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Bronwyn Reddan, *Love, Power, and Gender in Seventeenth-Century French Fairy Tales*. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2020. xvii + 242 pp. Illustrations, appendices, notes, bibliography, and index. \$65.00 U.S. (hb). ISBN 9781496216151; \$65.00 U.S. (pdf). ISBN 9781496223951; \$65.00 U.S. (eb). ISBN 9781496223937.

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The University of Nebraska Press has long enjoyed a reputation as an excellent source of cutting-edge thinking in women's studies, French literature, and especially criticism on early modern French women's writing. Its strength in this general domain is clearly articulated in the listing of recent titles from the press's "Women and Gender in the Early Modern World" series, edited by Allyson Poska and Abby Zanger. It has a deep history as well, including some of the earliest important contributions to the field, such as Peggy Kamuf's brilliant and groundbreaking *Fictions of Feminine Desire: Disclosures of Heloise*.<sup>[1]</sup> Bronwyn Reddan's *Love, Power, and Gender in Seventeenth-Century French Fairy Tales* is a fitting addition to an illustrious list.

Reddan's book is closely focused on one key matter: the challenge to the mainly male-scripted happy ending of the fairy tale posed by female writers or *conteuses* at the end of the seventeenth century, evidence of a strong vogue both for the genre and for concerns about the possibility of a happy ending for women in marriage, given the socioeconomic, patriarchally structured relations that prevailed at that time in French society. Reddan argues that these stories, penned and circulated as texts, took up and continued where salon conversations left off. They were grounded in the safe realm of the marvelous, from which vantage they confronted and commented obliquely on the bleak world of hard facts that oppressed even the most privileged of women at the height of the absolutist regime. The *conteuses'* critiques challenged the formulaic practices of the loveless marriages that were negotiated on young women's behalf, over which they had little say and in which they functioned as mere pawns and markers in exchanges of property and wealth among men. Another book came to mind while reading this one, *The Navigation of Feeling: A Framework for the History of Emotions* by William M. Reddy;<sup>[2]</sup> and it combined with another of earlier vintage but enduring relevance, in which Fredric Jameson exhorts his readers to "historicize, always historicize."<sup>[3]</sup> And so, it is only fitting that even the articulation of such a seemingly universal emotion as love should come under close scrutiny as a product of particular contexts and times. Bronwyn Reddan convincingly argues that the systematic examination of fairy tale endings has much to teach us about the hard socioeconomic realities of life for women of privilege at the end of the seventeenth century, their own exquisite awareness of their predicament, and how they felt about it.

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The book is organized into two parts: “The Formation of a Literary Emotional Community” and “Conversations about Love.” The body of the argument is framed by an introduction and a conclusion that announce, tie together, and reiterate the strands of the argument. Six appendices illustrate the careful scientific approach taken by the author in establishing her findings and arriving at her conclusions.

The first two chapters present the creation of a female literary community whose main concern and topic of interest is love. The French seventeenth century is already a period renowned for its female authors: names such as Madame de Lafayette, Madame de Villedieu, Madame de Sévigné, and Mademoiselle de Scudéry are well known in the pantheon of that era. But Reddan is investigating a more focused group of women writers who all found freedom to explore the emotion of love in the realm of fantasy; to debate whether it was an inclination or a passion; and to consider which of the two was better and more lasting, or if each carried its own dangers and risks. They developed as a community of writers in the last decade of the seventeenth century—writers who examined their situations (and the situations they observed around them), debated ideas, speculated on options, and shared texts in the protected sphere of the fairy tale genre. At the end of the seventeenth century, Charles Perrault would follow in the footsteps of the Neapolitan Basile and the Venetian Straparola in putting to pen and elevating to the status of “literature” popular folk tales from an oral tradition, only some of which featured fairies. Although preceded by his female counterparts, and most notably Madame d’Aulnoy, his reputation would prevail, unsurprisingly, as the originator and *premier auteur* of the French literary fairy tale. But he was not operating in a vacuum.

There appeared a real vogue for such tales among the elite at this time. Women, especially those who were also literate ladies of leisure, could take the time to explore and offer their view of the world, as they experienced it and observed it around them, in the relatively safe space of the “fairy tale,” a term first coined by Madame d’Aulnoy, certainly the most prolific practitioner of this new genre. Other members of this group include Madame de Murat, Madame d’Auneuil, Catherine Bernard, Catherine Durand, Charlotte-Rose de la Force, and Marie-Jeanne Lhéritier—collectively known in Reddan’s study as the *conteuses*. Lhéritier claimed that the genre took its cue from the twelfth-century Provençal troubadours and their notion of courtly love. This claim could stand some archival investigation and substantiation. Of 106 tales created between 1690 and 1709, Reddan points out in her thorough inventories, sixty-five were produced by the *conteuses*, as opposed to thirty-five by male authors, along with six anonymous works. It seems most likely, although it has not yet been fully established, that these women knew one another, exchanged texts and ideas, aired their writings in salon gatherings, and formed a community of readers, writers, thinkers, and speculators on the possibilities for women of the time in the safe space of the fairy tale. The *conteuses* dedicated many of their writings to royal and powerful women patrons, thereby seeking their protection and seeking to guarantee the safe passage of their ideas into the wider world.

It is impressive and gratifying to see that, in addition to the usual list of deservedly well-known and brilliant scholars of the fairy tale genre (Marina Warner, Jack Zipes, Raymonde Robert, Bruno Bettelheim, among others we can all name), Bronwyn Reddan has done such a thorough reading into the bibliography, specifically on French women’s fairy tales. Her sources are excellent and she has read them with a fresh eye. Recent scholars such as Patricia Hannon, Anne Birberick, Claire Carlin, Anne Duggan, Donald Haase, Nadine Jasmin, Jean Mainil, Lewis Seifert, Volker Schröder, Allison Stedman, Marie-Agnès Thirard, Charlotte Trinquet, and Marcelle

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Maistre Welch have brought to readers' attention the importance of this treasure trove of women's texts, so useful for examining the situations, conditions, and emotions allowable to women at this time. They have also permitted a study of the world of feeling women had to navigate, much as in Mademoiselle de Scudéry's "Carte de Tendre." [4]

The second chapter explores precisely what was understood by "love" in the seventeenth century, considering especially Descartes's sober examination of the passions. Love is specifically located in the heart and is clearly deemed essential to a life of happiness and fulfillment. The ideal at the time appears to be a union of a heterosexual couple of equal social rank. The parsing of love into emotion, sentiment, passion, inclination, the bodily symptoms, or signs of love (fainting, tears, blushing, sighs, etc.), as well as the window of the eyes and the face as sure indicators of the presence or absence of love—all of these matters are taken up. Probably most important is the distinction between involuntary (and therefore dangerous) passion and a more deliberate (and therefore safer) decision to be inclined to love someone. But there is always the danger of "love at first sight," which is to be avoided since it is most often initiated by men and thus puts women at the disadvantage of being cast in a submissive, objectified role. Much more interesting to the *conteuses* is the question of female agency in courtship and marriage. This is possible through an understanding of relationships as contracts negotiated and entered into in a mutually satisfying manner. Codes of conduct, tests of separation, and temptations are needed to help determine the desirability of a match. Many of the tales end unhappily, proving that indeed happy endings are few and far between, as far as the *conteuses* are concerned. At the end of the seventeenth century, the model of companionate marriage had begun to pose a challenge to the marriage of convenience, usually based on status and wealth. But both kinds of union were still performed within the patriarchal context that ultimately conferred authority in the family on the husbands and subservience on the wives. Therefore many women's fairy tale plots, when they don't end in tragedy, are simply expressions of wishful thinking.

In chapter three (which opens part two of the book), Reddan examines the representations of courtship, consent, and declarations of love in the fairy tales. A great distinction is underscored between the decisive "reciprocity of feeling" and parental approval (pp. 73-74). Courtship is viewed as a rite of passage that entails exchanges of tokens of affection with marriage as the ultimate goal. Parental consent is a legal requirement for marriage at the time, so elopements, as well as secret or clandestine marriages undertaken by a couple, constituted criminal behavior and resulted in material punishment.

It was a surprise to learn from Reddan that the median age of a first marriage for women was twenty-two in the sixteenth century, and twenty-five to twenty-six by the eighteenth century; for men, the earlier median age was twenty-four to twenty-five, and by the eighteenth century was twenty-seven to twenty-eight. The reason is sound and makes a great deal of sense; a couple needed to be ready to provide for a family and household before committing to a partnership. However, my own impression on the question of typical marriage age for young women in the seventeenth century was set, on the one hand, by that of the fictional Princess of Chartres, who was sixteen when her mother brought her to the court for the ostensible reason of finding her a match. She first appeared on the printed page in 1678, but of course, Madame de Lafayette is representing there the court of Henri IV from the early years of the sixteenth century. On the other hand, there is the age of Madame de Sévigné's daughter, Françoise-Marguerite, who, at twenty-three, was considered almost past her prime when she married the Count of Grignan. And Madame de Sévigné herself had been eighteen when she married in 1644. It is interesting,

given these disparities, to consider the usefulness of medians; perhaps they are not as useful as we might hope for indicating exact behavior patterns.

In any case, and as was the case in each of these instances, parents retained the legal right to refuse consent to a marriage of which they did not approve. Love became a mechanism for favoring the possibility of a choice of spouse and resisting total parental control over the choice of spouse. The *conteuses* offer many fairy tales that end unhappily, often to illustrate the tragic consequences of forced marriage. Some of the *conteuses* actually go so far as to question the possibility of any happy ending for a tale that concludes with a marriage. *Mésalliance*, cross-class couplings, were out of the question, and the *conteuses* do not challenge any of these strictures. It would seem they prefer to cling to the social status they enjoy within the confines of the patriarchal order. They always manage to make it work out to everyone's (including the families') satisfaction.

With regard to declarations of love, there are no surprises: the hero always makes his love known first, since declarations of love are not simply avowals of feelings but also expressions of social power. The *conteuses* also invent a few instances where the heroine speaks her love first, but never in such a way as to displace the prevailing social and economic role of marriage in society at that time. In order for a declaration of love to be felicitous, it must of course be accepted and reciprocated. Gift-giving is the next big topic Reddan focuses on, aided in her analysis by Marcel Mauss and Natalie Zemon Davis.<sup>[5]</sup> What seems most salient in this area with regard to the *conteuses'* visions, is the sense of obligation, of indebtedness created thereby. Here, Reddan analyzes most closely the "Riquet à la houppe" story, which is especially useful since there are two versions to compare, one male-authored (Charles Perrault) and the other female-authored (Catherine Bernard). The two stories offer competing plots, each illustrating quite accurately the conventional differences between the male and female views on the question of marriage. But female-authored stories also claim generosity and agency for some of their heroines, who give freely and abundantly to their suitors, in the mold of Mademoiselle de Montpensier.

The final chapter of Reddan's study concerns the representation of love after marriage. Probably the most succinct summary comes in the following passage: "In this chapter, I interpret the *conteuses'* choice of ending as a sociopolitical decision rather than a purely poetic one. This means that I read the ambiguous morality of tales that end unhappily or fail to punish social transgression such as adultery or premarital sex as moral instruction about the right way to love that undermined the patriarchal structure of courtship and marriage" (p. 4). Reddan appears to subscribe most completely to Hannon's view that "the *conteuses'* use of the marriage closure is, at best, an ironic gesture that cannot contain the subversive moral content of their tales" (p. 127). It turns out that vice and virtue are equally rewarded in enough of the *conteuses'* happy endings to support Reddan's contention that female-authored fairy tales at this time answer to a different moral code from the conventional one. Love can disappear upon marriage and the two should not necessarily be tied to each other. Many couples cannot endure in marriage but can continue to thrive and flourish once transformed into trees or intertwined plants. Love does not disappear. It remains possible, but not necessarily within the confines of the marriage script. Reason and virtue, combined, need to be the only guides for the *conteuses'* heroines in the moral landscape of their fairy tales.

Reddan concludes that these fairy tales do not necessarily offer timeless pearls of wisdom, lessons that can be applied at any time in any context. Rather, she insists that we need to read these tales,

and women's fairy tales in France at the end of the seventeenth century especially, as indicators of conditions for women at this particular historical moment. Clearly, these tales with their "emphasis on love as the proper motivation for marriage promoted a companionate model of marriage as an alternative to the traditional definition of marriage as a socioeconomic transaction" (p. 147). However the frame tale, the system within which courtships were conducted, remains unchallenged in the fantasies of the conteuses. Reddan's study demonstrates a thorough knowledge of the corpus of these tales and encourages the reader to want to know more about exactly what kinds of experiences women encountered in the domains of courtship, marriage, and household life in the age of absolutism. At the same time, her work encourages the reader to take women's fairy tales of the time seriously if they want to know how these women and their readers actually felt about love.[6]

#### NOTES

[1] Peggy Kamuf, *Fictions of Feminine Desire: Disclosures of Heloise* (Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press, 1982).

[2] William M. Reddy. *The Navigation of Feeling: A Framework for the History of Emotions* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2001).

[3] Fredric Jameson. *The Political Unconscious: Narrative as a Socially Symbolic Act* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1981).

[4] Joan DeJean is the major pathbreaker in this field, with her *Tender Geographies: Women and the Origins of the Novel in France* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1991); but I would personally add Michèle L. Farrell to this list. See her "Celebration and Repression of Feminine Desire in Mme d'Aulnoy's Fairy Tale: *La Chatte blanche*," *L'Esprit Créateur* 29 (Fall 1989): 52-64.

[5] See Marcel Mauss, *The Gift: The Form and Reason for Exchange in Archaic Societies* (London: Routledge, 2002) and Natalie Zemon Davis, *The gift in sixteenth-century France* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2000).

[6] Many thanks to Jean Mainil for his careful and exacting reading of the final script of this review.

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