

Thesis title :

The Invisible Fairy: the literary career of Marie-Catherine Le Jumel de Barneville, Baroness d'Aulnoy

Scientific argument (problem, context, methodology) :

Marie-Catherine Le Jumel de Barneville, literarily known by her married name Mme d'Aulnoy, is without doubt the best-known and most recognized 17th-century storyteller of our time: not only because she invented the genre of the literary fairy tale, publishing her first tale in *Histoire d'Hypolite, comte de Douglas* in 1690, but also because she was by far the most prolific storyteller of her time. With the four volumes of *Contes des fées* (1697) and the four volumes of *Contes nouveaux ou les Fées à la mode* (1698), she left twenty-five titles in her own hand, whereas Charles Perrault, her otherwise famous contemporary, only began publishing marvelous tales from 1694 onwards, and wrote a total of just three tales in verse and eight in prose. Finally, it was she who, through her choice of title, gave her name to the literary genre of the "fairy tale", a terminology still in use today. All these signs that should have ensured her a radiant posterity (the primacy of the genre, her name, the abundance of her output) did not prevent her invisibilization in literary history, until the inclusion of her *Contes* on the syllabus for the agrégation de Lettres competitive examination in 2022 (albeit in duet with Perrault) restored a little of her lustre.

However, her decisive contribution to the development of the French literary fairy tale has completely overshadowed the rest of her work, which is as abundant as it is diverse, and whose reception is sometimes comparable in scope to that of fairy tales. The *Histoire d'Hypolite, comte de Douglas*, for example, which literary history retains only as the inaugural date of the literary fairy tale, went through almost 80 editions in the century between its first publication and 1800. Her other works, published under a rather transparent anonymity (Mme D***), were equally successful, whether as collections of historical and gallant short stories (*Nouvelles espagnoles; Histoire de Jean de Bourbon, Prince de Carency; Le Comte de Warwick*) or stories with a more ambivalent fictional status, combining novelistic imagination with a biographical element that has never been clearly defined (*Mémoires de la Cour d'Espagne; Relation du Voyage d'Espagne; Mémoires de la cour d'Angleterre*). How can we include in this framework the *Nouvelles ou mémoires historiques contenant ce qui s'est passé de plus remarquable dans l'Europe tant aux guerres, prises de places, et batailles sur terre et sur mer qu'aux divers intérêts des princes et des souverains qui ont agi depuis 1672 jusqu'en 1679*, a text virtually ignored by critics and whose attribution should perhaps be

reconsidered? How much credence is to be given to the tumultuous life she is said to have led: plotting to get rid of her husband? spending time in prison - or in the convent, her more avowed equivalent? fleeing across Europe to escape justice? spying for France? an English lover? adulterous children? And how can we reconcile these extraordinary adventures, which are perhaps no more than rumors that have become legend, with the publication of Christian meditations (*Sentiments d'une âme pénitente, sur le psaume Miserere mei Deus; Le Retour d'une âme à Dieu, sur le psaume Benedic anima mea*)? And with the fact that she is received in the world and is said to have held a literary salon in Paris? What about her long collaboration with one of Paris's most prominent booksellers, Claude Barbin? There's a lot more we don't know about Marie-Catherine d'Aulnoy than we do, and this thesis will help fill the gap.

From a methodological point of view, the doctoral student will first have to carry out an archival and critical study of the sources that make it possible to reconstruct her personal life and literary career, in order to establish what is historically reliable and what is factually dubious. In particular, rather than focusing on the tales, as all recent studies of this author have done, it will be necessary to take into account the entire Aulnian corpus, which has never been undertaken before, in order to understand the issues at stake in her writing and the evolution of her literary career. As a reminder, the primary corpus of this thesis will therefore comprise more than a dozen titles: *Histoire d'Hypolite, comte de Douglas* (1690); *Mémoires de la cour d'Espagne* (1690); *Relation du voyage d'Espagne* (1691); *Histoire de Jean de Bourbon, prince de Carency* (1692); *Nouvelles espagnoles* (1692); *Nouvelles ou mémoires historiques contenant ce qui s'est passé de plus remarquable dans l'Europe* (1693); *Mémoires de la cour d'Angleterre* (1695); *Contes des fées* (1697); *Contes nouveaux ou les Fées à la mode* (1698); *Sentiments d'une âme pénitente et Retour d'une âme à Dieu* (1698); *Le Comte de Warwick* (1703). A reflection on women's polygraphic practice, based on the socio-poetic method, will enable us to place Mme d'Aulnoy's life and writing in the context of her production, which is essential for a non-anachronistic grasp of the issues at stake. In addition to the expected contribution to knowledge of French prose fiction at the turn of the 17th-18th centuries, the work must also include a study of reception, based on critical discourse but also on material bibliography, so that the biographical reassessment is accompanied by a literary reassessment. Finally, in addition to the interest of exploring a little-known work and rehabilitating a long-neglected author, Marie-Catherine d'Aulnoy's life story offers particularly enlightening elements for those interested in women's history.

5 key words

- Marie-Catherine Le Jumel de Barneville, Baroness d'Aulnoy
- literary history
- narrative prose fiction
- 17th-18th centuries
- Reception

Three-year schedule (from September 2024, grading by quarter)

Year 1: September 2024 - September 2025

NB: during this exploratory phase, we are not distinguishing between the different quarters, as we feel that the different workstreams should be opened simultaneously to stimulate reflection.

Once enrolment issues have been settled, the first year should focus on the study of the primary corpus, with the exploration of Mme d'Aulnoy's entire oeuvre, some ten works (fortunately of manageable length). The diversity of genres (memoirs, historical accounts, travelogues, short stories, spiritual meditations) means that the works need to be systematically catalogued, so that they can be compared with one another and any changes in style and writing style can be identified. In parallel with this literary approach, an archival and critical study of the sources (some of which are known, but perhaps also yet to be discovered) will enable us to precisely reconstruct his personal life and literary career. The chronological study of publications in relation to personal life paths will suggest the first avenues of interpretation, even if concomitance does not necessarily imply a cause-and-effect relationship. To understand these relationships, a critical bibliography of the subject will enable us to identify the multiple contexts with which the writer's career interferes. This first phase of exploration will be accompanied by critical readings: the history of narrative fiction at the end of the 17th century, the conditions of production and publication of women's works, the history of women (from the educational, family and legal points of view, *etc.*), the history of ideas, the history of books and political history. At the end of this first year, which will require a great deal of reading, rigor and the ability to synthesize, a first global approach will emerge, enabling us to problematize the links between literary production and personal life, and to consider the conditions of validity of the notion of "career" for a female writer at the end of the 17th century. As one of the aims of the thesis is to give Mme d'Aulnoy back the full breadth of her production, we will need to examine the specific place of fairy tales in her career as a writer, and consider the meaning to be given to the diversity of the genres she wrote in.

Year 2: September 2025 - September 2026

Autumn 2025: The second year will begin with further problematization, leading to a first draft of the thesis plan. The doctoral student will continue the reading and research begun, enabling him/her, for example, to identify recurring motifs in the writer's work.

Winter 2026: this quarter will be devoted to finalizing the writer's biography, in order to capitalize on certainties (and uncertainties). This biography should also give way to an approach to material bibliography, based on the study of paratexts (dedication, warning, epistle, privilege...) and on an examination of the editorial career of her work during her lifetime (publishers, editorial context, material format of the works).

Spring 2026: Following on from this investigation, a study of the writer's reception, from the 18th century to the present day, will enable us to situate the moment when she "dropped out" of literary history. It will then be necessary to examine the causes of her (non)transmission and the reduction of her work to fairy tales. Comparisons with contemporary women writers could also be an interesting avenue for reflection.

Summer 2026: The thesis plan will be refined and completed; it should be validated by the end of the summer, so that the third year can be devoted to writing. First draft of the bibliography.

Year 3: September 2026 - September 2027

Autumn 2026: start of thesis writing; proofreading by the director.

Winter 2027: writing continues; proofreading by the director and incorporation of comments.

Spring 2027: end of writing; proofreading by the director and integration of comments.

Summer 2027: overall re-reading by the doctoral student to avoid repetitions and/or contradictions. Finalization of biography and introduction. Preparation for defense.

Research unit references on the subject:

Conducted within the LAMo laboratory, UR 4276, the proposed topic integrates several of the themes on which the laboratory works. Firstly, theme 2 entitled "Literary construction of norms and hierarchies", supervised by Nathalie Grande; but also theme 3, "Patrimonialization and mediatizations" directed by Mathilde Labbé, since the question of the making of literary history, the construction of careers, and the role of gender in the constitution and transmission of corpora will be at the heart of the thesis problematic. The research carried out as part of this thesis will thus complement the work already carried out by Nathalie Grande on women writers and on the history of narrative prose fiction, as well as that of Mathilde Labbé on the phenomena of patrimonialization, and that of Dominique Peyrache-Leborgne on the uses of fairy tales.

Publications (in chronological order):

Nathalie Grande (éd.), *Sexe, genre et conte de fées, anthologie de conteuses de la fin du XVII^e siècle*, collection "La Nouvelle Cité des dames", PUSE, mai 2024.

Nathalie Grande et Mathilde Labbé (dir.), *Regards de femmes sur l'histoire littéraire, Revue d'histoire littéraire de la France*, n° 4, automne 2023.

Nathalie Grande, « Une amatrice malgré elle ? Madame de La Calprenède », *Pratiques d'amateur au XVII^e siècle, Elseneur*, n° 38, 2023, p. 101-114.

Mathilde Labbé, David Martens et Marcela Scibiorska (dir.), *Patrimonialisations de la littérature, Culture et Musées*, n° 38, automne 2021.

Nathalie Grande, « Masculinités rêvées : la végétalisation des héros chez les conteuses au tournant des XVII^e -XVIII^e siècles », dans *Horizons du masculin. Pour un imaginaire du genre*, Anne Debrosse et Marie Saint Martin (dir.), Paris, Classiques Garnier, 2020, p. 131-144.

Dominique Peyrache-Leborgne, « Sur les traces de Ma Mère L'Oye, de Perrault aux frères Grimm et après... », dans *L'écho des contes. Des Fées de Perrault à Dame Holle des Grimm. Versions littéraires, variantes populaires et reconfigurations pour la jeunesse*, Dominique Peyrache-Leborgne (dir.), Rennes, Presses universitaires de Rennes, 2019, p. 21-45.

Mathilde Labbé, « Les monuments de la nation littéraire », dans *Narrations auctoriales*, Carole Bisenius-Penin et Jeanne Glesener (dir.), « Questions de communication », série actes, 41, 2018, p. 85-102.

Dominique Peyrache-Leborgne, « Que sont Perrault, Grimm, Andersen devenus ? Réécritures des contes classiques », dans *L'Usage du conte. Contes classiques et réemploi – méthodes*

d'analyse, Patricia Eichel-Lojkine (dir.), Rennes, Presses universitaires de Rennes, 2017, p. 23-80.

Nathalie Grande, « Le “système de la mode” dans les contes de Mme d’Aulnoy » dans *Sociopoétique du textile à l’âge classique. Du vêtement et de sa représentation à la poétique du texte*, Carine Barbafieri et Alain Montandon (dir.), Paris, Hermann Editeurs, 2015, p. 387-400.