



A review of  
**The Island of Happiness:  
Tales of  
Madame d'Aulnoy**

Paul Quinn

One of the unintended consequences of the Covid lockdowns was the proliferation of podcasts. Whether this aural pox will survive the end of Covid restrictions, or whether some type of media Darwinism will see the best (or best-supported) survive with the rest lost in the ether, floating into space until detected by alien species whose view of the Earth will be warped by the ancient mediocrity contained in those broadcasts, is unclear. My jaundiced view of the podcast as a form is partly caused by having been asked to take part in three, which resulted in my recording two, but with only one finally being broadcast. The unbroadcast recording saw an interesting discussion of versions of 'Bluebeard' drift into a discussion of the fairy tales of Catherine d'Aulnoy and the desirability of d'Aulnoy's work being more readily available, both for students and for the general reading public. Such an edition would be a necessary corrective to the persistent phallogocentric ideas surrounding the authorship of fairy tales prior to the late 20th century. Those of us on the podcast who were aware of Princeton's new edition of *The Island of Happiness* welcomed the publication as filling that lacuna. With d'Aulnoy restored to the canon of fairy tale authors, the way would be open for appraisals of the importance of Dortchen Wild and Leonora Alleyne among others to the development of the fairy tale in the 19th century. It was therefore with some excitement that I received my copy of Princeton's new edition of *The Island of Happiness*; however, that excitement was quickly replaced with disappointment and puzzlement.

This is a selection of tales from *The Island of Happiness* and the texts, according to the note on translation (xx), are reprints of Zipes' translations of the tales originally published in *Beauties, Beasts and Enchantment: Classic French Fairy Tales* (1989). It is not therefore a new translation of 'The Isle of Happiness' published with the intention of introducing or re-introducing the public to the work of d'Aulnoy. As such, the reason for the existence of this selection from d'Aulnoy's tales is unclear and its use as a means of restoring d'Aulnoy to the reading public and to the academy is far from certain. This is a glorified coffee table book, the publication of which seems to have more to do with Natalie Frank's illustrations than with d'Aulnoy's stories. That is a problem for this reader: I admit to not really knowing

much about art and to having horribly conventional tastes – I like pictures where the animals' eyes follow you around the room – but, in this reviewer's estimation, Frank's illustrations are not particularly good. The illustrations seem to be part of a trend which sees fairy tales and fantasy accompanied by images which look like a bad prog-rock album cover, or which recall the front covers of novels by Michael Moorcock published in the 1970s, or the panels in actions comics of the 1970s and 1980s.

Natalie Frank tells the reader 'I came to the world of Madame d'Aulnoy because I want to draw tales that I read as unequivocally feminist' (xxi). This is a problematic statement. It is true that, compared to the work of Charles Perrault, the Grimms, and, for the most part, Hans Christian Andersen, the work of d'Aulnoy is striking in rejecting male-centred fairy tales in which men are the heroes and women are victims, waiting for a male saviour. But d'Aulnoy is more complicated than a binary reading will allow, a fact which is clear from her masterpiece, 'Belle-Belle, or the Chevalier Fortuné'. This is, as most of *Gramarye's* readers will know, a curiously modern tale in its vision of gender fluidity and performance. What constantly fascinates in all translations of 'Belle-Belle' is the apparent care with which d'Aulnoy uses pronouns: Belle-Belle is 'she' when dressed as a woman and 'he' when dressed as a man. In this, d'Aulnoy seems to be engaging with early modern ideas of clothes conferring gender. The other striking feature in the text is the use of the tyrannical sister/Queen as a figure for Madame de Maintenon. In the vision of the jealous and vengeful sister as a corrupter of justice, 'Belle-Belle' appears to be originally part of the culture of complaint against de Maintenon and her conservative, anti-woman campaign. This moves the familiar confrontation between female characters which we see in tales such as 'Snow White', 'Cinderella', 'Sleeping Beauty' and 'Hansel and Gretel' beyond narrative devices or structuralist tropes into something reflecting a real-world clash between women and competing ideas. It is too reductive simply to call 'Belle-Belle' 'unequivocally feminist'.

Ultimately this book has no real purpose: there is too much text for it to really be a coffee table book, there are too few tales for it to really reflect the range of d'Aulnoy's work, it's too expensive for an impulse purchase, the lack of scholarly material makes it useless for academic work, and it does not present a new translation of d'Aulnoy's work. It appears to exist simply as a space for Natalie Frank's illustrations and to promote her work. That's laudable, if you like Frank's work. But in terms of reigniting interest in and engagement with d'Aulnoy's stories, it is essentially useless.

Author: Madame d'Aulnoy. Translator: Jack Zipes. Illustrator: Natalie Frank.  
Publisher: Princeton (2021), 240pp.

.....

**Paul Quinn**