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# The Scandal of Sources of Henriette-Julie de Murat's *Histoires sublimes et allégoriques*

Jared Willden

In the foreword to *Histoires sublimes et allégoriques*, Henriette-Julie de Castelnau de Murat claims the following as she makes the reader aware of two things: “First, that I took the ideas for some of these tales from a past work entitled *The Facetious Nights of Straparola* . . . The second thing I have to say is that . . . if I met with any of these ladies [Murat’s contemporary *conteuses*] while treating some of the same subjects, I took no other model than the original” (*Histoires*, Foreword)<sup>1</sup>. Despite Murat’s insistence that Straparola is the only “model” for her *Histoires*, at least one of her tales is very different from the Straparola version. Murat’s “The Savage” (French: « Le Sauvage ») is clearly a retelling of Straparola’s “Costanza/Costanzo” tale. Deprived of an inheritance, Princess Constantine masquerades as a man in a foreign country, enters the service of a king there, and weds him once he discovers that she is a woman. There are, however, far more differences in the plots than there are similarities. The way in which the heroine’s womanhood is revealed, the roles

of the non-human characters, and issues of chastity and adultery are all significantly different between the two versions.

We would expect some embellishments and complications to be added in Murat's retelling, but the changes we see in "The Savage" surpass such expectations. Though Murat claims that there is "no other model than" Straparola, this seems to be an attempt to cast her work as bounded within the domain of the established literary canon of seventeenth-century France. By doing so, she could avoid criticism for her violation of *la bienséance* (the strict set of moral conventions to which both conduct and literature were subjected) and *le bon usage de la femme* (the ways in which it was proper for women to act and be portrayed; cross-dressing specifically was a severe violation). Three other tales, namely "Guerrino and the Savage Man," *Le Roman de Merlin*, and "Georgic and Merlin," present themselves as potential candidates for other models for Murat's changes; beyond these, a careful reading of "The Savage" suggests that Murat's own life was an even more significant thematic source for the tale.

Murat was repeatedly reported to be a "debauched woman" accused of "unruliness, libertinism, debauchery, and blasphemy," and these claims, along with allegations that she was lesbian, intensified when her husband disowned her (Cromer 3). Her first publication, *Mémoires de Madame la Comtesse de M\*\*\** (1697), was published anonymously as a seemingly autobiographical account that tells of a young lady who becomes disillusioned with her increasingly jealous and abusive husband. The lady describes the repercussions of her flight as thus: "My reputation was cruelly attacked: so I knew that of all the decisions that an innocent or guilty woman may make, the worst is to leave her husband's house" (*Mémoires* 129–30). It is difficult to assert to what extent the events of the *Mémoires* reflect actual elements of Murat's life. Miorcec de Kerdanet considers them autobiographical "memoirs of her life that she wrote herself" and separate from her fiction, but certain elements of the narrative are without question fictional (205). Sylvie Cromer maintains that they are "apocryphal" accounts of Murat's own creation (3). Perry Gethner and Allison Stedman describe them as "pseudomemoirs" (*A Trip to the Country* 3). Stedman further states that "it is difficult to tell if these [elements] are personal or if they are simply novelistic tropes" and notes that "in the letters [Murat] wrote to Mlle de Loches while in exile . . . she doesn't . . . give any clue as to how much of her own life served as an inspiration for" the *Mémoires* (Stedman).

The *Mémoires* are most likely inspired by Murat's own life but embellished with fictional elements. However, though fiction is used, there is no doubt

that the narrator and Murat both experienced a fall, a transformation from an adored wife to a woman considered licentious and debauched. In 1698, rumors about Murat escalated into attempts to have her exiled, and Louis XIV eventually exiled her to the Château de Loches, probably in 1702 (Cromer 3). The threat of exile was therefore looming over her when she published *Histoires sublimes* in 1699.

Murat's scandalous reputation threatened her ability to have her work published as it had to be approved by royal censors to obtain the *privilège du roy*, seventeenth-century France's equivalent of publication rights (Scott 29). Given the serious nature of Murat's misconduct, we can conclude that her conformity to *la bienséance* would have been particularly scrutinized by the royal censors. Of all the violations of *le bon usage de la femme*, cross-dressing seems to have been a particularly sensitive matter for the French and was construed as offensive to society, God, and women. It was a sign of the worst kind of immorality. When we consider the following potential sources, we must be mindful of the ways in which the issue of cross-dressing and associated issues of transformation are treated and consider why Murat may have preferred not to cite these sources.

The titles alone reveal a possible connection between Straparola's "Guerrino and the Savage Man," also from his *Facetious Nights*, and Murat's "The Savage." In "Guerrino and the Savage Man," we see that, by a mix of persuasion and theft, the savage man coerces Guerrino into freeing him. We see a somewhat similar scene with Murat's savage, who exercises a partially persuasive, partially forceful influence on the king. "Prince, have no fear," he says after surprising him, "I won't do you any harm as long as you promise to do as I tell you" ("The Savage" 215). The savage once again obtains obedience, this time as captive rather than captor. Just as Straparola's savage man repays his debt of freedom by saving Guerrino's life and securing his marriage, Murat's savage spares the king's life and weds the princess. There are similarities, and given that Murat read Straparola's *Facetious Nights*, it seems reasonable enough to assert that "Guerrino and the Savage Man" was another source for "The Savage" in addition to "Costanza/Costanzo."

There is, however, a significant difference between the texts. Whereas the plot of "Costanza/Costanzo" is driven by a satyr, the plot of "The Savage" is driven by Obligeantine rather than the savage. Murat's savage instead represents hope for the woman who finds herself in a seemingly hopeless arrangement with a man. Murat's Princess Fleurianne is like the narrator of the *Mémoires*. Both are in danger of being mistreated by a man, the latter by her husband and

the former by her suitor Carabut. Thanks to Constantine's intervention and then Obligeantine's magic, Fleurianne is "spared . . . a monster" and weds the princely "savage" turned human (212). Murat's savage fills a completely different plot role than Straparola's satyr and helps present the theme of the abused woman, which does not appear in "Costanza/Costanzo." It turns out that both the theme and the plot of "The Savage" have little to do with Straparola.

Concerning French sources for "Costanza/Costanzo," Sylvie Cromer points to *Le Roman de Merlin* by Robert de Boron. This late twelfth-century or early thirteenth-century manuscript has survived to our day only in fragments. Cromer asserts that one of its narratives parallels "Costanza/Costanzo" with a few character substitutions. In place of a king is Julius Caesar, and instead of a satyr with semi-omniscient power, it is Merlin, "half-crazed, half-prophet" who is captured (4). Merlin's ability to shapeshift is his signature trait in *Le Roman de Merlin*. He was also sometimes depicted as a wild man, wearing cow or sheep skin, being "big and tall and black and bristly," "cruel and fierce," and even wielding a club (Loomis 130). This "wild man" aspect of Merlin is frequently overlooked but prominent in his myth. When considering this Merlin—wild man on the exterior, wise and gentle man on the interior—we can understand how the figure plays into the stories of "Guerrino" and "The Savage."

Beyond this paradox, however, Merlin can also be considered the embodiment of the principal of transformation. He is free to take on whatever shape or form—whatever aspect—he desires. Given the importance of transformation in "The Savage," we should consider the significance of this motif in possible sources. Cromer asks, "Does Madame de Murat have a direct knowledge of the story of Merlin?" but immediately continues, "Regardless, the only source cited is Straparola" (4). We do not know if any more of *Le Roman de Merlin* survived to Murat's day than has to our own, so tracing whether or not this mostly lost text played an influence in "The Savage" would be a challenge. The little that we do know is that *Le Roman de Merlin* played a large part in influencing later medieval Arthurian legend and that a great amount of emphasis was placed on Merlin's shapeshifting.

While it is difficult to say with certainty that the iteration in Boron's *Merlin* was a source text for "The Savage," another Merlin tale, "Georgic and Merlin," is a strong possibility for a source text. Merlin was closely associated with the folklore of Brittany, the purported place of his death—and Murat's native region of France, according to Miorcec de Kerdanet (205). Published for the first time in 1903 by Breton folklorist François Cadic, "Georgic and Merlin" has some

similarities to “Guerrino and the Savage Man” (Delarue 384). Both “Georgic” and “Guerrino” are considered Aarne-Thompson type 502, “The Wild Man,” which is described as “The prince sets the prisoner free. The latter becomes his servant and helper” (Multilingual Folk Tale Database). “Guerrino” is generally considered the earliest version of type 502, but there is no telling how long “Georgic” had existed before it was first published by Cadic in 1903. Given the remarkable perseverance of the Breton culture in the region, a tale from the oral tradition could go back centuries. Indeed, several aspects of “Georgic,” such as Merlin’s prevalence, the symbolic importance of birds, and the victory of the knight over the seven-headed dragon, are indicative of the medieval French tradition, and parallels can be drawn between “Georgic” and several Arthurian tales, including the quest for the Holy Grail. These connections suggest that “Georgic” may very well be medieval in origin, which would make it a predecessor to “Guerrino” and perhaps the oldest recorded variant of type 502.

Transformation is again prominent in “Georgic and Merlin.” Georgic’s father, a lord, captures a bird named Merlin. Merlin promises to sing to Georgic if he releases him. Georgic consents, and Merlin promises to come to his aid when Georgic calls upon him (Delarue 237–38). Georgic is forced to flee the city for fear of his father’s wrath, but Merlin protects him. Georgic must then save a maiden from a seven-headed dragon, and Merlin gives Georgic a horse, a sword, and a cloak. Now “transformed” into a knight, Georgic ultimately slays the dragon and saves the damsel (239–42). The maiden’s father declares that he who slayed the dragon shall have his daughter’s hand in marriage. A pretender arrives with the dragon’s seven heads as evidence, but the girl recognizes that he is not the knight. Georgic was “so well disguised that it was impossible to make out his features,” yet the girl eventually recognizes the knight as Georgic, and they wed (243–44). The rest of the story details how Georgic travelled abroad to obtain items needed to cure the girl’s father of an illness (244–48).

We can break the plot up into essentially four parts, each of which finds a parallel in “The Savage.” First, both protagonists leave home because of a conflict with the father. Second, both assume a false identity and meet both new master and future spouse. Third, both slay the monstrous villain to save a lady. Lastly, both reveal their true identity, wed, and travel. The stories follow the same pattern, with Constantine’s travel coming earlier than Georgic’s.

Furthermore, the motif of transformation is similar in the two tales. Beyond the transformative importance of Merlin as already discussed, Georgic and Constantine both transform themselves by how they dress. Georgic does

not cross-dress as Constantine does, but their disguises have the same purpose of allowing them to be portrayed as a *chevaleresque* figure and therefore allowing them to rise to the rightful status of their birth. Transformation through disguise hides the identity of the protagonist from his or her future spouse. Merlin's magic enables Georgic's transformation, and "Mother nature, aided by [Obligeanne's] powerful magic" is responsible for the transformation of Constantine's sisters and brothers-in-law. Magic is also responsible for the transformation of the "King of the Loving Islands" to the savage and back again ("The Savage" 218). We therefore have two texts with seemingly different yet actually similar plots and a shared motif of transformation employed to very similar ends.

While "Georgic and Merlin" seems a contender for a source text for "The Savage," there is no certainty that Murat knew the tale. There is no telling when it first originated, and like with *Le Roman de Merlin*, there is simply not sufficient historical record. We can, however, make a guess. Though some modern scholars dispute his claims, Miorcec de Kerdanet tells us that Murat spoke the Breton language and that she wore a traditional Breton costume when she was presented at Versailles (206). As prevalent as the *matière de Bretagne* was in the French literary canon of the time, it is very possible that Murat was rather familiar with Breton "literature," most of which was oral. It is entirely plausible that Murat knew "Georgic and Merlin" even though there is no definitive proof. Given the subtle similarities in the two stories and the strong possibility that Murat would know the folktale, "Georgic and Merlin" was likely an inspiration behind or a source text for "The Savage."

Nevertheless, Murat only referenced Straparola. It could be that she merely declined to reference "Georgic and Merlin" as the tale impacted only one in her collection. Perhaps the influence was a subconscious one or she was more concerned with asserting that her tales were not based on Madame d'Aulnoy's. Each of these possible responses leaves us with another complication, however. Murat refers in her foreword to *Histoires sublimes* only to the "ladies" who were publishing fairy tales and ignores Perrault, whose *Histoires ou contes du temps passé* (the Mother Goose tales) had formed France's "fairy-tale language" just two years before the *Histoires sublimes* were published (François 179–180). Murat may simply have been trying to eschew the idea that she borrowed from her contemporaries, but there may be more behind the reasons for her claim.

We must remember that the great factor that separated Murat from many of her peers when it came to publishing was the previously discussed issue of

censorship. Murat needed to remain carefully grounded within the bounds of the French literary canon for the sake of literary safety. Anything out of the ordinary could have been grounds for an attack against her and her work and thus necessitate censorship and risk losing the *privège du roy*. Perrault's tales clearly took inspiration from Straparola, and in the foreword to the *Histoires sublimes*, Murat suggests that Madame d'Aulnoy and the other *conteuses* did so as well. Murat attempted to downplay any difference between herself and other tale writers, presenting them as one unit drawing on the works of Straparola in order to distance herself and her scandals from her work. This would have been advantageous to Murat because it was she herself who risked censorship more than her tales. Even if "Georgic and Merlin" was a deliberate source text, citing it may have led to attacks that Murat had perverted this story by taking a man who disguises himself as a man and transforming it into a story of a woman disguising herself as a man. It was much safer to only reference Straparola, for despite his own cross-dressing heroine, Straparola's influence of Perrault and the *conteuses* validated him as a canonically acceptable source despite the rules of *la bienséance* and *le bon usage de la femme*.

Murat therefore likely drew on "Georgic and Merlin" in addition to Straparola as a source for "The Savage" but declined to reference the former in an attempt to situate her work more safely in the tradition of the French literary canon to avoid censorship. She combines Georgic's transformation from "Georgic and Merlin" and Merlin's intertextual shapeshifting with the cross-dressing of Straparola's "Costanza/Costanzo." The resulting tale manages to explore transformation—both shapeshifting and cross-dressing—while escaping the censorship and criticism associated with cross-dressing.

Transformation, therefore, becomes the center of "The Savage." Murat's stated purpose for her *Mémoires* was to show that "appearances often deceive" (*A Trip to the Country* 3). This theme relates directly to the issue of transformation, particularly in "The Savage," where it is manifested by Constantine's cross-dressing and the King of the Loving Islands's shapeshifting. Murat's own life knew such transformations and deceptions. Like Constantine, she was deprived of being perceived as the woman she was. Like the King of the Loving Islands, Murat was transformed into a "savage" that was said to have violated society's and nature's laws ("The Savage" 217). Murat is, simultaneously, the protagonist of the work, the Princess Constantine, as well as the eponymous character, "The Savage."



Maria Tatar says of fairy tales, “The idea of personal transformation emerges logically from a genre that draws ceaselessly on shape-shifting and metamorphosis” (60). She is referring to the “personal transformation” of the tale’s audience, but in Murat’s case, Tatar’s statement is perhaps more true of the author than the reader. A victim of unwarranted abuse and slander, Murat underwent several transformations during her life; the most significant was the transformation from a cherished wife to an abused, “unfaithful,” and “licentious” wife. Murat desperately wanted to show what she said was the central theme of her *Mémoires*: “appearances often deceive” (*A Trip to the Country* 3). Constantine could make the transformation back to Constantine, but Murat could not make the transformation back to who she was before her reputation was stained and before her husband disowned her. The King of the Loving Islands could make the transformation back from savage monster to human nobility, but Murat could not. She was not given that opportunity by her accusers. There was no fairy magic to help her. Murat could only live her transformation back to her former life through her literature. She made her literature a reflection of her own scandalous life yet needed to remain safely within the bounds of canonically approved literature. She therefore chose to reference Straparola as her only source for her *Histoires sublimes et allégoriques* to maintain a secure position for her literature despite her violations of *la bienséance* and *le bon usage de la femme*. Fear of censorship and its repercussions prevented Murat from citing the most crucial source for her *Histoires sublimes et allégoriques*: the transformations in her own life.

## Endnotes

- 1 All present English translations of Murat, including the foreword, are the author’s with the exceptions of those from “The Savage,” translated by Allison Stedman in *Marvelous Transformations*, and the introduction Stedman and Gethner wrote to *A Trip to the Country*. All present English translations of Cromer and of Miorcec de Kerdanet are also the author’s.

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