

Research Article

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Gender, Class, and Human/Non-Human Fluidity in Théodore and Hippolyte Cogniards' *féerie*, *The White Cat*

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Abstract: The Frères Cogniard produced immensely popular vaudeville *féeries* in the nineteenth century and among them most popular was *The White Cat* (1852), which grafts two tales together by Marie-Catherine d'Aulnoy: “The White Cat” and “Belle-Belle, or the chevalier Fortuné.” The *féerie* foregrounds gender, class, human/thing, and species fluidity, which undermines hierarchies supported by dichotomies that in very similar ways privilege men over women, the upperclass over lowerclass, persons over things, and human animals over non-human animals. The essay traces these different forms of fluidity, examining the role of marvelous in general and metamorphosis in particular in problematizing normative structures of identity and revealing their arbitrary nature.

Keywords: Aulnoy, Marie-Catherine d', Théodore and Hippolyte Cogniard, gender, class, *féerie*

The Frères Cogniard produced immensely popular vaudeville *féeries* in the nineteenth century and among them most popular was *La Chatte blanche* (*The White Cat*), first staged in 1852. Writing for *Le Figaro*, Arnold Mortier remarks that the 1875 production of the *féerie* would be “the 486th representation of *The White Cat* at the Gaîté [theater]” in Paris (194); importantly, it was also featured in other popular Parisian venues.¹ At its first staging at the Cirque-National theater, the *féerie* was praised in Théophile Gautier's *Revue de Paris* for going well beyond Théodore and Hippolyte's other popular plays: “Let's just say that *The White Cat* surpasses what we know to be the marvelous up to this point” (“Le monde et le théâtre” 158). Writing for the weekly *Le monde illustré*, Charles Monselet describes the Châtelet theater production of 1869 in terms of “a terrifying luxury” and gives us a sense of the persistence of stagings of *The White Cat* in nineteenth-century culture:

You will tell me that there are always the same ballets, always the same decors ... always the same nude women suspended in the air, always the same kings given to the same pleasantries, always the same fairies chanting the same spells with the same golden wand, always the same lily-livered squire, always the same demons leaping about ... but what do you want me to say? It isn't always the same audience; spectators replace other spectators; it's my son, it's yours, who watch wide-eyed at those moments where I watched wide-eyed. (126)²

¹ All translations from the French are mine; all ellipses are from the original text. Jacques Offenbach was ready to produce *The White Cat* just before he had to step down from the direction of the Gaîté theater due to financial difficulties, but the play nevertheless was staged in June 1875 with a song by Offenbach. See Mortier 195–196 and Schneider 193–201.

² The French reads: “Vous me direz que ce sont toujours les mêmes ballets, toujours les mêmes décors ... toujours les mêmes femmes nues suspendues dans les airs, toujours les mêmes rois livrés aux mêmes plaisanteries, toujours les mêmes fées

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Years later, in 1908, Francis Chevassu declares that *The White Cat* “is not a play, it is a symbol ... renewing itself incessantly, becoming little by little the unique *féerie*, the typical *féerie*, destined to absorb all other similar creations.”³

This sumptuous *féerie* that often featured the very fashionable singer Thérèse as Pierrette was as baroque as the fairy tales by Marie-Catherine d’Aulnoy from which it drew. Vaudeville *féeries* interspersed song, dance, and spectacle with the goal, in Marie-Françoise Christout’s words, of “fill[ing] the audience with wonder” (79). Thanks to the elaborate use of machines and luxurious stage props, a *féerie* “allows one to escape from the logic of facts,” generates imaginary spaces in which “[f]ish dance the gavotte and cottages suddenly become hell or a palace” (Christout 79, 80). In his 1843 review of *La Biche au bois*, an earlier *féerie* by the Frères Cogniard, Gautier relishes in describing the dream-like world of the play, showing particular appreciation for the scene featuring the kingdom of the fish, which he calls “the most baroque fantasy,” and another in which mushrooms and leeks dance the polka; Gautier interestingly refers to these moments in the play as *travestissements* (68), which could be understood as disguises, travesties, or transvestism.

Already in these descriptions of the lavish spaces of the *féerie*, we get a glimpse of the unstable universe created on stage in which different realistic and fantasy worlds – cottages and palaces, fish and human kingdoms – are incongruously juxtaposed to one another and flow into each other via the movements through the plot of the main characters, who themselves are also transformed over the course of the play, sometimes by virtue of passing through fantastical spaces. In *The White Cat*, the heroine Blanchette is transformed into a knight and later into a cat; the prince Pimpondor spends nearly two out of three acts playing the role of the maiden in the tower; the peasant Petitpatapon becomes an eloquent squire; and the peasant Pierrette metamorphoses into a semiprecious gemstone and later a shrimp.⁴ The idea of fluidity takes quite literal form in the 1887 Châtelet representation of *The White Cat*, in which, as Emile Morlot notes, “they practically diverted the Seine [river] in order to have it pass through the stage of the Châtelet theater” (107); apparently, in the age of naturalism, the director used actual water on stage, to magical effect.⁵

The White Cat weaves together two stories by d’Aulnoy, “La chatte blanche” (“The White Cat”) and “Belle-Belle, ou le chevalier Fortuné,” both of which concern *travestissements*: a princess turned into a cat, a noblewoman transformed into a knight. The Cogniards’ *féerie* capitalizes on the fluidity of identity between female and male and between human and non-human present in the source texts, further integrating fluidity between peasant and noble identities, as well as between human and thing. It is perhaps the very materiality of the production that contributes to it challenging naturalized oppositions between, in Jane Bennett’s words, “dull matter (it, things) and vibrant life (us, beings)” (vii). Although Bennett’s work is concerned with problematizing the conceptual boundaries between “life/matter, human/animal, will/determination, and organic/inorganic,” similar binaries also uphold the opposition between man – associated, since Aristotle, with the life force of reproduction – and woman, viewed as the matter, the (passive) receptacle for this life; and social class, with the upper social echelons associated with concept and form, and the lower classes with physical (dull) labor and matter. Indeed, the same type of dichotomies that structure male superiority over women also structure upper class superiority over lower classes, human animal superiority over non-human animals, and human/subject superiority over things/objects. In this

scandant leur démarche de la même baguette d’or, toujours le même écuyer poltron, toujours les mêmes diables cabriolant ... mais que voulez-vous que je vous dise? ce n’est plus toujours le même public; ce sont des spectateurs qui remplacent d’autres spectateurs; c’est mon fils, c’est le vôtre qui écarquillent les yeux là où j’ai écarquillé les miens.”

3 The French reads: “Ce n’est plus une pièce, c’est un symbole ... se renouvelant sans cesse, devient peu à peu la féerie unique, la féerie type, destinée à absorber toutes les créations similaires.”

4 The word “Petitpatapon” comes from a popular ballad, “Il était une bergère/Et ron et ron, petit patapon” (“Once upon a time there was a shepherdess/And ron ron, petit patapon”), and is an onomatopoeia; “à petit patapon” can also signify “slowly” (“tout doucement”).

5 The French is quite witty, playing on the homonym “Seine” (the river) and “scène,” or stage: “on a presque détourné la Seine pour la faire passer sur celle du Châtelet.”

study of the Cogniards' *The White Cat*, we explore the ways in which the *féerie* deconstructs these ontological, gendered, and class hierarchies precisely through the fluidity of identity between persons, animals, and things, which is made possible by a constantly metamorphosing marvelous.

From Tale to Spectacle

The White Cat reorganizes chronologically the plotline of d'Aulnoy's "The White Cat" – whose tale does not proceed linearly – into which the Cogniards splice the *conteuse's* maiden warrior tale, "Belle-Belle." The *féerie* opens with the heroine Blanchette imprisoned in a castle that sits on a great rock by the sea; her adoptive mother, the fairy Violente, wishes to marry her to the evil and ugly king Migonnet. Violente tries to assure Blanchette that, although her future spouse may not be handsome (and Blanchette has never seen a man before), he will make her a powerful queen. But, as in the tale, the heroine encounters a handsome prince, Pimpondor, who in this case washes ashore (much like the prince Aimé in d'Aulnoy's "The Bee and the Orange Tree"), and Blanchette is immediately attracted to him. When Migonnet arrives to wed Blanchette, the heroine rejects him, while the fairy Violente decries her rebellious spirit. Initially in the *féerie* Pimpondor plays the role of the chivalric knight who tries to preserve his beloved from a monstrous marriage, but he is kidnapped by Migonnet, who imprisons the prince, and later plunders the kingdom of Pimpondor's father, King Matapa (which is the name of the evil emperor in d'Aulnoy's "Belle-Belle").⁶ Meanwhile, Violente casts Blanchette into the sea (recalling a similar scene in d'Aulnoy's "The Princess Rosette").

Blanchette survives and is taken in by the peasant Chiendent family, who make her their goatherd, but they eventually reject her because their daughter Pierrette's fiancé, Petitpatapon, has fallen in love with her. Blanchette then encounters the good Heather Fairy (*la fée de la bruyère*), who transforms the hero(ine)⁷ into the knight Fidèle in order to help Blanchette rescue Prince Pimpondor and save the kingdom of Pimpondor's father, Matapa. When Petitpatapon later comes upon Fidèle, he believes he had been in love with a man. Fidèle asks Petitpatapon to become his squire, to which he agrees, but Petitpatapon requests that the fairy grant him eloquent language to accompany his new social standing, which she does. The pair then journey to find their "extraordinary companions" to assist them in saving the prince and Matapa's kingdom. After locating Forte-Echine (Strong Spine), Fend-l'Air (Air Splitter), Fine-Oreille (Keen Ear), Trinquafort (Drink-a-Lot), Bouffelaballe (Bail-Eater), and Bourrasque (Burst of Wind), Fidèle and Petitpatapon need one further magical thing to assist them, a sapphire ring, which they seek out in the Kingdom of Gems (*le royaume des bijoux*). With a little help from his friends, Fidèle is able to return to Matapa his kingdom's wealth, and free the prince. However, Violente reappears, turns Fidèle/Blanchette into a cat-headed woman, and isolates her in another castle. These events lead to a second quest, this time carried out by Pimpondor and Petitpatapon, and eventually they are able to save both Blanchette and Pierrette. Interestingly, Blanchette only spends about 8% of the play as the Maiden in the Tower, 26% as the white cat, but 56% of the play as the hero, Fidèle, while Pimpondor is imprisoned for 56% of the *féerie*, only playing an active role for about a quarter of the play.

This broad overview of the plotline cannot begin to do justice to the complexity of the *féerie*, packed full of wordplay and burlesque moments, along with various airs and dances. One could view the play as a tribute to d'Aulnoy and her impact on the fairy-tale genre in the period, with its allusions not only to the two main source tales – "The White Cat" and "Belle-Belle" – but also to "The Bee and the Orange Tree," "The Boar Prince," and "The Princess Rosette."⁸ Like d'Aulnoy, in many respects the Cogniards flatten gender

⁶ As opposed to d'Aulnoy's tale, here Violente's dragon does not kill the beloved prince, but rather, the prince is taken captive.

⁷ I use hero(ine) here to emphasize the fluidity of Blanchette/Fidèle's gender. Although referred to in masculine terms in the scenes where Blanchette is referred to as Fidèle, it remains important to acknowledge that a subject gendered female has crossdressed to be able to carry out the quests, which would not be possible as female, without this "transvestism."

⁸ One of the members of Migonnet's government is named "Marcassin," the French title of "The Boar Prince" ("Le Prince Marcassin").

hierarchies – positioning female characters as being just as if not more capable than male characters – and they further challenge fixed notions of social class. While creating a pretext for elaborate costumes and scenery to enhance the spectacle-value of the *féerie*, the Cogniards’ integration of the episodes that take place in the Kingdom of Gems and later in the Kingdom of the Sea further challenge binaries between the human and the non-human, foregrounding what Bennett refers to as the vitality of matter. In many respects, *The White Cat* is carnivalesque in that it marks, to borrow Mikhail Bakhtin’s words, a “temporary liberation from the prevailing truth and from established order,” it momentarily suspends “all hierarchical rank, privileges, norms, and prohibitions” (5), including, in the *féerie*, those that uphold gender, class, species, and other ontological hierarchies.

Gender Fluidity

As Judith Butler has argued, “When the constructed status of gender is theorized as radically independent of sex, gender itself becomes a free-floating artifice, with the consequence that *man* and *masculine* might just as easily signify a female body as a male one, and *woman* and *feminine* a male body as easily as a female one” (*Gender* 6). The notion of gender as “free-floating” or fluid is embodied in the *féerie* by Blanchette-Fidèle, but is also suggested by the circumstances in which the prince, Pimpondor, finds himself. Much like d’Aulnoy’s knight Fortuné in “Belle-Belle,” as well as the title hero(ine) from Marie-Jeanne L’Héritier’s maiden warrior tale “Marmoisan,” Fidèle represents the ideal chivalric knight; in these early modern maiden-warrior tales, the crossdressed hero(ines) incarnate ideal masculinity better than any of the (other) male characters; the same is true for the Cogniards’ Fidèle.

He – the pronoun used throughout the section of Blanchette/Fidèle’s transformation – never hesitates in his quest to save Pimpondor from the evil Migonnet, and does a lot of other saving along the way, much like the knights of medieval cycles. After the Heather Fairy provides Fidèle with a chest full of luxurious clothes, the hero(ine) seeks out King Matapa, furnishing the impoverished king and queen with clothes appropriate to their rank and swearing that he will free Pimpondor and return to them the wealth of their kingdom. When traveling to the Kingdom of Gems to obtain the magical sapphire ring, Fidèle uncovers a plot to overthrow the diamond Regent, thus saving his kingdom. After successfully completing his first test – Matapa challenges Fidèle and his men to eating all the food the king amassed in the central square, which Bouffelaballe easily does – the hero(ine) sets out on his second quest: he must kill the dragon ravaging Migonnet’s kingdom.⁹ En route Fidèle comes across many marble statues, which he discovers are princesses transformed by Migonnet for having rejected his hand in marriage. With the magic ring, which allows the possessor to undo any enchantment, Fidèle saves the women whose fate he could have shared. As in d’Aulnoy’s “Belle-Belle,” the hero(ine) overcomes the dragon and manages to recuperate the treasures Migonnet stole from Matapa, and finally frees the prince. It is only with the appearance of the fairy Violente that the happy ending is postponed, with another episode of d’Aulnoy’s “The White Cat” spliced back into the action. In her clarifications to the notion of gender as performance in *Bodies that Matter* (1993), Butler explains that this performance “is not a singular ‘act’ or event, but a ritualized production” (95) that one undergoes usually under constraint to conform to normative forms of femininity or masculinity. We might consider all of these different actions carried out by the hero(ine) as so many ritual actions constitutive of his masculinity.

Just as Fidèle’s actions such as saving princesses and kingdoms and killing dragons ritually reiterate his masculinity, it is also confirmed by other characters’ recognition of him as masculine, including Petitpatapon, the companions, and Migonnet’s sister, Rosafiera. That is to say, these characters *interpellate* Fidèle as man. When Blanchette is transformed into Fidèle, Petitpatapon is quite confused:

⁹ In d’Aulnoy’s “Belle-Belle,” the dragon devastates Matapa’s kingdom.

Petitpatapon: Hein? what does I see?. that face ... I gotta be seeing things!. but it's Blanchette

Blanchette, *laughing*. Yes, my dear Petitpatapon, it is Blanchette, the goatherd!

Petitpatapon: What, mamzelle, yer a man!

Blanchette: As you can see. ...

Petitpatapon: I got it now why you refused to be my wife ... Ah! I's so humiliated by my naïve stupidity. ... I wuz yearnin for a guy! Ah!. (26)¹⁰

At the same time that the character Petitpatapon serves to recognize and interpellate Fidèle as man, he also functions as an example of an imperfect embodiment of normative masculinity, which only emphasizes Fidèle's ability to perform it. For instance, when Fidèle and his group of merry men are confronted by monsters, Petitpatapon shows fear, whereas Fidèle proves fearless. When Fidèle and Petitpatapon present themselves to Migonnet, Petitpatapon trembles beside a steadfast Fidèle. When he learns how Fidèle plans to kill Migonnet's dragon – getting the dragon drunk with wine then piercing its eye, its vulnerable spot – Petitpatapon is fully impressed, calling the plan “sublime” (89). The contrast between the two characters works to foreground Fidèle's successful embodied performance of ideal masculinity.

Arguably, Théodore and Hippolyte grant their hero(ine) Fidèle more agency than the hero(ine) of d'Aulnoy's “Belle-Belle” by eliminating the character of the horse Camarade, who acts as Belle-Belle/Fortuné's advisor. In the *Cogniards' féerie*, Fidèle needs no advice from other characters to carry out his deeds, and the Heather Fairy emphasizes the need to rely only on his own wits: “From this moment on, search, question, listen, and choose among those whom you will meet ... your intelligence must bring together the auxiliaries who can assure the success of your enterprise” (38); there is no advisor-horse to assist. Indeed, Fidèle demonstrates his intelligence through the process of negotiating with the six companions to join his band of merry men: “So, it's a deal, let's be on our way!” (43). When they are all recruited, much like a king, the Heather Fairy has them take an oath of allegiance to Fidèle, which again reiterates the character's masculinity through a traditionally male ritual of feudal allegiance. Fidèle's ability to negotiate and recruit what are essentially soldiers in his fight against Migonnet and gain their oath of allegiance are all actions that serve to embody and ground his masculine identity.

Fidèle's masculinity is also reinforced and interpellated through the character Rosafiera. Like the sister of the king whose kingdom Fortuné saves in d'Aulnoy's “Belle-Belle,” Migonnet's sister Rosafiera falls in love with the hero(ine). Upon Fidèle's arrival in Migonnet's kingdom, Rosafiera lures him into her boudoir; she expresses her appreciation for his “chivalric enterprise” (79) and declares: “Young! handsome! valorous and modest! he has everything! he has everything!” (80). In some respects she is the monstrous double of her brother: just as the detestable Migonnet fails to marry Blanchette, so the “wilted rose” Rosafiera fails to attain the hand of Fidèle. This doubling also emphasizes the hero(ine)'s gender fluidity, which is made possible through these interpellations by the other characters and through Blanchette/Fidèle's successful gender performances.

¹⁰ In French, Petitpatapon clearly speaks a lower class, peasant French. I tried to hint at class differences in the English I provide.

Petitpatapon: Hein? quoique je voyons?. cette figure-là ... J'ons-t-y la berlue!. Mais c'est Blanchette

Blanchette, *riant*. Oui mon cher Petitpatapon, c'est Blanchette la chevière!

Petitpatapon: Comment, mamzelle, vous êtes un homme!

Blanchette: Comme tu vois ...

Petitpatapon: Je comprenons maintenant pourquoi que vous refusiez d'être ma femme ... Ah! je suis-t-humilié de ma naïve bêtise ... je soupirions pour un garçon! Ah! ...

Interestingly, the “prince charming” of the *féerie*, Pimpondor, incarnates imperfect masculinity and arguably plays the role of the princess in the tower. The period in the play during which the hero(ine) shifts from goatherd to knight on a quest, Pimpondor is shut up in a dungeon in Migonnet’s castle. Like the princesses of Disney films, he is waiting to be saved, hoping to compensate the person who saves him. He also lacks the courage we see in Blanchette/Fidèle, who is ready to sacrifice everything to save Pimpondor. While in his cell, Pimpondor notes: “Oh Blanchette! I don’t reproach you, but making your acquaintance cost me dearly” (92). The idea that it is Fidèle/Blanchette who saves the prince is made quite explicit, and is articulated by Fidèle himself:

Pimpondor: Who are you ... young knight? Oh, these traits ... and these words that I just heard ... am I dreaming?

Fidèle: My dear prince, no ... it is Blanchette who is before you.

Pimpondor: Blanchette! ... it is she!

Fidèle: Who comes to save you ... but let’s go, let’s go, for a thousand dangers still threaten you ... we could be surprised. (95)¹¹

The Cogniards maintain the fluid, ambiguous nature of Fidèle/Blanchette’s gender identity by continuing to mark the character as masculine in both his dress and in the play’s indications. Fidèle succeeds in both freeing Pimpondor and returning the riches of Matapa’s kingdom; it is not a male character but a female one, the fairy Violente, who momentarily defers the happy ending by giving Blanchette the head of a cat and flying her off to an isolated castle. For his part, Pimpondor continues to demonstrate lack of chivalry. When Blanchette is carried off, Matapa convinces his son that Blanchette is dead and that it is therefore pointless to try to find her; it is only when the Heather Fairy appears and scolds Pimpondor for seeming to forget her so quickly that he begins his quest to find Blanchette.

As such, the Cogniards are in keeping with the early modern maiden warrior tales by d’Aulnoy and L’Héritier, in which the hero(ine) incarnates an ideal masculinity not demonstrated by any of the (other) male characters in the tales. We can see that Fidèle’s identity as male relies on convincing gender performances that lead the other characters to interpellate him as male, on the one hand; and on Fidèle positively measuring up and even outdoing the other male characters, most notably the (somewhat unsuccessful) “prince charming” of the tale, Pimpondor, on the other. The *féerie* foregrounds the fluidity of gender by showing that gender is not stable, but depends on reiterated performances by ostensibly female or male characters whose gender identities are in flux and depend on the recognition and interpellation of other characters. As we will see, the *féerie* similarly foregrounds the fluidity of class.

Class Fluidity

In *The White Cat*, gender fluidity destabilizes heteronormative constructions of masculine and feminine – based on male agency and female passivity – by foregrounding the fact that women as well as men can

¹¹ The French reads:

Pimpondor: Qui êtes-vous ... jeune chevalier? Oh! ces traits ... et ces paroles que je viens d’entendre ... est-ce que je rêve?

Fidèle: Mon cher prince, non ... c’est Blanchette qui est devant vous.

Pimpondor: Blanchette!. c’est elle!

Fidèle: Qui vient vous sauver ... mais venez, venez, car mille dangers vous menacent encore ... on peut nous surprendre.

perform various (active) tasks associated with masculinity, including saving kingdoms. In a similar manner, the *féerie* stages class fluidity in ways that destabilize the superiority of upper class persons and culture with respect to all that is deemed lower class. The first instance of class fluidity occurs with Blanchette herself, a prisoner in the fairy Violente's castle – an ostensibly upper class space – groomed to marry a monstrous king, who later performs the duties of a goatherd for the peasant Chiendent family; her shift from maiden in the castle tower to goatherd working for a peasant family actually leads Blanchette to enjoy more freedoms. But the Cogniards focus most of their attention on royals reduced to the life of a commoner, on the one hand; and Petitpatapon's rise in status, on the other; all of which takes many comical forms.

We first learn of Matapa's fall from glory from Petitpatapon, who remarks somewhat ironically that the king "is reduced to serving himself, shaving his own beard" (21); the comment points to what might be viewed as ridiculous about upper class culture, where nobles and kings employ others to dress and groom them. The third tableau opens in Matapa's palace, with the king and queen, in tattered attire, about to start their domestic tasks:

King: Madame queen?

Queen: What can I do for you, sire?

King: Well, the thread, the needle I asked you for?

Queen: Here it is, my lord and master ... if I took a moment to return, it's because I am heating up the iron.

King: Ah, yes! for your ironing! (30)

As they discuss their current situation, the stage directions indicate that the king starts sewing his torn breeches and the queen begins to iron, which they continue to do when the finance minister – in elegant rags like the royal couple – enters to update them on their poor financial situation. Later, when Fidèle arrives to declare his allegiance to the king and his plan to save the prince and the kingdom, the king tries to physically position himself so that Fidèle cannot see the holes in his breeches.

Such examples are exemplary of Henri Bergson's notion of "degradation." Bergson argues that the laughable emerges "when we are presented with something formerly respected as mediocre and vile" (95).¹² Whereas in d'Aulnoy's "Belle-Belle," the situation of the impoverished king is presented in more dramatic terms, the Cogniards foreground the comic in a king having to "serve himself" (like most people do) and further "degraded" to the point of sewing up holes in his breeches (which would be the task of a servant or woman, which also points to women's lower status in relation to men). While we can attribute these pokes at royalty as par for the course in a genre built on parody and the burlesque, we should also keep in mind that this *féerie* was produced in post-Revolutionary France, where relatively recently – in 1848 – France's last king after the Bourbon restoration (1814/1815–1830) and the July monarchy (1830–1848) was removed, and the Second Republic was established. The degradation of a king would have had a special ring to it in 1852.¹³

In a carnivalesque twist, *The White Cat* not only stages a king and queen who fall from grace, but it also represents the rise of a peasant who momentarily – even if in a fit of madness – is recognized as king. When the Heather Fairy makes Petitpatapon Fidèle's squire and dresses him appropriately, the former peasant realizes that class does not reside solely in external appearances such as clothes; it also manifests in one's linguistic abilities. As such, Petitpatapon requests that his language match his attire: "est-ce que

¹² Bakhtin also relates "degradation" to the physical and material: "Not only parody in its narrow sense but all the other forms of grotesque realism degrade, bring down to earth, turn their subject into flesh. This is the peculiar trait of this genre which differentiates it from all the forms of medieval high art and literature. The people's laughter which characterized all the forms of grotesque realism from immemorial times was linked with the bodily lower stratum. Laughter degrades and materializes" (20).

¹³ By 1852 the French Second Republic had already devolved into the Second Empire.

j'pourrions pas avoir une langue un tantinet dorée?" (27). This could be translated into standard English as "couldn't I have a tongue a tiny bit gilded" but in French the use of "j'pourrions" (first-person singular subject pronoun with a verb in first person plural) is characteristic of lower class, peasant speech, typical of the language of Petitpatapon before his transformation and also characteristic of the speech of his betrothed, Pierrette. With his transformation, the sophistication of Petitpatapon's speech is so exaggerated – with the use of the *passé simple* (typically not used in spoken language) and the imperfect subjunctive (also little used in spoken French) – that Petitpatapon can no longer understand himself:

Oh! It is astonishing! my tongue seems to untwine ... Oh! thank you, Madame ... Out of honor it would have been incoherent were I to enunciate as formerly ... my pastoral elocution could not have paired well with the supercilious envelope with which you have endowed my being. Oh! But it is prestigious with what velocity words rush to my lips to translate my fleeting thoughts; only, I do not understand much of what I am saying. (27)¹⁴

In many respects, this scene harkens back to Pierre de Marivaux's fairy-themed *opéra-comique*, *Arlequin Poli par l'amour* (1720), in which the language of the boorish Arlequin is similarly transformed by his love for the shepherdess Silvia. In his discussion of the use of the marvelous in the eighteenth-century *opéra-comique* – in many respects the ancestor of the nineteenth-century *féerie* vaudeville – David Buch remarks:

Unlike in serious, official opera, in the comic theater [*opéra-comique*] the marvelous subverts the social order. Magic powers allow commoners to assume princely roles and to further events in the plot that otherwise would be impossible owing to the period's rigid class system. It may seem ironic, but magic actually allows for the rational enlightenment of characters (and the audience), demonstrating the arbitrary nature of distinctions in social class. (104–105)

The same could be said about the fairy vaudeville in general and the Cogniards' *The White Cat* in particular, in which fluid class identities relativize class distinctions that have already been radically challenged during the French Revolution of 1789 and the 1848 revolution, but which, nevertheless, persist in nineteenth-century French society.

These class issues come to the fore shortly after Petitpatapon's metamorphosis when Pierrette expresses surprise at the noble transformation of her beau, exclaiming in lower class language "eh, it's him here in person? ("c'est-y ben lui-même en personne?"), to which Petitpatapon replies "What style! my dear ... this vulgar language irritates my nerves" (28). What becomes clear in this exchange is that Petitpatapon's linguistic performance allows him to position himself as superior to the lower class Pierrette; but the rapid ascent of Petitpatapon also reveals the arbitrary nature of these distinctions since we know very well that he is the same person – albeit with more eloquent speech – as before his very recent transformation. This arbitrariness culminates in the scene in which King Migonnet is magically rendered mad by the sapphire ring, which leads him to declare Petitpatapon "Prince of Cochinchina," cheering, "Long Live Petitpatapon II!" (100). Just as repeated gender performances such as quests and saving kingdoms contribute to the construction of Blanchette as the male *Fidèle*, so Petitpatapon's repeated aristocratic linguistic performances construct Petitpatapon as upper class, allowing him to momentarily play king.

In many ways, the play reveals the underpinnings of such class constructions. All that is upper class is associated with what is abstract and removed from what is immediately physical, while what gets marked as lower class is associated with the concrete, the body, matter. A king sewing or a queen ironing seems incongruous because kings and queens are not supposed to engage so directly in activities associated with concrete, quotidian reality or the body; kings are supposed to rule (intellectual labor) while the lower class works in the physical world (sews, farms, herds). This opposition is simultaneously reflected in and produced through language, whereby peasant speech is more direct, referring to the physical world, and often grammatically "incorrect" (according to the upper class) – that is, not adhering to the ideal, abstract

¹⁴ The French reads: "Oh! c'est étonnant! ma langue semble se détortiller ... Oh! merci, madame ... D'honneur, il eût été incohérent que je m'énonçasse comme naguères ... mon éducation champêtre n'eût pu marcher de pair avec l'enveloppe supercoquenteuse dont vous avez doté mon être. Oh! mais c'est prestigieux avec quelle vélocité le mot se précipite sur mes lèvres pour traduire ma pensée fugitive; seulement, je ne comprends pas beaucoup de ce que je dis."

notion of proper language – while upper class speech is more conceptual and indirect, referring to concepts like honor, duty, as well as style. When Petitpatapon learns upper class speech, he goes “meta,” providing commentary not about *what* is said, but about *how* things are said; he thus demonstrates a more abstract relation to language through speech acts that contribute to his ability to manifest a higher social status. Through their use of class metamorphosis, the Cogniards foreground how class identity – like gender identity – consists in performances constitutive of that identity; class identity as such, then, is not stable but fluid, constantly in the (re)making, shifting through each linguistic or other social performance. Indeed, *The White Cat* constantly points to the fluidity of all identities, including human and non-human.

People and Things

The Cogniards often insert strange, fictional worlds into their *féeries* onto which contemporary social and political tensions are projected. In their *Mille et une nuits* (*Thousand and One Nights*, 1843), part of the action takes place in the Kingdom of Monkeys and the Kingdom of Flowers; in *La Biche au bois* (*The Doe in the Woods*, 1845), characters come upon the Kingdom of Fish and the Kingdom of Vegetables. In *The White Cat*, Fidèle, on his way to rescue Pimpondor, passes through the Kingdom of Gems; and for his part, Pimpondor finds himself in the Kingdom of the Sea with Petitpatapon after the fairy Violente has them thrown into the sea (as she did earlier with Blanchette).¹⁵ In both of these episodes, hierarchies between human and non-human are constantly challenged, which have the potential of broadening the viewer’s ways of understanding things as well as non-human animals.

When Fidèle and Petitpatapon arrive in the Kingdom of Gems, they become aware of the plot to topple the monarchy of the Regent. “Regent” is a reference to the diamond considered the largest and most beautiful in the world, purchased by the regent of France, Philippe d’Orléans in 1717, from whom it derives its name (“Diamant”). That the Kingdom of Gems is somehow reminiscent of French monarchy is evident in the court festivities organized by the Regent, which include a “carousel” featuring equestrian games such as the *jeu de bague*, ballets, and fireworks.¹⁶ Fidèle informs the Regent that the Rhinestone (*le Strass*) was organizing a revolt with Pinchbeck (*le Chrysocale*), Jet (*le Jais*), and Marcasite (*la Marcassite*), among other imitation or semi-precious stones. Earlier, the Pinchbeck declares “For too long they considered us objects without value” (54), while Marcasite reports back that he “stirred up the Agates and the Carnelians, who are endlessly humiliated by the Pearls and Turquoises ... They have sworn to help us. Also, in addition, the whole Glass Jewelry district is ours” (55).¹⁷ Upon learning about the conspiracy, the Regent exclaims that “Costume jewelry” (*le clinquant*) – these “false and perfidious” gems – are “conspiring” and “revolting” against him (67).

These tensions mimic those of French society in the period. Nineteenth-century France was constantly moving between regimes that harkened back to the monarchical past and those inspired by the republican nature of the French Revolution, which theoretically was anti-hierarchical. First produced in 1852, the year Louis-Napoléon declares the Second Empire, after having served as president of the Second Republic, which itself toppled the monarchy of Louis-Philippe in 1848, *The White Cat* stages the very real tensions between the “true gems” (nobility and royalty) and the “clinquant” (the non-noble lower classes) in French society. The scenes taking place in the Kingdom of Gems challenge hierarchies of value between what are, essentially, different types of minerals, naturally occurring or human-made; this episode showcases the arbitrary distinctions between the social classes challenged by the class fluidity of characters like

¹⁵ In effect, the *féerie* creates parallel narratives between Blanchette, thrown into the sea after Pimpondor is captured by Migonnet, and Pimpondor, thrown into the sea after Blanchette is captured by the fairy Violente.

¹⁶ The carousel is a courtly, less martial type of tournament: more spectacle than warlike. The *jeu de bague* is an equestrian game whereby a rider uses a lance to pick up a ring from a pole.

¹⁷ The French reads: “J’ai soulevé les Agates et les Cornalines, qui sont sans cesse humiliées par les Perles et les Turquoises ... Elles ont juré de nous seconder. Puis, en outre, tout le quartier de la Verroterie est à nous.”

Petitpatapon and Matapa.¹⁸ At the end of the scene in which the revolutionary characters make their plans to overturn the Regent, they ironically sing: “Our turn has come, the golden age is gone!” (56), which suggests the possibility of other regimes based on different measures of (social) value. The end of the “golden age” can lead to a new age in which rhinestones, pinchbacks, and marcasites attain the value of diamonds and rubies.

At the same time that the scenes in the Kingdom of Gems reiterate the arbitrariness of class identity and value, it also points to different conceptions of “inorganic” vs. “organic” matter. Upon their arrival in the kingdom, Fidèle and Petitpatapon encounter the Ruby, who asks if they are “men from up there,” referring to the physical space above the sea. Petitpatapon answers in his now eloquent tongue: “Yes we are superior men” (57); he employs a multilayered term, “superior,” which can signify one’s “position or location” as well as designate one’s higher social or ontological status or rank.¹⁹ Petitpatapon’s use of “superior,” then, suggests that humans – at least in his eyes – are “superior” to gems. When Fidèle expresses his surprise at the sight of talking and moving (that is, active) gems, the Ruby explains: “When we are in our domain, at the center of our [underground] country, we are endowed with intelligence and personified, like you. But as soon as we leave our land of birth, we no longer are anything more than more or less precious gems” (58). Thus when moving from the underground space of their kingdom to the space of humans where they are instrumentalized as jewelry and human possessions, gemstones shift from being active subjects to passive objects.

We might understand these scenes in terms of questioning the split identified by Bennett between “dull matter (it, things) and vibrant life (us, beings)” (vii); the *féerie* compels us to view these gems in terms of vibrant – active, speaking, acting – matter that is not passive. In the world above, gemstones are instrumentalized as features of human jewelry, thus Fidèle’s surprise at their agency in their underworld. Discovering the existence of the Kingdom of Gems offers Fidèle, Petitpatapon, and the spectator what Bennett refers to as “a fuller range of the nonhuman powers circulating around and within human bodies” (ix). Although fairy tales were far from the exclusive domain of children in the period, the genre plays on what Bennett describes as “childhood experiences of a world populated by animate things rather than passive objects” (vii). Offering this “fuller range” of understanding things might initially serve as a pretext for fanciful spectacle, but it also invites the audience to think of the mineral world as vibrant matter instead of consisting of passive objects, which can have implications for how human animals view environmental and ecological issues, even if this is not the express objective of the Cogniards.²⁰

Species Fluidity

In the same way that the *féerie* challenges the opposition between organic (vibrant) and inorganic (dull) matter, so it challenges that between human and non-human animals. After being cast into the sea by the fairy Violente, Pimpondor and Petitpatapon find themselves in the Kingdom of the Sea. Whereas the Kingdom of the Gems mirror political tensions characteristic of the period, the Kingdom of the Sea imitates human amorous play and neighborhood gossip through the characters of the oysters, crabs, and mussels. At one point a mollusk (*Mollusque*), clam (*Clovis*), and oyster (*Pied-de-cheval*) discuss their relation to the human world:

¹⁸ The *Oxford English Dictionary* defines “mineral” as a “naturally occurring substance of neither animal nor vegetable origin; an inorganic substance.” Technically glass is not a “naturally occurring substance” (although it can be), but in the context of the play glass is imitating minerals and constitutes an “inorganic substance.”

¹⁹ The *Oxford English Dictionary*’s definition of “superior” includes concrete connotations (“higher physical level”) as well as social (“higher-ranking”) and ontological (“of a higher or better nature or character”), or more abstract meanings of the term; Petitpatapon is now sophisticated enough to play on these multiple connotations.

²⁰ Bennett remarks: “The figure of an intrinsically inanimate matter may be one of the impediments to the emergence of more ecological and more materially sustainable modes of production and consumption” (ix).

Mollusk: Oh, those inhabitants of the land, I can't stand them.²¹

Clam: Isn't the great family of the Clam [Clovis] victims of these gluttons every day!²²

Oyster (*Pied-de-cheval*): Shellfish, my children, oysters, my friends, mussels, my little chickadees ... beware of the shore, and always stay at the bottom of the sea. (107)

The air that follows mentions the shellfish sellers on the rue Montorgueil, a street in Paris known for its gastronomy. At the beginning of the scene that takes place in the sea, the shellfish view themselves as victims of human *gourmandise* before whom they tremble with fear.

When Petitpatapon arrives, he realizes, as it puts it, that “We are here in enemy territory,” and elaborates in an air:

Up above, where we live, in our world,

My dear, without pity, without regret,

We treat the inhabitant of the waves,

We catch it in our nets

By descending, the roles change,

It is the fish, down here,

Who fish for us and eat us. (110)

Who better to understand the arbitrariness of identities and relations of power than the peasant who was just transformed into a squire? The *féerie*'s carnivalesque that flips traditional hierarchies extends to the one that positions human animals as superior predators (subject, active) in relation to non-human animals, positioned as prey (object, passive). When Pimpondor and Petitpatapon speak with Oyster (*Pied-de-cheval*), the scene plays on the tensions between shellfish as subjects with agency and shellfish as food consumed by humans. Pimpondor explains that the Oyster's kind is welcome in palaces (ironically stating under his breath, “by the dozen”); when Oyster asks if they are really considered hors-d'oeuvres up above, Petitpatapon says “you are the chef-d'oeuvre of creation,” and continues in an aside, “with ground pepper and lemon” (113). But these references to eating what audiences would now view as sentient beings feels somewhat uncomfortable. Learning that big fish love to eat humans, Pimpondor complains to a mollusk that “you can't just eat people like that without hearing them out,” to which the mollusk responds by accusing the prince of being a “poissonphage,” or “fish-eater,” playing on the term for cannibal, “anthropophage.”

In effect, the use of “poissonphage” introduces the perspective of non-human animals, making eating fish and shellfish equivalent to eating humans, thus flattening the hierarchy privileging human over non-human animals. Pimpondor's demand to be heard further raises the issue of the voice of the non-human other, and suggests that the silencing of that voice is part of the objectification and instrumentalization that makes it possible for human animals to eat non-human animals. By turning the tables and making human animals the prey and more specifically the *victims* of non-human animals, the episode elicits audience empathy towards the fate and instrumentalization of all animals, suggested at the outset of the episode by Petitpatapon's remark about human animals' lack of “pity” and “regret” towards their non-human counterparts.

²¹ In French the mollusk says “je ne peux pas les sentir,” which means “I can't stand them,” but literally means “I can't smell them,” thus playing on the allusions to food, prevalent in the scene.

²² Here the Cogniards play on the relation between “clovisse” or “clam” and the name of the first king of the Franks, Clovis.

The episodes that occur in the Kingdom of Gems and the Kingdom of the Sea shake up hierarchies defining relations between humans and things, on the one hand; and human and non-human animals, on the other. Further granting vibrancy to things and non-human animals is the fluidity Pierrette enjoys as she moves between these universes, with a little fairy help, transforming first into a carnelian (a thing) and then into a shrimp (a non-human animal), all the while remaining recognizable as Pierrette, evident in her encounters with Petitpatapon, who perceives his betrothed in these different skins. In many respects, metamorphosis of humans into things – we might keep in mind that Fidèle transforms statues back into princesses – and humans into non-human animals can serve to endow those things and those non-human animals with “vibrancy”; it is a way of inviting spectators to view things and non-human animals through a different lens that shows the world-as-animate and possessing agency, and thus worthy of our empathy.

This fluidity not only occurs as characters move between and embody different genders, social classes, things, and species, but it also can take the form of hybridity. In the Cogniards’ *féerie*, Blanchette and later Pierrette are not fully transformed into cats: they have human bodies with a cat’s head. While d’Aulnoy’s fully cat heroine looks like a cat but speaks and acts human, the Cogniards’ heroines, only able to purr and meow, look part cat and part human, with their “felineness” residing as well in their behavior, that is, in their repeated feline performances.²³ At one point Petitpatapon realizes Pierrette has her eyes on a mouse, while Blanchette plays like a cat with the feather in Pimpondor’s cap. These hybrid creatures fully embody a fluidity in constant motion as they perform as both human – they demonstrate their discomfort at appearing before their lovers with their feline faces – and cat, until the fairy Titania restores them to their fully human forms. When we step back and consider the overall spectacle, the actors depicting minerals and sea creatures would similarly be recognizably human and non-human, that is, as hybrid beings with fluid identities, a fluidity that is furthermore inseparable from the nature of theatrical performance, whose actors constantly embody new identities.

Fluidity of identity takes many forms in the Cogniards’ *The White Cat* as characters move between genders, social classes, organic/inorganic matter, and species. This movement reveals the similar ways in which gender, class, species, and persons vs. things get constructed and it furthermore denaturalizes the binaries that are part and parcel of these constructions. Active vs. passive, subject vs. object, ideal vs. real, form vs. matter, organic vs. inorganic, live vs. dead, predator vs. prey: such binaries support dichotomies that are meant to distinguish between man and woman, upper class and lower class, subject/human and object/thing, and human and non-human animal. Indeed, the various forms of *travestissements* found in *The White Cat* reveal the arbitrariness of all identities by foregrounding the ritual performances constitutive of them, showing how quickly one can slip from being active to passive or predator to prey. That a character is consequently *interpellated* as male or female, upper class or lower class, etc., speaks to the success of the performance of that particular identity. Characterized by magic and metamorphosis, the genre of the *féerie* proves to be an ideal venue through which to explore the fluidity of gender, class, and species identity as well as – with its performing things – the vibrancy of matter.

Conflict of interest: Authors state no conflict of interest.

²³ Both heroines lose the power of speech, which elicits a misogynistic response from Petitpatapon, who states: “And two women who do not speak ... that has its price!” (“Et puis deux femmes qui ne parlent pas ... that well has its price!” (135).

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