

Review of *Quand les vers sont bien composés : Variation et finesse, l'art des Contes et nouvelles en vers de La Fontaine*, by Jole Morgante. Berne: Lang, 2013. ISBN 978-3-0343-1213-4. Pp. 467. €91/\$110.

Judiciously eclectic in her multifaceted approach to the art of Jean de La Fontaine's *Contes et nouvelles en vers*, Jole Morgante, Associate Professor of French Literature and seventeenth-century specialist at the University of Milan, organizes her praiseworthy study into four sections: "Statut problématique des *Contes*," "Contes et nouvelles: Un corpus autonome," "Complexité énonciative des *Contes*," and "Interdiscursivité et finalité communicative." Turning her attention first to the reception of the *Contes*, both in their day and in ours, Morgante situates their author in the various and diverse social and literary groups he frequented. Reminding us that La Fontaine referred to himself as the "papillon de Parnasse" (29), the critic demonstrates important links between his social life and the diversity that characterized his artistic production by bringing to bear letters and "historiettes" from his time, engaging today's critics, and providing a bibliography of both seventeenth-century and modern editions. Morgante's careful attention to multiple editions of similar narrative creations in verse and prose allows her to demonstrate what she calls the tranquil circulation of galant and ribald collections and to underscore La Fontaine's blending of tones, "basant l'utilité sur le plaisant du conte" (28; emphasis in original).

While appreciative of the contributions of critics, such as Catherine Grisé and John Lapp, to the specificity and creation of the *conte en vers*, Morgante notes the general lack of definition for the genre. To remedy the lacune, Morgante turns to Jean-Pierre Collinet's distinction between *fable* and *conte* and his emphasis on thematic and stylistic considerations in the introduction to his 1991 Pléiade edition (her "édition de base"). Linguistic abundance and stylistic alternance (variation of meter) are, according to Morgante, linked to La Fontaine's understanding of generic distinction and to his selection of subjects. As the title of her study, taken from the poet's own reflection, indicates, La Fontaine placed a premium on the very manner of composition: "... quand les vers sont bien composés, ils disent en une égale étendue plus que la prose ne saurait dire" (43). Underscoring the poet's principle of creative synthesis, Morgante illustrates his debt to and interaction with both oral and written traditions, Italian as well as French (47-52). Careful examination of key dictionaries of the time (54, note 67) demonstrates fluidity between the terms *conte* and *nouvelle*, reflecting La Fontaine's own usage, even to the extent that "un récit donné comme nouvelle par le sous-titre, peut ainsi être nommé conte dans le développement de la narration" (56). Here, Morgante's analysis of several pertinent

examples provides insight into both the poet's indifference toward the terms (she also includes *fable*) and his subtle awareness of "la spécificité du genre qu'il est en train de mettre en place, sans paraître vouloir y attacher trop d'importance" (69).

Reflections on the passions occupied seventeenth-century theologians, moralists, philosophers, *honnêtes hommes*, and *honnêtes femmes*. Morgante properly devotes a large section of her study to the question, evoking theories and perspectives from Antiquity and their transformation in the Early Modern (353-86). She demonstrates that love is central for La Fontaine, not only for the *Contes*. After all, as she reminds us, had not Chapelain declared: "l'amour est l'âme du monde, qui fait agir et qui conserve tout ce qui a quelque sentiment dans l'univers . . ." (344)? By examining the thematic of love in the poet's works which accompany or precede the *Contes*, works that Morgante felicitously terms "une sorte de nébuleuse" (73), the reader is led to grasp the diversification of the Lafontainian production, both formal and thematic. Morgante takes us through fruitful examinations of *Adonis* and *Psyché*, elegies, the experimental *Clymène*, and the intensely spiritual *Saint Malc*, skillfully analyzing multifarious stylistic variations and the highly polarized thematic of love.

Taking together *Contes* and *nouvelles* as an autonomous corpus, Morgante distinguishes criteria. Both short and pleasant, the *nouvelle* transmits something new, even *news* if we think of Marguerite de Navarre's *règles du jeu* (Morgante reminds us that La Fontaine acknowledges his debt to the *Heptaméron* for "La servante justifiée" [169]). Continuously engaging pertinent critics, such as Meletinskij, for reflections on a cultural dynamism favoring narration responsive to the Early Modern focus on the individual (111-12), and Cesare Segre for his "schéma à quatre niveaux" (119-20), Morgante herself furnishes clear and striking conclusions. Averting that "[c]e qui se donne à lire est . . . un tout organique," she emphasizes connections: ". . . la manière dont est construit le texte organise en même temps le message qu'il a le but de transmettre en atteignant le maximum d'efficacité communicative" (121).

As Morgante continues her convincing analyses, she establishes that often "chez La Fontaine, la situation des nouvelles est assez proche de celle des contes" (181) and that even where the model is complex, such as in "L'oraison de saint Julien," "on [n'] . . . arrive jamais à véritablement sortir du système de la narration brève" (190). A particularly fine section (195-209) focuses on cases of greater complexity, of "interférence de genres" and a kind of "dilatation narrative." Morgante's careful examination of "le merveilleux" brings to the fore La Fontaine's remarkable and *personal* capacity to draw on and interweave different traditions, thus renewing and enriching genres.

The division "Complexité énonciative des *Contes*" (211-321) with its sections on the discursive (digressions, narrative exchanges), the conversational (dialogues, interlocutorial or authorial interventions), and the thematic (motifs, cohesion), illustrates Morgante's skillful analyses of complexities only partially perceived by other scholars. For example, recognizing Grimm's and Collinet's ascription of "Conte d'un paysan . . ." to the "cas Foucquet," she examines the surrounding *contes*, even their rhymes, to reveal broader considerations and a veritable "historique" of the case (215-20). Another compelling feature of this section is Morgante's deliberation on La Fontaine's paratexts, which reveals the poet's theoretical reflections along with his spirit of independence and his attentiveness to his public, for example, to conventions such as the *bienséances* (286-89).

We have already alluded to Morgante's important consideration of seventeenth-century debates on love, the passions, and on *being* itself. Her analyses in the section "Interdiscursivité" (323-406), again of paratexts as well as texts, lead her to the discovery of a "double technique de construction" chez La Fontaine (levels of reorganization that may be "libertin" on one hand and "éthique" on the other [325-27]). The poet's own faith in his art and in poetry itself is aptly underscored in Morgante's lengthy citation from "Tableau," which closes La Fontaine's fourth collection and which is inspired by Aretino's *Ragionamenti*, while a detailed analysis attentive to intricate rhythm and rime effects in "L'ermite" lead Morgante to ask, rhetorically: "Tant d'art pour quoi faire s'il était tout simplement question de récits plaisants?" (405).

As her conclusion, Morgante applies herself to the last published volume of the *Fables*: the multi-layered significance of its date and its importance as a closing volume and as the final gesture of the poet who includes *Contes* in this last book of *Fables*. "[P]ar quel message La Fontaine a voulu quitter la scène littéraire de son temps?" she asks (408). Again examining texts and paratexts (for example, the double address to Louis, duc de Bourgogne), Morgante discovers and analyzes continuities such as the role of M^{me} de La Sablière as patron and friend, oriental inspiration, the key metaphor of the bee. Variation, again in this volume, characterizes thematic and formal organization, while the insertion of two *nouvelles* represents the poetic gesture of rehabilitation of one work (*Contes*) by the other (*Fables*) (421). Not content with this one interpretation, Morgante uncovers further complexity in the gesture, evidence that "les *Contes* et les *Fables* devaient nécessairement se rejoindre en confluant dans un même moule" (422).

Jole Morgante's masterful study is exceedingly well-documented, highly suggestive, and convincing. Her rich bibliography includes sections of early modern and modern editions, works of antiquity, works by La Fontaine's contemporaries, bibliographies, dictionaries, encyclopedias, and works of criticism on La Fontaine and other subjects. Two indices (of La Fontaine's works and of names cited) and a preface by Segre extend the study's usefulness for students and scholars alike.

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