H-France Review Vol. 25 (September 2025), No. 58

Anne E. Duggan, *The Lost Princess: Women Writers and the History of Classic Fairy Tales.* London: Reaktion Books, 2023. 260 pp. Illustrations and index. $25.00 U.S. (hb). ISBN 978-1 78914-769-8.

Review by Wendy C. Turgeon, St. Joseph's University.

Anne Duggan, Professor of French and Fairy Tale Studies at Wayne State University, offers us a fresh look at the ways in which iconic fairy tales took shape in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Her particular focus is on French women writers and re-tellers of well-known tales. Each chapter traces first the evolution of one fairy tale and its variations across this period, then how it was adapted into theatrical and musical extravaganzas for popular entertainment into the twentieth century.

This text offers advantages to a wide range of scholars: those interested in late ancient régime or the French Enlightenment literary history, Fairy Tale scholars and devotees, and feminists who may be intrigued by the shift in gender images within the historical trajectory of storytelling. I would also include scholars or devotees of theatrical productions from the eighteenth to twentieth centuries, encompassing pantomimes, plays, music, ballet, and film. We are constantly reminded that fairy tales have a rich and varied history and speak to the human condition. Duggan provides extensive notes for each chapter, directing scholars to other sources with useful background material. In addition, her bibliography is an excellent compilation of her sources and references to works that support her scholarly account of the history of these fairy tales. This is a rare book that can be read by academics and anyone interested in the history of fairy tales, especially those that have been recorded and transformed by women.

Duggan's major focus is Marie-Catherine d'Aulnoy (1652-1705), but she includes tales published by several women *conteuses*: Charlotte-Rose Caumont de La Force (1654-1724), Marie-Jeanne L'Heritier (1664-1734), Henriette-Julie de Murat (1668-1716), Gabrielle-Suzanne de Villeneuve (1685-1755), and finally Jeanne-Marie Leprince de Beaumont (1711-1780). Some were friends of Charles Perrault (1628-1703), another well-known author of some classic versions of fairy tales including "Little Red Riding Hood." These women are little known, and yet they created some of the most iconic fairy tales later retold by the Grimm brothers and incorporated into the Disney franchise in the twentieth century.

One of the author's goals is to correct the misunderstanding that dominates American culture today that the Disney franchise offers the definitive version of stories such as "Cinderella," "Puss 'N Boots," "Sleeping Beauty," "Beauty and the Beast," and so on. The hold Disney has on the fairy tale genre for many of us has limited our understanding of both the richness and variety within the genre and it has

generated feminist criticism of the women in fairy tales as passive individuals waiting for men to rescue them.

In her introduction, Duggan briefly reviews the community of these women who crafted complex versions of familiar fairy tales. In the following chapters, the reader encounters three important points. First, a given fairy tale is fluid and has been reworked to produce many variations; therefore, there is no definitive version of any given tale. Secondly, women's roles are transformed from version to version to reflect, and sometimes reinforce, the social mores of the time it was written (and women are often more active protagonists in the earlier versions). Thirdly, fairy tales were originally written for adults, or a mixed-age audience, and continued to inspire adult public entertainment (pantomimes, plays, music, and ballet) during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, even after the brothers Grimm and others had commandeered them for children. As these theatrical productions were developed in England and France and then traveled further afield, they intersected with and absorbed the familiar storytelling tropes of new cultures and locations.

To tell the stories of these transformations, Duggan traces the development of four classic fairy tale stories: "Cinderella," "Beauty and the Beast," versions of "Puss 'N Boots," and finally a genre of fairy tales where powerful women perform as men or in male roles. In each chapter, she takes us on a journey from very early versions, in some cases coming from the Italian storytellers Giovanni Francesco Straparola (ca. 1485-1558) and Giambattista Basile (1566-1632). These two male Italian writers crafted tales that were often bawdy and crude. Yet they also featured women as agents of fate rather than as pawns. These stories inspired d'Aulnoy and her group of women writers to incorporate subversive gender-bending messages coded within their fairy tales. It was safer to do this within the fairy tale genre, since fairy tales live in fantastical and imaginary worlds not considered to be reflective of reality.

Duggan's first chapter, "The Not-So-Passive Cinderella," offers us early versions of the Cinderella story, one familiar to many from the Disney movie's insipid heroine who is rescued from a life of drudgery by others, including her fairy godmother and ultimately the prince. Disney developed his version from the Charles Perrault retelling, in which the message appears to be that suffering quietly and accepting abuse is eventually rewarded by a prince coming to the rescue. Perrault's message must have resonated in an age when women had little or no power and men could decide their fate.

Duggan revisits the earlier Basile tale where Zerolla, the heroine in that version, exhibits great power in using magic to control her father and ultimately kills her stepmother. The fairies reward her with a king for a husband. Many adventures occur along the way in this story. Perrault was compelled to adapt this somewhat scandalous tale in order to affirm gender roles in the seventeenth-century aristocratic circles. Our author goes on to weave elaborate theories about the genealogy of the Cinderella story as it appears in d'Aulnoy, where it is filtered through Perrault's reworking of Basile as well as Marie-Jeanne L'Heritier's tale "Finette." The authors shape the tale to reflect the social mores of their times, and in the case of the tales by women, provide an invitation to imagine alternatives. Duggan spends a large portion of each chapter recounting each story's various versions in great detail. These meticulous retellings can get complex, and the reader must keep in mind the author's goals. In the end, Duggan seeks to highlight how d'Aulnoy and the other women authors used these innocent children's stories to weave alternative narratives with convoluted plots, marvelous events, and subtle models of women's agency. The second half of the chapter takes the reader on the journey these tales

took as they traveled throughout Europe and arrived in the Americas. Each culture adapted the story to blend into the local culture with changing names to familiar forms. Interestingly enough, a film released in 1973 by Václav Vorlíček, *Three Hazelnuts for Cinderella*, became a beloved European classic. In the end, Duggan points out that the story of Cinderella took two directions from the Basile origin: the Perrault/Disney gender-hierarchical version that reinforced social norms and the d'Aulnoy/Vorlíček variations which advocated for more equal relations between the genders.

Chapter two focuses on "Beauty and the Beast" and follows the pattern of chapter one. Duggan leads us through the original novella-length story by Gabrielle-Suzanne de Villeneuve to the abridged version by Jeanne-Marie Leprince de Beaumont. Fast forwarding to the twentieth century, we find two iconic versions: Jean Cocteau's marvelous movie (1946) and the Disney animated film from 1991. Duggan returns to an earlier time and suggests that other stories inspired and were adapted in various ways to craft the Villeneuve and Leprince de Beaumont tales; specifically, the author details the d'Aulnoy stories "Le Mouton" ("The Ram," 1697) and "Le Serpentin vert" ("The Green Serpent," 1697). Such stories, classified as "animal or monster bridegrooms" (p. 62), are found in many cultures. Duggan proceeds to trace each of these stories in detail and follows up with an account of how the tales were varied as they traveled to England and beyond. They were also adapted to theatrical productions, musical compositions, and pantomime (especially popular in Britain). Maurice Ravel's musical suite *Ma mère l'oye* (1910) included references to d'Aulnoy's green serpent tale. While the details of these mutations can get a bit overwhelming, they give the reader a robust account of how these tales evolved, were adapted, and incorporated popular trends of the times over a three-hundred-year period.

Chapter three reviews the histories of earlier versions of the familiar Puss 'n Boots story. The popular one is from Perrault and features a male cat. Before arriving at that version, Duggan first traces the genealogy of the Rapunzel story through the lens of versions by Basile and La Force. She depicts this seemingly unrelated tale as inspiring elements of d'Aulnoy's "The White Cat," who, it is worth noting, is female. After walking the reader through the complex adventures of her white cat, she takes us on the journey of the "White Cat" tale as it crosses the English Channel and the Atlantic Ocean to be reimagined in various media. This story takes on a life of its own in plays and in a comic book in Mexico, and yet so few of us are familiar with d'Aulnoy's cat, a feminine character who helps those she cares about, or the metamorphoses of this tale that fascinated generations. This chapter is replete with detailed accounts and as a bonus includes illustrations that demonstrate how mesmerized people were by this story. The main themes are nevertheless recognizable: female agency, women living roles unusually reserved for men, and a general love for the fantastical.

In chapter four, entitled "The Lost Amazon Warriors," Duggan takes us on a long tour beginning from tales by Straparola and Basile that inspired a number of French authors to depict gender role reversals with women successfully masquerading as men, often inspired by real-life women who ruled or went to battle as men did. She offers us a glimpse of the strange juxtaposition of powerful women living within social norms that appeared to deny the possibility that women could have equal status with men. One must suppose these real women were viewed as anomalies, not as models for female empowerment. And yet the tales told by d'Aulnoy and L'Heritier subversively celebrate the hidden powers of their gender. As with the previous chapters, this one is full of complex story-retelling and meticulous tracing of the ways these stories evolved, transformed, reflected, and challenged the larger culture in literary and artistic ways.

Finally, the epilogue offers a concise summary taking us on wild and for most readers, I suspect, unfamiliar journeys. The themes that run throughout the book include the claim that the fairy tales we know today were heavily influenced by this group of women writers. Interestingly, the versions by these authors continued to flourish and spread around Europe and the Americas, despite the hegemony of the Grimms in the nineteenth century. They offer us many scenarios of women owning their own decisions and determining their own fates, sometimes rescuing the men in the process. Finally, the entire history reminds us that progress is not inevitable and that twentieth- and twenty-first-century fairy tales, as dominated by the Disney syndicate, disempowered women and led to a backlash against fairy tales for promoting female passivity. In earlier times, the narrative was quite the reverse.

In summary, Duggan's work offers a thorough and compelling reading of subtly subversive early French female authors. These women crafted engaging fairy tales that endured and percolated through diverse art forms into the twentieth century, only to disappear or fade into the background with the rise of the Disney movie empire. This book reminds us of the richness of the fairy tale genre and how it often challenges dominant cultural norms and alerts us to the existential challenges of being human.

Wendy C. Turgeon
St. Joseph's University
wturgeon@sjny.edu

Copyright © 2025 by the Society for French Historical Studies, all rights reserved. The Society for French Historical Studies permits the electronic distribution of individual reviews for nonprofit educational purposes, provided that full and accurate credit is given to the author, the date of publication, and the location of the review on the H-France website. The Society for French Historical Studies reserves the right to withdraw the license for edistribution/republication of individual reviews at any time and for any specific case. Neither bulk redistribution/republication in electronic form of more than five percent of the contents of *H-France Review* nor republication of any amount in print form will be permitted without permission. For any other proposed uses, contact the Editor-in-Chief of H-France. The views posted on *H-France Review* are not necessarily the views of the Society for French Historical Studies.
ISSN 1553-9172