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Restoring Realism to the Fairytale, or, the Banal Optimism of Tahar Ben Jelloun's *Mes Contes de Perrault*

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Abstract: This article examines Tahar Ben Jelloun's *Mes Contes de Perrault* (2014) as a multilayered instance of literary appropriation. Ben Jelloun's stories, which relocate Charles Perrault's classic French fairytales to the Arab world, represent not only a subversive challenge to French cultural hegemony (as has been argued) but can also be read as a complex engagement with the history of French folktales and their literary adaptations. This study posits that Ben Jelloun's project restores elements of realism to Perrault's tales that were lost when the author adapted folk stories for the French court. By reintroducing themes of bodily suffering, desire, and quotidian struggles, Ben Jelloun reconnects these tales with their folk origins. Examining Ben Jelloun's "appropriation"—his word—in the context of Perrault's own adaptations, this study offers new insights into the circulation and transformation of folktales across cultures and literary traditions. It contributes to ongoing discussions about literary and cultural appropriation and the place of the fairytale genre in today's world.

Keywords: Tahar Ben Jelloun; Charles Perrault; fairytales; Franco-Maghrebi literature; French folk tales; literary realism

Tahar Ben Jelloun's *Mes Contes de Perrault* (*My Tales of Perrault*, 2014, referred to throughout as *My Tales*) begins with a preface entitled "Hommage à Charles Perrault". One quickly gets the sense, though, that the short opening essay is really a tribute to an old Arab woman named Fadela, who, down on her luck and pretending that she was a relative, came to live with Ben Jelloun's family during his childhood.¹ "She liked to tell us stories", writes Ben Jelloun:

My brother and I adored her because she knew how to take us on journeys with the rhythm of extravagant tales where Good always fought Evil, where the villains were always cruel, where the djinns were endowed with all powers. She would then close her eyes and speak as if she had read from the depths of her soul. She was impressive to see and to hear, and each time we were delighted (Ben Jelloun 2014a, p. 7).²

This illiterate storyteller, who seems to hold the *Thousand and One Nights* within her, represents one of two faces of Ben Jelloun's initiation to tales.

The other is Mme Pujarinet, his French teacher at the Franco-Moroccan school in Fez where his father sent him in the hopes that his son would encounter more substantial content than Scheherazade's endless yarns: "Enough with these tall tales from your old aunt!" exclaims the man in the preface to *My Tales*.³ "It's time to get serious!" (Ben Jelloun 2014a, p. 8). But what Ben Jelloun found at the colonial school were more stories, namely, the fairytales of Charles Perrault, whose name, alongside that of Gustave Doré, Mme



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Pujarinet would scrawl on the chalkboard once a week, before reading to her pupils from a big, illustrated volume entitled *Contes de ma mère l'Oye* (Tales of My Mother Goose, a reference to the 1862 edition of Perrault's tales, illustrated by Doré (see Perrault 1862)).

As the French teacher reads out loud, little Tahar cannot help but compare her to his Tartuffe of an aunt. "She was certainly less convincing than Fadela", he reflects, "less talented than her, too". And, listening to the European stories of fairies, princes, and supernatural animals, he finds himself drawing parallels with the *Thousand and One Nights*. This leads him to wonder: how would Fadela have told Perrault's tales? "She would have transformed them", he writes, in answer to his own question, "shaped them according to her fancy, giving them the color of her moments of solitude, of the misery she had known before coming to our home. Perhaps she would have also mixed them with tales from an imagined Orient where djinns and power-hungry men lead the world to its perdition" (Ben Jelloun 2014a, p. 8). Ben Jelloun concludes that, had she known how to read and write, Fadela—his "old mythomaniacal aunt, [a woman] so sympathetic, so pathetic, and so very human" (Ben Jelloun 2014a, p. 9)—might have written a masterpiece, simply by "appropriating" Perrault's tales, by "orientalizing" (Ben Jelloun 2014a, p. 9) them and, perhaps more importantly, by imbuing them with the misery and the pessimism of her own life, by giving to them the same qualities of the "racy [*scabreux*]" stories of the oral tradition with which she was familiar (Ben Jelloun 2014a, p. 8).

By now, of course, the reader of the preface has understood that this will be Ben Jelloun's own mission in *My Tales*. With Fadela as his muse, or, perhaps more aptly put, his fairy godmother, he will populate Perrault's world with North African and Middle Eastern objects and figures, turning a little riding hood into a burka or the skin of a donkey into a djellaba as if by magic, renaming Perrault's princesses Jawhara, Sakina, and even Sharazade, and relocating Bluebeard, Hop o' my Thumb, and Puss in Boots to the Arab world.⁴

Prior scholarship has rightly focused on the subversiveness of Ben Jelloun's act of "appropriation": by uprooting and delocalizing Perrault's stories, Ben Jelloun's project challenges the centrality of French culture and opens up new possibilities for literary connections between France and the Maghreb.⁵ What has not yet been sufficiently explored is just how appropriate it is to speak of appropriation when it comes to the subject of Perrault, whose fairytales were themselves retellings and adaptations—Perrault adapted folktales for his own purposes, namely, for the entertainment of a courtly audience.⁶ The present study proposes to reexamine Ben Jelloun's appropriation as it relates to Perrault's own borrowings and adaptations: in delocalizing Perrault's texts, Ben Jelloun not only challenges French literary hegemony, but also restores to the original tales something that they lost when Perrault accommodated them for the court of Louis XIV. As has been well documented, Perrault did away with much of the violent, erotic, or simply *banal* content that, as the cultural historian Robert Darnton has shown, characterized the French folktale (see, for example, Darnton [1984] 2009, pp. 11, 30, 32, 38, and 62), and, I would add, contributed to its literary realism.⁷ Ben Jelloun's *My Tales*, I argue, restore realism to the folktales by reintroducing the suffering body, the desiring body—all the misery of Fadela's past and all the "raciness" of the *Thousand and One Nights*—and by taking seriously the everyday realities of the regular people of the Arab world, as Ben Jelloun understands or imagines them. Thanks to an unlikely act of adoption and alteration, we find in Ben Jelloun's fairytales all the Eros and Thanatos inherent in the French folktales that Perrault took up and purified, so to speak, for the French aristocracy. We also find the same attention to quotidian struggles that defined the exploits of the heroes of the French folktales.⁸

Ben Jelloun's project is thus *doubly* subversive: on the one hand, in his *détournement* of a revered French author who figured prominently in his own colonial education, Ben Jelloun challenges French cultural hegemony (cultural dominance being, of course, a central feature

of France's imperial project in Africa)⁹; and, on the other hand, by reinserting into Perrault's tales something of the realism he found in the *Thousand and One Nights*, as remembered and recounted by Fadela, Ben Jelloun renders justice to the folktales which were subjected to Perrault's own purificatory project, his literary *mission civilisatrice*.¹⁰

Before examining what exactly makes Ben Jelloun's fairytales "realist", and what exactly they help us to appreciate about the notion of literary realism, it is important to understand how his stories differ from those of Perrault, whose tales the Franco-Moroccan author set out to rewrite. An important aspect of this difference lies in Ben Jelloun's willingness to tackle violent and sexual themes head-on, and the clearest example of this tendency can be found in his reimagining of "Bluebeard". To be fair, even Perrault's version is rather gory: a girl becomes the seventh wife of the story's titular character, a man who, she comes to learn, has slaughtered his six previous spouses. The passage where the young woman comes across the bodies in a forbidden chamber reads as follows in *Histoires ou Contes du temps passé* (1697, translated in 1741 as *Histories or Tales of Passed Times*), the first published edition of Perrault's fairytales:

D'abord elle ne vit rien, parce que les fenestres estoient fermées; après quelques momens, elle commença à voir que le plancher estoit tout couvert de sang caillé, et que dans ce sang se miroient les corps de plusieurs femmes mortes, & attachées le long des murs (c'étoit toutes les femmes que la Barbe bleuë avoit épousées & qu'il avoit égorgées l'une après l'autre). Elle pensa mourir de peur, & la clef du cabinet qu'elle venoit de retirer de la serrure luy tomba de la main[.] (Perrault 1697b, pp. 67–68).

She could not at first see any thing plainly, because the windows were shut. After some moments, she began to perceive that the floor was all covered over with clotted blood, on which lay the bodies of several dead women ranged against the walls: (These were all the wives whom Blue Beard had married and murdered one after another.) She thought she should have died for fear; and the key, which she pulled out of the lock, fell out of her hand (Perrault 1741, p. 25, translation modified).

Ben Jelloun rewrites the scene in the following way:

La salle était sombre, seul un rai de lumière perçait une fenêtre mal fermée. Elle vit des choses, mais ne parvint pas à savoir de quoi il s'agissait exactement. Puis il y eut l'odeur, entre humidité et pourriture. En avançant, elle aperçut des flaques noires dures; elle y enfonça un bout de bois: c'était du sang coagulé. Elle leva les yeux, et al.ors, elle aperçut des corps suspendus à des crochets de boucher. C'était des corps humains, des corps de femmes. Il y avait plus d'une dizaine. [...] Khadija fit tomber la clé dans une flaque de sang (Ben Jelloun 2014b, p. 73).

The room was dark, only a ray of light pierced through a poorly closed window. She saw things, but could not make out exactly what they were. Then there was the smell, something between dampness and rot. Walking forward, she noticed hard black puddles; she probed one with a piece of wood: it was coagulated blood. She looked up and, then, she saw bodies hanging from meat hooks. They were human bodies, bodies of women. There were more than a dozen. [...] Khadija dropped the key into a puddle of blood.

The descriptions are striking in their similarity. In Ben Jelloun's version, there are more dead bodies, more precise details (the meat hooks, notably), and he introduces smell and touch, which heighten the sense of horror. What makes the rewriting so much more awful, though, is the sentence Ben Jelloun appends to what is otherwise a fairly straightforward retelling. "Her master" the paragraph continues "consummated [*consommait*] [the women],

or at least tried to rape them, then, in rage, would slit their throats and had them brought there to keep them as in a cemetery, a museum of horrors". (Ben Jelloun 2014b, p. 73).

Perrault's protagonist is a monster who kills his wives one after another when they discover the bodies of their predecessors; it's impossible to say how or why the cycle ever began, a case of infinite regress. In contrast, Ben Jelloun's titular character is a serial killer with a psychosexual motive. He is impotent and he takes out his sexual frustration on women by raping and torturing them. Furthermore, in Ben Jelloun's story, the man's blue beard is not a biological anomaly or an indication of his monstrosity (as it is for Perrault's character, who has his oddly colored facial hair "by misfortune" (Perrault 1697b, p. 58)), but rather an intentional choice: the man dyes his beard in homage to a sect of femicidal cultists who live in the nearby mountains. His defining characteristic—his blue beard—is a visible tribute to his deadly misogyny, and he wears it like a badge of honor. The cycle of violence in Perrault's story is presented as atemporal and devoid of psychology, while for Ben Jelloun violence is the product of psychological and social circumstances. Ben Jelloun transforms the pure, hypothetical evil that we find in Perrault's tale into a violence that is sexual and gendered and historically contingent.

Other stories in Ben Jelloun's collection are similarly more explicitly cruel and/or sexual in nature. As in "Bluebeard", we often see examples of violence experienced by women¹¹: in Ben Jelloun's "Hop o' my Thumb", the father not only attempts to abandon his children in the woods, as he does in the source story, but he also beats his wife; and one of the kings who figures in "Hakim the Tuft" (Ben Jelloun's version of "Ricky the Tuft") comes close to kicking his baby daughters, whom he views, because of their biological sex, as a "misfortune" and a "curse" for which he blames their mother (see Ben Jelloun 2014d, p. 147). The stories also dwell on psychological wounds: in "The Fairies", for example, the good sister does not simply live happily ever after once she has been rescued by her Prince Charming, as she does in the Perrault tale of the same name, but must instead undergo a complex form of trauma therapy as a result of the abuse she has suffered from her mother and sister (see Ben Jelloun 2014h, pp. 105–19). Several stories (most notably, "Sleeping Beauty" and "Bluebeard") contain explicit references to the sexual violence and bodily harm experienced by Black women in Ben Jelloun's imagined Arab world.¹²

Ben Jelloun's version of "Little Red Riding-Hood", is probably the best example of content that is explicitly both erotic and violent in *My Tales*. "The Little Girl with the Red Burka" takes place in a country controlled by a fundamentalist Islamist group ("bearded men, dressed in black tunics, armed with sabers and rifles, [who] laid down the law and persecuted men who did not regularly attend mosque, [and who] stoned women who dared to defy them by wearing immodest clothes" (Ben Jelloun 2014f, p. 49)) where torture and gang rape are common. There is no wolf; instead, there is an adult man who kills the protagonist's sick grandmother, puts on her nightgown, and tries to rape the little heroine when she arrives with her provisions.

The girl with the red burka tricks her aggressor into falling on his own knife, but not before the man loses his disguise in pursuit of her, causing the girl to laugh at the size of his penis and then to threaten to castrate him. (The body is very present in these stories: the female hero of "Bluebeard" also makes fun of the serial killer's genitals, for instance (see Ben Jelloun 2014b, p. 71).) Ben Jelloun's insistence on the girl's body ("She had nice little breasts [*de petits seins bien sages*] whose budding nipples you could make out" (Ben Jelloun 2014f, p. 53)), and his decision to place rape at the center of the plot brings the story closer to the folktale, most of which is concerned with the girl's slowly getting undressed, throwing her garments into the fire one by one at the wolf's request until she is completely naked, at which point she joins the animal in bed. In Perrault's tale, the little girl is not explicitly sexualized, and there is no suggestion that the violence she will experience

has to do with anything other than the wolf's hunger. Bruno Bettelheim and others have argued that Perrault's story of "Little Red Riding-Hood" is all about Oedipal tensions and the vicissitudes of unconscious desire, but even for psychoanalytically oriented critics the erotic dimension of the story has nothing to do with its "manifest content"—that is, its narrative. Only when the tale has been subjected to a psychoanalytic reading do we see, for example, that "[t]he story [. . .] deals with the daughter's unconscious wish to be seduced by her father" (Bettelheim [1975] 2010, p. 175). For Ben Jelloun, on the other hand, the subject of the fairytale is the real and literal fact of violence against women. His title, unlike Perrault's, highlights the importance of gender and personhood: "Little Red Riding-Hood", a synecdochic, grammatically masculine object (in French: "*Le Petit chaperon rouge*"), becomes "The Little Girl with the Red Burka", a grammatically feminine person ("*La Petite à la burqa rouge*").

Ben Jelloun's reimagining of the antagonist of "Little Red Riding-Hood" is evidence not only of his willingness to represent sexual violence in detail, but also of another facet of his realism. The aggressor is not a big bad talking wolf, but rather a low-level Islamist vigilante in a fictional Arab nation where an extremist faction has gained a certain amount of political power. In almost every instance, Ben Jelloun transforms the monsters that are to be found in Perrault's stories into mediocre men, whose status as humans makes their violent acts all the more appalling, and all the more real.

In Ben Jelloun's version of "Hop o' my Thumb", to take another example, the ogre who, in Perrault's tale, attempts to eat the lilliputian hero's brothers and sisters, is described in the following way: "[The ogre was] neither tall nor short. He was neither a frightening monster nor a deformed animal; he was an ordinary man, one who would hardly be noticed. He was somewhat portly and had the look of a good family man. Nothing in his physical appearance marked him as a child eater".¹³ The antagonists of the French folktales were, similarly, at once despicable and *real*: as Darnton has shown, "the French ogres [in tales like "Hop o' my Thumb"] appear in the role of *le bourgeois de la maison* [. . .], as if they were rich local landowners. They play fiddles, visit friends, snore contentedly in bed beside fat ogre wives; and for all their boorishness, they never fail to be good family men and good providers" (Darnton [1984] 2009, p. 22). This is precisely the kind of ogre we find in Ben Jelloun's "Hop o' my Thumb"—right down to the description of a "good family man". He is a husband and father who makes dumb jokes and adores his ugly daughters. His real defect, for Ben Jelloun, lies in his belief that his family is more deserving than others: he kills people in order to spoil his children. (Ben Jelloun does not explain exactly how this works, but once the ogre has been tricked into slaughtering his offspring in place of Hop o' my Thumb's brothers and sisters, he laments: "My seven daughters were my fortune, my reason to live and to kill, my calling as an absolute and merciless ogre" (Ben Jelloun 2014k, p. 173).)

Often, the bad guys in *My Tales* evoke the kind of rich Emir whom, as can clearly be seen in his other works, Ben Jelloun considers to be the worst "type" of the Arab world.¹⁴ These men are impious, egotistical, sexist, and prone to debauchery, corruption, and oppression. Bluebeard, with his wealth and disdain for authentic religious practice, is one such figure; the Islamist in "The Little Girl with the Red Burka" is another. The father in "Donkey-Skin" is yet another: his incestuous desire for his daughter, it is suggested, is not simply the result of a double bind. (In Perrault's tale, he has committed himself to remarrying after his wife's death, but he has also promised *only* to marry a woman who is even more beautiful than she was; the only woman more beautiful than his wife is his daughter.) Ben Jelloun gives the eponymous character's father a backstory that is absent from the source text: before meeting Donkey-Skin's virtuous mother, he was a greedy polygamist who ran a corrupt government in which women had no civil rights. When the

man demands to marry his own daughter, and makes up a story according to which she is, in fact, an orphan, it is as if he is reverting to his lying, cheating, lecherous former self (see [Ben Jelloun 2014j](#), pp. 179–208).

A clear definition of “literary realism” is warranted at this point, especially because there are undeniable dissimilarities between Ben Jelloun’s oeuvre and what we tend to think of as realist fiction. Beyond the frequent presence of fairies, ogres, talking animals, and other magical creatures in *My Tales*, the book is also, often, defined by a rather universalist view of human nature, and the stories are rarely situated precisely in time or space.¹⁵ These characteristics would seem to stand in contrast to the kinds of fictions we associate with a genre defined by its detailed attention to the daily lives of regular people in specific places at specific moments in history.

Erich Auerbach argued that literary realism reached true maturity during the first half of the nineteenth century. *Mimesis* (1946), Auerbach’s seminal study of the genre, places particular emphasis on this period, and takes 1830s France as the place and time in which the literary “representation of reality” was truly perfected. Auerbach writes: “When Stendhal and Balzac took random individuals from daily life in their dependence upon current historical circumstances and made them the subjects of serious, problematic, and even tragic representation, they [...] completed a development which had long been in preparation [and] opened the way for modern realism [...]” ([Auerbach \[1946\] 2003](#), p. 554).¹⁶ Certain French authors writing in the wake of the July Revolution, were, Auerbach thought, uniquely attentive to the social and psychological struggles of common people. As the quotation suggests, though, literary realism had, for Auerbach, been in the making for some time. (Stendhal and Balzac “completed a development” that gave an existing realist literary tradition a “modern” expression.) In *Mimesis*, Auerbach identified elements of realist literary representation in texts dating back to Greek epic poetry and the Bible.

Picking up on Auerbach’s preference for the modern French novel, literature scholars of earlier periods have challenged the rather teleological (or, at least, progressionist) view of literary history that we find in *Mimesis*. R. Howard Bloch claims that the invention of European literary realism took place during the twelfth through fourteenth centuries with the advent of the fabliau: “The Old French comic tale in verse, or fabliau, lies at the origin of European realist literature”, begins Bloch’s introduction to the most comprehensive collection of fabliaux in English translation ([Bloch 2013](#), p. xiii). “The fabliaux are a social mirror of their time”, continues Bloch: “This first important expression of European literary realism represents an extremely valuable source of information about daily life in an age from which few documents survive, and those which do survive deal with domains of thought and imagination far removed from everyday experience”.¹⁷ Bloch’s definition of realism is essentially the same as Auerbach’s—a story takes seriously and represents faithfully the banal facts of the public and private daily lives of unremarkable people—but challenges the privileged place Auerbach gives to the authors of the modern French novel.

Wherever we decide to place realism’s invention, or perfection, it is apparent that the definition which Auerbach elaborates in *Mimesis* and which Bloch adopts applies neatly to the French folktales discussed by Darnton, whose analysis makes abundantly clear that in pre-modern folktales we find culturally and historically specific representations of the everyday realities of the lowliest of peasants. French folktales give us a sense of how “the little people” experienced the social structures that oppressed them and allow us to see what those at the lowest run of the social ladder desired (mostly, food), and how they suffered (mostly, from hunger). Like the French fabliaux, the tales glorify, directly and indirectly, those who take matters into their own hands, getting by as “smugglers, highwaymen, pickpockets, prostitutes” ([Darnton \[1984\] 2009](#), p. 26).

For the most part, Ben Jelloun does not celebrate guile or theft. Despite his claim in his preface that he did not want to draw moral conclusions from his stories (Ben Jelloun 2014a, p. 10), his tales tend to be every bit as moralistic as Perrault's (although they do not contain "*moralitez*"—that is, the preachy poems in verse with which Perrault's fairytales conclude). Ben Jelloun's version of "Puss in Boots", for instance, more or less follows Perrault's: it recounts the story of a miller's last-born son who inherits a boot-wearing cat; the animal outwits everyone in his path until his master has beautiful clothes, a castle, and (we are led to believe) the approval of a rich and beautiful girl's father. But, in Ben Jelloun's version, the story doesn't end there. The cat's master ends up confessing that he is an imposter to his future father-in-law, who, we find out, saw through the cat's trickery from the beginning. As a result, the owner of the magical cat has to do hard manual labor for over a year in order to earn enough money to take a wife honestly (see Ben Jelloun 2014g, pp. 85–104). Luckily, the object of his affections waits for him and he is able to marry her. It is undeniably a story with a *moral* lesson.

Ben Jelloun's protagonist is not like the pre-modern hero of the folktale that inspired Perrault, in which a little brother with no inheritance happens to meet a vixen (not a cat) on the road, who, through her wit, leads him to a pot of gold, which provides him with the resources to buy property and feed his many children. Unlike the folktale character who benefits passively from the intelligence of a wily animal, Ben Jelloun's protagonist cannot get what he wants through someone else's trickery—he can only get it through hard work.

Ben Jelloun's realism is for the most part not the subversive, trickstery realism that we find in the French folktales and fabliaux.¹⁸ But even in the so puritanical ending to Ben Jelloun's "Puss in Boots" (which it is hard to imagine would be very satisfying to child listeners today, or, at least, to those versed in Disney versions of Perrault's tales), there is a kind of realism that is absent in Perrault and that can be found in the folktale that inspired Perrault's fairytale. Like Perrault, Ben Jelloun gives the story a moral, but his conclusion is every bit as banal and grounded as is the one in the folktale. The seventeenth-century French peasant who has the good fortune to meet a magical fox ends up with enough to feed his children—no small thing for a pre-modern "*vilain*", but not a magical pumpkin carriage or a kingdom, either. In Ben Jelloun's story, we learn that, chances are, a talking cat isn't going to allow you to realize your wildest desires. If you stop whining about your position in the line of succession and do some hard work, though, you'll be all right. In neither story does the hero wind up with a castle.

Such lessons are reiterated in "Three Useless Wishes", Ben Jelloun's retelling of Perrault's "Three Silly Wishes", which, as the title suggests is not about the ridiculousness of the lowly protagonists, as is the case in Perrault's tale, but instead the needlessness of making wishes when anyone—even the unluckiest, poorest of people—can simply work their way out of poverty: "Get up and get to work" the wish-granting voice in the sky tells the protagonist in Ben Jelloun's retelling (Ben Jelloun 2014i, p. 218).¹⁹ The man does, and he and his wife live happily ever after: "A new life began for them" (Ben Jelloun 2014i, p. 219). The world of Ben Jelloun's tales is a purely meritocratic one where personal agency has the power of miracles.

"Cinderella", in Ben Jelloun's retelling, also has a banally optimistic and didactic conclusion, in which magic's role in the positive outcome is limited. The prince recognizes the protagonist, Sakina, not when she dons a slipper, but once her fairy godmother has advised her to be herself: "Be yourself and you will see that your beauty is recognized" (Ben Jelloun 2014c, p. 134). Sakina heeds the advice, smiles at the prince, and, poof, the happy ending is guaranteed. But, just in case the reader has failed to hear the fairy's trite counsel, Ben Jelloun inserts a character into the story, a blind old evangelist for the *Thousand and One Nights*, whose only narrative function seems to be to reassert the godmother's

lesson at the end of the tale. In Ben Jelloun's story, the old storyteller gets the last word. "Yes, a helping hand [*un coup de pouce*] is sometimes necessary" he tells Sakina: "But if you had not been inclined to be a princess or a queen, you would never have become one. Life has mistreated you, while at the same time it has shown you that evil is everywhere. Suffering is a school. The fairy noticed in you a strength of which you were unaware" (Ben Jelloun 2014c, pp. 140–41). The man even goes so far as to call into question the very existence of the fairy, suggesting to the girl that "*la fée, c'est vous*", "you are the fairy" (Ben Jelloun 2014c, p. 141). The magic—assuming there was ever any magic involved—was only "*un coup de pouce*". The moral of the story is, in essence, the same as in "Puss in Boots" and in "Three Useless Wishes": material gain and true love come not from fairy godmothers and talking animals, but from one's own inherent qualities (a pretty smile, if you're a girl; your ability to work hard, if you're a boy), which are sufficient tools to combat poverty, suffering, and the other evils of life.

"Puss in Boots", "Three Useless Wishes", and "Cinderella", in Ben Jelloun's rewritings, conclude on a tone that is at once optimistic and anticlimactic, or, at the very least, anti-marvelous. And, more than anything, it is this banal optimism that aligns Ben Jelloun's stories with the folktales that inspired Perrault. For all the text's exaggerated horror, even Ben Jelloun's "Bluebeard" ends in something of an anticlimax. In Perrault's tale, Bluebeard is killed by the heroine's brothers, who arrive just in time to prevent their sister's becoming the monster's seventh victim. In Ben Jelloun's story, the wife's brothers arrive just in time, but they do not exact vengeance themselves. Instead, they take the serial killer to an investigating magistrate who launches an inquest into the disappearance of the many female victims. During the trial that follows, the locals demonstrate outside the courthouse, holding up signs with slogans like "Justice for our daughters" and "No corruption, justice above all" (Ben Jelloun 2014b, p. 82). Because he refuses to express remorse, Bluebeard is sentenced to be executed. His death is not the result of revenge, but, rather, of an impartial, public judicial process (the trial is "free and transparent" (Ben Jelloun 2014b, p. 82)), which, had the man any humanity, would in all likelihood not have recommended capital punishment. Horrific and sensational as it is, the story is, in the last analysis, about the potential for the judicial process in a democratic society to combat misogynistic crimes. The conclusion is both optimistic and (comparatively) banal.

Shortly after the November 2015 terrorist attacks in Paris, Ben Jelloun published a short article in *Le Monde* entitled "Le Terrorisme expliqué aux enfants" ("Terrorism Explained to Children"). The Franco-Moroccan fiction writer, who had recently published his collection of fairytales, began the piece with a brief lesson in child psychology. "We must tell children the truth", he wrote:

We must, above all, not underestimate their ability to hear disturbing and horrible things. Not that they are stronger than adults, but their sensitivity can be tested without disastrous consequences for their development. Lies and denial can leave them with scars and complexes. Beautifying the world, lying about the seriousness of facts, either by denying them or by wrapping them in gift paper, could risk sheltering them from life, which is made up of both beauty and violence (Ben Jelloun 2015).

Ben Jelloun went on to allude to the cruelty we sometimes find in Perrault's fairytales, and to the *Thousand and One Nights* (stories which are, he wrote, "even more horrible"): children, he suggested, understand this violence in all its complexity and should not be shielded from it. At the time of *My Tales*'s publication in 2014, Ben Jelloun could not have predicted that the question of violence, and of its effects on children, would, only a year later, become such a pressing concern in the wake of what was, then, the deadliest instance of terrorism in France's history. And yet, there is no question that Ben Jelloun's interest in the violence of

fairytale, and in the ways in which children receive and interpret that violence, is intimately related to his concern for how children are affected by the most horrific, real acts of brutality that they witness in the real world. “Terrorism Explained to Children”, which would later become a book with a similar title (*Le Terrorisme expliqué à nos enfants* [Terrorism Explained to Our Children, 2016]) was the latest in a series of non-fiction works Ben Jelloun wrote with the intention of explaining complex and difficult subjects to children,²⁰ and those books help us to appreciate the pedagogical project of *My Tales*, which, given its violent content, might appear to be destined for a more mature audience.

Ben Jelloun, who briefly practiced as a psychoanalyst, seems, in his belief in children’s ability to digest violent stories, to echo Bettelheim’s argument that fairytales are useful for children in that they represent the sometimes harsh realities of the world, and show the child “that a struggle against severe difficulties in life is unavoidable, is an intrinsic part of human existence” (Bettelheim [1975] 2010, p. 8). For Bettelheim, though, fairytales do not ask children to confront the difficulties of life head-on; rather, they serve as allegories of sorts, providing manifest content which children intuitively understand relates to the latent anxieties and desires of the unconscious: “[The child] can achieve this understanding, and with it the ability to cope, not through rational comprehension of the nature and content of his unconscious, but by becoming familiar with it through spinning out daydreams—ruminating, rearranging, and fantasizing about suitable story elements in response to unconscious pressures” (Bettelheim [1975] 2010, p. 7). For Bettelheim, the lessons contained in fairytales are not understood literally and rationally by children; rather, they provide fodder for fantasy and play.

Ben Jelloun, in contrast, believes in children’s ability to think rationally: children can understand difficult things and they benefit from being asked to consider them at a young age. I suggested, parenthetically, that the ending of Ben Jelloun’s “Puss in Boots” might not be entirely satisfying to children hoping for marvelous, Disney-style conclusions; after all, magic and luck do little to benefit the feckless protagonist, who, despite possessing a talking cat, winds up doing manual labor in the fields of a cruel landowner before finally getting a decent promotion as recompense for his hard work. There is certainly no “gift paper” in this dénouement, just the hard facts of a rather banal life—facts that Ben Jelloun trusts his young audience to comprehend. Ben Jelloun’s theory of child psychology is different from Bettelheim’s: what he values in fairytales has less to do with their allegorical potential, or the fantasy and play the stories may inspire, and more to do with the difficult reality they depict. Fairytales, he believes, can be edifying without being allegorical, and nothing, for Ben Jelloun, is more edifying than the contemplation of the hard realities of the adult world.

In his fairytales, Ben Jelloun follows the structure of Perrault’s, as he promises he will in his preface, but he also adds to them examples of the most urgent ills of our world today: racial intolerance and gendered hatred (particularly in the Arab-Muslim world), and the effects and injustice of poverty. For Ben Jelloun, the origins of and solution to these problems relate mostly to individual agency and responsibility, with virtuous, hardworking people tending to find their way out of hardship, and intolerant wrongdoers inevitably being punished.²¹ But magic is not the primary force when it comes to the positive outcomes from which the diligent, intelligent, open-minded protagonists benefit, and when the bad are punished it is generally as a direct result of their own shortcomings, and often legal processes are involved (“The Little Girl with the Red Burka”, “Bluebeard”, “Sleeping Beauty”). On occasion, the antagonists of the stories are redeemed at the end through hard work or acts of charity (“Hop o’ my Thumb”, “Donkey-Skin”). Ben Jelloun’s theory of child psychology, or of how children receive and benefit from explanations, sheds light on his

project in *Mes Contes de Perrault* and, in particular, on the ways in which his stories diverge from Perrault's.

And, the anticlimactic endings of so many of Ben Jelloun's *Contes*, for all their didacticism, point precisely to what is *original* about the project: the antidote to the quotidian reality of prejudice and violence that is so present and apparent in the collection is, in the world of the fairytales, the banal optimism that each story conveys in one way or another. Like Perrault's tales with their versed "*moralitez*", Ben Jelloun's "orientalized" (his word) stories contain moral lessons, but unlike their source material, they do not sanitize or idealize the world of little people on which they are based. Closer to the French folktales and fabliaux, Ben Jelloun's stories tend to be about underdogs getting by with the resources available to them. Magical creatures show up from time to time and lend a "*coup de pouce*", but we often come to learn that, like Dorothy in Oz, Ben Jelloun's protagonists had the ability to realize their desires all along; they just had to learn it for themselves. While they inhabit magical worlds, their challenges are often not dissimilar to the ones Fadela seems to have experienced, and their powers are unspectacular. Like Fadela, Ben Jelloun's heroes often slick talk their way out of tricky situations, and one, named Sharazade, must repeatedly conceive of creative pretexts to avoid becoming the sexual partner of a lecherous king. When all else fails, happy endings are achieved through hard work. While Ben Jelloun's meritocratic view of the world may not always conform to reality, his approach to telling tales, in its unsexy everydayness, revives a realism that was lost, to a great extent, when Perrault adapted the stories of pre-modern peasants for the court of Louis XIV.

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Notes

- ¹ Charles Perrault's (1697a) *Histoires ou Contes du temps passé*, the first published edition of his fairytales, also opened with a dedicatory ("À Mademoiselle") addressed to a female figure.
- ² References to Ben Jelloun's *Mes Contes de Perrault* will be given according to the title of each story, rather than to the collection. All translations of *Mes Contes de Perrault* and of other bibliographic entries listed in French are mine.
- ³ The autobiographic elements of Ben Jelloun's "Avant-propos" are no doubt somewhat fictionalized. In a 2017 interview with Jean-Luc Hees, Ben Jelloun gave a different account of his admission to the colonial school in Fez, according to which his father sent him to the Franco-Moroccan school after he was beaten at the Koranic school he had previously attended (see Tahar Ben Jelloun (2017)).
- ⁴ For the sake of clarity, I refer to the titles of Perrault's stories, and to their characters, by the English names given in the Oxford World's Classics edition of Perrault's tales (Perrault 2010). I do the same for Ben Jelloun's titles, only three of which differ from the source text. They are: "The Little Girl with the Red Burka" (for "Little Red Riding-Hood"); "Hakim the Tuft" (for "Ricky the Tuft"); and "Three Useless Wishes" (for "Three Silly Wishes").
- ⁵ See Tania Intan and Amaliatun Saleha (Intan and Saleha 2020, pp. 17–28); see also Samia Kassab-Charfi (2017, pp. 53–66). More work could certainly be done to situate *Mes Contes de Perrault* within a tradition of postcolonial texts that take up the characters, plots, and/or structures of canonical works of literature. In *Mes contes de Perrault*, French literature is, for Ben Jelloun, a kind of "bien vacant", to quote the narrator of Kamel Daoud's (2014) *Meursault, contre-enquête*, another novel that "writes back" against the French canon (see Catherine Talley 2020, pp. 295–309). It is, in other words, a remnant of colonialism that Ben Jelloun, as a formerly colonial subject, can use for his own creative purposes. On the subject of postcolonial literary appropriation, see, most notably, Bill Ashcroft et al. (1989).
- ⁶ See, for example, Lydie Jean (2007, pp. 276–83). Jean contends that Perrault, in adapting popular tales, had no interest in preserving orally transmitted stories, or in the authenticity of his source material. Rather, his aim was to appeal to aristocratic audiences. A popular myth holds that Perrault's tales, like Ben Jelloun's, were inspired by an illiterate babysitter and storyteller—

namely, his son's nurse. The historian Robert Darnton believes that this was "probably" true: see Robert Darnton ([1984] 2009, p. 11). Ruth Bottigheimer, notably, de-emphasizes Perrault's reliance on folktales, at least in the composition of his early texts: see Ruth Bottigheimer (2008, pp. 175–89).

7 In *Mimesis*, Erich Auerbach identifies, and celebrates, a tendency that to him seems, continually, to crop up over the course of centuries in "Western literature" beginning with Homer—a tendency to represent reality faithfully, to depict not only what is beautiful, good, or sublime, but also what is real. Terry Eagleton summarizes the main thrust of *Mimesis*: Auerbach's primary criterion for a realist work has to do with "whether we can find secreted in the language of a particular text the bustling, workaday life of the common people" (Eagleton 2003). As Eagleton suggests, Auerbach's realism is a realism of the lives of everyday folks, and his interest in the representation of historical moments has, first and foremost, to do with how those moments were experienced not by great historical actors (politicians, inventors, intellectuals, and so on), but rather by *l'homme du commun*.

8 Perrault's tales, of course, are not entirely devoid of realist elements. Some of them retain a hint of the bawdiness of the folktales, and attention to the daily struggles of peasants can be observed in others. On the subject of realism in Perrault's tales see, notably, Felix R. Freudmann (1963, pp. 116–22). But, even a story like "Three Silly Wishes", whose protagonists are peasants, seems to differ from a fabliau or a folktale in its preachy tone and lack of irony regarding the idiocy of the lowly characters, and the "realist" tendencies that Freudmann identifies in Perrault's *contes* are often elements in the stories that are simply realistic (rather than magical and *unreal*).

9 To reiterate, this aspect of Ben Jelloun's project has already been explored and is not my focus here.

10 The term dates back to attempts made on the part of Enlightenment thinkers in France to square their belief in the superiority of white people with their promotion of theories of equality. See William B. Cohen (2009). The idea that Perrault "civilized" his source material has been so thoroughly accepted in most scholarship that one can read on the back cover of Nathalie Froloff's edition of the author's *Contes*: "Perrault civilizes monsters, transposes oriental folklore to the court of Louis XIV, and metamorphosizes cruelty into grace": see Charles Perrault (1999). Anne Duggan identifies a different kind of purificatory project—a gendered one—in Perrault's stories: see Anne Duggan (2008, pp. 211–26).

11 Ben Jelloun is a harsh critic of Islamic conventions as they concern women. For a condemnation of polygamy in *Mes Contes de Perrault*, for example, see Ben Jelloun (2014d, p. 151). A number of didactic books "explaining" racism, Islamophobia, etc., also deal with the subject of sexism in the Muslim world: in Ben Jelloun's chapter on "Islamophobia" in *La Philo expliquée aux enfants*, for example, the author asserts: "What scares people about Islam, beyond the threat of terrorism, is the way in which Muslims treat women in their countries". See Tahar Ben Jelloun (2020, p. 119). The burka is a frequent subject of discussion in these "expliqué" books: see, for example, Tahar Ben Jelloun ([1998] 2018, p. 25) and Tahar Ben Jelloun ([2002] 2012, pp. 111–12 and 155).

12 See, most notably, Ben Jelloun (2014e, p. 20), and Ben Jelloun (2014b, p. 70). Racism is one of the central subjects of conflict in Ben Jelloun's "Sleeping Beauty": one hundred years of sleep have turned the princess's skin "almost black", and her Prince Charming's mother refuses to accept her as a daughter-in-law. The "racist" woman even goes so far as to hire an ogre to assassinate her. One of the good fairies who protects the princess—named Jawhara in Ben Jelloun's retelling—explains her transformation by reasoning: "In order to preserve her youth, the princess had to give up the white color of her pretty skin; after all, a small sacrifice was necessary. . ." The fairy then tells the prince that she is sure that he is not among those "who have prejudiced views of people of color!" Despite the lesson of tolerance Ben Jelloun's story is clearly intended to convey, the implication is that race is purely phenomenological (oddly, the princess, when she gives birth to twins, produces one boy who is "all black" and a girl who is "all white"; in Perrault's story, the children are named Day and Dawn, respectively, and their physical appearances are not described). And, as the good fairy's words make clear, in the world of Ben Jelloun's fairytale, for a white person to become a "person of color" represents a loss, a sacrifice. See Ben Jelloun (2014e, pp. 32 and 36). These observations complicate to an extent arguments made by Samia Kassab-Charfi: see Samia Kassab-Charfi (2017, pp. 53–66). White and black attributes in the dichotomous world of *Mes Contes de Perrault* tend to be associated, respectively, with goodness and evil, beauty and ugliness: in "The Fairies", for example, we find two sisters, one beautiful and good, one ugly and evil; the first has "an all-white heart" while the other has a "black soul" that, at the end of the story, "henceforth spread over her face, which was more and more repulsive". See Ben Jelloun (2014h, pp. 109 and 113). The hero of "Hakim the Tuft" is born ugly: "He was blackish, smaller than normal, all wrinkled, and what's more he had a little hump on his back. He had, in the middle of his skull, a tuft of very black hair". See Ben Jelloun (2014d, p. 144).

13 Ben Jelloun (2014k, p. 171). The ogre that makes an appearance in "Sleeping Beauty" is, similarly, unremarkable in terms of his looks: "El Ghoul had an ordinary appearance; he was neither one-eyed nor lame. [. . .] No, El Ghoul had a perfectly acceptable human appearance". See Ben Jelloun (2014e, p. 42).

14 See, for example, Tahar Ben Jelloun (1995) and Ben Jelloun (2020). Ben Jelloun's interest in social types, it should be noted in passing, is another facet of his "realism" in Auerbach's sense of the term, discussed in greater detail below.

15 Ben Jelloun, as a thinker, is a strong proponent of a specifically French brand of universalism, which tends to downplay difference and specificity in favor of a view that all humans—or at least all French citizens—are, essentially, the same. The simplest articulations of this notion can, unsurprisingly, be found in Ben Jelloun's books for younger audiences. In *La Philo expliquée aux*

enfants, for example, the entry for “Racism” begins: “Above all, know that races do not exist. [...] There is only one race: the human race, which is composed of more than seven billion individuals who are all different and, yet, all alike”. See Ben Jelloun (2020, p. 110).

- 16 It should be noted that Auerbach’s interest in “historical circumstances” is not at all limited to political and economic history, and his notion of “realism” does not necessarily describe a literature that depicts the political and economic *forces majeures* of an era: his book’s chapter on Antoine de la Salle, for example, does not argue for the “realism” of *Du Réconfort de Madame du Fresne* because the subject matter of the story details an episode from the Hundred Years’ War, but, instead, because it represents an instance in Medieval literature where we see a man and women together, in a moment of intimacy, in a domestic space, discussing matters that are not only political but also *familial*. Auerbach’s realism, like the realism discussed by Robert Darnton and R. Howard Bloch (discussed below), describes a literature that takes seriously and represents in detail the realities of daily life.
- 17 Bloch (2013, p. xxii). See also R. Howard Bloch (1986), where Bloch provides a more developed explanation of the fabliau’s relationship to literary realism.
- 18 One notable exception can be found in “The Little Girl with the Red Burka”, which is, perhaps, the best story in Ben Jelloun’s collection of fairytales, if only because it is relatively free of the didacticism which the other stories ooze—at least up until the last two paragraphs (see Ben Jelloun 2014f, pp. 49–58). The little girl with the red burka survives thanks to her cleverness, undoing her attacker in a way that recalls the bawdiness and violence of a medieval fabliau or the *Roman de Renart*, a series of medieval French tales in which a wily fox outsmarts—and often humiliates and physically harms—wolves, lions, and humans.
- 19 In Ben Jelloun’s version of the story, Jupiter, who grants the wishes in Perrault’s tale, is not explicitly named.
- 20 *Le Racisme expliqué à ma fille* and *L’Islam expliqué aux enfants (et à leurs parents)*, first published in 1998 and 2002, respectively, had both dealt directly with the subject of terrorism. *La Philo expliquée aux enfants*, published in 2020, also discusses terrorism. As their titles suggest, all three books are intended for children, among other readers.
- 21 Ben Jelloun’s obfuscation of structural forces when it comes to discussing questions of race, religion, gender, and social class—both in *My Tales* and in other materials aimed at young audiences—is perhaps somewhat at odds with his assertion that we should not “beautify the world” when communicating with children.

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