Lucre and Seduction in Perrault's Contes

Charles Perrault's Histoires ou Contes du temps passé, avec des moralitez, published in 1697, have enjoyed a venerable three-hundred-year history as parables in which good triumphs over evil. In the realm of courtship and male-female relations in general, the moral and/or physical virtues of a young protagonist are rewarded by marriage in six out of the eight tales.

When we examine these marriages from the standpoint of Parrault's adult contemporary audience, however, the concept of marriage as a reward is called abruptly into question. Benefits are not unilateral; on the contrary, these marriages most often involve a hero or heroine who is markedly inferior to his or her new spouse in terms of social rank. Even on this superficial level, such a marriage represents a violation of the accepted social order. Bienséance, not to mention economic self-preservation, demands the marriage of equals, and a union between a prince and a peasant or even a bourgeoise would be unthinkable.

In this sense, marriage in Perrault's Contes is frequently a matter of seduction, in the strict sense of the Latin sēdūcere, meaning to lead astray. It is the upper-class or wealthy spouse who is drawn outside the protection of social norms, and into a liaison which would, in the real world, inflict serious if not irreparable damage to his or her personal status.

Who or what is the agent of this seduction? It is not, in fact, the protagonist's virtue alone which overwhelms the spouse's better judgment. Instead, it is often economic considerations, in the form of the protagonist's perceived wealth,

which help to inspire the fatal coup de foudre. The temptation of lucre, as a force which disrupts the social stability of the marriage bond, represents also an intrusion of the real world into the fantasy world of the tale. And the effect of such an intrusion is that the reader is forced to re-evaluate the tale's moral message in light of that real-world context, and to question whether the supposed ideal of behavior offered in the tale is in fact to be lauded or deplored.

The attractive power of money over marriage is depicted with ironic humor in the tale "La Barbe bleue." The opening words of this tale set the tone: "Il était une fois un homme qui avait de belles maisons à la Ville et à la Campagne, de la vaisselle d'or et d'argent, des meubles en broderie et des carrosses tout dorés"[1]. Then, after this catalogue of wealth, a secondary clause is introduced: "mais par malheur cet homme avait la Barbe bleue: cela le rendait si laid et si terrible, qu'il n'était ni femme ni fille qui ne s'enfuit de devant lui." The man's wealth takes precedence over his hideous appearance, both within the grammatical structure of the sentence and subsequently in the reactions of society.

Though it is known not only that the man is terrifying to look at but that he has had several former wives who mysteriously disappeared, he is not rebuffed when he approaches "une Dame de qualité" for the hand of one of her daughters. His wealth makes him an eligible suitor, despite his being physically and perhaps morally repugnant. At first the daughters refuse, but their resolve is weakened by a courtship which involves the lavish display of wealth. "La Barbe bleue" invites the neighborhood for an eight-day house party in the country:

> Ce n'était que promenades, que parties de chasse et de pêche, que danses et festins, que collations ... enfin tout alla si bien, que la Cadette commença à trouver que le Maître du logis n'avait plus la barbe si bleue, et que c'était un fort honnête homme (p. 149).

Once the marriage takes place, the bride's friends and neighbors hasten to come calling, "tant elles avaient d'impatience de voir toutes les richesses de la Maison" (p. 150). They are treated to the sight of one richly furnished room after another, whose contents are catalogued exhaustively for us by Perrault:

> . . . des tapisseries, des lits, des sophas, des cabinets, des guéridons, des tables et des miroirs, où l'on se voyait depuis les pieds jusqu'à la tête, et dont les bordures, les unes de glace, les autres d'argent et de vermeil doré, étaient les plus belles et les plus magnifiques qu'on eut jamais vues (p. 150).

The deliberate mention of several items which were newly introduced or fashionable at the time of the Contes' publication in 1695, such as tall mirrors and "sophas"[2], underscores the fact that Perrault is describing the real world of his own contemporaries, as opposed to the abstract world of the traditional folktale.

The neighbors' reaction is to praise and to envy "le bonheur de leur amie" (p. 150). This "bonheur" is strictly materialistic in nature, for in any other context a woman would be pitied for having such a terrifyingly repulsive husband.

At the conclusion of the tale, after the wife's

near-fatal disobedience, money is the dominant force in resolving her difficulties. She inherits her husband's great wealth, and uses it for the social advancement of herself and her family:

> Elle en employa une partie à marier sa soeur Anne avec un jeune Gentilhomme, dont elle était aimée depuis longtemps; une autre partie à acheter des Charges de Capitaine à ses deux frères; et le reste à se marier elle-même à un fort honnête homme, qui lui fit oublier le mauvais temps qu'elle avait passé avec la Barbe bleue. (p. 153-4)

The first of the tale's two verse moralités recites the predicted lesson about the dangers of curiosity, but it is interesting to note that the verb employed by Perrault is "coûter," a word with obvious pecuniary implications. The moral begins: "La curiosité malgré tous ses attraits / Coûte souvent bien des regrets" and ends thus: "Et toujours il coûte trop cher" (p. 154). The wife's curiosity in fact cost her the magnificent lifestyle and prestige she enjoyed as the spouse of such a wealthy man.

There are other tales in which a humble heroine or hero is cloaked in false trappings of wealth, with a perceptible impact upon the prospective spouse. Perhaps the most familiar among these is "Cendrillon," who of course dresses up to go to the ball with the aid of her fairy godmother. In this tale, the dichotomy of rank between heroine and hero is not extreme, since she is the daughter of a "gentilhomme" (p. 171). According to Furetière's Dictionnaire universel of 1690, this term is defined as "Homme noble d'extraction, qui ne doit point sa Noblesse ni à sa charge, ni aux Lettres du Prince." Cendrillon, however, is not

garbed in a manner which befits her true rank. Unlike her stepsisters, who dress for the ball in red velvet and embroidery, Cendrillon is dressed in cloth of gold and precious stones: "ses habits furent changés en des habits de drap d'or et d'argent tout chamarrés de pierreries" (p. 173). Her helpful godmother also gives her an entourage befitting a monarch, including a gilded coach and six attendant lackeys (p. 173).

Not surprisingly, the prince is taken in by this tempting façade: "Le Fils du Roi, qu'on alla avertir qu'il venait d'arriver une grande Princesse qu'on ne connaissait point, courut la recevoir; il lui donna la main à la descente du carrosse, et la mena dans la salle où était la compagnie" (p. 174). Perrault makes it clear that in addition to Cendrillon's personal attractions, it is her clothes which make an enormous impact upon the spectators: "Toutes les Dames étaient attentives à considérer sa coiffure et ses habits, pour en avoir dès le lendemain de semblables, pourvu qu'il se trouvât des étoffes assez belles, et des ouvriers assez habiles" (p. 174). Then without pause, Perrault tells us that "Le Fils du Roi mit [Cendrillon] à la place la plus honorable, et ensuite la prit pour la mener danser." Due to the richness and obvious expense of her attire, Cendrillon is treated as though she outranked every other woman present, a situation which is of course far from the truth.

The tale's dénouement has been deformed by popular tradition, so that the prince himself places the glass slipper upon Cendrillon's foot. This romantic scene, however, is not to be found in Perrault. Instead, it is another "Gentilhomme" who conducts the test, and the prince never sees her in humble garb. Before Cendrillon is led to the palace, her fairy godmother changes the

clothes into new ones, "encore plus magnifiques que tous les autres. . . . On la mena chez le jeune Prince, parée comme elle était: il la trouva encore plus belle que jamais, et peu de jours après, il l'épousa" (p. 177). The phrase "parée comme elle était" is revelatory, as this information is superfluous in terms of the plot; it serves rather to emphasize the importance of Cendrillon's deceptive parure in winning the hand of the prince.

The false appearance of wealth is carried to a much greater extreme in "Le Maître Chat, ou le Chat botté." In this tale, it is actually a peasant, a miller's son, who wins the hand of a princess. This represents a violent rupture of the established social order, so severe as to force the reader to question whether the young man should be viewed as a hero or as a threatening arriviste.

The young man's advancement, as perpetrated by the tale's central character, the Cat, is accomplished by creating the false appearance of wealth and rank. He is first given a fictitious name, "Monsieur le Marquis de Carabas." According to Furetière, this title did not indicate hereditary nobility, but rather the posession of land designated as a "marquisat" by royal degree ("lettres patentes"). The title is therefore a direct indicator of wealth, not breeding[4].

First appearances are all-important, and the Cat orchestrates the false drowning scene, wherein thieves have supposedly stolen the clothes of the Marquis. As a result, "Le Roi ordonna aussitôt aux Officiers de sa Garde-Robe d'aller quérir un de ses plus beaux habits pour Monsieur le Marquis de Carabas" (p. 159). Dressed in the King's own lavish garments, the young man is thus elevated to

a similar rank in the eyes of the gullible King and his daughter, who immediately falls in love: "elle en devint amoureuse à la folie" (p. 159). The phrase "à la folie" stresses to the reader that this passion is indeed crazy, in its violation of social bienséance.

The Cat carries the deception further by passing off the Ogre's rich lands and impressive castle as belonging to the Marquis. The King's reaction is illuminating: "Le Roi était étonné des grands biens de Monsieur le Marquis de Carabas" (p. 160), and then: "Comment, Monsieur le Marquis, s'écria le Roi, ce Château est encore à vous! il ne se peut rien de plus beau que cette cour et que tous ces Bâtiments qui l'environnent; voyons les dedans, s'il vous plaît" (p. 160-1). Initial astonishment is followed by acquisitive curiosity, to see whethter the castle's furnishings match the grandeur of its façade. Then, after consuming "une magnifique collation," the King offers the hand of his daughter to the Marquis:

> Le Roi charmé des bonnes qualités de Monsieur le Marquis de Carabas, de même que sa fille qui en était folle, et voyant les grands biens qu'il possédait, lui dit, après avoir bu cinq ou six coups: "Il ne tiendra qu'à vous, Monsieur le Marquis, que vous ne soyez mon gendre." (p. 161)

The progression of events, as offered by Perrault, is that the King is first charmed, which according to Furetière was commonly said in reference to magical spells; then he is seduced by the Marquis' apparent wealth; and then he consumes a quantity of wine, which has a well-known effect of distorting one's perception of reality. In this case, the alcohol merely reinforces the King's

willingness to embrace the illusion of the Marquis' identity, a willingness which is born of simple greed.

The tale's first verse moralité states that a rich inheritance may be all well and good, but "L'industrie et le savoir-faire / Valent mieux que les biens acquis" (p. 161). The term "valoir mieux," meaning to have greater worth, may be taken quite literally in this context, to mean that the Cat's cleverness and deceit brought the young man far more material gain than he could have hoped to inherit, and certainly far more than that to which he was legitimately entitled[5].

In the story "Les Fées," we are not dealing with deception, but rather with a situation in which the spouse is fully aware of the inappropriateness of the intended marriage, but proceeds nevertheless because of financial considerations. This is admittedly a cynical view of a tale which is usually regarded as as straightforward parable of virtue rewarded and vice punished, but it is Perrault who embeds this cynicism within the text.

The social status of the heroine is left ambiguous, although when she assists the old woman at the well, her only words are "oui-da, ma bonne mère" (p. 165). "Oui-da" is an unmistakably rustic colloquial expression, described as "un terme populaire" by Furetière. Pierre Richelet's Dictionnaire François of 1680 goes even further, to describe "da" as a "sorte d'interjection qui n'a lieu que dans le style le plus simple, ou dans la conversation familière"[6]. The heroine's own words thus identify her social inferiority.

Her chance encounter with the prince is described as follows:

> Le fils du Roi qui revenait de la chasse la rencontra et la voyant si belle, lui demanda ce qu'elle faisait là toute seule et ce qu'elle avait à pleurer. "Hélas! Monsieur, c'est ma mère qui m'a chassée du logis." Le fils du Roi, qui vit sortir de sa bouche cinq ou six Perles, et autant de Diamants, la pria de lui dire d'où cela lui venait. Elle lui conta toute son aventure. Le fils du Roi en devint amoureux, et considérant qu'un tel don valait mieux que tout ce qu'on pouvait donner en mariage à une autre, l'emmena au Palais du Roi son père, où il l'épousa. (p. 167)

The prince's interest is piqued at first by the girl's beauty, but after seeing the pearls and diamonds issuing from her mouth, he becomes more solicitous; whereas before he simply asked what the matter was, now he begs her politely ("la pria") to tell her tale. The coup de foudre then strikes, and the prince falls in love--but with what, the girl or the jewels? The gallantry of love is followed immediately by a coldblooded financial assessment: "Le fils du Roi en devint amoureux, et considérant qu'un tel don valait mieux que tout ce qu'on pouvait donner en mariage à une autre. . . ." As in the tale of "Le Maître Chat," the phrase "valoir mieux" may be taken literally, as indeed the gift of producing precious gems at will is worth more in sheer monetary terms than any possible dowry. There is not even a token acknowledgment of the girl's virtue; instead, greed is clearly the motivation for the prince's behavior.

Both of the tale's verse moralités support this reading of the tale. The first begins, "Les Diamants et les Pistoles, / Peuvent beaucoup sur

les Esprits" (p. 167), a sentence which neatly sums up what actually happens in the tale. Then, however, Perrault does an about-face, stating that kindness is of greater importance: "Cependant les douces paroles / Ont encor plus de force, et sont d'un plus grand prix." This brief tour de galanterie contradicts the first statement, but the effect of this contradiction is to underscore the relative abstraction and the implausibility of the sentimental moral, when it is juxtaposed with the hardheaded truth of the other.

The second moralité states that "L'Honnêteté coûte des soins, / Et veut un peu de complaisance, / Mait tôt ou tard elle a sa récompense, / Et souvent dans le temps qu'on y pense le moins" (p. 167). The words "coûte" and "récompense" have obvious financial overtones, and one may again interpret the meaning literally, since the heroine's act of kindness does indeed bring her a financial reward greater than any she could ever have imagined, as well as a marriage of ultimate social prestige.

There is therefore a certain parallel between the wife of "La Barbe bleue," who sells herself to a repulsive man in order to enjoy his wealth, and the prince in "Les Fées," who disregards what is due his exalted position in order to enjoy the wealth of an inferior bride. Similarly, there is a parallel between the prince in "Cendrillon," who is dazzled by the false appearance of wealth and rank of the mysterious unknown princess at the ball, and the King and princess in "Le Maître Chat," who are taken in by a well-dressed impostor, and to a certain extent, victimized by their own greed.

In all of these tales, however, the temptation of lucre is a force which motivates the marriage

of unequals, thereby violating the social standards of acceptable behavior. The characters who violate this bienséance appear in a very different light as a result, suggesting that the tales' moral message is more complex than might be at first supposed. The wife of "La Barbe bleue" and her envious friends, the avaricious King and the mercenary princes all serve to warn us against the love of money, which is not only the root of all evil but also a threat to the stability of the social order.

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Notes

[1] Charles Perrault, Contes, ed. J.-P. Collinet (Paris: Gallimard, 1981), p. 149. All citations of the Contes are taken from this edition.

[2] Tall mirrors are also mentioned in "Cendrillon" as an indication of wealth:

> [Cendrillon] couchait tout au haut de la maison, dans un grenier, sur une méchante paillasse, pendant que ses soeurs étaient dans des chambres parquetées, où elles avaient des lits des plus à la mode, et des miroirs où elles se voyaient depuis les pieds jusqu'à la tête (p. 171).

The term "sopha" was a neologism in Perrault's day, as indicated by its absence from contemporary dictionaries.

[3] The following dictionaries were consulted for this study: Antoine Furetière, Dictionnaire universel (La Haye: Chez Arnoud et Reinier Leers, 1690), 3 vols., pages unnumbered, and Pierre Richelet, Dictionnaire François (Genève: Jean Herman Wiederhold, 1680), 2 vols.

[4] See also Le Petit Robert (1984), I, 1158.

[5] For a more complete discussion of "Le Maître Chat ou le Chat botté," see my book Perrault's Morals for Moderns (New York, Berne, Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang, 1985), Chapter V.

[6] Richelet, I, 207. This definition is also cited by Collinet, p. 334.