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Holly Tucker

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PREFACE TO THE SPECIAL ISSUE ON
“REFRAMING THE EARLY FRENCH FAIRY TALE”

For several years, I have taught a course on Approaches to the French Fairy Tale for our Freshman Seminar program at Vanderbilt University. As many *Marvels & Tales* readers who teach similar classes can relate, a course on fairy tales is guaranteed to raise the eyebrows of more than a few parents and administrators. However, sharing space in the schedule of classes with seminars such as “New York, New York: Film and Literature,” “Musicals! All Singing, All Dancing,” “The Social Construction of Hip Hop/Rap Music,” and “The Simple Art of Murder: Knowledge and Guilt in Detective Literature,” my fairy-tale course is in good company (or, in the case of the latter, perhaps not!).

In the context of a Freshman Seminar program, the choice of an ostensibly “lightweight” topic is a calculated risk that has the potential for a rich payoff. First, fairy tales and other such courses fill seats; my seminar is always over-enrolled. Second, and more important, the primary goal of our Freshman Seminar program is “to instill curiosity [in students] . . . [to help them] examine all ideas critically [and] to develop a mind free of preconceptions” (<http://sitemason.vanderbilt.edu/cas/freshmanseminars>). What better way to challenge preconceptions than to ask students to engage critically texts that seem, at least initially to them, impermeable—and perhaps even antithetical—to scholarly discourse?

While the students change each semester, the notions or critical “frameworks” they bring to my classroom on the first day remain fairly stable: Fairy tales are, and always have been, for children. They are generally consistent across time and space. They remain untouched by the cultural politics of race, class, gender, and sexuality. And, of course, they are at their best when in the hands of Disney’s Imagineers. As the fairy tale is increasingly recognized as a legitimate field for scholarly inquiry, researchers have offered up a treasure of evidence that dramatically rewrites these and other popular (mis)understandings of what is, in the end, a highly complex genre. From formalist and structuralist accounts of the fairy tale to psychoanalytic perspectives, from feminist

engagements to sociohistorical inquiries, the trajectory of critical approaches is as diverse as the tales themselves.

As fairy-tale studies as a general field continues to flourish, it is worth noting that beginning in the mid-1990s there seems to have been a disproportionate upsurge in interest regarding the French fairy tale and particularly those tales originating from the Old Regime salons. New editions of Perrault and d'Aulnoy's *contes*, moderately priced anthologies of seventeenth- and eighteenth-century tales, and English translations have made many previously unknown texts available to a wider public for the first time. Moreover, the books of Lewis C. Seifert (1996), Philip E. Lewis (1996), and Patricia Hannon (1998) set a deliberate and highly scholarly tone for monographs by Anne Defrance (1998), Nadine Jasmin (2002), Elizabeth Wanning Harries (2001), Jean Mainil (2001), Sophie Raynard (2002), Holly Tucker (2003), and Anne E. Duggan (forthcoming). For readers interested in exploring the remarkable breadth and depth of scholarship on the early French fairy tale, Bérénice V. Le Marchand's impressive bibliography, included in this issue, will prove extremely useful.

The aim of this special issue is not to rehearse what these important studies already tell us about the early French fairy tale. Instead, what is at stake in these pages is—as the title suggests—a “reframing” of the types of questions that we may wish to ask as we continue to recalibrate and to nuance our understandings of the *contes de fées*, their contexts, and the *conteurs* and *conteuses* themselves. Just as we challenge our students to shake off preconceived notions in order to open their minds to new ways of viewing a seemingly well-worn topic, it may be time for us, too, to give thought to the frames through which we view our work, the questions those frames allow us to ask, and how the answers we are likely to uncover are dictated by the boundaries we have set for ourselves, both intentionally and unwittingly.

Ruth B. Bottigheimer opens the volume by asking the provocative question, Are French fairy tales really French after all? Bottigheimer resets the time line for the early French tale, placing it instead in sixteenth-century Italy. She follows the travels of Straparola's *Pleasant Nights* from Venice, to Lyon, and finally to Perrault's Paris. Basing her arguments on the complex publication history of Straparola's tale collection, Bottigheimer questions an emphasis on orality as the primary means of transmission in late-seventeenth-century tales and suggests that scholars of the fairy tale should also consider the international nature of book trade and, most importantly, the material and sociological circumstances surrounding the fairy tale.

Allison Stedman questions a tendency in the field to look at individual tales as discrete units and tackles instead the question of “frame” in both its literal and figurative meanings. She reads d'Aulnoy's “*L'île de la félicité*” (“The

Island of Happiness”), so often celebrated as the first “French fairy tale,” not in isolation but as having a symbiotic relationship to d’Aulnoy’s frame narrative (the lengthy romance of Hippolytus and Julie). In so doing she makes a strong case for examining the relationships between the fairy tale and the history of the early novel. Demonstrating how tale and frame are self-consciously linked, Stedman suggests the ways in which d’Aulnoy revises a traditional prose model and, especially, creates a road map of sorts for the fairy tale as a nascent genre.

If there is strong interest in pinning down with greater certainty the early fairy tale’s compositional influences and intentions, it is no doubt complicated by the *conteurs* and *conteuses* themselves who have left us with contradictory cues on how fairy tales circulated in early modern culture. With this in mind, two key texts in this debate—the preface to Perrault’s “Griselidis” and Murat’s “Aux Fées modernes”—are presented in the Texts and Translations section of this issue. Although these short texts are well known to scholars of the French tale, they have not yet to my knowledge been presented in tandem, in English. The juxtaposition of Perrault’s reference to a folk influence and Murat’s insistence on literary erudition in her response to Perrault should provide a useful lens through which readers may view the debates in which both Bottigheimer and Stedman engage.

While much recent scholarship on the gender politics of the early French fairy tale has underscored the ways in which the fairy tale allowed the *conteuses* to fly under the radar as they worked out thoughtful critiques of increasingly exclusionary cultural, political, and medical institutions, Elizabeth Wanning Harries suggests instead that the *conteuse* was acutely aware of the “violent” costs of agency and learned self-expression. The violent fairy-tale “death wish,” as Harries calls it, reveals an important focus of the symbolic function of language as weapon. Making note of the tendency of modern tale-tellers to downplay or delete the bloody and brutal scenes that so often marked early tales, she views symbolic violence in d’Aulnoy’s tales as an important, though neglected, framework through which gendered self-sacrifice and restorative change take place in the fairy tale.

Finally, Kathryn A. Hoffmann sheds a different light on our discussion of compositional frames by moving us into an early modern world of voyeuristic delights where the corporeal marvel and *conte* fuse. Bridging d’Aulnoy’s “Babiole” with fairground accounts of harpsichord-playing monkeys and hog-faced and hairy women, Hoffmann challenges us to resist altogether the notion of borders and the closures they might imply in order to understand the *conte* in a wider range of contexts and, particularly, as a type of matrix where complementary and conflicting discourses merge and coexist in the early modern period.

Early modern border crossings such as these beckon us toward inquiries that fully appreciate the ways in which the early tale itself promotes a spirit of intellectual fluidity and discursive interaction. As each of the contributions in this volume suggests, “reframing” can serve as an important and productive act of opening up, of taking stock, and of forging ahead into the important and exciting work that we still have yet to do in fairy-tale studies, and in our classrooms.

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Guest Editor