, belle Duchesse, interrompre pour quelques moments vos occupations sérieuses et savantes pour écouter une de ces fables gauloises qui viennent apparemment en

droite ligne des conteurs ou troubadours de Provence, si célèbres autrefois. Je sais que les esprits aussi grands et aussi bien faits que le vôtre ne négligent rien; qu'ils trouvent dans les moindres bagatelles des sujets de réflexions importantes que tout le monde n'est pas capable d'y découvrir; et je ne puis même m'empêcher de croire que vous en ferez une dès l'abord. Vous vous étonnerez sans doute, vous que la science la plus profonde n'a jamais étonnée, que ces contes, tout incroyables qu'ils sont, soient venus d'âge en âge jusqu'à nous, sans qu'on se soit donné le soin de les écrire...(239).

Not only does the conventional, if not parodic, flattery force the *dédicataire* to recognize the serious side of fairy tales, it also suggests that she too will soon write a *bagatelle* comparable to the one about to be told. To reiterate the pedagogical usefulness of this tale, the narrator describes the *conteuse* from whom she first heard the *conte* and her motives for telling it:

Une dame très instruite des antiquités grecques et romaines, et encore plus savante dans les antiquités gauloises, m'a fait ce conte quand j'étais enfant, pour m'imprimer dans l'esprit que les honnêtetés n'ont jamais fait tort à personne, ou, pour parler comme le vieux proverbe, que *beau parler n'écorche point langue*, et que souvent,

Doux et courtois langage
Vaut mieux que riche héritage.

Elle s'efforçait de me prouver la vérité de cette maxime fort sensée, quoique gothique, par l'histoire très merveilleuse que je vais vous raconter (239-40).

As she introduces the *moralité* the narrative is supposed to illustrate, the narrator also advances that this tale has a moral value equal, and perhaps even superior, to the ancient *fable*. (Indeed, she suggests this explicitly at the very end of the tale: "Contes pour contes, il me paraît que ceux de l'antiquité gauloise valent bien à

peu près ceux de l'antiquité grecque; et les fées ne sont pas moins en droit de faire des prodiges que les dieux de la Fable" [265].) Yet, at the same time as showing herself to be a *conteuse* of "modernist" tales from the "*antiquités gauloises*," the narrator inscribes herself as an historian who recounts events from a supposedly objective viewpoint. For instance, the narrator entertains this pretense, when she interrupts the narrative to comment on the defense the marquis makes of Blanche's novels after her stepmother's scolding for reading them:

Vous trouverez peut-être, Madame, que le père de Blanche était un peu trop prévenu pour les romans, vous qui ne vous occupez que des lectures sublimes; je ne sais pas ce que vous en penserez, mais je ne vous dirai pas non plus ce que j'en pense, je raconte seulement ce que porte ma chronique: je suis historienne, et une historienne, aussi bien qu'un historien, ne doit point prendre de parti. Ne badinez pas, je vous prie, sur ces réflexions, car si vous alliez perdre votre sérieux, vous me feriez perdre le mien aussi. Cependant, j'en ai bien besoin pour avoir la force de vous raconter tranquillement la suite de cette surprenante histoire (248).

Claiming to be an historian—and poking fun at her own masquerade, the narrator not only ridicules the status of *nouvelle* she gives to her fairy-tale narrative but also derides the stance of historical objectivity the narrator in the *nouvelle historique* conventionally adopts. The subversive comic of this and all of the narrator's extradiegetic commentaries on the plot is part of the tale's imitation of a *salon* game. The published seventeenth-century fairy tales emulated one of the *jeux d'esprit*, the oral games of improvisation that were part of *salon* activities (Baader, 226-27),⁸ and the narrator's commentaries on her text seek to reproduce the oral spontaneity of this *salon* storytelling. But in Lhéritier's tale, the narrator uses this polite, *mondain* exterior to subversive ends. Her joking commentaries become a *jeu* of a different sort—the tale's rhetoric of

invraisemblance—whereby the woman writer insists on her equality with men and creates a new space within the structure of the fairy tale for the heroine's *exemplum*.

By mimicking both the *historienne* and the *conteuse*, the narrator shows that her tale is neither a *nouvelle historique* nor a conventional *conte de fées*, but a narrative where elements of both genres exist in tension with each other. It is a tale where this tension, the narrator's rhetoric of *invraisemblance*, rewrites phallogocentric structures to include the active heroine. In one of the most common of fairy-tale paradigms, the textuality of the narrative is determined by the sexuality of the hero: a major part of the plot is constructed around the hero's desire and quest for his female sexual object. In this structure, the heroine becomes the passive, submissive object of exchange among the male characters. Blanche's conduct in "Les Enchantements de l'éloquence," although validated by the narrator's extra-diegetic commentaries, does not reverse this male-dominated structure since the prince pursues her and eventually marries her in the tale's utopian ending. And yet, the very fact that the narrator insists on Blanche's exemplary eloquence as the tale's moral "lesson" reduces the narrative significance of her marriage to the prince. In fact, rather than serving as a reward for her passivity and the hero's activity, this marriage closure can be read as the recompense for Blanche's active eloquence as well as the prince's marginal pursuit of his object. The critical difference of this tale's ending is even more apparent if compared to that of a contemporary tale based on the same folklore motif (tale-type 480)—"Les Fées" by Perrault, who was Lhéritier's uncle.⁹ In this tale, the unnamed heroine, who is given the gift of "speaking" flowers and jewels by a fairy for her *honnêteté* (and not explicitly for her eloquence), charms a prince with her mercantile worth. And at the end of the tale, when the prince finds her fleeing her stepmother:

Le fils du roi, qui vit sortir de sa bouche cinq ou six Perles, et autant de Diamants, la pria de lui dire d'où cela lui venait. Elle lui conta toute son aventure. Le fils du roi en devint amoureux, et considérant qu'un tel don valait mieux que tout ce qu'on pouvait donner en mariage à un autre, l'emmena au Palais du Roi son père, où il l'épousa (149).

In contrast with Blanche's seduction of her prince with the "...tour dont elle parlait" (252), Perrault's heroine enchants the "*fils du Roi*" with her monetary worth ("...un tel don valait mieux que tout ce qu'on pouvait donner en mariage à un autre"). Moreover, as Louis Marin has pointed out, this heroine is a literal and figural object of exchange between two men—her father (whom she physically and morally incarnates: "[elle] état le vrai portrait de son Père pour la douceur et pour l'honnêteté..." [147]) and the prince (Marin, 317-18). In Lhéritier's tale, Blanche does not completely break the circuit of exchange of women among men, but the narrator's valorization of her heroine's activity exceeds the bounds of the fairy tale thereby rewriting its *vraisemblances*. Blanche's eloquence inscribes feminine activity within a structure that ordinarily would confine the heroine to passivity and silence.

Beyond this rewriting of the fairy-tale structures, I would also like to suggest that the tension between the conventions of the *nouvelle historique* and the *conte de fées* in "Les Enchantements de l'éloquence" is a deliberate confusion which allows this tale to be read as a utopian history of sorts. The intermittent historical details as well as the narrator's parody of an historian's discourse enclose the fairy tale's utopian time and space within a recent past that pretends to be verifiable. Blanche's example then becomes the imagining of a different history for women, just as the *nouvelle historique* imagines the secret causes ignored by the official histories it demythologizes. Nonetheless, like all utopias, Lhéritier's has its limits. The inscription of feminine activity is reserved for the

aristocratic woman whom Blanche epitomizes with the "natural" *douceur* of her eloquence. Furthermore, her exemplary activity reinstates an endangered aristocratic order resembling that of the *noblesse d'épée* at the end of the seventeenth-century. On one level, her eloquence, too, does not escape the constraints of the patriarchal symbolic since it creates a different, "feminine" rhetoric from several masculine traditions. But in this connection, Blanche's eloquence poses questions that are central to the current discussion in feminism about women's relation to language. From the Anglo-American feminists' ideal of a "neutral" language for both sexes to the French feminists' utopian theorizations of a *parler-femme* or an *écriture féminine*, feminist theorists have explored the social and psychic components of women's subjection to what Lacan calls the Name-of-the-Father, language as women's (and men's) inscription into patriarchy.¹⁰ What Blanche's rhetoric does is to contradict this symbolic system from within it (the only relation she can have to language) exposing its phallogentric bias. With all its inherent limits, Blanche's eloquence is nevertheless a rhetoric of resistance that imagines women's different relation to language through an unauthorized, unfaithful discourse. By insisting on its own *invraisemblance*, "Les Enchantements de l'éloquence," like many of the seventeenth-century *conteuses'* tales, creates a new literary *vraisemblance* by which the aristocratic woman can represent her difference.

University of Michigan

Notes

¹One of the most famous of these is, of course, Genette's "Vraisemblance et motivation" which gave a new theoretical focus to the question of verisimilitude in texts. Other significant studies include: Micheline Cuénin, *Roman et société sous Louis XIV: Mme de*

Villedieu. 2 vols. (Paris: Champion, 1979); Erica Harth, *Ideology and Culture in Seventeenth-Century France*. (Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1983); and Marie-Thérèse Hipp, *Mythes et réalités: Enquête sur le roman et les mémoires (1660-1700)*. (Paris: Klincksieck, 1976).

²Such a negative appraisal is even evident in two of the most important studies on the *conte de fées* in this period—Robert: "...la probabilité de trouver des 'chefs d'oeuvres' n'est pas nulle, loin de là, elle est cependant considérablement diminuée" (15), and Storer: "Ceux [contes de fées] qu'ont produit les médiocres écrivains rappellent et servent à accentuer le côté de la mauvaise préciosité, qui persistait bien vivant au déclin du siècle..." (17). I myself am wary of critical categories implying artistic "quality" or "value" since, besides being highly subjective, they mask the ideological presuppositions on which they are based.

³The "*conteurs*" were Choisy, Fénelon, Le Noble, Mailly, Nodot, Perrault, and Preschac. See Robert and Storer for a general introduction to the tales of the *conteurs* and the *conteuses*.

⁴For this part of my analysis I am indebted to Fumaroli's illuminating study. As the course of my own reading will show, however, my thinking diverges considerably from his concerning the consequences of the different rhetorical traditions.

⁵Indeed, the tale's parodic function is perhaps even suggested in the title where the solemn and erudite "*éloquence*" is joined with the suggestion of popular magic—"*les enchantements*." Fumaroli sees in this conjunction "quelque enjouement parodique" of the titles of Latin and French treatises on rhetoric ("*Les Enchantements*," 165).

⁶As Croll (78) indicates, these two *genera* along with the *grand genus* formed a triad of rhetorical "characters" that were defined during Cicero's time as having the following effects on listeners: the *humile*

genus was for teaching or telling; the *medium genus* for delighting or giving pleasure; and the *grande genus* for rousing or exciting to action. Blanche thus combines two different *genera*, each with different rhetorical functions, in her eloquence.

⁷In contrast with the *roman héroïque* whose plot is usually set in ancient times, the *nouvelle* often portrays events set in "recent times"—the sixteenth century or early seventeenth century. For a concise discussion of this and other questions pertaining to the definition of the *nouvelle*, see Kibédi Varga.

⁸See Baader (especially 44-61) for a more general discussion of the *salons' jeux d'esprit*.

⁹See Fumaroli ("Les Enchantements") for a detailed comparison of the differences between the plots of these two tales. Historical data seems to indicate that Lhéritier and Perrault wrote their respective tales within weeks or months of each other and in full cognizance of the other's text (Soriano, 136). This intertextual "link" between the uncle and the niece is also apparent in the last four verses of Perrault's "Peau-d'Ane" reproduced in the dedicatory introduction to "Les Enchantements de l'éloquence" and in the *madrigal* by Lhéritier in the preface to the *Contes en vers*. This intertextuality is strikingly evidenced at the end of this tale when the narrator describes Alix's death: "Enfin, après avoir bien souffert, elle mourut de misère *au coin d'un buisson*, pendant que Blanche triomphait" (265). The italics emphasize the paradigmatic difference of Lhéritier's formulation from Perrault's ("...la malheureuse, après avoir bien couru sans trouver personne qui voulût la recevoir, alla mourir au coin d'un bois" [149]) and suggests that the *conteuse's* text distances itself from Perrault's silencing of the heroine's voice and activity.

¹⁰For a concise introduction to feminist critical theory, see Moi; and for a summary of the diverging trends in Anglo-American and French feminist thought, see Stanton.

Works Cited or Consulted

- Baader, Ranate. *Dames de Lettres. Autorinnen des preziösen, hocharistokratischen und "modernen" Salons (1640-1698): Mlle de Scudéry - Mlle de Montpensier - Mme d'Aulnoy* (Stuttgart: Metzler, 1986).
- Bezzola, Reto R. *Les Origines et la formation de la littérature courtoise en Occident (500-1200). 2^e partie. La Société féodale et la transformation de la littérature de cour* (Genève and Paris: Slatkine and Champion, 1984).
- Croll, Morris W. *Rhetoric, Style, and Rhythm. Essays by Morris W. Croll*. Ed. Patrick, J. Max and Robert O. Evans (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1966).
- Fumaroli, Marc. *L'Age de l'éloquence. Rhétorique et 'res literaria' de la Renaissance au seuil de l'époque classique* (Genève: Droz, 1980).
- _____. "Les Enchantements de l'éloquence: "Les Fées de Charles Perrault ou De la littérature." in *Le Statut de la littérature: mélanges offerts à Paul Bénichou*. Ed. Marc Fumaroli (Genève: Droz, 1982): 153-86.
- Genette, Gérard. "Vraisemblance et motivation." in *Figures II* (Paris: Seuil, 1969) 71-99.
- Kibédi Varga, Aron. "Pour une définition de la nouvelle à l'époque classique." *Cahiers de l'Association Internationale d'Etudes Françaises*. XVIII (1966): 53-65.
- Lathuillère, Roger. *La Préciosité. Etude historique et linguistique*. Tome I. *La Position du problème—Les*

Origines. "Publications romanes et françaises" LXXXVII (Genève: Droz, 1966).

Lhéritier de Villandon, Marie-Jeanne. "Les Enchantements de l'éloquence ou les effets de la douceur. Nouvelle" (1696) in *Contes de Perrault*. Ed. Gilbert Rouger (Paris: Garnier, 1967) 239-65.

Marin, Louis. "Essai d'analyse structurale d'un conte de Perrault: *Les Fées*." in *Essais sémiologiques*. "Collection d'esthétique" 11 (Paris: Klincksieck, 1971) 296-318.

Moi, Toril. *Sexual/Textual Politics. Feminist Literary Theory*. "New Accents" (New York: Methuen, 1985).

Robert, Raymonde. *Le Conte de fées littéraire en France de la fin du XVII^e à la fin du XVIII^e siècle* (Nancy: Presses universitaires de Nancy, 1982).

Soriano, Marc. *Les contes de Perrault. Culture savante et traditions populaires*. Collection "Tel" 1969. (Paris: Gallimard, 1977).

Stanton, Domna C. "Language and Revolution: the Franco-American Dis-Connection" in *The Future of Difference*. Ed. Eisenstein, Hester and Alice Jardine (Boston: G. K. Hall, 1980) 73-87.

Storer, Mary Elizabeth. *Un Episode littéraire de la fin du XVII^e siècle. La Mode des contes de fées (1685-1700)*. 1928 (Genève: Slatkine Reprints, 1972).