

Antithesis and Ideology in Perrault's "Riquet à la houppe"

by
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Après cela il est aisé à juger si le Prince des Philosophes a eu raison de comparer la femme à la Matière première, parce qu'elle désire toujours changer de formes, et quoiqu'elle en ait une très parfaite, qu'elle garde une inclination générale pour toutes les autres.

Jacques du Bosc, *L'honneste femme*

At first glance, woman's inconstancy alluded to by the "feminist" writer Jacques du Bosc in his 1633 text, *L'honneste femme*, seems to be confirmed by the two versions of the literary fairy tale "Riquet à la houppe."¹ In both the first version published in 1696 by Catherine Bernard, and the second published in 1697 by Charles Perrault, the heroine indeed undergoes metamorphoses which alter the shape of her character. Both tales relate how the perfectly beautiful but stupid heroine becomes intelligent thanks to the ugly Riquet's supernatural powers, which, in Perrault's tale, are not easily distinguished from the power of love. To be sure, Perrault's heroine, presented as "Matière première" who desires form or intellect,

J'aimerais mieux . . . être aussi laide que vous et
avoir de l'esprit, que d'avoir de la beauté comme
j'en ai, et être bête autant que je le suis (183)

reflects the "Prince des Philosophes" conception of woman.² This unnamed heroine brings to mind Pygmalion's perfect statue before it is endowed with life, that is, with intelligence, language, a name. Indeed, Perrault's rewriting of the Pygmalion myth substitutes the princess' portrait, which originally elicits Riquet's love, for the sculptor's

statue, and replaces Venus by a fairy. While it is true that Riquet works magic in both tales, only in Perrault's tale does love itself possess its proverbial magic power. Nonetheless, this love will prove to be an eminently reasonable one, subservient to the control of the rational intellect.

Now in order to illustrate his particular version of love's beneficial effects, Perrault takes certain liberties with the story's plot. Most critical analyses explain what are defined as plot inconsistencies in Perrault's "Riquet" by referring to Bernard's earlier version of the same tale. According to critical consensus, Perrault's rendition, while generally faithful to Bernard's model, nevertheless alters certain details of the story while neglecting to adapt others.³ However, until Louis Marin's recent analysis, the resulting illogicalities of plot were interpreted thematically with little or no attention given to the structural logic of the tale. Taking into account both thematic and structural elements, this paper examines Perrault's "Riquet" and shows how its oft-praised "classic" style practices a kind of seduction by symmetry which, despite inconsistencies, charms the reader into complicity with a very rational love story. This seductive symmetry will prove to be grounded in antitheses, which, I will suggest, are not ideologically innocent.

As Marin has pointed out, Perrault's "Riquet" is based on the ideological opposition between intelligence and beauty, a dichotomy I refer to as the mind-matter antithesis. Like preceding critics, Marin comments on an initial lack of symmetry: two queens in neighboring kingdoms give birth several years apart from each other, however, the first queen has only one son, the intelligent but ugly Riquet, whereas the second queen has two daughters. The first daughter reverses Riquet's characteristics in that she is beautiful but stupid and can endow her loved one with beauty, while the second is Riquet's female double, minus his power to render his loved one intelligent; either the first queen needs another son or the second queen needs one less daughter. Marin shows how structural symmetry is accomplished by focusing on two story elements: Riquet's name and the

underground kitchen scene where, after the heroine has enjoyed Riquet's gift of intelligence for one year, he asks her to marry him. First of all, Riquet's name, "Riquet à la houppe," situates him on the borderline between humanity and animality; like the hoopoe bird, his head sports a tuft of feathers. But more importantly, the legend of Terseus, who was transformed into a hoopoe for his rape of Philomela, is inscribed in Riquet's tuft; it is a sign suggesting that Riquet bears a trace of (or is capable of) Terseus' crime inspired by erotic desire. The kitchen scene is important because it effects the reconciliation of Eros and Logos; it represents the sublimation of violent erotic desire which is transformed into the institution of marriage. The episode of the underground kitchen coincides with the heroine's acceptance of Riquet's marriage offer and his subsequent transformation in her eyes. Thus the restored harmony between Eros and Logos, beauty and intelligence, is reflected in the tale's final symmetry (Marin, 162-74). Clearly, symmetry will be achieved at the tale's closure, but meanwhile, Perrault's narrative maneuvers toward this symmetrical ending constitute a story in and of themselves. If indeed one may say that the Terseus legend is inscribed in Riquet's bird-like tuft of hair, one might also suggest that the Aristotelian male and female principles which inform the *querelle des femmes* are inscribed in the antithetical figures that dominate Perrault's tale. For, as we shall see, the tradition of Renaissance Aristotelianism which associated men with form and women with matter is reflected not only in the feminist and anti-feminist texts of the first part of the seventeenth century,⁴ witness the text of Du Bosc, but also in the fairy tales of Perrault. Upon analysis, Perrault's seductive symmetry will prove to carry a gender-coded ideological message that opposes mind as male to matter as female.

As already stated, critics agree that Perrault's "Riquet" is marked by certain incoherent elements. To be sure, two characters, the younger daughter and Riquet's rival, are at one point off-handedly dropped from the narrative. However, if one examines the dominant tale antithesis, which not only generates the tale but also unifies it in the

manner of a leitmotif, these deigetic inconsistencies can be understood as necessary to the tale's structural *and* moral integrity; they will prove to result from the narrator's use of antithesis as a form of persuasion, even when this practice impinges on the "rights" of characters, that is, their continued existence in the story. This global antithesis is built upon a series of lesser oppositions and is assured by the fairy who appears at the tale's very beginning and acts as the agent of symmetry. First of all, Riquet himself is presented as possessing antithetical qualities. Even though he is "laid et . . . mal fait," the fairy presiding at his birth assures that he will have "beaucoup d'esprit" and that he will be able to transmit this gift to his loved one. However, this original opposition is a less than perfect antithesis, that is, it does not present a balanced opposition. For, although Riquet's dual nature is suggested, his contradictory properties are subdued in order to emphasize his intellectual mastery: "il avait dans toutes ses actions je ne sais quoi de sispirituel qu'on en était charmé" (181). The contiguous description of Riquet's mother not only functions to tie her irremediably with the imperfection of matter, but since it overlaps with Riquet's characterization, it also serves to contrastively valorize her son's superior faculties; the ugly Riquet is linked to bestiality through the fault of his mother, and yet this very tie acts to highlight the outstanding quality of his intelligence, which derives from the fairy. Riquet's queen mother is defined by her biological function and by her emotive character which suggests a certain passivity associated with the inertness of matter. This queen assumes, through her affliction, responsibility for her malformed infant and thus indirectly confesses to be the source by which imperfection (ugliness) enters the world. The fairy has just assured her that her son's powers will compensate for his undesirable appearance:

Tout cela consola un peu la pauvre Reine, qui était *bien affligée* d'avoir mis au monde un si vilain marmot (181; emphasis added).

Thus the mind-matter antithesis is inscribed in the first lines of the tale. And, as we shall see, its subsequent repetitions saturate the text.

The fairy present at Riquet's birth then reappears as "la même fée" several years later in a neighboring kingdom where a second queen gives birth to two daughters, one of whom is Riquet's antithetical twin. This fairy may be conceived of as the agent of symmetry since her repeated presence serves to further symmetrize the parallel and contrasting birth events while recalling the initial mind-matter antithesis:

La même fée qui avait assisté à la naissance du petit Riquet était présente, et pour modérer la joie de la Reine, elle lui déclara que cette petite Princesse n'aurait point d'esprit, et qu'elle serait aussi stupide qu'elle était belle (181; emphasis added).

The adjective "même" suggests that the elder princess' birth in the second paragraph repeats, or is a variation on, Riquet's birth in the first paragraph. "La même fée" and her same but different gift express a kind of repetitive symmetry which Peter Brooks has referred to as "a return to and of" the text:

Repetition in all its literary manifestations may in fact work as a "binding", a binding of textual energies that allows them to be mastered by putting them into serviceable form within the energetic economy of the narrative. Serviceable form must in this case mean perceptible form: *repetition, repeat, recall, symmetry, all these returns to and returns of*, that allow us to bind one textual moment to another in terms of similarity and substitution rather than mere contiguity (Brooks, 280-300; emphasis added).

The repetition concretized by "La même fée" is not only a return of fictional event, that is, the symmetrically contrasting births and gifts, but also a repeat of ideological intent expressed by the valorized opposition mind-matter;

the "binding of textual energies" here serves to promote that ideology which affirms mind's superiority over matter. Indeed, the symmetrically antithetical representation of the elder daughter's birth is more than a journey back to the first paragraph which it repeats through inversion. It also suggests a journey that goes much further back in textual memory, one that returns to the antithetical basis of the *querelle des femmes*, which echoed Aristotle's division of nature into male and female principles, the latter being associated with matter and the former with mind (form). For it is clear that the elder daughter's essence is to be beautiful and to give beauty, whereas Riquet's essential quality is to be intelligent and to give intelligence. Ian Maclean notes that many texts of the first part of the seventeenth century accord moral qualities to their characters according to a gender polarity. Such a division based on sexual difference marks Perrault's tale, especially when one considers that the fairy's gifts, which both describe and prescribe gender-determined identities, qualify as a kind of predictive narration, understood as "A narrative in which the narration precedes the narrated in time" (Prince, 76). This predictive narration, disguised as a gift, seals both Riquet's and the princess' fate and at the same time serves the purposes of the antithetically constructed text, which may be considered the one of least surprises.⁵

Now, when the second queen learns of her first daughter's mental infirmity she is described as mortified, nonetheless, this grief is doubled by the birth of her second ugly daughter:

Cela *mortifia* beaucoup la Reine; mais elle eut quelques moments après un bien plus grand *chagrin* car la seconde fille dont elle accoucha se trouva extrêmement laide (181-82; emphasis added).

This negative emotivity born of the mother's body reflects the queen's realization that she, like the preceding queen, is the agent of matter, and as such engenders both physical and mental deformity through the respective births of her younger and elder daughters. Motherhood is thus humiliated, the afflicted first queen corresponding to the

shamed second queen. Indeed, Maclean reminds us that seventeenth-century moralists associate woman with the flesh and the devil (Maclean, 66); her enjoyment of the world's pleasures is but the mark of her imperfection. The birth event can thus be seen as the consequence of woman's love of pleasure; it serves to finalize her disgrace. I would suggest that Perrault evokes the birth on the static level of a moral abstraction, through repetitive antithetical figuration; the message emphasizes the inferiority of matter.⁶

I will now discuss what has been noted as the first story inconsistency, namely the uncommented exclusion of the younger daughter. If one considers that part of Perrault's story consists in his narrative maneuvers to keep the mind as male, matter as female antithesis inviolable, the younger's disappearance is hardly disconcerting. Because she is intelligent and female, she transgresses the initial dichotomy of male intellect and female materiality. This governing opposition nevertheless admits to subtleties as in the case of Riquet whose antithetical characteristics are a fact of his birth. The same is true for the younger daughter: even though she is a seeming anomaly according to the overall logic of the tale, she does have a provisional existence since her birth works to emphasize the superiority of mind over matter by showing that suitors prefer her intelligence to her sister's mindless beauty:

Quoique la beauté soit un grand avantage dans une jeune personne, cependant la cadette l'emportait presque toujours sur son aînée dans toutes les Compagnies. D'abord on allait du côté de la plus belle pour la voir et pour l'admirer, mais bientôt après on allait à celle qui avait le plus d'esprit pour lui entendre dire mille choses agréables; et on était étonné qu'en moins d'un quart d'heure l'aînée n'avait plus personne autour d'elle, et que tout le monde s'était rangé autour de la cadette. L'aînée, quoique fort stupide, le remarqua bien, et elle eût donné sans regret toute sa beauté pour avoir la moitié de l'esprit de sa soeur (182; emphasis added).

The younger daughter, then, underlines the original dichotomy; her function in the story is to repeat the mind-matter statement, but after she has done so, her female identity becomes problematic. Since any further elaboration of her character would destabilize the original antithesis which defines matter as female and mind as male, the narrator simply omits her since her attributes exceed the "moral" symmetry of the tale.

The second story inconsistency again shows how coherent ideological argument can foster diegetic incoherence. I am referring to the suitor who wins the elder princess' heart. The princess, whose beauty has been enhanced by intelligence after she agrees to marry Riquet within a year, attracts marriageable candidates from the neighboring kingdoms. She has difficulty in finding an equally intelligent match until one fine day . . .

. . . il en vint un si puissant, si riche, si *spirituel et si bien fait*, qu'elle ne put s'empêcher d'avoir de la bonne volonté pour lui (184; emphasis added).

This suitor is the only character who has it all from the very start. Since his perfection, "spirituel et . . . bien fait," represents a fusion or resolution of the gender-marked mind-matter dichotomy, he recalls this original opposition only to transgress it. However, transgression has its price: this would-be lover makes his *début* and disappears as promptly as the love at first sight of the heroine, that is the voice of sentiment. His peremptory dismissal is logical in that he ventures beyond the governing antithesis whose resolution, the marriage of Riquet and the elder princess, is meant to demonstrate the superiority of mind over matter. The heroine's *coup de foudre* for the ephemeral suitor literally does a vanishing act: after the princess' father demands her decision as to a future mate, she takes a stroll to reflect, when suddenly the ground gives way, along with her desire, and she is face to face with Riquet—or rather with Riquet's gallant rhetoric on love and reason.⁷ In a lengthy discourse grounded in the antithesis *avoir de l'esprit / ne pas en avoir*, Riquet's rhetoric persuades the princess that he is the superior marriage

choice. This convincing orator thus concludes his *raisonnement*:

Est-il raisonnable que *les personnes qui ont de l'esprit* soient d'une pire condition que *ceux qui n'en ont pas*? Le pouvez-vous prétendre, vous qui en avez tant, et qui avez tant souhaité d'en avoir? Mais venons au fait, s'il vous plaît. A la réserve de ma laideur a-t-il quelque chose en moi qui vous déplaît? Etes-vous mal contente de ma naissance, de mon esprit, de mon humeur, et de mes manières? "Nullement, répondit la Princesse, J'aime en vous tout ce que vous venez de me dire (186; emphasis added).

In this gallant conversation, love is obviously not an affair of the heart, rather, it is one of reasoning and language. Gone are the rights of sentiment represented by the preferred suitor: the heroine succumbs to Riquet's seductive rationality with a feeble "j'aime en vous tout ce que vous venez de me dire." Her words could reflect those of the reader, who, seduced into complicity with Perrault's symmetrically classic tale, lets discrepancies pass largely unnoticed.

The third and final discrepancy concerns the heroine's ignorance of her powers and Riquet's surprising knowledge of them. Once again, we will see how the incoherency of story coincides with the coherency of ideology. Riquet concludes his winning argument by informing the princess of her powers:

. . . sachez que *la même fée* qui au jour de ma naissance me fit le don de pouvoir rendre spirituelle la personne qu'il me plairait, vous a aussi fait le don de pouvoir rendre beau celui que vous aimerez et à qui vous voudrez bien faire cette faveur (187; emphasis added).

Jean-Pierre Collinet explains this oversight by suggesting that it derives from Bernard's model where it is a logical story element: Bernard's Riquet reasonably gives the heroine a year to make her decision since she does not

possess reciprocal powers. However, in Perrault's version, the hero could have informed the heroine of her powers at their first meeting and thus have married her without delay (Collinet, 291-92).⁸ But for this storyteller, delay is of the essence, since it assures the textual space necessary for yet another "return to and return of" the underwriting ideology. Certainly, it is a return of "la même fée," and, as such, further contains the tale within the borders traced by the *querelle*. As the agent of symmetry, the fairy acts like a centrifugal force radiating out from the tale's center and fixing all characters and events in the lines of her ideological influence. The fairy's ordering is accomplished through antithetical figuration, indeed, one might say that all of the tale's contrasting oppositions lead back to "la même fée."⁹ Since her gift-giving signals her authorial powers as the tale's ordering mechanism, she is a kind of double for the artist as creator, and is thus privy to hidden meanings (the idealistic love story is written for an active male and a passive female) and the secrets of form (antithetical figuration transmits ideology). The fairy's (or the artist's) predictive narration affixes characters to one or another side of the gender determined beauty-intelligence polarity, in such a way that her "gifts" are little more than imposed destinies. To be sure, the fate she conjures up for the protagonists is the idealistic love story, shown to be grounded in an ideology valorizing (male) mind over (female) matter. Now, from the perspective of the latter half of the seventeenth century, when *Les Malheurs de l'amour*¹⁰ dominate the literary imagination, this fairy tale of mutual love is an anachronism.¹¹ But time stands still when the moral message is front and center; thus, at the story's closure, the reader is back at the tale's beginning, that is, s/he recalls the fairy's initial prediction valorizing intelligence over beauty.

This final recall of the initial antithesis occurs when the narrator suggests the correct interpretation of his tale. Riquet has just become handsome because the princess has so willed it:

Quelques uns assurent que ce ne furent point les charmes de la Fée qui opérèrent, mais que l'amour

seul fit cette Métamorphose. *Ils disent que* la Princesse, ayant fait réflexion sur la persévérance de son Amant, sur sa discrétion, et sur toutes les bonnes qualités de son âme, et de son esprit, ne vit plus la difformité de son corps, ni la laideur de son visage ... (187; emphasis added).

The series of repetitive dichotomies which constructs the story thus culminates in this doxa-inspired ending, «Quelques uns assurent que," "Ils disent que;" mind is unquestionably superior to matter since, to paraphrase the closing *moralité*, "beauty is in the eyes (*mind*) of the beholder."¹² Repetitive contrastive symmetry lends a certain "weight" to a moral message heard as early as the tale's opening lines and reaching as far back as the antithetical male and female principles informing the *querelle des femmes*. The very last line of "Riquet" is evidence of the force of anterior narration which seals the text like a destiny:

Dès le lendemain les noces furent faites, *ainsi que Riquet à la houppe l'avait prévu, et selon les ordres qu'il avait donnés longtemps auparavant* (187; emphasis added).

Surely, this story has been told before.

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Notes

¹Ian Maclean refers to Du Bosc as a feminist writer and defines feminism as "a reassessment in woman's favour of the relative capacities of the sexes" (Preface, viii).

²The heroine's desire for "form" recalls Agnès in Molière's *L'Ecole des femmes* (V.4. 1556-59).

³The basic difference between the two tales can be summarized as follows: Bernard's tale concentrates on the inequalities and deceit of a husband-wife-lover triangle. Since only Riquet possesses powers, relations of dominance and subordination abound. Perrault's version eliminates

the lover to focus on the reciprocity between hero and heroine: both have matching powers and both fall in love.

⁴See Maclean, especially, (6-7) and (47).

⁵According to the *Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics*, Aristotle recommended antithesis as a form of satisfying expression and compared it to syllogism, "for it is by putting opposing conclusions side by side that you refute one of them" (*Rhetoric*, 3.9.8, qtd. in *Princeton ...*, 40). The idea that argument by antithesis deals with *conclusions* is very pertinent for a text based on predictive narration, where the story is told (known) before it is written.

⁶In "Théorie de la figure," Jean Cohen discusses abstraction as a property of antithesis (105-06).

⁷Most critics have neglected Riquet's important discourse which decides the heroine in his favor.

⁸Other critics who have discussed Perrault's inconsistencies include Jeanne Morgan, *Perrault's Morals for Moderns* (New York: Peter Lang, 1985) 103-07, and Jeanne Roche-Mazon, "De qui est 'Riquet à la houppe'," *Revue des deux mondes* 46 (1928): 404-36.

⁹Collinet suggests the fairy's link to symmetry when he thus describes the elder daughter's gift: "Surtout, par un effet de symétrie qui bouleverse l'économie du récit et change sa signification, elle possède, par la grâce de la même fée, le privilège de rendre beau qui lui plaira" (291).

¹⁰The author is Catherine Bernard (Paris: M. Guerout, 1687).

¹¹See Marie-Thérèse Hipp, *Mythes et réalités: Enquête sur le roman et les mémoires, 1660-1700*. (Paris: Klincksieck, 1976).

¹²While it is true in a certain sense that the heroine is blind to Riquet's physical deformity, Perrault chooses instead to emphasize the heroine's new-found deductive

reasoning. This is highlighted through her acceptance of Riquet's discourse on reasonable love (see p. 9). Thus this tale's version of the proverbial power of love differs from a less rational conception wherein "love is blind." For a different perspective see Eliante's speech in Molière's *Le Misanthrope* (II.4.711-30).

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