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Holly Tucker, *Pregnant Fictions: Childbirth and the Fairy Tale in Early-Modern France*. Detroit, Mich.: Wayne State University Press, 2003. xv + 213 pp. Illustrations, notes, works cited, and index. \$34.95 U.S. (cl). ISBN 0-8143-3042-8.

Review by Leslie Tuttle, University of Kansas.

This literary study juxtaposes two seemingly divergent sources of narratives about reproduction in the seventeenth century: science and fairy tales, especially those authored by women. By doing so, it makes a contribution to our understanding of elite women's cultural production in the seventeenth century. Tucker argues that renewed uncertainty about where babies come from "render[ed] the boundaries between scientific 'facts' and marvelous fictions remarkably tenuous" (p. 4). As scientific discoveries challenged traditional knowledge about conception--and thus about the nature of men and women--fairy tales explored the social consequences of the new facts of life. Her most important argument is that with their tales, the *conteuses* resisted the historical forces conspiring to wrest control over reproduction from women.

Scholars have long recognized that fairy tales were all the rage at the close of the century of reason. Between 1690 and 1715, over one hundred literary fairy tales were published. Charles Perrault's *Contes de ma mère l'oye* remains the most famous, but female authors in fact dominated the genre, accounting for two-thirds of the titles. A rich vein of recent work on fairy tales, most notably that of Jack Zipes, Lewis Seifert, and Patricia Hannon, has interpreted this corpus as a locus of opposition to the increasingly morose and conservative court of Louis XIV and Maintenon, and to increased pressure on women to retire from their position as arbiters of culture.[1] Tucker's work follows this interpretive trajectory but eschews discussion of the aristocratic politics of the salon from which the tales emerged to focus especially on the recurring reproductive motifs within them.

When the focus is on stories of pregnancy and birth, the preponderant influence of women authors is indeed striking. While only two of Perrault's tales address reproduction directly, Tucker documents that the single reproductive theme of an infertile royal couple occurs in a quarter of the tales published in the 1690s by the most prolific of the *conteuses*, Madame d'Aulnoy, and in a third of those by Madame de Murat (p. 59). Something is clearly going on here. The royal infertility motif suggests political anxieties of the mid-sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries endured throughout the Sun King's reign, a theme Tucker contemplates at length. More broadly, Tucker argues that the profusion of reproductive themes in women's tales reflects the ambivalence with which elite women responded to changes as diverse as the Scientific Revolution, absolutist regulation of family and sexuality, women's exclusion from the academies that rewarded literary and scientific achievement, and the changing practice of obstetrics.

Chapters one and two set the stage by examining overlap between the discourses of science and the cultural world of the *conteuses*. These chapters establish that elite women were likely to be familiar with scientific debates about the reproductive process. As Tucker demonstrates, these debates reached an audience not only through the *Journal des Sçavans*, but also through the *Mercure Galant*. Beginning with chapter three, each subsequent chapter juxtaposes a motif in the tales with an aspect of the changing discourse of reproduction culled from scientific literature, midwifery texts, and the work of historians and anthropologists of birth such as Jacques Gélis and Mireille Laget. Chapter three compares ambivalence about midwives with the *contes'* dualistic image of fairies. In the tales, it is only with the help of fairies that humans manage to get pregnant and bring babies to term. Yet fairies also have a

more menacing side, threatening pregnant women and their children with curses and disfiguring punishments. Tucker suggests, not entirely convincingly, that the tales' menacing fairies echo the contemporary medical establishment's assault on midwives, and that by continuing to make birth a feminocentric event, *conteuses* were "taking a stand on the expulsion of the midwife from the childbirth scene" (p. 75).

Chapter four, "It's a Girl!" examines the cultural preference for male children, reviewing contemporary advice in "the art of making boys." The *conteuses*, especially d'Aulnoy, frequently subvert this preference by writing of mothers who gorge themselves on cooling fruit, thereby ensuring, according to humoral theory, that they will produce girls. The *conteuses* also resolve cases of royal infertility with the birth of beautiful princesses who bring joy to parents and subjects alike. Tucker juxtaposes the fairy-tale preference for girls with a discussion of the Salic Law discourses whereby royal women were excluded from the throne and reduced, symbolically, to wombs. A number of tales by both male and female writers make clear reference to the "miraculous" birth of Louis XIV to Anne of Austria after 22 years of marriage. In sum, Tucker interprets these tales as a "subversive rethinking" of a system that makes political stability dependent on the risky proposition that docile queens will churn out princes in a timely manner (pp. 13, 94-7).

Chapter five explores reflections in the *contes* of the connections between a mother and her fetus, in particular the early modern belief that maternal longing and imagination could mark the child in-utero. Here, fairy tale women seem doomed to repeat the sin of Eve; their insatiable desires for the produce from fairy gardens condemn their daughters to a myriad of punishments. If most people in the seventeenth century accepted that they had inherited original sin from the first mother, by the 1690s, science argued this connection was more direct and physical than they had known. The theory of ovist preformationism, as Tucker explains it, refuted the Aristotelian notion that women were mere vessels for male seed and "maintained that at the moment of creation God placed within Eve the preformed bodies of all souls that would ever be born" (p. 115). Despite the seemingly negative connotations of women punished across generations for their unruly desires, Tucker interprets these stories as "insist[ing] on the importance of a cohesive female community and the transfer of knowledge, and genetic material, through generations of women" (p. 118).

Chapter six concludes the examination of embryological debates in the fairy tales by arguing that as the Enlightenment took root, the forces of patriarchy regrouped to tame the subversive, matrilineal potential of ovist preformationism. Tucker analyzes the widely circulated story that an astronomer named François de Plantade had witnessed, through his microscope, tiny men emerging from sperm (1699), Academician Jean-Paul Bignon's tale of a world upside-down where humans are reborn from eggs (1712), and Mademoiselle de Lubert's fanciful "Princess Eggshell and Prince Bonbon" (1745). Bignon's tale is interpreted as a parody of *précieuse* claims to scientific or literary authority, while Lubert's is a "ventriloquization" of Maupertuis' 1745 demolition of preformationism, *Vénus Physique*. In other words, Tucker claims the "voice of the parturient" heard in the earlier tales of d'Aulnoy or Murat was silenced as the ascendancy of rationalism and the male scientific establishment was assured.

There are many sources of delight in *Pregnant Fictions*, not least of which are the marvelous tales themselves. Many of these stories are difficult to find in modern editions and will be unknown to readers. On this front, it is exciting to note that a volume of fairy tales by seventeenth-century female authors, edited and introduced by Domna Stanton and Lewis Seifert, is planned for the "Other Voice in Early Modern Europe" Series from the University of Chicago Press.[2]

Tucker's juxtaposition of scientific and medical discourses with fairy tales is illuminating. Yet the focus on the content of the tales rather than on the conditions of their production or reception often provokes questions about the relation between the deliberately unreal narrative world and the "real world" on which it purportedly comments. Tucker does not tell us very much about the women and men who

authored these texts. This is presumably because frustratingly little is known about them or because what little is known is ground that has been covered before. Yet it would be helpful to know even just a little more about the writers and their relationships to court culture and the Republic of Letters. For example, Tucker mentions as an aside that one *conteuse*, Madame de Murat, was banished from the court for writing a satire about Louis XIV and Maintenon (p. 94). Did other *conteuses* write under similar clouds? How were the *contes* received by readers?

Similarly, it seems likely that these fanciful stories, like the other products of the salons, are playful, arch, coded texts in which the author's point of view is elusive and may even be deliberately obscure. This helps explain why Tucker arrives at conclusions—in particular, that women's tales “resist” and “rewrite” male domination of reproduction—that, while plausible, diverge from those of other scholars. Seifert, for example, reviews d'Aulnoy's treatment of mothers and finds not a celebration of female community, but a fair number of evil and foolish mothers.[3] In several cases, Tucker's evidence would support more nuanced conclusions about the responses of women and men to a challenging, and presumably confusing, epoch in the search for the “true” facts of life.

Despite these minor reservations, *Pregnant Fictions* is an engaging book that convincingly argues that the mysteries of reproduction were deeply implicated in seventeenth-century women's efforts to make sense of the cultural transformations they were living through.

NOTES

[1] See Jack Zipes, *Beauties, Beasts, and Enchantment: Classic French Fairy Tales* (New York: Meridian, 1991); Lewis Seifert, *Fairy Tales, Sexuality, and Gender in France, 1690-1715: Nostalgic Utopias* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996); Patricia Hannon, *Fabulous Identities: Women's Fairy Tales in Seventeenth-Century France* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 1998).

[2] At this time, it does not seem that a publication date is set for the fairy tale volume. The list of titles in the series is available at <http://www.press.uchicago.edu/Complete/Series/OVIEME.html>

[3] Seifert, 183-88.

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