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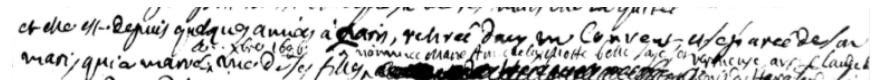
Madame d’Aulnoy’s productive confinement

VS

According to many critics today, Madame d’Aulnoy’s *contes des fées* originated in the sociable setting of her *salon*. Jack Zipes, the doyen of American fairy-tale studies, summarizes the prevailing view:

In 1685 she received permission to return to Paris, and she set up house in the rue Saint-Benoît, which became one of the most interesting literary salons of the period [...] It became customary at Mme d’Aulnoy’s salon to recite fairy tales and on festive occasions to dress up like characters from fairy tales. She herself became one of the most gifted storytellers at her salon, and eventually she published several volumes of fairy tales.¹

Archival documents cast serious doubts on this rosy picture and suggest that d’Aulnoy’s creative process was, perforce, more solitary than communal. Earlier scholars, most notably Mary Elizabeth Storer, had already highlighted the author’s references to her “solitude” in two works published in 1690, including *Histoire d’Hypolite comte de Douglas*.² In the second part of this historical romance, the eponymous hero tells “a tale not unlike those of the fairies” to the abbess of a convent in which his beloved Julie is locked up by order of her jealous husband. The abbess is so charmed by Hypolite’s story that she allows him to see and entertain Julie. This fictional scene, which marks the birth of the literary fairy tale in France, becomes even richer in the light of indications that d’Aulnoy herself spent some real time in a convent. Following earlier biographers, Storer cited a handwritten, undated note by the genealogist Charles-René d’Hozier, according to which d’Aulnoy “has been living for some years in Paris, retired in a convent and separated from her husband.” Since the husband died in August 1700, this note must have been written before that date – but more precise information needs to be sought elsewhere.



Bibliothèque nationale de France

Government correspondence and notarial records (not previously discussed in d’Aulnoy scholarship) provide additional pieces of the puzzle.³ They show that on December 10, 1686, King Louis XIV himself ordered that “la dame de la Motte d’Aulnoy” be arrested and taken to the Ursuline convent in the town of Blois – perhaps at the request of her husband, for the order stipulated that he would pay for her room and board. On February 19, 1687, the minister Seignelay informed the Lieutenant civil of Paris that d’Aulnoy had been detained because of her “bad behavior” (*mauvaise conduite*), but that the king’s intention was not to prevent her from pursuing the lawsuits she had filed against her husband: she was therefore granted access to her personal papers and permission to write to her lawyers and relatives. On July 13, 1687, the order was given to

Information

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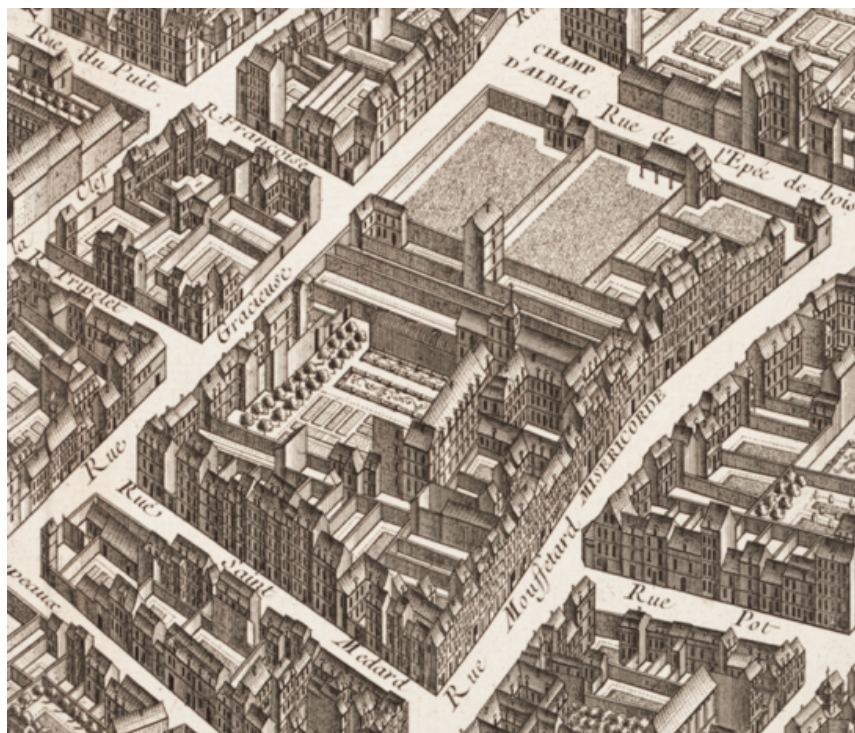
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transfer d'Aulnoy from Blois to a convent in Paris, that of the *Hospitalières de la Miséricorde de Jésus*, located in the rue Mouffetard.



Turgot map of Paris (ca. 1739) – Boston Public Library

It is indeed in the parlor of this convent that d'Aulnoy signed at least four notarized documents. Their dates range from October 20, 1688 to February 14, 1695, which is thus consistent with her references to her “solitude” in 1690. When and how did she regain her freedom? Since she had entered the convent not by her own choice, but by order of the king, her discharge would normally have required another royal order – for which I have looked in vain. So we must again turn to d’Hozier who, in another series of notes (dated July 1702), wrote that d’Aulnoy “through her wit, her intrigues, and her friends found the way to leave the convent in which she was living (*par son Esprit ses intrigues et ses amis elle a trouvé le moyen de sortir du Couvent ou elle étoit*).” By January 1698, in any case, her address was no longer rue Mouffetard, but rue Saint-Benoît.

One can only speculate about the conditions of d’Aulnoy’s almost decade-long confinement. Was she allowed to receive many visitors? to go out for shopping, or medical appointments, or physical exercise? What was her relationship like with the community of nuns who had to put her up (and put up with her) for so many years? She clearly retained a measure of legal and financial autonomy, in relation not only to her lawsuits but also to her publications. Indeed, this period of forced seclusion was an extraordinarily prolific one for d’Aulnoy, with nearly twenty volumes of novels, memoirs, and religious reflections appearing in rapid succession between 1690 and 1695. All of them, judging by the currently known evidence, were composed, not in the freedom of a worldly salon, but within the walls of a Parisian convent, between rue Mouffetard and rue Gracieuse.

The first two volumes of *Les Contes des fées* were published in April 1697. By that time, the writer may well have left the convent and established her own salon, whose bustling atmosphere is evoked in a few later accounts. The frame narratives surrounding her fairy tales, however, continue to convey a vision of individual and indeed solitary authorship, most strikingly in the prologue to volume 3, printed in August 1697.

“Madame D...” meets with a group of friends for a stroll through the park of Saint-Cloud, but soon separates herself from the others: “leave me here without scruple, I won’t be unoccupied.” Sitting next to a fountain, she is visited by a young nymph, who speaks to her in verse until the return of the group scares her away. Madame D...’s friends marvel at this fabulous encounter: “how lucky you are to be in such an agreeable commerce, sometimes with the Muses and sometimes with the Fairies; you can never be bored.” Pressed by the company to tell them more fairy tales, the author complies by pulling out a manuscript ready to be read aloud (*un cahier tout prest à vous lire*).⁴

From the enforced “solitude” of 1690 to the voluntary self-isolation of 1697, the case of Madame d’Aulnoy demonstrates that social distancing and confinement can bear wonderful literary fruits. By contrast, the final years of her life, during which she appears to have been fully immersed in the life of the capital, were much less productive. In 1703, she published her last work and was threatened with exile over her inveterate gambling, but was allowed to stay in Paris. In the fall of 1704, Louis XIV sent her a royal gift (*gratification*) of 1500 livres, which she had not yet cashed when she died on January 13, 1705, at the age of only 52.

Volker Schröder

May 2, 2020



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Footnotes

1. Jack Zipes (ed.), *The Great Fairy Tale Tradition*, New York: Norton, 2001, p. 822.
2. Mary Elizabeth Storer, *Un épisode littéraire de la fin du XVIIe siècle: la mode des contes de fées*, Paris: Champion, 1928, p. 19-20.
3. The sources used in this essay are preserved at the Bibliothèque nationale de France (Cabinet de d’Hozier and Fonds Clairambault) and the Archives Nationales (Maison du Roi and Minutier central des notaires de Paris).
4. *Les Contes des fées*, vol. 3, Paris: Barbin, 1698 (achevé d’imprimer: 31 août 1697), p. 1-9. My reading of this scene concurs with that of Juliette Cherbuliez: “Significantly, and

in contrast with the collective activities of Madame D...’s friends, her encounter with the nymph is a solitary act [...] This image stands in active distinction to that of a salon or any women’s collective of writing. In d’Aulnoy’s modern fable of how fairy tales come to a worldly milieu, the act of writing is one of solitary production.” (*The Place of Exile*, Lewisburg: Bucknell University Press, 2005, p. 200-201)

PS (September 2020): the substance of this blog post was first presented in a paper given on May 17, 2019, at the 49th annual conference of the North American Society for Seventeenth-Century French Literature in Salt Lake City, Utah.

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