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Fact or Fable?
Female Gender and Sexuality in Villedieu's
Histoires allégoriques

RUSSELL GANIM

In many respects, the *Fables ou Histoires allégoriques* of Marie-Catherine Desjardins, more commonly known as Madame de Villedieu (1640?–1683), can be read in terms of the sexual politics of neo-classical France. Unlike many of her other works, the *Fables* serve in part as a defense and illustration of female presence and sexuality. A moral that emerges in the nine tales she classifies as “fables” is that the female gender proves as authoritative and as intelligent as the male and that female sexuality should be considered as natural and as legitimate as its masculine equivalent. In her dedication to Louis XIV, Villedieu apologizes for not rendering her *Fables* an example of “des leçons d’une vertu solide” (90).¹ While her *Fables* do not always cast the behavior of male or female characters (in most cases insects and animals) in a virtuous light, neither do they portray this behavior as fraught with vice. Females speak less frequently than males in Villedieu’s fables, but the number of female characters and the intriguing ways in which they are presented demonstrate a unique sensibility to women and the conditions under which female identity is constructed in an erotic, social, and personal context. In this vein, Nancy D. Klein makes the following argument with respect to the *Fables*:

Villedieu seems to be searching for another reality that includes a place for the expression of women’s perspectives, a position that denies and excludes superficiality in love relationships.² (117)

Accordingly, there emerges throughout this text a sense of independent womanhood consonant with that of a female authorial voice. By the time the *Fables* were

1 The statement comes from the dedicatory poem in the *Fables* entitled “A sa Majesté.” Unless otherwise noted, all citations from Villedieu are taken from the Slatkine Reprints edition. I have modernized the orthography from Villedieu’s original text, but not the capitalization and punctuation.

2 See Klein’s chapter on the *Fables* (pp. 115–17) in *Selected Writings of Madame de Villedieu*.

published in 1670, Villedieu's plays, *nouvelles*, and provocative lifestyle had established her as an *aventurière* of sorts.³ The *Fables* are not the most potentially scandalous of her literary offerings, but they do constitute an often overlooked example of the author's innovation and versatility in terms of genre, style, and message.

Although Villedieu uses the term "galant" to describe this work, the exclusive classification of her *Fables* under the rubric of "galanterie" — insofar as it relates to "libertinage" — would be inaccurate, since her perspective is much more nuanced. At the same time she advocates infidelity to relieve conjugal *ennui*, she describes with an almost pathetic tenderness the tale of a disconsolate widowed dove trying to find new love by recounting the qualities of her late husband to a less-than-noble woodpigeon.⁴ Similarly, she recasts the myth of Diana and Acteon by blaming the latter's demise not on his aggression but on his prudishness. Acteon's failure to follow instinct with the willing Goddess demonstrates the idea that denial can be just as tragic as indulgence.

The question of why Villedieu chooses the fable as her mode of discourse suggests many possible answers. While it would be an exaggeration to suggest that she sought to displace La Fontaine as pre-eminent in the genre, it is plausible to assume that Villedieu saw the form as a means of finding, like La Fontaine, an audience in the salons and at court. The satire, irony, and relative simplicity that characterized the fable in Louis XIV's era served as good cover for a woman with a controversial agenda. In addition to advancing a favorable portrait of the female gender, Villedieu ridicules the political and personal foibles of men. Consequently, the fable serves as a means of conveying a controversial message in a safe and creative manner that allows the poet to contribute to the genre by adding a feminine perspective. Villedieu's reference to Ovid in her dedication and the frequent use of the word "metamorphose" throughout her fables suggest an emphasis on protean forms, characters, and themes which allow her a high degree of flexibility in tackling a contentious subject. Within the corpus of Villedieu's lyric, the fable's rhetorical and aesthetic agility echoes, in a more subtle way, the more strident declarations of female sexuality found in the sonnets affirming her "jouissance."⁵

Villedieu published her *Fables* two years after the first edition of La Fontaine's famous work appeared in 1668. Her principal text is comprised of eight fables,

3 I take the term *aventurière* from Elizabeth Goldsmith's chapter on Villedieu in *Publishing Women's Life Stories in France, 1647–1720*. See p. 134.

4 The fable in question is entitled, "La Tourterelle, & le Ramier." Consult vol. 1, pp. 90–91 of the Slatkine Reprints edition.

5 Perhaps Villedieu's most famous work is a sonnet simply known as "Jouissance," which is reproduced on page 37. It was first published in the *Recueil de Sercy (Poésies choisies [...], 1660)* and is included in Klein's *Selected Writings*, p. 20. A second sonnet with

but one additional fable should be added to the corpus: the aforementioned retelling of the myth of Acteon and Diana, which carries only the title of "Fable" and is included at the end of the "Treizième Journée" in the *Journal Amoureux* published in 1671. While a point-by-point comparison of Villedieu and La Fontaine is not the chief purpose of this paper, Villedieu's texts must be read in the context of La Fontaine, since her work can be interpreted in part as a response to his. One notable similarity between Villedieu and La Fontaine is that they shared the same publisher, Claude Barbin, who was responsible for the distribution and promotion for much of Villedieu's work throughout her career. Donna Kuizenga suggests that Barbin published Villedieu's *Fables*, "in order to profit from the recent success of La Fontaine's *Fables*" (8).⁶ Indeed, much of Villedieu's work as a whole was consistent with the moralist currents of the day, and her *Fables* were no exception. While it is not known for certain if Villedieu and La Fontaine met, it is quite probable that their paths did cross. They frequented the same literary circles, and in addition to Barbin, they shared acquaintances such as Pierre Corneille, Molière, the Duchess of Montpensier, and the historian Gédéon Tallémand des Réaux.

The connections between Villedieu and La Fontaine are reinforced in the texts themselves. From a formal standpoint, Villedieu generally follows the standard *Æsopic/La Fontainian* structure of prologue, apologue, and epilogue in which a moral and/or emotional conflict is elucidated and resolved through a beast tale in order to comment upon the human condition.⁷ Villedieu's narrator is much like La Fontaine's in that the poet gives the impression of being a detached observer who is actually quite engaged in the discursive process, either by directly questioning the reader or by stating her own opinions about the situation at hand. Dialogue — whether conducted explicitly between the characters in the fable or implicitly between the poet and the reader — is essential to the narrative framework that both authors create. Thematically, both Villedieu and La Fontaine stress the problematic nature of human interaction in matters of love, ethics, and affirmation of the self. The result is a highly paradoxical, mildly cynical portrait of human-kind, the tone of which is ironic but also understanding and appreciative of humanity's shortcomings.

the same title appeared in the *Journal Amoureux* (1671) between the *Huitième* and the *Neuvième Journée(s)*. It is reproduced in vol. 3, p. 161 of the Slatkine Reprints edition.

6 The quote is from the Introduction to Kuizenga's critical edition and translation of *the Mémoires de la vie d'Henriette-Sylvie de Molière*.

7 An excellent analysis of the fable's traditional format can be found in David Lee Rubin's *A Pact with Silence*. See especially chapter 1, entitled, "Genre, Magnitude, Structure, End," pp. 1–50.

While Villedieu parallels La Fontaine in terms of form, theme, and tone, she directly intersects with him by reproducing the characters in some of La Fontaine's most renowned fables. The best example is Fable VII, entitled *L'Agneau, & ses freres*, where the opening verses clearly recall La Fontaine's "Le Loup et l'Agneau":

Autrefois nâquit un Agneau,
Plus digne d'être un Louveteau
[...]
Que d'avoir Moutonne origine.
Il criait sans cesse famine,
A tous les Agneaux du troupeau. (1: 96)

The fable relates the exploits of the wolf-like lamb who through force and guile manages to monopolize not only his mother's breast, but those of all lactating females in the herd. Starved except for the greedy ram, the herd finds itself in a miserable state which is confirmed by a merchant who, upon seeing the sheep, believes they are the victims of a curse. Laying eyes on the fattened ram, the merchant quickly comprehends the situation and tells the herd's owner to let the others graze and procreate while he buys the perpetrator and makes of him, "le meilleur plat/De la prochaine Hostellerie" (vv. 45–46). The poet's epilogue revels in the lamb-wolf's comeuppance while underscoring the fable's social relevance:

Je n'expliquerai point ma Fable.
Tout convoiteux du bien d'autrui,
Tout Parasite insatiable,
Bref, tout humain, du siècle d'aujourd'hui,
Qui d'être mon Agneau, se sentira capable,
Saura bien que je parle à lui. (vv. 50–55)

Villedieu's conclusion is crucial to apprehending both her resemblance to La Fontaine and her departure from him. Stylistically, the trope of denying editorial perspective while fully engaging in it places Villedieu within a fabulist tradition dating from the classics and reinvigorated by La Fontaine. On a substantive level, moral commentary of this type reinforces both Villedieu's and La Fontaine's roles as critics of society and even as intellectual dissidents. Both seek a balance between universal pronouncements ("*Tout* convoiteux du bien d'autrui,") and specific critiques of the era in which they live ("du siècle d'aujourd'hui"). In Villedieu's case, however, her adaptation of La Fontaine is marked by a declaration of independence from him that underlines her originality in the genre.

Specifically, Villedieu surpasses La Fontaine by adding new layers of meaning to the notion of "la raison du plus fort."⁸ Affirming the uniqueness of her fable through the phrase "mon Agneau" (v. 54), Villedieu's *plus fort*, unlike La Fontaine's, is trumped by an *encore plus fort*. Consequently, the meanings of terms such as "raison" and "plus fort" are called into question. Absolutism, while existing in both theory and practice, is anything but absolute. In the preceding fable, *Le Chat, & le Grillon* (VI), the tiny cricket rails convincingly against the delusions of magistrates, military officers, and bourgeois who claim a "puissance absolue" over others. However, in an ironic display of force similar to that in *L'Agneau, & ses freres*, the rhetorically powerful insect scatters back to his pallet once the owner of the café in which he lives loudly makes the evening's last call.⁹ Both fables underscore that the exercise of power, even in Louis XIV's era, is not as certain as it appears. For a female poet to express such an idea is a clear affirmation of both her audaciousness and her own power as a writer. Her concluding statement in *L'Agneau* that "tout humain" and by extension the reader, "Saura bien que je parle à lui," only serves to confirm this authority. Although a certain self-righteousness can be read into such a statement, the assertion of one's voice in this manner bespeaks a confidence and self-possession found in writers sure of their talent and message. Micheline Cuénin contends that Villedieu had little desire to "rivaliser avec La Fontaine" (132). But while Villedieu may not be La Fontaine's equal in terms of output, it is clear that she sees the *Fables* as validating her presence as a literary figure at mid-century. Villedieu's *Agneau* does not deal with female sexuality per se, but it does confirm her authorial identity more than any of the other fables in the collection and thus provides a backdrop against which the portrait of the female in her *Fables* can be measured.

The contrast with La Fontaine also stands out in Fable III, entitled *La Cigale, le Hanneton, & l'Escarbot*. With respect to the cicada, Jean-Pierre Lafouge cites this fable as a classic example of the *mal-mariée* (478–79).¹⁰ Indeed, the fable begins with the cicada and June bug living happily as a married couple only to see their domestic tranquility shattered when the June bug misbehaves with a wasp. The cicada's ire, described as a "féminin courroux" (v. 24), is such that her husband must "s'enfuir aux cris de la Cigale" (v. 27).

8 The phrase comes, of course, from the opening verse of "Le Loup et l'Agneau" (I, x). See pp. 44–45 of Jean-Pierre Collinet's edition of La Fontaine's *Œuvres Complètes*.

9 *Le Chat, & le Grillon* is found on pp. 95–96 of vol. 1.

10 Much of Lafouge's article deals with Villedieu's relationship to La Fontaine. See also Klein's aforementioned chapter (n. 2) where she mentions the work that Lafouge, Bruce Morrissette, and Carlo Roger François have done in this regard.

Indeed, the cicada's answer is so intense that she feels obligated to "redoubler ses cris" (v. 28). The contrast between the singing of La Fontaine's cicada and the screaming of Villedieu's is clear enough.¹¹ Of course, one could argue that La Fontaine's cicada has nothing to do with Villedieu's, and that his indolent but nonetheless likeable grasshopper bears little to no resemblance to that of the jilted insect in Villedieu. Nonetheless, given Villedieu's affirmation of her authorial presence and of her independence from La Fontaine, it is difficult not to see a political and literary statement in the portrayal of her cicada. Unlike La Fontaine's cicada, who is more or less gender-neutral, Villedieu's is clearly identified as a female, with the poet alternately calling her "Épouse" (vv. 7, 23) and "Dame Cigale" (v. 22). To a degree, this feminization is stereotyped in that the cicada is first represented as a loyal, loving wife, only to be transformed into a harpy upon learning of her husband's infidelity. At the same time, however, there is the sense that this worthy spouse and lady has been wronged and that her wrath is justified. The poet states, "Pour moins Épouse se mutine/[...] [et] accuse le coquet Époux/De fausser la Foi conjugale" (vv. 23–26). To rise up in mutiny and to accuse the spouse of violating the marital bond suggests a kind of feminine strength and self-assertion that resonates in Villedieu's *Fables*. In terms of her *œuvre* as a whole, this fable also exemplifies what Nathalie Grande calls "la mise à mal de l'idéalisation sentimentale" (447).¹² Along these lines, at the end of *La Cigale, le Hanneton, & l'Escarbot*, the beetle, or "escarbot" counsels the June bug that both members of married couples should opt for infidelity as a means of staying together. What Villedieu challenges, then, is the cultural and literary "ideal" of masculine power, as well as that of everlasting love.

The representation of power that defines the female perspective in Villedieu's *Fables* is balanced by what Lafouge has called "la voie de l'intériorité" (476). He speaks of the sentimental, if not "autobiographical" character of her work, and discusses in particular the collection's first fable, *La Tourterelle, & le Ramier* (472–73) — the tale of the widowed dove and the woodpigeon alluded to earlier. Without question, this fable speaks to the personal nature of the author's project and underscores the intimacy with which the feminine is portrayed and betrayed. Similarly, analysis of the autobiographical nature of the *Fables* should include brief discussion of Fable VIII, *L'Hirondelle, & l'Oiseau de Paradis*, which concludes the work (1: 97). Here, Villedieu seems to make the most direct

11 See p. 33 of the Collinet edition for La Fontaine's "La Cigale et la Fourmi." Villedieu's "Cigale" is found on pp. 92–93 of vol. 1.

12 Grande speaks of this subverted ideal in Villedieu's *nouvelles* — in particular *Le Portefeuille* (1674) — but its application to the *Fables* is readily apparent. I thank Nancy Klein for bringing this article to my attention.

reference to her turbulent relationship with Antoine de Boësset, a military officer also known as Sieur de Villedieu. Their romance began in 1658 and ended ten years later when Boësset was killed in the siege of Lille. Despite Boësset's numerous promises of amorous and financial commitment, the two never married. Nonetheless, the former Marie-Catherine Desjardins did take Villedieu's name upon his death, and her devotion to him underpins many of her major works. That Villedieu considered herself a widow is no doubt reflected in *La Tourterelle, & le Ramier*. The sense of mourning and undying love, however, is tempered by caution in *L'Hirondelle, & l'Oiseau de Paradis*. Villedieu, who sometimes accompanied Boësset to his postings, portrays herself as the passionate but vulnerable swallow that follows the bird of paradise from place to place only to realize that love alone does not provide the basics of food, water, and shelter. Villedieu endured chronic financial problems throughout her career, in part because of Boësset's failure to make good on his promises. The admonition that concludes the poem advises lovers to attend to material as well as emotional needs when entering into amorous relationships:

Jeunes Amans, ma Fable parle à vous.
 Quelle que soit l'ardeur qui vous transporte,
 Sur un peu de prudence, appuyez votre amour,
 Les plaisirs les plus grands, sont sujets au retour,
 Et la nécessité demeure la plus forte, (vv. 35–39)

As was the case at the conclusion of *L'Agneau, & ses freres*, Villedieu's poet directly addresses the reader. In this instance, the experience is more personal in nature, but in both she affirms her authority as a speaker *en connaissance de cause*. As Roxane Lalande states with respect to Villedieu's *œuvre* as a whole, the author sets forth, "a universalized vision of human behavior extracted from her own individualized experience" (20). The role she assumes is that of mentor, presumably for both men and women, though the point of view is that of a female who shares her disappointments in love so that others may avoid the same fate.

To the extent that Villedieu's *fables ou Histoires allégoriques* establish a distinctive female presence with respect to love, gender roles, and authorial voice, the work touches upon the notion of female sexuality. However, the fable that deals most directly with the erotic dimension of the female psyche is one not included in the *Histoires Allégoriques*. It is entitled simply "Fable," and retells the myth of Acteon and Diana.¹³

13 Villedieu's adaptation of the myth was probably written at the same time as her *Fables*, but there is no indication as to why it was not included in the main collection, which appeared a year earlier. See volume 3, p. 169, of Slatkine.

The goal of the fable is to rehabilitate the image of Diana and cast her in a more favorable, if not amatory, light. Villedieu's vehicle is the Goddess's sexuality, which is a quality to be celebrated and enjoyed rather than repressed. Most know the myth as an incident where the hunter, Acteon, happens upon Diana as she bathes. The Goddess then turns Acteon into a stag, whereupon he is devoured by his own dogs. Common interpretations speak of punishment for voyeurism, the pathology of chastity, or the shock of sexual awakening. Historically, Diana is seen as either a perpetrator of injustice or as a staunch defender of her personal integrity and well-being. Villedieu's poet agrees with the conventional argument that Acteon merits his fate, but the reasons are more complex, as are Diana's motives. Here, the Goddess punishes Acteon more for his inactions than for his actions. Villedieu describes Acteon, to whom she refers as a "Chasseur, encore adolescent [...] [qui]/Sceut de l'occasion faire si peu d'usage" (vv. 22–23). Initially, the poet takes the traditional view that Diana reacts in self-defense, portraying her as a woman "de tendre lignage" who must "[...] renfermer [...] / [un] si barbare courage" (vv. 20–21). In a rhetorical about-face, however, she develops the theme of Acteon's hesitation to deride the young hunter for not taking advantage of the opportunity before him:

Quoi? Voir au bain si charmante Déesse,
 Qui d'un humain regard sans doute l'accueillit;
 Une gorge, des bras.... Enfin.... de la jeunesse,
 Jamals Déesse ne vieillit;
 Et de tenter le sort ne montrer nulle envie,
 A la voir seulement une heure s'amuser;
 Hé! de quoi servirait la vie
 Aqui sait si mal en user? (vv. 26–33)

Clearly, Diana is a temptation worth indulging not merely for her beauty — which evokes sensuousness worthy of the *Pléiade* — but for her desire. Not only is she "charming," but comes down to the level of her would-be suitor by casting a "human gaze" in order to "welcome him." In this Eden-like setting, there is nothing criminal about female nudity. Paradoxically, the sin is *not* to partake of nature's youthful pleasures: Female erotic desire is celebrated while male chastity and impotence are mocked and castigated. Villedieu's Acteon, whom she calls a "témoin trop discret" (v. 36) reflects upon his hesitation only to be figuratively devoured by "remorse" (v. 37) and "regret" (39). Symbolically, the dogs represent Acteon's internal anguish as much as they do Diana's revenge. The fable's conclusion sanctifies the Goddess's retaliation for Acteon's sin of omission:

Que benite à jamais soit la belle Chasseuse,
 Qui se montrant si rigoureuse,
 Fit voir quels supplices sont dûs
 Aux mauvais ménagers des doux moments perdus. (vv. 46–49)

Certainly, Diana triumphs at the end as the poet affirms her status as both deity and huntress. Yet, the reference to the "doux moments perdus" suggests a kind of *jouissance manquée* that implies regret on the part of the Goddess. The erotic hunt is to be celebrated, but can only be enjoyed with willing prey. Nonetheless, the elevation of female sexuality to a level of such frankness underscores, among other things, the intellectual and artistic *frisson* that the public experiences through Villedieu's unique and intense voice.

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