

Pregnant Fictions: Childbirth and the Fairy Tale in Early-Modern France

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Tucker, Holly. *Pregnant Fictions: Childbirth and the Fairy Tale in Early-Modern France*. Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2003. Pp. xv, 213. \$34.95 Hardcover.

In *Pregnant Fictions: Childbirth and the Fairy Tale in Early-Modern France*, Holly Tucker engages the gendered social milieu surrounding the writing of fairy tales. Tucker seeks to place the literary fairy tales by female salon writers, or *conteuses*, in a historical context of male medical penetration of female spaces and French national concerns about fertility. Her narrow focus on a specific historical time and place—the early-modern period in France—grounds her analysis, allowing her to tie in precise historical facts to the production of fairy-tale discourse.

Tucker’s historical and contextual approach combines many women-centered concerns in her analysis of *conteuses’* fairy tales. She carefully grounds these tales in their historical context of the French monarchy’s fertility problems, the start of (predominantly male) medical incursions into female spaces, and the Cartesian mind/body duality, which was utilized to restrict women from intellectual realms based on their bodies’ reproductive functions. Tucker’s research yields a wealth of primary sources, from medical drawings of monstrous fetuses to correspondences between female fairy tale writers and the male scientific elite, and her commitment to contextualizing the recurring reproductive concerns of these fairy tales leads to a novel perspective on other folkloric genres of the time, notably birth-related legends and superstitions.

Utilizing interdisciplinary methods, Tucker explores various hypotheses of how conception and pregnancy functioned, hypotheses that were not only potentially imbued with sexist ideologies but that also manifested in how fairy-tale mothers conceived and gave birth. For instance, Madame d’Aulnoy appeared to reject Aristotelian physiology, which “held that women were themselves passive vessels for the more noble, male-dominated processes of reproduction” (90) in favor of Galenic embryological models, in which “the gender of the child was determined by the dominant seed” (87). This can be

seen in d'Aulnoy's tale "Fortunéé," in which a queen who is persecuted because she only bears daughters actually "cannot bear sons because it is she, not her husband, who is dominant" (87). Tucker's insistence on the writers' intertextual awareness of medical doctrines of their age strengthens her argument that fairy tales are, and have been, important sites of resistance to gendered domination.

One of Tucker's abiding concerns is with male colonizations of female spaces, both physically and ideologically. Since Tucker draws her texts from a time when "new obstetrical practices contributed to the surveillance and control of reproduction by providing additional ways (primarily to men) to infiltrate the dark recesses of (primarily female) reproductive organs" (6), she seeks out the responses to these colonial procedures in fairy tales. Her thesis is that "the *conteuses* used the fairy tale to suggest their unwillingness to watch passively as male intellectual communities reshaped the cultural and political meanings of their bodies" (53). These changes occurred in medical and philosophical discourses, as well as manifesting on the legal front, for, as Tucker notes, "the French state made repeated attempts to control midwives and to place them under the supervision of male medical practitioners" (71). Tucker also documents and laments how second-wave (c. 1730-1758), mostly male writers of fairy tales appropriate the fairy tale's contestatory space, folding it back into male discourse. Tucker states in her conclusion: "By the end of the eighteenth century the *conte de fées* becomes both the property of and the playground for masculine discourse" (148), a culturally specific claim that might have comparative analogs.

The folkloric roots of these literary tales proved another site of conflict in early-modern France. Tucker points out that, unlike Perrault's effort to link his fairy tales to oral rather than literary traditions, "many *conteuses* were instead attempting to distance themselves from the genre's connection to the unlettered" (44). The *conteuses* wished to participate in intellectual discourse in part to "rewrite prevailing medical theory and practice to show that female reproduction did not necessarily have to imply confinement" (48), hence their discourse adapted not only a literary style, but also demonstrated fluency with current scientific theories. These sophisticated tales, which Tucker analyzes as part of a gendered power struggle, thus are instruments of their authors' intentions, meant to question power roles.

Other power struggles become evident through intertextual evidence. Tucker, in linking (real-world) midwives and (fictional) fairies, draws in numerous birth-room

superstitions (66-67). She thus describes the milieu of the *conteuses* in terms of interlocking reproductive beliefs, which also bleed into their tales as elements of how female characters conceive and are conceived of, both literally and metaphorically. In her chapter “Like Mother, Like Daughter,” Tucker gives examples of contagious magic, such as the effect “of the imagination on the body” in relation to the birthmarks and prenatal cravings of mothers, which are discussed in medical texts of the time and also appear in fairy tales (102). Intertextuality is crucial to Tucker’s thesis, for she establishes that “medical intertexts in their tales clearly document the ways in which women understood, resisted, and rewrote the ‘real-world’ implications of the ever-shifting landscape of reproductive theory and practice at the height of the Scientific Revolution” (147). The strong intertextual and historical currents in Tucker’s book combined with its rigorous research and fruitful analyses make it a worthwhile read for anyone interested in fairy tales, reproductive folklore, and French culture.