

# The Image Of Women In European Philosophical Tales

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***ABSTRACT: In this period of sanitary crisis – Covid-2019, the article investigates the fictional portrayal of women in Charles Perrault’s and Voltaire’s writings. By analyzing the tales, we examine the gender-specific elements put forward in the philosopher’s prose and thus to define a possible contribution to current women rights. In an effort, first, to determine the historical and social context, a consideration of “the image of women in 18th century France” has been established. Then the author derives from the observation of several critical studies, emphasizing on Charles Perrault’s and Voltaire’s contradictory attitude towards women. Therefore, this chapter attempts to provide an intelligible answer to the question if the free-thinker must be considered as a misogynist or as a precursor of feminism. The main part of this paper presents a synthetic overview, as well as a descriptive analysis of the female protagonists’ profile, followed by a discussion of a few remarkable main characters and, finally, a review of closely related themes. The study concludes that, despite the strong masculine values dominating his epoch, Charles Perrault’s and Voltaire’s fictional work, in its historical definition, can partly be considered as a key in feminist efforts.***

***Key words: the image of women, gender-specific elements, women rights, philosophic tales.***

## 1. INTRODUCTION.

In particular, the analysis of narratives can be seen as a fictional mirror of social, legal, political, educational and moral values, as they apply to eighteenth-century society. The dominant role of the Church will be particularly emphasized and this in almost all of the above areas. On the other hand, a realistic picture of the present conceptions will give us the necessary perspectives and / or an aptitude for relativization, thus enabling us to reach the best founded and most legitimate conclusions. This article will shed light - for similar reasons - on the attitude generally displayed by the philosopher towards the fairer sex. Also, we aim to provide an enlightening analysis that should offer an answer to the controversial question of whether Charles Perrault and Voltaire are to be seen as misogynist or as precursors of feminism

## 2. MATERIALS AND METHODS.

To analyze the corpus, embracing philosophical tales in prose by Charles Perrault and Voltaire and for the presentation of this article, we have intentionally opted for a thematic

approach. We will describe respectively the profile of the heroine of Perrault and Voltaire, the physical as well as the psychic traits (cf. feminine beauty, sensitivity, sensuality, weakness, intelligence and major character traits), then we will discuss a number of main protagonists (cf. the heroine, the antiheroine, the wife / lover, the mother and the woman head of state) and finally, we will highlight some themes which particularly deserve our attention, namely: education, sexuality, marriage and the subjugation of women. It will become clear that the critical and rational attitude of Charles Perrault and Voltaire with regard to religious questions will play a primordial role in the formulation of several observations. Finally, in our conclusion, we will provide the questions that guided the research.

“How to select the tales? Indeed, a first problem already arises in terms of terminology. There seems to be some confusion surrounding whether these are novels or philosophical tales. Adams DJ evokes that Voltaire himself had qualified his first essays as “stories” (Zadig, Micromégas) while, in other cases, he did without any description (especially in relation to Memnon, in *Le Monde comme il va*. and *Candide*). When discussing the genre, it seems that Voltaire preferred the word “novel”. All in all, it would seem logical to qualify as novels, the stories which are distinguished from the rest by their narrative development and by their length. Others, on the other hand, deserve the label more tales since they are less extensive and generic figures are lacking. This clarification being made, we propose to speak henceforth simply of tales, for strictly practical reasons. Our corpus includes twenty-one tales covering the period from 1715 (the year of composition of the One-Eyed Hooker) to 1775 (the year of publication of the story of Jenni or the Sage and the Atheist). We based our work on the *Romans et contes en vers et en prose* edition (La Pochothèque, 1994) which includes fifty-seven stories. We cannot deny that the development of a corpus from the prolific work of Voltaire, requires taking questionable sides. Faced with the profusion of tales in verse and prose, a choice had to be made which was based on the problematic and for which several objective criteria determined the establishment. The first is of course relating to the presence of our study subject. Thus, we have selected the stories in which the female figure occupies a central or secondary place, but relevant. The analysis of the representation of women will be done directly on the entire corpus. However, the lack of time has forced us to limit the use of certain narratives to the light of a few succinct extracts. We must also point out that, since we had to limit the research, we did not discuss tales in verse, nor even “novels” that look like epistolary (such as *Paméla* and *Les Lettres d’Amabed*).

On the other hand, in France, from 1696, Charles Perrault had collected and published the famous “Tales of my mother Goose”, published under the title: *Histoires ou Contes du temps passé*, which have never ceased to nourish, during generations, the imagination of children, young and old. We report here the tale of Charles Perrault, which, as we know, not only offers us a version which is continued after the wedding of the Prince and the Princess by other adventures, but also embellished the tale of allusions relating at the court of the Sun King. His version, in its delightful literary form, is therefore somewhat “arranged” in detail, although the very structure of the tale is respected.

### 3. DISCUSSION.

According to MARIE-LOUISE Von Franz, a woman can have an educational and transforming influence on a man's eros. A man, especially if he is very absorbed in

professional or intellectual activities, will often tend to be somewhat crude and undifferentiated in the realm of feeling. He comes home, absent-mindedly kisses his wife, eats, immerses himself in his newspaper or the television and goes to bed: he forgets to be interested in his wife and to speak with her, to have a true dialogue. If he's having sex with her, what would she be complaining about? He does not see who his wife is and her needs, or what she would have to offer him. This is where a woman's attitude can have a transformative effect. If she is able to uphold her human rights without falling under the influence of what Jung calls a negative animus, a spirit of recrimination or discouragement that would make matters worse, and if she has a good relationship with humans with whom she lives, she will be able to make her understand certain aspects of female psychology. Just as he was first influenced by his mother in the formation of his feeling, the women he met later would play an important role in the building of his anima and his function as Eros.

But the woman, on her side, is under the influence of the man's anima. A woman who behaves spontaneously in a certain way and who notices that the man she loves or who interests her is shocked or disturbed, because this behavior offends the image he has of the woman, will have tendency to adapt to what man desires, for fear of losing it. Even at a very young age, a little girl quickly understands that if she plays into her father's anima game by cuddling and flirting with him, she gets what she wants from him. The "daddy's girl" will push aside her mother who demands that her nails be clean and be on time at school; she will know how to say "daddy" in such a charming tone that he will melt and fall into her trap. This is how the girl begins to exploit human anima by adapting her behavior to it. This is good to a certain extent, because it teaches the future woman to know male reactions and to know how to enter properly into the game of instinct that governs the relationship between the sexes, but this attitude carries a danger. As an adult, such a "woman-anima" adopts the role suggested or imposed on her by the man who holds her interest at that time, and the male environment, professional or otherwise, in which she evolves. She loses her autonomy and is aware of herself only as a mirror of her partner's desires. She becomes the "woman-object". Man may find her wonderful, at least initially, but if she fails her, she will feel devastated, her awareness of her personality depending only on whoever is her.

"Everyone knows that the 18th century is that of women."

"Woman in the eighteenth century is the governing principle, the reason which directs, the voice which commands."

"It was chiefly in the eighteenth century that women exercised, to its fullest extent, the great and remarkable influence they always possessed in France."

The aforementioned sayings bear witness to a unanimous resolution regarding the status of women in the 18th century, inviting us to believe that the Enlightenment has in store the best of all possible worlds for the fairer sex. In this part of our work, we will examine whether these three reflections can be taken literally or whether they tend rather towards a Leibnizian optimism.

In addition, in the more general context of this preamble, it seems relevant to us to shed light on the attitude of the contemporaries of Perrault and Voltaire towards the second sex. Without wishing to dwell too much on the ideas generally in force, we devote a few paragraphs to the perception of the philosophers, encyclopedists and politicians of his time. Indeed, we consider it interesting to point out, in a concise manner, a few features which will

allow Voltaire to be placed in the larger framework of the century in which this thinker lived. In short, we will try, from an overview of feminine existence in the 18th century, to highlight the different facets of her condition, her role and the place she holds in the century which wants to be “enlightened” by metaphorical light of reason.

The Salons We begin our examination of the aforementioned assertions - which claim that the eighteenth century adopts an exceptionally favorable attitude towards women - by highlighting a phenomenon specific to the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries: "salons". Through its main feature, “the art of conversation”, the literary salon fully devotes itself to its leading role of disseminating the “spirit of the Enlightenment”. In addition, it is its organizers who contribute to the success of the exhibitions. It is indeed one of the most popular activities for women. The reputation of the salon rests on the quality of the guests and for a salon to acquire a good reputation, the hostess must surround herself with intellectuals or illustrious philosophers who initiate the debates; sometimes even a celebrity of the capital appears, such as Voltaire. Among the famous salt workers, we must certainly cite Mme Geoffrin, Mme du Deffand, Julie de Lespinasse, Mme Necker, Mme de Tencin, Mme Lambert, Louise d’Epinay, Mme Du Châtelet and a plethora of other educated and learned women. In this place where woman and man of letters meet, it is possible to give free rein to discussion and this without any censorship. A symbiosis of the sexes playing especially in favor of women who seize any opportunity to flourish. They become partners with whom we question topical issues such as politics, literature, education, etc. Let us also recall the orientation of the conversations and debates, which differed according to the reign. In particular, the living room of Louis XV time seemed to open onto the present, while the living room of Louis XVI time looked to the future. The spirit of 1788 and 1789 is abundantly present and the chat often takes on the attitude of dissertation. It would not be excessive to assert that, from a certain point of view, the salons prepared the ground for the French Revolution and that in this respect it was the woman who occupied a prominent place in the “hearth” of the Revolution. Finally, it should be noted that the salt cellars still leave their mark on other areas. Notably - since the literary salon was often regarded as the antechamber of the Academy - academic seats never depended so closely on female influences. So it is in a way the living room that acts as a springboard with the woman unlocking the first access doors to worlds hitherto dominated by the male sex.

However, even if the female salt worker gradually climbs the ladder social, living rooms only allow him to partially escape his subordinate condition, as the following passage shows:

Intelligence was acceptable in the “woman of spirit” - a person who was content to hold a salon, to provide the space for intellectual debate - but the “learned woman” was no longer a woman.

If a privileged circle of wealthy women has the honor of actively participating in the most current debates, then is there a similar place reserved for women in the field of art and literature? When we examine 18th century painting, we see that it now shows more and more ordinary beings, engaged in daily activities, among which it represents the woman immersed in reading. Indeed, the novel knows a considerable vogue in the XVIIIe century and this evolution will be especially the merit of the female reader. Some historians of French literature even go so far as to assert that the romantic genre is “a fiefdom of women.” It is

true that the woman finds there food for her imagination and a first relief for her thirst for education.

The 18th century romantic library will be enriched by philosophers and other men of letters, as well as by a fruitful contribution from many women. In this way, the moral works of Mme Lambert as well as the memoirs of Mme d'Epinay appear on the list of masterpieces of women's literature. But women also practice in the letter-writing style. Examples of works from a woman's pen are endless within this genre. However, we must mention in particular the correspondence of Marie du Deffand, Manon Roland, Germaine de Staël, Anne Catherine Helvétius, Françoise de Graffigny and Julie de Lespinasse. It is therefore necessary to underline the active participation of women in the romantic genre and in 18th century literature in general. Simone de Beauvoir, in her work "The Second Sex", also insists on this fact as well as on the consequences that flow from it:

The eras that have most sincerely cherished women are not courtly feudalism, nor the gallant nineteenth century: it is those - the eighteenth century for example - where men saw similarities in women; it is then that they appear to be truly romantic.

The word "similar" leaves no room for doubt. This statement leads us to see that woman is on the way to conquering the place she deserves; equal to man. However, female victory must be qualified, as C. Gobert rightly points out, author of the article The image of women in classical utopia: function of a syncretic figure: If she climbs on the social ladder, it is never by the active conquest of any office, but, exclusively, alongside her husband and therefore passively. The historian of feminine literature, Jean Larnac, even goes so far as to strongly qualify the merit of women of the pen. Thus we read in her book Histoire de la littérature féminine en France that the only writers whose works present a remarkable composition or style are those who were guided by men: Madame de Lafayette by Segrais and La Rochefoucauld, Madame de Staël by her many friends, Georges Sand through his lovers, Madame Colette through Monsieur Willy. As a preamble to the study of the image of women in Voltaire's tales, we cannot ignore a brief presentation of a few male artists of the same period, who attribute a remarkable role to women. Some of them even go so far as to spread quite innovative ideas about the status of women.

The first work that retained our choice undoubtedly contributed to broadening the social spectrum of the Age of Enlightenment. Indeed, we are alluding to the Dangerous Liaisons of Pierre Choderlos de Laclos. Allow us to note here a revealing passage from the eloquent letter 81:

"May your fears cause me pity!" How much they prove to me my superiority over you! and you want to teach me, lead me?

Ah! my poor Valmont, how far is it from you me ! No, all the pride of your sex would not be enough to fill the gap between us. Because you couldn't perform my projects, you deem them impossible! [...]

It is clear that the contemporaries of Perrault and Voltaire did not remain impassive in the face of current educational practices. In particular, from the end of the 17th century, we see the emergence in France of profound educational reflections. This questioning relates above all to the female sex: how should girls be educated, but also and above all to what extent?

Such conceptions, which one can certainly qualify as revolutionary, will shake up the thinking of the time. However, the response was not long in coming and this time it came

from a whole different corner. Recall that the initial aim was to exclude the woman, reducing her to her maternal and conjugal role. In fact, predestined to maintain the race and having a monopoly on delicate trades, we were unanimous on the fact that female education should only be oriented towards practice. The woman was only to learn skills and knowledge that could be useful to her in the household, as mother and wife. However, “it could not be either one or the other”, synthesizes L. Abensour, “without a reasoned practice of virtue and without an equally reasoned knowledge of religious duties”. Here it is, the conviction of Fenelon; theologian and man of the Church who, in 1687, published the book with the promising title: *On the Education of Girls*. Fenelon suggests that for the public good, morals and the very interest of religion, it was desirable that serious concern be taken to organize it. On the one hand, the theologian therefore seems to want to take a step forward, because his vision is not limited solely to the role of woman in relation to her family, on the other hand, Fénelon considers the problem of education in the broader framework of society: it is the mother who prepares the following generations.

It has sometimes been said - wrongly, I think - that myth is the story of gods and fairy tales the story of human beings. This theory comes up against the fact that in some folk tales the characters bear the names of mythological gods. Thus, in some versions of *Sleeping Beauty*, the Fairies have the names of goddesses, as we will see later; and in many versions the two children of the heroine are given the names Sun and Moon, while in other versions they are called Aurora and Day (cf. Perrault). As the mother of the Sun and the Moon is not an ordinary being either, we can conclude that the story is an allegory that refers to the myth of Letô giving birth to Apollo and Diana on the island of Delos. . Moreover, the Sun and the Moon with their mother is a well-known alchemical theme.

The wedding. This chapter will allow us to define the woman as a wife. Below, we will discuss the status of a woman in relation to that of her husband as well as adultery and its consequences within the couple. It should be noted that this is again an area placed under the strict supervision of the Catholic Church.

In the 18th century, marriage can be described as a family affair. In addition,

“It is almost always a marriage of convenience”, because regardless of the tastes or desires of the young woman, the marriage association will above all be an arrangement at the will of the parents. At the marriage market, they select the ideal spouse who matches the predetermined standards of rank and fortune. Indeed, “women, they never marry below their status. Such a union would have dishonored them and their families ”.

Once married, the young girl passes from patriarchal tutelage to marital authority. Elisabeth Badinter confirms that in conjugal society, women are certainly not equal to men: “In men, physical power, the power of reason and mastery of the world. To the woman, the sensitivity, the devotion to his family and the submission”. Samir al Haddad explains the origins of this submission in his thesis: "it is the already very old heritage of a series of customs and traditions of which the Judeo-Christian religion is the anchor" and he mentions a passage from R. Metz's work: “canon law assigned to women a status which places them in a state of inferiority to men”.

The preceding passages highlight what we have already indicated above in our analysis, namely how the absolute power of the Church is felt in every corner of society.

#### 4. RESULTS.

While embarking on the analysis of the representation of women in the philosophical tales of Charles Perrault and Voltaire, it seems interesting to us to shed light on this subject outside the fabulous context. In his book *Voltaire in his tales*, Jacques Van Den Heuvel has already shown to what extent the life of the writer as well as his ideas are closely linked to tales: "For Voltaire, reality is always at the very root of fiction." Voltaire finds there a way to extend in fantasy, the real facts of his life. A clarification therefore remains to be made on the more "personal" question: what attitude does Voltaire generally display towards women?

In *Voltaire and the Century of light* we read that the *Dictionnaire philosophique* can be considered as "an epitome of the century of Enlightenment or a distillation of the spirit of the Encyclopedia stripped of its technical elements". It is also necessary to mention the context of the publication of the *Philosophical Dictionary* (first edition, 1764) which the author of the aforementioned book, A.O. Aldridge describes as: "A reflection of the Voltaire who had defended the Calas family, it is also an effort to bring about a certain degree of social reform, particularly through reducing superstition and increasing tolerance". We must therefore keep in mind that the articles in the Dictionary are first and foremost a way of expressing the writer's aversion to religious intolerance, even an ultimate weapon against the infamous. Let's take a look at what Voltaire says about women in his diabolical dictionary. We have limited ourselves to the analysis of a few relevant extracts from the articles adultery, divorce, equality, woman and man, which we will treat respectively below.

*The beauty.* When we observe the first summary grid, we cannot deny that the beauty of women constitutes a hallmark characteristic of the heroines of Voltaire. Each tale contains one or more allusions to the physical appearances of the female characters. Voltaire likes to draw a flattering portrait: the women have a good height, tender eyes and beautiful hair; some in braid and others in curls. In the light of the extracts that we have just quoted, one observation is necessary. Indeed, although Voltaire portrays most of his female characters as beautiful creatures, he does not seem to intend to overuse this aspect by systematically devoting extensive descriptions to it. A first argument which could justify this choice is undoubtedly that in certain stories, the physical aspect appears only in the background, while in other stories (eg *The one-eyed crocheter*, *Cosi-sancta*, *Zadig*, *Memnon* or *Human Wisdom*, *Candide*, *The White and the Black*, *the Ingenuous*, *the Princess of Babylon*, *the Story of Jenni* or *the sage and the atheist*) beauty is in a way a common thread throughout history. It is therefore obvious that a particular accent will sometimes be absent.

A second argument is valid in several respects and that is why we want to stress it at the outset. Indeed, the philosopher's initial preoccupation has always been the transmission of one or more messages underlying the plot, some of which are of a moral nature. Therefore, long descriptions or analyzes are absent if they do not add anything essential to the fundamental ideas that the writer wishes to convey to his readers. This does not prevent, as we will see in a later point, that beauty of women plays a significant role in the representation of a number of themes addressed by the authors.

In Voltaire's *Candide*, two passages refer to the transitory nature of female beauty. The first example shows how the old woman goes to frantic efforts to convince her audience of her unmatched youthful splendor:

I haven't always had my eyes wide open and rimmed with scarlet; my nose hasn't always touched my chin, and I haven't always been servant. [...] I grew in beauty, in graces, in talents, in pleasures, respects, and hopes: I was already inspired by love; my throat was forming; and what a throat! white, firm, cut like that of the Venus de Medici; and what eyes! What eyelids! what black eyebrows! what flames were shining in my two pupils, and erased the scintillation of the stars! (C/O, p. 234).

Apparently Voltaire is convinced that "the sight of a beautiful woman softens him [the man], because it must be agreed that God created women only to tame men"

In most fairy tales a number of trials and difficulties arise, which the hero must overcome. There are for example variants in Russia, France and Catalonia where the Prince, having discovered Beauty, unites with her without waking her, and then leaves her. She gives birth to two children, and goes in search of their father. According to Perrault, the prince, after waking the princess, returns to his father's kingdom without saying anything about his adventure or his marriage. It was only after the death of the king his father that he brought his wife and children back to court. Then he leaves for the war and his mother's ogress wants to eat her daughter-in-law and her grandchildren, Aurore and Jour, who are barely saved by the mercy of the steward responsible for killing them. The young king returns at the appropriate time and the ogress, in spite, throws himself into the cauldron full of poisonous beasts prepared for his victims. The classic theme of the deliverance of the princess is therefore followed here by that, no less typical, of the cruel mother-in-law who persecutes the mother and the child or children. In all these versions, a hunter, a steward or a cook saves them, the old queen is punished and the young couple lives happily now. One might think that in variations of this type the young prince was neither emotionally nor manly mature.

*Intelligence and wisdom.* Let us remember that "if [in the 18th century] women want to get involved in science, then all their charm withers; they cease to be what they are, while making very vain efforts to become what they want to appear. Indeed, we have already insisted on the fact that in the Enlightenment, intellectual qualities are supposed to be there, the prerogative of the male half (see above: "female presence in Voltaire's life"). Likewise, the romantic woman of that time, being excluded from the realm of reason, often disappears in the shadow of manly glory. Likewise, references to human intelligence can be found in many of the philosophical tales.

## 5. CONCLUSION.

Female autonomy is, in the end, never complete: women cannot occupy the narrative space themselves, they need men who invoke it actively or through their behavior. They are thus locked in a few restricted thematic networks, such as love, eroticism and the conflict of the sexes. In any case, she is always seen under her gender identity and reflections on women in general are never far away. These rarely go as far as misogyny, but we see a lot of stereotypes around women arise among our authors in particular. In the tales of Perrault and Voltaire, the woman incorporates much more a specific function for the man. Lampo, as always, sits in between and incorporates stereotypes just like the type of the eternal feminine and the anima. Admittedly, the differences between the sexes remain important, and the male focus as well as the male gaze on women, with its portion of stereotypes, still remain preponderant.

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