RANDOM HOUSE eBOOKS

Wonder Tales

Marina Warner

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About the Book

Marina Warner has gathered together a magical collection of fairy tales by the great women storytellers of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. These are passionate, extraordinary, and occasionally proto-feminist retellings of classic fairy stories by women who ingeniously used the fairy-tale genre to comment on their own times and experiences.

These stories are all in translations by celebrated writers, including Gilbert Adair, John Ashbery, Ranjit Bolt, A.S. Byatt and Terence Cave. With an illuminating introduction by Marina Warner, recognised as one of our greatest experts on myth and fairy tale.

About the Author

Marina Warner is a novelist, historian and critic; her fiction includes *Indigo, The Lost Father* (awarded a Commonwealth Writers' Prize) and the recent collection of stories, *The Mermaids in the Basement*. Her historical quests into areas of myth and symbolism – *Alone of All Her Sex, Joan of Arc* and *Monuments and Maidens* – led her into the exploration of fairy tales. She is the editor of *Wonder Tales*, a collection of fairy tales by the great woman storytellers of the 17th and 18th centuries, and author of a study of the fairy tale, *From the Beast to the Blonde*. In 1994 she gave the Reith Lectures on BBC radio, *Managing Monsters: Six Myths of Our Time*.

Marina Warner lives in London with her husband, the painter John Dewe Mathews, and her son.

ALSO BY MARINA WARNER

Fiction

In A Dark Wood
A Skating Party
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The Mermaids In The Basement

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Managing Monsters: Six Myths Of Our Time
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Wonder Tales (Editor)

From The Beast To The Blonde:
On Fairy Tales And Their Tellers

For Carmen
With love, in wonder

WONDER TALES

Six Stories of Enchantment

EDITED AND INTRODUCED BY
Marina Warner

WITH ILLUSTRATIONS BY
Sophie Herxheimer

Introduction

INTRODUCTION

WONDER HAS NO opposite; it springs up already doubled in itself, compounded of dread and desire at once, attraction and recoil, producing a thrill, the shudder of pleasure and of fear. It names the marvel, the prodigy, the surprise as well as the responses they excite, of fascination and inquiry; it conveys the active motion towards experience and the passive stance of enrapturement. The French *conte de fées* is usually translated as fairy tale, but the word *Wundermärchen* was adopted by the Romantics in Germany and the Russian folklorists to characterise the folk tale or fairy tale. It's a useful term, it frees this kind of story from the miniaturised whimsy of fairyland to breathe the wilder air of the marvellous.

The six stories translated here were written in the heyday of the first literary enthusiasm for tales, by a group of writers who shared much else besides: they were urban, aristocratic, they knew one another's work, and exchanged ideas about it in various Parisian *hôtels particuliers* where they entertained; in some cases, they were close friends. It was these writers, almost all women, telling stories and publishing them in a city setting under the Sun King at a quintessential moment of the ancient régime, who consciously invented the modern fairy tale. Word games of all kind were a pastime, and the art of conversation developed as an ideal of salon society. Telling stories, elegantly, resourcefully, aptly, was required of a guest; in Mme de Murat's novel, *Les Lutins du château de Kernosy*, one of the heroine's unwanted suitors shows his dull wits when he fails to appreciate the importance of fantasy in narrative and goes to bed before the talespinning begins.

Charles Perrault, the famous author of *Contes du temps passé* (1697), in which the familiar versions of ‘Cinderella’, ‘The Sleeping Beauty’ and so forth first appeared, is represented here by a gallant tale on which he is now thought to have collaborated with a most remarkable spoiled priest and libertine, the Abbé de Choisy. Perrault championed the cause of the *conte de fées* against the scorn of his confrères in the Académie; he was a cousin of Marie-Jeanne L’Héritier and he responded to her ardent partisanship of the literary wonder tale. Furthermore, as the theme of ‘The Counterfeit Marquise’ is cross-dressing and Choisy was a celebrated transvestite, as Perrault also travestied himself in the guise of *ma Mère l’oye* (Mother Goose) to publish his tales, it didn’t seem inappropriate to allow their story into a book otherwise composed by women, some of them countesses and baronesses, if not marquises.

More than the deeds of the fairies, wonders characterise fairy tales; indeed, fairies don’t even put in an appearance sometimes (there are none in ‘Red Riding Hood’, for instance). But marvels of all kinds tumble (and fly) thick and fast through these stories, and various fairies, good and bad, appear to conjure them; they can offer help or hindrance, white magic or black magic; they form part of the intrinsic quest structure of the tales, as the protagonists are put to the test. The heroine must climb a mountain wearing iron shoes and fill a cribbled pail, she must go down to hell and fetch the magic water of discretion. The wonders also serve to punish the wicked – the ogre is deceived and beats thin air, thinking he is dispatching his enemy; sometimes they are both boon and bane, like the magic fruits in the fairies’ garden in ‘The White Cat’, which come when you whistle.

Magic expresses itself above all in shape-shifting, and indeed, metamorphosis could be said to be one of the distinguishing marks of this protean genre; Bearskin,

Starlight, The White Cat, Hidessa in ‘The Great Green Worm’, and the lovers in ‘The Counterfeit Marquise’ are all bound at one point or another in a different shape which conceals their true identity and their passion. The quest for love entails a quest for recognition of self, past the barriers of conventional expectation; love means that external social rules can be broken – the prince is disturbed by the desire that stirs in him for Bearskin in her mute bear form, and Izmir feels the attraction of Starlight when she’s been turned into a Moor, contrary to her fear that he will not love her now that she has turned black. ‘The Great Green Worm’ is a tale of double metamorphosis in which both Hidessa, the ugly little one (Laidronette in the French) and the loathly worm find love before they are changed back into a fairy tale couple. All these transformations comment on the oppressive narrowness of the prevailing canon of beauty, the restrictive grasp of erotic possibilities. Although the tales are embedded in the values of their time, and bear the marks of its prejudices and its snobbery, they do also constantly press against the barriers to make them give way.

Hidessa is clever, and spirited and brave and persevering, and though Marie-Catherine d’Aulnoy was directly inspired by Apuleius’s second-century tale of Cupid and Psyche, her heroine is never as lachrymose or spineless as poor Psyche; similarly, in Marie-Jeanne L’Héritier’s story, Finessa is full of schemes to fight adversity in whatever shape. The multiple masks and metamorphoses, ruses and disguises underline the importance of trueness of heart and toughness of mind, the inner world as opposed to the outer. But popular transmission of fairy tales, especially in the post-war period, has catastrophically emphasised beauty as the feminine virtue most needed to succeed. This runs directly counter to the vision of the female quester expressed here, above all by D’Aulnoy in ‘The Great Green Worm’.

After wonder, consolation; after inquiry, resolution; after shape-shifting or metamorphosis, the happy ending. Happy endings characterise the wonder tale, and a happy ending, in this collection, means a certain strain of exalted, heartfelt, hardwon love. The formulaic closure of the traditional fairy tale has excited much criticism; especially from teachers who rightly deplore that such stories lead girl children to want wedding bells and nothing much else from life perhaps except a castle or two – the dream of becoming a Princess Di. This type of reading results when the tales are prised loose from their historical context, and viewed as unchanging repositories of eternal wisdom with application across time, place, culture, and history. Wonder tales do of course speak of things that matter and will go on mattering with universal significance; otherwise it wouldn't be possible to respond to the delicious fancifulness of 'The White Cat' with any pleasure today. But they were also produced for adults, to deal with actual, urgent dilemmas at a certain time and in a particular context, which shape and colour the obstacles and the goals of the heroes and the heroines. The modern residue, purveyed in a dozen Cinderella plots from Disney's film (1950) to *Pretty Woman* (1990), composed of sugarcandy ornament, ambitious snobbery, and demeaning romantic bilge misses the polished shafts the tales point at hypocrisy and greed and other social ills in their own times.

Though Henriette-Julie de Murat, Marie-Catherine d'Aulnoy, and Marie-Jeanne L'Héritier liked to stress that they told the stories to amuse, their material reveals the deep cunning of fiction and fantasy at work to give relief from pain. As Walter Benjamin has written, 'the original displeasure of anxiety' in wonder tales, 'turns into the great pleasure of anxiety successfully faced and mastered.' The *précieuses*, the feminist writers of the generation before D'Aulnoy and L'Héritier, had fought for tenderness in friendship between men and women, for reform of the

language, and for equal rights to intelligent talk. They had also focused on matters of more immediate material urgency: asking for control of their own money, for their right to choose not to marry; or, if they were married off, they wanted to be given the same social permission, as men, to take a lover. Above all, however, they wanted to decide for themselves on the husband of their choice, not accept an arrangement with a stranger. They also sued for the opportunity to learn, and to travel. These demands are buried in the tales; they were driven into the coded language of enchantment by the most penetrative state censorship on the one hand, and fervent religious revivalism on the other. They themselves had to undergo metamorphosis and hide in the landscape of wonder in the later years of the Sun King's reign – Marie-Jeanne L'Héritier was a *salonnière*, who inherited the salon held by the novelist and high priestess of the *précieuses* movement, Madeleine de Scudéry. The Baronne d'Aulnoy received in her successful salon on the rue St Benoît; Perrault and the Abbé de Choisy frequented these social gatherings; so did Mme de Murat, until she was exiled from Paris by order of the king, because she had written a satire which clearly targeted his liaison with the pious Mme de Maintenon. Murat was sent to Loches, in the Loire valley, in 1694, and was held there under a form of house arrest; nevertheless, she began her own 'Académie du domicile' to keep herself amused, and was remembered by one friend as telling stories at night till the embers in the fire died out.

Murat's disgrace offers a precious insight into the immediate context of the wonder tales collected here. The *salons* and the *salonnières* were watched by the court at Versailles (Anne of Austria was known to have hired spies to infiltrate them because they were seedbeds of protest and dissent); the Fronde, the nobles' uprising which convulsed the early part of Louis XIV's reign, had been organised from the salons of great ladies, like the Marquise

de Rambouillet – some of them famously took part in the fighting.

The positions developed in salon conversation were not intrinsically or exclusively political – they were socially subversive. The practice of storytelling grew up in the salons as part of an open campaign about equality and intelligence in conversation; the *précieuses*, with Madeleine de Scudéry at their head, assaulted the conventions which made *galanteries* the only topic of mixed company. It is hard for readers today, accustomed to the frivolous image of the ancien régime, to pass through the screen of custom and rethink the character of some of its personalities. The rise of rationalist philosophers helped to distort their activities, especially their use of fantasy, and their love of extravagant storytelling. Rousseau would proscribe fairy tales from children's education in *Émile*; such nonsense could overheat their already excited minds, he argued. He also scorned the salons for their effeminacy: 'Every woman in Paris,' he wrote, 'gathers in her apartment a harem of men more womanish than she.' He recommended that men retire to their own clubs, according to the English model. The Marquise de Lambert, one of the great literary ladies of the salons, was already lamenting at the start of the eighteenth century, 'There were, in an earlier time houses where [women] were allowed to talk and think, where the muses joined the society of the graces. The Hôtel de Rambouillet, greatly honoured in the past century, has become the ridicule of ours.'

Henriette-Julie de Murat was not alone in using tales to catch the conscience of the king; nor in being punished for it. The seventeenth-century wonder tale, with its varied register, now *galanty* now caustic, now knowing, now faux-naïf, points forward to the biting Voltairean conte. Voltaire was friends with his storyteller contemporaries, like Mlle de Lubert, who were carrying on the ironic tradition adumbrated by D'Aulnoy and Murat, and straining

medieval fable and romance through a mesh of satire. In Murat's novel, *Les Lutins du château de Kernosy*, the two stories 'Starlight' and 'Bearskin' are told aloud to the company gathered after dinner: including the heroines' aunt and guardian, who has plans to sell her wards to the highest bidder, however appalling he might be, in order to pay off her gambling debts. (Though these tales have been reattributed to Lubert since, they function seamlessly within Murat's scheme.)

The pioneering D'Aulnoy also focuses on impediments to love. She recast the classical love story of Cupid and Psyche in a myriad tales, obsessively making the case for choice against the intrigues of interested parties. In her *contes*, like 'The Great Green Worm' and 'The White Cat', true love has to struggle against numerous determined enemies. Though the message is largely lost on today's audience, thoroughly accustomed to choosing not just one partner but several, the French wonder tale was fighting for social emancipation and change on grounds of urgent personal experience.

Marie-Catherine d'Aulnoy was fifteen or sixteen in 1666, when she was taken from a convent where she had been placed for her education by François de la Motte, Baron d'Aulnoy, some thirty years older than her, who had bought his title and his lands after rising from the position of valet in the service under of the Duc de Vendôme, a nobleman well-known for his taste in young men. In her *Memoirs*, which are as colourful as her wonder tales might lead one to expect, she relates how she was abducted without warning with the connivance of her father, who profited in the transaction. Three years later – this part does not appear in the *Memoirs* – Marie-Catherine d'Aulnoy became entangled in a remarkable scandal. In 1669, two noblemen deposed against M. le Baron d'Aulnoy that, in a fit of rage against a tax demand which he was refusing to pay, he had abused the king and his ministers in the Palais de

Luxembourg. Their testimony landed the baron in the Bastille on a charge of lèse-majesté, which then carried a capital penalty. He escaped death after the witnesses against him had been tortured and confessed to calumny. Their testimonial implicated Marie-Catherine d'Aulnoy and her mother, the Marquise de Gadagne, as fellow conspirators: the men were believed to be their lovers, and the whole incident an elaborate and careful scheme to rid themselves of M. d'Aulnoy.

The two women left the country; again, the scraps of evidence read like an adventure – out of Alexandre Dumas, however, rather than the seventeenth century. One story describes how Mme d'Aulnoy was in bed when the sergeant arrived to arrest her, how she jumped out of the window, and hid under a bier in a nearby church, before rejoining her mother and fleeing abroad. Later, Mme de Gadagne was given a handsome pension by the king of Spain for services rendered in Rome; her daughter returned to Paris around 1685, no questions asked, and opened her salon, where she enjoyed dressing up with her guests as characters in the stories they exchanged, between refreshments of fruit cordials, café au lait, and hot chocolate.

Mother and daughter had been reprieved, it was said, on condition they worked as spies for the French, and that they lived (and pursued their trade) in Spain, Italy and England. The Baron d'Aulnoy did not receive much sympathy; on his death in 1700, Saint-Évremond wrote to his widow (there was no possibility of divorce), 'The condition of a widowhood … brings joy to those who lose wicked husbands.' He added that he was sorry that she had been left nothing: 'This injustice alone makes me loathe his memory.' Deprived of marital support (in the circumstances perhaps not surprising), need drove on Mme d'Aulnoy's industry. She had a light-fingered way with sources, and her first great successes – spirited and apparently first-

hand accounts of manners and morals at the Spanish and English courts – have been shown to be either fanciful – or borrowed. Such stratagems are quite proper, however, in the fantastic sphere of the wonder tale; D'Aulnoy recasts the ancient folk tales and romances she discovered with her own rampant imagination, laced with mordancy, and bubbling with fantastical invention.

Marie-Catherine d'Aulnoy's is an exceptional story in its detail, but not in its general drift; the Comtesse de Murat was denounced for unruly behaviour, including lesbianism, by her husband and his family, and after long petitioning, only succeeded in returning to Paris from exile a year before she died. The account of the ogre Rhinoceros in 'Starlight' and of parents who oppose their son's wishes in 'Bearskin' and renege on their promises, springs from the same social arrangements as D'Aulnoy's tales, which for all their high-spirited fun, can sound a dark note at times: 'Such a marriage becomes slavery if it is not formed by love.'

These successors of the *précieuses* were combating aristocratic complacency and determinism: tenderness and interior worth rather than title and goods were what they urged in a prospective husband. It's a matter of historical irony typical of women's lives that these women should be known by their married names and titles – but the situation is difficult to reverse in library catalogues and other reference works. L'Héritier, by contrast, like one or two other contemporaries whose work is still little known (Mlle de Lubert and Mlle Bernard) resisted marriage throughout her life, following the example of her friend and mentor Mlle de Scudéry.

Men and matrimony were not the only issue to which the women developed responses in common. The ironical picture of Quietlife Island in 'Starlight' comments for instance on Louis XIV's ruinous wars and the cult of

military might. But their storytelling presented a united front in other ways, too.

Wonder tales and fairy stories do not have onlie begetters, but are reworked from tradition and other sources, and crystallised in one form at one time by one teller for one audience, then by another with different listeners or readers in mind. The stories here share a declared origin in tradition: D'Aulnoy claims in one place to have gathered her material from 'an old Arab slave woman', L'Héritier invokes more intimate memories of her own nurse and governess telling her stories by the fire, and she urged her friend the Comtesse de Murat to follow her example and set down on paper the ancient tales which had come down in French from the voices of the people; Murat caused a commotion in Paris when she went out wearing the Breton peasant costume she favoured. The *conte* was characteristically transmitted orally, and when Marie-Jeanne L'Héritier and Murat made their claim to popular roots, they were defying the tradition of high-flown classicism, pompous odes and allegorising mythologies. Fables, old wives' tales, proverbs, the handed-down, well-used, anonymous culture did not require an education to be understood or an aristocratic audience to be heard; the writers shared it among themselves, and echoes sound between the stories, as the imagery recurs, of white cats, disembodied hands, rudderless boats, while the motifs return with modular differences: cannibal ogres, jealous old fairies, bad mothers, rivalrous brothers. 'The White Cat' for instance recognisably combines the plots of 'Rapunzel' and 'The Three Feathers', two of the best-known Grimm Brothers' tales, published much later, in 1812.

The popular, unwritten provenance was often – almost always – fictive. D'Aulnoy drew on Greek romances, medieval legends of Mélusine, on Tristan and on Merlin, on *fabliaux* and the *Lais* of Marie de France, on her contemporary La Fontaine, as well as finding plots and

much narrative incident in the down-to-earth and vigorous fantasies of story collections like Boccaccio's *Decameron* and *Le Piacevoli Notti* by Giovan Francesco Straparola ('The Babbler'). L'Héritier, too, for all her protestations about her beloved childhood nurse, also drew on printed literature, especially Giambattista Basile's *Lo Cunto de li Cunti*, published in 1634–6 in Naples. She chose to pass on Basile's tale 'Sapia Liccarda' because it features a heroine of spirit resisting her given fate. But she made changes. The wicked brother does not figure in the earlier Italian story, and all the heroine's tricks are only her ardent way of testing her lover. L'Héritier's rather gruesome additions – in the Basile, the dummy is made of sweetmeats, in 'The Subtle Princess', of animal lights – confront the existence of unregenerate, male wickedness. Although the flavour of her style and her friends' and colleagues' remains unequivocally literary, even flowery, it is also garrulous; repetition and hyperbole, cascades of detail in description, and circles within circles of plot devices are all part of the bazaar storyteller's stock-in-trade. These authors further laid claim to an oral context of origin, by framing several of these tales within a novel, in which one of the characters is given a turn to tell a story aloud. To keep this particular stylistic flavour, dialogue has been set out in this collection as if the stories were being told by one voice.

The hard and fast distinction between literature and orature breaks down in the tradition, because the written versions nourish the spoken and vice versa. 'Starlight' rings changes on the medieval *chante-fable* of 'Aucassin and Nicolette', including the topsy-turvy land, Quietlife Island, where the women do the fighting (with crab apples) while the menfolk lie around in bed. Variations on the theme of the trickster princess who lives on her wits, dupes her adversaries with dummies and masks in order to win her true love, appear all over the world and are still being told aloud today. A story recently collected in Palestine

relates with similar glee the clever ruses of a certain Sahin, to win herself and her sisters well-trained husbands.

The point of recalling the oral connection was twofold: as women writers and fairy tales were sneered at by members of the Académie française like Boileau, they made common cause by identifying themselves with the vulgar people against the establishment authorities, who debarred them. In the prolonged and bitter Querelle des Anciens et des Modernes (The Quarrel between the Ancients and the Moderns) women and wonders were fiercely, definitely Modern; men and gods Ancient. Madame de Lafayette, even though her chaste restraint tends to the *ancien* style, was influenced by the circle of *modernes* in which she had earlier moved, to catch an atmosphere of wonder here and there.

But also, by pleading native, Gallic tradition, the storytellers could include anything and everything they pleased, breaking all the rules of classicism, of the unities, of linguistic purity, of decorum – what was called *bienséance* or seemliness. Hence the pleasure in the grotesque, the unlikely and the incongruous, the mixture of tragedy and comedy, the frank eroticism, the casual cruelty and the topsy-turvy bizarreries in these tales of wonder: nothing could be further from the austere tenor and proportion of a tragedy by Racine.

The challenge issued by the form of the *conte* or wonder tale itself has been overlooked in the subsequent domestication of the genre; when the child audience was singled out by the newly flourishing market in juvenile literature, fairy tales began to be adapted to suit a nursery setting, with patent moralities adjusted to train children in what is expected of them. This trend started in the chapbooks of the eighteenth century but was established in the first quarter of the nineteenth. D’Aulnoy remained the most successful of the writers in the new, fashionable genre, but her work was continually abridged and

bowdlerised – with the paradoxical effect of making it seem all frills and furbelows and bo-peep bonnets. ‘Mother Bunch’, the sobriquet she was given in eighteenth-century England, became a portmanteau name, like Mother Goose, for a fairy storyteller; when she was still alive, Mme d’Aulnoy tried unavailingly to unscramble the false attributions and the pirated editions. Though the tradition of storytelling should entail a continual return, reclaim, revision, and maybe repudiation, it is a pity when the palimpsest becomes so dense that the text beneath is obscured.

Perrault is today much more famous than Madame d’Aulnoy or the other writers published in this collection, partly because he too was adapted, modified, and carefully selected over centuries of popular publication. The cannibal ogress in ‘The Sleeping Beauty’ has been cut from many later editions, for instance, and the tale included here has never been included in a collection of Perrault’s *Contes* even though the best scholarship has attributed it to him. Though Perrault’s ambiguous approach to the nursery tale was always clear to the reader, he became a favourite uncle because his jocular tone pokes fun at the material itself (when the ogre’s wife in Hop O’ My Thumb finds her daughters’ throats cut, she has a fainting fit – ‘most women faint in similar circumstances’ remarks Perrault). This sprightliness covers up the darkness lurking in his stories (the cruelty to Cinderella, the incest in ‘Donkeyskin’), in a way that Madame d’Aulnoy’s fantasies never do. Her ironies reinforce the viciousness or indifference of her wicked characters rather than work to blur their impact.

The writers collected in *Wonder Tales* were anthologised in *Le Cabinet des Fées*, first published in three volumes in Amsterdam in 1731, then rearranged and increased to forty-one volumes and appearing from 1785 in Paris and Amsterdam and then in Geneva, after the Revolution interrupted their appearance. The attributions were

muddled, and have continued to present some problems: ‘The Subtle Princess’ for instance was given to Murat in 1731, to Perrault in 1785, though the editor there admitted he was not sure Perrault had written it; the first edition of Murat’s novel, *Les Lutins du château de Kernosy* (1710), does not include the two tales printed here. D’Aulnoy’s tales filled one volume in the 1731 edition of *Le Cabinet*, and nearly four in 1785. Jack Zipes, the American folklore scholar, has recently retrieved many of these neglected authors for the contemporary, English-speaking audience with his collections; this book owes a great debt to his pioneering work. ‘Bearskin’ and ‘Starlight’ have never been reprinted in French, let alone translated, as they were not collected with Murat’s stories in *Le Cabinet des Fées*, where she fills the first two volumes of the 1731 edition.

Terence Cave, who has made a subtle and impeccable translation of ‘The Princesse de Clèves’, by Mme de Lafayette, seemed the appropriate choice for these urbane and ironic romances. Gilbert Adair, who enjoys intertextual games, responded to Marie-Jeanne L’Héritier; three hundred years ago she ended one story with the self-reflexive comment: ‘If, like many travellers in the land of Fiction, my fate is to get lost in this land, more difficult to cross than people think, it’s as well that I get lost on the path I’ve chosen, than on another.’ Ranjit Bolt, who has turned such adroit versions of plays by Perrault’s contemporaries like Molière, has translated the Perrault–Choisy, with its dramatic disguises, mistaken identities and climactic final curtain. A. S. Byatt, who in *Possession* explored the serpentine lore of the fairy Mélusine, and even named her heroine the poet Christabel LaMotte, has written fairy tales herself, and in her recent novella, ‘Morpho Eugenia’ in *Angels and Insects*, played her own enigma variations on the butterfly imagery of Cupid and Psyche; D’Aulnoy might have scried Byatt in a magic glass when she was writing ‘Le Serpentin vert’. At a launch of his

book of poems, *Flow Chart*, John Ashbery revealed that he was translating ‘The White Cat’ for the sheer delight of it – a piece of strong and magic luck which set this book on its way, as the first volume, it is hoped, of a new library of the wonder tale.

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Kentish Town, 1993