



The first German translation of Les Contes des fées

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The first German translation of *Les Contes des fées*

VS

A longstanding scholarly consensus holds that German translations of Madame d'Aulnoy's fairy tales did not appear until the second half of the eighteenth century, starting with *Das Cabinet der Feen* published in the 1760s by Friedrich Immanuel Bierling.¹ By contrast, a first English translation of four tales was printed as early as 1699, followed between 1707 and 1721 by several expanded collections of *Tales of the Fairies*.² To explain the relative lateness of the German translations, it has been suggested that the people initially interested in d'Aulnoy's texts were mostly sophisticated aristocrats, capable of reading the French originals, and that a demand for versions in the vernacular arose only half a century later, when lower-class audiences too developed a taste for fairy tales. But this dominant narrative needs to be revised in light of the book that I would like to introduce in this post: a German translation of the first eight tales from *Les Contes des fées*, published in Nuremberg in 1702.



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This publication was first identified as a translation from Mme d'Aulnoy in an [1896 article](#) by the bookseller and bibliographer Max Spirgatis. As part of his research on German translations of Molière published in Nuremberg by Johann Daniel Tauber, Spirgatis perused the catalogs of the 1701-02 Leipzig and Frankfurt book fairs and recognized the titles of the stories listed in one of Tauber's announcements. Considering the many correspondences between d'Aulnoy's tales and those of the Brothers Grimm, he pointed out the potential interest of this translation and noted that further investigations would be worthwhile.

Spirgatis' find was apparently missed by specialists of the *Märchen*, but it made its way into several standard bibliographies such as the 1914 *Bibliotheca Germanorum Erotica & Curiosa*, which indicated d'Aulnoy's authorship and referred to a copy held by the Royal Library in Berlin. In 1979, this entry was reproduced in the *Gesamtverzeichnis des deutschsprachigen Schrifttums*, where it appeared under "Aulnoy." In the meantime, the Berlin copy had been destroyed or looted during World War II, but another copy was

Information

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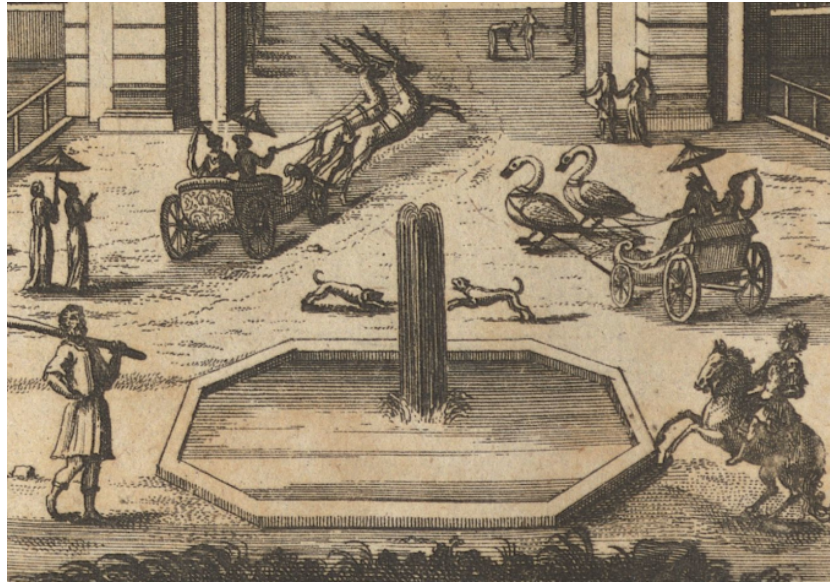
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preserved – and expertly catalogued – in the University Library of Erlangen-Nürnberg. I became aware of it in February 2019, while searching for early editions of d'Aulnoy in the [CERL Heritage of the Printed Book Database](#). When they were alerted to the book's status as a precious *rarissimum*, the librarians promptly proceeded to scan it and to make the [digital version available online](#).

There is no mention of d'Aulnoy anywhere in the book; author and translator are both anonymous. Nor is there any reference to fairies in the book's title, *Der Curiose Schauplatz / Presentirend Acht Lust- und Lehrreiche Gedichte*, which may be rendered as *The Curious Theater, Presenting Eight Pleasurable and Instructive Poems*. This title affiliates the collection with the early modern genre of *theatrum literature*, and in particular the works of the Nuremberg polygraph Georg Philipp Harsdörffer, such as *Der Grosse Schau-Platz Lust- und Lehrreicher Geschichte (The Great Theater of Pleasurable and Instructive History)*, first published in 1650-51. The crowded title page also displays the titles of the eight tales: compared to the French original, these titles are much amplified, invariably naming not just one character but both lovers (with the male protagonist coming first in all but one case).

The title page also highlights the intended readership of this translation, which was done “dem Curiosen Frauen-Zimmer zu Gefallen,” that is “to please the curious womenfolk.” The same expression appears at the beginning of the preface: since these stories have been much beloved by amateurs of the French language, the translator thought that a German version could be just as agreeable for people who don't know French, and above all for ladies curious in this regard (“vor allen dem respectivè Curiosen Frauen-Zimmer”). But they are also sufficiently “good and charming” for a young man looking for entertainment and laughter after having finished his serious business; what's more, there is much in these stories that allows for “useful application” and provides moral instruction. While at first foregrounding a female audience, the preface thus makes a case for the universal appeal of these texts; incidentally, both author and translator are presented as male (“der Frantzösische Scribent”; “der Übersetzer”).

Here is not the place to undertake an analysis of the translation, which keeps quite close to the original except for a few omissions and misunderstandings and the insertion of some jokey comments. Rather than delve into the text, I would like to draw attention to the illustrations, explicitly advertised on the title page as a bonus feature of the publication (“Mit Kupffer-Figuren staffiret”). They consist of nine etchings on copper, including a full-page frontispiece and eight half-page headpieces. Only the frontispiece is signed: “Montalegre fec.” – probably [Joseph de Montalegre](#), active ca. 1696-1729. This image is not a copy of the frontispieces of the French or Dutch editions (which portray scenes of storytelling) but constructs an original portal into d'Aulnoy's universe. A diverse mix of humans and animals prefigures the cast of the tales: cat, peacock, and owl perch on top of the main arch, while two fairies arrive in carriages pulled by stags and swans and steered by monkeys. The curious reader can't help but wonder what kind of festivity (baptism or marriage?) is being celebrated in the palace today.



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Six of the eight headpieces at the beginning of the tales are similar to those found in the French edition. The German versions, however, are slightly larger and have a different aspect ratio, allowing for the inclusion of additional figures in the background. This change in format can serve not just a decorative but a narrative purpose: instead of showing only one episode (as in the French originals), some of these vignettes indeed combine several scenes into a synopsis *in nuce* of the entire tale:



left: Württembergische Landesbibliothek Stuttgart / right: Universitätsbibliothek Erlangen–Nürnberg



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Two of the headpieces are altogether different from those in the French edition. They are not original creations by Montalegre, but copied from the first Dutch edition of *Les Contes des fées*, published by Meindert Uytwerf in The Hague in 1698. These images focus on scenes from the beginning of the tales, probably chosen for their grotesque or marvelous element: the evil fairy Carabosse in “La Princesse Printanière,” and the beautiful peacock in “La Princesse Rosette”:



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It is certain that the 1698 Uytwerf edition also served as the textual basis for the German translation: in both books, exactly the same passage of “L’Oiseau bleu” was omitted by mistake. This connection confirms the important role that Dutch publishers played in the international circulation of French literature around 1700. The title page of Uytwerf’s edition of *Les Contes des fées* attempted to capitalize on the huge success of d’Aulnoy’s books about Spain by presenting the author as “Madame D**. Auteur des Memoires & Voyage d’Espagne.” A German translation of her Spanish memoir and travel narrative had appeared in Leipzig in 1695 (and would be published anew in 1703), yet for some reason Johann Daniel Tauber and the anonymous translator preferred not to allude to them in *Der Curiose Schauplatz* and to keep the identity of the “Frantzösische Scribent” a mystery. But regardless of their attribution to any individual author, these eight translated tales now existed in print and could spread and be read throughout the German lands; they were published again, with textual revisions and additions as well as new illustrations, in 1739 and 1743. To repeat Max Spirgatis’ suggestion cited above, further investigations could be worthwhile.

Volker Schröder

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Footnotes

1. Nürnberg: Raspe, 1761-65; d’Aulnoy’s tales can be found in volumes 3-6, dated 1762-63. The contents of *Das Cabinet der Feen* was first detailed by Richard Benz, *Märchen-Dichtung der Romantiker. Mit einer Vorgeschichte*, Gotha: Perthes, 1908, p. 215-218. On the presence of French fairy tales in eighteenth-century Germany, see especially Gonthier-Louis Fink, *Naissance et apogée du conte merveilleux en Allemagne: 1740-1800*, Paris: Les Belles Lettres, 1966; Manfred Grätz, *Das Märchen in der deutschen Aufklärung*, Stuttgart: Metzler, 1988; and David Blamires, “Die deutsche Rezeption der Märchen von Marie-Catherine d’Aulnoy,” in *Zwischen Aufklärung und Romantik*, ed. Konrad Feilchenfeldt et al., Würzburg: Königshausen & Neumann, 2006, p. 138-149.

2. On English translations of d’Aulnoy’s fairy tales, see Melvin Palmer, “Madame d’Aulnoy in England,” *Comparative Literature* 27, 3 (summer 1975), p. 237-253, and Christine A. Jones, “Madame d’Aulnoy charms the British,” *Romanic Review* 99, 3-4 (May-November 2008), p. 239-256.

N.B.: This post summarizes the contents of a paper presented on October 22, 2021, at the 40th Annual International Conference of the Society for Interdisciplinary French Seventeenth-Century Studies, organized by Anne Duprat and Charlotte Trinquet du Lys.
