Power and the Manipulation of Masculinity in “Finette Cendron”

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Abstract
Despite their massive contributions to the fairy tale genre, women's tales often go unrecognized. This examination of Marie-Catherine D'Aulnoy's 1697 version of Cinderella, “Finette Cendron,” is undertaken in terms of representations of masculinity. Although the text maintains a heteronormative perspective on marriage and women's duties, it undermines the traditionally powerful masculine role by giving power to the purposefully manipulative female characters. Attention is paid to the ways in which masculine characters in “Finette Cendron” have moments of exhibiting traditionally feminine characteristics and how this works to further subvert the image of the men's power being inherently connected to their masculinity.

Among her thirteen publications, Madame Marie-Catherine D'Aulnoy's collections of fairy tales and adventure stories Les Contes des Fées and Contes Nouveaux, ou Les Fées à la Mode were her most popular. As a salon owner in Paris in the late seventeenth century, D'Aulnoy catered to a clientele of aristocrats and princes, telling stories for their entertainment. She was part of a group of women called “les conteuses” who met in salons and who, along with a few men including Charles Perrault, are credited with establishing the fairy tale genre in France between 1690 and 1715. Of the fairy tales that appeared during this first wave, it is estimated that more than two thirds were written by women, yet the conteuses are often not recognized for their work. Their tales were often complex, long, mischievous, digressive, and self-referential, differing from Perrault’s tales of the same time which are more blunt and to the point. The conteuses challenged the plot patterns that were earlier established by the Italians Basile and Straparola, and attempted to establish new ones. While the conteuses’ stories were popular at the time, Perrault’s tales have ultimately lasted as the more recognizable versions. D'Aulnoy's stories were recorded in the conversational style in which they would have been told in salons. Her tales were meant
for an adult audience, and often featured active female protagonists, which is a contrast to other folktales of the time and could be part of the reason why these tales were not taken up by the mainstream.

D'Aulnoy's tale "Finette Cendron" is a version of the Cinderella story. It was published in Les Contes des Fées (1696-1698). It begins with a king and a queen who have become impoverished due to their poor management of their kingdom, and who decide that the only way to survive is to rid themselves of their three daughters, Fleur d'Amour, Belle-de-Nuit, and Fine-Oreille or Finette. They plan to abandon the girls in the forest, but Finette overhears them and goes to see her fairy godmother, Merluche, who gives her an unbreakable thread that she can use to find her way home by tying one end to the door and letting the thread out as they walk. When her mother leaves them out in the forest, Finette saves her sisters, even though they beat and abuse her. The mother plans to take them out again and this time the fairy godmother provides her with a sack full of ashes to sprinkle on the path to help her find her way home, but forbids her to help her cruel sisters. Because of her good nature, Finette helps her sisters anyway. The third time the mother takes them out to the woods Finette doesn't dare ask her godmother for help, having disobeyed her, and the girls get lost. Finette plants an acorn, which grows quickly and enables her to climb up and find a castle. Her sisters rob her of her clothes and jewels and head to the castle, only to find that it belongs to an ogre. The ogre and his wife threaten to eat them, but Finette saves them by destroying the ogres. The sisters are ungrateful and they take over the castle and enslave Finette, condemning her to work in the ashes while they go to Prince Cheri's ball. While they are gone, Finette finds a golden key in the chimney and finds the chest that it fits, which contains beautiful gowns. The fairy godmother sends her a Spanish stallion, which carries her to the ball where she dazzles everyone, especially the prince. The sisters don't recognize her at the ball and abuse her when she gets home, but it turns out that she has lost her slipper at the ball and the Prince announces that he will marry whomever the shoe fits, becoming physically love sick while he waits to find the woman. When she leaves on the stallion to the shoe fitting, the sisters recognize her and she splashes them with mud and passes them by. She restores the Prince's health, and finding him handsome and intelligent, she marries him. With her newfound power she reestablishes her parents' kingdom and marries off her two sisters to good men despite their cruelty to her. The moral of the story is to "Do favours of the undeserving until they weep/ Each benefit inflicts a wound most deep." In other words, it is best to kill your enemies with kindness.

The masculinity of the secondary male characters in Marie-Catherine

D'Aulnoy's "Finette Cendron" is defined and portrayed in relation to their female partners. Finette Cendron's father the King, the male Ogre, and the Prince are all manipulated by their female partners, which results in a portrayal of masculinity that subverts normative patriarchal representations of the male as powerful and the female as weak. Although this text maintains a heteronormative perspective on marriage and women's duties, it undermines the patriarchal masculine roles by giving power to the manipulative female characters.

The first male encountered in the text is Finette Cendron's father, the King who has lost his kingdom. The Queen refers to the King as "sire" when she introduces the idea that she wishes to abandon their children. The Queen uses flattering language to stroke the King's ego in order to get her way. As his wife, she is traditionally supposed to be subordinate to him, so positioning him as her "sire" allows him to feel more powerful even though it is clear that she is making the decisions. The King's reaction to her plan is to "weep when he found he had to separate himself from his children." His connection to his offspring and the act of crying are both stereotypically a mother's domain, yet the king freely expresses his sadness at the loss of his children without concern that his tears areemasculating. Within the initial situation of this story D'Aulnoy has identified the Queen as more powerful than her husband because of her cold, calculating, and intelligent demeanor, thus separating her from the traditionally weak maternal persona. As a result of the Queen's power, the King's masculinity is undermined and he is established as possessing 'weak feminine' qualities.

This trend is continued with the introduction of the next male character, the Ogre. The Ogre is presented as large, masculine and powerful, and though his wife, the Ogress, outwardly respects his masculinity, she also undermines it by appealing to his sense of entitlement in order to get her way. When Finette Cendron and her sisters encounter the Ogress, she identifies the castle they have arrived in as "the Ogre's castle." She also refers to the girls as "his breakfast," acknowledging her responsibility as wife to feed her husband while neglecting her own desires to eat the children. Though she is aware of her expected position as wife she decides to undermine her husband's male power by hiding the girls, thus taking control of the situation. When the Ogre arrives, he is described as a hyper-masculine figure that is "six times as tall as his wife. When he spoke the building shook, and when he coughed it was like peals of thunder." This description enforces his outward masculine power by emphasizing that he is much bigger than his wife and that even his speech is violent, as he is able to physically shake a structure with his

5 D'Aulnoy, 454.
6 D'Aulnoy, 454-455.
7 D'Aulnoy, 461.
8 D'Aulnoy, 461.
9 D'Aulnoy, 461.
deep masculine voice. He is described as having one “great filthy eye” which poses him as a sexual threat as his gaze is positioned as dirty. This image of his one filthy eye could also be a reference to the penis, its urethra appearing like one eye, therefore his gaze on his wife and on the sisters is a sexual threat on multiple levels. His size, his vocal presence, and his gaze make him an imposing and frightening masculine figure for the Ogress and the sisters. This is enforced when he realizes that there are children in the house and that his wife has been hiding them. He reacts by threatening his wife, saying: “I’ll cut your head off and make a ball of it.” The Ogress strategically shows fear at her husband’s aggressive masculine threat in order to manipulate him. She allows him to have a sense of violent control over her, and as a result convinces him that keeping the girls around to serve in the house will be to his benefit and pleasure. In this way, the Ogress tricks her husband into promising not to eat the girls so that later she can eat them herself when he is out of the house. The Ogre is portrayed as a frightening and aggressive masculine figure, but when his wife says “no” to him, it is clear that the power truly lies with her. Much like the Queen, the Ogress’ ability to manipulate her husband by flattering the Ogre’s pride in his masculine power over the household allows her to get her way.

It is at this point in the story, in the Ogre’s home, that Finette begins to use the powers of manipulating men that she has observed from the adult women around her. Finette presents herself as small and feminine by telling the Ogre that she is too small to reach the heat of the oven. The Ogre exerts his masculine power by saying, “I’m tall enough,” and then he “thrust[s] his body so far into the oven.” The explicitly sexual action of “thrusting” is used to demonstrate the Ogre’s masculine and sexual power over the small, feminine Finette. It is Finette’s mastery of the manipulation of his masculine pride that allows her to kill the Ogre and save her sisters.

Finette’s new ability to manipulate men creates a turning point in the story as she now has the power of an adult woman. The next male character that is introduced is therefore the Prince she will eventually marry. The Prince’s name is Cheri, which translates in to English as the word “dear” and is generally a sweet term of endearment, not a masculine descriptive name. Right away he is equated with femininity. When Prince Cheri finds Finette’s shoe he is out hunting, which is a stereotypically masculine pastime; however this is subverted by his traditionally feminine actions with the shoe as he “had it picked up, examined it, admired its diminutive size and elegance, turned it over and over, kissed it, took care of it, and carried it home with him.” The Prince seems to mother the shoe, which

10 D’Aulnoy, 461.
11 D’Aulnoy, 461.
12 D’Aulnoy, 462.
13 D’Aulnoy, 462.
14 D’Aulnoy, 465.
undermines his supposedly powerful role as male royalty. After finding the shoe the Prince becomes physically weakened in a lovesick state, which further undermines his power. It is the Queen, his mother, who has the power to draw the secret of the shoe out of her son by promising to give him the woman he loves no matter who she is. The Prince "took courage from the queen’s promise," therefore it is the Queen who has the power to reinstate the Prince’s masculine quality of courage.

From the first moment that Prince Cheri sees Finette, he is "enraptured by her sight" and therefore immediately under her control. Right away Finette begins to exert her power by allowing the Prince to kiss her hand and pay her compliments, thereby subjugating him to her. When the Prince’s parents beg Finette to consent to have the wedding take place immediately, she refuses, further emphasizing her power in the relationship. The fact that she will only consent to the marriage if her father’s kingdom is restored to him shows that Finette is now in control of both the power of the Prince and her own father’s power. Finette is fulfilling her role as a daughter by being loyal to her father, and as a woman by marrying a man, but she clearly has gained a certain sense of power.

The women in this text use their feminine roles as partners to manipulate masculine power to their advantage. Masculine characters in this text have moments where they exhibit traditionally female characteristics, which further works to alter the image of the powerful male as inherently masculine. Although the patriarchal institution of marriage is enforced through this text, D’Aulnoy’s “Finette Cendron” successfully subverts traditional images of masculine power by presenting female characters that know how to manipulate their male partners.

15 D’Aulnoy, 465.
16 D’Aulnoy, 466.
17 D’Aulnoy, 466.
18 D’Aulnoy, 467.
FOOTNOTES

Works Cited
