70-23,525

HOWARD, Fannie Louise Scott, 1926-
ILLUSION AND REALITY IN THE CONTES OF
LA FONTAINE: A STUDY OF THEORY AND PRACTICE.
[Portions of Text in French].

Rice University, Ph.D., 1970
Language and Literature, modern

University Microfilms, A XEROX Company, Ann Arbor, Michigan
ILLUSION AND REALITY IN THE CONTES OF LA FONTAINE:
A STUDY OF THEORY AND PRACTICE

by

FANNIE LOUISE SCOTT HOWARD

A THESIS SUBMITTED
IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE
REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE OF

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

Thesis Director's signature:

Houston, Texas

May 1970
FOREWORD

Readers of La Fontaine have seldom been lukewarm in their reaction to his Contes, and from the time of their first publication, opinion of their general interest and of their literary worth has been sharply divided. Chapelain, the reigning literary authority of the mid-1660's applauded the appearance of the first tales, complimenting their author on his "jugement à ménager les expressions ou antiques ou populaires qui sont les seules couleurs vives et naturelles de cette sorte de composition"; he encouraged La Fontaine to continue mixing the "pleasant" with the "useful," to refresh himself from his more serious pursuits in giving the public more of these little stories.¹ Madame de Sévigné found them delightful,² and even Boileau spoke of one of them as a "conte plaisant," an "invention fleurie," praising La Fontaine's good taste and the simplicity and charm of his language and narrative technique.³ However, more prudish critics (and Boileau was to become one of their number) were shocked by the indecencies of the tales and felt that they were dangerous to the morals of their readers; this adverse criticism finally resulted in the interdiction of the fourth collection of tales, brought out in 1674, and contributed to La Fontaine's difficulties in being admitted to the Academy.

Critics of La Fontaine's taste were joined in the
next century by Voltaire, who deplored the "expressions basses et incorrectes," the "ton bourgeois" of La Fontaine's tales, while admitting that they were "les meilleurs que nous ayons," their author having surpassed Rabelais in this genre "et souvent égalé la naïveté et la précision qui se rencontrent dans trois ou quatre ouvrages de Marot." Critics of his licentiousness were seconded in the 19th century by Brunetière, who judged the Contes "un livre à garder sous la clef dans les bibliothèques."

In our own century, assessment of the Contes has been just as varied. Michaut apparently appreciated their gaiety, their "ton...railleur et malin," but Valéry pronounced them "assommants." Among more recent students of La Fontaine, Odette de Mourgues agrees with Valéry, finding the tales "froids et ennuyeux." By means of a very ingenious definition of precious poetry, she concludes: "La contribution la plus intéressante [que La Fontaine] ait faite à la littérature précieuse, ce sont ses Contes."

Nous avons à l'état pur, donc irréel et glacé, le mécanisme monotone de la farce, de la ruse et de la luxure. A cette grivoiserie de convention s'ajuste une attitude aussi conventionnelle: indulgence amusée, fausse pudeur, jeu de cache-cache.

Margaret Guiton, another sensitive student of the Fables, speaks of La Fontaine's "pseudoarchaic" style in the Contes as "insipid," and she finds no more reality in them than did Odette de Mourgues.
No breath of Renaissance vitality survives in La Fontaine's stories. The main point was to suggest the by then unmentionable events or objects his predecessors had spelled out in black and white, to come as close as possible to outright indecency without actually saying the word and thus involve the reader in the complicity of the pointless but off-color anecdote. . . . unreality seemed a necessary ingredient of pleasurable poetry.

Pierre Clarac has also spoken of the lack of reality in the tales.

Il y a chez Boccace, un sentiment de la vie, un accent de conviction, de passion qu'on chercherait en vain dans ces récits dont le ton est si détaché . . . et où l'auteur ne met rien de lui-même, les réflexions dont il les coupe ça et là ne relevant que d'une banale philosophie de cabaret. . . . On chercherait en vain dans ces monotones polissonneries un mot ayant un goût de chair.

He continues his review of the tales, calling Le Tableau (IV, 16) and La Jument du compère Pierre (IV, 10) "l'obscénité toute pure." 

John Lapp, a very enthusiastic admirer of the tales, takes exception to this evaluation of Clarac, praising the "wit and versatility" of Le Tableau, which he finds "a delightful comic poem, a miniature masterpiece," and pointing out instances of "human quality" in the tales. In his article concerning literary affinity between La Fontaine and Ariosto, he insists that the eroticism of the tales must be considered "as an aesthetic factor which La Fontaine dealt with as an artist." In her very sensitive, sympathetic study of the tales, Renée Kohn, comparing some of them with their Italian models to determine the goût of
La Fontaine as a *conteur*, finds that, with few exceptions, they "échappent à la vulgarité et à l'ennui," thanks to the "sens parfait de la bienséance" of their author. Though she believes that "il n'a pas fait oeuvre de moraliste," she does point out a "thème instructif" in the *Contes*, that of the problem of ill-matched marriages, seen especially in *Le Calendrier des vieillards* (II, 8). In her fine analysis of *L'Oraison de St. Julien* (II, 5), she points out "tous les détails de psychologie," which, "pour légèrement indiqués qu'ils soient, sont vrais."\(^{14}\)

Philip A. Wadsworth, in his study of the artistic growth of La Fontaine in his early tales, traces the development of the author's poetic and narrative skill and also of his conception of the *conte*. Discarding the old clichés about the tales, he analyzes La Fontaine's theory of the *conte en vers* discussed in the prefaces of 1664, 1665, and 1666, and defines the author's technique, through comparisons of *Joconde* (I, 1) and *La Fiancée du roi de Garbe* (II, 14) to their Italian models, and through very perceptive analyses of these two tales. Pointing out the careful psychological development of the heroine in *La Fiancée*, he shows that this tale "has more to recommend it than smutty fantasy." He concludes that in the tales written before 1666 La Fontaine "perfected the stylistic quicksand upon which he would build his fables. . . . [and] gained a sure talent for observing the world."\(^{15}\)
I am particularly indebted to Professor Wadsworth for my own orientation to the study of the Contes. In his book, in his lectures, in the guidance he has given me in the course of my work, he has stressed the importance of trying to understand what La Fontaine himself was attempting to do in the tales. Thus it is out of the question to impose a preconceived interpretation on the tales, or to criticize La Fontaine for what he has not done. It seems pointless in the case of an author who would say in the preface to his tales of 1665, "je m'accommoderai, s'il m'est possible, au goût de mon siècle," to reproach him for his failure to write in the manner of his predecessors, instead of judging him on his own merits. On the other hand, it would be naive to take at face value everything an author of the 17th century in France said in a preface.

The most frequently quoted statement about the Contes is La Fontaine's remark in the preface to the tales of 1665 in response to the reproach of an imagined critic that the tales have not the least trace of verisimilitude:

... ce n'est ni le vrai ni le vraisemblable qui font la beauté et la grâce de ces choses-ci; c'est seulement la manière de les conter.

Jean Biard cites this statement, among other similar ones taken from the tales, to show that La Fontaine's view of literature was that "it is on style and form that . . . a writer must concentrate his efforts."
the subject-matter of any literary work is only the necessary pretext, the framework of an author's exercise in language and style: the perfection of form remains the standard by which he himself wishes to be judged. 16

Odette de Mourgues sees the passage as another proof of La Fontaine's intention to follow faithfully in his tales the "precious" tradition of his century.

Il ne déguise nullement le manque de substance de son œuvre. Il s'agit d'un jeu sans plus.

The importance of style in the writings of La Fontaine—in the tales, the fables, in everything he wrote—is undeniable. But one questions whether it would be possible for the author of the fables not to have inserted something of himself and his ideas into these tales by means of the very stylistic devices he brought to such perfection. Could there be nothing in the tales besides a preoccupation with technique? Nothing "true"? And could there really be no shred of plausibility in these tales that were so popular in the reasonable 17th century? In any case, La Fontaine's statement alone does not prove either that the tales are merely stylistic exercises or that they are utterly lacking in substance.

Henri Peyre has pointed out that the most elementary rule of criticism is to doubt most firmly that which an author asserts most positively in his preface, that is, "de nous méfier avant tout de ce qu'il souhaite que nous
Without going quite that far, my basic approach has been to study carefully the tales themselves in order to interpret the tone and intent of La Fontaine's remarks about his storytelling art, while at the same time comparing his tales with their models in order to see how he went about "adapting himself, if possible," to the taste of his own time, and also to discover what new or personal interpretations he gave to the work of his predecessors. In this manner it has been possible to gain insights into what La Fontaine meant by the "vrai" and the "vraisemblable"—reality and the illusion of reality. And in the process, I have moved from a lukewarm appreciation of La Fontaine's art in the tales to a frank enjoyment of them, thus joining those readers and students of La Fontaine who admire the Contes.

I have found that the tales that lend themselves best to a study of this type are those in which a commentary on an artistic problem or on a current literary theory accompanies the story. Sometimes this commentary is in a prologue and sometimes it occurs as a digression or brief parenthetical intervention within the tale. With few exceptions, the tales that I examine at any length contain such commentaries. The literary problems that are called to the reader's attention in these brief remarks in the tales are discussed in a different way, or sometimes only obliquely alluded to, in the prefaces to the editions
of 1665 and 1666. An examination of these prefaces shows two main principles underlying all the other remarks: the desire of La Fontaine to please his readers and his demand for artistic liberty. In the preface of 1666 it is the author's freedom from the constraint of the Malherbian rules of versification and his freedom in imitating his sources that are said to "please" the readers; comments in the tales of Parts I and II reveal La Fontaine's preoccupation with the second of these "freedoms." In the preface of 1665 the author claims the right to tell licentious stories, while agreeing to remain within the limits of propriety, suggesting that the public is "pleased" by such tales; in certain tales of Parts III and IV, La Fontaine continues to comment on this question. I have organized my study of the tales to conform to these two general divisions.

These tales can be read on several levels. One can simply read the literary commentary, and thus determine the artistic problems with which the author is concerned. Or one can read the recounting of the "bon tour d'amour," appreciating the various little "asides" and other devices of the author that make the story more enjoyable. My own aim has been to read all levels at once, that is, to read the tales as poems, in order to discover if possible the author's total, personal reinterpretation of each tale. One thus discovers that the discussion of technique not
only calls attention to the practice of that technique, but actually often aids in its accomplishment: for example, commenting on preparations may do more to "prepare" the reader for the next event than the actual preparation itself. More than that, often the critical commentary aids in portraying a character, and in this way the technical discussion helps to imply a personal interpretation of the author. Other interventions and digressions prove to be no more gratuitous than the critical commentary. Added to these remarks extraneous to the plot itself are many other devices that also help to convey the author's meaning: certain techniques borrowed from the theatre, such as dialogue and movement and a "dramatic" structure that creates suspense (and sometimes the suspense itself is created by a technical discussion); all kinds of sensory images, not only visual and auditory but also olfactory and tactile; the poetic use of sound and rhythm, special uses and placement of words. I have not exhausted the study of any one of these techniques. But studying them as they are employed in certain tales that reveal a particular preoccupation with technique, one sees that their total result is the creation of poetic little fictions—contes en vers—in which the author is able to insinuate not only indecencies which, too plainly revealed, would not be pleasing to the public, but other ideas as well—a certain "reality" that is not merely plastered on the
surface, but which derives from within the tale.

The reasons for the interdiction of the *Nouveaux Contes* of 1674 have remained rather mysterious. And critics have never agreed whether the tales of that collection are more scabrous than the others. Jacques Schifferlin, one of the editors of the Pléiade edition of the *Fables, Contes, et Nouvelles*, writes:

On ne comprend pas l'interdiction de cette quatrième partie qui n'a rien de plus licencieux que les précédentes, publiées avec privilège du Roi. "Au reste, ajoute Walckenaer, ces contes n'égaient pas encore en licence quelques-uns de ceux de Boccace et de la reine de Navarre, dont on permettait le débit et les réimpressions et qu'on lisait sans scrupule."18

However, Clarac, as we have seen, judges these tales to be no longer "plaisanteries gauloises," as were the others, but pure obscenity. Michaut wrote that in his opinion, the tales of the third and fourth parts of the *Contes* "dépassent en licence les contes des parties antériorieures. . . . mais je suis presque forcé de m'en tenir à l'affirmation pure: il est trop difficile d'apporter des preuves."19 The proof lies in the close examination of the text; my own will perhaps be useful in helping to clear up the mystery.
NOTE ON REFERENCES

The quotations from the works of La Fontaine which appear in this thesis are taken from the two volumes of his
Oeuvres complètes of the Bibliothèque de la Pléiade series (Paris: Editions Gallimard). Quotations from Volume I,
Fables, Contes et Nouvelles (1954), will be followed simply by page numbers in parentheses. Volume II, Oeuvres diverses
(1958), will be indicated by the abbreviation OD. In some cases the tales are referred to by number, rather than by page: the notation (IV, 16), for example, following the title of one of the tales, means the sixteenth tale in Part Four of the Contes.
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Chapter</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>I. THE QUARREL ON Imitation: Creating the Vraisemblable</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A. Introduction, Toward More Naturalness</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1. Early Literary Activity</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Les Rieure du Beau-Richard</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Conte d'une chose arrivée à Château-Thierry</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B. Parts One and Two of the Contes, Storytelling, Characterization, Illusion</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1. Publication of Parts One and Two of the Contes</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Dissertation sur Joconde</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Joconde</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Le Cocu battu et content</td>
<td>56</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. La Servante justifiée</td>
<td>65</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. Le Berceau</td>
<td>74</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. La Fiancée du roi de Garbe</td>
<td>83</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8. Conclusion</td>
<td>106</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
II. THE INSISTENCE ON PROPRIETY:  
PORTRAYING THE VRAI ............. 111

A. Part Three of the Contes,  
Truth, Dissemblance, Morality .. 111

1. Introduction. Justifying  
Licentious Stories ............. 111

2. Les Oies de Frère Philippe .. 116

3. Man's Nature, Hermits, Saints .. 135
    a. Les Rémois, La Coupe  
enchantée, Le Petit  
Chien, Psyché ............. 135
    b. Poème de la Captivité  
de Saint Malo ............. 149
    c. Le Diable en Enfer ............. 161

4. Conclusion ............. 169

B. Part Four of the Contes,  
The Veiling of Indecency, the  
Question of Taste ............. 177

1. Introduction. The Social  
Acceptability of the Contes .. 177

2. Riddles, Metaphors, Allegories .. 182
    a. Comment l'esprit vient  
aux filles ............. 182
    b. Le Diable en Enfer, Le  
Diable de Papefiguère,  
La Chose impossible, La  
Jument du compère  
Pierre, Les Lunettes .. 186
    c. Le Cas de conscience ............. 190

3. Le Tableau ............. 195

4. Conclusion ............. 215
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Chapter</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>III. SYNTHESIS: ILLUSION AND REALITY</td>
<td>220</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A. Part Five of the Contes.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Poet and his Critics</td>
<td>220</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1. Introduction. Reaction to Censure</td>
<td>220</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. La Clochette</td>
<td>222</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Le Fleuve Scamandre</td>
<td>229</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Les Aveux indiscrets</td>
<td>241</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Le Remède</td>
<td>246</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B. Conclusion</td>
<td>253</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NOTES</td>
<td>291</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>WORKS CONSULTED</td>
<td>307</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
CHAPTER I

THE QUARREL ON IMITATION:
CREATING THE VRAISEMBLABLE

A. Introduction. Toward More Naturalness

1. Early Literary Activity

Ce poète n'écrivait pas pour se satisfaire seulement, ou pour satisfaire un petit nombre de gens choisis; il avait pour but:
Populo ut placèrent quas fecisset fabulas.

With this quotation from Terence, La Fontaine modestly, yet hopefully closed the Avertissement to his first book of contes, the Nouvelles en vers tirée [sic] de Boccace et de l'Arioste. It was an unimposing little volume containing only two of his tales in verse, Le Cocu battu et content and Joconde,¹ but it would finally bring him the renown that he had coveted since beginning his literary career a decade earlier. The forty-three-year-old La Fontaine had had an unusually long period of apprenticeship, during which he had read and tried out the styles and genres of a large number and variety of writers, both ancient and modern.²

But until the appearance in December of 1664 of these two pilot pieces in a genre with which he had been experimenting for two or three years or more, he had had only modest success as a writer, his compositions known to few others than his relatives and friends in Château-Thierry and Paris, and those whom he encountered at Vaux.
Of La Fontaine's earliest literary activity, all that survives are three smutty chansons which date from the late 1640's and early 1650's. This was the period of his association with the "knights" of the "Round Table," a group of aspiring writers who met weekly at Paul Pellisson's, or perhaps at the home of Conrart, or at some Parisian cabaret, to read to each other their latest compositions. It was probably some of these friends who encouraged La Fontaine in his audacious project to adapt to the increasingly prudish French stage the licentious Eunuchus of Terence. He published his version of the comedy, L'Eunuque, in 1654, although he knew it to be only "une médiocre copie d'un excellent original" (OD 263). It does not seem to have been performed, and La Fontaine never published it again. Around 1657 he had the good fortune to become one of the protégés of Nicolas Fouquet, the surintendant des finances under Mazarin and a generous patron of the arts. In the summer of 1658 he presented to Fouquet his Adonis, a long poem recounting in a flowery "héroïque" style (OD 3) the tragic love story of Venus and Adonis found in ancient mythology. Early in 1659 he began Le Songe de Vaux, an imaginative description of the marvels of Fouquet's château of Vaux-le-Vicomte; but at the time of Fouquet's arrest almost three years later, this composition remained incomplete.
2. Les Rieurs du Beau-Richard

In the spring of 1659 La Fontaine began offering his benefactor Fouquet, in return for his generosity, the various "installments" of the "Pension Poétique": épîtres, épitaphes, ballades, odes, dizains, relations, épitragmes, and other light verse. One of these rather precious pieces was published during this period. Hidden away in a collection of poems that appeared in 1660 was an unsigned Ballade (Sur la paix des Pyrénées) expressing joy over the forthcoming marriage of Louis XIV and the infanta Marie-Thérèse, who would bring with her to the court of France, "outre un métail qui brille,/ Les Jeux, les Ris, les Grâces, et l'Amour" (OD 498). There is a brief allusion to the approaching marriage of the king in Les Rieurs du Beau-Richard, suggesting that this gay little comédie-ballet, performed at Château-Thierry by some of La Fontaine's friends, was written at about the same time as the Ballade. But the atmosphere of Les Rieurs is quite different from that of the Ballade and other compositions written for Fouquet. Whereas they, for the most part, were written in an artificial, precious language and often portrayed a world of fantasy peopled by gods and goddesses and minor divinities, such as "les Ris," this lively farce utilizes everyday, colloquial expressions and presents an anecdote about small-town tradespeople
told by the local "Rieurs."

The play has close connections with La Fontaine's first tales in verse. It is a dramatization of one of the jokes told by the town idlers who gathered regularly on the square called the Beau-Richard in Château-Thierry. It opens with one of these idlers—"rieurs"—separating himself from the assembly to announce, in a prologue, first the tone and then the subject of the play. At the meetings on the Beau-Richard, he says, everything is funny, "Ce n'est que farce et comédie" (OD 349). Then he appears to announce that this will be a farce about affected women, perhaps similar to Molière's Les Précieuses ridicules, which was being played in Paris at precisely this time.⁶

Qui ne rirait des précieux?  
Qui ne rirait de ces coquetteries  
En qui tout est mystérieux,  
Et qui font tant les Guillemettes?  

Elles parlent d'un certain ton,  
Elles ont un certain langage  
Dont aurait ri l'aîné Caton,  
Lui qui passait pour homme sage.

However, the "rieur" has only been teasing his audience:

D'elles pourtant il ne s'agit  
En la présente comédie:  
Un bon bourgeois s'y radoucit  
Pour une femme assez jolie.

These stanzas, leading the reader off course before finally revealing the subject of the piece, serve not only to attract the attention of the reader, but also to emphasize
the contrast between the artificial manners and language of the précieuses and the more natural behavior of the village folk whose tale will be told in the scenes that follow.

The "rieur" concludes the prologue by telling the joke which is the core of the play, the ruse of a canny husband who takes advantage of a gullible merchant's lust for his wife, to save paying a debt he owes the merchant. When his wife tells him that the merchant has made improper advances, the husband advises her to promise the merchant a kiss in return for the note acknowledging his debt to the merchant; upon receipt of the note she is to tear it into pieces and then cough loudly, whereupon the husband will appear.

In the play that follows, this local anecdote is expanded to eight very brief scenes, or "entrées," in which songs and dances are combined with the action. The wheat merchant is the first to be introduced, standing behind the counter of his shop boasting of his wealth and happiness, wishing only for "un petit coeur." He is joined by two wheat sifters, who are put to work ridding his wheat of "la moindre ordure." Their work finished, they apparently leave, and the cobbler enters to ask for wheat on credit. The bargain is made to the satisfaction of each of them, but the merchant insists "qu'un notaire écrive." While the cobbler is out looking for a notary, a very
reputable notary who happens to be nearby comes singing and dancing into the shop of the merchant.

Avec moi l'on ne craint jamais
Les et caetera de notaire;
Tous mes contrats sont fort bien faits,
Quand l'avocat me les fait faire.

Mieux que pas un, sans contredit,
Je regle une affaire importante.
Je signerai, ce m'a-t-on dit,
Le mariage de l'Infante. (OD 353)

The agreement is drawn up and the three argue politely over the payment of the notary's fee, the shoemaker vaguely indicating that he will pay it on repaying the debt. Next to arrive is a miller, a white-faced Jodelet exaggerating his misery, which is increased by the indolence of his talking ass.

The last three scenes are in the cobbler's shop, where the cobbler's wife makes her "entrée."

Que mon mari fait l'assoê!
Il ne m'appelle que son âme;
Si j'étais homme, en vérité,
Je n'aimerais pas tant ma femme. (OD 356)

Her opening lines show this lady to be a more complicated character than the anecdote in the prologue had indicated. There she had seemed only the passive tool of her husband, but in these final scenes of the play, the ruse seems to be not his idea but hers.

As she finishes her dance, the merchant enters. It seems that time has passed and the note is due, for
he obliquely offers to postpone demanding payment of her husband's debt to him if she will grant him "quelque faveur."

Votre me devez; mais, entre nous,
Si vous vouliez... bien à votre aise...

When she resists, the hard-hearted merchant speaks his mind more plainly:

Pour faire court en trois paroles,
La courtoisie, ou le sergent,
Ou bien payez-moi six pistoles! (OD 357)

Without first consulting her husband, as the wife in the anecdote had done, she pretends to submit, to save the honor of her household.

Je suis pauvre, mais j'ai du coeur:
Plutôt que mes meubles l'on crie,
Comme j'ai soin de notre honneur,
Je ferai tout.

Mollified by her apparent surrender, the merchant sends for refreshments. Little meat pies and wine are brought in by a prudent pastry cook, who, in an aside to the audience, explains that he will pretend not to notice that the merchant is making love to the cobbler's wife.

Ho! ho! Voici bien autre affaire;
Mais ne faisons semblant de rien...
Bonjour, Monsieur; bonjour, Madame.

Drinking to the health of the pretty wife of his debtor, the merchant is ready to conclude their bargain; but the
wife asks him first for the "paper." Here the conflict of the two passions of the merchant, his avarice and his lust—a conflict only sketchily indicated—creates an amusing bit of action: the merchant holding the paper just out of reach of the wife, refusing to give it to her for fear she will not keep her promise, the wife pouting and reassuring him that her word is her bond, the merchant hoping to satisfy her by gingerly tearing off a small corner of the note. In the story in the prologue it was the wife who was to tear the paper "de bout en bout"; here it is the merchant who at last recklessly tears the note in half himself, and the moment he does it, the wife coughs. Although there has been no previous agreement between the husband and wife—except for the one indicated in the prologue—at her signal he enters "en diligence," to frustrate completely the too-credulous merchant, who, we imagine, retreats under a hail of blows.

Le Marchand: Argent! argent!
Le Savetier: Papier! papier!
Le Marchand: Si je m'oblige à vous le rendre...
Le Savetier: Ce n'est mon fait. Point de quartier.
           Je ne me laisse point surprendre.

La Fontaine has not only added new characters and action to the brief anecdote told in the prologue; he has, in presenting his principal characters, slightly deviated from the original plot, making the story told in the play a new version of the first one. In the expanded, dramatized version of the story, there is little attempt at logical
plot development. Instead, the characters make their entrances one after the other, perform their special numbers and leave, to create an entertaining embryonic comédie à tiroirs, not too different from those of Molière.

The prologue of this piece suggests that La Fontaine may already have been experimenting with adapting in verse some of the tales that would appear in his early collections. Considered apart from the play it introduces, it reveals a structure and movement which illustrate in a primitive form some of the narrative techniques which La Fontaine would perfect in the next several years. As has been noted, it begins with a kind of preface about the "précieux," which, though it seems to have no relationship with the anecdote that follows, prepares it by setting the comic tone and suggesting, by opposition, the realistic quality of the characters and their story. In the three central stanzas of the anecdote, the husband's direct discourse to his wife establishes the need for the ruse, foretells its ultimate success by a reference to the credulity of the merchant, and alludes to the indelicacy of the situation by a six-line insistence on the cough.

Ma femme, il vous faut l'abuser,  
Car c'est un homme un peu créeule: 
Sous l'espérance d'un baiser,  
Faites-lui rendre ma cédule.

Déchirez-la de bout en bout,  
Car la somme en est assez grande.
Toussez après. Ce n'est pas tout! 
Toussez si haut qu'on vous entende.

Il ne faut pas tarder beaucoup, 
De peur qu'il n'arrive fortune: 
Toussez, toussez encore un coup, 
Et toussez plutôt deux fois qu'une. (OD 350)

With the familiar "Ainsi fut dit, ainsi fut fait," La Fontaine avoids needless repetition of the action already suggested by the husband's directions to his wife. Then after recounting in only four lines the end of the story, not forgetting to mention that "La dame tousse à temps et heure," La Fontaine comments on the reaction of the merchant.

Le galant songe à s'aller pendre; 
Mais il y songe seulement: 
Pour cela n'est-il à reprendre.

The last stanza is a comment on the risks to which both husbands and lovers are exposed.

Tous les galants craignent la toux, 
Elle a souvent troublé la fête. 
Nous parlons aussi comme époux, 
Autant nous en pend sur la tête.

La Fontaine will make just such remarks on his characters' actions and motives throughout his tales, and he will conclude many of them with similar general observations—that resemble the "morals" of the fables—arising from the events related in the story.
3. Conte d'une chose arrivée à Château-Thierry

At some time before publishing his first tales, La Fontaine wrote a third version of the local joke that inspired Les Rieurs du Beau-Richard. This new adaptation, which he called Conte d'une chose arrivée à C. (Château-Thierry), combines details from both the prologue and the ballet of Les Rieurs; and though it suppresses the secondary characters of the latter, it adds new characters in a scene at the end which is found in neither of the earlier versions. Decasyllables replace the octosyllables of Les Rieurs, the new tale told in only forty-one lines.

The exposition of this tale, presenting immediately all of the necessary background information, is a model of brevity.

Un savetier, que nous nommerons Blaise,  
Prit belle femme, et fut très avisé.  
Les bonnes gens, qui n'étaient à leur aise,  
S'en vont priér un marchand peu rusé  
Qu'il leur prêtât, dessous bonne promesse,  
Mi-muid de grain; ce que le marchand fait. (374)

These few lines are more than a simple statement of facts; they also indicate indirectly, by the adjectives "très avisé" and "peu rusé" that the cobbler will not pay his debt to the merchant, and furthermore they enlist the reader on the side of the cobbler. This is accomplished by several techniques. First, the adjectives just mentioned, applied to the cobbler and the merchant, suggest the classic
conflict between the shrewd poor man and the unwary rich man, and the observer of such a conflict may be expected to sympathize with the poor man. This is particularly true if the rich man remains anonymous and the poor man is individualized. La Fontaine has placed the savetier at the beginning of the story and then has interested the reader in him as a person by giving him a name; besides a name, he has a pretty wife who is united with him against the merchant. The pretty wife's accompanying her husband to buy the wheat is perhaps also an insinuation that Blaise, the "avisé," is not above using his wife's beauty to accomplish his purpose, whether to obtain credit or to avoid payment of his debt. The active partnership of the husband and wife, the attempt to individualize the cobbler, the suggested conflict—all of this is new to the Conte d'une Chose. In this exposition the reader is taken into the author's confidence and becomes his accomplice, eager to watch the unfolding of the plot and to supplement the author's words by his own imagination.

All information necessary to the development of the story is presented quite directly to the reader, and in logical order. In the lines immediately following those above, the reader learns that the note has expired; then he is told plainly why the merchant is pressing the couple for payment: "Crut que par là baiserait la commère." The merchant makes his proposition to the wife in direct dis-
course, as in the prologue of *Les Rieurs*.

Vous avez trop de quoi me satisfaire,  
Ce lui dit-il, et sans débourser rien:  
Accordez-moi ce que vous savez bien.  
--Je songerai, répond-elle, à la chose.

The wife straightway relates the merchant's lustful proposal to Blaise, who does not appear displeased, but sees the situation as a way to "rattraper" their money, "sans coup férir."

Tout de ce pas allez dire à cet homme  
Qu'il peut venir, et que je n'y suis point.  
Je veux ici me cacher tout à point.  
Avant le coup demandez la cédule;  
De la donner je ne crois qu'il recule;  
Puis tousserez, afin de m'avertir,  
Mais haut et clair, et plutôt deux fois qu'une.  
Lors de mon coin vous me verrez sortir  
Incontinent, de crainte de fortune.

This tale does not end with the successful accomplishment of the husband's ruse nor with a commentary on the reaction of the merchant when the cobbler appears, as had the ballet and its prologue. These details are skipped over entirely. The forthright relation of the original anecdote prepares a new ending, which diverts the interest from the men to the wife.

Ainsi fut dit, ainsi s'exécuta;  
Dont le mari puis après se vanta;  
Si que chacun glosait sur ce mystère.

La Fontaine's friends at Château-Thierry who had attended the performance of the *comédie-ballet* would have recog-
nized in this final scene the "rieurs" on the Beau-Richard, laughing about the latest town gossip. But even without a previous knowledge of the play, a reader would have seen vividly the action suggested in the final lines of the *Conte d'une chose*. A group of "gros bourgeois" and their wives are discussing the trick played on their rich merchant friend by the cobbler, just as this clever fellow's pretty wife walks by. One of these very solid citizens, who, one imagines, is perhaps himself attracted to "la belle," teases her about her part in the affair, insinuating that she may not have coughed until after concluding her part of the bargain with the merchant.

Mieux eût valu touser après l'affaire,
Dit à la belle un des plus gros bourgeois;
Vous eussiez eu votre compte tous trois.
N'y manquez plus, sauf après de se taire.
Mais qu'en est-il, or ça, belle, entre nous?

But the saucy wife of the cobbler, as quick-witted as her husband, is more than a match for this "gros bourgeois," advising him in a neat riposte to look after the behavior of his own wife.

Elle répond: "Ah! Monsieur, croyez-vous
Que nous ayons tant d'esprit que vos dames?

Je pense bien, continua la belle,
Qu'en pareil cas Madame en usé ainsi:
Mais quoi! chacun n'est pas si sage qu'elle.

This piquant ending shows the spirited wife of the poor
man succeeding in thoroughly discomfiting the rich man and his wife, while leaving unanswered the question of the *honnêteté* of both of the women.

The provocative treatment of the two wives in the *Conte d'une chose arrivée à Château-Thierry*, the new narrative techniques we have seen in this tale, the use of slightly archaic expressions, along with a more colorful, natural-sounding dialogue, would seem to separate this tale by two or three years from *Les Rieurs du Beau-Richard*. In writing the *Conte d'une chose*, La Fontaine made use of the language, the techniques of versification, and the story structure which he would discuss in the *avertissement* of the *Nouvelles en vers* of 1664 and in the preface to his *Contes et Nouvelles* of 1666. He also illustrated in reworking one of his own pieces his theory of imitation, which he would defend in 1666, claiming his right to "tailler dans le bien d'autrui ainsi que dans le sien propre" in order to create a "nouvelle nouvelle" (386). He was already a long way from his "médiocre copie" of the *Eunuclus*, and was reflecting with more assurance the simplicity, unity, and naturalness which he had praised in speaking of Terence's play.

Le sujet en est simple, comme le prescrivent nos maîtres; il n'est point embarrassé d'incidents confus; il n'est point chargé d'ornements inutiles et détachés; tous les ressorts y remuent la machine, et tous les moyens y acheminent à la fin. . . . et
pour comble de louange, la nature y instruit tous les personnages, et ne manque jamais de leur sug-
érer ce qu'ils ont à faire et à dire. (OD 263)

During the early years of his career, La Fontaine was increasingly aware of a change in literary taste, away from the artificiality of the kind of verse he was writing for Fouquet, toward more naturalness. Seven years after L'Eunuque he refers again to Terence, in the well-known commentary on "la nature" which occurs in his letter to Maucroix describing the magnificent fête given at Vaux in honor of the king, on August 17, 1661. Part of the entertainment was a new comédie-ballet by Molière, Les Fâcheux, and in the midst of his description of this play, La Fontaine pauses to speak of Molière's popularity, likening his manner to that of Terence.

Cet écrivain par sa manière
Charme à présent toute la Cour.
De la façon que son nom court,
Il doit être delà Rome:
J'en suis ravi, car c'est mon homme.
Te souvient-il bien qu'autrefois
Nous avons conclu d'une voix
Qu'il allait ramener en France
Le bon goût et l'air de Térence?
.
.
.
.
Nous avons changé de méthode;
Jodelet n'est plus à la mode,
Et maintenant il ne faut pas
Quitter la nature d'un pas. (OD 525-26)

These final lines have the ring of a manifesto; and in fact, La Fontaine's fame, which was still several years away, would come from the increasing "naturalness" of his
works: the "naïveté" of his language, the plausibility of his fiction, the truth of his observation of human nature.
B. Parts One and Two of the Contes. Storytelling, Characterization, Illusion

1. Publication of Parts One and Two of the Contes

It cannot be determined exactly when La Fontaine began writing tales. Perhaps, as Brienne said, he "faisait des contes pour Fouquet, et cela pour avoir du pain." Perhaps he began thinking seriously of developing the genre as a vehicle for his special talents and tastes after the arrest of Fouquet in 1661. In any case, sometime during the early 1660's, he copied and sent to Conrart nine of the tales he had been writing, including Le Cocu battu et content and the Conte d'une chose arrivée à Château-Thierry. These tales and another which seems to have been written at about the same time, Soeur Jeanne (I, 9), plus Joconde, make up Part One of modern editions of the Contes. Joconde was not written until 1663 or 1664, and the unusual circumstances of its composition and circulation in manuscript were responsible for the launching of La Fontaine's career as a conteur.

La Fontaine was not the only writer experimenting in this genre during the early 1660's. St. Evremond, whom La Fontaine had probably encountered at Vaux, had composed La Matrone d'Ephèse, an imitation of Petronius written in prose with a few lines of verse, which would be included in the Nouvelles en vers of 1664. And a certain Bouillon,
an acquaintance of Ménage and Pellisson, had written an imitation in verse of the Giocondo episode of the twenty-eighth canto of the *Orlando furioso*. In 1662 Bouillon died, but in 1663 his works were published, including his version of Ariosto's story. On January 14, 1664, La Fontaine obtained the *privilege* for his own *Joconde*, which had possibly already been passed around among his friends and those of the late M. Bouillon. Comparisons and discussions of the two tales apparently resulted in a lively quarrel between partisans of La Fontaine and Bouillon; for the "Journal des Savants" reported in January of 1665 that a great many people had joined in the dispute: "et elle s'est tellement échauffée qu'il s'est fait des gageures considérables en faveur de l'un et de l'autre."

Finally, on December 10, 1664, perhaps encouraged by his friends to take advantage of these "heated" discussions over the relative merits of the two tales, La Fontaine published his *Joconde*, adding to it one of his earlier tales, *Le Cocu battu et content*, and the tale of St. Evremond, prefacing the slim volume with a few remarks about the style of his two *Nouvelles en vers*. The tale from Boccaccio, he said, was written in "vieux langage," which, "pour des choses de cette nature, a des grâces que celui de notre siècle n'a pas." By "vieux langage" he meant the old-fashioned expressions and constructions of the Marotic style he had developed during his years at Vaux, a style
which he had used in the tales of the Conrart manuscript. He had written the tale from Ariosto in "vers irréguliers," he said, because this style, resembling prose, might seem the more natural, "et par conséquent la meilleure." He urged his readers to indicate their choice of styles, for he had already chosen other tales that he planned to adapt in verse. However, before beginning, he would wait to see whether these two would be well-received. Then on January 10, 1665, just a month later, he "consented to the publication" of what remained of the "bagatelles" he had already written; "several people," he explained in the preface to this new collection, had advised him to take advantage of the current interest in them, "de ne pas laisser refroidir la curiosité de les voir, qui est encore en son premier feu" (345). He indicated again in this preface his plans for more tales, notably "ceux de Boccace qui sont le plus à mon goût." Reassured by the success of this first group, he set to work writing the thirteen new tales that would appear in January of 1666 in the Deuxième Partie des Contes et Nouvelles en vers de M. de La Fontaine.

2. Dissertation sur Joconde

The first half of the preface to Part Two of the Contes, written just over a year after the appearance of Joconde, is given to a discussion of poetic style, and
particularly of the desirability of matching style to subject; in the second half the author describes and attempts to justify his method of imitating his sources. The entire preface appears to echo the dispute over Joconde, a dispute which seems to have arisen not over the relative literary merits of the tales of Bouillon and La Fontaine, but rather over opposing views on poetry and imitation.

Bouillon had followed Ariosto's text quite closely in composing his inept verses, whereas La Fontaine had taken many liberties with his model in creating his brilliant, witty tale. Circulating anonymously at the same time as the manuscript of Joconde was an interesting piece filled with allusions to literary theories called the Dissertation sur Joconde, whose purpose was to show that La Fontaine's method of imitation had resulted in a tale that would please the reading public of the 1660's in France. It is in the form of a letter to a friend, written to arm him with arguments that would help him win his wager of "cent pistoles" on La Fontaine's conte.11 The author of the letter asserts from the beginning that there is no comparison to be made between the "narration froide" of Bouillon and the "conte plaisant" of La Fontaine. This immediately settles the question of choice between a "traduction sèche et triste" and an "invention fleurie." Describing La Fontaine's method of imitation, the author defines his century's conception of artistic creation:
Monsieur de La Fontaine a pris à la vérité son sujet d'Arioste; mais en même temps il s'est rendu maître de sa matière: ce n'est point une copie qu'il ait tirée un trait après l'autre sur l'original; c'est un original qu'il a formé sur l'idée qu'Arioste lui a fournie. C'est ainsi que Virgile a imité Homère; Térence, Ménandre; et le Tasse, Virgile.

(B 309-10)

On the other hand, Bouillon is only a "valet timide," who never takes a step without the leave of his master, a "traducteur maigre et décharné."

Bouillon and his literal translation thus neatly dismissed, the author devotes the main part of his letter to a discussion of why La Fontaine's free imitation of Ariosto's tale is better even than the original. The one-word summary of all his reasons is that La Fontaine's version of this ridiculous tale managed to Plaire. And it could not have pleased a modern public without having been modified; for not only the Alps but also more than a hundred years of artistic activity separated the incoherent and fantastic world of Ariosto from the elegant, reasonable century of the courtiers of the Roi Soleil. Bouillon's error had been in failing to render his model French, in failing to reflect the social and literary climate of his own day.

The ensuing detailed comparison of the tales of La Fontaine and Ariosto begins by invoking Horace's principle of literary consistency, which maintains that in order to please, a work must be consistent with itself
and with its public. The opening passage of the *Ars poetica* of Horace, demanding unity in a poem as in a painting, provokes our anonymous author to a discussion of the separation of the genres (B 310-11). In the course of the years since the 1630's, the mixed genres in the theatre, such as the pastoral and the tragicomedy, had gradually fallen from favor, and now the mixture of the heroic and the comic as it is seen in the *Orlando Furioso* is equally censured. Our critic condemns first a structure that allows the alternating of serious, heroic passages with ridiculous, farcical episodes. Then he condemns the further incoherence of a style that permits the telling of a comical story like *Joconde* in a grave and reasonable manner.

Vous diriez que non seulement, c'est une histoire très-véritable, mais que c'est une chose tres-noble et très-héroïque qu'il va raconter. (B 311)

Even without the precepts of Horace, "la pure raison" would teach that nothing is worse than writing something serious in an unelvated style, unless it is telling an absurd story in serious terms. This last is permissible only if "ce sérieux [est] affecté tout exprès, pour rendre la chose encore plus burlesque" (B 312). Here then is the secret for telling absurd stories: an author must express himself in such a way that he makes the reader understand that he does not believe a word of what he is telling
him; and this, paradoxically, makes the reader accept the story as plausible. How do we know? Because he laughs. And only the plausible "touche la passion," that is, "excite à rire." The interesting point here among all these subtleties is the idea that an author thus causes the reader to trick himself into accepting for the moment a ridiculous thing as, if not exactly the truth, at least a semblance of truth. La Fontaine realized that in a tale like Joconde, "il ne fallait badiner sérieusement"; that a uniformly bantering tone would insure plausibility.

The author's commentary on structure and style has moved from literary consistency to verisimilitude in such a way as to make vraisemblance a necessary consequence of consistency. The discussion of the lack of unity of character in Ariosto's tale reflects this same relationship of the two principles. It is pointed out that the language and diffident behavior of a Tircis do not suit the coarse words and rude actions of a muledriver, and that the perfect, long-suffering love of a Céladon is out of place in a ridiculous story like this one (B 317, 313). Ariosto's psychology is called absurd; character development must be reasonable, must conform to what the reader imagines would happen under the circumstance described. The implication here is that the reader must be led to anticipate the action that the author presents, or at least to accept it as reasonable. Actions should be consistent with char-
acter and should depend upon the character's psychology. Even the extremely ridiculous situation of three men in bed with one girl can be well enough prepared to seem plausible (B 316-17).

Of no less importance than a character's harmony with the situation and with himself is the harmony required between the character and the moral sentiments of the public. Ordinary relationships such as the one between a king and his subjects must be maintained in order not to shatter the appearance of reality, seemingly the most necessary ingredient of a good tale. A reader during the time of Louis XIV could countenance indignities to the king (B 314, 318) no more than Italian impertinences regarding the church (B 314, 315); and Ariosto's indelicate puns and metaphors are almost as shocking to a seventeenth-century Frenchman's sensibilities as is such a thing as a father's selling his daughter to a couple of strangers for their common use (B 315, 318).

La Fontaine's taste is seen as impeccable. Thanks to his formation "au goût de Térence," he never deviates from "la route du bon sens" (B 315). The long, pompous periods and careless, conventional diction of the unlucky M. Bouillon (B 320) are replaced in La Fontaine's tale by a naturalness and simplicity, "une certaine naïveté de langage," which derives in large part from the irregular rhythm of his verse.
C'est cette naïveté inimitable qui a été tant estimée dans les écrits d'Horace et de Térence, à laquelle ils se sont étudiés particulièrement, jusqu'à rompre pour cela la mesure de leurs vers, comme a fait M. de La Fontaine en beaucoup d'endroits. En effet, c'est ce molle et ce facetum qu'Horace a attribué à Virgile, et qu'Apollon ne donne qu'à ses Favoris. (B 315-316)

His style has beauties difficult to define; not the least of these is the relationship established with the reader. By his indirect narrative technique—expressing a doubt, for example, instead of presenting an idea plainly—La Fontaine "enjoue sa narration" and "occupe agréablement le lecteur" (B 316). Another of his methods of "occupying" the reader is through ellipsis in narration. Leaving as much as possible for the reader to deduce has the added advantage of making the story concise.

... tout l'artifice de la narration consiste à ne marquer que les circonstances qui sont absolument nécessaires. (B 317)

But the author of this Dissertation finally admits, a bit helplessly, that the most charming passages defy analysis.

Ces sortes de beautés sont de celles qu'il faut sentir, et qui ne se prouvent point. C'est ce je ne sais quoi qui nous charme, et sans lequel la beauté même n'aurait ni grâce ni beauté. (B 316)

To appreciate the evident beauties of the Joconde of La Fontaine, one needs only to have the "bon sens" of the century. And it is precisely this "jugement" that
Ariosto lacked. To him goes the glory for "l'invention"; but some of La Fontaine's own inventions rival all that is most ingenious in Ariosto's tale, while at the same time rectifying the obvious faults in taste and vraisemblance.

... confessons que Monsieur de la Fontaine ayant conté plus plaisamment une chose très-plaisante, il a mieux compris l'idée et le caractère de la narration. (B 319)

Boileau is generally considered to be the author—or one of the authors—of this Dissertation, Boileau, who would later speak of having "sali" his memory with odious tales about unfaithful wives such as "Joconde et son histoire." During the early 1660's his relations with the author of Joconde were quite cordial, and they shared at that time not only a taste for licentious stories but also certain literary opinions, as may be seen by comparing the Dissertation with the prefaces of Parts One and Two of the Contes. La Fontaine's remarks in the Avertissement of 1664 concerning the desirability of a natural-sounding rhythm in the tales and Boileau's praise of the "simplicity" and "charm" of La Fontaine's verse—the "naïveté" of his language likened to that of Horace and Terence—seem to arise from similar ideas on versification. Both authors express admiration for Terence, and both allude frequently to the Ars poetica of Horace. La Fontaine refers directly to Horace's principle of literary consistency in the preface of 1665, speaking of the "loi
indispensable, selon Horace, ou plutôt selon la raison et le sens commun, de se conformer aux choses dont on écrit."

But it is the preface of 1666 that appears to reflect most clearly the attitudes and arguments of the Dissertation. It closes with a reference to the passage of the *Ars poetica* with which Boileau had opened his Dissertation:

... il [ne] faut point ... faire rire et pleurer dans une même nouvelle. Cette bigarrure déplait à Horace sur toutes choses; il ne veut pas que nos compositions ressemblent aux grotesques, et que nous fassions un ouvrage moitié femme, moitié poisson. (387)

In his opening discussion on the desirability of matching style to subject, La Fontaine defends the irregularities of his verse, explaining that his "mauvaises" rhymes, run-on lines, vowels in hiatus are intentional, these and other "négligences" being inseparable from poetry of this type.

*Il faut laisser les narrations étudiées pour les grands sujets, et ne pas faire un poème épique des aventures de Renaud d'Ast.* (385)

These lines seem almost a paraphrase of a passage in the Dissertation criticizing Ariosto for writing the adventure of Giocondo in too elevated a style.

*Sans mentir, j'ai de la peine à souffrir le sérieux avec lequel Arioste écrit un conte si bouffon. ... s'il voulait décrire les exploits d'un Alexandre, ou d'un Charlemagne, il ne débuterait plus gravement.* (B 311)
They recall as well Boileau's criticism of the long period of the opening lines of Bouillon's tale:

N'est-ce pas bien entendre la manière de conter, qui doit être simple et coupée, que de commencer une narration en vers, par un enchaînement de paroles à peine supportable dans l'exorde d'une Oraison? (B 320)

La Fontaine's definition of his method of imitation, found in the last half of the preface of 1666 (386), is strikingly like that of Boileau in the Dissertation (B 309-10).¹⁵

These similarities could of course have been the result of coincidence. Horace's precepts were commonly discussed and accepted, as was the principle of free imitation. But one readily imagines that La Fontaine and Boileau talked over the ideas presented in both the Dissertation and the prefaces and that Boileau may even have encouraged La Fontaine in his project to write his own imitation of a tale so poorly copied by Bouillon. Boileau's criticism of Bouillon in the Dissertation is unnecessarily cruel, but only a few lines of Bouillon's uninspired verse suffice to suggest that La Fontaine would have agreed that such verse would not have been appreciated by the majority of the readers of his day.

Astolfe, Roi de Lombardie,  
A qui son frère plein de vie,  
Laissa l'Empire glorieux,  
Pour se faire religieux;  
Naquit d'une forme si belle,  
Que Zeuxis, et le grand Apelle,
De leur docte et fameux pinceau
N'ont jamais rien fait de si beau.

And in all three prefaces of these first collections of tales La Fontaine reveals his sensitivity to the taste of the public and his desire to conform to it: "je m'accommoderai," he said in the preface of January, 1665, "s'il m'est possible, au goût de mon siècle, instruit que je suis par ma propre expérience qu'il n'y a rien de plus nécessaire."

3. Joconde

Boileau's comparison in the Dissertation sur Joconde of the Giocondo story of Ariosto and the Joconde of La Fontaine neglects the beauties of the Orlando Furioso to emphasize the difference in taste between the Italians and the French, between the "extravagances" of Ariosto's century and the reasonableness of La Fontaine's. According to the testimony of Brossette many years later, La Fontaine had seen the imitation of Ariosto's tale written by Bouillon, "très méchant poète," and having found it "fort mal bâti," had decided to write his own version. 16 There seems to be evidence in the Joconde of La Fontaine that he set out deliberately not only to improve on the poetry of Bouillon's tale—choosing instead of the regular octosyllables of Bouillon the more natural vers libres, to which he gave "du piquant et de l'agréable," more "sel," more "grâces" (385),
more naturalness than the stiff epic-style verse of Bouillon displayed—but also to update the tale of Ariosto in order to make it appeal to his contemporaries, to illustrate his century's conception of good taste and vraisemblance, in short to demonstrate his own method of imitation.

The Joconde of La Fontaine is remarkable among his contes for the amount of "local color"—fleeting representations of contemporary life—added to the original plot of its model. These anachronistic touches of color, far from gratuitous, effect a constant shift in focus between the fantasy of the tale and the reality of the present, which, besides making the story amusing, gives a kind of artificial, whimsical plausibility to the tale. The Never-Never Land created from this mixture of the Once-Upon-a-Time and the Here-and-Now-in-the-Court-of-King-Louis-XIV is a country where anything and everything may be expected to happen—and does.

The first contemporary note that La Fontaine adds to the Giocondo tale takes the form of a digression on the vanity and the licentiousness of the ladies at court, a digression so cleverly worked into his opening lines that it is hardly distinguishable as such, seeming instead to be necessary to the portrayal of the king's character.

Long ago in Lombardy there was a prince, La Fontaine begins, "aussi beau que le jour." But that common, inex-
pressive comparison is quite insufficient to indicate the exceptional beauty of this prince. His beauty was such,

... que des beautés qui régnaient à sa cour
La moitié lui portait envie,
L'autre moitié brûlait pour lui d'amour. (351)

La Fontaine saves himself from the indignation of the court ladies by showing immediately that it is not their conduct or vanity that he is criticizing; he only wanted to describe the boundless beauty and vanity of the king. It is he, not they, who is seen admiring himself in the mirror, and betting his best province that no mortal's beauty equals his.

Et, s'il s'en rencontre un, je promets, foi de prince,
De le traiter si bien, qu'il ne s'en plaindra pas.

Watching and listening (from the ante-chamber?) is an ambitious courtier who steps up to take advantage of the king's bet. He is Joconde's brother from near Rome, obviously no newcomer to the court. He would never assert flatly that his brother could win for him the title and lands he coveted. He has already mastered the art of the innuendo, the sly hint. La Fontaine may now retire behind this flatterer's direct discourse, a masterpiece of 17th century tact, in which he contrives to insinuate that his brother just might be able to rival the king's beauty ("aux plus charmants il n'en doit guère"), while continuing La Fontaine's raillery of the lasciviousness of the court
ladies. This wary courtier knew better than to refer directly to the ladies' activities. ("Il ne faut à la cour ni trop voir, ni trop dire" [356].) Needing to choose his words carefully in order to evoke delicately the ladies' indecencies, he could find no more polite manner than the use of précieux language. La Fontaine's "brûlait d'amour" in the first lines had passed almost unnoticed, the expression "brûler de" being such a common one that its metaphorical meaning—and its literal meaning as well—had been lost. The diplomatic courtier picks up this old Petrarchian metaphor, continuing it in order to suggest to the king the use his brother could be to him, while at the same time making sly fun of the ladies.

Que je n'en sois pas cru, mais les coeurs de vos dames.
Du soin de guérir leurs flammes
Il vous soulagera, si vous le trouvez bon:
Car de pourvoir vous seul au tourment de chacune,
Outre que tant d'amour vous serait importune,
Vous n'auriez jamais fait; il vous faut un second.

This vainest of kings rises to the bait of the flatterer, revealing his vulnerability, while in his turn making an ironic comment on the ladies.

Voyons si nos beautés en seront amoureuses,
Si ses appas le mettront en crédit;
Nous en croyons les connaissseuses,
Comme très bien vous avez dit.

The ladies of the court of this prodigiously handsome king are certainly good judges of beauty; and connaissseuses
rhyming with amoureuses suggests their expertise in another area as well.

By now the reader has accepted this hidden digression on contemporary life as an integral part of the story, and he is waiting anxiously to see the ladies and their reaction to Joconde. We see them for the first time at the moment of Joconde's arrival at court, in a scene that demonstrates wonderfully well Boileau's recommended ellipsis in narration. The day of his departure to Rome Joconde had discovered the infidelity of his wife, and this knowledge had altered his beauty.

Ce n'était plus ce miracle d'amour
Qui devait charmer tout le monde. (354)

There has been no previous scene showing the king telling his favorites of the impending arrival at court of a man purported to be almost as handsome as he. We have not been told of their gossip sessions and their primping, nor of their eagerly straining forward to see Joconde as he is presented to the king. But we hear and see all of this in the one phrase: "ce miracle d'amour." Then we sense their disappointment and hear their malicious, disdainful laughter, as they take turns insulting the poor confused country gentleman:

... Est-ce là ce Narcisse
Qui prétendait tous nos coeurs enchaîner?
Quoi! le pauvre homme à la jaunisse!
Ce n'est pas pour nous la donner.  
A quel propos nous amener.  
Un galant qui vient de jeûner  
La quarantaine?  
On se fût bien passé de prendre tant de peine.

We sense also the king's anxiety, now dispelled, as we see him smile: "Astolphe était ravi."

The addition of the court ladies to the tale has helped depict the vanity of the king, besides providing a pretext for the audacity of Joconde's brother, whose direct assertion that Joconde was more handsome than the king would have been implausible to 17th century readers. Their presence in the story has helped to make new characters of Ariosto's Astolfo and Fausto, who have become caricatures of a vain king with a weakness for women—one thinks of the young Louis XIV himself—and one of the many flatterers at his court. But now the ladies have served their purpose, and La Fontaine is a bit embarrassed by their presence in the story. He has presented them as being vain and licentious, and then has shown their disdain of Joconde. Now, instead of forgetting them, letting the reader imagine their vying with each other for Joconde's attention after the return of his handsome appearance, La Fontaine seems compelled to "write them out" by relating explicitly an action which could logically be expected to result from the lascivious nature he has given them. His method is a bit awkward, disrupting the movement of the tale. He uses a sort of "flash-forward," obliging the
to make room in the story for events that *vraisemblablement* do not have time to occur between the moment Joconde finds the queen with the dwarf and his departure with king on their amorous adventures.

> Ce penser le console; il reprend tous ses charmes;  
> Il devient plus beau que jamais;  
> Telle pour lui verse des larmes,  
> Qui se moquait de ses attraits.  
> C'est à qui l'aimera: la plus prude s'en pique;  
> Astolphe y perd mainte pratique.  
> Cela n'en fut que mieux; il en avait assez. (355)

Even the verse seems forced, and for the moment the reader is disconcerted. After this interruption, both he and the author must consciously pick up the thread of the story: "Retournons aux amants que nous avons laissés."

La Fontaine continues making changes in his model throughout *Joconde*; but he denies inventing anything at all, implying or claiming openly that he is following Ariosto's text to the letter. Lapp calls this "the pose of the subservient narrator" and compares it to a similar technique used by Ariosto, who pretends to efface himself before Turpin, the feigned chronicler of the *Orlando Furioso*. In the context of the events surrounding the composition and appearance of *Joconde*, these claims of innocence of tampering with the source material, these protestations of ignorance of all facts except those related by Ariosto, seem to be ironic references to the op-
posing views on methods of imitation, especially if one knows the tale of Ariosto. Even for those who may not be aware of all the differences in the two tales, La Fontaine's insistence that he is following Ariosto closely creates very amusing effects. The technique of claiming to be a literal translator, new in Joconde,¹⁹ is used three times quite early in the tale to help portray the character of the hero, insinuating certain ideas about him without expressing them directly.

Immediately after the first scene, in which Astolphe is inveigled into sending for Joconde, the brother of this handsome gentleman goes to persuade him to leave his peaceful life in the country and join the king at his court.

A la campagne il vivait,
Loïn du commerce et du monde:
Marié depuis peu; content, je n'en sais rien. (352)²⁰

The author's claim that he does not know whether or not Joconde is content, living far from the excitement of the world with his bride, is an oblique reference to his source, which, presumably, does not supply this information. His pretended ignorance immediately causes the reader to suspect that Joconde is less than content and to be sensitive to clues that will corroborate his conjecture. La Fontaine has arranged these clues very carefully, in order to provide several motives for Joconde's leaving his wife to go
to Astolphe's court.

In spite of his indirect claim not to have deviated from Ariosto's text, La Fontaine's description of Joconde begins with a change in his model: while Giocondo lived in Rome, Joconde lives in the country, and his isolation seems to contribute to his decision to leave. The reader is told that Joconde's wife left nothing to be desired:

Sa femme avait de la jeunesse,
De la beauté, de la délicatesse.

But this information is followed by a strong hint that, all these charms notwithstanding, Joconde was not content:

Il ne tenait qu'à lui qu'il ne s'en trouvât bien.

The reader is prepared to believe that Joconde will not be unresponsive to the invitation of the king:

Son frère arrive, et lui fait l'ambassade;
Enfin il le persuade.

Three short phrases, and he has been persuaded to leave, the six-syllable conclusion accentuating the rapidity of his capitulation.

The word Marié, placed at the beginning of this brief introduction of the hero, would have suggested to the reader of tales of this type that, if Joconde was bored with life in the country, he was also bored with his wife: it was commonly agreed that "diversité de mets" (358) was re-
quired by every man, and that married men in particular needed a change. But even for the uninitiated, the rapid juxtaposition of ideas and the effects of rhythm have conveyed the certainty that Joconde is discontent and that his wife's most eloquent pleas will not avail to dissuade him from leaving.

Joconde's wife is just as certain as the reader that Joconde is happy to have an excuse to leave, that the attraction of life at court will outweigh her tearful farewell.

Joconde d'une part regardait l'amitié
D'un roi puissant, et d'ailleurs fort aimable;
Et d'autre part aussi sa charmante moitié
Triomphait d'être inconsolable,
Et de lui faire des adieux
A tirer les larmes des yeux.

She seems not even to hear his argument that the king's favor can be advantageous to them—the argument that persuaded the wife in Ariosto's tale to allow Giocondo to leave her. Instead, sure that Joconde will not listen to her nor be turned from his decision, she adopts the pathetic tones of the heroines of her favorite sentimental novels and plays, and then stands behind her mask, enjoying her own performance as she pleads poetically with him to stay. She contrasts the constancy of her love with the ephemeral nature of success at court, and the "inquiétude" that accompanies this success with the perfect "repos" of the country, where one may "fermer la paupière" beside babbling
Crois-mois, ne quitte point les hôtes de tes bois,
Ces fertiles vallons, ces ombrages si coûs,
Enfin moi, qui devrais me nommer la première.

Just before the end of her tirade the wife drops to the reader a final important clue to Joconde's character: "Va, cruel, va montrer ta beauté singulièrè." Joconde's vanity added to his restlessness make his leaving inevitable. The reader knows it, his wife knows it, but Joconde likes to pretend that nobody is aware of his real reasons for leaving:

L'histoire ne dit point ni de quelle manière Joconde put partir, ni ce qu'il répondit,
    Ni ce qu'il fit, ni ce qu'il dit;
    Je m'en tais donc aussi, de crainte de pis faire.
Disons que la douleur t'empêcha de parler;
C'est un fort bon moyen de se tirer d'affaire.

This is one of the most amusing passages in the story. It follows the last line of the wife's dramatic speech in which she says she hopes to die of grief before the end of the day. The repetition of the sound i pictures for us Joconde's discomfiture, his casting this way and that for a plausible excuse for leaving his charming young bride, his finally deciding that the best solution would be to assume a dolorous expression and say nothing. And this is achieved in a passage in which La Fontaine is claiming that since Ariosto says nothing of their parting, he would of course not think of adding a word to Ariosto's text. The
humor of the passage is heightened by the knowledge that Ariosto describes at length what each said to the other, showing Giocondo as sorrowful as his wife over the prospects of their separation.

When the wife in La Fontaine’s tale looks around for something to give Joconde on his departure, she finds, not the religious relic of the Italian tale, but such sentimental trinkets as French ladies would be expected to have lying about:

Un bracelet de façon fort mignonne,
Et voilà de plus mon portrait
Que j'attache à ce bracelet. (353)

At this point La Fontaine intrudes upon the scene to say:

Vous autres, bonnes gens, eussiez cru que la dame
Une heure après eût rendu l'âme;
Moi, qui sais ce que c'est que l'esprit d'une femme,
Je m'en serais à bon droit défie.

Of course we do not think she will die. We have even suspected that she wants her husband to leave. This intervention seems not only a forewarning of events to come, but the author’s reminder that he has made his preparations well, that he has portrayed her insincerity, and that she will behave according to her nature and that of all women. The only way not to have seen through her crocodile tears would be not to have paid any attention to her at all. And Joconde has not. He has been so busy preparing his own
doleful exterior to hide the delight in his soul at the thought of something new and exciting, that he has not seen that she also has been putting on a show. Besides pointing out the consistency of his characterization, La Fontaine in this intervention is reminding the reader that he is in on the joke, and that part of his enjoyment comes from seeing how Joconde's own insincerity has prevented his being aware that his wife will waste no time in finding consolation for his absence.

The scene introduced by this intervention shows Joconde returning for his forgotten gifts and finding his wife, not dying of grief, but sleeping blissfully in the arms of a "lourdaud de valet." Boileau pointed out that any man's first impulse would be to kill the wife or at least her lover, and that an author would have to think of a good reason to justify any other reaction to such a situation. Ariosto had alleged the perfect love of his hero to explain his mercy for the adulterers, and Boileau criticized the absurdity of this reasoning.

Si je ne me trompe, c'était bien plutôt là une raison, non seulement pour obliger Joconde à éclater, mais c'en était assez pour lui faire poignarder dans la rage sa femme, son valet, et soi-même; puisqu'il n'y a point de passion plus tragique et plus violente que la jalousie qui naît d'un extrême amour. (B 313)

La Fontaine's changes in the character of the hero correct these inconsistencies, and more than that, they add to the
humor of the tale. He has already shown his hero to be motivated by vanity and a restless desire for change and adventure, and he has depicted his insincerity. These characteristics will be constant throughout the tale and will explain Joconde's actions in this and subsequent scenes. His behavior will surprise the reader no more than does his wife's; each acts according to the nature the author has given him.

We have seen that the lines in which La Fontaine pretends to be a literal translator, "Marié depuis peu, content je n'en sais rien," and "L'histoire ne dit point, etc.," have underlined and contributed to his reinterpretation of the Giocondo of Ariosto. Now a third reference to Ariosto's text emphasizes Joconde's insincerity, his tendency to hide his motives not only from others but even from himself, while insinuating to the reader, through a doubt expressed similarly to that of the "Marié depuis peu" line, his real reasons for leaving his faithless wife and her lover undisturbed.

Six different narrative techniques in quick succession, including this technique of expressing doubt, mark the stages of Joconde's rapid rationalizing of the " perfide tour" of his wife. La Fontaine begins with a three-line récit that summarizes the whole scene, without giving any explanation for Joconde's failure to kill the sleeping lovers.
This statement of fact is followed by the author's opinion:

Et mon avis est qu'il fit bien.

We are not sure whose thoughts are expressed in the three lines that follow, the author's or Joconde's:

Le moins de bruit que l'on peut faire  
En telle affaire 
Est le plus sûr de la moitié.

But the doubt expressed in the next line suggests that it was probably Joconde himself thinking of the scandal that would result from his killing the perfidious pair.

Soit par prudence, ou par pitié,  
Le Romain ne tua personne.

And because of the lines immediately preceding these, we are sure he has restrained himself "par prudence." Now come three lines of discours indirect libre in which we see the final step in Joconde's rationalization, a partial articulation of the "reason" he is adopting officially on the surface of his consciousness.

D'éveiller ces amants, il ne le fallait pas,  
Car son honneur l'obligeait, en ce cas,  
De leur donner le trépas.

Finally, his decision made, he speaks in direct discourse:
Vis, méchante, dit-il tout bas; 
A ton remords je t'abandonne.

Joconde has moved from honest, spontaneous rage to a false générosité whose hypocrisy he has effectively concealed, at least from himself. The line expressing doubt, "Soit par prudence, ou par pitié," is the one that shows the difference between his subconscious and his conscious reasons. It is manifestly clear to the reader that Joconde's "prudence" stayed his hand; but the reason he gives himself is that he left them sleeping "par pitié." What he calls "honneur" is seen to be nothing more than his vanity, which dictated the prudence.

It is in the line "Soit par prudence, ou par pitié" that we discern a veiled reference to Ariosto's text, which La Fontaine is interpreting in his own manner, while at the same time claiming not to know Joconde's real reason for restraining himself. In this allusion to his source, so discreet as to pass almost unnoticed, La Fontaine may again be reflecting the opposing views on imitation; but here the quarrel is reduced to a faint echo. Assimilated into the portrayal of Joconde's character, it has produced a very fine poetic effect, conveying the irony of this passage.

La Fontaine continues his good-naturedly cynical appraisal of Joconde's motives by emphasizing a detail mentioned only briefly by Ariosto: that Joconde has been replaced by a servant.
Bien souvent il s'écrit, au fort de son chagrin:
"Encor si c'était un blondin,
Je me consolerais d'un si sensible outrage;
Mais un gros lourdaud de valet!
C'est à quoi j'ai plus de regret:
Plus j'y pense et plus j'en enrage." (353-54)

The malady which alters his beauty does not result from his grief over the betrayal of his great love for his wife as in Ariosto. Joconde's suffering is caused by the cruel blow dealt to his vanity.

His pain is assuaged and his beauty restored the moment he learns that the king, disdained for "un nain contrefait" (355), has suffered an even worse affront than he. Delighted, "bien empêché de ce secret," he runs straight to the king with the news of the queen's treachery, characteristically hiding from himself his real motives:

Mais quoi! Joconde aimait avec trop de zèle
Un prince libéral qui le favorisait
Pour ne pas l'avertir du tort qu'on lui faisait. (356)

However, knowing only too well that "peu se sont vantés du don qu'on leur fait/ Pour un semblable nouvelle," he realizes he must prepare the king psychologically to accept his cruel fate.

In his discussion of this part of the tale, Boileau imagined Ariosto puzzling over the problem of preparing the king to receive this outrageous news ("Il n'est pas vraisemblable que le roi n'en témoigne rien") and inventing the sacred oath that would prevent the king from doing harm
to the queen and the dwarf.

Ne voilà-t-il pas une invention bien agréable?
Et le Saint Sacrement n'est-il pas la bien placé?
(B 314)

Although La Fontaine would not always avoid impious references to the church and to the clergy, he would have agreed with Boileau that such a use of a sacred oath, constituting a breach of current notions of propriety, should be avoided in a tale written to appeal to a sophisticated public.

And so he conceived of the "dénombrement" of all the kings and Caesars from the beginning of time who had suffered patiently and heroically the infidelity of their spouses, using a period fifteen lines long to obtain an excellent poetic effect. The outrageous length of the period matches the extravagance of the invention; and one seems to hear Joconde gasping for breath, intentionally emphasizing the length of the list, hoping thus to forestall the ire of the king. This amusing, self-conscious, artificial "preparation" underlines the need expressed so often by Boileau to "fonder" all the events of a tale. But the real "preparation" is hidden in the king's character itself.

La Fontaine has never said explicitly that the king is vain. Three words at the beginning of the tale, "en se mirant" (351), and three more after Joconde's failure to impress the women, "Astolphe était ravi" (354), have sufficed to demonstrate to us his vanity. The rapidity of
Joconde's capitulation in the face of scandal is now
eclipsed by the speed of the king's acceptance of an even
worse indignity, evoked in only six lines.

L'énormité du fait le rendit si confus
Que d'abord tous ses sens demeurèrent perclus;
Il fut comme accablé de ce cruel outrage;
Mais bientôt il le prit en homme de courage,
   En galant homme, et, pour le faire court,
   En véritable homme de cour. (356-57)

The first three lines show poor Astolphe crushed by the
blow to his pride. But see what a man of courage he is!
Right away—after reflecting only a moment on the cruel
laughter of the court ladies, we imagine—he takes it like
a valiant hero. Or at least like a man of honor. Then
comes the final ironic play on the words coeur—courage—cœur,
which, destroying the common expression "homme de coeur,"
demolishes at the same time the hero.

   Our two "hommes de cour" set out to avenge them-
selves, as all heroes do who have suffered affronts to
their honor, matching the vengeance to the insult.

   Je consens de perdre la vie,
   Si, devant que de sortir des confins d'Italie
      Tout notre liyre ne s'emplit,
   Et si la plus sévere à nos voeux ne se range. (357)

With their beauty, wit, and "bonne lettres de change,"
they have no difficulty filling their little white book
with the names of their conquests; wives of all the
officials of the land, from the lowest to the highest,
all succumb to their charms.

Les coeurs que l'on croyait de glace
Se fondent tous à leur abord. (358)

At this point, La Fontaine interrupts himself to answer anticipated criticism of the implausibility of this part of his tale.

J'entends déjà maint esprit fort
M'objecter que la vraisemblance
N'est pas en ceci tout à fait.
"Car, dira-t-on, quelque parfait
Que puisse être un galant dedans cette science,
Encor faut-il du temps pour mettre un coeur à bien."

Je le rends comme on me le donne;
Et l'Arioste ne ment pas.
Si l'on voulait à chaque pas
Arrêter un conteur d'histoire,
Il n'aurait jamais fait; suffit qu'en pareil cas
Je promets à ces gens quelque jour de les croire.

This passage seems to be, even more clearly than the three already noted, an allusion to the differing views on imitation; and here, claiming to be a literal translator, La Fontaine calls attention to his own method of imitation, which is quite the opposite of that of the "timide" M. Bouillon, "traducteur maigre et décharné" (B 310).

Before considering the implications of this passage, it will be helpful to examine the paragraph of the preface to the Contes et Nouvelles of 1666 in which La Fontaine refers more directly to the quarrel on imitation, speaking openly of the "hardiesses et les licences qu'il s'est données" in the treatment of his sources. Insisting on
his right to exploit any model, "sans qu'il en excepte
les nouvelles même les plus connues, ne s'en trouvant
point d'inviolable pour lui," and to change his source
material to create a work so original that "celui qui l'a
inventée aurait bien de la peine à reconnaître son propre
ouvrage," he justifies this "liberté que l'auteur se donne"
by citing precedents in antiquity.

[Térence] a mêlé du sien parmi les sujets qu'il
a tirés de Ménandre, comme Sophocle et Euripide
ont mêlé du leur parmi ceux qu'ils ont tirés des
écrivains qui les précédèrent, n'épargnant histoire
ni fable où il s'agissait de la pienséance et des
regles du dramatique. Ce privilege cessera-t-il
à l'égard des contes faits à plaisir? et faudra-
t-il avoir dorénavant plus de respect et plus de
religion, s'il est permis d'ainsi dire, pour le
mensonge, que les anciens n'en ont eu pour la
vérité? (386)

In basing his claim for the right of free imitation
on the example of Sophocles and Euripides, who had changed
not only fiction but also historical fact to suit their
artistic purposes, La Fontaine is alluding to opposing
theories of vraisemblance, which had resulted from divided
opinion on methods of imitation. These theories had been
derived from Aristotle, whose poetics had been so diversely
interpreted first by the Italians and then by the French
that the question had become quite complicated.21 There
were those who argued that the vrai should not be changed
and that that which was historically true sufficed in
poetry, the vrai being necessarily vraisemblable. This
was the stand taken by Corneille. The opposing camp understood Aristotle to say that poetry had nothing to do with what had actually happened, nor even with what could possibly happen, but rather with what general opinion would believe to be possible under given circumstances, the trick being for the writer to arrange these circumstances in such a way as to give them the vraisemblance desired by partisans of both theories. Perhaps this quarrel was the basis of the dispute over the two versions of Joconde. If it was, La Fontaine would have been amused at the idea of applying a rule for tragedy to his "contes faits à plaisir."

This amusement is apparent in Joconde in La Fontaine's response to the "esprit[s] fort[s]" who may be expected to object that the activities of Joconde and Astolphe do not seem natural. "Impossible to please the critics!" La Fontaine seems to be saying. "First I am told by one group that I must not deviate from my source. I am following their advice," he claims playfully.

Je le rends comme on me le donne; 
Et l'Arioste ne ment pas.

"And now I am told by an opposing group that I must render Ariosto's tale vraisemblable! One demand excludes the other!"

La Fontaine has conveyed his impatience with literary quarrels through the very subtlety of the objections of these critics: they are not complaining that the
number of conquests of our heroes is too extravagant to
be credible, but only that the women have yielded without
having to be cajoled. These imagined accusations of im-
possibility serve to remind the reader that without the
interruption, he would never have stopped to consider the
implausibilities of the tale. For the 17th century reader
has been caught up in the story, just as Boileau said he
would be, and this is true precisely because of the changes
La Fontaine has made in adapting Ariosto's text: he has
preserved a uniformly playful tone, he has added contem-
porary touches that have given a glimmer of reality to the
surface of the tale, he has unified the characters to give
interior coherence to the story, and he has removed any
elements whose impropriety would break the bond between
the reader and the improbable world of Joconde.

Just let me tell my story in my own way, says La
Fontaine: "Je promets à ces gens quelque jour de les
croire."

The author's intervention earlier in the story, in-
troducing the scene in which Joconde found his wife in bed
with his valet, had called attention to the author's
preparations and to the consistency of his characters.
Now this digression to discuss vraisemblance, a little
past the mid-way point in the story, has marked the end
of the "preparations" of characters and events and the
beginning of the climactic episode in which one girl will be seen in bed with three men, a preposterous situation rendered almost credible—and highly entertaining—by La Fontaine's art.

Our pair of "miracles d'amour" have tasted from the simplest to the most elegant dishes ("De tout un peu, c'est comme il faut l'entendre" (358)), and now they are exhausted after all their efforts. They need to stop and rest, "Et cela plus tôt que plus tard." But more than rest, they need new stimulation for their appetite. Simple diversity will no longer suffice. The king suggests "quelque objet en commun," saying that one will be enough for both of them in their present state.22 This arrangement itself must be a stimulating idea to them; but in addition to this new manner, they must have, not simply a woman new to them, but a brand new, never-before-used, young girl: "Choisissons-la toute nouvelle" (359). Joconde knows of such a one, the daughter of their innkeeper, and his humorous play on "nouveauté" emphasizes their need for a new stimulus.

Je la tiens pucelle sans faute,
Et si pucelle qu'il n'est rien
De plus preceau que cette belle.

After an argument over precedence in which Joconde claims that protocol should not come into play, they draw straws and "Joconde eut l'avantage/ Du prétendu pucelage."

Here begins a sort of "Illusion comique" in which
La Fontaine, as much as Corneille in his Illusion, seems in his own way to be discussing the illusion of reality—vraisemblance—which is produced by dramatic fiction, and by his conte.

The main character in the little farce is Maître Pucelage, who "Joue des mieux son personnage" (360). He is an excellent choice, because he, of all possible choices, represents best the new stimulation of which our two adventurers are in such desperate need. His costume is always that of a young girl, and his mask always has a look of innocence, as if the girl were no more knowledgeable of the pleasures of love than her doll (359). Her co-player is always a young, handsome man who can give her presents, which she can never resist:

La belle étant venue en leur chambre le soir
Pour quelque petite affaire,
Nos deux aventuriers près d'eux la firent seoir,
Louèrent sa beauté, tâcherent de lui plaire,
Firent briller une bague à ses yeux.
A cet objet si précieux,
Son coeur fit peu de résistance.

Her show of resistance, however brief, is a very necessary ingredient of the man's pleasure, because it reinforces his belief—or rather his will to believe—that this time he will really find the novelty that he needs. He suspects that the heroine is false, that Pucelage is only "prétendu":
Je sais que cet honneur est pure fantaisie;
Toutefois, étant roi, l'on me le doit céder:
Du reste il est aisé de s'en accommoder.

It is easy for Maître Pucelage to fool the wisest of
men, but it matters little to the hero whether the pucelage
is real or feigned, for the pleasure is all in his own
imagination. If he can be convinced, or if he can convince
himself, that he has "rompu la glace" (360), then he will
be content. In the final act of the comedy Maître Pucelage
is unmasked and seen for what he is, pure illusion. A
young boy had already "tried him out," and does so again,
right under the nose of his rivals.

La porte ouverte elle laissa;
Le galant vint et s'approcha
Des pieds du lit, puis fit en sorte
Qu'entre les draps il se glissa;
Et Dieu sait comme il se plaça,
Et comme enfin tout se passa;
Et de ceci ni de cela
Ne se douta le moins du monde
Ni le roi lombard, ni Joconde. (361)

However, the denouement is happy. Everybody laughs at the
ruse, the girl is married, and again "pour pucelle employée"
(362). In the epilogue to this "Illusion comique" the two
heroes return to their wives, willing to believe that
"maudits enchanteurs" must have cast a spell on them.

Et si par quelque étrange cas
Nous n'avons point cru voir chose qui n'était pas? (363)

Every man prefers to persist in his illusion.
In these scenes starring Maître Pucelage La Fontaine has not only veiled the lewdness of the situation; he has unveiled, by dropping clues along the way, the duper and the willingness of his victims to be duped. The illusion so carefully preserved by the inn-keeper's daughter and by the men provides an amusing comedy, while at the same time evoking the illusion created by a writer of a fiction which is wilfully kept intact by his readers. Not that they believe in the fiction as a representation of real life. Joconde's pleasure is not so much sensual as intellectual; similarly, the reader requires only that a fiction be plausible enough to be suggestive of reality, that it provide stimuli to his imagination that will allow him to make up his personal fiction. There are overtones here as well of La Fontaine's own love of variety, of his own constant need for new intellectual challenges. But, typically, he has animated these ideas in a fiction, carefully fabricated, as delicate as the "glace" of the "Illusion Comique."

4. **Le Cocu battu et content**

Written two or three years before its appearance with Joconde in December of 1664 or early in 1665 in the *Nouvelles en vers tirée de Boccace et de l'Arioste, par M. de L. F.*, *Le Cocu battu et content* demonstrates already La Fontaine's theory of imitation and his sketchy theory
for the conte en vers enunciated in his prefaces of 1665 and 1666. The story is told in decasyllabic lines of "vieux langage," its style so different from the piece it accompanied that La Fontaine felt it necessary to assure his readers in an Avertissement placed at the beginning of the slim volume that the two were indeed "d'une même main" (343). Le Cocu has none of the obviously modern touches of Joconde, but for all that, it was just as modern in concept as its more spectacular companion. For the story line, La Fontaine follows almost exactly the tale of Boccaccio. The changes he makes give more unity to the characters and more reasonableness to the action, and provide suspense by giving the story a more rapid, forward movement than is found in the tale by Boccaccio. Reversing the method of Boccaccio, La Fontaine cuts to a minimum the exposition of the necessary facts and then expands the scenes at the end, better to enjoy the spectacle that he always finds so amusing, of a person accepting willingly and happily an illusion for reality.

La Fontaine is able to dispense with Boccaccio's elaborate explanations of his characters' motives because the situation as La Fontaine sees it has already become "classic." In the farces of the day the formula is already set: old husband / young wife / young man = cuckoldry. And so La Fontaine has only to sketch in lightly his characters, and the reader will fill in the details. In such
a conventional situation the reader would be impatient
with too many preliminary "preparations"; he knows exactly
what will happen and is curious to know only how it will
happen. This distillation of Boccaccio's realism does not
give the impression so much of automatism as of "Nature."
These characters behave undeviatingly according to the
nature conventionally given them, and this is accepted as
perfectly normal by the reader. No "logical" explanations
are necessary, and more importantly, none of the characters
seems villainous or depraved, but only natural. La Font-
taine's highly generalized atmosphere also makes possible
the acceptance and enjoyment of the improbable farce at the
end, in which youth and nature triumph over age, not cruel-
ly, but quite comically.

The young man in Le Cocu battu et content sees the
young woman, not by design as in Boccaccio, but simply
by chance. He was returning from Rome, stopping along the
way any time his good fortune brought him "bon vin, bon
gîte, et belle chambrière." There came a day when, having
stopped off in a small town, he saw a pretty lady pass by:

Leste, pimpante, et d'un page suivie;
En la voyant, il en fut enchanté,
La convoita, comme bien savait faire. (369)

In these few lines La Fontaine has indicated the intrigue.
Only a few more and the "noeud" is tied:
C'est, lui dit-on, la dame du village;  
Messire Bon l'a prise en mariage,  
Quoiqu'il n'ait plus que quatre cheveux gris. (370)

The whole situation is suggested by the image of the husband's four gray hairs. The lady, who was "jeune, fringante, et belle," would be quite unnatural not to be looking for "un ami digne d'elle," who could supplement by his youth the "biens" of her bald, old husband.

In Boccaccio's tale the young man, having heard of the exceptional beauty of a certain lady of Bologna, determines to go to see her for himself. He obtains permission to leave home by telling his father that he wants to make a pilgrimage to the Holy Sepulchre. All that remains of this situation in La Fontaine's tale is the equivocal "pèlerin" in the line, "Voici comment le pèlerin s'y prit." This word recalls the first line of the tale, "N'a pas longtemps de Rome revenait," while reminding the reader of the necessity for ruse in a case such as this.

The young man's first step is to engage himself to the husband as his falconer. La Fontaine adds the brief scene in which the husband agrees to hire him, but only after consulting with his wife.

Pour fauconnier le loua bien et beau,  
Non toutefois sans l'avis de sa femme.

This fleeting glimpse of the old man's foolish affection for his wife shows the reader why, in La Fontaine's tale,
he never left her alone except to go hunting. La Fontaine is careful also to mention that the young falconer always accompanied his master on his hunts. These two details "prepare" the necessity of tricking the old man into leaving his wife alone. Boileau would have admired this "rectification" of the "invraisemblance" of Boccaccio, whose hero found himself alone with his lady during one of his master's hunts, but still waited for the extravagant ruse of that night before contenting his burning desires.

Nothing is left of Boccaccio's scene in which the young man must remain uncertain and trembling in the ruelle beside his master's bed as the wife reveals to her husband the young man's avowal of love. This kind of suspense could not have been justified by La Fontaine's principle of unity of character. He has already rapidly depicted the "natural" attraction of these young people to each other, and one more brief stroke shows the two of them plotting together against the husband:

La jeune dame en était bien d'accord;  
Ils n'attendaient que le temps de mieux faire. (370)

The ruse in La Fontaine's tale could not "logically" be a surprise to either of his characters.

La Fontaine has hurried to the moment of the ruse in only forty-eight lines; for if this is the only part of the story not yet imagined by the reader, it is also
the part that interests the author most. Now he slows down to give his personal emphasis to Boccaccio's story, to exaggerate the old man's delusion; and in doing so he gives personalities to the characters, who have been until now only shadows.

The wife has the important role in the first scene of the comedy, and she plays it with real talent, stretching out the description of her surprise and of the terrible wrath that she could barely control on hearing the falconer's treacherous "propos d'amour":

.. . je fus si surprise,
Que je pensai tomber tout de mon haut;
Car qui croirait une felle entreprise?
Dedans l'esprit il me vint aussitôt
De l'étrangler, de lui manger la vue:
Il tint à peu. (371)

Relating what she allegedly said to the falconer, she contrives to remind her husband that he is always with her not because he is suspicious of her, but "par amour."
The equivocal "Je ne me puis dépêtrer de cet homme" is very amusing to the reader, who cannot help being in league with her against her gullible husband, so easily persuaded that dressing himself in his wife's skirt and nightcap and going to the garden to trap the falconer is his own "stratagème." We follow him there and then leave him in the bitter cold, shivering, his teeth chattering, looking very ridiculous. The rapid transition from the cold garden
back to the warm bed underlines the "natural" conflict between youth and age, and succeeds in dispelling any sympathy the reader may have had for the duped husband.

Compared to the cold of the garden, the stolen moments in the warm bedroom seem even more delicious:

Lorsqu'Amour seul étant de la partie,
Entre deux draps on tient femme jolie,
Femme jolie, et qui n'est point à soi. (372)

In the following scene back in the garden it is the falconer's turn to exaggerate his loyalty to the husband. He indignantly reproaches the shameless infidelity of the "wife," and all the while Messire Bon weeps for joy.

Et tout ravi, disait entre ses dents:
"Loué soit Dieu, dont la bonté m'envoie
Femme et valet si chastes, si prudents!"

The young man chases him to the house, pelting him with heavy blows, but the scene is more playful than violent.

The final scene shows Messire Bon back beside his wife, happily laying plans that will assure the future felicity of his wife and his falconer, and his own continued cocuage.

... M'amie,
Quand nous pourrions vivre cent ans encor,
Ni vous ni moi n'aurions de notre vie
Un tel valet; c'est sans doute un trésor.
Dans notre bourg, je veux qu'il prenne femme:
A l'avenir traitez-le ainsi que moi.
--Pas n'y faudrai, lui repartit la dame;
Et de ceci je vous donne ma foi. (373)
Just as the dupers in *Le Cocu battu et content* have pulled the wool over the eyes of their victim, so has the author of the tale duped the reader into accepting for a moment the "reality" of his *conte*. The method La Fontaine employs in this tale for creating *vraisemblance* utilizes conventional character types, as we have seen, but supplemented by dramatic elements. For if the reader is capable of supplying for himself the motives of the characters, the story "comes alive" for him only at the moment La Fontaine animates his characters by giving them speech and movement. In this tale, the visual images are called up first by the dialogue. Then the visual images are augmented and brightened by the alternating sensations of cold and warmth, felt in the shifts in scene from the garden to the bedroom, so that finally the brief lines relating the *bastonnade* seem almost to open the curtains on an early Molière farce, but a farce from which any distasteful violence has been removed.

At the end of the Boccaccio tale, it is the wife who suggests that the valet be honored for his loyalty to his master. La Fontaine, having the husband pronounce his own sentence, has heightened the irony of the situation, providing the light tone required in a tale that ends happily for everybody.

In his preface of 1666 La Fontaine said that certain changes he had made in his models were due to his
having decided that happy endings were suitable for "ces sortes de contes."

Que si l'auteur a changé quelques incidents et même quelque catastrophe, ce qui préparerait cette catastrophe et la nécessité de la rendre heureuse l'y ont contraint. (387)

However, in order to be pleasing, the ending would have to be consistent with the rest of the story. Happy endings and odious characters, laughter and tears, are mutually exclusive, he said, according to the principle of literary consistency expounded by Horace:

... cela [chacun ... content à la fin] plaît toujours au lecteur, à moins qu'on ne lui ait rendu les personnes trop odieuses. Mais il n'en faut point venir là, si l'on peut, ni faire rire et pleurer dans une même nouvelle. Cette bigarrure déplait à Horace sur toutes choses. (387)

In many of his tales La Fontaine seems to reinterpret this rule to mean that the reader should not be made to feel too much sympathy for the rather odious character who gets his just deserts at the hand of another of whose actions the reader approves. But in Le Cocu battu et content the rule is applied literally; in fact, the rule could easily have derived from this tale. One has the feeling in reading Le Cocu that the ultimate source of the rule was not so much the literary principle of consistency as La Fontaine's own particular view of people and their foibles. In this tale he does not condemn the young wife
and the young man for their romantic little escapade.
Neither does he despise the old man's credulity.

On ce fut une plus forte dupe
Que ce vieillard, bon homme au demeurant. (371)

In deciding to end his tales happily, La Fontaine seems to have been translating his own amusement at the sight of man's weaknesses into an artistic principle.

5. La Servante justifiée

La Fontaine continued capitalizing on the quarrel on imitation in his second volume of contes, published a year after the appearance of Joconde and the tales of the Conrart manuscript. Not only does he devote half of the preface of 1666 to a presentation of his own theory and method of imitation, but he begins two of the tales of this collection with prologues in which he comments on the question.

J'y mets du mien selon les occurrences,
C'est ma coutume; et sans telles licences,
Je quitterais la charge de conteur. (418)

These lines, expressing the essence of his theory of imitation, conclude the prologue of La Servante justifiée, one of the tales in La Deuxième partie des Contes et Nouvelles en vers de M. de La Fontaine (1666). In this prologue, there is hardly a trace of the rather contentious tone of the preface to the volume. In these verses, the
theory of free imitation is presented as self-evident: no teller of tales ever tells a story without putting a great deal of himself into it, without giving it his own personal interpretation. The metaphor that La Fontaine uses in this prologue reveals that he sees collections of old tales as storehouses, well-stocked with materials that are available to anyone for the taking. An author has only to choose what he likes, the way he would walk into a bakery and choose the kind of bread he wanted.

Boccace n'est le seul qui me fournit:
Je vas parfois en une autre boutique.
Il est bien vrai que ce divin esprit
Plus que pas un me donne de pratique:
Mais, comme il faut manger de plus d'un pain,
Je puis encore en un vieux magasin. (418)

The liberty for which he has argued in the preface, the liberty to use existing materials in his own manner, is here considered a natural right of storytellers.

A key line for conveying this idea is the one in which La Fontaine expresses an opinion about man's need for diversity in foods as if it were a fact: "Mais, comme il faut manger de plus d'un pain." Here he uses this "truism" about food to speak of his need for diversity in inspiration. In Les Troqueurs (IV, 3) he will use this same "food" metaphor to speak of man's need for diversity in love:
Le changement de mets réjouit l'homme: 
Quand je dis l'homme, entendez qu'en ceci 
La femme doit être comprise aussi. (554)

His sweeping generalization includes "manants," along with women and "honnêtes hommes":

Aurait-on pris des croquants pour troquants
En fait de femme? (558)

In the prologue to Pâté d'anguille (IV, 11), a tale that gives concrete form to the metaphor, La Fontaine will speak of his own need for diversity, which seems to be an esthetic as well as a physical need.

Même beauté, tant soit exquise,
Rassasie et soule à la fin.
Il me faut d'un et d'autre pain:
Diversité, c'est ma devise.

Cette maîtresse un tantet bise
Rit à mes yeux: pourquoi cela?
C'est qu'elle est neuve. (594)

He concludes this prologue by extending his personal need for diversity to the literary principle of expressing similar ideas in a variety of forms.

Je l'ai déjà dit d'autre façon,
Car il est bon que l'on déguise,
Suivant la loi de ce dicton.
Diversité, c'est ma devise.

These last lines refer perhaps to Les Troqueurs; but they may be applied as well to La Servante, where one senses the same blending of artistic comment and comment on human nature seen in Pâté d'anguille.
Since the food metaphor is so commonly applied to instinct, in La Fontaine's tales and elsewhere, the line in the prologue, "comme il faut manger de plus d'un pain," suggests almost automatically man's natural need for variety in love. It is perhaps this overtone of meaning that persuades the reader to accept La Fontaine's theory of imitation as "natural": an author's changing his source materials to suit his own needs is as natural as man's need for variety in food and love, and as La Fontaine's own need for variety in artistic stimuli. He has taken stories from the Decameron and from the Cent nouvelles nouvelles, La Fontaine says in this prologue. This story, "un C'était moi, naïf autant que rare," is taken from the Heptameron of Marguerite de Navarre.

J'y mets du mien . . .

Already persuaded to accept the principle of free imitation, the reader now is encouraged by this provocative phrase to try to define the "mien" of La Fontaine, or at least to determine what, in this particular tale, constitutes his personal touch.

A comparison of La Servante justifiée with its source, the forty-fifth nouvelle of the Heptameron, reveals that La Fontaine has effected a complete change of atmosphere from that of the older tale. The dismal, black and white and gray winter setting has been transformed
into a gay, bright springtime scene; the white *chemises* of the older tale are replaced by elegant costumes, reflecting, presumably, the colors of the vivid new grass and flowers. The changes in decor and costumes accompany a re-creation of the characters. The husband in the older tale (presented by direct description and through an episode in the first part of the story that does not appear in La Fontaine's tale) is a lecherous *tapissier* who, though deaf, is quite clever, clever enough to hide his "charitable" acts toward the neighbor women from his honest wife. He also cannily betrays her over a period of months with their chambermaid, whom he has despicably corrupted against her will. The husband in La Fontaine's tale seems only a careless gentleman frolicking with his pretty, complaisant servant girl. In the *Heptaméron*, the husband is able to continue his secret treachery because of the simplicity of his wife: "sa femme estoit aussi contente d'estre trompée que luy de la tromper." This description of the wife, *trompée* and *contente*, is all that La Fontaine retains from the first part of his model. And our comparison shows that all of the omissions and changes that La Fontaine makes in the original story serve, on the one hand, to emphasize the "happiness" of the delusion of the wife, and on the other hand, to make her persistent delusion seem a "happy" situation for the reader.

La Fontaine's story begins:
Un homme donc avait belle servante.

All that remains of the scheming husband of the *Heptaméron* is "a man" with a pretty servant.

*Elle était fille à bien armer un lit,*
*Pleine de suc, et donnant appétit;*
*Ce qu'on appelle en français bonne robe.*

Just as in *Le Cocu battu et content*, La Fontaine's method here is to generalize the characters. If there is nothing exceptional about the husband, neither is the servant different from other servants; she is not innocent and blameless as was her ancestress in the *Heptaméron*, but the usual pretty servant girl of rather easy virtue. The implication is that what will happen between them is as inevitable as it is natural. This notion is conveyed not only through the conventional characters, but also through the extension of the "food" metaphor to the description of the servant girl, "succulent and appetizing." Whereas the notion that man's need for variety in love persuaded the reader to accept as natural La Fontaine's theory of imitation in the prologue, here in the story, the preceding discussion of theory has prepared the reader to accept the "naturalness" of the situation that is sure to develop between these two people. Thus by conventionalizing the characters, and by blending an artistic discussion with the tale itself, La Fontaine has already done much toward removing that which seemed reprehensible in the activities of this pair in the
Heptaméron story. Add to this the spring morning setting and the pretty manners of the servant girl, and the scene is given a "grâce" that makes disapprobation all but impossible.

In his reinterpretation of the husband and the servant girl, La Fontaine has complicated their relationship with each other. In the Heptaméron, there is no ambiguity in their situation:

... un matin, avant que personne fut esveillé en sa maison, la mena toute en chemise... et, en se jouant tous deux à se bailler de la neige l'un l'autre, n'obligerent le jeu des Innocens.

In La Fontaine's tale, however, the situation is not so clearly drawn, and the delicate, but constant suggestion that what appears to be real in their relationship with each other is only an appearance of reality adds a comic dimension that helps to remove any lingering trace of villainy from their actions. In La Servante it is not clear who made the arrangements to meet in the garden.

Par un beau jour, cet homme se dérobe D'avec sa femme, et d'un très grand matin S'en va trouver sa servante au jardin. Elle faisait un bouquet pour madame.

Did he see her in the garden by chance, or had she mentioned the night before that she planned to be out early gathering flowers for madame's "fête"? He appears to make the first advances after she finishes her bouquet, but see her provocative resistance:
Sans rien gâter: c'était une façon
Sur le marché; bien savait sa leçon.

She pelts him with flowers, "il la baisa pour en avoir raison," she trips and falls, and one thing leads to another... In the light of this scene, the second line of the story, "Il la rendit au jeu d'amour savante," seems, instead of a mere summary of events, an ironic commentary on the delusion of the man, who thinks that he alone is the leader in the game with the servant girl.

The relationship of the husband and wife is no less complicated. The neighbor has seen the little comedy between him and the servant. If the servant has been playing a role with him, it is now his turn to "jouer son rôle" (419) with his wife. And the illusion created by his role-playing with her is convincing enough that nothing the neighbor "languarde et méchante" can say will be able to shatter it. The episode must have seemed a romantic dream come true to "la pauvre épouse," who was surely led to imagine that it was her own "succulence" that gave her husband his early morning "appétit." It is perhaps this illusion about herself that will prevent her from even wanting to see beneath the surface actions of her husband.

In this tale, none of the relationships is quite real. Even the testimony of the neighbor who has "pourtant l'œil assez bon," is a bit false:
... j'ai vu de mon logis
Dans son jardin votre mari paraître,
Puis la galande.

Words themselves are not always what they seem, as La Fontaine's play on the verb "s'insinuer" in the beginning of the story has pointed out:

Le bouquet fait, il commence à louer
L'assortiment, tâche à s'insinuer.
S'insinuer, en fait de chambrerie,
C'est proprement couler sa main au sein. (418)

And the question remains at the end whether the wife's final equivocal words on the subject of the servant do not perhaps hide her own self-delusion.

Pourquoi chasser? j'en suis très bien servie.

Has she been deceived, or does she guess the truth and cover it up? The reader wonders if her apparent blindness to the reality of the situation is not really a protection for her own self-esteem.

Whether she is deluded or not, the reader agrees with the neighbor's words: "c'est justement le cas." She has been well served by the servant, no matter if her husband's attentions to her were insincere. His attempt to deceive her have created a pretty interlude, for her, and for the reader, who can enjoy her delusion—feigned or real—because the odious aspects of the husband's character have been removed.
Removing the "odieux" to create a happy ending is part of the "mien" of La Fontaine, announced in the preface of this second volume of tales and seen already in Le Cocu. Another personal touch is the illusory quality of the tale, heightened by the theatrical elements that La Fontaine has added. The illusion that the husband creates for the wife in their scene together in the garden is matched by the illusion in the mind of the reader who, watching their graceful movements that repeat those of the husband and the servant, imagines that he is seeing the second entrée of a ballet. Until the gossipy neighbor makes her entrance, the story is told only by gestures. Her dialogue with the wife adds another theatrical dimension to the piece. In La Servante justifiée, as in the theatre, nothing is real, but everything is made to seem real. The vraisemblance of this tale, produced in large part by the dramatic elements added to the story in the Heptaméron, consists in the reader's having been persuaded to believe that just as Le Cocu was battu et content, the Femme is here trompée et contente.

6. Le Berceau

Le Berceau is another tale in the second volume of Contes et Nouvelles which, though it contains no direct discussion of the theory of imitation, reveals La Fontaine's preoccupation with "preparations" for a happy ending. The
plot of this tale, taken from Boccaccio, is fairly complicated, and according to La Fontaine's interpretation of it, the innkeeper himself, the victim of the events in the story, could hardly have accepted the outcome as *vraisemblable*. La Fontaine's problem, then, was to make the innkeeper's skepticism apparent, while at the same time arranging things in such a way that the innkeeper's willing acceptance of the preposterous conclusion would be *vraisemblable* to the reader, thus assuring a satisfying dénouement for characters and readers alike.

In the first part of the story, La Fontaine seems to have hesitated between two possible methods of presenting his characters: briefly sketching in traditional types who could be expected to behave in certain ways, or attempting to give rather elaborate reasons for their actions. He begins by using the same method he used in *Le Cocu*, taking advantage of conventional characters who would suggest conventional situations. The first nine lines present the poor innkeeper and his family:

```
Non loin de Rome un hôtelier était,
Sur le chemin qui conduit à Florence;
Homme sans bruit, et qui ne se piquait
De recevoir gens de grosse dépense:
Même chez lui rarement on gitait.
Sa femme était encore de bonne affaire,
Et ne passait de beaucoup les trente ans.
Quant au surplus, ils avaient deux enfants:
Garçon d'un an, fille en âge d'en faire. (400)
```

In spite of the fact that La Fontaine has spent five
lines describing the innkeeper and his poor inn, then two describing the wife, it is the children who attract our attention, and particularly the daughter. All we know of her is her approximate age, but La Fontaine's piquant manner of suggesting it, at the very end of the introductory passage, fastens our interest on the girl. Then with the immediate presentation of Pinucio, "jeune homme de famille," the reader quickly imagines the inevitable situation; and La Fontaine's rapid, staccato rhythm emphasizes the "naturalness" of the mutual attraction of this "new" young girl and the adventurous young man.

Muet n'était, elle sourde non plus;
... sentir pris, parler, être écouté,
Ce fut tout un. (401)

But now La Fontaine slows down to individualize the motives of the girl, to explain why she "listened" to Pinucio: it was because she had "le coeur trop haut, le goût trop délicat," to be interested in boys of her own class, explains the author, quite irrelevantly, it seems to the reader, who is just as impatient with the author's care to tell him that the girl had already scorned a number of proposals of marriage.

Rejetait l'un, de l'autre ne voulait,
Et n'avait rien que Pinuce en l'idée.

The brief lines explaining the watchfulness of her parents
are of course necessary to the intrigue:

Longs pourparlers avecque son amant
N'étaient permis; tout leur faisait obstacle.

But the advice to parents and husbands that follows is a digression that seems to add nothing to the tale.

Ne gênez point, je vous en donne avis,
Tant vos enfants, ô vous pères et mères;
Tant vos moitiés, vous époux et maris:
C'est où l'amour fait le mieux ses affaires.

In this personal intervention, recalling the "lesson" of Molière's Ecole des femmes and Ecole des maris, La Fontaine is perhaps giving a hint that everyone—"enfants," "pères," "mères," "moitiés," "maris"—will be involved in the imbroglio at the end. He is also developing the conflict between the hard practicality of the father and the romantic dreams of the adolescent girl, probably reminded daily of her "état" that she cannot hope to change. But it is not yet apparent how this conflict will affect the denouement, when the interest shifts from the girl's personality to the father's reaction to the comedy.

After having finally finished presenting his characters and establishing the facts necessary to the subterfuge, as he makes his final "preparation" in this rather tedious exposition, La Fontaine intervenes to alert the reader that now, at last, something interesting is about to happen:
Entre les deux un berceau pour l'enfant,
Et toutefois plus près du lit de l'hôte.
Cela fit faire une plaisante faute
A cet ami qu'avait notre galant. (402)

In the prologue to *Les Quiproquos*, published in
1696 by Madame Ulrich in *Les Oeuvres posthumes de M. de La
Fontaine*, there is perhaps a recollection of the difficulty
La Fontaine experienced in "preparing" the intrigue of
*Le Berceau*. Speaking of the plot of *Les Quiproquos*, he
admits the need for "habiles mains" to carry off "une chose
ainsi surprenante."

Il est besoin d'en bien fonder le cas,
Sans rien forcer et sans qu'on violente
Un incident qui ne s'attendait pas. (650)

Of all such intrigues due to the "tours" of "l'aveugle
enfant," the one in *Le Berceau* wins the prize "à l'égard
de Boccace," he says.

Car, quant à moi, ma main pleine d'audace
En mille endroits a peut-être gâté
Ce que la sienne a bien exécuté.

An author's sincerity is not always easy to determine,
especially in a "préface." But this time, one is inclined
to believe that La Fontaine was honestly disappointed in
at least the first part of his version of the Boccaccio
tale.

The last part of *Le Berceau* amply compensates for
its rather slow beginning, and the shift in emphasis, from
the daughter to the father, begins as his wife slips into bed beside Pinucio's friend (403). This whole scene is perfectly discreet, but La Fontaine nevertheless succeeds in evoking the wife's enjoyment of the situation.

The room is completely dark; we see nothing, we hear nothing. But the blackness is filled with the silent thoughts and the secret desires of the still-young wife, as she shudders to think she may have inadvertently lain down, "en chemise ainsi nue," beside the two young men. She does, of course, lie down beside Pinucio's friend "Foi ne fut, n'étourdi"), who counterfeits the husband "trop bien," La Fontaine's dissection of this ordinary expression seeming to express the woman's astonishment, and perhaps even her suspicion:

Il fit l'époux, mais il le fit trop bien.  
Trop bien! je faux: et c'est tout le contraire,  
Il le fit mal: car qui le veut bien faire  
Doit en besogne aller plus doucement.

The wife pushes her wonder aside, "puisque Dieu nous l'envoie," and La Fontaine intervenes again to remind us that he has prepared us from the beginning to comprehend his oblique evocation of this young woman's still healthy appetite:

La dame était de bonne emplette encor;  
J'en ai, je crois, dit un mot dans l'abord.

This intervention reveals La Fontaine's concern with
"preparations" in this tale, but it seems more than a mere commentary on his art. This interruption confirms what we have sensed about this woman, and we are thus subtly prepared for her reaction to the situation when she is forced to accept it consciously.

The quiet secrecy of this scene becomes uproarious confusion, as Pinucio commits the fatal error common to many of La Fontaine's heroes: he must boast of his prowess and good fortune. To emphasize the "logic" of this action that sets off a chain of reactions, La Fontaine inserts parenthetically this truism: "Gens trop heureux font toujours quelque faute." This tendency to boast, to play the Gascon, is common in the theatre as well as in tales. Arnolphe discusses this common fault of Frenchmen in Molière's *Ecole des femmes* (III, 3):

Voilà de nos Français l'ordinaire défaut:  
Dans la possession d'une bonne fortune,  
Le secret est toujours ce qui les importune,  
Et la vanité sotte a pour eux tant d'appas,  
Qu'ils se pendraient plutôt que de ne causer pas.

La Fontaine calls this fault "discrétion française" in *Le Maître en droit* (IV, 8), a tale in which a young student confides in his law professor, boasting to him of his success with the professor's own wife, a situation similar to the one in *L'Ecole des femmes* between Arnolphe and Horace, and in this variation in *Le Berceau*.

Pinucio's boasting is not to his friend, as he
thinks, but to the father of his maîtresse, the irate bourgeois father, whose outburst betrays his attention to business affairs as well as to public opinion of him and his household. Hear his indignant bellowing:

Comment! dit-il d'un ton plein de colère,
Vous venez donc ici pour cette affaire?
Prétendez-vous, beau Monsieur que vous êtes,
En demeurez quitte à si bon marché?
Quoi! ne tient-il qu'à honnir des familles?
Pour vos ébats nous nourrirons nos filles!
J'en suis d'avis! Sortez de ma maison:
Je jure Dieu que j'en aurai raison.
Et toi, coquine, il faut que je te tue.

Then silence. Pinucio, the daughter, the wife, in this moment of realization, hardly dare breathe, and the suspense in sound and movement match the suspense of the reader.

Only the friend, who having remained in his own bed feels that he is safe from reproach, has the composure to fabricate a story that satisfies the innkeeper. It is not the wife, as in Boccaccio's tale, but the friend who breaks the silence and sets everyone in motion again. La Fontaine's moment of suspense allows everyone—even the husband—time to appreciate the danger of his own situation, and to suspect at least a part of the truth about the others.

Acting according to his "nature," that has been depicted through the suggested conflict with his daughter in the first part of the tale—poor, bourgeois innkeeper
that he is, thinking of the fee for the night's lodging that he would forfeit if he chased the men out, thinking of the gossip that would spoil his chances of finding a husband to take his daughter off his hands—the husband accepts the friend's story "pour argent comptant" (405). He does not, as in Boccaccio's story, joke with Pinucio about his dreams and sleep-walking. Neither does he seem fooled by his wife's equivocal reassurances that their daughter is no guiltier than she (Elle n'a fait ni pis ni mieux que moi). The conflict between father and rebellious daughter and father and impertinent young man is also the conflict between the husband and his wife, who is allied against him with the other young people. And so, unhesitatingly, but unconvincingly, the husband capitulates: "C'est assez; je vous croi." But he is not unhappy.

On se leva, ce ne fut pas sans rire:  
Car chacun d'eux en avait sa raison.  
Tout fut secret; et quiconque eut du bon  
Par devers soi le garda sans rien dire.

The father's prudence stems not so much from "honneur"—as in Joconde—as from "honnir," shame to his family, but, more importantly, shame to himself. Just as unwilling to consider the possibility of having been cuckolded as the possibility of missing an advantageous business deal, he has good reasons for pretending to believe in the illusion
of the "stratagème"; preserving appearances is simply more important to him than facing facts.

La Fontaine has been able to convey his vision of this petit bourgeois, who is no less willing to accept illusion for reality than were the aristocratic adventurers in Joconde, by means of the verisimilitude that he creates in Le Bercceau. He gives the innkeeper form by putting him onstage, where he reacts according to the nature of other bourgeois fathers in the theatre. But this character is given an extra dimension of reality by the conflict with his daughter which La Fontaine suggests in his rather lengthy "preparations," and which we sense only in retrospect, along with the secret conflict between him and his wife: first in the dramatic suspension of movement at the end of his tirade, and then quite clearly in his curt "C'est assez; je vous croi" with which he puts an end to the comedy they are all playing with each other.

7. La Fiancée du roi de Garbe

The last tale in the collection of 1666, La Fiancée du roi de Garbe, begins with a prologue of thirty-seven lines, which contains, besides a précis of the long tale to follow, a playful discussion of the opposing theories on imitation. In these verses La Fontaine emphasizes his audacious departure from his source and justifies his
method of free imitation, opening with an argument he
would repeat, in a different tone, in the preface to this
volume: that he was not the first author to make changes
in his model.

"Il n'est rien qu'on ne conte en diverses façons," he begins. "On abuse du vrai comme on fait de la feinte." Then, very deadpan and self-righteous, he says that he
can permit such licenses in stories that "passent pour
chansons," but certainly not in those whose truth is im-
portant to posterity! Having thus claimed to support those
critics who insisted that for the grands genres, which
were said to have a moral purpose, it was important not
to change the historical facts upon which they were based, he proceeds to explain that for his story the rule does
not apply:

Le fait d'Alaciel est d'une autre nature.
Je me suis écarté de mon original.

Alaciel not being an important historical figure, he may
change her story with impunity. The critics may say what
they will:

Tout cela n'est pas un grand mal;
Alaciel et sa mémoire
Ne sauraient guère perdre a tout ce changement.

This question out of the way, he explains that he
has retained only two points from his model, the two he
considers the most important for the story; and his manner of discussing them suggests the entirely new interpretation he has given to this tale of Boccaccio.

L'un est que par huit mains Alaciel passa
Avant que d'entrer dans la bonne.

La Fontaine repeats this point two more times: Alaciel "changea huit fois de chevalier"; she was "veuve de huit galants." The second point he retained is that, although Alaciel had these eight amorous adventures before finally being delivered to the king of Garba, "son fiancé ne s'en embarrassa." This point is also repeated twice more: "elle n'en plut pas moins aux yeux de son fiancé"; "il la prit pour pucelle."

The poor girl suffered cruelly "en ses traverses,
Accidents, fortunes diverses," La Fontaine says. And now his gradual characteristic shifting from an objective to a subjective tone suggests that Alaciel has a tendency to rationalize the misfortunes that befell her.

Il ne faut pas pour cela qu'on l'accuse:
Ce n'était après tout que bonne intention,
Gratitude ou compassion,
Crainte de pis, honnête excuse. (445)

She has another trait which may explain to a certain degree her fiancé's apparent indifference to her altered perfections: she seems to be deceitful.
Veuve de huit galants, il la prit pour pucelle;  
Et dans son erreur par la belle  
Apparemment il fut laissé.

But Alaciel's duplicity cannot explain entirely her fiancée's "erreur." La Fontaine appears clearly to find the king of Garba's delusion the most amazing, and amusing part of the story.

Qu'on y puisse être pris, la chose est toute claire;  
Mais après huit, c'est une étrange affaire.

We see already from La Fontaine's insistence on the two points he is retaining from Boccaccio that his own tale will be a satire of Alaciel's double nature, and also a satire of the king of Garba who, eight times blinder than other men, does not see through the illusion his fiancée creates of her purity.

La Fiancée du roi de Garbe, with its prologue, eight episodes, conclusion, and epilogue, is the longest of all of La Fontaine's tales. Unifying the 801 lines of Alaciel's misadventures would not have been an easy task, especially for the author who would write at the end of his first volume of fables in 1668, "Les longs ouvrages me font peur" (150). In a note to Mauroix, written sometime during the year 1665 when he was preparing the tales of his second volume, La Fontaine speaks of the special pains he took in writing this adaptation of Boccaccio.
La Fiancée du roi de Garbe est un breuvage de longue haleine. Il y a des traits qu'il me faut revoir.

(OD 587)

La Fontaine may have seen the prologue to this tale as one device for providing an artificial kind of unity, as well as a kind of plausibility. It seems almost a literal application of Boileau's explanation in the Dissertation sur Joconde of how to make an absurd story vraisemblable. Speaking of La Fontaine's success in creating a kind of vraisemblance in Joconde, Boileau says:

Le secret donc en contant une chose absurde, est de s'énoncer d'une telle manière, que vous fassiez concevoir au lecteur, que vous ne croyez pas vous-même la chose que vous lui contez. Car alors il aide lui-même a se décevoir, et ne songe qu'à rire de la plaisanterie agréable d'un auteur qui se joue et ne lui parle pas de bon. Et cela est si véritable, qu'on dit même assez souvent des choses qui choquent directement la raison et qui ne laissent pas néanmoins de passer, à cause qu'elles excitent à rire. . . . [une pensée absurde] ne laisse pas de passer pour vraisemblable, parce qu'elle touche la passion, je veux dire qu'elle excite à rire.

(B 312)

We have seen that in the first part of his prologue La Fontaine says in effect that he does not believe a word of what he will be telling in the story. Then he says three different times that he is retaining from his source the fact that Alaciel had eight lovers before being handed over finally to her fiancé. And paradoxically—perhaps because, as Boileau said, it "excite à rire"—the reader attaches himself to these eight episodes, almost all that
remains of the source, as if they were true. The second point retained from the original story, that the king of Garba takes no notice of Alaciel's rather doubtful past, depends of course upon the first and "passes" no less "for plausible." Knowing in advance the framework of the "history" and its happy outcome for Alaciel, but without knowing what each adventure will be, the reader speeds through the transitions between episodes, never stopping to question their vraisemblance. This artificial kind of suspense, created before the story itself begins, lightens considerably La Fontaine's task in linking his episodes and in maintaining the interest of the reader. After the fifth episode, repeating the device of the prologue perhaps because he fears his reader's interest may be flagging, La Fontaine stops to count the number of "travaux" of the infante and to reassure the reader that he is not falsifying the story.

Le sixième incident des travaux de l'infante
Par quelques-uns est rapporté
D'une manière différente.
Force gens conclurent de là
Que d'un galant au moins je fais grâce à la belle.
C'est médisance que cela;
Je ne voudrais mentir pour elle:
Son époux n'eut assurément
Que huit précurseurs seulement.
Poursuivons donc notre nouvelle. (457)

A large part of La Fontaine's concern in composing this long tale would have been in linking together all of these implausible episodes in such a way as to make each
one seem the "natural" consequence of the one preceding it and the cause of the one following it. He may well have been thinking of these difficulties when he wrote in the preface to this second volume of tales of the necessity of making the events of a tale perfectly clear to the reader:

... une chose ... est la suite et la dépendance d'une autre ... le moindre fonde quelquefois le plus important; en sorte que si le fil vient une fois à se rompre, il est impossible au lecteur de la renouer. (387)

In none of his tales does La Fontaine seem more conscious than in La Fiancée of making the careful preparations that provide the slim "fil" of logic on which depends a large part of his system of vraisemblance. In the first part of the tale particularly, he takes pains to establish Alaciel's character, in such a way that the links which chain one event to another seem really the different stages in her own psychological development. At the same time, since many of the misfortunes that befall her could actually only be the result of chance, La Fontaine attempts to supply "reasonable" explanations for these changes of fate, in order to satisfy his and his readers' demand for a semblance of reality.

The reader is given a preview, as we have seen, of Alaciel and her story in the prologue. In a transitional stanza between the prologue and the story proper, La Fon-
taine continues the introduction of his new Alaciel. Her
description begins much like that of other desirable girls
in La Fontaine's tales:

Aussi ce qu'on se peut figurer sous le ciel
De bon, de beau, de charmant, et d'aimable,

but then the author accentuates the exceptional quality
that will help explain the extraordinary nature of her
exploits:

D'accommodant, j'y mets encore ce point,
La rendait d'autant estimable.

This comic "flaw" in an otherwise conventional character
sets the tone for the new Adventures of Alaciel, so dif-
ferent from Boccaccio's violent episodes caused by his
heroine's fatal beauty, that "ce n'est plus la même chose,
c'est proprement une nouvelle nouvelle" (Préface, 386).32

Alaciel's father, the sultan, had affianced his
lovable and obliging daughter, whom he loved better than
life itself, to the king of Garba, and as her story begins,
we are given a glimpse of this young girl's readiness for
adventure:

La belle aimait déjà; mais on n'en savait rien:
Filles de sang royal ne se déclarent guères;
Tout se passe en leur cœur: cela les fâche bien,
Car elles sont de chair ainsi que les bergères.

One is not sure whether it is La Fontaine or young Alaciel
herself who is reflecting on her impatience at having to
contain her romantic inclinations. The object of her affection, Hispal, a young gentleman in her father's court, is chosen to accompany her on her journey to the realm of her fiancé; and the wry litotes of the author underlines the certain consequence of this act: "S'en fier à quelque autre eût peut-être été mieux."

After eight days of sailing toward her destiny, a complete change of tone marks the first peripeteia in Alaciel's story. "Grifonio le gigantesque" and his band of corsairs, having heard that the "infante" was on board, attack the ship, and our mock-hero Hispal fights them off as valiantly as any Roland against a band of Saracens. Outnumbered twenty to one,

... Hispal, par sa vaillance
Tenait les choses en balance.

Maint corsaire sentit son bras déterminé:
De ses yeux il sortait des éclairs et des flammes. (446)

Grifonio seizes the princess, not forgetting her "cassette aux bijoux," which, La Fontaine says "entre nous," contains as well as diamonds some "témoignages doux," evidence that Hispal has already been laying the groundwork during the voyage (as is the author) for Alaciel's eventual surrender to her fate. But first Hispal must save his fair lady from her present fate-worse-than-death. So with one neat "revers" he chops Grifonio in half just as the latter is carrying his prey from one vessel to another, causing
Alaciel and the cassette to fall into the water.

This new peripeteia is marked by another change in tone. The storm of the battle scene becomes the calm of "la liquide plaine" as each pilotless ship "Au gré d'Eole et de Neptune flotte." La Fontaine seems here to underscore the lack of logical transition and the importance of fate in the life of Alaciel; but to prevent his reader from losing the "fil" of his story, he attracts his attention to the amusing image of Alaciel, buoyed by her billowing skirts that filled with air as she fell from the clutches of Grifonio, being towed by the faithful Hispal to the nearest reef, pulling behind her the cassette.

Aucuns ont assuré, comme chose constante,
Que même du péril la cassette échappa;
Qu'a des cordons étant pendue,
La belle après soi la tira. (447)

To avoid starving—and motivated, we are led to suspect, by the possibility of consummating their growing love—they leave the first rock and continue toward the coast, "La cassette en laisse suivant,/ Et le nageur poussé du vent" (448). Finally after passing from rock to rock for two days, they reach land, "Lui, la princesse, et la cassette."

The rhythm of this last line causes the reader to realize that the cassette has been recurring with the regularity of a refrain, and the author's intervention at
this point seems truly a reflection of the reader's thought:

Pourquoi, me dira-t-on, nous ramener toujours
Cette cassette? est-ce une circonstance
Qui soit de si grande importance?

His insistence on the cassette has not been simply whimsy, the author assures us. Since "on ne vit ni d'air ni d'amour," plausibility demands that these young people have some way of sustaining life in this new land. "La cassette y pourvut avec maint diamant." And besides, says our author, consider the chain of events that result from the diamonds in the cassette.

Hispal vendit les uns, mit les autres en gages;
Fut achat d'un château le long de ces rivages;
Ce château, dit l'histoire, avait un parc fort grand;
Ce parc, un bois; ce bois, de beaux ombrages;
Sous ces ombrages nos amants
Passaient d'agréables moments.
Voyez combien voilà de choses enchainées,
Et par la cassette amenées. (449)

Thus parodying his own rule of the causal linking of events, La Fontaine reveals the artificiality of much of the vraisemblance that he achieves in his contes. In this digression he indicates that he knows his readers well enough to realize that, even in the case of such a fairy tale as this, their "bon sens" would reject a story that did not in some way supply practical, seventeenth-century explanations to situations; and yet he suggests as well the ease with which the reader accepts incredible stories told in an entertaining manner. Finally, by means of this
playful discussion of his art, La Fontaine alerts the reader to an appreciation of the "links" in the psychological development of Alaciel and to the "linking" of circumstances—her gratitude to Hispal, her uncertainty about her future, the remoteness of their situation, the springtime, their youth, a sudden shower—that culminate in her eventual, inevitable downfall.

Combien en voyons-nous se laisser pas à pas
Ravir jusqu'aux faveurs dernières,
Qui dans l'abord ne croyaient pas
Pouvoir accorder les premières! (450)

La Fontaine continues to link the episodes of Alaciel's adventures, both by artificial devices and by character development, and these two types of techniques are often blended. An example of this blending may be seen in a commonplace observation of human nature following Alaciel's surrender to Hispal: "Rien ne coûte en amour que la première peine." On the reader's acceptance of this truism depends much of the vraisemblance of the episodes that follow, in which Alaciel is passed from hand to hand with only token resistance on her part.

The principal commonplace upon which this tale is based, suggested in the prologue, is that all women, whether young maids, wives, or widows, in order to make themselves desirable, are able to feign an air of purity and innocence, personified in the mind of men by a "pucelle." To create this air de pucelle, a woman has
only to put on a show of resistance before yielding to a man. Exaggerating this convention by multiplying it by eight, La Fontaine effects, even as early as the prologue, a satire of woman's duplicity, and an even more amusing satire of man's need of the illusion created by her pretense.

Our heroine's accommodating nature allows her to adapt herself early to this weakness of men. The young, inexperienced Alaciel, even though she knows that "filles de sang royal ne se déclarent guères," finding herself isolated on a rock in the middle of the sea, facing almost certain death, hazards a hint that it would not be inappropriate for the two lovers to take advantage of the situation.

Hispal, dit la princesse, il se faut consoler; Les pleurs ne peuvent rien près de la Parque dure; Nous n'en mourrons pas moins: mais il dépend de nous D'adoucir l'aigreur de ses coups. (447)

But then if she responds only by sighs and tears and "regards . . . au ciel adressés" (447) to Hispal's oblique declaration of his love, it is because she adapts herself immediately to what he expects of her:

Se consoler! dit-il; le peut-on quand on aime? Ah! si... Mais non, Madame il n'est pas à propos Que vous aimiez.

According to the rules of the game, she must allow him to
continue to believe that he had the idea first.

Safe on shore, the seed that she has planted in his mind grows until he repeats to her the essence of what she had suggested to him on the rock:

Nous voici, disait-il, en un bord étranger,
Ignorés du reste des hommes;
Profitons-en . .

. . . . . . . . . . . . .

Qui vous retient . .

. . . . . . . . . . . . .

Et n'avez-vous point fait assez de résistance?

Since she was resisting "à regret," and since Hispal had tired of this resistance, she could allow herself to be convinced, by her "gratitude" and by the conspiring elements which sent them scurrying into the dark grotto.

The innocence-resistance theme in *La Fiancée* is related to and accompanied by the theme of "keeping up appearances" in society. Here again Alacie's accommodating nature comes into play. We have already noted the perfect propriety of Alacie, the sultan's daughter, who, playing the role demanded of her by her position, would never dream of "declaring herself" to a young gentleman. But as fate would have it, she and her young gentleman Hispal find themselves washed ashore in a land far from their own world, where they can enjoy their love freely and openly. When their enjoyment reaches the point of satiety, Alacie sends Hispal back to her father's court to prepare for her return; but she realizes that on
returning, she will have to put on the front necessary for existence in that society.

Allez-vous-en voir promptement
Ce qu'on croira de moi dedans Alexandrie
Quand on saura que nous sommes en vie.
D'guisez bien notre sjour;
Dites que vous venez prparer mon retour,
Et faire qu'on m'envoie une escorte si sur
Qu'il n'arrive plus d'aventure. (451)

Zafr, Alacie's father, is no less anxious than she to keep up appearances. One can see the skepticism that he carefully covers as he substitutes for Hispal a different leader for the escort sent to bring the princess back home.

Dès qu'il eut à tout satisfait,
On fit partir une escorte puissante.
Hispal fut retenu; non qu'on eut en effet
Le moindre soupçon de l'infante. (452)

The next line amuses the reader, who knows that Zafr's probable "soupçons" are well founded: "Le chef de cette escorte était jeune et bien fait."

In Alacie's second adventure, her new young and handsome leading man frankly joins her comedy of resistance, making this episode the gayest of them all. "Elle s'en tint fort offensée" at his declaration of love, and he pretends to let himself die of hunger because of his despair:

Car de se poignarder, la chose est trop tôt faite:
On n'a pas le temps d'en venir
Au repentir.
She attempts to convince him—and herself—that she believes him to be in earnest in his "terrible entreprise."

Laisser mourir un homme, et pouvoir l'êmpêcher,
C'est avoir l'âme un peu trop dure.
Par pitié donc elle condescendit
Aux volontés du capitaine,
Et cet office lui rendit
Gaîment, de bonne grâce, et sans montrer de peine:
Aucrement le remède eût été sans effet.

The gay "jeûneur," making excuses for postponing their departure, is surprised by Grifonio's lieutenant and his band of pirates. Once again Alaciel "fit fort la rebelle" (453) before yielding to this "corsair et demi," who "ne s'en étonna pas,/ N'étant novice en tels cas." Alaciel has no opportunity in the fourth episode to put on her show of resistance, since Bacchus, "et Morphée, et l'hôte de la belle,/ Cette nuit disposèrent d'elle" (456). And, because she had obviously already played the Hélène to so many Parises (459), her resistance would not have been vraisemblable to her co-players in the fifth and sixth episodes!

However, fortune brings Alaciel in her seventh adventure a leading man with whom she can resume her comedy. He is a knight errant, "grand chercheur d'aventures" (459), but too chivalrous to steal a kiss from the sleeping beauty he encounters in the woods. Alaciel takes up her role as one of the "belles" of long ago who "passaient pour chastes et pures," as soon as she awakens.
L'infante s'éveilla, surprise au dernier point.
"Non, non, dit-il, ne craignez rien:
Je ne suis géant ni sauvage,
Mais chevalier errant, qui rends graces aux Dieux
D'avoir trouvé dans ce bocage
Ce qu'à peine on pourrait rencontrer dans les cieux."

His offer of his "personne" and his "bras" is accepted gratefully, and Alaciel tells him of her misfortunes, "supprimant, comme l'on peut croire,/ Les six galants."
The chivalrous knight "en prit/ Ce qu'il crut à propos d'en prendre." Neither has fooled the other; their pleasure comes from playing their roles. Alaciel stretches out her resistance this time all the way back to her father's realm, daily paying the knight only small installments of his "récemopense" for escorting her home, and paying his heir "la dernière" of the favors that remained of her debt, only when she is delivered at the frontier.

If Alaciel succeeds in returning home, it is because she has learned, in the course of her experiences, the truth of another conventional commentary on human nature, which is an adjunct of the "innocence-resistance" truism: that man needs the excitement of the new and unknown; that he must have variety. In fact, she has learned the "lesson" of Les Troqueurs, that woman also needs the stimulation of change. Her idyll with Hispal ended because both, "las de tant d'amour . . . à la fin regretterent la cour." Neither admitted it to the other, but each was glad to end "un amour sans crainte et sans désir" (451). The
boredom that inevitably results from too much of a good thing, as in Pâte d'anguille, caused the end of her fourth adventure as well:

... L'hôte enfin se lassant
Pour d'autres conquêtes soupirer. (456)

There is no more constant theme in the tales of La Fontaine than this need for the stimulation that comes from a new situation. We have seen the use he makes of this conventional theme in Joconde and La Servante justifiée.\(^{33}\) Here in La Fiancée, the need for change becomes an artistic principle. In this long tale, which could otherwise have seemed monotonous, La Fontaine appears to have "accommodated himself," following the lead of his heroine, to his reader's, and to her own, desire for something new and different, by changing the tone of the episodes as often as Alaciel changed "chevaliers." We have seen the mock-heroic of the battle scene with Grifonio; the next scene with Hispal is a kind of mock-pastorale that recalls the precious atmosphere of the Astrée. Miss Kohn has pointed out the "ton alerte des fables" in the line that speeds Hispal out of the life of Alaciel: "Il s'embarque, il fait voile, il vogue, il a bon vent" (452).\(^{34}\) The gaiety of the scene with the second lover is counterbalanced by the mock-grimness of the adventure with Grifonio's lieutenant and the voluptuousness of the episodes in the seigneur's luxurious château. And the villainy of the ravisher in
the scene in the pavillon (458) is followed by the chivalry of the knight errant in the scene in which, as Wadsworth has remarked, "La Fontaine seems to be burlesquing chivalric novels."35

When Alaciel is finally returned to her own land, her first care is to cover her eight indiscretions in order to resume her role as the sultan's daughter. Her young traveling companion, her eighth "chevalier," leaves her at the border, "Pour ne donner aucun ombrage" (461), and it is his old "gouverneur" who delivers her to Zair. She laughs to herself as her old escort tells her father an allegorical riddle of her adventures in the land where people worship a certain god whose temples are named "alcôves et ruelles," a land where she, from the beginning, had accommodated herself to the new customs.

Là les gens pour idole ont un certain oiseau
Qui dans ses portraits est fort beau,
Quoi qu'il n'ait des plumes qu'aux ailes.
Au contraire des autres dieux,
Qu'on ne sert que quand on est vieux,
La jeunesse lui sacrifie. (462)

Before the old man's story began, La Fontaine had intervened to say that he would end his story rapidly.

... il est bon que j'imite
Phébus, qui, sur la fin du jour,
Tombe d'ordinaire si court
Qu'on dirait qu'il se précipite. (462)

Now it is the very brevity of the description of the
sultan's reaction to the tutor's story, "Zaïr était ravi," recalling the "Je vous crois" of the bourgeois innkeeper in Le Berceau, that conveys Zaïr's skepticism. The riddle is easy to guess, but Zaïr is "ravi" to have an excuse, however transparent, that will allow him to close his eyes to all but appearances. Has not La Fontaine told us from the first line of the story that "Zaïr, soudan d'Alexandrie/ Aima sa fille Alaciel/ Un peu plus que sa propre vie"?

Once again, the brevity of the scene in which the princess is presented to the king of Garba, added to the silence of her audience as she tells "les mensonges qu'il lui plut," shows us that the subjects and the ruler of this new land are just as determined to keep up appearances as were Zaïr and the people of Alexandrie. Alaciel will be perfect as their new queen, for she is past mistress at playing whatever role is demanded of her.

La nuit vint; on porta la reine dans son lit.
A son honneur elle en sortit.

No less than the widow of Le Gascon puni (II, 13), this "veuve de huit galants" is expert in creating a certain "air de pucelle" (442); and it is only this ephemeral illusion which has been important to each of her nine husbands.

In the epilogue to the story of Alaciel, La Fontaine assumes the role of marriage counselor, drawing a moral
from the story to give advice to husbands and brides. First he advises husbands to mistrust their ability to discern the truth about their brides.

Ce conte nous apprend que beaucoup de maris Qui se vantent de voir fort clair en leurs affaires N'y viennent bien souvent qu'après les favoris, Et, tout savants qu'ils sont, ne s'y connaissent guères. Le plus sûr toutefois est de se bien garder, Craindre tout, ne rien hasarder. (463)

Then he advises girls that all husbands are not as blind as the king of Garba.

Filles, maintenez-vous; l'affaire est d'importance: Rois de Garbe ne sont oiseaux communs en France; Vous voyez que l'hymen y suit l'accord de prés, C'est la l'un des plus grands secrets Pour empêcher les aventures.

Continuing his fatherly advice, he warns the girls that, although they may believe their friendships with boys to be perfectly innocent, "Cupidon alors fait d'étranges leçons."

Rompez-lui toutes ses mesures; Pourvoyez à la chose aussi bien qu'aux soupçons.

If, however, it is not possible to "garder sa fleur" for one's husband, "pour l'avoir perdue, il ne se faut pas pendre."

Even before Alaciel's story began, we were given a forecast of her peculiar ability to adapt herself to every situation. Added to this quality was her ability
to accommodate her thinking to the thing she had decided to do. From the beginning she meant well, she tells herself ("Ce n'était après tout que bonne intention"). But when "La Parque" changed the course of her life ("privé de pilote, / Au gré d'Eole et de Neptune flotte") and buffeted her about, what could she do but try to soften its blows ("il dépend de nous/ D'adoucir l'aigreur de ses coups").

C'est tout ce qui nous reste en ce malheur extrême. (447)

Her first deviation from the path of virtue seemed clearly the result of circumstances and her own nature, both of which were beyond her control, plus a determination to make the best of a bad situation. Subsequent compromises were of course easier than the first ("Rien ne coûte en amour que la première peine"). The author showed us that Society itself provided her with a ready-made set of maxims to live by:

Qu'est fait Alaciel? force n'a point de loi. S'accommoder a tout est chose nécessaire; Ce qu'on ne voudrait pas, souvent il le faut faire. Quand il plait au destin que l'on en vienne la, Augmenter sa souffrance est une erreur extrême: Elle se force donc, et prend en gré le tout. Il n'est affliction dont on ne vienne à bout. (453)

The old tutor's final words summed up very well Alaciel's attitude toward the vicissitudes of her life.
Madame dès l'abord s'est faite à leur méthode
Tant elle est de facile humeur;
Et je puis dire à son honneur
Que de tout elle s'accommode. (462)

In the prologue the author insisted on the originality of all but two of the details of this story, and his manner of discussing these details emphasized the originality of his interpretation of Alaciell and her fiancé. The reader is thus encouraged to assume that, though the tone of the epilogue is as playful as the rest of the tale, the creator of the new Alaciell is here underlining a personal comment on the relationships between men and women, and perhaps even on the difficulties of man's life in the world. While mocking Alaciell's inability to separate truth from fiction, La Fontaine seems to sympathize with her affirmative, practical approach to the destiny that is sent her. He recognizes her inability to direct either her own actions or her emotional reactions to circumstances, and he appears to approve of her cheerful acceptance of her situation.

Si quelqu'une pourtant ne s'en pouvait défendre,
Le remède sera de rire en son malheur.
8. Conclusion

Imitation of the ancients, together with imitation of nature, was among the most basic tenets of the classical doctrine; and throughout La Fontaine's century, literary critics agreed generally on the principle of free imitation of source materials. In his first published work, L'Eunuque, La Fontaine had revealed that his own conception of imitation went beyond mere translation. He had chosen his subject from Terence, and then had attempted to reconceive it so that it would be suitable for his public, succeeding best when he gave up trying to follow Terence's text and added inventions of his own. In Clymène, a strange piece dated variously from 1658 to around 1670, whose eight versions of a single subject demonstrate his views on imitation, La Fontaine denounced servile copyists.

Car, vouloir qu'on imite aucun original
N'est mon but, ni ne doit non plus être le vôtre,
Hors ce qu'on fait passer d'une langue en une autre.
C'est un bêtail servile et sot, à mon avis,
Qui n'osent avancer qu'en suivant la première,
Et s'iraient sur ses pas jeter dans la rivière. (OD 34)

In the Epître à Huet, written toward the end of his career, he would still be criticizing the "imiter, sot bêtail," who follow their models like sheep.
J'en use d'autre sorte; et, me laissant guider,
Souvent à marcher seul j'ose me hasarder.
On me verra toujours pratiquer cet usage;
Mon imitation n'est point un esclavage. (OD 648)

Though free imitation was accepted in principle,
individual interpretation of the theory and its applica-
tion in artistic creation varied according to the taste
of the critic and the talent of the author. Hence the
continued discussion of the subject, and the possibility
that a mediocre poet like Bouillon could have, in fact,
attracted some followers. La Fontaine's preoccupation
with imitation in Parts One and Two of the Contes indi-
cates the publicity value of the question at the time of
the publication of his first tales.

His digression in Joconde to protest playfully:
"Je le rends comme on me le donne;/ Et l'Arioste ne ment
pas" (358), added to the three other passages of the tale
in which he claims less directly to be translating Ariosto
literally, suggests strongly that a quarrel between
proponents of literal and free imitation may not only
have precipitated the publishing of Joconde, but may
quite possibly have inspired the writing of the tale.
And if this be true, then a literary quarrel—real or
imagined—was at least partly responsible for the develop-
ment of one of La Fontaine's most distinctive narrative
techniques: claiming to be a literal translator, claim-
ing the authority of his source in order to excuse all
kinds of audacities. It is interesting to note that in *La Fiancée*, one of the tales of 1666, though he announces from the beginning, "Je me suis écarté de mon original ... J'ai suivi mon auteur en deux points seulement," La Fontaine continues using the technique of the literal translator, developed, it seems, in *Joconde*: "Aucuns ont assuré," he says, that Alaciel and Hispal were able to save the "cassette aux bijoux" (447); with the jewels they were able to buy a château, which, "dit l'histoire," had a park, etc., (449). Besides recalling perhaps the quarrel on imitation, this technique contributes to the natural, oral quality and the confidential, satirical tone of the tales.

Closely related to the principle of imitation were the theories on *vraisemblance*, the repeated criticism of Ariosto's implausibility by the author of the *Disser-tation sur Joconde* revealing the importance of verisimilitude in the 17th century conception of literary beauty. This critic of Italian "impertinences" and "extravagances" seemed to equate *vraisemblance* with reasonableness, with good sense, with that which would be accepted as logical or true, applying the test of naturalness to poetic style and storytelling techniques alike. No claims were made for the reality of La Fontaine's tale, but for its appropriateness: in spite of its absurdity, it did not shock the judgment and good taste of the cultivated French
public for whom it was written, its appeal deriving from the semblance of reality created by the storyteller.

The Contes and Préfaces of 1665 and 1666 reflect this same notion of verisimilitude. La Fontaine's digression on vraisemblance in Joconde ("J'entends déjà maint esprit fort/ M'objecter que la vraisemblance/ N'est pas en ceci tout à fait" (358))³⁷ is echoed in prose in the preface of 1665:

On me peut encore objecter que ces contes ne sont pas fondés, ou qu'ils ont partout un fondement aisé à détruire; enfin, qu'il y a des absurdités, et pas la moindre teinture de vraisemblance. Je réponds en peu de mots que j'ai mes garants; et puis ce n'est ni le vrai ni le vraisemblable qui font la beauté et la grâce de ces choses-ci; c'est seulement la manière de les conter. (347)

These remarks, like those in the passage in Joconde, seem to allude to opposing theories of imitation and verisimilitude, concerned with allowable changes in the vrai in order to achieve the vraisemblable; and once again, La Fontaine pretends to be only a literal translator of his models. In this manner he avoids taking sides in a literary quarrel which, he feels, has no bearing on his tales. But in spite of his apparent insistence here and in Joconde, as well as in La Fiancée du roi de Garbe, that the theories concerning the "vrai" and the "vraisemblable" did not apply to his contes, certain other comments in the prefaces and tales, and especially his
"manière de conter" reveal special care in establishing "fondements" that create the vraisemblance admired by the author of the *Dissertation sur Joconde*.

In his discussion of his method of imitation found in the preface to the *Contes et Nouvelles* of 1666, La Fontaine explains the close relationship between fondements and his own kind of vraisemblance, an artificial, fragile plausibility contrived of logic and consistency—in tone, character development, and action. The author is often obliged to cut out parts of his model, he says, to avoid excessive length, and especially to avoid obscurity:

... car, si la clarté est recommandable en tous les ouvrages de l'esprit, on peut dire qu'elle est nécessaire dans les récits où une chose, la plupart du temps, est la suite et la dépendance d'une autre, ou le moindre fonde quelquefois le plus important; en sorte que si le fil vient une fois à se rompre, il est impossible au lecteur de le renouer. (387)

If the preparations are made properly, if nothing causes the thread of the story to break, the reader will be imperceptibly carried along to the final "catastrophe," forgetting that the apparent reality of the tale he is reading is nothing but an illusion. Thus the storyteller will have achieved his main purpose, "qui est d'attacher le lecteur, de le réjouir, d'attirer malgré lui son attention, de lui plaire enfin" (385).
CHAPTER II
THE INSISTENCE ON PROPRIETY:
PORTRAYING THE VRAI

A. Part Three of the Contes.
Truth, Dissemblance, Morality

1. Introduction. Justifying Licentious Stories

The quarrel on imitation, which La Fontaine had
exploited to launch his career as a conteur, was really
only academic, but the preface to the Contes et Nouvelles
en vers of 1665 reveals that La Fontaine was aware of the
possibility of more serious criticism of his contes than
that he had dared to make changes in the tales that were
his models. He opened this preface with a discussion of
the contents of the book. He spoke modestly of the "baga-
telles" which he was adding to the two tales which had
appeared a month earlier, saying that he was publishing
these new tales only because "on était en train d'y prendre
plaisir."

. . . je m'accommoderai, s'il m'est possible, au
gout de mon siècle, instruit que je suis par ma
propre expérience qu'il n'y a rien de plus néces-
saire. (345)

Some of the new tales were long, some were short. "On en
trouvera même quelques-uns que j'ai prétendu mettre en
épigrammes," he said (346). To "grossir" his book, he had
added two pieces which had "ni le sujet ni le caractère du
tous semblables au reste du livre": one of these, *Les Amours de Mars et de Vénus* (OD 115), was from the *Songe de Vaux*, and the other, an *Imitation des Arrêts d'Amour* (OD 584), was probably from the same period.

But he interrupted his apology for the heterogeneous nature of the collection ("je ne sais même si la variété n'était point plus à rechercher en cette rencontre qu'un assortissement si exact") to answer anticipated objections to the subject matter of his book, calling on Horace to justify its licentiousness:

... la nature du conte le voulait ainsi; étant une loi indispensable, selon Horace, ou plutôt selon la raison et le sens commun, de se conformer aux choses dont on écrit. (346)

Then, as he would do in the preface of 1666 to excuse the "licences" of his method of imitation, he cited precedents, other authors who had written this sort of tale, whose example he would surely be allowed to follow.

Or, qu'il ne m'ait été permis d'écrire de celles-ci, comme tant d'autres l'ont fait, et avec succès, je ne crois pas qu'on le mette en doute; et l'on ne me saurait condamner que l'on ne condamne aussi l'Arioste devant moi, et les anciens devant l'Arioste.

Agreeing that for works which "promettent beaucoup de retenue dès l'abord" it would be better to suppress certain circumstances or at least to disguise them, he insisted that his tales would be spoiled by "trop de scrupule."
Qui voudrait réduire Boccace à la même pudeur que Virgile ne ferait assurément rien qui vaille, et pecherait contre les lois de la biénseance, en prenant à tâche de les observer.

He interpreted biénseance to mean, not "extrême pudeur," but, as Cicero had said, "ce qu'il est à propos qu'on die eu égard au lieu, au temps, et aux personnes qu'on entre-tient" (347).

All of this discussion of literary principles seems to have been a mock-serious manner of saying that the real justification for licentious stories was that people enjoyed them.

Ce principe une fois posé, ce n'est pas une faute de jugement que d'entretenir les gens d'aujourd'hui de contes un peu libres.

Although he did not mention it in the preface, he included in this collection a Ballade with the refrain "Je me plais aux livres d'amour," which makes the same point (OD 585). As La Fontaine himself remarked, this Ballade, written perhaps during the Vaux period, includes a little tale "en quelque façon" (OD 118-19). It has three characters, the author and two women: Chloris, an outspoken, cultivated young lady, and her fifty-year-old piously prudish friend Alizon "la sucrée," who seem the vague outlines of the Misanthrope's Célimène and Arsinoé. Alizon deplores the fact that the Bible is neglected in favor of such novels as L'Astrée, and she finds it shocking that Chloris would
say: "Je me plaîs aux livres d'amour." But she is discovered to be a hypocrite when her "péchés écrits" fall into the hands of the author and Chloris, who shamelessly read her confession:

J'ai lu maître Louis mille fois en ma vie;  
Et même quelquefois j'entre en tentation    
Lorsque l'Ermite trouve Angélique endormie,  
Rêvant à tels fatras souvent le long du jour.  
Bref, sans considérer censure ni demi,    
Je me plaîs aux livres d'amour. (OD 586)

The author gleefully confronts her with her "papelardie" and avows that he also enjoys love stories—"honni soit celui qui mal y pense!" The lesson of this little piece seems to be that those who claim to be horrified over "livres d'amour" are prudish hypocrites.

It is not clear in the preface of 1665 who La Fontaine thought would object to his subject. In the Ballade there are references to the Church's censoring of books. First the pious Alizon advocates burning L'Astrée "avec maint vers du temps." Then, teasing Alizon for reading the Orlando Furioso and comparing her to the hypocritical Oriane in Amadis de Gaule, the author says:

Cette histoire, Chloris, est du pape maudite;  
Quiconque y met le nez, devient noir comme un four.

Finally, in the envoi to the Ballade, the author says, "À Rome on ne lit point Boccace sans dispense." In the preface he says only, "Je ne pèche pas . . . en cela contre la morale." Whether he was thinking of objections from the
Church or from critics who insisted that art should have a moral purpose, he exculpated himself by disclaiming any interest in either the vrai or the vraisemblable, emphasizing his lack of serious intent in his tales: "qui ne voit que ceci est jeu et par conséquent ne peut porter coup?"

Objections to his tales may also have come from those concerned with the education of girls, who believed that love stories could have a corrupting influence on innocent young readers. In 1665 La Fontaine may have made concessions to this opinion by admitting the possible danger of the "douce mélancolie . . . qui est une grande préparation pour l'amour" that could come from reading the most chaste and modest novels, while excluding his own tales from this category on the grounds of their gaiety. But four years later, in a digression in *Les Amours de Psyché et de Cupidon*, a less timid La Fontaine proposed absolute freedom in a young girl's choice of books, answering openly the objection to love stories of "nos mères de maintenant." "Si jamais vous avez des filles, laissez-les lire," he advised. First, because it is useless for mothers to forbid their daughters to read novels, in the hopes of preventing their finding out what love is, he said, "la Nature servant d'Astrée." Besides, a girl who has never read love stories is the easy prey of a man.
. . . une fille qui n'a rien lu croit qu'on n'a garde de la tromper, et est plus tôt prise. Il est de l'amour comme du jeu; c'est prudemment fait que d'en apprendre toutes les ruses, non pas pour les pratiquer, mais afin de s'en garantir. (OD 206)

One wonders whether in these last lines La Fontaine's thought did not slip from novels such as the Astrée to his own tales. ²

2. Les Oies de Frère Philippe

By the time La Fontaine published his third volume of Contes et Nouvelles en vers in 1671, he seemed to feel that the popularity of his tales exempted him from serious criticism of their subjects. This volume is not introduced by a preface as were the editions of 1665 and 1666. Instead, it opens with a kind of dedicatory piece, consisting of a prologue and a tale from Boccaccio, in which La Fontaine expresses his gratitude to his feminine readers for the honor they do him in reading his tales and offers them, "en récompense" Les Oies de Frère Philippe. The prologue of this piece is strikingly like the last part of the preface to the Contes et Nouvelles of 1665, in which La Fontaine attempts to establish the innocuousness of his contes; but similar as it is in outline to the preface, the prologue has an entirely different tone and a new emphasis which make it distinct from its model. Before examining the prologue, it will be helpful to study the tale, for
much of the meaning of the prologue depends upon the tale itself; and La Fontaine's changes in the Boccaccio story help to effect and to emphasize the unity of the two parts of *Les Oies de Frère Philippe*.

Boccaccio tells the story, which is no more than an anecdote, in chronological order, saving his commentary on the meaning of the story until the end. La Fontaine, in order better to connect the story to the prologue, begins with a transitional passage which combines extravagant, flowery compliments to the ladies with a statement of the lesson to be derived from his story and a précis of the tale.

This will be a tale, he begins, illustrating the power of your charms, against which all precautions are useless.

Vous auriez surpassé le printemps et l'aurore  
Dans l'esprit d'un garçon, si, des ses jeunes ans,  
Outre l'éclat des cieux et les beautés des champs,  
Il eût vu les vôtres encore.  
Aussi, dès qu'il les vit, il en sentit les coups.  
Vous surpasses tout; il n'eut d'yeux que pour vous;  
Il laissa les palais: enfin votre personne  
Lui parut avoir plus d'attraits  
Que n'en aurait, a beaucoup prés,  
Tous les joyaux de la couronne. (478)

Linking the story to this transitional passage, La Fontaine begins in medias res, showing the young boy living in the woods, with only the birds for company. Their singing distracted him but, alas, he could not yet understand their language. Gradually the explanation of his situation un-
folds. His father had brought him to this "école si sauvage" following the death of his mother.

Et le pauvre garçon ne connut la lumière
Qu'afin qu'il ignorât les gens.

For a very long time he did not imagine the existence of any other creatures than the "habitants de cette forêt":

... des loups, des oiseaux, enfin ce qui respire
Pour respirer sans plus, et ne songer à rien.

The word "songer" catches the reader's attention. La Fontaine often plays with the ambiguity of this word. In La Coupe enchantée (III, 4) he uses its several meanings to portray the terrible uncertainty and awful suspicions of a jealous husband.

Ses songes sont toujours que l'on le fait cocu;
Pourvu qu'il songe c'est l'affaire:
Je ne voudrais pas un tel point garantir:
   Car pour songer il faut dormir
Et les jaloux ne dorment guère:
Le moindre bruit éveille un mari soupçonneux. (494)

For the reader of the tales of La Fontaine, the word takes on another, special meaning. In Comment l'esprit vient aux filles (IV, 1), the young Lise "songeait autant que sa poupée" until Father Bonaventure taught her the game that "fait venir l'esprit et la raison" (547). No sooner does "l'esprit s'insinue et s'avance" than Lise begins to "songer."
Lise lui fait une humble révérence,
Et s'en retourne en songeant à cela.
Lise songer! Quoi? déjà Lise songe!
Elle fait plus: elle cherche un mensonge,

Vous voyez donc que je disais fort bien
Quand je disais que ce jeu-là rend sage.

It is this extra connotation of erotic daydreaming
that La Fontaine intends here in Les Oies and that crystal-
lizes the idea the author has been "insinuating" into
"the mind" of the reader: that a human being should not be
separated from the society of his own kind, that he should
not be denied the knowledge of his own nature. The idea has
been suggested by the adjective "pauvre" describing this
boy being educated in an "école si sauvage," and in the
lines concerning the singing of the birds:

Tout son plaisir était cet innocent ramage;
Encor ne pouvait-il entendre leur langage.

The birds and the other animals of the forest speak a
natural language whose meaning is being denied this young
boy isolated from his own species. And the unnaturalness
of the situation is emphasized by the artificiality of the
précieux diction of this part of the tale.

Now La Fontaine explains the cause of this deplor-
able situation:

Ce qui porta son père à fuir tout entretien,
Ce furent deux raisons, ou mauvaises, ou bonnes:
L'une, la haine des personnes,
L'autre, la crainte.
Since the death of his wife, the world had seemed odious to Philippe; tired of mourning and lamenting and hearing groans of unhappiness on all sides, he hated the world and feared loving another woman. Thus he had decided to be a hermit, "et destina son fils/ A ce même genre de vie."
Philippe had given away his worldly goods to the poor, and had withdrawn from the society of men.

Il s'en va seul, sans compagnie
Que celle de ce fils, qu'il portait dans ses bras;
Au fond d'une forêt il arrête ses pas. (479)

Deep in the forest, Philippe had hidden from his young son any knowledge of the existence of women, of desires, of love, not because of his "humeur noire," but "par un saint motif."

Boccaccio had said simply that Philippe, having lost his beloved wife, had decided to consecrate his life and that of his son to the service of God; therefore, in order that the son not be diverted from his divine mission, he had kept from him any knowledge of the world.

La Fontaine's interpretation of the Boccaccio story has complicated Philippe's reasons for becoming a hermit, adding to his grief over the loss of his wife his misanthropy, the woefulness of human life in the world, and his "fear" of women. Philippe appears to have left the world permanently not so much because he wanted to dedicate himself to God, but because he was seeking personal peace away
from the wretchedness of men. Furthermore, he seemed to be seeking refuge from himself. Fearing his own nature, hating others, he resembled another of La Fontaine's misanthropes who fled society because he dreaded seeing in other men's weaknesses the image of his own. Three years before the appearance of Les Oies de Frère Philippe, L'Homme et son image was published in the first book of Fables. In this fable, a tribute to La Rochefoucauld, whose Maximes La Fontaine could have read in the early editions of 1665 and 1666, ³ La Fontaine speaks of man's love for himself, of his constant preoccupation with himself, of his unwillingness to admit that his own faults are mirrored by the "sottises" of others. The "Narcisse" of this fable, like Frère Philippe, hides himself from society, "Aux lieux les plus cachés qu'il peut s'imager," no longer daring to risk the comparison between himself and others of his own kind.

La Fontaine has also given his own interpretation of Philippe's reasons for the unusual education of his son, an interpretation that is rather mysterious. What does he mean by "saint motif"? In the tales, saintliness, which implies the successful suppression of a person's humanity, is represented by sexual chastity. ⁴ It seems that it is this narrow meaning which applies in Les Oies; and Philippe's motive in keeping his son saintly appears to be related to his fear of women. He knew enough about his
own nature to realize that as long as he remained among the people of the world, he was ever in danger of yielding to the temptation of another woman's charms. And he apparently hoped that by bringing up his son far from society and keeping him perfectly innocent during his formative years, he could effectively suppress the boy's nature and prevent his having to suffer in his turn because of his love for a woman.

And so he planned the education of this ancestor of Emile in five-year stages, omitting any study of man: when the boy was five, Philippe combined nature study with "menaces du diable"; at ten, he began speaking to him of the "other world," but "de la femme point parlé"; at fifteen, he taught him, as well as he was able, about the Creator, "Et rien touchant la créature." When his son was twenty, Philippe decided to take him to the city.

In the Boccaccio story, it is the son who suggests that he be allowed to accompany his father into the city. He is young, he says, and can endure the fatigue of the trip much better than his father; as soon as he learns how and from whom to ask alms, he will be able to make the trip alone. The old man, believing the son to be so accustomed to the service of God that the lure of the world would have little effect on him, agrees that this is a good idea.

La Fontaine lengthens this part of the tale, changing it to emphasize the old man's reluctance to take his
son into the city and adding the old man's reflections on
the plight of this boy who would be left with only a
"besace" and a "bâton" as his inheritance. Philippe was
old, "tout cassé, ne pouvait plus qu'à peine/ Aller quérir
son vivre." And when he was dead, what would his son do?
How could the young man live without any acquaintances but
the wolves in the forest? "Le père à tout cela songeait
sur ses vieux ans." There were very few men who did not
give him alms. He could have been rich if he had wanted to
be, just as he could have had love if he had desired it.

... Enfin dans la cité
Frère Philippe souhaité
Avait force dévots, de dévotes pas une.
Car il n'en voulait point avoir. (480)

As soon as he thought that his son was "ferme dans son de-
voir," he decided regretfully to take him to see the people
of the city. "Ce ne fut qu'en pleurant qu'il exposa ce
fils."

The two hermits arrive in the city, and the tone of
the tale changes abruptly. The unnatural précieux diction
of the first part is replaced by a simple, lively conver-
sational style appropriate for conveying the excitement and
amazement of the ingenuous young man.

Le jeune homme, tombé des nues,
Demandait: "Qu'est-ce là? —Ce sont des gens de cour.
—Et là? —Ce sont palais. —Ici? —Ce sont statues."
But as soon as he sees some beautiful young ladies, he has eyes only for them.

"Qu'est-ce là, dit-il à son père,"

"C'est un oiseau qui s'appelle oie.
—O l'agréable oiseau! dit le fils plein de joie.
Oie, hélas! chante un peu, que j'entende ta voix!"

Here at last is a bird who speaks to his heart, whose language he is sure to understand.

La Fontaine had announced in the beginning that this would be a story in which would be seen the triumph of feminine charms: "Nulle précaution ne les peut étouffer" (478). The story has indeed shown that even a well-brought-up saint will respond to his natural urges unless he is kept permanently isolated from the society of his own kind. However, the story is more than an objective demonstration. We have seen a concentration of "hidden persuaders" at the beginning of the story that condemn the unnaturalness of the boy's isolation. And the author's claim of impartiality in the lines stating Philippe's reasons for fleeing "tout entretien" appears now to have been another device to stimulate the reader to judge for himself these reasons and to decide that, whether from "la haine des personnes" or from fear of love, Philippe was wrong to try to deprive his son of his humanity. If the reader had been at all uncertain whether Philippe's reasons were "mauvaises ou bonnes," the fresh, naive tone of the end of the tale would have
persuaded him that the joy of the young man in seeing the
female of his species outweighed any unhappiness that
might come to him through his contact with them. The story,
then, does more than show that precautionary measures are
useless against the force of nature; it suggests as well
that an attempt to repress man's nature is wrong.

La Fontaine takes a similar stand for naturalness
in the prologue to this tale, commenting as well on the
problem of reconciling natural behavior and the demands of
polite society. To begin our study of the prologue it will
be interesting to compare it with the preface to the Contes
et Nouvelles of 1665.

One has only to place the verses of the prologue of
Les Oies de Frère Philippe beside the last part of the
preface of 1665, beginning with the evocation of Cicero's
definition of bienséance, to see that the movement of the
argument of the two pieces is, with one exception, exactly
the same. The author is concerned in both with establish-
ing the propriety of his subject matter, insisting that
slightly off-color stories are not unsuitable for his
readers, whose morals could in no wise be corrupted by them,
and that the manner of telling his tales is all that is
important to him.

... ce n'est ni le vrai ni le vraisemblable
qui font la beauté et la grâce de ces choses-ci;
c'est seulement la manière de les conter.
(Préface, 347)
Contons, mais contons bien: c'est le point principal. (Les Oies, 477)

Although in both pieces the author is arguing that his tales are harmless for women to read, in the preface he avoids saying directly that a good number of his readers will be women. "Ce n'est pas une faute de jugement que d'entretenir les gens d'aujourd'hui de contes un peu libres," he says. When he finally mentions them at all, it is to tease them—rather conventionally—about their infidelities, while at the same time mocking the carelessness of their husbands.

. . . qui ne voit pas que ceci est jeu, et par conséquent ne peut porter coup? Il ne faut pas avoir peur que les mariages en soient à l'avenir moins fréquents, et les maris plus fort sur leurs gardes.

But the prologue to Les Oies is addressed directly to the "beau sexe"; and although a certain playfulness is not absent from the piece, its general tone is rather serious, La Fontaine's remarks to the women and his observations about them reflecting his personal experience and judgment.

The prologue begins by saying more openly what the preface only implied: that women today do enjoy reading risqué stories.

Je dois trop au beau sexe, il me fait trop d'honneur De lire ces récits, si tant est qu'il les lise. (477)
As in the preface, La Fontaine continues by citing their gaiety as one proof of their harmlessness. Why should the fair sex not read these funny tales of the tricks lovers play? he asks.

Irait-il après tout s'alarmer sans raison
Pour un peu de plaisanterie?

At this point in the argument of both the prologue and the preface, the author diverts the attention of his critics from a possible condemnation of his tales to consideration of another influence which he claims to be much more prejudicial to the moral behavior of his readers. In the preface he speaks of the lovesick longing that comes from reading sentimental novels.

Je craindrais plutôt une douce mélancolie, où les romans les plus chastes et les plus modestes sont très capables de nous plonger, et qui est une grande préparation pour l'amour. (347)

In the prologue, it is no longer sentimental novels that La Fontaine says he would fear as a dangerous influence, but the cajolery of suitors.

Je craindrais bien plutôt que la cajolerie
Ne mit le feu dans la maison.
Chassez les soupirants, belles, souffrez mon livre.

For a moment he seems to emphasize the danger of getting acquainted with men. But then his argument takes another turn, leading it even farther from the more superficial
tone of the preface. Why, asks La Fontaine, should you deprive yourself of the company of men any more than you should deny yourself the pleasure of reading my tales? You do not surrender indiscriminately to the wheedling of every wooer.

Mais pourquoi les chasser? ne saurait-on bien vivre
Qu'on ne s'enserme avec les morts?
Le monde ne vous connaît guère,
S'il croit que les faveurs sont chez vous familières:
Non pas que les heureux amants
Soient ni phénix ni corbeaux blancs;
Aussi ne sont-ce fourmilières.

This accumulation of animal metaphors, added perhaps to the crow evoked in the mind of the reader of the Fables by the word "cajolerie," attaches this passage to Les Oies and its play on the "langage" of the birds, helping to convince the reader that La Fontaine is here sincerely speaking of the real nature of real women and of his own ideas about "bien vivre."

Our reading of Les Oies has convinced us that isolation from one's fellows is practically impossible. Did not Frère Philippe have to admit the necessity of taking his son back to the city in order that he might be able to "quérir son vivre" after his father's death?

Que ferait ce cher fils? comment venir à bout
De subsister sans connaître personne?
Les loups n'étaient pas gens qui donnassent l'aumône.
(479-80)
And have we not been equally persuaded that such isolation, even if it were possible, is undesirable? Furthermore, did we not feel that the son's response to the impulse of his nature was good?

The isolation of Frère Philippe in the tale is called in the prologue "closing oneself up with the dead." It is not really living; at least, it is not living the life a human being was meant to live. In the tale, no attempt is made to reconcile the desirability of naturalness and the demands of living in society. But in the prologue, La Fontaine suggests possible approaches for "bien vivre."

Women can avoid their nature no more than can Philippe's son, La Fontaine appears to say. That women have lovers is not simply legendary, like the Phoenix. Lovers may not be as numerous in real life as in the tales, but they do exist. La Fontaine himself knows too well that women are not promiscuous or undiscriminating.

J'ai servi des beautés de toutes les façons:  
Qu'ai-je gagné? Très peu de chose,
Rien. 6

How then could his book of tales do more than he has been able to do? "Beau sexe, vous pouvez le lire en sûreté." Some of his tales are "faux," exaggerating the promiscuity of women and the ease with which they are duped. If the "bons tours" are false, they will do no harm. Some of his tales are "vrais," showing women allowing themselves to be
duped. Of these the readers will disapprove. Since women live freely in society, are already wise to the "bons tours" of the dupers, and perhaps already have a certain number of "heureux amants," their mothers and husbands would be ridiculous to object to his stories!

Je n'y vois rien de périlleux
Les mères, les maris, me prendront aux cheveux
Pour dix ou douze contes bleus!
Voyez un peu la belle affaire!

The key to La Fontaine's argument is that his women readers live freely in society, and that, society itself acting as a restraint on their natural instincts, they have no need of other restraints. In the prologue to a tale published in 1667, Mazet de Lamporechio (II, 16), La Fontaine speaks of the folly of parents who believe that closing their daughters behind the walls of a convent will automatically insure their chastity. In his comments, the natural urges of young girls are taken for granted, the problem being how best to control these impulses. Locking them away from the society of men is worse than useless, he says. Their desires are only augmented by constraint and by idleness.

Tentation, fille d'Oisiveté,
Ne manque pas d'agir de son côté;
Puis le Désir, enfant de la Contrainte.
Ma fille est Nonne, ergo c'est une sainte:
Mal raisonner. (469-70)
The only succor for helpless nuns, whose "pudeur" is attacked by so many enemies, is "l'assistance divine," but three-fourths of them are without vocation and are thus easy preys of "le Malin." Girls left in society, on the other hand, are much more likely to remain chaste—if remaining chaste is possible, the author hastens to add. A better rampart than "le voile" against the assaults of love is a good husband. But the best defense of all is the girls' own need for respect, their own care to protect their reputation. Cloistered girls, not having to worry about their reputation, yield to every adversary, while girls in society, fearful that "on ne donne atteinte à leur honneur," are attacked by "moins d'ennemis."

The counterpart of the "filles du monde" of Mazet are the women of the prologue of Les Oies. They too, far from hiding themselves from society, benefit from it. In the opening lines of the prologue La Fontaine indicates the attention given by members of the "beau sexe" to keeping their reputation intact.

Ne peut-il pas, sans qu'il le dise,  
Rire sous cape de ces tours,  
Quelque aventure qu'il y trouve?

This concern with society's opinion of them is surely in part responsible for their self control in the face of the "cajolerie" of their suitors. For if these women are wise to the wiles of dupers, they are no less wise to the demands
of society: expected by society to appear chaste, they respond to its demands, play their role, and then can "rire sous cape." In these lines there is no condemnation of the "mensonge" implied in keeping outer appearances chaste while secretly enjoying "innocent" pleasures. On the contrary, La Fontaine's vaguely suggested scheme of "bien vivre," which we can discern in his comments to the women in the prologue to Les Oies and in the tale dedicated to them, we see that "mensonge" is inevitable. To have a good life, a human being need not, indeed should not, aspire to be a saint. Rather than trying to suppress his nature, he should try simply to control it. His own natural vanity and the customs of society can help him; but the result will be a certain insincerity. The women to whom this tale is addressed accept their own nature while at the same time making concessions to the society they cannot and should not avoid, and we can only conclude that La Fontaine approves of them.

In this prologue, which at first glance seems so similar to the preface of 1665, La Fontaine establishes, whether consciously or unconsciously, a new dimension to his storytelling art. His case for the innocuousness of his contes no longer depends upon their lack of vraisemblance, as in the first Préface, but on the true nature of the real women who read them. And he no longer claims that there is nothing true in his tales. "S'ils sont faux, ce
sont vains discours," but, "S'ils sont vrais . . ." He is still mainly interested in telling a story well, and this includes, as always, adapting his sources to the taste of his public; his own interests, and doubtless those of his readers, have prompted the shift in emphasis in *Les Oies de Frère Philippe*. By his storytelling art, he has blended the tale with his prologue: mingling his praises of his readers' beauty with the exposition of the subject of his tale, linking the two parts with a similar metaphor, changing the order of the events of the tale to suggest ideas early in the story that could be immediately applied by the reader to the ideas in the prologue. These ideas, that man's living in society is both good and necessary—at least for those who, like Philippe's son, have no calling to live isolated from the world—help to clarify for the reader La Fontaine's conception of "bien vivre" sketched in the prologue, which adds to the ideas in the tale the necessity of *mensonge*. Seriously establishing a system of "bien vivre" would certainly not have been La Fontaine's principal concern in writing *Les Oies de Frère Philippe*: "Contons, mais contons bien; c'est le point principal."

But through this blending of prologue and tale, ideas and techniques, the reader discerns La Fontaine the moralist.

Not that he was ever really absent from the *Contes*. We have already seen that from the time of the first tales, he made changes in his sources that showed his interest in
the nature of man, an interest that he shared with other writers of his time and with his public. This is not the first time he has spoken out in his own name to express a personal sentiment about human life. It has been noted that his announced drastic departure from his source in La Fiancée du roi de Garbe made this tale a work in which La Fontaine could be assumed to be expressing his own sentiments about man’s weaknesses. The prologue to Mazet has been seen as an example of a personal comment on human nature and society. In the prologue to Le Calendrier des Vieillards (II, 8), La Fontaine spoke with apparently sincere indignation about the problem of ill-matched marriages.

Plus d’une fois je me suis étonné
Que ce qui fait la paix du mariage,
En est le point le moins considéré
Lorsque l’on met une fille en ménage. (430)

In this tale La Fontaine shares with Boccaccio the sentiment that it is folly to try to force another’s nature to conform to one’s own; but La Fontaine’s comical exaggeration of the impotence of the old man Quinzica and his calendar of holy days, making utterly ridiculous the idea of trying to "contenir" a young wife, suggests that he is speaking not merely for Boccaccio but for himself.

Vierge n’était, martyr, et confesseur,
Qu’il ne chommait; tous les savait par coeur.
Que s’il était au bout de son scrupule,
Il alléguaït les jours malencontreux,
Puis les brouillards, et puis la canicule,
De s'excuser n'étant jamais honteux,
La chose ainsi presque toujours égale,
Quatre fois l'an, de grâce spéciale,
Notre docteur régalaît sa moitié,
Petitement; enfin c'était pitié. (432)

This calendar could well have inspired Philippe's program of studies in Les Oies, by which Philippe, similarly to the old man in Le Calendrier, hoped to impose his own pattern of life on his son, a project which La Fontaine condemns, more subtly, but just as sincerely as he condemns the silly scheme of Quinzica.


a. Les Rémois, La Coupe enchantée, Le Petit Chien, Psyché

It is perhaps the admission, in the prologue to Les Oies, of the possibility of the "vrai" in the contes that makes the reader even more aware that in this tale the complicated, and rather confused, motives of Frère Philippe reflect other preoccupations of the author than the ones expressed by the main theme. Along with the cheerful acceptance of man's nature and the recommendation, not of abstinence, but of moderation in indulging one's irrepressible natural urges, there is in this tale a hint of misanthropy, of pessimism about man and about love, a suggestion of contemporary man's egoism, of his fascination with himself.

Other tales in the volume introduced by Les Oies
develop in a variety of ways these pessimistic themes.

In *Les Rémois* (III, 3) La Fontaine comments on the egoism of love, which is no longer characterized by the devotion of the lover to the mistress of his heart, but by the sole quest for pleasure. In this tale two lecherous neighbors of a painter's wife try to cover their real motives regarding her by a transparent act of "Pleurs et soupirs, gémissements gaulois."

Femmes, voilà souvent comme on vous traite.
Le seul plaisir est ce que l'on souhaite;
Amour est mort; le pauvre compagnon
Fut enterré sur les bords du Lignon. (490)

In a tale in the edition of 1666, *A femme avare galant escroc* (II, 9), there was a variation of the theme in *Les Rémois*: the motive of a woman consenting to gratify a man's desire for pleasure was seen to be not love, nor even "plaisir," but gain.

Gratis est mort; plus d'amour sans payer:
En beaux louis se content les fleurettes. (436)

In the volume of 1671, this theme of surrender to bribery is developed in *La Coupe enchantée* (III, 4), which begins, after the prologue on cuckoldry, by developing as well the theme of the irrepressibility of nature, seen in *Les Oies*. Caliste was the "fille naturelle" of a man who had doted on her mother while refusing to spoil their relationship by marrying her. The suffering of this man when
his "bonne amie" died in childbirth was even more cruel than that of Philippe when his wife died.

... Le pauvre homme en pleura,
    Se plaignit, gémit, soupira,
    Non comme qui perdrait sa femme:
Tel deuil n'est bien souvent que changement d'habits,
    Mais comme qui perdrait tous ses meilleurs amis,
    Son plaisir, son coeur, et son âme. (496-97)

Fearing that his daughter, "chassant de race," would anticipate "Prêtre, notaire, hymen, accord," he locks her away in a convent in order that she might remain chaste. There she was taught no more about love than Philippe's son had been.

... Là cette belle apprit
    Ce qu'on apprend: a manier l'aiguille;
    Point de ces livres qu'une fille
Ne lit qu'avec danger, et qui gâtent l'esprit;
    Le langage d'amour était jargon pour elle. (497)
    On n'eût su tirer de la belle
    Un seul mot que de sainteté:
    En spiritualité
    Elle aurait confondu le plus grand personnage. (497)

But on her entrance into the world, "adieu les livres saints"; her nature asserted itself. Immediately a host of suitors appeared and she chose one, who was handsome, "beau personnage"—and "d'humeur commode," the author adds.

Mingled with this theme of nature is the theme of money, whose power is felt in Caliste's life as soon as she enters society. The suitors had appeared, not so much be-
cause of her accomplishments in embroidery or her virtue or even her beauty, but because of her wealth. If their motives were mixed in wanting to marry her, so were her father's in legitimatizing her. In four lines of the fragment of La Coupe enchantée published in 1669, deleted in 1671, La Fontaine speculates on the father's reasons:

Soit par affection, soit pour jouer d'un tour
A des collatéraux, nation affamée,
Qui, des écus de l'homme ayant eu la fumée,
Lui faisait réglement sa cour. (827)

Caliste marries Damon, with whom she lives happily for two years; then jealousy spoils their union. Damon, suspecting her of infidelity, disguises himself as Eraste, who, he fears, is Caliste's lover. He fails to move her with flattery or with tears and sighs, but finally she yields to the offer of money, an intervention of the author under-scoring the power of this "blissful metal" to vanquish a woman's virtue.

Soyez beau, bien disant, ayez perruque blonde,
N'omettez un seul petit point;
Un financier viendra qui sur votre moustache
Enlevera la belle. (502)

Le Petit Chien opens with a similar cry: money may not be able to buy a woman's love, but it can buy her favors.

La clef du coffre-fort et des coeurs, c'est la même.
Que si ce n'est celle des coeurs,
C'est du moins celle des faveurs. (530)
And in this tale woman is not alone in being willing to compromise her virtue for money.

... car qui hait les présents?
Tous les humains en sont friands,
Princes, rois, magistrats. Ainsi, quand une belle
En croira l'usage permis,
Quand Vénus ne fera que ce que fait Thémis,
Je ne m'écrierai pas contre elle.

The story begins as Anselme, a rich judge, is appointed ambassador to Rome and must therefore be absent from his wife Argie for six months or more. Realizing that "Longue ambassade et long voyage/ Aboutissent à cocuage," he takes what he hopes will be sufficient precautionary measures against his wife's infidelity. Giving into Argie's charge all of his wealth, in order that she may resist the temptation of "Don ... le père d'Abandon," he advises her to retire to their house in the country to escape "sa soeur la Cajolerie." Flee from temptation she does, but "la soupirante cohorte" follows her. She resists virtuously until a pilgrim, who is really Atis the handsome knight-errant in disguise, offers her, in exchange for one night with her, his magic dog, who in dancing shakes to the ground coins and precious gems. Upon learning of his wife's infidelity, Anselme plots to have her killed. Now the petit chien qui secoue de l'argent et des pierreries is really the fairy Manto. By her magic she saves Argie and permits her to see Anselme prostitute himself to obtain the
magnificent palace which he covets, and which Manto had caused to be built in order to tempt him (538-541). Confronting him in his costume of page to the "More lippu," Argie forces him to admit that, compared to his crime, hers was surely excusable. The pessimistic moral of this story is that in the world everybody has a price, and that all that people can do is to suffer each other's common weaknesses. Speaking of the magic dog Argie says:

Puis faites-moi trouver au monde une Excellence,
Une Altesse, une Majesté,
Qui refuse sa jouissance
A dons de cette qualité,

Savez-vous qu'il a fait le Louvre que voilà?
Le Louvre pour lequel...Mais oublions cela,

Touchez là, mon mari, la paix. (542)

At one point in the story, one of the characters flees from the world and its emphasis on money. It is Atis, the knight-errant, one of the group of suitors who had followed Argie to her country house. He was young, "blondin/ Bien fait et beau par excellence" (532), the only one of the wooers to whom Argie was attracted. But until the fairy Manto transformed herself into the magic dog and allowed herself to be presented to Argie by Atis the pilgrim, he was no more fortunate than the others. He had not spared earnest protestations of his love for her, nor had he spared any expense. Finally, having impoverished himself only to find her still insensible to his devotion,
he had withdrawn from society: "il s'éclipse; il part; il va chercher/ Quelque désert pour se cacher" (532). The solitary place that he found was deep in the silent forest.

... Notre amant à la fin
S'établit dans un bois écarté, solitaire:
Le Silence y faisait sa demeure ordinaire,
Hors quelque oiseau qu'on entendait,
Et quelque écho qui répondait. (533)

This was a perfect retreat from the constant competition of the world.

Là le bonheur et la misère
Ne se distinguaient point, égaux en dignité
Chez les loups qu'hébergeait ce lieu peu fréquenté.

But the silent communion with the forest and the wolves that inhabited it, the neutral state of suspension of human desires, both for riches and for love, could be no more than a brief respite for Atis, who found in his desert no real tranquillity.

Son amour l'y suivit; et cette solitude,
Bien loin d'être un remède à son inquiétude,
En devint même l'aliment,
Par le loisir qu'il eut d'y plaindre son tourment.

Bored in his solitude, he was irresistibly drawn back to the contest that was his destiny.

"Retournons, ce dit-il, puisque c'est notre sort:

Adieu, ruisseaux, ombrages frais,
Chants amoureux de Philomèle;
L'esclave fugitif se va remettre encore
En ses fers, quoique durs, mais, hélas! trop chéris."

Inspired by an episode in a fairy tale from the
Orlando Furioso, and making personal use of the trite,
precious imagery seen in the last two lines quoted above,
La Fontaine is able in this lyric digression, as separate
in tone from the rest of the tale as Atis was remote from
the world of men, to make his own commentary on man and his
existence. The withdrawal of Philippe in Les Oies was per-
manent, though his misanthropy, his disillusionment, his
mistrust of the world and humankind were only hazily de-
fined. In Le Petit Chien, the sordidness of the world and
the complex motives of its inhabitants are the subject of
the tale, while Atis retreats only temporarily. At a time
when the world becomes too much for him, he leaves to find
peace in the desert, to muster his forces for another con-
frontation with the difficulties of his existence, from
which it is not in his power to escape.

This commentary is made in the framework of a conte,
the last one in the volume introduced by Les Oies, whose
tone, though not as light as that of Les Oies, is certainly
not that of a philosophical discussion. In spite of the
frivolous nature of the genre, in both of these tales, and
in others that we have examined, the more serious preoccu-
pations of the author are occasionally apparent.

Many of the ideas expressed in the tales of 1671
appear in the hermit episode of Les Amours de Psyché et de Cupidon, in which occurs the digression we have seen on girls' being allowed to read novels. La Fontaine pointed out in the preface to this long adaptation of Apuleius, published in 1669, that this was one of several episodes that were of his own invention. It occurs just after Psyché is abandoned in fury by her husband, whom she has just discovered to be, not a horrid monster, but the beautiful Amour. Resolved to search throughout the world for an herb that would cure her husband's burn, caused by the drop of oil that fell from her lamp as she gazed upon the beauties of the sleeping god, in her wandering she happened upon the desert retreat of the vieillard and his two granddaughters.

She and the old man, "la vieillesse en propre personne" (OD 195), espy each other on opposite banks of a river, where he comes each day to fish. In spite of his age, accentuated by La Fontaine's description of his long beard and hair and wrinkles, "dont la plus jeune était presque aussi ancienne que le déluge," upon seeing the beautiful Psyché, he drops his nets, "s'oubliant soi-même aussi bien que s'il eût été dans son plus bel âge." Psyché accepts his offer of hospitality and follows him to the grotto where he lives with his young granddaughters, "à peu près comme chez les premiers humains," but "plus proprement" (OD 197). Perceiving the old man to be of higher birth than his present condition would indicate, Psyché asks him
for advice: in her despair she is contemplating suicide, even though Amour has forbidden her to elude the pain of her life, banished from his presence (OD 199); on the other hand, she is finding it difficult to decide to "[cesser] de vivre." The author had remarked earlier:

Ces irrésolutions et ces retours vers la vie, qui font la peine de ceux qui meurent, et dont les plus désespérés ne sont pas exempts, entretiennent un cruel combat dans le coeur de notre héroïne. (OD 189)

The old man begins by comparing man to a caged bird. The "loi commun" of man is that he is born with two conflicting impulses: "il court incessamment vers la mort, il la fuit aussi incessamment." He is a prisoner of these two instincts, but instead of singing and trying to divert himself, as does a bird who has been enclosed in a cage, man despairs of his lot. The old hermit speaks of this revolt against nature as a crime, which results in other crimes:

Premièrement vous détruisez l'ouvrage du Ciel ... En second lieu, vous vous défiez de la Providence, ce qui est un autre crime. Pouvez-vous répondre de ce qui vous arrivera? (OD 200)

Psyché allows herself to be convinced only when he reminds her of the punishment after death that awaits those who take their own lives. Then she asks him to tell her how he happens to be living so far from the "beau monde" which he had obviously frequented.

The old man's story resembles markedly that of Frère
Philippe. The old hermit had been the "premier philosophe" in the court of a king, he said. "Outre la faveur je ne manquais pas de biens" (OD 201). His wife had died many years before, leaving him an exquisitely beautiful daughter whom he loved very much. He had reared her according to the ideal of moderation expressed in Les Oies: "Point de coquetterie ni d'ambition; point d'humeur austère non plus." Sought after by the most illustrious persons in the court, she was finally married to the commandant of the king's army, who was no sooner her husband than he became unbearably jealous of her. Like the husband in Le Petit chien, this "pauvre esprit . . . ne voyait pas que, si la vertu ne garde une femme, en vain l'on pose des sentinelles à l'entour." Fortunately for his unhappy wife, he was killed in battle, and she resolved never again to subject herself to the misery of marriage: "encore préférerait-elle la mort à l'hymen" (OD 202). The charming widow and mother of two infant daughters was soon importuned by countless suitors, including the son of the king; and at his daughter's request, the philosopher obtained permission to retire from the court to his house in the country so that they might escape the unwelcome wooers. But the "amants" followed them, as they followed Argie in Le Petit Chien; and so they fled to the desert, where they spent two days "avec beaucoup de repos" before being found out by the "amants."
Un amant vint nous demander le chemin; un autre amant se mit à couvert de la pluie dans notre cabane. Nous voilà désespérés, et n'attendant de tranquillité qu'aux Champs Elysées.

His daughter was determined to resist "aux cajoleries que l'on lui ferait"; but fortunately for their peace of mind, "la Philosophie" appeared to the old man in a dream and revealed to him the safe hideaway in which they were presently living. Having left all but a few necessities and books behind, the old man was obliged to sell fish to the rich, indolent inhabitants of the nearby city in order to subsist. In this manner they had lived "sinon avec luxe et délicatesse, avec beaucoup de santé tout au moins" (OD 203) for the past ten years. But six months before, the mother had died, and now that her daughters were sixteen and fourteen years old, the old man feared that once again the "amants" would appear to plague them.

... les amants se font passage partout; ce n'est pour rien que leur protecteur a des ailes. Ces filles, comme vous voyez, sont en âge de l'appréhender. Je ne suis pourtant pas certain qu'elles prennent la chose du même biais que l'a toujours prise leur mère.

The old man finishes his story, enthusiastically extolling the virtues of solitude. Psyché cannot be persuaded that he would prefer solitude and a life of reflection on the faults of men to a "grandeur légitime" and "plaisirs innocents." But he explains that, to a philos-
opher, "la véritable grandeur . . . est de régner sur soi-même, et le véritable plaisir, de jouir de soi. Cela se trouve en la solitude, et ne se trouve guère autre part."

However,—and here he seems wiser than Frère Philippe—he realizes that a life of solitude is not desirable for everybody.

Je ne vous dis pas que toutes personnes s'en accommodent; c'est un bien pour moi, ce serait un mal pour vous. Une personne que le Ciel a composée avec tant de soin et avec tant d'art, doit faire honneur à son ouvrier, et régner ailleurs que dans le désert.

Psyché has learned already that she is helpless against her instincts:

--Hélas! mon père, dit notre héroïne en soupirant, vous me parlez de régner, et je suis esclave de mon ennemie [Vénus]. Sur qui voulez-vous que je règne? Ce ne peut être ni sur mon coeur, ni sur celui de l'Amour.

The granddaughters of the old hermit are equally helpless against their own nature, especially the younger of the two. Although she, like the son of Frère Philippe, had been denied any knowledge of love, her grandfather having refused to allow her to read the novels that her sister had read, "lui trouvant l'esprit trop ouvert et trop éveillé," the word "amant," she said, had come into her thoughts of its own accord.

Je me lasse d'être un enfant et une ignorante. J'ai résolu de prier mon père qu'il me mène un de
ces jours à la ville; et la première fois que Psyché se parlera à elle-même, ce qui lui arrive souvent étant seule, je me cacherai pour l'entendre. (OD 207)

Psyché, who is listening to this conversation between the two young girls, joins them, saying that since it is evident that the precautions of their grandfather are useless, Nature having already taught the younger sister so much, she will tell her more about what she has already suspected. She begins with a little riddle about "un certain peuple agréable, insinuant . . . qui ne songe qu'à nous plaire, et nous plaît aussi."

Il n'a rien d'extraordinaire en son visage ni en sa mine; cependant nous le trouvons beau par-dessus tous les autres peuples de l'Univers. Quand on en vient là, les sœurs et les frères ne sont plus rien. . . . De vous dire précisément comme il est fait, c'est une chose impossible; en certains pays il est blanc, en d'autres pays, il est noir.

Psyché tells the girls the story of her unhappy adventure with her husband, who was also her lover, but assuring them that even the pain of love is pleasure. Although there are those who would like to avoid sacrificing to the god of Love, she says, nobody can resist his power. She herself had once known the tranquillity of freedom from love, but without being any happier.

The "félicité languissante" that the philosophers seek, she says, "les morts la trouvent sans nulle peine."

Psyché is no more willing to close herself up with the dead
than are the women of the prologue of *Les Oies*, and her advice to these girls, if followed, would make of them the same kind of natural, but discreet, women as those to whom La Fontaine would dedicate *Les Oies*.

Ce que vous avez à faire est de bien choisir, et de choisir une fois pour toutes; une fille qui n'aime qu'en un endroit ne saurait être blâmée, pourvu que l'honnêteté, la discrétion, la prudence, soient conductrices de cette affaire, et pourvu qu'on garde des bornes, c'est-à-dire qu'on fasse semblant d'en garder. Quand vos amours iront mal, pleurez, soupiriez, désespérez-vous; je n'ai que faire de vous le dire: faites seulement que cela ne paraîsse pas; quand elles iront bien, que cela paraîsse encore moins, si vous ne voulez que l'envie s'en mêle. (OD 208)

The next day, Psyché persuades the old hermit that since he cannot live forever, he must assure the future of his granddaughters by introducing them to the good people of the neighboring town; and the episode ends as all four leave the desert, to return to the troubles—and joy—of the world.

b. *Poème de la Captivité de St. Malc*

In 1673, a year before the appearance of the fourth volume of tales, La Fontaine published a work in which he dealt in a more sober tone with problems arising from man's nature and his life in the world, the *Poème de la Captivité de Saint Malc*. Taken from a translation of a letter of St. Jerome by Arnauld d'Andilly, and written, it is supposed, at
the request of the Messieurs of Port-Royal, its "caractère de piété" separated it from the licentious contes, allowing its author to dedicate it to the Grand Aumônier de France, the Cardinal de Bouillon (OD 47). But this poème was nevertheless obviously conceived by the author of Psyché and Les Oies de Frère Philippe.

La Fontaine opens his poem in praise of "la vertu solitaire" of this saint by invoking the Virgin, "Reine des esprits purs," to aid him in his pious undertaking.

Fais que dans mes chansons aujourd'hui je t'honore; Bannis-en ces vains traits, criminelles douceurs Que j'allais mendier jadis chez les neuf Soeurs. (OD 49)

Then he begins the story of this hero, who had spent his youth far from the world, in "ces déserts, ces forêts, ces antres écartés," where lions and the "favoris du Ciel" were the only inhabitants. Living there under the guidance of a saint "plein de sagesse," Malc had passed his time in constant prayer, not for forgiveness of any overt sins, but that Christ might help him continue to dominate his human desires. But the peace of this solitary life is disrupted when his parents die, leaving him a large fortune. The young, inexperienced Malc succumbs, without realizing it, to the lure of gold: he tells himself that it is possible to enjoy temporal treasures without guilt, that often through gifts to the poor and to the church it is possible
to gain entrance into paradise; unconsciously rationalizing, he explains to his old counselor that he only wants to prevent his avaricious relatives from misusing his inheritance, that he wants to found a monastery, that he thinks he can be of more service to mankind by setting a good example in the world than by living in isolation. The old counselor of this apprentice saint rebukes him for his imprudence, if not indeed for his pride, in thinking he can remain free from sin after leaving this solitary place.

Fuyez, fuyez, mon fils, le monde et ses amours;
Il est plein de dangers qui surpassent vos forces.  
(OD 50)

Flee from the enticement of worldly riches, he says, but flee even more from the temptation of woman, against whose charms you will be powerless. Does the peace that we enjoy here have fewer charms for you than the lure of the world? His pleas are eloquent, but Malc leaves, abandoning his fragile innocence to fate.

Since the desert is infested with Arabian brigands, he realizes that he must not attempt to travel alone. Fortune joins him to a group made up mostly of old men and women and children, so that when a band of Saracens attack, all but Malc and the young wife of one of the travelers flee. These two are taken as slaves by the Saracen chief, and too late, Malc regrets not having heeded the advice of his wise old counselor.
Forêts, s’écriait-il, retraites du silence,
Angéliques cités d’où je me suis banni,
Je vous ai méprisés, déserts: j’en suis puni.
Ne vous verrai-je plus? Quoi! songe, tu t’envoles!

(OD 51)

His plans have been futile and have brought him only misfortune. By an accident of fate Malc, who had thought he could direct his own course in the world, is taken into servitude, and each event which follows as a consequence takes him farther away from his idealistic goal of a saintly life in the society of men.

Upon his arrival in the domain of his Arab master, he undergoes the first test of his ability to remain free from the stain of the world. The chief of the triumphant returning marauders orders Malc to worship his children. At this point, the author of the tales intervenes to imply, by his familiar technique of claiming ignorance of the facts, that Malc’s debut in the world was marked by an act of compromise.

Si Malc s’en défendit, s’il l’osa, s’il le put,
S’il en subit la loi sans peine et sans scrupule,
C’est ce qu’en ce récit l’histoire dissimule.

Had Malc’s natural instinct of self-preservation caused him to submit? Had he felt no qualms in obeying this infidel? By this expression of doubt, La Fontaine alerts the reader to an awareness of subsequent occasions when Malc will compromise his principles, either consciously or involuntarily.
Malc and the beautiful young woman who shares his captivity are set the task of guarding the Saracen's sheep. However, the saintly couple scrupulously avoid any contact with each other. They never join in the games and dances of the festivals; they spend all night in prayer only to leave at sunrise with their flocks to pass the day in meditation, each in a separate pasture. The young woman senses Malc's attraction to her, and so she deliberately exposes herself to the sun in the open plains in order to diminish her charms.

Ses mains avec plaisir auraient détruit ses charmes; Mais, n'osant attenter contre l'œuvre des cieux, Le soleil se chargeait de ce crime pieux. (OD 53)

Malc pastures his flock near a stream, hidden away from the light of the sun by the dense shade of cedar trees. In this solitary place he spends his days praying for help in combatting the perils that surround him. Slavery, fear, a cruel master, none of these is the most pressing evil.

Tu m'as donné pour aide au fort de la tourmente Une compagne sainte, il est vrai, mais charmante. Son exemple est puissant, ses yeux le sont aussi.

Rewarding the humble modesty of this saintly couple who were constantly in prayer for help in the struggle against their desires, Heaven had protected them from yielding to temptation. But not content with the gift of grace that had allowed them to avoid sin, they now long for
an opportunity really to prove their faith through their own suffering, to merit salvation by their own efforts.

Qu'avons-nous, disaient-ils, jusque-là mérité?
Quand auras-tu, Seigneur, tes enfants pour rivaux?
Oui, Seigneur, nous t'aimons, nous l'osons protested:
Mais si l'effet ne suit, que sert de s'en vanter?
Il faut porter ta croix, goûter de ton calice,
Couvrir son front de cendre, et son corps d'un cilice. (OD 54)

While this saintly pair are thus engaged in meditation, each in his own separate place, their flocks prosper, watched over by the "ministres divins" who preserve them from the wolves and thorns. Their master, profiting from the situation without knowing the cause, decides that the marriage of these two slaves would better insure their continued service to him. Malc pleads with the Arab not to force them into this sinful marriage, explaining that their religion forbids the adultery that would result from his union with this woman who already had a legitimate husband. The Arab, incensed by the audacity of this slave who alleged his religion as a reason to question his master's orders, threatens to kill Malc if he does not obey. In an involuntary reaction to his fear, Malc moves to the side of the woman, signifying his submission to his master's wishes, compromising once again his virtuous ideals. Thus the prayer of the couple is answered: this "lien plein d'horreur" will provide the occasion that will cruelly test
the strength of their dedication to God.

Alone that night in a "lieu sans clartés," they have recourse to prayer. "Tous deux avaient besoin de grâces singulières" (OD 55). Malc, fearing that Heaven might abandon them, and mistrusting his own powers to continue to resist sin, decides to flee from this grave danger by killing himself. Aid comes to him unexpectedly from the woman herself. She stays his hand, assuring him that God would never leave his children in their need; furthermore, she is outraged by his suspicion of her. You must have noticed, she says, that I have a certain power over my senses. She confesses that although she had been lawfully married in the eyes of the world, she had kept the "trésor" of her virginity: "j'en fis voeu toute petite encor."

Would I be more apt to lose it now "par un crime," she asks.

Non, Malc; je ne crois pas que le Ciel le souffrit. Il m'en empécherait, quelque appât qui s'offrit.

(OD 56)

Her pious argument for continuing to live ends with the practical reminder that all errors can be expiated, "on peut pleurer encor," but that once dead, one can no longer do anything. Malc has only to dissemble, to pretend, to behave in secret as a brother while behaving in public as a husband. In this manner, with God's help and her own, he will be able to continue living while remaining chaste.
Malc, grasping at this solution to his problem without recognizing the inconsistency of his saintly goal and the lie necessary to achieve it, cannot find the words to express his gratitude to God nor to praise the "sagesse" of this woman. The night ends as all the preceding nights, with the couple passing the hours in prayer. During the days that follow, they feign such conjugal felicity that their marriage is offered as an example to other young couples.

Là montrant aux bergers une apparente joie,
Les larmes, les soupirs, et les austérités,
Quand ils se trouvaient seuls, faisaient leurs voluptés. (OD 57)

Finally the insincerity of this life becomes intolerable to Malc. Watching the communal activities of a colony of ants, he is reminded that in the spiritual freedom of his life in seclusion, he also was able to be useful to "des troupes de saints." He sees plainly the futility of his present life, in which he is too preoccupied with himself to think of his duty to others, and he hates the "mensonge" that had kept him alive merely that he might continue to exist: "Vil esclave, tu mens pour éviter la mort!" Why had he not resisted when the Arab forced him to marry, he asks himself; why had he not been willing to face death for his principles?

If the young woman helped Malc through his crisis of
fear by advising dissimulation as a practical solution to their difficult problem of remaining pure in a hostile world, now Malc helps her to see that such a life of compromise could never be satisfying to a saint.

Quelque prétexte qu'ait un mensonge pieux, 
Il est toujours mensonge et toujours odieux.

Here they are living not for God, but for his enemy, he says. He paints for her the profound peace of his solitary life, contrasting it with the present agitation of his heart.

Ne reviendront-ils point ces biens que j'ai quittés; 
Ah! si vous jouissiez de leur douceur exquise! (OD 58)

Building to an ecstatic climax he asks her to join him in breaking their chains, in fleeing without scruple, in returning to the solitary life in the forest, where they might live without pretense. Let us tempt Providence no longer, he says; "ayons une humble peur" (OD 59).

The "prudente bergère" agrees, and so they flee, crossing the river with the aid of inflated goatskins, escaping from the pursuing Arabs and from the jaws of a lionness, who kills the Arab chief and one of his slaves. Far from the land of the unholy Saracens, the saintly couple finish their lives. Their marriage is dissolved, the woman enters a convent and Malc a monastery. There he lives in penitence, "plus ange que mortel" (OD 61), his
severe asceticism lengthening his life far beyond the normal span.

De son zèle fervent l'inépuisable source
Fomente la chaleur qui retarde sa mort.
Pres d'un siècle d'hivers n'a pu l'éteindre encor.

La Fontaine's poème makes of the story of the life of St. Malc a meditation on man, divided between his spiritual nature's yearnings for purity and his physical nature's attraction to the world of men. In the beginning of Saint Malc, La Fontaine announced formally his subject: "Je chante d'un héros la vertu solitaire." Vertu is the word La Fontaine uses in this poem to express the purity to which one side of man aspires, and we have seen that the concept of virtue in Saint Malc is broader than mere sexual chastity. In the course of Malc's adventures it has been clear that resisting the temptation of the young woman was not enough to satisfy his thirst for the peace that only real purity could bring him. Commenting on the agitation of Malc's soul during his marriage in the land of the Saracens, the author has explained that the necessity to appear to be something he was not was the cause of Malc's "ennui."

Toute feinte est sujet de scrupule à des saints,
Et, quel que soit le but où tendent leurs desseins,
Si la candeur n'y règne ainsi que l'innocence,
Ce qu'ils font pour un bien leur semble être une offense. (OD 57)
In Saint Malc, saintly virtue is understood to mean complete sincerity, integrity of ends and means, of outer appearance and inner purpose. True virtue depends upon being "plus ange que mortel," that is, on the suppression of most of the physical nature of man, on freedom from the tyranny of instinct, and La Fontaine concludes that such virtue is possible only through isolation from the world of men, and then only for the few who are favored by God's grace.

La Fontaine has suggested in his additions and comments throughout the poem reasons why such perfect purity is not possible in the world. Foremost among these reasons is man's pride in his own powers of achievement, his ambition to deserve rewards through his own efforts. Malc's project for setting a saintly example in the world was doomed to failure from the outset because he did not recognize the fragility of his purity, which depended not upon his own efforts but upon his isolation from temptation. Believing himself to be capable of sincere conduct, he was betrayed by his own nature as soon as he was exposed to temptation. La Fontaine further suggests that even in seclusion, saints themselves are not free from human weakness, showing Malc while still in the desert committing the primary sin of pride, falling into the trap of his own nature, powerless to control his reaction to the lure of the world, and then hiding from himself his real motives.
Funeste appas de l'or, moteur de nos desseins,  
Que ne peux-tu sur nous, si tu plais même aux saints!  
(OD 49)

Man is characterized by mixed motives, La Fontaine seems to say, thus encouraging the reader to see through the reasons Malc gives himself and others for his acts. Why did he leave the peace and security of his isolation, why did he later pray for an even more difficult test of his virtue, we ask, if not as an egotistical proof of his own powers? And what was his prudence in the face of danger to his life but the result of his betrayal by his own nature?

We have been made aware also of the importance of chance in a man's life, suggested as a reason why virtue, or sincere conduct, is impossible in the world. La Fontaine has taken pains to show how, even though at times a man may act virtuously by his own will and with the grace of God, the train of events, caused by chance and his own natural impulses, prevents the possibility of real unity in his life: Malc's ambition or foolhardiness caused him to leave the safety of his retreat, by chance he is sent into captivity, where he virtuously avoids sin; because his flocks prosper, he is ordered to marry; his instinct for self-preservation makes him obey, and he is thus exposed to greater temptation, etc., etc. Finally a wiser Malc recognizes the pitfalls of the world, accepts his weakness,
and retreats from the society of men in order to regain the peace of a virtuous, solitary existence.

c. Le Diable en Enfer

If the spiritual nature of Malc finally prevailed in the Poème de la Captivité de Saint Malc, his human nature triumphs in one of the tales of the Nouveaux Contes of 1674, Le Diable en Enfer (IV, 9). In this conte La Fontaine appears to be parodying his pious poem of 1673, and Rustic is the all too human caricature of the virtuous Malc. 14

At the end of his sojourn in the world, Malc had finally recognized his weakness; having experienced for himself his powerlessness to remain virtuous there, he had acquired the humility of his old counselor and could advise in his turn his woman companion: "Ne tentons plus le Ciel, ayons une humble peur." Le Diable en Enfer opens with the author preaching the same humility, except that here, as one would expect in such a tale, only one aspect of the difficulty of contact with the world is mentioned.

Qui craint d'aimer a tort, selon mon sens,  
S'il ne fuit pas dês qu'il voit une belle.  
À tels périls ne faut qu'on s'abandonne. (584)

La Fontaine offers this tale as one more proof of his thesis, already illustrated in Les Oies and St. Malc:
"Qu'il fait bon craindre, encor que l'on soit saint." If Malc had not vaingloriously prayed for a more difficult test of his faith, he would not have been exposed to the temptation that caused his mensonge; now we read in the prologue to Le Diable en Enfer:

... si Rustic avait craint,
Il n'aurait pas retenu cette fille,
Qui, jeune et simple, et pourtant très gentille,
Jusques au vif vous l'eut bientôt atteint. (585)

Whereas the "saint" was the principal character in St. Malc, the young girl Alibech has the more important role in Le Diable en Enfer, which is really the story of her attempt, and failure, to achieve sainthood, and her cheerful acceptance of her limitations. There is a marked resemblance between her and Malc's young companion in captivity, seen especially in their "prudence," their willingness to dissemble; but Alibech, failing to encounter a true saint as her guide in her quest for purity, must content herself with something less than the chastity of her saintly sister.

The young Alibech, "fille un peu neuve, à ce que dit l'histoire," had been reading the lives of saints, perhaps of St. Malc himself—how they lived "comme des anges" in seclusion, better able "en lieux cachés" to accomplish their "pieux desseins." Alibech, on the brink of adult life in the world, was strangely attracted to the purity
of this angelic existence. And so she runs away from home, and perhaps from herself, without a word of good-bye to anybody: "Mère, ni soeur, nourrice, ni compagne/ N'est avertie." At last she comes to a dark wood where she finds an old man, a grotesque version of Malc's old counselor:

Homme possible autrefois plus gaillard,  
Mais n'étant lors qu'un squelette et qu'une ombre.

Alibech tells him her childish desire to be a saint.

Père, dit-elle, un mouvement m'a pris;  
C'est d'être sainte et mériter pour prix  
Qu'on me révère, et qu'on chomme ma fête.  
Oh! quel plaisir j'aurais, si tous les ans,  
La palme en main, les rayons sur la tête,  
Je recevais des fleurs et des présents!

Is your profession so difficult? she asks; "Je sais déjà jeûner plus d'à demi." The wise old man advises her to give up her foolish project. Having learned through the years that saintliness consists in more than fasting, and that he himself is able to remain a saint only by avoiding all contact with the fairer sex, he sends her on to Rustic, closing his door in her face and locking himself away from temptation.

Très sage fut d'agir ainsi, sans doute,  
Ne se fiant à vieillesse, ni goutte,  
Jeune, ni haire, enfin a rien qui soit. (586)

Farther on in the woods Alibech finds the young hermit Rustic, "jeune saint très fervent," full of confi-
dence in his own powers to continue in his complete devotion to God. "Ces jeunes-là s'y trompent bien souvent," remarks the author, who will show the reader certain involuntary actions and rationalizations of this young hermit that will indicate that he has not yet learned that the prerequisite of saintliness is humility.

The naive Alibeche explains to Rustic that she has such an uncontrollable appetite to be a saint that she had feared "Que quelque jour son fruit n'en fût marqué." Rustic smiles at such innocence, and our experience in reading other contes, in which innocence is always appetizing, causes us to suspect an unconscious motive behind this smile. He protests over-modestly—and ironically—that he has but little "connaissance/ En ce métier," but consents to share what he has learned: "Nous vous rendrons la chose familière." La Fontaine's substituting "chose" for "sainteté" telegraphs a meaning to the reader of which Rustic seems unaware.

Maître Rustic eût dû donner congé.  
Tout d'abord à semblable écolière.

But he is already rationalizing his actions:

Il dit en soi: "Rustic, que sais-tu faire?  
Veiller, prier, jeûner, porter la haire?  
Qu'est-ce cela? moins que rien, tous le font;  
Mais d'être seul auprès de quelque belle  
Sans la toucher, il n'est victoire telle.
By such a victory over my nature, he says, I will merit paradise, "et me tire du pair." When night falls, he prepares a bed for Alibech, unaware of his real motive.

Car, de coucher sur la dure d'abord,
Quelle apparence? elle n'était encor
Accoutumée à si rude exercice. (587)

Rustic has been too proud, too presumptuous. His will is separate from his body, which, in spite of his good intentions, asserts itself.

Couchés à part, Alibech s'endormit;
L'ermit non: une certaine bête,
Diable nommé, un vrai serpent maudit,
N'eut point de paix qu'il ne fût de la fête.

Alibech's natural physical development has betrayed her spiritual yearnings also, La Fontaine's personnification of a part of her body emphasizing her powerlessness against her nature:

... certain sein ne se reposant point,
Allant, venant; sein qui pousse et repousse
Certain corset en dépit d'Alibech
Qui tâche en vain de lui clore le bec,
Car toujours parle; il va, vient et respire:
C'est son patois; Dieu sait ce qu'il veut dire.

The poor hermit "fit de ce point sa méditation," and at last finding his passion too much for his will, Rustic capitulates.
Adieu la haine, adieu la discipline.
Et puis voilà de ma dévotion!
Voilà mes saints! Celui-ci s'achemine
Vers Alibech . . .

From now on, says La Fontaine, if Alibech is to be a saint, she will have to content herself with martyrdom: "Frère Rustic peu de vierges faisait" (588).

But Rustic is not portrayed as villainous; he is only a man reacting naturally to the attraction of a pretty, brand new girl, who was, though unaware of it, ready and more than half-willing to be déniaisée.

Et, ne sachant ni ceci, ni cela,
Moitié forcée, et moitié consentante,
Moitié voulant combattre ce désir,
Moitié n'osant, moitié peine et plaisir . . . (588)

By the rhythm of these lines, the repetition of words, the alternation of opposing ideas, La Fontaine depicts not only the action of this "acte de repentante," but also the conflicting emotions of this adolescent girl, her fear of life and longing for purity finally overcome by her desire to satisfy her healthy, normal appetite. These lines portray as well the natural modesty of this young girl, coupled with her natural desire to please—already suggested by the "façons" and "manière douce" (587) which Rustic found so alluring—making an engaging variation on the theme of the typically feminine resistance to a man's advances. 15

La Fontaine uses the familiar need for diversity to
explain the end of Alibech's project to live the life of a hermit, and his continuation of the metaphor of the title of this tale, rather crudely personifying parts of the body, emphasizes the instinctual, involuntary aspect of her leaving Rustic to return to her family.

En vain l'enfer son prisonnier rappelle;
Le diable est sourd, le diable n'entend point.
L'enfer s'ennuie, autant en fait la belle;
Ce grand désir d'être sainte s'en va.

Furtivement elle quitte le sire,
Par le plus court s'en retourne chez soi.

The end of La Fontaine's tale is quite different from that of his model. In Boccaccio's story, while Alibech and Rustic are murmuring against each other, he because she is so importunate and she because he is not able to satisfy her demands, Alibech's family all die in a fire, and she is left the sole heir of the fortune. An opportunist named Néherbal, who has squandered his own means, hears of the existence of Alibech and goes out to find her before the state confiscates her inheritance. To the great satisfaction of Rustic, and over the protestations of Alibech, Néherbal takes her back to her home, marries her, and shares in her estate.

La Fontaine begins the last part of his tale by professing not to know what Alibech could have said to her parents to explain her absence, and this characteristic expression of doubt sets the tone for the rest of the tale.
Do the parents believe her story, "Que son coeur, mû d'un
appétit d'enfant,/ L'avait portée à tâcher d'être sainte"?

Ou l'on la crut, ou l'on en fit semblant.
Sa parenté prit pour argent comptant
Un tel motif: non que de quelque atteinte
À son enfer on n'eût quelque soupçon.

Or do they accept her story at face value because they
hope to find a husband for their daughter?

Mais cette chartre est faite de façon
Qu'on n'y voit goutte, et maint geôlier s'y trompe.

This could be a comment of the author expressing a truth
illustrated in Joconde and La Fiancée and many other tales;
it could also be the reasoning of Alibech's relatives, con-
fident that their young simpleton will be able to delude
her husband.

Alibech tells the adventure to her friends, who
laughingly advise her to accept the proposal of her neigh-
bor Néherbal before he hears what happened.

Elle le fit. Néherbal n'était homme
À cela près. On donna telle somme
Qu'avec les traits de la jeune Alibech
Il prit pour bon un enfer très suspect,
Usant des biens que l'hymen nous envoie.

The author implies that if Néherbal is easy to fool, it is
because he wants to be, the detail of the ample dowry and
the equivocal word "biens," plus the reminder that Alibech
is young and pretty, suggesting that he is a practical man
willing to compromise.

As in the prologue to *Les Oies de Frère Philippe*, there is here no condemnation of the *mensonge* to which they all seem to consent—Alibech, her family, and Néherbal. On the contrary, the conduct of Alibech seems to be much more sincere than the course adopted by Rustic. This vainglorious mirror image of Malc had had the temerity to try to rival the angels; in order to merit paradise he defied both Satan and his human nature only to find that his own efforts were insufficient against two such redoubtable enemies. He has been no more successful than Philippe's son in controlling his desires, or than Malc, who, as we have seen, was in a different way also the easy prey of his instincts and his egoism. "Tout homme est homme, et les moines sur tous," La Fontaine said in *L'Ermite* (II, 15), and he does not seem to have changed his mind. Rustic, at least, is not one of those rare genuine saints who managed to shed their humanity. Confronted with his human weakness, he is not willing to admit defeat; remaining in the forest, he is only a hypocrite. Or else he is deluding himself into believing, in spite of the evidence to the contrary, that he can achieve saintliness.

4. Conclusion

In spite of the pious tone of *Saint Malc*, La Fontaine's conclusions about man in this poem are not incom-
patible with his observations in *Le Diable en Enfer* and so many other tales. Before retiring permanently from the life of other men to become "plus ange que mortel," Malc was no more exempt from the taint of the world than his fellows. His innocence proved as fragile as the will of Rustic and the *devoir* of Philippe's son. His life was as much the result of fortune and the train of events as poor Alaciel's in *La Fiancée*, and he was no less guilty than she of accommodating himself to circumstances. If Malc achieved integrity between what he was and what he appeared to be, it was because he had cast off almost all of his humanity and had quit earthly life; La Fontaine's insistence on this saint's unusual longevity seems to underline the fact that he had all but overcome his temporal existence. But there is every indication in the poem that La Fontaine believes such a degree of purity to be impossible for the ordinary man.

Je chante d'un héros la vertu solitaire,
Ces déserts, ces forêts, ces antres écartés,
Des favoris du Ciel autrefois habités. (OD 49)

Malc was a virtuous hero, a "saint héros" (61), one of the chosen of God who abhorred duplicity and compromise. But one has the impression that La Fontaine fears that such extraordinary, authentic heroes, though they might have existed "once upon a time," could no longer exist in the seventeenth century, whether in society or isolated from it.
There is in any case no question of such heroism in the tales, the true hero having been effectively destroyed as early as Jiconde. Old men, who have lived their lives, preach vertu to the younger people: we remember Quinzica and his calendar, the parents of young nuns in Mazet, Philippe in Les Oies, Caliste's father in La Coupe; "Fuyez la ville et les amants, / Et leurs présents," cried old Anselme to Argie; "Fuyez l'or; mais fuyez encor d'autres appas," entreated Malc's old counselor. But the vertu of these older people was far from intact. Richard de Quinzica protested that he loved Bartholomée, but it is evident that his having a young, well-born wife also flattered his ego and advanced him in his profession.

Cestui Richard était juge dans Pise,
Homme savant en l'étude des lois,
Riche d'ailleurs, mais dont la barbe grise
Montrait assez qu'il devait faire choix
De quelque femme à peu près de même âge;
Ce qu'il ne fit, prenant en mariage
La mieux séante et la plus jeune d'ans
De la cité; fille bien alliée,
Belle surtout: c'était Bartholomée
De Galandi, qui parmi ses parents
Pouvait compter les plus gros de la ville. (431)

Caliste's father had a selfish reason for not marrying her mother, and even his motive in naming Caliste his heir seemed egotistical. Philippe's motives in becoming a hermit were hardly pure, and Anselme's weakness in the face of bribery was far more ignominious than his wife's. One can assume that even the advice of Malc's old counselor was
based on some unhappy experience of his own weakness.

Time and again and in a variety of ways, La Fontaine condemns man's ignorance of his own limitations. In the Contes, this theme is often presented in stories about old men with young wives: their difficulties result from the husband's not admitting that his advanced age makes the demands of his nature different from those of his wife. These old men are often called "sot" and are always made to look as silly as possible. We have seen this already in Le Calendrier des Vieillards. In La Mandragore (III, 2) La Fontaine tells another story of the "sottise" of the old man Nicia, "un sot en son temps très insigne," who was resolved that he and his young wife should have a child. In spite of prayers and magic, "il ne put tant faire/Que d'être père." And by his blindness to his own impotence and to his wife's natural desires, Nicia allows himself to be duped flagrantly by a young student who made it possible for him to be "père appelé" (481). In Le Roi Candaule (IV, 8) La Fontaine condemns the "sottise" of the king who thought that by his command he could force one of his vassals to remain insensible to the view of the charms of the queen "Toute nue." Of course "Gygès en fut ému, quelque effort qu'il put faire" (576). Neither reasoning, nor magic, nor will can avail to change anyone's nature.

While he was living with other people, a little like Atis in Le Petit chien, Malc found strength for coping with
the difficulties of his life by seeking out moments of peace in the silence of the woods, beside a clear stream.

Malc aimait un ruisseau coulant entre des roches. Des cédres le couvraient d'ombrages toujours verts: Ils défendaient ce lieu du chaud et des hivers. De degrés en degrés l'eau tombant sur des marbres Mélait son bruit aux vents engouffrés dans les arbres. Jamais désert ne fut moins connu des humains; A peine le soleil en savait les chemins. (OD 52)

The temptation of this peace finally proved stronger for Malc than the temptation of the world, and he regained permanently his beloved desert. But his motive for returning does not seem too different from Frère Philippe's motive for becoming a hermit. Like Philippe Malc had discovered that he had the faults of other men; and his return to the desert seems a selfish fulfillment of a longing to be free of the tyranny of his imperfect nature.

In a long meditation following the brief fable, Le Songe d'un habitant du Mogol (XI, 4) published in 1678, La Fontaine praised the solitude and peace for which one side of his own nature seemed always to long.

J'inspirerais ici l'amour de la retraite; Elle offre à ses amants des biens sans embarras, Biens purs, présents du Ciel, qui naissent sous les pas.

Solitude où je trouve une douceur secrète. Lieux que j'aimai toujours, ne pourrai-je jamais, Loin du monde et du bruit goûter l'ombre et le frais? O qui m'arrêtera sous vos sombres asiles? (268)
In *Le Juge arbitre, l'Hospitalier, et le Solitaire*, written in 1693, after his conversion and only two years before his death, La Fontaine spoke again of man's need to leave the "plainte et murmure" of the world. The judge and doctor of this fable, "affligés" by the cares of their employ among men, leave to "confier leur peine au silence des bois" (315). There they find the hermit, like the misanthrope in *L'Homme et son image*, "près d'une source pure,/ Lieu respecté des vents, ignoré du soleil," contemplating his own image, seeking to know himself.

More than two decades earlier the old philosopher-hermit of *Psyché* had said, less poetically, the same thing to the troubled bride of *Amour*:

> Attendez du moins quelques jours en cette demeure. Vous pourrez vous y appliquer à la connaissance de vous-même. (OD 200)

But *Psyché* appeared to embody the other side of the nature of La Fontaine, the restless, practical side, which recognized the impossibility of the absolute. This young woman
fled from life, but only temporarily, only long enough to
gain a better perspective, to learn to face herself and her
problems forthrightly, and then to return to her world,
whose mensonge she accepted as natural.

In this she is no different from Alibech in Le Diable
en Enfer, who seems to have begun gaining knowledge of her
real self very soon after arriving at the hut of the hermit.

Quant au souper, elle eut pour tout service
Un peu de fruit, du pain non pas trop beau.
Faites état que la magnificence
De ce repas ne consista qu'en l'eau,
Claire, d'argent, belle par excellence. (587)

In the light of all the other "ondes pures" near which the
poet sat to translate the voice of nature,17 in the Fables,
in Psyché, in St. Malc, in other contes, his insistence
here on the beautiful, silvery, clear water—added to what
may be Alibech's reflection that at home the bread is
considerably better!—suggests to the reader that already
Alibech is seeing herself more clearly, and is recognizing
her lack of vocation. "Rustic jeûna; la fille eut appétit."
Like Psyché, her yearning for tranquillity is outweighed
by her appetite for life, to which she returns cheerfully,
telling quite automatically the white lie required for re-
admission into the world.

La Fontaine's gay interpretation of Alibech's story
sums up rather well his various treatments of the problem
of man vis-à-vis the questions of truth and dissemblance,
and is representative of his most frequent conclusions.
The happy ending, passing more lightly over the ugly motive
of Néherbal, softens the cynicism of Boccaccio's denouement.
"On ne vit ni d'air ni d'amour," La Fontaine had said in
La Fiancée: man's avariciousness seems only natural, given
the conditions of the world he finds himself in. Lies, too,
seem natural and necessary; but no matter, Alibech is going
to live happily ever after with her sensible, good-natured
husband. That seems to be the important thing.

A tous époux Dieu doint pareille joie!
B. Part Four of the Contes.
The Veiling of Indecency,
the Question of Taste

1. Introduction. The Social Acceptability of the Contes

Among La Fontaine's most enthusiastic readers was the witty and cultivated member of the literary aristocracy of the 17th century, Madame de Sévigné, who perhaps as early as 1657 had read with pleasure the Epître to the Abbess of Mouzon, which La Fontaine had written for her friend Fouquet. In March of 1671, just a few weeks after the appearance of the third volume of Contes et Nouvelles, La Fontaine published for the first time, in the Fables nouvelles et autres poésies, the dizain in which he expressed his gratitude for her praise of his Epître. Since his years at Vaux she had read and appreciated not only his fables but also his tales, and she admired particularly the Contes of 1671, recommending them to her daughter Madame de Grignan, apparently a less loyal reader of La Fontaine than her mother.

Ne jetez pas si loin les livres de La Fontaine. Il y a . . . des contes qui vous charmeront: la fin des Oies de Frère Philippe, les Rémois, le Petit Chien, tout cela est très joli. (May 6, 1671)

Perhaps because of her position and her widowhood, as well as her honnêteté, Madame de Sévigné did not find it necessary to "rire sous cape de ces tours" (477); on the contrary, she indicated her enjoyment of them quite openly,
alluding in other letters to such tales as L'Ermite,19 one of the tales in the second volume, and Comment l'esprit vient aux filles, which opens the Nouveaux Contes of 1674. However, her own very discreet adaptation of this last tale in the letter to her daughter dated May 20, 1680, in which she writes of "une Agnès" who had learned "un peu de tout" from her confessor, "un jésuite qui a bien de l'esprit," reveals that the social acceptability of the contes, as well as their wit and piquancy, depended upon the decency of the language used to describe these "bons tours."

La Fontaine had not failed to see the relationship between the literary taste and the life style of his contemporaries, realizing that a society that covered its crudity with a polite veneer would naturally demand that authors veil with artificial expressions the raw reality they wished to portray in their works. He had responded from his earliest tales to this refined taste of his public, admitting in the preface of 1665 that, while "trop de scrupule gâterait tout" in this genre, it was nonetheless necessary to "garder en cela des bornes, et que les plus étroites sont les meilleures." And although there always seemed to be objections to his tales, whether from the church, or from critics who held that a literary work should have a moral purpose, or from those concerned with the education and behavior of young women, the tales from the beginning had a large number of amused readers, who appar-
ently did not find them objectionable. But in 1674, the Nouveaux Contes had to be published secretly and then sold clandestinely. This fourth volume of tales was banned in France ostensibly because it was "rempli de termes indiscrets et malhonnêtes," and because it would have the effect of corrupting "les bonnes moeurs" and of inspiring "le libertinage" (834). As for this last accusation, while it is true that the majority of these tales deal with priests and nuns, it is doubtful, as Professor Adam has pointed out, that La Fontaine intended to portray in his adaptations of these anticlerical stories from the Middle Ages and the 16th century the actual conduct typical of ecclesiastics and conventuals of his own day. And though he was guilty of the choice of his source materials, some of which are of questionable taste, any one of the Nouveaux Contes is much less licentious than its model. And yet the allegation of "termes indiscrets et malhonnêtes" is not indefensible.

Although in none of the tales published by La Fontaine is there any word considered vulgar, any name of a part of the body normally covered by clothing except "sein" or "tétons" and occasionally "bras nu" or "pied nu," there seems to be in the Nouveaux Contes a concentration of techniques designed to uncover the unmentionable, heretofore alluded to much more obliquely. It is as if La Fontaine were stretching propriety to the limit, seeing just how far he could go without saying "quelque sottise/ Qui
[lui] fera donner du busque sur les doigts," as he says in
Le Tableau (613). Or as if he were making fun of the
precious, exaggerated modesty required of him and other
writers:

Puis cette main dans le pays s'avance.
L'autre s'en va transformer ces deux monts
Qu'en nos climats les gens nomment tetons;
Car, quant à ceux qui sur l'autre hémisphère
Sont étendus plus vastes en leur tour,
Par révérence on ne les nomme guère.

La Jument du compère Pierre (593)

Or as if he were twitting too-prudish young ladies who ob-
viously were only feigning ignorance when they claimed not
to understand his allusions.

Il me faut tirer de ma tête
Nombre de traits nouveaux, piquants; et délicats,
Qui disent et ne disent pas,
Et qui soient entendus sans notes
Des Agnès même les plus sottes:
Ce n'est pas coucher gros; ces extrèmes Agnès
Sont oiseaux qu'on ne vit jamais.

Le Tableau (612)

It was of course the very ambiguity of the language
of the tales that allowed such young unmarried ladies as
Mlle de Sillery, niece of La Rochefoucauld, to read and
enjoy them while at the same time preserving an appearance
of innocence.

Mes contes à son avis
Sont obscurs. Les beaux esprits
N'entendent pas toute chose.
Faisons donc quelques récits
Qu'elle déchiffrer sans glose. (195)
These lines gently mocking the pretty pretense of this twenty-five-year-old woman who was soon to become the marquise de la Motte-au-Maine, are from the fable Tircis et Amarante, written for her in 1674, the year of the publication of the Nouveaux Contes. They seem an echo of the lines quoted above from the introductory stanza of Le Tableau, the last tale of the forbidden collection, in which the author also speaks of needing to find expressions that will be understood without explanations; they are followed by a riddle which, as we shall see, seems the pastoral counterpart of the more impudent prologue to the first tale of the edition of 1674, Comment l'esprit vient aux filles.

Tircis disait un jour à la jeune Amarante:
"Ah! si vous connaissiez comme moi certain mal
Qui nous plaît et qui nous enchante!
Il n'est bien sous le ciel qui vous parût égal":

"Comment l'appellez-vous ce mal? quel est son nom?
—L'amour. —Ce mot est beau. Dites-moi quelques marques
A quoi je le pourrai connaître: que sent-on?
—Des peines près de qui le plaisir des monarques
Est ennuyeux et fade . . . " (196)

The very circumspect and precious Amarante, who resembles perhaps the lady for whom her little conversation with Tircis was written, finally admits that she understands the meaning of the word "love"; and then, teasing poor Tircis, allowing him to believe for a moment that it is he for whom she has felt this pleasurable pain, she shatters his hopes with a surprise ending to the scene that recalls the tales:
"Voilà justement/ Ce que je sens pour Clidamant."^{22}

2. Riddles, Metaphors, Allegories

a. **Comment l'esprit vient aux filles**

In the riddle on the first page of the *Nouveaux Contes*, in the opening lines of *Comment l'esprit vient aux filles*, the poet asks "comment ce jeu s'appelle," and this time he does not give an explicit answer. Instead, the clues making the name of the game so obvious that no "glose" is necessary, the reader solves it for himself, unless, like Mlle de Sillery, he chooses not to understand the double meaning of the words.

Il est un jeu divertissant sur tous,
Jeu dont l'ardeur souvent se renouvelle;
Ce qui m'en plaît, c'est que tant de cervelle
N'y fait besoin et ne sert de deux clous.
Or, devinez comment ce jeu s'appelle.
Vous y jouez, comme aussi faisons-nous;
Il divertit et la laïde et la belle;
Soit jour, soit nuit, à toute heure il est doux,
Car on y voit assez clair sans chandelier.
Or, devinez comment ce jeu s'appelle.
Le beau du jeu n'est connu de l'époux:
C'est chez l'amant que ce plaisir excelle,
De regardants, pour y juger des coups,
Il n'en faut point; jamais on n'y querelle.
Or, devinez comment ce jeu s'appelle. (547)

This fifteen-line stanza built on only two rhymes, punctuated by the recurring "guess the name of the game," is a delightful opening to the book. Without saying so, La Fontaine is giving us a preface, as at the beginning of
Part Three. He is stating at the same time as the subject of this *conte* the subject of almost all the tales in the collection, while reminding the reader that this is all just an amusing game, the game that lovers play with each other reflected by the game the author is playing with his readers. The clues to the riddle in the first five lines are vague, but La Fontaine seems to be talking about literary matters, a writer-reader game. Then the clues shift to the game of love, though we are still aware of the double meaning. It is not necessary to have a brilliant mind in order to see beneath my words, La Fontaine seems to be saying to the reader, any more than it is necessary to be enlightened as to the rules of the game: ignorance, whether feigned or real, is no handicap. And the best part of all is that the game—reading my tales, making love—is played in secret.

The riddle is one of La Fontaine's favorite techniques for "attracting" and "attaching" the attention of the reader, as he put it in 1666 (385), for creating a kind of suspense, and, what seems more important in the *Nouveaux Contes*, for "saying without saying" (612), for unveiling the thing he is ostensibly veiling. As we shall see in examining some of the tales of this collection, the riddle game has a number of variations. In *Comment l'esprit vient aux filles*, the tale which is introduced by this prologue, the challenge to the author is to give ordinarily decent
words an indecent connotation, and the point of the game for the reader is to see the intended meaning beneath the surface meaning.

Foremost among such words in this tale of course is the word "esprit," already implied in the opening riddle. Beginning the tale, La Fontaine says in effect, if you do not have enough "esprit" to guess the name of the game from the clues I have given you, never mind:

*Je vais encore vous en dire un usage:*
*Il fait venir l'esprit et la raison.*

The principal character in this tale is Lise, a young adolescent who has not yet outgrown a trait common to all children: she takes words at their face value. When her mother, exasperated with the girl's lack of attention to her duties, shouts, "Va-t'en chercher de l'esprit, malheureuse!" Lise takes her command literally and goes out to try to buy some wit. Her neighbors laughingly send her to *père* Bonaventure, "Car il en a bonne provision," and this good father is only too happy to oblige her, "Sans exiger nul salaire." Her innocence "augmentait ses appas," the author tells us.

*Il est marchande et marchande, entre nous:*
*A l'une on vend ce qu'a l'autre l'on donne.*

Now La Fontaine repeats the riddle technique to
depict the gradual dawning of "esprit" in Lise's mind, her gradual change from child to woman, as the clues given her by Father Bonaventure become clearer and clearer.

Mon Révérend la jette sur un lit, Veu la baiser. La Pauvrette recule Un peu la tête; et l'innocente dit: "Quoi! c'est ainsi qu'on donne de l'esprit? —Et vraiment oui", repart Sa Révérence; Puis il lui met la main sur le téton. "Encore ainsi? —Vraiment oui; comment donc?" La belle prend le tout en patience.

Now, although the answer to the riddle is becoming more and more apparent to Lise, La Fontaine must resort to much more indirect language to make his point clear to the reader.

Il suit sa pointe, et d'encor en encor : Toujours l'esprit s'insinue et s'avance, Tant et si bien qu'il arrive à bon port.

Playing with repetitions of the sibilant s and of adverbs, and with a rhythmical succession of equivocal verbs of motion, he conveys his meaning both decently and "wittily."

At last, having obtained the wit her mother had sent her for, Lise goes home "songeant à cela," Lise, who in the beginning "songeait autant que sa poupée." And to prove she is no longer a child, but a typical, resourceful female, "elle cherche un mensonge," to explain her late return to her family. Two days later her friend, clairvoyante et finette," suspected that the day-dreaming Lise "ne songeait pour rien," and pried the story from her. But except for this one indiscreet admission of the truth, Lise,
rendered "sage" by "ce jeu-là," "ne crut pas devoir parler de rien."

Most of the lines quoted here developing the ambiguity of "esprit" and related words are quite subtle and in no way objectionable, and even those that are rather coarse are still clever enough to pass. But for another twenty lines or so following the line in which "l'esprit s'insinue et s'avance," La Fontaine lingers so crudely over his metaphor that a "sage" young lady would be justified in pretending not to have the "wit" to understand them. He has not used a single off-color word, but by his insistence on multiple meanings of the ordinary word "esprit" he has made too clear his intention to name the unnameable and has thus passed the ordinary limit of socially acceptable humor. 23

b. **Le Diable en Enfer, Le Diable de Papefiguîère, La Chose Impossible, La Jument du compère Pierre, Les Lunettes**

Certain lines in **Le Diable en Enfer** (IV, 9) are similarly tasteless. Here again La Fontaine chooses to describe the unmentionable and then over-develops his metaphor, making the comparison so obvious, observing so minutely the details of the déniaissement of the innocent Alibech (whose story resembles that of Lise) that what might have been "piquant" and "délicat" becomes either tiresome or embarrassing, depending on the attitude of the
individual reader. Rabelais' "solution de continuité" used in Le Diable de Papefiguère (IV, 5), while meant once again to uncover that which is usually covered, seems in comparison quite elegant.\textsuperscript{24}

Often the clues of La Fontaine's metaphor—riddles depend upon allusions to classical mythology. La Chose impossible (IV, 14) consists almost entirely of such a riddle. In this tale, a certain young man, according to his agreement with Satan, was allowed to enjoy the favors of his "cruelle" as long as he could continue thinking of new orders for the devil to execute. Finally at his wit's end, he explained his difficulty to his "divinité," who was able to rid him of the torment of the demon by suggesting a thing impossible to accomplish.

\begin{verbatim}
L'amant dit au démon: "C'est ligne circulaire
Et courbe que ceci; je t'ordonne d'en faire
Ligne droite et sans nuls retours:
Va-t'en y travailler et cours."
\end{verbatim} (606)

The devil's frantic efforts to carry out his orders, and his ultimate failure, make up part of the riddle's clues, but the allusion to the mythological Golden Fleece is the key to the quite obvious answer. The riddle is funny, largely because of the disparity between the crudity of the object and the artificial elegance of the language used to describe it. Another source of humor is the similar incongruity between the real nature of the "charmante inexorable" who could suggest such an "impossible thing," and
the precious diction used to gloss over her vulgarity. Nevertheless, as in *Comment l'esprit vient aux filles*, *Le Diable en Enfer*, and *Le Diable de Papefiguière*, because of the indecent nature of the "chose," a prudent, precious "Agnès," though amused by the riddle, would perhaps have claimed it was impossible for her to solve.

We have seen La Fontaine's ironic use of precious diction in *La Jument du compère Pierre* (IV, 10).\(^{25}\) In the passage quoted above from this tale, by his geographical metaphor developed around the word "monts," considered an elegant image for a part of the female anatomy, he contrives to evoke another part, which out of "révérence" is seldom named. In this brief passage in a tale about a hypocritical parish priest, La Fontaine very amusingly alludes to the taboo against certain words, while demonstrating a technique he has developed in order to conform "religiously" to the demand for a surface propriety.

There is another commentary on the need for refinement in language in *Les Lunettes* (IV, 12). Here the riddle technique takes the form of a rather long allegory, an extreme example of a deliberate and unnecessary dwelling on the identification of an unmentionable object. The young "blondin" of this tale had disguised himself as a nun in order to gain entrance to a convent, where, through the diligence of this "soeur jouveneau," Sister Agnes had to "élargir sa ceinture,/ Puis mettre au jour petite créature."
In order to uncover the culprit who had brought such scandal to the abbey, all the nuns were required to undress. This of course would prove embarrassing to "la feinte ouaille," unless he could think of a further disguise.

Plus son esprit à songer se travaille,  
Moins il espère échapper d'un tel pas.  
Nécessité, mere de stratagème,  
Lui fit... "eh bien?" lui fit en ce moment  
Lier... "et quoi?" (599)

By his familiar guessing game La Fontaine has already wittily evoked the object to which he is alluding. But then, to be certain that the reader has guessed correctly, he points out that the actual word he needs is unspeakable:

... Foin! je suis court moi-même;  
Où prendre un mot qui dise honnêtement  
Ce que lia le père de l'enfant?

Then finally in the twenty-one line allegory of the two laces, taken from Greek mythology, he finds the "détour suffisant/ Pour cet endroit," saying afterwards: "Il est facile à présent qu'on devine/ Ce que lia notre jeune imprudent." As a matter of fact, the allegory was told in fun, itself much more obscure than the suggestive guessing game that provoked it. If the author had not announced his intention of finding a decent word for the indecent one and then added a rather crude "glose" to explain his circumlocution, the allegory alone would have allowed a Mlle de Sillery to preserve a wide-eyed innocence.
c. *Le Cas de conscience*

Within the digression in *Les Lunettes* made in search of an acceptable word is another digression on the inscrutable nature of women.

Mais si d'avoir une fenêtre au corps
Etait utile, une au coeur au contraire
Ne l'était pas, dans les femmes surtout;
Car le moyen qu'on pût venir à bout
De rien cacher? . . .

. . . .
La femme fut lacée un peu trop dru.
Ce fut sa faute; elle-même en fut cause,
N'étant jamais a son gré trop bien close. (599)

The typically feminine determination to present to the world an impervious façade is always fascinating to La Fontaine. In *Le Cas de conscience* (IV, 4), among the most innocent of all the *contes*, he seems to demonstrate a correlation between this characteristic of women and the technique of describing indecencies while preserving a surface modesty.

The tale is preceded by a prologue in which La Fontaine speaks of the poet's prerogative to create his own special universe through the names he chooses to give to ordinary people or situations.

Dieu, par sa bonté profonde,
Un beau jour mit dans le monde
Apollon, son serviteur,
Et l'y mit justement comme
Adam le nomenclateur,
Lui disant: "Te voila; nomme." (559)

Otherwise unpalatable situations may be transformed into
quite acceptable ones by the honorable words of the "gens du pays des fables."

Tout leur est nymphe ou bergère,
Et déesse bien souvent. (558)

La Fontaine then makes an allusion to Horace, indicating perhaps that such transformations respond to an inner need of people to dignify, or render poetic, their natural urges.

Horace n'y faisait faute:
Si la servante de l'hôte
Au lit de notre homme allait,
C'était aussitôt Ilie;
C'était la nymphe Egérie;
C'était tout ce qu'on voulait. 26

But whether in response to a personal need of their readers or to the demands of society, poets are wise to conform to the taste for "noms et titres agréables": "Cela ne leur coûte guère," La Fontaine says.

In the preface to the Contes of 1665 La Fontaine had claimed Horace as his authority in his discussion of literary consistency, and now in this prologue an allusion to Horace is again followed by remarks on harmony of style and subject and characters. As a poet, La Fontaine says, he would be permitted to call the characters of his tales by any name that pleased him.

Et s'il me plaisait de dire,
Au lieu d'Anne, Sylvanire,
Et pour messire Thomas;
Le grand druide Adamas,
Me mettrait-on à l'amende?
But "tout considéré"—his subject, his characters, his principle of consistency—he has decided on the more common, natural names for this tale.

Le présent conte demande
Qu'on dise Anne et le curé.

In the tale that follows, Anne and the curé do seem entirely consistent with the names given them. Like parish priests in all other tales, Messire Thomas is a bit lecherous, a bit hypocritical, a bit sensual, more interested in a good meal than in the spiritual life of his parishioners. But, largely because of the scene depicting the lively dinner on the day of the conclave of the priests of the diocese, this curé seems the most "natural" of all of La Fontaine's ecclesiastics. The young Anne appears to represent La Fontaine's notion of a typical girl, as real as the women readers to whom he dedicated Les Oies de Frère Philippe. Like those more cultivated ladies, this unrefined village girl reveals the classic feminine tendency to keep her nature in check, to cover her natural responses by a virtuous exterior. La Fontaine's style in this tale, carefully contrived to seem natural, is a harmonious reflection of the characters, and particularly of Anne, "drue, honnête toutefois." 27

The first scene of the tale demonstrates this delicate balance of naturalness and artificiality found in both
the girl and the style. Anne is introduced as "la perle et le paragon" of her village, a girl with healthy, normal instincts, but whose reputation is ir reproachable. In this scene she is watching with pleasure a young man bathe in the river, but she is hidden from sight.

Anne ne craignait rien; des saules la couvraient Comme eût fait une jalouse. Cà et là ses regards en liberté couraient Où les portait leur fantaisie. (559)

Even behind the veil of willow branches she experiences a secret shame; but in spite of her scruples, she continues to look attentively, defenseless against her desire to see all the "différents traits du garçon au corps jeune et frais," and enjoying the sight too much to leave.

A la fin ne comprenant pas Comme on peut pécher de cent pas, Elle s'assit sur l'herbe, et, tres fort attentive, Annette la contemplative Regarde de son mieux. (560)

Just as Anne is protected by her veil of willows, so is the reader protected from all but a hazy view of what she is contemplating. The author has hinted at the "différents traits" of the nude young boy by his reference to the "honte" of Anne and to the tailoring skill of Love.

Nuls défauts ne pouvaient être au gars reprochés; Puis, dès auparavant aimé de la bergère, Quand il en aurait eu, l'Amour les eût cachés; Jamais tailleur n'en sut, mieux que lui, la manière. (559)
Now, as Anne sits down on the grass to continue looking at this "sujet de plaisir," the author compares what she is doing to an artist drawing from life, the better to suggest to the reader the points that are engaging her attention.

. . . Quelqu'un n'a-t-il point vu
Comme on dessine sur nature?
On vous campe une créature,
Une Eve, ou quelque Adam, j'entends un objet nu;
Puis force gens, assis comme notre bergère,
Font un crayon conforme à cet original.
Au fond de sa mémoire Anne en sut fort bien faire
Un qui ne ressemblait pas mal. (560)

Though Anne could not resist enjoying secretly the sight of the nude boy, she did not surrender to Amour.

. . . Anne, la scrupuleuse,
N'osa, quoi qu'il en soit, le garçon régaler,
Ne laissant pas pourtant de récapituler
Les points qui la rendaient encor toute honteuse.

But at Easter confession Messire Thomas condemns the casuistry of Anne, who had convinced herself that her desire was no sin as long as she had hidden it from view.

Être dans ses regards à tel point sensuelle!
C'est, dit-il, un très grand péché;
Autant vaut l'avoir vu que de l'avoir touché.

La Fontaine does not join the curé in his condemnation of Anne. He has criticized neither her sensuality in looking at the young boy, "digne enfin des regards d'Annette," nor her dissimulation. Without the priest's probing, she would have been able to keep her natural urges private
while preserving appearances in her village, and when she turns the tables on the curé at the end, we are on her side against the priest: there can be no harm in looking! She has been presented as a normal young girl who, while unable to deny her nature, curbs it, and, refusing to "name" her sensuality or to "call" it a sin, she transforms it into something she can accept. Her discreetness matches that of the author's technique as he describes the boy's nudity, the veil of willow branches suggesting at the same time as the veil she draws over her secret self, the veiling technique of the author. In the framework of Le Cas de conscience, and in the light of the prologue, the "veiling" of Anne and of the author are both seen as effecting necessary transformations which, while not changing reality, make it more palatable.

3. Le Tableau

La Fontaine's most important discussion of the technique of hiding vulgarity behind a veil of decency is found in Le Tableau, the last tale in the Nouveaux Contes; and the inspiration for this discussion is once again the nature of women. To create Le Tableau, La Fontaine had need of all the "naming" devices available to him as a poet, for the situation, unlike the one in Le Cas de conscience, is the most scabrous of any of the tales in this collection.

The source of the tale is a very lewd anecdote from
the *Ragionamenti* of Aretino about convent life. Before the *Nouveaux Contes*, La Fontaine had published only two tales about nuns, a very brief one in the first volume (I, 9) and *Mazet de Lamporeschio* in the second. But in the *Nouveaux Contes*, three more tales besides *Le Tableau* are about nuns. In the prologue to *Le Psautier* (IV, 7), a tale in which an abbess mistakes her bedfellow's breeches for her veil, La Fontaine begs permission of the nuns to be allowed to place them "pour la dernière fois" in this collection.

De vos bons tours les contes ne sont froids;  
Leur aventure a ne sais quelle grâce  
Qui n'est ailleurs; ils emportent les voix. (572)

The second tale of the *Nouveaux Contes* had been about "l'abbesse ayant besoin d'un bon garçon," and in spite of his promise in *Le Psautier*, the twelfth tale, *Les Lunettes*, would tell of the bizarre accident to the spectacles of yet another abbess. Here again he promises to "laisser là les nonnes."

Or apportons à cela quelque fin;  
Je le prétends, cette tâche ici faite. (598)

In *Le Tableau* there is no mention of his having broken his promise again. His purpose in this tale is not simply to tell another of the "bons tours" about nuns that had inspired *L'Abbesse*, *Le Psautier*, and *Les Lunettes*, but to discuss and demonstrate the artistic principle of veiling.
To do this, he has so completely transformed the nuns and the convent that were his models, that he has created an entirely original "painting," depicting a brand new, artificial universe.

The prologue to *Le Tableau* has features in common with the last part of the preface to the *Contes et Nouvelles* of 1665 and with the prologue to *Les Oies de Frère Philippe*. All three are written with his feminine readers in mind, and all three deal with the question of the suitability of his subject. But as the prologue to *Les Oies* had a different tone and purpose from the *Préface*, so does the prologue to *Le Tableau* give a new twist to the subject of propriety.

La Fontaine announces in his opening stanza that he is writing *Le Tableau* especially for his lady readers; but he makes it immediately clear that this *conte* will be the diabolic opposite of the innocent tale *Les Oies de Frère Philippe* which he had dedicated to them three years before. He is offering them this time, not a tale showing their charms to be irresistible, but a description of a pornographic picture.

On m'engage à conter d'une manière honnête
Le sujet d'un de ces tableaux
Sur lesquels on met des rideaux. (612)

The tone in which he speaks of the ladies in the two prologues is as different as the subject of the tales. In *Les Oies* he indulgently pictures them chuckling in private
over his "contes bleus," and speaks approvingly of their occasional, natural, love affairs, which they discreetly cover. We have seen already his impatience in Le Tableau as he speaks of the feigned innocence of the women for whom he is writing: "ces extrêmes Agnès/ Sont oiseaux qu'on ne vit jamais," he says. 28 This sweeping assertion about women is followed by another, by which the author means to establish the appropriateness of his subject, and in which he insinuates what he had said in a different way in his raillery of the prude Alizon in the Ballade published in 1665: that an exaggerated show of virtue conceals an equally immoderate lubricity.

Toute matrone sage, à ce que dit Catulle, 
Regarde volontiers le gigantesque don
Fait au fruit de Vénus par la main de Junon.
A ce plaisant objet si quelqu'une recule,
   Cette quelqu'une dissimule. (612-613)

In the preface of 1665, La Fontaine justified the subject of his tales by invoking Cicero, who had defined bienséance as that which is appropriate for the place, time, and public to whom one is speaking; "ce principe une fois posé," La Fontaine said, licentious stories were not inappropriate for "les gens d'aujourd'hui" (347). 29 Now in Le Tableau, on the questionable authority of Catullus (to whom he ascribes the verses from the anonymous eighth epigram of the Priapeia to which he alludes in the passage quoted above) 30 he states very dogmatically the "principle" upon
whose acceptance depends the justification of his choice of subject in this tale. He has said in a variety of ways—beginning in the Ballade and Préface of the edition of 1665 and continuing in the prologue to Les Oies—that women enjoyed reading licentious stories, though they did not like to admit it. Here in Le Tableau he has extended this observation of feminine nature to the emphatic declaration of what he implied in his portrayal in Le Cas de conscience of a young girl covertly gazing at a nude young boy: that women take pleasure in the contemplation of that which is considered obscene by at least some segments of their society, though they may dissimulate their enjoyment of such things. Then, "ce principe posé," La Fontaine seems to suggest, as in Le Cas, that an author's technique of writing about taboo subjects must take into account this tendency of women in society to hide their natural responses under a surface modesty.

... pourquoi plus de scrupule,
Pourquoi moins de licence aux oreilles qu'aux yeux?

... Chastes sont ses oreilles,
Encore que les yeux soient fripons. (613)

Speaking of the difference between looking and listening, La Fontaine may be commenting on a phenomenon of his precious century familiar to some twentieth century cultures: that is, first, that women can look, and with enjoyment, as he claims, at anything at all—such as a nude
male—in secret; in polite society they can look at a painting of nudity without embarrassment; and they can, without blushing, hear about any subject—the obscene situation of this Tableau, for example—as long as the language that is used remains separate from the thing discussed.

Quand le mot est bien trouvé,
Le sexe, en sa faveur, a la chose pardonne:
Ce n'est plus elle alors, c'est elle encor pourtant;
Vous ne faites rougir personne,
Et tout le monde vous entend.

In his statement of the "principe" of Catullus, La Fontaine has already illustrated a technique he had developed as a result of this social phenomenon, using an obscure allusion to mythology that was unrelated, in the minds of his readers, to the object described. This separation of word and object, he suggests, effected by the choice of words not readily identifiable with the subject discussed, allows the lady listener, or reader, to remain detached enough from the situation that she can avoid showing any embarrassment she might otherwise reveal (or feel obliged to reveal) by a modest blush. In Le Cae de conscience, Anne is literally separated from an embarrassing object by a veil of willows. In Le Tableau the distance required between the vulgar scene and the ladies for whom its description was written would be preserved by hanging a veil of decent words between the two: "Nuls traits à découvert
n'auront ici de place." But because of these ladies' willingness to part the curtains hiding pornographic pictures from view, the author would make his veil quite transparent.

Tout y sera voilé, mais de gaze, et si bien Que je crois qu'on n'en perdra rien.

Perhaps La Fontaine chose to treat his imitation of Aretino as a description of a painting in order to speak of the censorship of art and literature. Pointing out that people react differently to visual and auditory stimuli, he may be referring to the relative freedom accorded painters and sculptors, compared to the restraints, both social and legal, imposed on writers. The painter of this Tableau, however, had apparently overstepped even the more flexible bounds of propriety for painting; his description of his subject must have been too direct, for prudish censors would hang a curtain over it. The author who proposes to describe this picture and who wishes to avoid censorship, will have to disguise the subject with a veil of ambiguities, double meanings, circumlocutions, such as the rather abstruse allusion to mythology already mentioned ("le gigantesque don," etc.).

And La Fontaine accepts the challenge: "Puisqu'on le veut ainsi, je ferai de mon mieux." A subtle author "qui s'exprime avec grâce" could make anything at all acceptable, "car tout passe." Choosing words which "disent
et ne disent pas," he would make this picture visible to 
the mind's eye of the fair sex without offending their 
sensitive ears, and also slip past the watchful gaze of 
the censors, whom he seems to be defying in this tale. 
Even though the ears of the ladies may be more "modest" 
than their "roguish" eyes, "Je veux," he says, "expliquer 
à des belles/ Cette chaise rompue, et ce rustre tombé,"
thus giving his readers the first veiled glimpse of the 
scene.

The "traits nouveaux, piquants, et délicats" of 
which La Fontaine weaves his veil in Le Tableau are vari-
ations of techniques already used in other tales, designed 
to encourage the reader to see through the surface meaning 
of the words. The prologue itself is "piquant": the 
reader is alerted before he begins the tale that many a 
"trait" of the author's pen will hide an indecent object. 
At the end of the prologue La Fontaine reminds the reader 
again to expect an obscene story, as he rejects the aid 
of the chaste Muses in favor of Apollo, who would know 
more than they about the "joli jeu d'amour" played in the 
land of Love.

One of La Fontaine's techniques for speaking de-
cently of love, particularly in tales dealing with ecclesi-
astics, was to substitute a word associated with religion 
for the more descriptive term; the satire deriving from the 
use of such words added to their piquancy. The "dîme" paid
to the monks in Les Cordelières de Catalogne (II, 2) and all the words related to this metaphor provide much of the humor of this piece, one of the first tales La Fontaine published about monks or priests. Another example of an expression for love in these tales about priests was charité, used in Comment l'esprit vient aux filles (549), Le Diable en Enfer (588), and Péronde (571). If it was necessary to find suitable substitute expressions for the act of love, it was also necessary to find decent words for those women who ply the trade of love. La Fontaine found several such words to speak of his heroine in La Courtisane amoureuse, a tale in the third volume. The word in the title, courtisane, is the first euphemism he employs. Then to begin the tale, he speaks of "une de ces femmes/Qui font plaisir aux enfants sans souci" (513), a periphrasis for the more usual "fille de joie" (517). He speaks also of the "métier de nymphe" and then of "prête-resses de Vénus" (515). Finally at the end, in the "moral" of the story of this courtesan who wins for herself a proposal of marriage, La Fontaine blends with words related to mythology and commonly applied to courtesans a word normally applied only to nuns, this word calling up in its turn a conventional joking remark about the lasciviousness of nuns.
Or, faites-en, nymphes, votre profit.
Amour en a dans son académie
Que j'aimerais pour un pareil hymen,
Témoin Constance, et tout ce qui s'ensuit.
Noviciat d'épreuves un peu dures:
Nonnes je sais qui voudraient, chaque nuit,
En faire un tel, à toutes aventures. (520)

In the exposition of Le Tableau, La Fontaine again mixes words from the cult of Venus and from religion, but this time they are so closely blended that it is not at all clear to the reader whether his metaphor is meant to describe "nymphes" or "nonnes."

Jadis la ville de Cythère
Avait en l'un de ses faubourgs
Un monastère;
Vénus en fit un séminaire;
Il était de nonnains, et je puis dire ainsi
Qu'il était de galants aussi.
En ce lieu hantaient d'ordinaire
Gens de cour, gens de ville, et sacrificateurs
Et docteurs,
Et bacheliers surtout. (613-614)

From the beginning we are disoriented. Are we in the fabulous city of the mythological Venus or in a suburb of a modern city? Even if we assume that La Fontaine's use of mythology is allegorical, as it always is in the tales, we are still at a loss to know whether the background of this "picture" is a religious seminary or an "academy of love"; whether the "galants" who frequent this place would encounter lascivious nuns or young "priestesses of Venus."
The galants are themselves almost as ambiguous as the
"nonnains." In this uncertain atmosphere the "gens de cour" and the "gens de ville" could represent Immortals and mortals as well as noblemen and bourgeois. It seems fairly clear that the "sacrificateurs" are sacrificing to Venus, but the word suggests priests of some ancient religious cult as well as modern catholic clergymen. The "docteur" and the "bachelier" continue the notion of religious education evoked by the word "séminaire." But the theologians could be teachers of points of doctrine either of the Church or of Amour. And are the "bacheliers" studying for the priesthood or are they simply boys looking for pleasure? La Fontaine himself would say in 1685, in his remarks introducing La Clochette, that the reader may take his choice between the two possible meanings of the word "bachelier."

Interpretez ce mot à votre guise:
L'usage en fut autrefois familier
Pour dire ceux qui n'ont la barbe grise;
Ores ce sont suppôts de sainte Eglise. (621)

Continuing his exposition of Le Tableau, the author tells us that one of these young students, whether secular or ecclesiastical, was the particular friend of two of the "nonnains" of this "maison."

Propre, toujours rasé, bien disant, et beau fils,
Sur son chapeau luisant, sur son rabat bien mis,
La médisance n'eût su mordre. (614)
He rendered "maint et maint" service to his two young friends, we are told, tutoring them alternately in their study of Love, it seems, using the experimental method!

L'une n'avait quitté les atours de novice
Que depuis quelques mois; l'autre encor les portait.
La moins jeune a peine comptait
Un an entier par-dessus seize;
Age propre a soutenir these,
These d'amour: le bachelier
Leur avait rendu familier
Chaque point de cette science,
Et le tout par expérience.

The description of the girls' room and of the girls themselves continues the nymphe-nonne metaphor and emphasizes the sensuality of the equivocal "nuns." These young girls are eagerly awaiting an appointment with their young friend in a setting arranged to delight his senses. Other divinities have been called in to aid Venus in the "cérémonie": "Flore à l'haleine d'ambre" has scattered flowers about the room, and Bacchus and Ceres, "de qui la compagnie/ Met Vénus en train bien souvent," are also in attendance. The sparkling crystal and the impeccable table linens strewn with flowers forming love-knots and monograms increase the voluptuousness of the scene.

Leurs cloîtrières Excellences
Aimaient fort ces magnificences:
C'est un plaisir de nonne.

And the beauty of the two nuns "aiguaisait l'appétit aussi de son côté."
Blancheur, délicatesse, embonpoint raisonnable,  
Fermeté: tout charmait, tout était fait au tour;  
En mille endroits nichait l'Amour,  
Sous une guimpe, un voile, et sous un scapulaire,  
Sous ceci, sous cela, que voit peu l'oeil du jour,  
Si celui du galant ne l'appelle au mystère. (614-15)

The very natural, familiar conversation of these  
two "sœurs" comes as a surprise after the artificiality  
of their description and of that of their room and of the  
refreshments they had prepared for the "bachelier," whom  
they are more and more impatient to see.

Elles disaient du mal, puis du bien; puis les belles  
Imputaient son retardement  
À quelques amitiés nouvelles.  
"Qui peut le retenir? disait l'une; est-ce amour?  
Est-ce affaire? est-ce maladie?  
—Qu'il y revienne de sa vie,  
Disait l'autre; il aura son tour." (615)

But the young galant does not appear; in his stead arrives  
the "rustre" announced before the exposition began, a  
coarse and stupid "Mazet." This allusion to a character  
in an earlier tale (II, 16), a young gardener whose "work"  
had "contented" a whole convent of nuns, suffices to sug-  
gest the use to which the unexpected visitor will be put  
by these two creatures of pleasure.

That women appreciate, and even prefer, the amorous  
prowess of lower-class men is a frequent convention in  
tales. We remember the valet who consoled the wife of  
Joconde (353) and the dwarf who supplanted king Astolphe  
(355). "Un muletier à ce jeu vaut trois rois" (407), the
author tells us in his tale about a mule-driver who shared the royal bed with queen Tudelingue "la belle." La Matrone d'Ephèse (published in 1682), which ends with the proverbial-sounding "Mieux vaut goujat debout qu'empereur enterré" (641), makes the most charming use of this convention. Another idea common in tales and already expressed in Comment l'esprit vient aux filles is that, for making love, ignorance or stupidity is no handicap: "pour pareil affaire/Il n'est besoin que l'on soit si subtil" (550).

La Fontaine repeats these familiar ideas in Le Tableau in the lines recording the reaction of the "nuns" to the porter, "lourd d'ailleurs, et de très court esprit," who knocked at their door "avec ses mains pesantes." The frank conversation of the girls is again remarkable and seems to suggest the naturalness of their desire.

"Servons-nous de ce maître sot; Il vaut bien l'autre, que t'en semble?"
La professe ajouta: "C'est très bien avisé. Qu'attendions-nous ici? Qu'il nous fût débité De beaux discours? Non, non, ni rien qui leur ressemble. Ce pitaud doit valoir, pour le point souhaité, Bachelier et docteur ensemble."

The author is still developing his séminaire-académie d'amour metaphor; the "beaux discours" used in connection with the "bacheliers" and "docteurs" suggest persuasive words of love at the same time as learned lectures on theology. And in the lines that follow these, La Fontaine
continues to contrast the "Mazet" with the elegant and intelligent "bachelier," using words and expressions that minimize the mentality of this oaf and emphasize his instinctual quality—even his animality—while at the same time underlining the sensuality of the two "nuns."

... la taille du garçon,
Sa simplicité, sa façon,
Et le peu d'intérêt qu'en tout il semblait prendre,
Faisaient de lui beaucoup attendre.
C'était l'homme d'Esope; il ne songeait à rien,
Mais il buvait et mangeait bien;'
... Ainsi bientôt apprivoisé,
Il se trouva tout disposé
Pour exécuter sans remise
Les ordres des nonnains...

Though he could never be a seminarian, he seemed so well qualified for his "office de Mazet" that he won from the "nonnains" a "brevet."

Thus ends the long exposition, a really impressive accomplishment in which the elements of La Fontaine's metaphor are so perfectly balanced that, at least in the beginning, the reader finds it impossible to decide which level is symbolic and which is real. Using a technique that is the impudent parallel of the fable metaphor, seeming now to be describing worldly nuns by comparing them to "nymphes" with an elegant, upper-class clientele, now to be using a prologed religious euphemism to speak of the activities of the "priestesses of Venus," the author succeeds in suggesting a composite of the two: "filles" devoted to
"joie," devotees of sensual delight.

The _bachelier_ of the exposition will never arrive.33 Characteristically concerned with the unity of his tale, La Fontaine attempts to tie up the loose ends in an epilogue, looking beyond the "painting" and imagining what would happen if the _bachelier_ finally came.

L'heure du rendez-vous m'embarrasse. Et pourquoi?
Si l'amant ne vint pas, soeur Claude et soeur Thérèse Eurent à tout le moins de quoi se consoler:
S'il vint, on sut cacher le lourdaud et la chaise;
L'amant trouva bientôt encore à qui parler. (618)

But his presence in the exposition has not been unnecessary to the tale. The author uses the contrast between him and the _Mazet_ to establish the character of these two young women. Through their relationship with the young student, the author suggests the sophisticated side of their nature: they respond to his refined appearance and tastes by providing an artificially elegant setting for their appointments with him. Through the elaborate comparison of the _bachelier_ and the _Mazet_—and through the simplicity and openness of the girls' own remarks about both men—La Fontaine emphasizes the natural wantonness of these _nonnes_. By this portrayal of their nature they seem vaguely to become a kind of allegorical representation of the "matrones sages" of the prologue to this piece, or perhaps the embodiment of the secret dreams of the "extrêmes Agnès" for whom their adventure was written.
Finally "la peinture commence," and once again, to encourage the reader to look carefully for a hidden meaning, the author calls on Apollo to help him in his description of this obscene picture.

Dieu des vers, ne me quitte point:  
J'ai recours à ton assistance.  
Dis-moi pourquoi ce rustre assis,  
Sans peine de sa part, et très fort à son aise,  
Laisse le soin de tout aux amoureux soucis  
De soeur Claude et de soeur Thérèse. (616)

The poet hopes to be discreet in dealing with the pranks of Cupid but remarks that "Les jeux sont violents." The chair supporting the Mazet breaks and he finds himself on the floor:

... Ou soit par le défaut  
De la chaise un peu faible, ou soit que du pataud  
Le corps ne fut pas fait de plume,  
Ou soit que soeur Thérèse eut chargé d'action  
Son discours vêhément et plein d'émotion.

La Fontaine continues his metaphor by associating words used to speak of love with names given to certain activities and objects in a seminary or church, referring to the emotional discourse of Thérèse, calling the man the "galant cathédral" and the chair the "amoureuse tribune." Prodding the reader again to try to see through the veil he has hung over the scene, the author sends away the censors and their "œil profane," and invites the "gens de bien" to see how Claude profited from the accident to the chair. When Thérèse and the great oaf fell, she lost her bearings
("perdit la tramontane"); continuing the nautical metaphor, La Fontaine tells us that Claude then took the helm ("s'em-parant du timon"). This provokes a fight, Thérèse trying to pull Claude off the "trône."

Soeur Claude, prenez garde à vous;
Thérèse en veut venir aux coups;
Elle a le poing levé. "Quelle ait!" C'est bien répondre.

Claude suit son chemin, le rustre aussi le sien;
Thérèse est mal contente, et gronde. (617)

Now a lengthy allusion to "Bellone" and the armor of Venus, "quand elle entre en champ clos avec le dieu de Thrace," circuitously suggests the nudity of the two girls. In case his meaning has not been clear enough, La Fontaine encourages his lady readers not to miss his point: "Belles, vous m'entendez; je n'en direz plus."

Though La Fontaine's main concern in this tale seems to be with veiling indecency, there is also evidence of his preoccupation with another esthetic problem, reflected as he comments once again at the end of the tale on the difference between words and colors, eyes and ears:

Les mots et les couleurs ne sont choses pareilles;
Ni les yeux ne sont les oreilles. (618)

This is the problem suggested by the Horatian formula ut pictura poesis: a poem may be like a painting, but it is not the same thing as a painting.

La Fontaine had many times before drawn inspiration
from pictorial representations. A little piece that appeared with his first Contes et nouvelles en vers in 1665, and again in the edition of 1669 of Parts One and Two of the Contes, Les Amours de Mars et de Vénus, was a recounting of events from the life of Vulcan depicted in a series of tapestries at Vaux. This fragmentary description has certain elements in common with Le Tableau—in particular, its indirect portrayal of action, its mythical characters and unreal atmosphere, and its frequent references to the artist's rendering of the scenes ("Voyez-vous ce galant qui les montre du doigt?" (OD 117), etc.). But now in Le Tableau La Fontaine's comments reveal a conscious effort to deal with the problems involved in changing from one artistic medium to another.

Painting may have an advantage over poetry in being directly presented to our eyes; according to Horace, things presented to our ears impress our minds much less vividly. But a poem, for things of the nature of this Tableau, is in some ways superior to a painting. It can describe—better even than a series of pictures—continuous action. A striking feature of Le Tableau is that, though it purports to be a description of a painting, its structure is like that of many of La Fontaine's other tales: after the prologue, there is an exposition of the background information necessary to the understanding of the Tableau, followed by a recounting of the violent action of the picture itself,
and it ends with an epilogue which seeks to unify the piece, resolving the plot and the fate of the characters after concluding the esthetic discussion begun in the prologue.

Perhaps La Fontaine was, in fact, describing an illustration of this scene in the Ragionamenti viewed by Nanna through a crack in the wall of her convent cell. But whether such a picture existed or not, treating Ariosto's anecdote as a poetic description of a painting was an effective way to enlist the reader in helping the author overcome his difficult task of telling decently this very indecent story; for it is largely through the reader's own efforts to see it that the painting becomes visible to him. The fact that one does indeed try to see the action is perhaps proof of La Fontaine's premise that women like to look at obscene objects. However, La Fontaine's verbal portrayal of these women so wantonly pursuing satisfaction of their desires is not an erotic experience for the reader. On the contrary, reading this artful description of their adventure is only an intellectual exercise. At the end of the tale La Fontaine appears to admit his failure in translating into verse his pornographic picture.

Or ai-je des nonnains mis en vers l'aventure, 
Mais non avec des traits dignes de l'action, 
Et comme celle-ci déchet dans la peinture, 
La peinture déchet dans ma description.

But actually this comment underscores the success of his
project, which had been to show that the most shocking situation could be related in such a way that nobody would blush at the telling. A painter's rendering of this action, one step removed from the reality it portrayed, would have to be covered from view. But, increasing the distance between the object and the spectator by one more degree, the poet allowed his lady readers to remain separate enough from the situation that they could read his verses and remain unmoved, thus permitting them to maintain their unruffled exterior.

4. Conclusion

In the prologue of Le Tableau, La Fontaine said, "Qui pense finement et s'exprime avec grâce/ Fait tout passer, car enfin tout passe"; and in his tale, a triumph of ambiguity, he has indeed managed to make the scabrous at least artistically acceptable. But the collection which is terminated by this daring experiment did not "pass." Although he had wagered that he could avoid censorship, La Fontaine did after all receive "du busque sur les doigts" (613): the sale of the book was officially prohibited in 1675 and the scandal lingered on; nine years later La Fontaine was publicly reprimanded as he was finally being received into the Academy.

The rather sarcastic parenthetical comment on the
meaning of the word bachelier in Le Clochette, which he published the year after his reception into the Academy, and in which he disavows any intention to malign the Church, indicates perhaps that he was especially criticized for his treatment of the young nuns and their friends in Le Tableau. Actually, though he is impertinent and satirical, in none of his tales about nuns and priests does La Fontaine appear to be specifically anticlerical. He has no religious or moral purpose in such tales, as he protests solemnly in the prologue to L'Abbesse (IV, 2):

L'exemple sert, l'exemple nuit aussi.
Lequel des deux doit l'emporter ici?
Ce n'est mon fait: l'un dira que l'abbesse
En usa bien, l'autre au contraire mal,
Selon les gens. Bien ou mal, je ne laisse
D'avoir mon compte, et montrer en général,
Par ce que fit tout un troupeau de nommes,
Qu'ouailles sont la plupart des personnes:
Qu'il en passe une, il en passera cent;
Tant sur les gens est l'exemple puissant! (550)

Deciding whether the abbess was right or wrong in following the lead of the nuns under her care is not what interests him. He wants simply to tell a story about nuns that illustrates a characteristic of "la plupart des personnes."

Since his first tales about religieux, he has seen them as being no different from other people. "Tout homme est homme, et les moines sur tous" (464), he said
in *L'Ermité* (II, 15). Of course this thesis was rather shocking and La Fontaine knew it; but he nevertheless continued illustrating it in his adaptations of traditional tales about nuns and priests, using them—and even the story of *Saint Malo*—to make observations about human nature in general. The priest in *Le Cas de conscience* is no different from Anne: both are sensual and both are hypocritical, and their similarity is emphasized by the "pointe" at the end of the tale by which Anne parodies the priest's judgment of her sin in looking at the naked boy. "Autant vaut l'avoir vu que de l'avoir touché," he had said, reprimanding her for being "dans ses regards à tel point sensuelle" (561). When the priest upbraids her for not giving him the fish as the "tribut" she owes him for "l'examen de [ses] fautes," she retorts: "Autant vaut l'avoir vu que de l'avoir mangé" (562).

We have seen La Fontaine's comments in the prologue of *Mazet* on the futility of locking young girls behind the walls of a convent, and on the restraining influence of society on the behavior of women (469). The women addressed in the prologue to *Les Oise* and Anne in *Le Cas de conscience* illustrate La Fontaine's point that concern for their reputation assists women in controlling their natural impulses, as the nuns in *Le Tableau*, so unrestrainedly pur-
suining pleasure, seem to prove that any young woman who did not need to appear chaste would be the easy prey of her natural desires. But even if La Fontaine was making a general observation, even if his aim in Le Tableau was not to expose the sensuality of worldly nuns, his comparison between the "joie" of these "filles" and that of the "filles de joie," between their "maison" and a "maison de plaisir" was too audacious and was surely a factor in the censoring of his book and in his public censure.

Another factor that perhaps contributed to the scandal was his "principe" about women so dogmatically stated in the prologue to Le Tableau, and the story choices in the Nouveaux Contes and the "unveiling" techniques that were the consequence of his reasoning that, since women liked to look at indecent objects, they would like vulgar stories. As we have seen, the same thesis is more subtly implied in Le Cas de conscience, a tale whose kinship with Le Tableau is remarkable. In both there is an implied plea for naturalness, in both the author indirectly deplores artificiality while accepting it as necessary, and in both an observation of the inscrutable nature of women is accompanied by a discussion and demonstration of the technique of veiling. It would be interesting to know which of these tales was written first, whether La Fontaine enunciated his technique of veiling in Le Tableau as a result of his observation of a prudent young girl who found it sensible to call
things by agreeable names, or whether his discussion of his "painting" in Le Tableau suggested the examples of veiling in Le Cas de conscience. Whichever came first, in Le Tableau La Fontaine overstated his proposition about women, and his bald assertion was apparently offensive.

Whether he was right or wrong in his conclusion about women—and the lively surreptitious sale of his book may indicate that he was not wrong—he forgot his own rule for the "jeu" he was playing: he had failed to "garder en cela des bornes" (Préface, 346), and the official modesty was shocked. "Tout beau!" says Apollo in Le Tableau, "ces matières/ A fond ne s'examinent guères" (616)!
CHAPTER III
SYNTHESIS:
ILLUSION AND REALITY

A. Part Five of the Contes.
The Poet and his Critics

1. Introduction. Reaction to Censure

When La Fontaine began soliciting the seat on the Academy left vacant at the death of Colbert in September of 1683, one of his first steps, according to Perrault, was to send a letter "à un prélat de la Compagnie" disavowing his contes and promising never to write any more of them. On November 15 of that year, in a stormy session of the Academy, La Fontaine was elected to that august body; but the king delayed approving his admission, apparently to force the Academy to admit Boileau, the king's historiographer. In January of 1684, La Fontaine published in the Mercure Gallant a Ballade to the king, begging him to be "moins rigoureux,/ Plus indulgent, plus favorable" (639) than those who had disapproved of his tales, intimating that although objections to his contes were ridiculous, he would comply with the demand of certain persons that he cease writing them.

Quelques esprits ont blâmé certains jeux,
Certains récits, qui ne sont que sornettes.
Si je déferre aux leçons qu'ils m'ont faites,
Que veut-on plus?
After the election of Boileau to the Academy on April 17, 1684, La Fontaine's admission was approved by the king, and finally on May 2 he was officially received. The director of the Academy was obviously indignant over the admission of the author of the Contes, admonishing him severely, in a speech made in response to the reception speech of La Fontaine, to "joindre la pureté de moeurs à la doctrine, la pureté du coeur et de l'esprit à la pureté du style et du langage, qui n'est rien, à le bien prendre, sans l'autre" (OD 981). At the end of the session, La Fontaine read his Discours à Madame de La Sablière, in which he deplored his misspent life and his inconstance, "en vers comme en amours."

J'entends que l'on me dit: "Quand donc veux-tu cesser? Tu changes tous les jours de manière et de style; Tu cours en un moment de Térence à Virgile; Ainsi rien de parfait n'est sorti de tes mains. Hé bien! prends, si tu veux, encor d'autres chemins: Invoque des neuf Soeurs la troupe tout entière; Tente tout, au hasard de gâter la matière; On le souffre, excepté tes contes d'autrefois."

(OD 645)

But though he spoke candidly of his faults, he did not promise to cure himself of any of them; and so it was not surprising that he should publish in July of 1685, in the Ouvrages de prose et de poésie des Sieurs de Mauroix et de La Fontaine, five new tales, the last he would ever publish, in which certain comments of the author reveal clearly the resentment he felt at his censure by l'abbé
de La Chambre. But more than that, in writing these tales, La Fontaine seems to have made an effort to redefine, and to defend, his storytelling art; for in the personal commentary in these five tales, and in the techniques employed in them, may be seen a kind of résumé, or synthesis, of his theory and practice of the conte.

2. La Clochette

The opening lines of the first of these tales, La Clochette, seem to refer directly to the day of his formal reception into the Academy and echo the Discours à Madame de La Sablière.

Oh! combien l'homme est inconstant, divers, Faible, léger, tenant mal sa parole! J'avais juré hautement en mes vers De renoncer à tout conte frivole; Et quand juré? c'est ce qui me confond, Depuis deux jours j'ai fait cette promesse. Puis fiez-vous à rimeur qui répond D'un seul moment. Dieu ne fit la sagesse Pour les cerveaux qui hantent les neuf Soeurs: Trop bien ont-ils quelque art qui vous peut plaire, Quelque jargon plein d'assez de douceurs; Mais d'être sûr, ce n'est là leur affaire. (621)

Speaking thus playfully of his own inconstancy—of the need of diversity that had pushed this "Papillon du Parnasse" all his life to flit "de fleur en fleur, et d'objet en objet"—he seems also to be claiming indirectly the artistic freedom he had demanded twenty years earlier in beginning his career as a conteur. "Or, qu'il ne m'aît été permis
d'écrire de celles-ci, comme tant d'autres l'ont fait et avec succès, je ne crois pas qu'on le mette en doute," he had said of his stories in 1665, but admitting "qu'il faut garder en cela des bornes" (346). Now in La Clochette, speaking again of the author's right to exercise his art, he seems, as then, to insinuate that such things as his tales are pleasing to the reading public, and to admit as before the necessity to compromise:

Si me faut-il trouver, n'en fût-il point,
Tempérément pour accorder ce point;
Et, supposé que quant à la matière
J'eusse failli, du moins pourrais-je pas
Le réparer par la forme en tout cas?

These last three lines recall the end of his argument in the first preface for the acceptance of his subject: all that matters in these tales, he concluded then, was "la manière de les conter." They recall as well the oft-quoted line from Les Oies de Frère Philippe: "Contons, mais contons bien: c'est le point principal" (477). And these lines in La Clochette serve, ever so discreetly, the same function as the prologue of Le Tableau: that is, they alert the reader to look beneath the "forme" to see the "matière," for which the poet apparently needs to make amends. "Qui pense finement et s'exprime avec grâce/ Fait tout passer, car tout passe" (613), he said in Le Tableau. "Voyons ceci," he says in La Clochette, betting once again that he can make something indecent "pass" the watchful eye
of the censors.

The little tale that follows, whose source is unknown, is less than fifty lines long. It breaks a convention that is not broken in any other tale, the "rule" that all innocent young girls are as eager to be déniaisées as men are to oblige them. In other words, it is the story of the despicable rape of a thirteen-year-old girl, one of the few tales with a strangely moving, disquieting ending.

It begins with the sarcastic parenthetical explanation of the word "bachelier," which, as has already been noted, seems to refer to the scandal which arose over the Nouveaux Contes, and particularly to the last tale of that collection, Le Tableau, in which a bachelier is said to have instructed two nonnains in the fine points of love.

Dans la Touraine un jeune bachelier...
(Interpretez ce mot à votre guise:
L'usage en fut autrefois familier
Pour dire ceux qui n'ont la barbe grise;
Ores ce sont suppôts de sainte Eglise.)
Le nôtre soit sans plus un jouvenceau.

If you misinterpreted my intention in Le Tableau, we imagine him to be saying, if you believed me to be mocking the holy Church, you are the one who is at fault and not I. But this intervention does more than remind us of the Nouveaux Contes; somehow, in claiming that this young man is not a seminarian, the author manages to insinuate that he is. The reader unconsciously associates this young man
with hermits or priests in other tales who have deflowered young virgins or taken advantage of the simplicity of young wives; so that this "bachelier" seems a bit villainous as he "cajol[e] la jeune bachelette" in the meadows and beside the stream, lusting after one in particular who is too young to be interested. However, the atmosphere in general is not sinister. On the contrary, the piece has a pastoral and archaic tone, produced as much by the old word "bachelier" and the derivative "bachelette" as by the name "Io" representing the cows watched over by the young shepherdesses (if Io is not indeed the name of one single cow "portant une clochette"), by the repetition of the suffix -ette added to fille and jeune, and also by a digression on the sexual precocity of city girls, compared to the innocence of girls in the country.

Notre galant vous lorgne une fillette,
De celles-la que je viens d'exprimer;
Le malheur fut qu'elle était trop jeunette,
Et d'âge encore incapable d'aimer.
Non qu'a treize ans on y soit inhabile;
Même les lois ont avancé ce temps;
Les lois songeait aux personnes de ville,
Bien que l'amour semble né pour les champs.

With another vague reminder of Le Tableau, the author tells us that the "bachelier déploya sa science," but that the girl failed to respond to his efforts to seduce her.

So the would-be lover must resort to ruse. He leads a heifer away from the herd, and the author, remembering to make the action seem natural, intervenes to explain why
the young girl did not count the cows to be sure that she had them all: "Jeunesse n'a les soins qui sont requis."
Then in four brief lines he conveys the realistic scene between the girl and her mother, who discovers that one of the cows is missing.

Sa mère, étant moins oublieuse qu'elle,  
Vit qu'il manquait une piece au troupeau;  
Dieu sait la vie! elle tance Isabeau,  
Vous la renvoie ...  

The raucous voice of the peasant woman fades away as we follow the sobbing girl who, in the twilight, goes back to search for the heifer, "et demande aux échos/ Si pas un d'eux ne sait nulle nouvelle/ De celle-là." The bachelier had taken the bell from the heifer and, ringing it, he caused the girl, who thought she was on the trail of the heifer, to follow him into the woods. Imagine her terror when she heard the voice of her "amant," says the author to the reader, bringing the tale swiftly to its end:

"Belle, dit-il, toute chose est permise  
Pour se tirer de l'amoureux tourment."  
A ce discours la fille tout en transe  
Remplit de cris ces lieux peu fréquentés.  
Nul n'accourut. O belles, évitez  
Le fond des bois et leur vaste silence.

In all La Fontaine's other tales showing a lover "extricating himself" from the "amorous torment" of his desire for a woman, he makes it apparent that the man and woman are equally responsible for the situation that
develops between them and for its outcome; the woman's resistance is clearly half-hearted if not wholly feigned, so that such tales conclude gaily and satisfactorily, not only for the characters, but also for the reader. In 1666, in the preface to Part Two of the Contes he had presented this personal interpretation and treatment of existing story plots as a rule for the genre. In a tale, he said then, everybody should be happy at the end; happy endings are pleasing to the reader, unless the characters have been made to seem too hateful.

Mais il n'en faut point venir là, si l'on peut, ni faire rire et pleurer dans une même nouvelle. Cette bigarrure déplait à Horace sur toutes choses. (387)

But in La Clochette, La Fontaine replaces the amusing game of seduction by rape, seemingly out of resentment toward those who had reprimanded him for his past contes and in audacious defiance of their warning that, as a member of the Academy, where his progress "dans le chemin de la vertu" would not escape the notice of the king, he would be expected to unite purity of heart and mind to the purity of his style and language (OD 981).

If his only wager in this tale was that he could dress up his recounting of an incident of rape in language that would pass the censors' scrutiny, then he must be judged successful in his project. But if he was also betting that his "forme" could compensate for the seriousness of the
"matière"—that he could turn a tragic tale into something sufficiently playful that the reader would not be disturbed by the ending—then it must be admitted that he lost his wager. For the conteur does not succeed in removing that which is odious in the character of the bachelier. He seems to try to give him an excuse for his dastardly deed, explaining that this young man believed "tout artifice" to be permitted him in order that he might escape the "amoureux tourment." But however poetically expressed, this conventional argument is not acceptable here as justification of the lover's ruse. Not only has it been implied that the bachelier is a lustful villain, but the girl herself is shown to be unwilling. The situation, then, is unnatural, upsetting. One identifies, not with the bachelier, but with his victim, whose tender age and complete innocence render her a pathetic, if not a tragic, figure. As a result, one feels a certain uneasiness, even anguish, at the end of the tale, and this feeling is not alleviated by the lightness of the style.

On the contrary, the apparent beauty and innocence and gaiety of the pastoral scene intensifies the violence of the drama enacted beneath this surface calm. The poet's "forme," which for reasons of bienséance must only suggest indirectly the action of the scene, thus reveals clearly the tragedy of the "matière," rendering it more poignant than a more direct, realistic treatment might have done.
In this respect, *La Clochette* must be considered a singular artistic achievement. The commonplace moral of the story, contained in the last two lines—the usually joking advice to girls not to go alone into the woods, that calls to mind Perrault's *Little Red Riding Hood*—captures in a special way the imagination of the reader. Coming immediately after the brief, pathetic "Nul n'accourut," the warning to avoid the vast silence of the deep forest suggests to the reader the dark dread of life felt by this shepherdess, who was still too young to be ready for the mysteries of love.

3. *Le Fleuve Scamandre*

The second story in this last group to be published, *Le Fleuve Scamandre*, also contains references to the scandal of the *Nouveaux Contes* and to the indignities its author suffered on being received into the Academy. The prologue begins with another allusion to his inconstancy.

Me voilà prêt à conter de plus belle;  
Amour le veut et rit de mon serment.

Sarcastically admitting the necessity for more discretion, in lines that recall again the less acid "bornes" of the preface of 1665 as well as the discussion of veiling in *Le Tableau*, La Fontaine piously claims that rather than be the cause of corrupting his readers, he would prefer not even to entertain them!
Si, dans ces vers, j'introduis et je chante
Certain trompeur et certaine innocente,
C'est dans la vue et dans l'intention
Qu'on se méfie en telle occasion.
J'ouvre l'esprit, et rends le sexe habile
A se garder de ces pièges divers.

In the preface of 1665 it was "la douce mélancolie, où les romans les plus chastes et les plus modestes sont très capables de nous plonger" (347) that La Fontaine said he would fear, rather than the gaiety of his tales, as a "préparation pour l'amour." In Les Oies de Frère Philippe, it was "la cajolerie" of suitors that he feared "Ne mit le feu dans la maison," and not his "contes bleus" (478, 479). Now, in Le Fleuve Scamandre, it is ignorance that is seen as dangerous.

Sotte ignorance en fait trébucher mille,
Contre une seule a qui nuiraient mes vers.

As usual, La Fontaine is doing several things at once in his prologue. He is not only answering his critics and playfully making claims for the utility and appropriateness of his tales. He is introducing the story, stating discreetly its subject—another deflowering of a young virgin—and hinting as well at what he seems to be doing in this tale: writing a very decent parallel of three earlier tales about the dénaissement of a young innocente: L'Ermite (II, 15), Comment l'esprit vient aux fillès (IV, 1), and especially Le Diable en Enfer (IV, 9), one of the most impudent of the Nouveaux Contes. It has been suggested that
La Fontaine's thesis that all men are alike, illustrated in stories showing priests, monks, and nuns to have the same nature as other human beings, may have contributed to the scandal surrounding the collection of 1674. The examination of those tales has indicated that La Fontaine's suggestive description of "unmentionable" body parts and the act of love was also probably a factor in the censoring of the book. Both of these elements are present to a marked degree in *Le Diable en Enfer*, and it seems that in *Le Fleuve Scamandre* both are implied in "la chose" that the author proposes to disguise with "traits moins forts." Though the first lines of the prologue appear at first to be only claiming artistic freedom, as did the prologue of *La Clochette*, they are also a statement of the theme that all men, including the author, and even the gods are subject to their passions. And this time, the author will use mythology (in which gods often are seen to have the passions of men) instead of the Christian religion to illustrate his thesis.

*Hommes et dieux tout est sous sa tutelle,
Tout obéit, tout cède à cet enfant.*

This statement is certainly less daring than his previous assertion in *L'Ermité* that "Tout homme est homme, et les moines sur tous," but it is not really different.

The transitional stanza following the prologue also produces multiple effects. First, La Fontaine acknowledges his source, indicating from the beginning that the basic
facts of the story are not of his own invention, but taken from "un orateur estimé dans la Grèce," who, banished from his country, and accompanied by his friend Cimon, "voulut voir le séjour/ Où subsistaient encor les ruines de Troie."
The contemplation of the city built from the debris of Ilion, and noble by her misfortunes, inspires the exquisite, wistfully lyrical lines which suggest to the reader the poet's old love for the epic poetry which was no longer in vogue, the "language of the gods," whose passing he never lamented in more poignant tones.7

Ilion, ton nom seul a des charmes pour moi;  
Lieu fécond en sujets propres à notre emploi,  
Ne verrai-je jamais rien de toi, ni la place  
De ces murs élevés et détruits par des dieux,  
Ni ces champs ou couraient la Fureur et l'Audace  
Ni des temps fabuleux enfin la moindre trace  
Qui pût me présenter l'image de ces lieux?

Then, seeming to apologize for his digression—"Pour revenir au fait, et ne point trop m'étendre,"—he begins his tale, whose atmosphere has been prepared by this very reverie. The story, the first part of it, that is, has a remote, dreamy quality, appropriate for this delicate study of another young girl on the brink of womanhood. And this girl—like all the other young innocents in La Fontaine's tales except the "bachelette" in La Clochette—seems ready, even eager, to be initiated into life's mysteries.8

The simplicity of her dress matches the freshness of the banks of the river to which she is seen descending, a
freshness that in turn reflects the ingenuousness of this young "bergère."

Une jeune ingénue en ce lieu se vient rendre,  
Et goûter la fraîcheur sur ces bords toujours verts.  
Son voile au gré des vents va flottant dans les airs;  
Sa parure est sans art; elle a l'air de bergère,  
Une beauté naïve, une taille légère. (624)

Careful to preserve the illusion he is creating, which would be shattered by an obvious lack of logic, the author mentions immediately that there is a grotto nearby, a detail missing in his source. Continuing his preparations, he tells us that because of the heat, the solitude, and perhaps a vague erotic longing ("quelque dieu malin"), the girl decides to take a "demi-bain." Watching her along with us is Cimon, who, not by design as in the letter of Aeschines, but simply by chance, happens to have been walking beside the river as she came along. But now, devouring her hundred beauties with his eyes and heart, he is moved to take advantage of the superstition of the people of Troy!

Prend l'air d'un dieu des eaux, mouille ses vêtements,  
Se couronne de joncs et d'herbe dégouttante,  
Puis invoque Mercure et le dieu des amants:  
Contre tant de trompeurs qu'eût fait une innocente?

Like Alaciel in La Fiancée, this young girl will obviously be the victim of her nature and of circumstances, persuaded no less by her own desire than by the eloquence lent to this companion of Aeschines by the messenger of the gods.

La Fontaine seems always to have been fascinated by
what might be found hidden in the heart of a woman; perhaps
his particular predilection for situations in which someone
is watching a woman sleep or bathe was a way of translating
this fascination. It is as if in these unguarded moments
he felt that one might see into the souls of these inscrutable
creatures, which, when they were conscious of other
people watching, they were so careful to hide. Now we
watch this young girl as she uncovers a white foot:

Puis le plonge en l'onde argentée,
Et regarde ses lis, non sans quelque pudeur.

Thus absorbed in contemplating her own nude foot in the
clear water, she is surprised by Cimon and tries to hide
herself from him in the grotto, where he follows her.

Je suis, dit-il, le dieu qui commande à cette onde;
Soyez-en la déesse, et régnons avec moi:
Peu de Fleuves pourraient dans leur grotte profonde
Partager avec vous un aussi digne emploi.
Mon cristal est très pur; mon cœur l'est davantage;
Je couvrirai pour vous de fleurs tout ce rivage:
Trop heureux si vos pas le daignent honorer,
Et qu'au fond de mes eaux vous daigniez vous mirer!

There are so many memories here of other "ondes pures"
where men and women, in quiet seclusion, were able to dis-
cover themselves. But one thinks especially of Alibech,
the young, innocent girl of Le Diable en Enfer who found
herself mirrored in the young hermit Rustic, who consented
to share with her in his cabin in the woods his knowledge
of sainthood. The image of Rustic grows clearer as this
"god" seduces the girl in the same way as the young "saint," making her think that yielding to him would be an act of reverence.10

L'éloquence du dieu, la peur de lui déplaire,
Malgré quelque pudeur qui gâtait le mystère,
Conclurent tout en peu de temps:
La superstition cause mille accidents.
On dit même qu'Amour intervint à l'affaire.

How much more discreetly here than in Le Diable en Enfer does La Fontaine convey the half-hearted complicity, the awakening sexual desire of this young girl, who still believes in fairy tales. But the comparison with Alibeck and her own "superstition," who was herself "moitié forcée, et moitié consentante" (588), seems apparent.

An element that contributed to the surrender of the girl to the "god" Scamander was her own vanity, her susceptibility to the temptation of a position of eminence. This addition to the source seems to have been borrowed from L'Ermité, a tale about a young girl ("Pucelle encor, mais à la vérité,/ Moins par vertu que par simplicité") and a hypocritical hermit, who convinced her that from their illicit union would be born a pope.

Vous régnerez, serez la signora,
Ferez monter aux grandeurs tous les vôtres.
Princes les uns et grands seigneurs les autres,
Vos cousins ducs, cardinaux vos neveux;
Places, châteaux, tant pour vous que pour eux. (468)

Similarly, the "god" argues persuasively:
Je rendrai toutes vos compagnes
Nymphes aussi, soit aux montagnes,
Soit aux eaux, soit aux bois.

The pregnant girl in L'Ermite returns to her mother, her
pride in becoming the mother of a pope and her newly digni-

died demeanor conveyed by the ironic use of the word signora:

La signora, de retour chez sa mère,
S'entretenait jour et nuit du saint-père.

The "god" Scamander tells the young girl whom he has "wedded"
in the grotto not to announce their marriage until he has
spoken about it to the council on Olympus. This simple
young girl, building castles in Spain like La Laitière with
her pot au lait (168), and like "La signora" (who "mit au
monde une fille"!), already sees herself among the Immortals.

La nouvelle déesse à ces mots se retire,
Contente, Amour le sait. (625)

The word déesse here conveys the very human emotion of pride,
as well as the simplicity of this girl, and with this trait,
borrowed, it seems, from the earlier, more earthy tales, the
spell is broken. Whereas until now the situation has seemed

arbstract, general, a portrayal of the universal female in a
mythical setting, from here on the tale takes on a more
specific, realistic, human quality.

The idyll of the "god" and the girl ends for the
same reason as that of Alibech and Rustic—and countless
other couples in the tales: Cimon the "god," like the
author, is inconstant; like other men he must have diversity.

O mortels! est-il dit qu'à force d'être heureux
Vous ne le soyez plus? Le banni, sans rien dire,
Ne va plus visiter cet antre si souvent.

Cimon is exposed as an imposter during a wedding procession, and the girl's dream of a marriage in the heavens, a personal twist of La Fontaine, comes crashing down to earth.

La belle aperçoit l'homme, et crie en ce moment:
"Ah! voilà le fleuve Scamandre!"
On s'étonne, on la presse; elle dit bonnement
Que son hymen se va conclure au firmament.

But the denouement is happy:

On en rit; car que faire? Aucuns à coups de pierre
Poursuivirent le dieu, qui s'enfuit à grand'erre;
D'autres rirent sans plus.

The reaction of the people in La Fontaine's tale is exactly the opposite of that of the indignant Trojans of Aeschines' letter. By this change, and by a personal remark which accompanies it, the conteur calls attention to the increasing prudishness of his own society and seems to allude once more to the official disapproval of his tales.

. . . Je crois qu'en ce temps-ç'i
L'on ferait au Scamandre un très méchant parti.
En ce temps-la semblables crimes
S'excusaient aisément: tous temps, toutes maximes.

The new ending to the original is like that of Le Diable
en Enfer, where La Fontaine said more directly what he is saying here by antithesis: human beings may as well accept their weaknesses good-naturedly.

He tacks on an epilogue to Aeschines' anecdote, perhaps because of his tendancy to settle the fate of all the characters of a story. Or perhaps it was because the tale was Le Diable en Enfer in disguise that he gave it the ending that is so similar to that of its too-daring counterpart.

L'épouse du Scamandre en fut quitte à la fin
Pour quelques traits de raillerie.
Même un de ses amants l'en trouva plus jolie;
C'est un goût. Il s'offrit à lui donner la main.
Les dieux ne gâtent rien: puis, quand ils seraient cause
Qu'une fille en valût un peu moins, dotez-la,
Vous trouverez qui la prendra:
L'argent répare toute chose.

The additions La Fontaine made to his model, borrowed from his earlier tales, prepare, in a way, the satire in this epilogue. Nobody thinks of demanding perfection of this girl; and, as in Le Diable en enfer, money overcomes everybody's scruples. The phrase "Les dieux ne gâtent rien" is especially equivocal. It is hard to tell whether it is the excuse offered by the girl and her parents, or the one the "amant" gives himself when he decides to close his eyes to the faults of this girl who has an adequate dowry. Or whether it is the last sly comparison between priests and dieux, adding to the satire of man and society a carefully disguised satire of the church.
The many levels of meaning in this tale, the many memories of other tales, make this one of the most complex of La Fontaine's contes, and one of the most charming. La Fontaine's thought in this delicate, lyrical, satirical Fleuve Scamandre is always slipping just out of reach. But one has fleeting impressions of meaning that are all the more piquant because of their constant shifting about.

The thesis that all men share the same nature, announced in the prologue, seems to be illustrated in the tale, through the insistence on the device of the dieu-homme Cimon, and through the vague similarity of this tale with Le Diable en Enfer. And another theme, "know thyself," implied in the last lines of the prologue ("Sotte ignorance," etc.) does seem to be a strong undercurrent in the tale.

One of the most engaging parts of this story is La Fontaine's study of the young girl awakening to knowledge of herself on the banks of the Scamander. Such an abstracted version of other young innocentes in the tales that she doesn't even have a name, she seems the eternal female adolescent just becoming aware of her femininity.

To a greater extent than in most of the other tales, the poet himself seems present in this idyll played out near the Fleuve Scamandre. The cajolerie of lovers in the tales, from the time of Joconde, had won them the object of their desires, while the author of so many seduction scenes, who seems always to have been an admirer of women, claimed again
and again to have had little or no success as a lover. "J'ai servi des beautés de toutes les façons," he said in the prologue of Les Oies de Frère Philippe. "Qu'ai-je gagné? Très peu de chose, / Rien." And in Belphégor, which appeared in 1682, in the verses dedicating the tale to Mademoiselle de Champmeslé, he spoke again of his failure to win the favors of a beauty whom he desired.

De mes Philis vous seriez la première,  
Vous auriez eu mon âme toute entière,  
Si de mes vœux j'eusse plus présumé:  
Mais en aimant, qui ne veut être aimé?  
Par des transports n'espérant pas vous plaire,  
Je me suis dit seulement votre ami,  
De ceux qui sont amants plus d'a demi:  
Et plût au sort que j'eusse pu mieux faire! (642)

Although the recurring self-portrait of the poet presented in the guise of unhappy lover might well have been partially a literary pose, one does suspect that La Fontaine's joking self-disparagement, where women were concerned, hid more than a little truth. So that in Le Fleuve Scamandre, after his prologue on the irresistibility of Amour and his lyrical digression on the evocative power of the name Ilion, he seems to remain in the tale in the person of Cimon, "le héros de ces vers," the orator Aeschines' glib friend, who was aided in his seduction of the young Trojan virgin by the god of Eloquence. Cimon's success seems like wish-fulfillment for the poet, whose own eloquence created the dreamy atmosphere of this beguiling tale.
4. *Les Aveux indiscrets*

Throughout this study, from *Joconde* to the tales of 1685, we have seen that it is easy to misunderstand La Fontaine's "literary" comments in his tales, or rather, to understand them in more than one way. One never quite knows whether the author is serious in these remarks, or whether he is mocking literary theorists and critics of his tales. Especially in these ambiguous tales of 1685, La Fontaine's comments about his art are so colored by sarcasm directed against his censors, that it is almost impossible to decide exactly what he meant by them. A good example of the difficulty of interpreting La Fontaine's theorizing in his *contes* has already been noted in the three lines in *La Clochette* in which the author insists on the importance of form.

Et, supposé que quant à la matière
J'eusse failli, du moins pourrais-je pas
Le réparer par la forme en tout cas?

These lines reflect opposing theories of the purpose of art: those that derived from Aristotle claimed that art was justifiable by the pleasure its form afforded, while the theories that reflected the poetics of Horace insisted on the utility of the subject as well as pleasure, stating that a poet's aim in pleasing his public should be the moral instruction of his readers. In the light of our reading of *Le Fleuve Scamandre*, in which La Fontaine points out his increased efforts to comply with the rules of propriety
imposed on writers, and then unconvincingly claims to have a moral purpose in the tale, the lines on "forme" in *La Clochette* seem even more ambiguous. Was La Fontaine opting for pleasure over utility and denying that he had any interest in substance, or was he calling attention to his more circumspect manner of describing indecencies? Or was he doing both at once?

In the opening lines of *Les Aveux indiscrets* (V, 5) there is also a rather sarcastic, ambiguous comment that seems another instance of the author's intention to under-line his exaggerated efforts to submit himself to demands for decency. La Fontaine begins his story without a prologue. In the city of Paris, he says, none could compare with Aminte, a girl who had everything: she was beautiful, lovable, young, apparently chaste, and her father was rich. The handsome Damon fell in love with her.

Il fit si bien l'esclave de la belle,
Qu'il en devint le maître et le vainqueur.
Bien entendu sous le nom d'hyménée:
Pas ne voudrais qu'on le crut autrement. (634)

The author's intervention to clarify his meaning forces the reader to see the erotic situation hidden beneath the superficially elegant, precious diction, and points out the inconsistency and prudish hypocrisy of censors of his tales. On the other hand, by this intervention La Fontaine also mockingly implies his good, moral intentions.
The tale is simple and not very amusing, but La Fontaine's use of an expression which he had used in an earlier tale to refer to a cuckolded husband (Le Bât, III, 8), plus another analagous expression, provides the pretext for an interesting, and again quite ambiguous, response to critics of his tales. The wedded bliss of Damon and Aminte is disrupted at the end of a year when Damon confesses a premarital indiscretion which resulted in the birth of a daughter; Aminte responds to his confession by admitting having had a son as the result of a similar indiscretion. In despair, the jealous husband straps on a pack-saddle and cries out, "Je suis bâté!" The good bourgeois mother of Aminte, who comes with her husband to try to patch up the quarrel of the young couple, berates Aminte for her indiscretion in telling her husband about her son. "I myself had three children before I was married," she says, "but do you think I have told your father?" Unfortunately, the husband is listening to this confidential conversation. Beside himself, he straps on the girth of the pack-saddle and goes about the town crying, "Je suis sanglé!"

"Les deux maris vont dans maint carrefour, Criant, courant, chacun a sa maniere: "Bâté" le gendre, et "sanglé" le beau-père. (636)

"They" won't believe this last point, La Fontaine says, and then presents an extravagant "proof" of the truth contained in his tale. He uses the episode from the Orlando
Furioso, in which the betrayed Orlando kills the horse of his rival Medoro and drags away Angelica's mare, to show that the action of the husbands of his tale has had a precedent in literature, and that "je suis sangle" and "je suis bâté" mean the same thing.

Tout deux sont bons. Vous voyez de la sorte Que ceci peu contenir vérité.

This study has suggested that when La Fontaine spoke of being interested in neither the "vrai" nor the "vraisemblable" in 1665, he was denying the relevance to his contes of current opposing theories of imitation, and not literally excluding truth or plausibility from his tales. Now, similarly, in Les Aveux indiscrets he seems to be spoofing another literary theory. He does not appear to be implying that there is no truth at all in his tale; on the contrary, his joking explanation of a kind of anti-vérité serves to point out the figurative meaning of the two terms bâté and sangle and of the action of the two husbands, an action that demonstrates the truth that jealousy is folly and only makes the victim of such a passion look silly. But his elaborate explanation seems to be a tongue-in-cheek answer to the criticism of certain of his fellow members of the Academy that his tales were frivolous and therefore worthless. For after proving the "vérité" of his tale, he shows its "utilité." To do this he assumes the role of marriage
counselor, as in La Fiancée, and advises:

Le noyau d'hymen doit être respecté,  
Veut de la foi, veut de l'honnêteté;  
Si par malheur quelque atteinte un peu forte  
Le fait clocher d'un ou d'autre côté,  
Comportez-vous de manière et de sorte  
Que ce secret ne soit point éventé.

In such a case, "Mentir . . . est digne de pardon," he says piously, and then finishes with a disarming confession:

Je donne ici de beaux conseils, sans doute:  

In other tales, and in a variety of tones, La Fontaine has spoken sincerely, it seems, of the "lies" necessary for life in society. But just as his literary discussions should not be accepted at face value, so should his moralizing be read skeptically. The "mentir" is here difficult to assess, but in this context, his moral advice seems to be spoken in the same ironic tone as the rest of the discussion.

Boileau's Art poétique, published in 1674, had omitted the least reference to the author of the Contes, and had condemned a "vain amusement" that did not join the "useful" with the "pleasant."

Auteurs, prêtez l'oreille à mes instructions.  
Voulez-vous faire aimer vos riches fictions?  
Qu'en savantes leçons votre Muse fertile  
Partout joignez au plaisant le solide et l'utile.  
Un lecteur sage fuit un vain amusement,  
Et veut mettre à profit son divertissement. (B 182)
His Epître IX, written in 1675, appeared for the first time in 1683; it continued the thought of the Art poétique to speak of truth as being indispensable in art as in life.

Rien n'est beau que le vrai, le vrai seul est aimable...
Il doit régner partout, et même dans la fable.
De toute fiction l'adroite fausseté
Ne tend qu'à faire aux yeux briller la vérité. (B 134)

It is amusing to think that Boileau may have been among those who were the targets of La Fontaine's raillery of the theories concerning "vérité" and "utilité." It is perhaps the unexpected intrusion of Ariosto into Les Aveux indiscrets, to prove the truth of the anecdote, that reminds the reader of the tales that La Fontaine's rival for a seat in the Academy had, during the years when he was considerably less prudish, helped launch La Fontaine's career as a conteur, defending, and thus publicizing, in his Dissertation La Fontaine's Joconde.

5. Le Remède

Still another of the tales of 1685, Le Remède, seems an impudent answer to such critics as Boileau. It begins with a very equivocal prologue on the advisability of seeking out the truth and portraying it discreetly.

Si l'on se plait à l'image du vrai,
Combien doit-on rechercher le vrai même!
J'en fais souvent dans mes contes l'essai;
Et voilà toujours que sa force est extrême,
Et qu'il attire à soi tous les esprits.
Non qu'il ne faille en de pareils écrits
Feindre les noms; le reste de l'Affaire
Se peut conter sans en rien déguiser;
Mais quant aux noms, il faut au moins les taire.
Et c'est ainsi que je vais en user. (631)

In his discussion of a new conception of the imitation of
nature that appeared in literary theories around 1660, René
Bray said of this passage: "La Fontaine reconnaît aussi que
la vérité plaît." But although La Fontaine does not deny
the principle that "rien n'est beau que le vrai," he hardly
seems serious in this prologue. On one level at least, and
behind a veil of ambiguity that makes his meaning almost in-
discernible, he seems to be repeating the thesis he advanced
in Le Tableau: I have noticed, he seems to say, that every-
body is attracted to my description of "true" (read vulgar)
objects and situations; but to comply with the demand for
modesty, I will call this truth by another name. Or, as he
said in Le Tableau, "Nuls traits à découvert n'auront ici
de place;/ Tout y sera voilé, mais de gaze" (613). Four
times, then, in the tales of 1685, La Fontaine appears to
refer very subtly to his daring discussion and demonstra-
tion in Le Tableau of his theory of veiling: in his remarks
on form in La Clochette; in his promise to disguise "la
chose" in Le Fleuve Scamandre; in his intervention to point
out the veiling accomplished by precious diction, and in
his illustration of words and actions that have literal and
figurative meanings in Les Aveux indiscrets; and now in
Le Remède in these comments on the importance of portraying
the "vrai" in art. The expression "feindre les noms" reminds us of Le Cas de conscience (IV, 4), in which La Fontaine speaks of the tendency of poets to employ euphemisms. These words that "disent et ne disent pas," as he put it in Le Tableau, reflect a similar tendency of people in society to employ euphemistic language. This characteristic of cultured people is demonstrated in Le Remède in the title itself. Régnier points out that the word remède was considered more "noble" than the wordsclystère and lavement and that the Academy included this new meaning of the word in its Dictionary of 1694, "sur le désir, dit-on, du Roi lui-même." At the end of the story, to describe the lover gallantly substituting himself for his maîtresse when the servant comes to administer the "remède," La Fontaine demonstrates his ability to "feindre les noms."

. . . il présenta pour elle
Ce que Brunel à Marphise montra.
La gouvernante ayant mis ses lunettes,
Sur le galant son adresse éprouva;
Du bain interne elle le régala. (533)

On another level, La Fontaine seems to be talking about the difference between truth and fiction in this prologue when he speaks of the "vrai" and the "image du vrai," suggesting that in order to achieve verisimilitude it is necessary to arrange artfully the truth: "feindre les noms." This possible meaning becomes more apparent in the discussion at the end of the tale in which the author answers those who
would criticize the *vraisemblance* of his story. The heroine of the tale, described as the spirited, headstrong daughter of a well-to-do family of Normandy, is able to persuade her materialistic parents to allow her to marry the young man of her own choice, though he is less wealthy than the person they had destined for her. During the long delay necessary for arranging the marriage, the determined girl, "*ayant fait dans son coeur* / *Cet hyménée, acheva le mystère* / Selon les us de l'île de Cythère." Her lover is still in her bed when her nurse enters early one morning, as planned, "*remède en main.*" Now the girl behaves in a manner that belies the willful character that the author has given her, and he points this out.

La fille alors ne fut pas assez fine;  
Elle n'avait qu'à tenir bonne mine,  
Et faire entrer l'amant au fond des draps,  
Chose facile autant que naturelle.  
L'émotion lui tourna la cervelle;  
Elle se cache elle-même, et tout bas  
Dit en deux mots quel est son embarras.  
L'amant fut sage: il présenta pour elle, etc.

The nurse is none the wiser, and all ends well.

The tale finished, the author says that if all this were only nonsense—and he would not swear that it is not—the "critiqueurs . . . peuple sévère" would find fault with his characterization of the girl.

*Ils me diront: "Votre belle en sortit  
En fille sotte et n'ayant point d'esprit:  
Vous lui donnez un autre caractère;*
Cela nous rend suspecte cette affaire:  
Nous avons lieu d'en douter; auquel cas  
Votre prologue ici ne convient pas."

"Je répondrai . . ." he begins, but then, just as he had  
done in Joconde when the imagined critics interrupted his  
tale to accuse the author of invraisemblance, he refuses to  
answer.

Par cent raisons j'aurais beau les confondre;  
Cicéron même y perdrait son latin.

But what would have been his "cent raisons" with which he  
could have confounded the critics? In Le Remède he had ar-  
ranged his fiction as carefully as he had always done, pre-  
paring the reason for the remède, the reason for the invrai-  
semblable reaction of the girl, intervening to indicate that  
though the character of the girl would lead one to expect  
more self-possession in such a circumstance, her emotion  
got the better of her judgment. The fact is, he might have  
said, truth is stranger than fiction, people do not always  
behave logically, their actions are not always voluntary; for  
if they are part "cervelle," they are also part "émotion."  
In telling you a true story about a true person, have I not  
created the "image du vrai?" Until I stopped to discuss the  
question with you, had you even questioned the vraisemblance  
of the tale?

Instead of all this, La Fontaine says simply, "J'ai  
mes garants," repeating his response to anticipated criticism
twenty years earlier in the preface of 1665.

On me peut encore objecter . . . qu'il y a des absurdités, et pas la moindre teinture de vraisemblance. Je réponds en peu de mots que j'ai mes garants. (347)

"Je le rends comme on me le donne," he said in *Joconde*.

Defending La Fontaine's method in *Joconde*, Boileau had said:

Il rapporte à la vérité des aventures extravagantes, mais il les donne pour telles . . . et si le lecteur lui veut faire un procès sur le peu de vraisemblance qu'il y a aux choses qu'il raconte . . . il s'en sauve en riant. (B 312)

How ironic it is to think that now in 1685 Boileau is among those who would find fault with the narrative technique which he had praised as surpassing even that of Ariosto.

With *Le Remède* we have come full circle in the examination of La Fontaine's attitude toward literary critics and their theories. Here, as in *Joconde*, he "runs away laughing" from the critics, secure in his knowledge that whatever this "peuple sévère" may say, however loudly they may clamor against him, he has a large public who enjoy his tales. And from *Joconde* to *Le Remède* La Fontaine's attitude has not changed regarding the pet theories of these critics. His mockery of the "vrai" and the "image du vrai" in *Le Remède*, though more ambiguous and sarcastic than ever before, only emphasizes what he seemed to be saying in his comment on the "vrai" and the "vraisemblable" in *Joconde* and the preface to the *Contes* of 1665: that he refused to be
judged by the standards applied to other, more serious
genres, and that he claimed the right to exercise his story-
telling art, to the end of entertaining his readers.
B. Conclusion

In any period, there is an interaction between an author's own creative urges—his preferences, his particular talents, his yearnings for expression—and the aesthetic standards of the society for which he is writing. Especially during the 17th century in France would the tension between these inner and exterior forces have been an important factor in artistic creation. The myth of writers of that century submitting to literary principles imposed upon them by Chapelain and Boileau has long been dispelled. But, certain formally stated standards of literary excellence having been more or less accepted by the cultivated public, an author was compelled to comply, to whatever extent and in whatever way was possible for him, to the taste of the time. Studies of the works produced during the classical period show this taste to have been quite catholic. Nevertheless, in all its various modes of expression, what we call French classical literature—that which was created to appeal to the evolving society of 17th-century France—reveals, to a greater or lesser degree, particular characteristics: certain attitudes, certain recurring subjects and themes, together with a special respect for form.

Throughout his career, La Fontaine wrote numerous prefaces in which he discussed aesthetic theories and technical problems, frequently including such commentary within the various works themselves. This conscious and con-
scientious examination of his art reveals his constant concern with the problems involved in trying sincerely to adapt his creative impulses to his public, especially when the public, like the poet himself, was pleased by a variety of literary styles and forms; "... je m'accomoderai;" he said, "s'il m'est possible, au goût de mon siècle."

There were those during the 17th century, as in any age, who claimed the right to dictate taste, those who, for aesthetic or moral reasons, wanted to limit the literary activity of both writers and readers to certain standards of beauty or propriety. It was against these restrictions, imposed not by the taste of readers nor by the author's own sense of fitness but by the arbitrary demands of theoreticians and censors, that La Fontaine revolted.

The history of the Contes dramatizes this revolt. In the prefaces to the first two volumes of tales, and interwoven in many of the tales themselves, from Joconde (1664) to Les Quiproquois (published posthumously in 1696) are echoes of all the important tenets of what is now called the Classical Doctrine. These remarks, the tales themselves, and the fact of La Fontaine's continuous writing and publication of tales in the face of official disapproval, together reveal the author's own theory for the conte, a "classical" theory founded on artistic liberty, this liberty limited only by the twofold principle of bienséance: the intrinsic fitness of all parts to the whole, and the ex-
trinsic fitness of the work to the society for which it was intended.

The Classical Doctrine was concerned only with the genres written in verse by the ancients: the epic, the tragedy, the comedy, and lyric, bucolic, and satiric poetry; and the century was rife with literary quarrels between adherents of different interpretations of the theories that made up the Doctrine. The idea of applying a set of rules destined to regulate the *grande genres* to such works as the tales seems, at first glance, ludicrous, and one senses La Fontaine's irony in many of his comments on literary theories found in the *Contes* and their prefaces. This mocking tone contributes to the gay atmosphere of the tales. La Fontaine seems partly to have included these remarks for the publicity value of literary quarrels. On the other hand, a careful reading of the tales makes it impossible to doubt the sincerity of the storyteller's intention to establish guide lines for the new genre he was developing: "il s'est véritablement engagé dans une carrière toute nouvelle, et il l'a fournie le mieux qu'il a pu" (386).

Basic to the Classical Doctrine, and to La Fontaine's own theory, was the principle of imitation. Implied in writing a new version of an old tale, by nature licentious and in many cases so well-known as to be almost worn-out, was the impudent *gageure* that the story could be re-created
in a way that would render it even more amusing, and that furthermore the new story would pass not only the eye of the 17th century critic, but also of the censor. La Fontaine's first real literary success was the result of his wager that he could write a better tale than Bouillon, better even than Ariosto. And in 1682, after the interdiction of the too-audacious Nouveaux Contes and while he was trying to obtain membership in the Academy, he published La Matrone d'Ephèse, betting again that he could update an old tale and make it "pass," confident of his ability to please.

S'il est un conte usé, commun, et rebattu,
C'est celui qu'en ces vers j'accommode à ma guise.
"Et pourquoi donc le choisis-tu?
Qui t'engage à cette entreprise?
N'a-t-elle point déjà produit assez d'écrits?
Quelle grâce aura ta Matrone
Au prix de celle de Pétrole?
Comment la rendras-tu nouvelle à nos esprits?"
Sans répondre aux censeurs, car c'est chose infinie,
Voyons si dans mes vers je l'aurai rajeunie. (637)

Comparing La Fontaine's tales with their models, as he seems repeatedly to challenge us to do, has proven to be the best method of assessing his remarks concerning the vraisemblable and the vrai, concepts of capital importance to French classical literature. One sees immediately that there is little realism, in the 19th-century French sense of the word, in the tales. Not only did La Fontaine leave out most of the details of his source materials that individualized the characters or identified their culture or
revealed their authors' particular philosophy, but he added very little "local color" to replace that which he deleted. As in the tragedies of the day, the reader is left to imagine most of the setting and costumes of the tale, and is free to fill in for himself the bare outlines of the characters' features and personality. Leaving out these details, La Fontaine made his tales generally more concise than their models, to concentrate his reader's attention on the action. This action, strictly speaking, is no more realistic than the decor; however, within the universe of the Contes, it is plausible. Though the author of this universe claimed no interest in the rules for verisimilitude, he in fact took great care in making his tales "seem true," pointing out in the tales themselves that questions of vraisemblance simply do not arise, so well has he created an illusion of reality.

He seemed aware that the creation of the illusion depended first of all on the attitude of the reader, on his willing cooperation. He consented to publish Part I of the tales, he said, only because "on était en train d'y prendre plaisir" (345). Everybody likes licentious stories, he intimated; they have been written and enjoyed for hundreds of years. A reader who opens a book of tales is already expecting to be amused. Ready to escape into a make-believe world, he is conditioned in advance to accept and enjoy the story, no matter how improbable it might be. To "entertain"
and "please" the reader, the writer has only to "attract" his attention and "fasten" it to the tale; and "pleasing" is the storyteller's "principal point" (387).

Even in his first tales La Fontaine made structural changes in his sources that made the Contes not only more concise and unified than their models but that gave them a more rapid forward movement. As he indicated in his remarks on fondements, the clarity and apparent logic of his plots is due to the consequential action: "une chose, la plupart du temps, est la suite et la dépendance d'une autre" (387). And he experimented from the first tales with two types of suspense. 

Joconde illustrates the type in which the suspense derives from ignorance of the outcome of the plot. The desire to know what will happen rivets the reader's attention to the tale, his eager curiosity indicating that he is temporarily deluded into believing that what he is reading is not fiction, but an account of a true story. 

La Fiancée du roi de Garbe illustrates another type of suspense, that which comes from the anticipation of completion of a plot whose outcome is already known. In tales with this kind of structure, that is, those which are introduced by a prologue in which the author hints at the denouement and even at some of the events of the tale, the reader's pleasure comes from the storyteller's skill in creating an illusion of a world in which all the improbable events of the tale seem real, leading as they do to a conclusion already known
to be inevitable.\textsuperscript{13}

The characters of the tales convince because they are consistent within the universe created for them. In their own world they are "true." Like stock characters in the theatre, they behave according to set conventions, so much so that any deviation from the pattern is at once noticeable. Speaking of a husband, for example, who could not be persuaded to be unfaithful to his wife, the author says that he finds him less believable than something admittedly supernatural would be.

\begin{quote}
L'Hippogriffe n'a rien qui me choque l'esprit,
Non plus que la Lance enchantée;
Mais ceci, c'est un point qui d'abord me surprit. (499)
\end{quote}

This remark is especially interesting, coming as it does immediately after the lines in which the "enchanteresse" Nérie, who controlled the winds, the tempests, and Destiny itself, is made to seem perfectly natural by the emphasis given to her conventionally human inability to resist the power of love: "Avec toute sa science,/ Elle ne put trouver de remède à l'amour." In addition to the predictable nature of the characters, their direct discourse is important in the creation of an apparent reality. The exposition of the tales is typically written in the past tense, the tense changing to the present as the action begins. In the midst of the narrative, which in switching from the past to the present tense encourages the reader to visualize the scene
in progress, the characters are given speech, and an "actual" existence is thus created: the reader, seeming to hear their voices and see their gestures, is deluded into believ-
ing, momentarily, that he is witnessing a real conversation between real people.

The illusion created by the "logical" plot and the "natural" characters whose action is rendered "visible" is like the illusion created in the theater. Not the high illusion of tragedy, or even of ordinary comedy, which is due, in part, to a much stricter adherence to rules of vraisemblance than is found in the tales. But the illusion of farce. At the end of the extravagant fairy tale Le Petit Chien qui secoue de l'argent et des pierreries (III, 13), whose improbable plot depends entirely on magic, La Fontaine, tongue in cheek, answers imaginary criticism of the struc-
ture of his tale.

"Que devint le palais?" dira quelque critique.
Le palais? que m'importe? il devint ce qu'il put.
À moi ces questions! suis-je homme qui se pique
D'être si régulier? Le palais disparut.
"Et le chien?" Le chien fit ce que l'amant voulut.
"Mais que voulut l'amant?" Censeur, tu m'importunes.

(542)

On the one hand, the storyteller is here excusing himself from following to the letter the rules written for more serious genres. But on the other hand, he uses this apparent interruption as an excuse to write an epilogue in which he indulges his impulse—as he does in other tales—to com-
plete the action that is only partially unified in the tale itself.

At the end of another tale, *Les Lunettes* (IV, 12), he points out the lack of formal unity which is quite typical of farces. In this tale a young man is caught living in a convent, disguised as a nun. He had passed as one of the *fillettes*, the author takes pains to tell us, because his beard had not yet begun to grow; but he had nevertheless fathered the *petite créature* which Sister Agnes had brought into the world. The prioress and the old nuns are incensed, the one, the author hints, because she fears criticism from her peers and superiors, the others, we are led to believe, because they are jealous of the sexual attractiveness of the younger sisters. The *jouveneau* is to be punished by a sound thrashing; and the storyteller carefully explains why, in the next to the last scene, the young man is left alone, tied to a tree, "Le dos à l'air avec toute la suite": the younger more sympathetic nuns have been locked up, and the *vieilles brebis* have gone to look for all manner of terrible instruments with which to chastise him.

This self-consciously "logical" narrative leads to the final action, which, though it gaily terminates the story, leaves it quite disunified. A miller, mounted on his mule, happens along, and the *jouveneau* cleverly inveigles this dull-witted would-be "Mazet" to take his place. The tale ends with a veritable witches' dance, worthy of the
finale of a Molière farce.

Large d'épaule, on aurait vu le sire
Atteindre nu les nonnains en ce lieu,
L'escadron vient, porte en guise de cierges
Gaules et fouets: procession de verges;
Qui fit la ronde à l'entour du meunier,
Sans lui donner le temps de se montrer,
Sans l'avertir. "Tout beau! dit-il, Mesdames,
Vous vous trompez, considérez-moi bien:

—Qu'entend ce rustre, et que nous veut-il dire?
S'écria lors une de nos sans dents;
Quoi! tu n'est pas notre faiseur d'enfants?
Tant pis pour toi, tu payras pour le sire:

À ce discours, fouets de rentrer en jeu,
Verges d'aller, et non pas pour un peu;
Meunier de dire en langue intelligible,
Crainte de n'être assez bien entendu:
"Mesdames, je... ferai tout mon possible
Pour m'acquitter de ce qui vous est dû."

Pendant qu'on donne au maître l'anguillade,
Le mulet fait sur l'herbette gambade.

What finally happened to the miller? What became of the young man saved from the ire of these toothless old women?

The author answers:

Je ne le sais, ni ne m'en mets en peine:
Suffit d'avoir sauvé le jouvenceau,
Pendant un temps les lecteurs, pour douzaine
De ces nonnains au corps gent et si beau,
N'auraient voulu, je gage, être en sa peau.

Again refusing to be régulier, La Fontaine seems also to be parodying the theories for tragedy which state that through identifying with a character, the spectator experiences the passion of terror or of compassion. As a matter of fact, the reader, engrossed in this extravagant finale, has in all likelihood forgotten all about the hero of the tale;
without this reminder, he would probably not have thought of him again. This little farce, like the other tales, binds the reader not by its strict observance of rules for verisimilitude but by its own particular symmetry. Neither perfectly unified nor absolutely plausible, it creates a universe which is consistently ridiculous, within whose confines the reader is both interested and amused, willingly deluded and pleasantly diverted.

Though the dramatic elements of the Contes would make them easily adaptable to the stage—and indeed a large number of them were dramatized during the 17th and 18th centuries—\(^1\) the storytelling of the tales remains quite different from story-enactment as seen in the theatre. The differences in the two forms result in large part from the difference in the audience for which each is written. Whereas a play is written for a large crowd of spectators, a tale is written for an individual reader, and the confidential tone of the Contes is one of their most distinctive qualities. It is this very intimacy that makes their subject matter acceptable: the fair sex, "sans qu'il le dise," may read these adventures and "rire sous cape." Furthermore, appealing to the reader's own imagination, the author is able to leave out not only many details which, explicitly expressed, would shock the reader's sense of bienséance, but many more which, though they would supply information that would contribute to the superficial vraisemblance of
the action, would only lengthen and complicate unnecessarily the tale.

The author is almost continually present in the *Contes*. He intrudes to repeat information already given, which the reader may have forgotten; he supplies further facts about the plot, which he has not given in the exposition; he describes simultaneous actions, only one of which would normally be visible on the stage; he calls attention to various meanings of certain words; he digresses, discussing subjects that seem unrelated to the plot; he emphasizes certain character traits; he explains the significance of the action, pointing out a moral at times, as in the fables. Frequently a tale begins with a prologue in which the author states a principle that is supposedly illustrated by the story, and quite often, by means of an epilogue, the author projects the consequences of the action of the tale into the future. Though the narrator's presence contributes to the charm of the tales, the author of a play must, as much as possible, remain off stage. Of course playwrights have always had to adapt certain storytelling techniques to their use; necessary information and attitudes must be related, and this is often accomplished by means of conversations, messengers' reports, monologues, and the like, which are essentially narrations. How to make these undramatic elements seem dramatic, while allowing the spectator to understand, on the spot, the implications of the
action and the dialogue, is a constant concern of playwrights. Further study of La Fontaine's narrative techniques, compared with his methods in his pieces for the theatre and the methods of the best playwrights of his century, would help to explain his having repeatedly failed in the area of acted drama, while succeeding so well in creating the narrated drama of the tales and fables.

One of the most interesting features of the Contes—and one of the most characteristic—is the author's consciousness of the critic and his frequent reference to contemporary literary quarrels and technical and aesthetic problems. Our examination of these remarks in the context of the tales has shown them to be seldom, if ever, completely gratuitous. Sometimes they give meaning to the tale or to the characters; sometimes the tale itself helps illuminate the author's intention in his discussions of literary problems. They are hardly more extraneous to the tales than is the discussion of the règles unessential to the plot of Molière's La Critique de L'Ecole des femmes. What this study has suggested is that, just as Molière's L'Impromptu de Versailles is a comedy about making comedies, just as Corneille's Illusion comique is a play about the magical powers of playwrights and actors to create illusion, so do many of La Fontaine's Contes seem to be tales about storytelling, about the art of creating a fiction that will pass, without too close a scrutiny, for the truth.
Their apparent subject is of course love, the great subject of French classical literature. Dealing not with the heroic and tragic aspects of love as do the tragedies, but with its every-day, seamy side, they portray a dream world in which it is possible to satisfy one's every inclination or sensual appetite. This *songe* is created by *mensonge*; the illusion depends on a convincing fiction. In the tales there is what seems to be a conscious correlation between the seduction of women and the seduction of readers: as a man cajoles a woman, artfully deceiving and ensnaring her, so does the storyteller, by his art, entice and beguile the reader ("attach[e] le lecteur . . . le réjou[i]t . . . attir[e] malgré lui son attention" (387)). This relationship is not restricted to the seduction of women. The idea that suggests itself again and again is that any character who dupes another is doing the same thing a writer does: creating an appearance that passes for reality.

This correlation seems apparent even in tales that do not contain a discussion of technique. An interesting example of such a tale is *La Gageure des trois commères* (II, 7), whose real subject seems to be the creation of the vraisemblable. It consists of three stories told in the framework of a wager: each of three wives bets she can devise the best trick for deluding her husband and enjoying her paramour under her husband's very nose, and each agrees to tell, "sans nul déguisement . . . le cas au vrai" (422).
Thus insinuating that the stories about to be told are "true," the author proceeds to tell them one by one. The ruses vary in audacity according to the nature of the husbands. The first is devised to trick the least gullible. To fool this husband who believes only what he sees, the wife carefully prepares an exterior "reality": she disguises her young lover in the costume of a chambermaid, counting on the husband's own imagination to convince him that what he sees is really a pretty young girl applying for a position in their household. The faultiness of the husband's vision, who actually sees only what he wants to see, is accentuated by the role that "eyes" play in the first part of this tale.

Le jouvenceau ... vient pour se louer
D'un air modeste; et baissant la paupière.
Du coin de l'œil l'époux le regardait,
Et dans son coeur déjà se proposait
De rehausser le linge de la fille.
Bien lui semblait, en la considérant,
N'en avoir vu jamais de si gentille.
On la retient, avec peines pourtant:
Belle servante, et mari vert galant,
C'était matière à feindre du scrupule;
Les premiers jours, le mari dissimule,
Détourne l'œil, et ne fait pas semblant
De regarder sa servante nouvelle;
Mais tôt après il tourna tant la belle,
Qu'elle feignit à la fin de se rendre. (422)

All three characters are playing a role, and the husband is so busy playing his that he doesn't "see" that he is being duped. At the end, when the wife "discovers" the chambermaid in her husband's bedroom, she whisks her off for safe-
keeping to her own bed.

S'en va jouer un autre personnage;
Fait au logis deux métiers tour à tour;
Galant de nuit, chambrière de jour. (424)

The second trick is played on the husband who is
most easily duped; so the ruse need not be at all vrai-
semblable: "Il ne faut pas se lever trop matin/ Pour lui
prouver que trois et deux font quatre" (421). The trick
can be explained "en peu de mots":

L'autre, de qui le mari croyait tout,
Avec qui lui sous un poirier assise,

Leur grand valet près d'eux était debout,
Garçon bien fait, beau parleur, et de mise,
Et qui faisait les servantes trotter.
La dame dit: "Je voudrais bien goûter
De ce fruit-là; Guillot, monte, et secoue
Notre poirier." Guillot monte à l'instant.
Grimpé qu'il est, le drôle fait semblant
Qu'il lui paraît que le mari se joue
Avec la femme . . . (424)

After this drastically abridged opening, the pace slows down
in order for the words of the "beau parleur" to work their
charm. The valet claims so convincingly to have seen from
the treetop his master taking his pleasure with his mistress
that the husband climbs the pear tree to see for himself
whether it is enchanted.

Le maître à peine est sur l'arbre monté,
Que le valet embrasse la maîtresse.
L'époux, qui voit comme l'on se caresse,
Crie, et descend en grand'hâte aussitôt. (426)
Having climbed the tree because he was convinced that the valet's illusion was real, at the end he is persuaded, by words alone, that reality itself is an illusion.

L'époux remonte, et Guillot recommence. 
Pour cette fois, le mari voit la danse 
Sans se fâcher, et descend doucement.

The reader himself can hardly imagine the "ébats" under the pear tree, so lightly does La Fontaine suggest them. After the sorcery of words has done its work, the tale ends abruptly; the tree is chopped down without explanation. "Abattez seulement," the wife says to the workmen. "Quant au surplus, ce n'est pas votre affaire."

The success of the third wife's ruse depends once again on the credulity of the husband, but it is considerably more complicated than either of the first two. Pleasure, for this wife, consists in the intellectual challenge of the rare and difficult; and to introduce her tale the author demonstrates the mental acrobatics necessary for devising and carrying out her trick, using a rather complex paraphrase to say that though the wife often found pleasure outside the conjugal bed, the husband always slept at home.

Bon besoin eut d'être femme d'esprit, 
Car pour époux elle avait pris un homme 
Qui ne faisait en voyages grands frais; 
Il n'allait pas querir pardons à Rome, 
Quand il pouvait en rencontrer plus près; 
Tout au rebours de la bonne donzelle, 
Qui, pour montrer sa ferveur et son zèle, 
Toujours allait au plus loin s'en pourvoir.
Pèlerinage avait fait son devoir
Plus d'une fois . . . (427)

To obtain at least two nights with her lover, in her own bed, this wife begins by making her husband suspicious of her. She arranges for him to discover, one night after they are in bed, a string tied to her toe, which leads to the front door. So intent on pretending not to be awake that he fails to notice that his wife is only pretending to be asleep, the husband, thinking himself very clever, finally slips quietly from bed and follows the string to the street. There he spends the night, armed to the teeth, awaiting the lover he supposes will come and announce his arrival by pulling the string. Meanwhile, a chambermaid admits the lover through a back entrance, and he spends the night in the husband's accustomed place. The husband allows himself thus to be duped two more nights, after which, "Il en fallut venir au dénouement." The ending involves the elaborate lie invented to explain the first one and leads, quite irrelevantly, to the marrying of the wife's chambermaid to the lover's valet. This valet, after the "third act" of the "comedy," pulls the string, is captured by the husband, and claims to have come to see the chambermaid.

"C'est donc cela, poursuivit la commère
En s'adressant à la fille, en colère,
Que l'autre jour je vous vis à l'orteil
Un brin de fil: je m'en mis un pareil
Pour attraper avec ce stratagème
Votre galant. Or bien, c'est votre époux!

"
A la bonne heure! il faut cette nuit même:
Sortir d'ici." Berlinguier fut plus doux,
Dit qu'il fallait au lendemain attendre.
On les dota l'un et l'autre amplement;
L'époux, la fille; et le valet, l'amant;
Puis au moutier le couple s'alla rendre,
Se connaissant tous deux de plus d'un jour. (429)

One is struck by the theatrical aspect of all three
of these tales. The first could easily be a lively mime,
the second, opening with its stiff, stylized scene, recalls
puppet shows, and the third, with its ridiculous portrayal
of the gullible husband stalking an imaginary lover, and its
happy ending that involves the marriage of two young lovers,
resembles so many farces and comedies. But these are tales,
told in such a way as to make the reader aware that within
each of these comedies is another comedy. There are really
two audiences: we, the readers, and the husband of each
tale, who allows himself to be convinced that the show he
is watching, put on for him by his wife and her lover, is
real. It is perhaps the author's introduction of the three
tales, in which he presents them as examples of ruses de-
signed for three kinds of husbands, and his remarks follow-
ing the tales, in which he leaves the choice of the best
"tour" to the reader, that suggest the analogy of wife to
writer, husband to reader. In any case, within the frame-
work of the wager, these tales do seem a demonstration of
storytelling techniques. Experimenting with types of plots,
different kinds of denouements, dialogue, euphemisms, ellip-
tical style, methods of making the action seem visible (or invisible), the author deals not only with structural problems but seemingly with the psychology of the reader as well; and these two aspects work together in the creation of vraisemblance in the tales. The reader of La Gageure des trois commères is made aware of the steps of each wife's plot to trick her unsuspecting husband. But more than that, he actually participates in the ruse by supplying missing details. Though he knows the ultimate outcome, he reads the tale to the end, eager to see how it will turn out. And his very amusement at the delusion of the husband proves that he also is being deluded. Like the husbands, who believe what they see because their eyes are so full of what they are imagining that they are blinded by the truth, the reader, prompted by the merest hint of plausibility, fabricates his own dream-world, in which he enjoys the good fortune of the most successful of the duper's, while laughing at the duped.

In most of La Fontaine's contes, there is a third comedy played out: this is the act put on by the duped, who are clearly only pretending to accept the lies of the duper as truth. Variations of this comedy include the feigned delusion of cuckolded husbands and the show of modesty or virtue or innocence of women, whose very resistance is as seductive as the craftiest wiles of the seducer. This comedy becomes even more apparent when the contes are com-
pared with their sources. Almost invariably one of the most noticeable differences between the old and new versions of a tale is that La Fontaine's "nouvelle nouvelle" emphasizes the illusions that all the characters attempt to create about themselves in the minds of others—if not in their own minds—, while at the same time making clear the point that the "others" are not really fooled.

For example, comparing the plot of Les Quiproquo (V, 8) with very similar plots in the Cent nouvelles nouvelles (IX) and the Heptameron (VIII), we see that La Fontaine's version of the old tale is the only one of the three in which all the principal characters discover that they have been deluded. The tale involves a double ruse: a servant girl plots with her mistress to pretend to submit to the importuning of the master; at the time of the rendez-vous, the mistress substitutes for the servant; but the wife does not know that the husband has agreed to share his good fortune with a friend. In the older stories, though the husband realizes, too late, his mistake, the wife remains ignorant of the fact that she has unwittingly cuckolded her husband. But in Les Quiproquo, she discovers the embarrassing truth at the same moment as her husband and his friend.

Her consciousness of the situation is only one of the changes La Fontaine made in the old tale that indicate an interpretation of the story based on an analysis of the
characters' motives. His changes aim also at making the story more reasonable. He adds to the description of the servant the fact that she is the same size and of the same general appearance as her mistress. Furthermore, in his version the servant is "un peu coquette" (651), and seems definitely to resist the master only to encourage him. In the other tales the servant feigns to agree to content his desire only on the orders of her mistress, to whom she has loyally and virtuously reported the advances of the master. But in La Fontaine's tale she forgets her previous refusals of his proposals after he offers her a handsome price for her favors, and then she tells her mistress. This is actually the beginning of a third ruse which La Fontaine adds to the story "pour rendre le conte/ Un peu meilleur" (654). In order to have her cake and eat it too, the girl's plan seems to be to gain the confidence of her mistress by revealing the master's philandering, and then to compensate him later for the money he would have lost. But to return to the preparation of the double substitution, in La Fontaine's tale the conclusion of the bargain is to be the next day, not at night as in the older tales, but during the morning, in the dark cellar. Whereas the master in La Fontaine's models offers to share his pleasure with a friend out of generosity and love for him, the master in Les Quiproquo agrees to accept a friend whom he encounters "par hasard" as a partner in his project only after the friend
offers to pay half of the expense. And the reason for keeping the partnership secret is carefully explained: would a sensible girl agree to being the subject of the gossip that was sure to ensue from the bragging of these two Gascons? They could fool her in the dark simply by keeping silent, and this would seem but prudent to the girl, "les murs ayant des oreilles" (653).

It is clear that the time of the rendezvous was changed from nighttime to morning so that, upon ascending the cellar stairs, the wife would see the husband and friend waiting for her. The reader readily visualizes the surprise on the faces of all three, as each one realizes the truth.

Mais quand l'époux vit sa femme monter,  
Et qu'elle eut vu l'ami se présenter,  
On peut juger quel soupçon, quel scrupule,  
Quelle surprise, eurent les pauvres gens;  
Ni l'un ni l'autre ils n'avaient eu le temps  
De composer leur mine et leur visage. (654)

Now the author comments on the reactions of the wife and husband.

L'époux vit bien qu'il fallait être sage;  
Mais sa moitié pensa tout découvrir.  
J'en suis surpris: femmes savent mentir;  
La moins habile en connaît la science.  
* * * * * * * * * * * * * * * * * * * * * * * *  
La dame fut toujours inconsolable. (654)

It is not the certain knowledge of what has happened to her that causes the outcome of this adventure to be so
painful to the wife and to all concerned. It is her failure to cover her chagrin by pretending not to understand. She should have realized—as did her husband and servant and all the other men and women in the tales—that the rule for happiness was dissimulation.

Whether it was La Fontaine’s attempts to correct certain implausible elements of his source materials that prompted him to invent reasonable explanations of the characters’ actions in this tale, or whether it was his satirical interpretation of the characters that suggested the changes he made in the older tales, it is certain that *Les Quiproquo* reflects special attention to storytelling techniques and that this preoccupation with the *vraisemblable* gives a dimension of the *vrai* to an otherwise ridiculous tale. Thus this tale demonstrates all the levels on which the *Contes* may be read.

Remarks in the prologue and epilogue indicate that on one level the tale is an examination and exercise of the art of telling tales.

Bien est-il vrai qu’il faut d’habiles mains
Pour amener chose ainsi surprenante;
Il est besoin d’en bien fonder le cas,
Sans rien forcer et sans qu’on violente
Un incident qui ne s’attendait pas. (650)

Preparations, careful characterization, consequential plot development that will lead the reader painlessly to a satisfactory ending: these are the things that will occupy
the writer. His remarks at the end deploring the "incon-
solable" wife seem to indicate, by antithesis, that he still
believes that ideally an entertaining tale would have a
happy ending; at least it seems apparent that the author
feels that the end of this tale, presumably the last he
wrote, is rather unsatisfying.

Even before referring to these problems of technique,
the author begins preparing the reader for this "nouveau
tour," opening the prologue by recounting an instance of
substituting one woman for another, supposedly from his
own experience. Then he presents the tale itself as "proof"
of "Les quiproquo de Fortune et d'Amour."

On ne peut mieux établir cette chose
Que par un fait à Marseille arrivé;
Tout en est vrai, rien n'en est trouvé.

The "truth" that this tale and all the tales of La
Fontaine contain has nothing to do with a naturalistic por-
trayal of life. That which seems natural in the characters
and the action is only a stylization of nature; as in the
tricks the characters play on each other, what seems real
is only a fragile illusion. This tale, like the others,
has literary sources: "De pareils traits tous les livres
sont pleins." But, as La Fontaine pointed out more than
once, fiction can seem more real than fact, if it is sub-
mitted to the rules of vraisemblance: "Bien est-il vrai
qu'il faut d'habiles mains." And in making this tale seem
real, La Fontaine has added to his sources his own observations on the nature of man. In this case, he questions the reality of apparent fidelity (of the servant to the mistress) and of apparent generosity (of the husband to his friend). Then, having questioned the possibility of sincere action, he seems to deny the desirability of it (the wife's honest reaction to the situation).

Thus the contes, which are mensonges and feintes, are about mensonges and feintes, and the author appears to recommend mensonges and feintes as an art de vivre. On the first two levels La Fontaine is a storyteller, concerned with entertaining his reader, and on the third he is a moralist, satirizing man in society. And the levels blend in such a way that the form of the tales and their substance—whether that substance be the art of storytelling or the observation of man—are inseparable, the one being the result of the other.

La Fontaine's observation of man in the tales is not at all systematic, nor even always explicit. His commentaries on the actions of the characters, in prologues and epilogues and in interventions in the tales, add to his recreation of the characters as well as to the humor of the tales. But his own attitudes—the lessons of the tales—more often derive from the structure of the tales themselves, and particularly from their happy endings. Seeking foundations for his plots substantial enough to make them inter-
esting, the author ascribes to his characters enough dif-
ferent motives that the tales taken all together do present
a fairly whole picture of man.

This picture is neither all gloomy nor all glad. In
the Contes, man, part spirit as well as part body, sometimes
yearns for the peace that would come from freedom from pas-
sion; but his instinct for living, which implies the pain
of passion, is too strong to permit him to renounce his
humanity. The solution to his dilemma begins with knowledge
of his own nature and the lucid analysis of his motives.
Any attempt in these stories to dominate passion by the will—
to remain chaste or faithful, for example, or to become a
hermit-saint, or to react heroically, generously, honorably
to a situation—is interpreted as motivated by pride, self-
love, self-interest. The implication of all of La Fontaine's
satirical portrayals of his characters' motives, of their
attempts to delude others and even themselves, is that when
man stops assigning acceptable, noble reasons to his ac-
tions, he must see that his real motives are much less
exalted than he might like to admit. However, these mo-
tives, though less acceptable to himself and to his fellows,
are in general not condemned in the tales as being base,
but are presented simply as being basic. They derive from
his instincts—not only for sexual enjoyment,
but also for self-preservation in a competitive society—
and these instincts are represented, through the lack of
villainy in the tales and their happy endings, as being natural and good. The only way for a man to stifle his instincts is to "close himself up with the dead," and this, according to the morality of the *Contes*, is an inadmissible solution even if it were possible for a man to carry out such an intention, as *La Matrone d'Ephèse*, to name one more example, so amusingly demonstrates.

. . . vous vous devez défier de vos forces:
Ne vous vantez de rien. Si votre intention
Est de résister aux amorces,
La nôtre est bonne aussi; mais l'exécution
Nous trompe également; témoin cette matrone.

Cette veuve n'eut tort qu'au bruit qu'on lui vit faire,
Qu'au dessein de mourir, mal conçu, mal formé:
. . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . .
Mieux vaut gougat debout qu'empereur enterré. (641)

Man's only recourse, torn as he is between a desire for purity and a desire for life, is compromise: he should know himself, acknowledge his limitations, and then make the best of the situation, "rire en son malheur" (463). The tales are at once a satire of the demise of heroism, pointing out the impossibility of authentic, sincere conduct, and a kind of consolation, looking forward instead of backward, refusing to cry over spilt milk. Their portrayal of man is pessimistic, but the pessimism is attenuated by the picture painted of man's cheerfulness, which communicates a very practical—and admittedly comical—kind of courage in the face of insurmountable difficulties.
The *art de vivre* thus implied in the tales presupposes duplicity. Knowing himself to be the victim of his nature and blind chance, man finds his only dignity in keeping his secret self secret from others. Life in society, as society is currently structured, demands a certain insincerity. This false appearance becomes ridiculous and detestable only when, carried to the extreme, it becomes prudery and hypocrisy. The solution to the dilemma, then, is neither in allowing one's instincts to run rampant nor in an over-niceness that rejects man's nature and the society he has created, but in *juste mesure*, civilized restraint.

The inspiration for this approach to life seems to be women; not just the "volages femelles" of the tales, but also the real women of the author's own acquaintance, those, perhaps, whom he addressed indirectly in the preface of 1665, or to whom he dedicated *Les Oies de Frère Philippe*, or to whom he was referring in the prologue of *Le Tableau*. Traditionally viewed as deceitful, inconstant, inscrutable, they are treated more sympathetically in the *Contes*, where one senses in La Fontaine's satire of them a genuine admiration and affection. The ideal woman in the tales reflects the best of the civilized, precious society that her living counterparts were so instrumental in shaping. In general more lucid and practical than the men in the tales, better able to exert her will over her emotions, and with
no desire to escape her destiny, she neither questions nor rejects society, but adapts herself to its demands, using it to help her hold her instinct in check. Reacting honestly to the demands of her nature, she is not totally wanton; preserving a surface elegance and modesty, she is no prude. The very diction of the tales, contrasting precious with natural language, points up the duality of her existence (if not her natural duplicity!) and is an important element in conveying the author's attitude. The reader is startled in *Le Tableau*, for example, by the flashes of unvarnished reality made visible behind the gauzy illusion of acceptable words by means of the inelegance of the dialogue of the nuns, whose fastidiousness is belied by their lasciviousness. In *Le Cas de conscience*, one of the most charming of the tales, Anne seems the embodiment of the ideal: natural, but restrained; and the language of this story, alternating between indirect and direct styles, reflects the harmonious balance of the girl's life.

Different as they are, these two tales are really two sides of the same coin, the one a positive picture of the spirited Anne whose seemly behavior is contrasted with the hypocrisy of the priest of her village, the other a more negative attack on prudery. In both of them women are the inspiration for a moral commentary and also for a discussion and illustration of the problem of veiling the scabrous. Throughout the tales, La Fontaine's circumlocu-
tions and euphemisms seem a satire of man in society, who covers his real motives the way a writer glosses over the reality he is portraying. But in the *Nouveaux Contes* the reader is aware of a more overt criticism of hypocrisy and prudery, accompanied by more elaborate devices invented to veil increasingly daring situations. Both *Le Cas de conscience* and *Le Tableau* open with remarks on techniques of veiling and proceed to a demonstration of the author's virtuosity in rendering acceptable the unacceptable. *Le Cas de conscience* seems a reaffirmation of La Fontaine's statement in the preface of 1665 in which he accepts as natural the desirability of maintaining a certain amount of decorum in retelling the earthy tales that were his models: "Je confesse qu'il faut garder en cela des bornes et que les plus étroites sont les meilleures . . ." (346). And *Le Tableau* seems to take up the argument where *Le Cas de conscience* leaves off: "aussi faut-il m'avouer que trop de scrupule gâterait tout."

A masterpiece of ambiguity, *Le Tableau* effects a really remarkable blending of the several possible levels of La Fontaine's *Contes*. Protesting against prudishness in women at the same time as the prudish censorship of literature, commenting on the discrepancy in social conventions for painting and poetry while contrasting the possibilities and effects of these media, the author so effectively engages the reader's attention in moral, tech-
nical, and aesthetic considerations that he tends to forget the story he is reading. Indeed, these questions eclipse and actually become the plot: the reader is more interested in seeing how the "ears" will make the picture perceptible to the "eyes" (613) than in discovering the outcome of the story. Hiding his pornographic model behind a veil woven as much of these preoccupations as of the spectacular Cult of Venus – Christian Religion metaphor, La Fontaine proves the point he made in the preface of 1665: that although it was necessary to observe strictly the proprieties, excessive delicacy would spoil everything.

Or ai-je des nonnains mis en vers l'aventure,
Mais non avec des traits dignes de l'action,
Et comme celle-ci déchets dans la peinture,
La peinture déchets dans ma description,
Les mots et les couleurs ne sont choses pareilles;
Ni les yeux ne sont les oreilles. (618)

No writer of the classical period concerned himself more than the author of the Contes with the problem of adopting a style suitable to his subject; his preoccupation with finding the proper versification, diction, and structure for the stories he was re-telling was constant from the time of his first collections to the years of his last tales. He achieved so well what he set out to do, effecting in his Contes such a remarkable blend of form and substance, that one can only be astonished at the criticism they have received and at the neglect they have suffered.
Part of the unfavorable criticism of their style may derive from the difficulty of separating style and subject in the Contes, as these lines from Les Oies de Frère Philippe seem to indicate.

Contons, mais contons bien; c'est le point principal; C'est tout; à cela près, censeurs, je vous conseille De dormir, comme moi, sur l'une et l'autre oreille. Censurez, tant qu'il vous plaîra, Méchants vers et phrases méchantes; Mais pour bons tours, laissez-les là, Ce sont choses indifférentes; Je n'y vois rien de périlleux. (477-78)

Objections to the style of the tales may actually arise from objections to their subject, so closely are the two allied. Though the style of the Contes is not always as polished as that of the Fables, the two are very similar. In some tales more than others the part of the fables is clearly visible; Le Tableau with its sustained metaphor is an example. And yet, because of its subject, Le Tableau is decried, called pure obscenity, while the Fables are praised as masterpieces.

Some readers have disapproved of the Contes out of prudery. But many may have deplored their existence, or ignored them entirely, for more subtle reasons. For one thing, it is difficult for a reader not to reject all that is different from the accepted great works. Of course, the greatest works of the classical period in France were themselves innovations, as Will G. Moore has pointed out in his essay on French Classical Literature:
The *maxime*, the letter, the sermon, the portrait, these did not really belong to literature until the French classical writers had produced their work. Racine's tragedy and Molière's comedy are both quite original new departures from traditional types; in effect they are new genres.†

It is interesting to note that in his remarks on La Fontaine Professor Moore does not discuss the *Contes*, which were certainly among the new genres developed during the period.

The prejudice against a work that does not conform to preconceived notions of what constitutes good literature is often accompanied by the persistent prejudice against a work whose only avowed purpose is to entertain its readers. Comedy is generally placed lower on the scale of literary values than tragedy; the pessimistic is thought to be more real and more profound than optimism. Thus the *Misanthrope* is a "great" play, while Molière's farces, many of which are themselves real gems, are given less consideration. The aim of Corneille and Racine as well as Molière was to "please" their readers, in their more serious works as in their comedies; and paradoxically the highest appreciation is accorded to those of their works which please by causing a lessening of pleasure. Happy endings, though they may serve to encourage man in his dilemma, are most often considered shallow.

La Fontaine's instinct for happy endings reflects that of many of his readers. For many people, the gloom of tragedy is incompatible with their own view of life.
Perhaps it is the instinct for self-preservation that causes certain readers to reject a totally pessimistic picture of man. They grow weary of the continued reminder in tragedy that they are inextricably bound by their nature and by chance or fate, and they seek the release provided by comedy's cheerful acceptance of man's shortcomings and of his helplessness in the face of superior forces. The Contes, while ending happily, do not ignore the facts of human existence. In a way, they too, like many of the universally admired masterpieces, interpret man's life pessimistically; but their pessimism is mitigated by their practical recommendation not to worry about what cannot be changed. It is true that the Contes show man's happiness to be only an illusion: he is victimized, he must rationalize his situation. Nevertheless, his imaginary happiness is happiness. And the reader of the tales participates vicariously in the felicity of the heroes of the tales, gladly permitting himself to be ensnared in the web of illusion woven by the author, escaping into an imaginary world of easy conquests, pleasure, and happy endings.

Even though the classification of works according to a hierarchy of literary values persists, it is still possible to appreciate a multiplicity of forms. The reader may prefer the tragedy of Racine, but he will be deprived of much pleasure if he does not read Molière. Among the plays of Molière, the reader may prefer the Misanthrope, but he
need not deny himself the delight of the gayer comedies and farces. The *Fables* are unquestionably La Fontaine's masterpiece, but a great deal of enjoyment can come from reading the *Contes*. The personal taste of the individual reader will always determine whether he enjoys them or not. But if he rejects them out of prejudice, he has only himself to blame for missing the fun he might have had in reading them. No writer has continually attained the level of his best work—not Corneille, not Molière, not Racine; however, it would be a mistake to destroy, or ignore, all but the very best. In a way, the *Contes* complete the *Fables*, which neglect, on the whole, the side of human nature which provides the basis for these entertaining tales. And besides rounding out La Fontaine's observation of man, they add a bit more to our knowledge of their author.

The *Contes* contribute in a unique way to the study of French classical literature. Their immediate and continued popularity sheds light on the literary taste of a century that received *Timocrate* and *La Devineresse* of Thomas Corneille with considerably more enthusiasm than *Le Misanthrope* and *Phèdre*. Since the *Contes* deal with risqué stories, they accentuate the author's problems, exhibiting, in some respects more strikingly than other genres, many of the tendencies and themes of the period. They allude to contemporary literary discussions, reflecting through the years various quarrels and trends. They emphasize the
importance of form, that depends not on outside authority but on the materials of the tales themselves. They self-consciously refuse vulgarity of expression, maintaining a decorum that is mischievously suggestive and amusing. They observe and analyze the complex behavior of civilized people, influenced less by will or reason than by instinct, and as much by self-interest as by society, and constitute another study of the difference between act and motive, illusion and reality.

These "classical" elements are by-products of La Fontaine's efforts to amuse the readers of his century and are coupled to illustration in a manner perhaps instinctive to the storyteller. But the author may well have seen these "bons tours d'amour" as perfect vehicles for satirizing the insincerity of society and the hypocrisy of certain readers and critics who, affecting to prefer the lofty, were in fact "pleased" by the licentious; for appealing for more naturalness in human relations as in art; for dramatizing his revolt against an unreasonably narrow criticism or censorship; and also for experimenting with and commenting on the literary theories of the day. What more humorous commentary could be made on the rules for the bienséances than to apply them to such bawdy stories? And what better way to contribute to the elaboration of theories for literary creation than to demonstrate his own interpretation and use of them in a new genre?
The modern reader who enjoys the tales finds them amusing not necessarily because of the "bon tour" they recount, which is after all quite harmless, as La Fontaine insisted, and which becomes rather monotonous. He is entertained by the masterful technique of the storyteller and by his indulgent satire of man—including the reader and himself. But one must finally admit the very real difficulty of a perfectly objective assessment of the tales. With every reading, with every change in point of view, it is possible to find new sources of amusement, new meanings. The *Contes* are written in such an ambiguous manner that subjective interpretations will always creep in. Perhaps this is the best proof of their poetic value.
NOTES

FOREWORD


4 "Discours aux Velches," Oeuvres complètes, ed. Louis Moland (Paris: Garnier frères, 1877-85), XXV, 244.


6 Gustave Michaut, La Fontaine (Paris: Hachette, 1913-14), II, 94.


10 See note on references, p. xii.


12 "The Esthetics of Negligence," L'Esprit Créateur, III, 3 (Fall 1963), 110.


15 Young La Fontaine (Evanston, Ill.: Northwestern University Press, 1952), pp. 139-166.
CHAPTER I

1 In addition to these two tales in verse by La Fontaine, there was a tale in prose with a few lines of verse by St. Evremond, *La Matrone d'Éphèse*, borrowed from Petronius.

2 Ancient and modern influences on La Fontaine's early development have been studied by Philip A. Wadsworth in his work, *Young La Fontaine* (Evanston, Ill.: Northwestern University Press, 1952).

3 See OD 479, 870.


5 See OD 494-95 for the épître beginning "Je vous l'avoue et c'est la vérité,/ Que Monseigneur n'a que trop mérité/
La pension qu'il veut que je lui donne," in which La Fontaine promises regular installments of the "pension": "madrigaux" in the summer, "menus vers" in October, "ballades" in January, "quelque sonnet plein de dévotion" for Easter. This last installment might well be "le pire," he said: "On me voit peu sur tels sujets écrire."


7 The entire piece is less than a dozen pages long.


9 This tale appeared under the title *Historiette* in an undated collection called *Les Plaisirs de la poésie galante*,
gaillarde et amoureuse, probably between 1660 and 1665.

10 See Fables, Contes et Nouvelles, 809.

11 Quotations from the Dissertation sur Joconde are taken from Boileau, Oeuvres Completes, Bibliothèque de la Pléiade (Paris: Gallimard, 1966), pp. 309-24; however, for the sake of consistency the orthography has been modernized. The abbreviation B will refer to this volume.

12 See note 17.

13 Clarac believes that Boileau's brother Gilles wrote a part of it (Pierre Clarac, Boileau (Paris: Hatier, 1964), pp. 48-57); Wadsorth suggests that La Fontaine may have collaborated with Boileau (op. cit., p. 148).

14 See Satire I, ll. 52 ff. (B 64). This satire on women was not published until 1694, though it was begun probably twenty years earlier.

15 See pp. 22 and 50 of this thesis.

16 See Fables, Contes et Nouvelles, 809.

17 It will perhaps be helpful to recall Ariosto's tale. Astolfo, the handsome and vain king of Lombardy, hears from Fausto, one of his courtiers, that he has a rival in beauty: it is Giocondo, Fausto's brother, who lives in Rome. Curious to see for himself the beauty of this gentleman, Astolfo sends for Giocondo, whose deep devotion to his wife makes him loath to leave home. Finally persuaded by his brother, he consents to go to Astolfo's court, but not without much sorrowful leave-taking of his wife, who gives him a religious relic to carry on his journey as a token of her love. Two miles out of Rome, he remembers having left the gift at home and rides back to fetch it, finding his wife, not grieving over his departure, but asleep beside one of his servants. His impulse is to kill the sleeping adulterers, but because of his love for his wife, he spares their lives. Giocondo's secret grief cruelly alters his beauty, and he languishes under the solicitous care of the king. One day, surprising the queen in the arms of the king's dwarf, he is persuaded that his own wife's infidelity was not so much an insult to him as the result of the weakness of her sex, which never could be contented by one man, were he even a king. Fortwith his beauty is restored, and when the king asks him for an explanation of this phenomenon, he tells him about the queen. First, however, he extracts from the king a promise not to retaliate in any way against the guilty parties and binds him to his promise by a sacred
oath. Astolfo, restrained from avenging himself on his wife and the dwarf by the oath he had sworn on the Agnus Dei, asks Giocondo for advice. His handsome courtier suggests that they go from country to country trying the weakness of other women, making cuckolds of other husbands.

Having finally proven to their own satisfaction that no woman could be contented with one man, the king and Giocondo agree to share one woman, hoping that the two of them together would be able to appease her appetite. In Spain, they find a poor innkeeper who is willing to sell them his daughter, and she accompanies them on their return home. Before leaving Spain, they stop in an inn, where she encounters a Greek whom she had loved in her father's house, and who, by his wheedling, obtains permission to join her that night as she lies between Astolfo and Giocondo. These two galants, upon learning of the trick played on them by the girl, conclude good-naturedly that there is no cure for the fickleness of women. They marry the girl to the Greek and return to their own wives, who, they now know, are as honest as the best.


19 The technique is repeated often in later tales and in other pieces. See for example Le Remède (V, 4): "Il me suffit de n'avoir en l'ouvrage/Rien avancé qu'après des gens de foi:/ J'ai mes garants: que veut-on davantage?" See also St. Malc (OD 51): "Si Malc s'en défendit, s'il l'osa, s'il le put,/ S'il en subit la loi sans peine et sans scrupule,/ C'est ce qu'en ce récit l'histoire dissimule."

There is a variation of this technique in the last tale of the Contes et Nouvelles of 1665, Conte d'un paysan qui avait offensé son seigneur: "Un paysan son seigneur offensa:/ L'histoire dit que c'était bagatelle" (379). This variation is similar to the frequent hemistich "à ce que dit l'histoire."

20 This is the first example given by Boileau in his Dissertation to illustrate the molle and the facetum which, he says, Apollo bestows only on his favorites. It is curious that though Boileau was able to "feel" the beauty of such passages, the "je ne sais quoi" which charms the reader, he seems to have misinterpreted La Fontaine's intended meaning. "S'il eût dit simplement, que Joconde vivait content avec sa femme, son discours aurait été assez froid; mais par ce doute où il s'embarrasse lui-même, et qui ne veut pourtant dire que la même chose, il enjoue sa narration, et occupe agréablement le lecteur" (B 316).

This motive is different from the motive in Ariosto's tale. See note 17.

In both tales a well-born young man arrives in a certain town, sees the beautiful young wife of a very substantial gentleman of the area, and immediately covets her. Hoping to obtain her favors, the enterprising young man enters into the service of her husband; and as soon as he finds the right moment, he declares himself to the lady. One night, this excellent wife tells her unsuspecting husband that his favorite domestic has made improper advances and that she has agreed to meet him in the garden that very night in order to expose his perfidy. The irate husband, at his wife's suggestion, disguises himself in his wife's clothing and goes to keep the rendezvous with the impertinent retainer. During his absence, the wife and the young man spend a few delicious moments in the bedroom, and afterwards the false servant goes to the garden and beats soundly the "wife," whom he has invited to meet him, he claims, only to test her faithfulness to his master. The husband, despite the beating, is delighted to find that he has such a faithful wife and such a loyal servant.

In the Boccaccio tale, Madonna Beatrice promises Lodovico, alias Anichino, that if he will come to her bedside around midnight she will content his desire for her. When he appears, she holds fast to his hand as she denounces him to her husband. All the while, the terrified Anichino struggles to free his hand and flee, fearing that he is being betrayed by his master's wife.

See p. 50 of this thesis.

This metaphor is used in Joconde. See pp. 38-39 and 53 of this thesis.

The plot of the last part of the story in the Heptaméron and the plot of La Fontaine's tale are basically the same: early one morning a man is seen behaving shamefully in his garden with his servant girl by a neighbor who is looking out her window; the man, having seen the neighbor observing him, repeats the act with his wife, who, upon being told by the neighbor of her husband's misbehavior with the servant girl, answers, "It was I" whom you saw, and not the servant.

29 In the versions of both Boccaccio and La Fontaine, the basic story is the same. A poor innkeeper and his still handsome, youngish wife had two children, an infant son and an adolescent daughter. The daughter was infatuated with a young gentleman who was himself quite enamored of her. The young man and a friend arrived at the inn late one night and asked for lodging, to be told that the only available bed was in the room where the innkeeper slept with his family. The young gentleman was delighted with the arrangement, which would provide him the opportunity he had been denied to be alone with the girl. As soon as everyone seemed to be asleep, he slipped quietly into the girl's bed.

Here the order of events differs slightly in the two tales. In Boccaccio’s, the wife is awakened by the noise of a falling object, pushed over by a cat, and she leaves the bedroom to investigate. The friend finds it necessary to leave the room for a moment, and on his way out the door he bumps into the baby’s cradle, which the wife had pushed away from her own bed as she left. He puts the cradle near his bed so that he can pass through the door, and on his return he leaves the cradle where he had put it. When the wife returns to the bedroom, she lies down in the bed near which she finds the cradle, thinking she is in her own bed with her husband. In La Fontaine’s version, the friend leaves the room first, "Pressé d’aller mettre ordre à quelque chose/ Qu’honnêtement exprimer je ne puis," and returns, leaving the cradle near his bed, before the wife is awakened by the noise. As in the Boccaccio story, the position of the cradle causes her to climb into bed beside the friend, who takes immediate advantage of her error.

When at last the young man leaves the daughter’s bed to return to his own, he is confused by the position of the cradle and gets into bed beside the innkeeper. Mistaking the innkeeper for his friend, he begins to relate to him the joy that has been his that night. The irate father’s outcries awaken the wife who, realizing she is in the wrong bed, moves the cradle to a new position beside her daughter’s bed and jumps into bed with the daughter, thus proving, or so she claims, that no harm could have come to the daughter. The young man pretends to be dreaming and talking in his sleep, and the father accepts the explanation as true.

30 This is an idea expressed quite often during La Fontaine’s century. He uses the idea again in Le Petit Chien (III, 13): "plus on veut nous contraindre," Argie says to Anselme, "Moins on doit s’assurer de nous"(542).

31 La Fiancée du roi de Garbe is taken from Boccaccio’s Il Soldano di Babilonia, novella VII of the Second Day of the Decameron.
32 P. A. Wadsworth (op. cit., pp. 161-66) shows in his comparison of La Fiancée du roi de Garbe with Boccaccio’s tale that La Fontaine’s "wickedly satirical extravaganza" is indeed "almost wholly of his own invention."


35 op. cit., p. 164.

36 "Marié depuis peu; content, je n'en sais rien" . . . "L’histoire ne dit point ni de quelle manière/Joconde put partir" . . . "Soit par prudence, ou par pitié,/ Le Romain ne tua personne" (352, 353).

37 See above, pp. 49-52.

CHAPTER II

1 This opinion was reflected by Furetière in his remarks on the education of young women in Le Roman bourgeois, published in 1666. He advises allowing girls to read sentimental and heroic romances, in order to accustom them "au récit des passions amoureuses." Otherwise, a girl to whom all novels had been forbidden might fall upon one which "d’abord lui corrompra l’esprit. Tel entre ceux-la est l’Astrée: plus il exprime naturellement les passions amoureuses, et mieux elles s’insinuent dans les jeunes âmes, où il se glisse un venin imperceptible, qui a gagné le coeur avant qu’on puisse avoir pris du contre poison." (Romanciers du XVIIe Siècle, ed. Antoine Adam (Paris: Gallimard, 1956), p. 700).)

2 In 1685, in another mock-serious defense of the subject of his tales, he would repeat this argument.

Si, dans ces vers, j’introduis et je chante
Certain trompeur et certaine innocente,
C’est dans la vue et dans l’intention
Qu’on se méfie en telle occasion.
J’ouvre l’esprit, et rends le sexe habile
A se garder de ces pièges divers.
Sotte ignorance en fait troubucher mille,
Contre une seule a qui muiraient mes vers. (623)

See for example the prologues of L'Ermite (II, 15) and Mazet de Lamporechio (II, 16).

See Contre ceux qui ont le goût difficile, l. 37 (52), and Le Corbeau et le renard (32).

These lines remind the reader of the Élégie première to Clymene, published also in 1671, in the Fables nouvelles et autres poésies, in which La Fontaine exaggerates his failures as a lover. But while the tone of the Élégie is playful, here La Fontaine speaks rather ruefully of his lack of success with the women.

The irrepressible impulses of these nuns' nature is the idea expressed by Boccaccio. La Fontaine's discussion of the practice of cloistering women is an original interpretation.

P. Clarac shows in his study of St. Malc that La Fontaine took his task quite seriously; "qu'il a longuement médité sur le récit de saint Jérôme, que les changements qu'il a apportés témoignent d'un sentiment profond de son sujet et qu'il en a su tirer une œuvre toute sienne par la claire ordonnance et la vérité des sentiments." (La Fontaine (Paris: Hatier, 1959), p. 100.) See also "La Fontaine et Port-Royal," Revue d'histoire de la philosophie, XXXIV (January and April, 1943), 149 ff., in which Clarac makes a close comparison of the poème of La Fontaine and the translation of Arnauld d'Andilly.

It is already evident that La Fontaine had, characteristically, reconceived the story of St. Malc. According to St. Jerome, Malc had run away from home as a young man, taking refuge in a monastery to avoid being married. Later, after his father had died and after his own hair had begun graying, he decided to return home to comfort his old mother. The old abbot of the monastery was aghast that he would yield to this "temptation of the devil" to return to his mother, even though Malc offered to rebuild a part of the monastery with some of the money he would inherit. In La Fontaine's poem we are not aware of a monastery nor of any other monks than the "vieillard censeur de sa jeunesse," nor are we told how it happened that Malc had "confiné sa jeunesse" in the desert. We can only imagine that he was sent there by his parents.

This technique is especially reminiscent of Joconde ("Marié depuis peu; content, je n'en sais rien" (352)). Actually St. Jerome's story is quite explicit, stating that upon arriving in the land of the Saracens, the prisoners had to bow their necks and venerate the wife and children of the chief, after the fashion of these people.
In the account of St. Jerome, when the caravan was captured by the Saracens, the young woman was separated accidentally from her husband, who had been allotted to one of the members of the band, while she and Malc had made up a part of the share of the chief. St. Jerome describes the journey of the two prisoners to the land of the Arabs, but once they are there, he does not mention the young woman again until the chief and his wife decide to marry Malc to his fellow slave. La Fontaine begins preparing the drama of this marriage from the moment he says that "Fortune" joined Malc to a band of "gens sans défense; peu de jeunesse entre eux, force vieillards craintifs, femmes, familles, enfants aux coeurs déjà captifs" (Od 50). When the Saracens attack, these weaklings instinctively run away to try to save themselves.

Telle fuit la colombe, oublissant ses amours,
A l'aspet du milan qui menace ses jours.

La Fontaine shows us the pitiful spectacle of fathers leaving their children, a young man leaving his fiancée, and Malc's young companion being abandoned by her husband. Une dame encor jeune, et sage en sa conduite,
Aux yeux de son époux dans les fers fut réduite.
Le mari se sauva regrettant sa moitié. (Od 51)

La Fontaine emphasizes the woman's beauty and youth, hinting at the situation developing between her and Malc. Bien qu'à peine la dame acheva son printemps,
Que son teint eût des jours aussi frais qu'éclatants,
L'Arabe n'en fit voir qu'une estime légère.
Il luionna l'emploi d'une simple bergère,
Avec Malc l'envoya pour garder ses troupeaux. (Od 52)

Instead of being motivated by gain, as in the poem of La Fontaine, the Saracen chief of St. Jerome wants only to reward Malc for his service to him by giving him a wife. La Fontaine's interpretation is in harmony with his pessimistic view of man; it has the added advantage of making the fury of the chief, on hearing Malc's refusal, more reasonable.

The virginity of the woman is an invention of La Fontaine. According to St. Jerome, the reason that the idea of their marriage was just as hateful to the woman as it was to Malc was that she was anxious to rejoin her husband.

Le Diable en Enfer is based on a tale by Boccaccio, and its plot is very similar to that of its Italian model. However, La Fontaine's commentary and his deft character studies make the parallel between Le Diable en Enfer and St. Malc quite obvious. See also Renée Kohn, Le Gout de La Fontaine (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1962), p. 271, and note 18, p. 411. This is one of the more vulgar
of La Fontaine's tales, and one might question, along with Miss Kohn (p. 289) La Fontaine's taste in choosing to write it. Perhaps it was because he could see the reverse side of his own St. Male in this plot of Boccaccio. Another possibility: were certain elements of his St. Male suggested by the Boccaccio story?

15 Alibech resembles an earlier "innocente," "déniaisée" by Frère Luce in L’Ermité (II, 15), which appeared in 1667.

Jeune, ingénue, agréable, et gentille;
Pucelle encor, mais, à la vérité,
Moins par vertu que par simplicité. (464)

La Fontaine's interpretation of this young virgin emphasized her yearning for love and her natural coquettishness, apparent as she prepared to obey the voice of "le Ciel" (which was really that of the hypocritical hermit), which had told her to go to Frère Luce's cabin, there to become the mother of a pope.

La belle mit son corset des bons jours,
Son demi-cint, ses pendants de velours,
Sans se douter de ce qu'elle allait faire:
Jeune fillette a toujours soin de plaire.

16 Régnier interprets this phrase to mean: "A y regarder de si près, a reculer devant cela," comparing it to a passage in Niceise that is similar:

Car il est homme, que je pense,
A passer la chose au gros sas. (523)


17 C'est ainsi que ma muse, aux bords d'une onde pure,
Traduisait en langue des dieux
Tout ce que disent sous les cieux
Tant d'êtres empruntant la voix de la nature. (277)

Epilogue to the Fables of 1678

18 See OD 491-493, 880-882, 950.

19 November 19, 1670; November 22, 1671.


21 There are two exceptions in La Vénus Callipyge (I, 6), but this tale was not published among the works of La Fontaine during his lifetime.

22 John Lapp has said that this fable "by a stricter definition" might be called a conte. "Esthetics of Negli-
gence," *L'Esprit Créateur*, III, 3 (Fall 1963), 108.


24 In *Le Petit Chien*, the last tale in the volume of 1671, La Fontaine used a kind of riddle to suggest the extremely compromising agreement between Anselme and the "More lippu." But here he seemed to employ the device really to veil a situation presented much more plainly by Ariosto. He began with a euphemism, a variation of the double meaning technique used in such tales as *Comment l'esprit vient aux filles* and *Le Diable en Enfer*. The Hideous Moon, who was ostensibly the owner of the palace that so dazzled Anselme, proposed to give it to him if he would serve him two days as "enfant d'honneur." Anselme's lack of comprehension must have been apparent, for after a pause the More said:

... Entends-tu ce langage?
Et sais-tu quel est cet usage?
Il te faudra expliquer mieux. (540)

Then he had recourse to mythology to give Anselme a clearer clue:

Tu connais l'échanson du monarque des dieux?

Anselme

Ganymède?

Le More

Celui-là même.

Prends que je sois Jupin, le monarque suprême,
Et que tu sois le jouvenceau.

In the spite of the invitation to see beneath the surface meaning of the words, the allusion remains obscure enough that a lady reader's claim not to understand could pass as sincere.


26 Haec ubi supposuit dextra corpus mihi laevum
Ilia et Egeria est; do nomen quodlibet illi.
(Book I, sat. II, ll. 125-26)

27 The direct source of this tale is unknown.


29 See above p. 113. See also p. 125 for the discussion of the prologue to *Les Oies*, in which La Fontaine states more directly that women like to read licentious stories.

30 Nimirum sapiunt videntque magnam
Matronae quoque mentulam libenter.
Besides the reference to censors and censorship in the prologue, there is another possible reference in these lines:

Dites au dieu des vers que dans mon entreprise
   Il est bon qu'il me favorise,
   Et de mes mots fasse le choix,
   Ou je dirai quelque sottise
Qui me fera donner du busque sur les doigts. (613)

La Fontaine later addresses the censors directly:
   Censeurs, n'approchez point d'ici votre oeil profane. (617)

This is an allusion to an anecdote in *La Vie d'Esopo* (19). Xantus, Aesop's master, sent him to find a man "qui ne se mette en peine de rien." Aesop brings him "un paysan qui regardait toutes choses avec l'indifférence d'une statue," and who ate everything that was set before him, regardless of Xantus' protestations that nothing was fit to eat.

The *bachelier* of *La Fontaine's conte* is a composite of the *baccelliere*, Nanna's "friend," and the *vicario del vescovo* of the *Ragionamenti*. In Aretino's tale it is the vicar for whom the two young nuns are impatiently waiting; a *mulattiere* mistakes these nuns' room for another to which he had been summoned, and obligingly substitutes for the vicar, who does not appear.

The word *cathedral* formerly referred to a clergyman of a cathedral. (Note of Régnier, op. cit., V, 593.)

*Ars poetica*, l. 361.

See P. A. Wadsworth, *Young La Fontaine* (Evanston, Illinois: Northwestern University Press, 1952), pp. 113-117, for a discussion of *La Fontaine's* appreciation of the fine arts, which were a "very powerful stimulus to his imagination."

Segnius irritant animos demissa per aurem,
   Quam quae sunt oculis subjecta fidelibus, et quae
   Ipse sibi tradit spectator. (*Ars poetica*, ll. 180-82)

There are a number of references in Brantôme's *Recueil des dames* (*Oeuvres Complètes* (Paris: P. Jannet, 1858-95), XI and XII) to illustrated "Aretino's." These seem to be essentially pornographic picture books of lovers, with possibly brief captions from Aretino. But there were no known illustrated editions of the *Ragionamenti* at the time *La Fontaine* wrote his tale. The scene described by *La Fontaine* was later illustrated by de Hooge in the edition of
1685 (Contes et Nouvelles en vers de M. de La Fontaine) printed in Amsterdam.

39 See above, p. 205.

Chapter III

1 See OD, "Tableau chronologique," September 6, 1683.

2 In 1682 La Fontaine had published Bélphégor and La Matrone d'Éphèse in a volume entitled Poème du Quinquina et autres ouvrages en vers de M. de La Fontaine. Walckenaer remarked that these are contes "de nature a ne pouvoir etre blâmes par les esprits les plus scrupuleux."

3 Régnier has pointed out an analogy between this tale and one of the stories in Le Moyen de parvenir (Ch. XXI), but suggests that La Clochette is "peut-être de l'invention de La Fontaine." (Oeuvres de J. de La Fontaine, Grands Écrivains de la France (Paris: Hachette, 1883-92), VI, 3.

4 See above, pp. 205, 215-16.

5 L'Ermité (II, 15), Comment l'esprit vient aux filles (IV, 7), Le Diable en Enfer (IV, 9), Les Cordeliers de Catalogne (II, 2), La Jument (IV, 10).

6 Speaking of the two young girls, who were of an age to "soutenir these d'amour," the author said:

... le bachelier
Leur avait rendu familier
Chaque point de cette science,
Et le tout par expérience. (614)

7 In 1669, in the Avertissement to Adonis, La Fontaine wrote:

Je m'étais toute ma vie exercé en ce genre de poésie que nous nommons héroïque: c'est assurément le plus beau de tous, le plus fleuri, le plus susceptible d'ornements et de ces figures nobles et hardies qui font une langue à part, une langue assez charmante pour mériter qu'on l'appelle la langue des dieux.

(OD 3)

In the foreword to Le Songe de Vaux, published in 1671, the poet speaks of the changing taste in poetry:

Je reprendrais ce dessein si j'avais quelque espérance qu'il réussit, et qu'un tel ouvrage pût plaire aux gens d'aujourd'hui; car la poésie lyrique ni l'héro-
Ique, qui doivent y régner, ne sont plus en vogue comme elles étaient alors. (OD 78)

8 It will be helpful for this reading of the story to review briefly the tenth letter of the twelve letters attributed to Aeschines, which is the model for this story. This apocryphal letter was supposedly written during Aeschines' exile from Athens. The author of the letter begins by presenting his traveling companion Cimon as an immoral person who caused trouble in every town along their way because of his scorn for local customs and laws. Their visit to Troy was a kind of literary pilgrimage: Aeschines had resolved to stay there, he said, until he had visited all the places mentioned in the Iliad. One day he was watching a ceremony of the inhabitants of Troy, a nubility rite, during which the girls of marriageable age bathed in the river Scamander, symbolically offering their virginity to the god of this river. Unbeknownst to him, his friend Cimon had hidden himself in the reeds of the river, in order to ensnare the beautiful young Callirrhoe, who was taking part in the ceremony. As she was pronouncing the customary words, offering her virginity to Scamander, Cimon, crowned with reeds, sprang to her side, saying that he, Scamander, accepted her gift; and he carried her away to receive it. But the trick was found out when, four days later in the course of a procession honoring the newly-wed girls, Callirrhoe spied Cimon watching with Aeschines. Bowing down before him, she identified him to her nurse as the Scamander, to whom she had given her virginity; and the two men were obliged to flee from the city to avoid being burned by the irate townspeople. In closing his letter, the author says to his correspondent: "You will probably be more indignant than I over Cimon's impious trick; or perhaps you will only laugh heartily."

9 We remember the knight-errant who came upon Alaciel asleep in the woods and had to overcome his desire to steal a kiss from the sleeping beauty.

Psyché was found asleep by Amour, in the mouth of a cave in the wilderness, where she had gone to hide herself after her curiosity had caused the blackening of her face. "Elle était couchée sur le côté, le visage tourné vers la terre, son mouchoir dessus, et encore un bras sur le mouchoir, pour plus grande précaution, et pour s'empêcher plus assurément d'être vue " (OD 249). Awakened by the kiss of Amour, she ran into the darkness of the cavern to hide her disfigurement from him.

At the end of Clymene, Acante found his maîtresse asleep and contemplated for a long time the beauties of three "endroits" before finally deciding which one to kiss.
Cette bouche m'appelle à son haleine d'ambre.
J'ai parcouru le sein de l'un à l'autre bout;
Le pied, par sa beauté qui m'était inconnue,
M'a fait aller à lui. (OD 45)

Awakened by the kiss, Clymène hid under the covers.
The women who were caught napping only ran away and
hid when they were awakened. But the wife of the Roi de
Candaule (IV, 8), when she discovered that she had been
watched while bathing, reacted more violently to having been
seen "Toute nue," poisoning her husband, "le monteur
d'appas," and marrying the admirer of her beauties.
The tables were turned in Le Cas de conscience (IV, 4),
with Lise watching her young man bathe, while she remained
hidden, with her thoughts, behind willow branches.

10 "Qu'on fasse une oeuvre à Dieu fort agréable,
Emprisonnant en enfer le Malin," Rustic said (587).

11 La Formation de la doctrine classique, reprint (Paris:

12 op. cit., VI, 46, n. 2.

13 La Fontaine discusses both kinds of suspense in 1669 in
the preface to Psyché. He explains that in his novel he has
changed the oracle of the story of Apuleius in such a way
that the reader knows from the beginning that the "monstre
cruel" to whom Psyché will be delivered is in reality the
charming Cupid. Psyché must remain ignorant of the identity
of her husband:

Je conviens qu'il faut tenir l'esprit en suspens,
dans ces sortes de narrations, comme dans les pièces
de théâtre: on ne doit jamais découvrir la fin des
evenements; on doit bien les préparer, mais on ne
doit pas les prévenir.

However, the author insists that knowing the outcome in
advance, far from spoiling the suspense, adds to the reader's
pleasure, which is to discover what the particular events
of the story are and how they contribute to the catastrophe.
En un mot, le plaisir que doit donner cette fable
à ceux qui la lisent, ce n'est pas leur incertitude
à l'égard de la qualité de ce mari, c'est l'incerti-
tude de Psyché seule.

14 A study by Clarence D. Brenner, "Dramatizations of
French Short Stories in the Eighteenth Century," University
of California Publications in Modern Philology, XXXIII,
No. 1 (1947), 1-34, shows that during the years 1702 to 1794
"ninety-one dramatizations of the contes [of La Fontaine]
can be identified with reasonable certainty."
Corneille's preoccupation with the problem is evident in his examen of Horace, in which he evinces no little pride in his invention of Julie as the narrator of the first part of the combat between the three Horaces and the three Curiaces.

Margaret M. McGowan, in her article "Le Papillon du Parnasse: A Reappraisal of La Fontaine's experiments in drama," Australian Journal of French Studies, IV, 204-24, suggests La Fontaine's need to maintain an "ironic distance as an element in his failure in the theatre: "It was one thing . . . to indulge . . . private desires in narrative form where La Fontaine could keep a dimension of ironic consciousness, never allowing the reader to forget the narrator's presence; it was another to explore them in the theatre." She suggests the personal nature of the opera Astrée as a reason for its lack of success. "His taste and temperament might well have been more suited to the arm-chair theatre style which was not adequately explored until the time of Musset."
WORKS CONSULTED

Editions of the Contes and of the Complete Works of La Fontaine


Nouveaux Contes de Monsieur de La Fontaine. Mons: Gaspar Migeon, 1674.

Contes et Nouvelles en vers de M. de La Fontaine, illus. by Romain de Hooge. Amsterdam: Henry Desbordes, 1685.


Tales and Novels in verse, from the French of La Fontaine, by several hands. Edinburgh: Samuel Humphreys, esq., 1762.


Vol. I. Fables, Contes et Nouvelles, ed. Edmond Pilon and René Groos (Fables) and Jacques Schiffrin (Contes). 1954 [c1948].


Works about La Fontaine


Brenner, Clarence D. "Dramatizations of French Short Stories in the Eighteenth Century with Special Reference to the Contes of La Fontaine, Marmontel, and Voltaire," University of California Publications in Modern Philology, XXXIII, No. 1 (1947), 1-34.


Montégut, E. "La Fiancée du roi de Garbe et le Décaméron," *Revue des deux mondes,* XLV (June 1, 1863), 721-36.


Wadsworth, Philip Adrian. "La Fontaine and his Views on Marriage," *Rice University Studies,* LI, No. 3 (Summer 1965), 81-96.

- "La Fontaine as a Poet for Women (and Men Too)," French Review, XXXIX, No. 2 (Nov. 1965), 241-249.


Other Works Consulted


