The Source of Two of Voltaire's "Contes en Vers"

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THE SOURCE OF TWO OF VOLTAIRE'S 'CONTES EN VERS.'

I.

ON the 1st day of December 1763 Voltaire wrote to the Marquise du Deffand: 'L'aveugle fait ce qu'il peut pour amuser l'aveugle...il croit que le présent conte pourrait faire passer un quart d'heure de temps attendu (comme il est très bien dit dans ledit conte) que les soirées d'hiver sont longues.' The *conte* to which he refers is undoubtedly *Ce qui plaît aux dames*, as that is the only one of his stories in verse which mentions long winter evenings. Since on the 3rd of November Voltaire tells Chauvelin that he has no verses for him because it is not yet 1764, when he had promised to send him some, we may evidently date this bit of poetry as having been written in November 1763. There seems to be no reason to believe the statement made in the *Mémoires secrets de Bachaumont* under the date of the 12th of December 1763 that the friends of Voltaire do not attempt to conceal the fact that Voltaire had had this story in his portfolio for more than thirty years. There is no mention made by Voltaire of this story before November 1763¹. It began to circulate in manuscript form in December and it was published late in the month with the date 1764, in twenty-two pages. It aroused a good deal of interest, and, at the same time, a tempest in a teapot, for Fréron immediately accused Voltaire of having copied Dryden. On the 19th of December Voltaire wrote to Damilaville that it should not appear at the same time as the *Traité de la tolérance*, but told him to do as he wished with it; and on the 4th of January 1764 he wrote to D'Argental that he was sorry that it had been printed, because 'it is withering little flowers which are only charming when they are not sold in the market.' He wrote to the Cardinal de Bernis on the 6th of January that a *conte* of his had been badly printed and that it was one that he would not dare

¹ *Mémoires secrets pour servir à l'histoire de la république des lettres*, Londres, 1767.

to send to a prince of the Roman church. This undoubtedly refers to our story in verse, since in a letter of the 1st of January he complains of the misprints in it. He was perhaps a little troubled that the story had been made public because of the sly flings at the church in it at a time when, as we know, he wanted his *Traité de la tolérance* to be as well received as possible, and feared, as he had written Damilaville, that the public might think that a man who could write of religion and fairies at the same time was equally indifferent to both. By the 6th of January Voltaire denied the authorship of *Ce qui plaît aux dames* in a letter to Ruffey. Not only is the regret that it has been printed, the use of the name Guillaume Vadé as the author, the final denial of the authorship typically Voltairean, but also his attempt to conceal the exact source of the tale shows a curious state of mind no less typical of Voltaire in certain moods.

In his letter to Damilaville of the 19th of December 1763, he says that *Ce qui plaît aux dames* 'est tiré en partie d'un vieux roman, et a même été traité en anglais par Dryden.' As the sentence is worded, if one did not often find Voltaire misleading when mentioning his sources, one would be likely to infer that Voltaire drew the story from an old romance independently of Dryden, and that the old romance in question might be in French. Moland seems to have been partially misled in this way, for in his edition of Voltaire's works he merely adds that Dryden's story is called *The Wife of Bath* and that it is an imitation of Chaucer's tale of the same name taken itself from an old work¹. Moland does not seem to know of Fréron's charge, which practically amounts to one of plagiarism, and he does not indicate the exact source of *Ce qui plaît aux dames*.

If we accept Voltaire's implication that the source is an old romance, we find at the outset that there is no French romance known to deal with this tale. We are inevitably led to an English original. *The Wife of Bath's Tale* is distinctly English², and in addition to Chaucer's treatment of it, we find versions of it in Gower's *Confessio Amantis*, and in four ballads: *The Marriage of Sir Gawaine*, *The Wedding of Sir Gawen and Dame Ragnall*, *The Ballade of King Henry*, *The Knight and the Shepherd's Daughter*. One looks in vain in these versions for points of resemblance to Voltaire's poem; but both in Chaucer's treatment and in that of Voltaire, the knight, when almost despairing of answering the question, as to what pleases women most, comes upon

¹ Moland's edition of Voltaire, p. 9, vol. x.

² Maynardier, *The Wife of Bath's Tale*, London, 1901, p. 80.

some maidens dancing. This incident does not occur in any of the other early versions. Thus the possibility of influence upon Voltaire by these stories may be set aside. There are several later treatments of the tale, however, which might have served as Voltaire's source, such as: *Women Pleased*, a play by Fletcher; *A New Sonnet of a Knight and a Fair Virgin*, by Richard Johnson; *The Wanton Wife of Bath*, a ballad; *The Wife of Bath*, a play by Gay; and a version by Goldsmith in *A Citizen of the World*. There is no evidence, however, that any of these served as the source of *Ce qui plaît aux dames*.

In the third number of *L'année littéraire* for 1764, Fréron accused Voltaire of taking his *conte* from Dryden's modernization of Chaucer's *Wife of Bath's Tale* and he strengthened this accusation by giving a prose translation of Dryden's poem. This must have galled Voltaire considerably, for he undoubtedly saw it, in spite of his assertion in his letter of the 24th of May 1764 that he never read *L'année littéraire*, for this remark is more or less of a joke, and we know very well that he did read this magazine¹. Let us now weigh the evidence and perhaps discover why Voltaire, so prone to reply in such cases even to the most obscure pamphleteer, now maintained a strict silence. We have reason to doubt that Voltaire could have read the old English of Chaucer; but it yet remains to be proved that Chaucer's *Wife of Bath's Tale* is not the old romance which he claims is the source of his poem. Also we must not fail to take into consideration a French translation of Dryden's version which appeared in the June number 1757 of the *Journal étranger*.

If we examine these versions for points of similarity and difference, we find that in Chaucer the old hag is described as follows: 'A fouler wight there may no man devyse.' Dryden adds to this: 'Propped on her lusty staff not half upright.' This additional phrase appears in Voltaire: 'Pliée en deux, s'appuyant d'un bâton.' Chaucer has the old dame say: 'Thise olde folk can muchel thing.' Dryden modernizes this to read: '...for wisdom is in age.' Voltaire follows Dryden saying: '...le sens vient avec l'âge.' Chaucer has no line which corresponds exactly to Dryden's line: 'The female senate was assembled soon'; but Voltaire has the line: 'Incontinent le conseil assemblé.' Nor has Chaucer any phrase corresponding to Dryden's: '...and I expect my hire,' which Voltaire translates: 'et j'attends mon salaire.' Although other similarities between Dryden and Voltaire can be pointed out, this is

¹ *Mémoires secrets pour servir à l'histoire de la république des lettres*, fév. 5, 1764.

sufficient evidence to prove that Voltaire followed Dryden's modernization and not Chaucer's 'old romance.'

As for the translation in the *Journal étranger*, there is enough evidence to show that Voltaire went to the original instead of being content with the wretched and incomplete translation, although it is possible that it was the reading of the *Journal étranger* which suggested the story to his mind. In Dryden the maid is going to market, and also in Voltaire, while in the translation she is merely going 'à la ville.' Voltaire renders the line, 'and I expect my hire,' quite exactly, 'et j'attends mon salaire,' while the *Journal étranger* reads: 'Pour salaire j'exige qu'il m'épouse.' In Dryden and in Voltaire the old dame admits that she is ugly and poor. The translation leaves out this idea. Plainest of all, however, is the evidence of relationship of these versions shown by the passages describing the dance. Chaucer says:

Wher-as he saw upon a daunce go,
Of ladies, four and twenty and yet mo.

Dryden adds the following details:

He saw a quire of ladies in a round,
That featly footing seemed to skim the ground.
Thus dancing hand in hand so light they were,
He knew not where they trod, on earth or air.

The *Journal étranger* is content to render this: 'Au clair de la lune, il aperçut une troupe agréable de femmes, qui se tenoient par la main pour danser en rond.' Voltaire must have gone to Dryden directly for the following lines:

Il vit de loin vingt beautés ravissantes,
Dansant en rond...
Rasant la terre et ne la touchant pas.

Thus Fréron was right; and if Voltaire did not reply it may well have been because there was nothing to say. This 'old romance' was certainly 'even treated in English by Dryden,' as Voltaire says. If it had not been, we should never have had the pleasure of reading *Ce qui plaît aux dames*.

II.

Another of this collection of *Contes en vers* published by Voltaire under the name of Guillaume Vadé is entitled *Gertrude ou l'éducation d'une fille*. Again Voltaire withheld the information in regard to the source of his story, and in this case did not give even a hint to the future commentator. Neither Moland nor anyone else seems to have discovered the source of this other 'flower' which Voltaire regretted to

have exposed to the crowd in the market place. Of course there is no real reason why Voltaire should name the author of these bagatelles, as he calls them, but since he often seems to take pains to conceal his sources, it is a rather interesting game to discover them. In this case it is Firenzuola who gave the Patriarch of Ferney a chance to while away a few hours of a long winter when the snow was almost blinding him, by composing and perhaps dictating what he calls 'un conte de ma mère l'oie' for his friends. It is interesting to note that Voltaire does not appear to have mentioned Firenzuola in any connection in his writings; and just how he came into contact with the *novelle*, whether in the original or in a French translation, is not plain.

The synopsis of the fifth *novella* of Firenzuola reads as follows: 'Mona Francesca s'innamora di Fra Timoteo, e mentre con lui si solazza, Laura sua figliuola accorgendosene, fa venire un suo amante; la madre se ne avvede e gridala, e Laura con una bella parola la fa tacere, e vergognandosi dello erro suo, s'accorda con la figliuola.' This is, of course, plainly the source of Voltaire's *Gertrude ou l'éducation d'une fille*, although, as in the case of *Ce qui plaît aux dames*, the tone and esprit is distinctly Voltairean and of the eighteenth century. The Italian source, indeed, has been followed far less closely than the English source from which he translated whole phrases and many ideas. With the exception of the name of the daughter's lover, Andreuolo, which Voltaire has retained as André, nothing appears to have been literally translated from the Italian story.

Of course, in neither of these two cases ought anyone to accuse Voltaire of flagrant plagiarism. These *contes* were first intended by Voltaire to be mere trifles to amuse his friends. They became more important than he expected they would, and aroused a great deal of interest at the time of their publication. Several of them were made into comic operas, including *Gertrude ou l'éducation d'une fille*, which was set to music by Favart. That fact, together with the attempt on the part of Fréron in the case of *Ce qui plaît aux dames* to cast discredit on his most bitter enemy, gave the whole collection of his *Contes en vers* a prominence greater than Voltaire expected and, if we can believe him, greater than he really wanted. Also it must not be forgotten that when these tales have passed through the active and original mind of the Lord of Ferney, little remains of the sources except the bare plot of the story. The content is distinctly Voltairean.

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