

SPAIN UNDER THE GAZE OF A FRENCH WOMAN: THE RELATION DU VOYAGE D'ESPAGNE (1691) BY MADAME D'AULNOY

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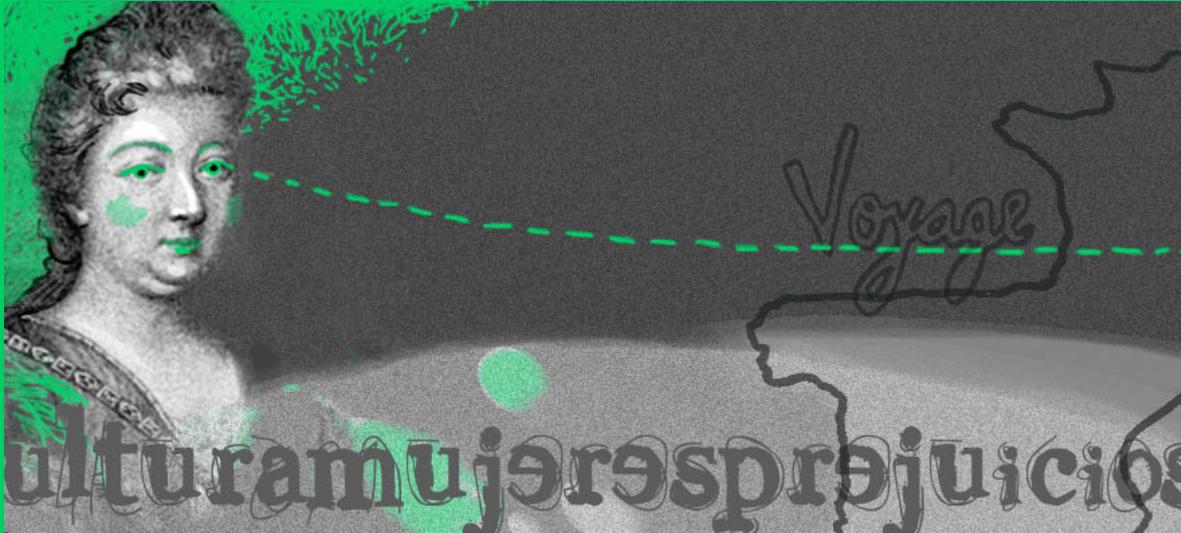
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Abstract || Madame d'Aulnoy's *Relation du voyage d'Espagne* (1691) had an immense literary importance and can be considered a mirror to the culture of Spain and its customs in the late Seventeenth-Century. Madame d'Aulnoy's observations do not aim to pass judgment on Spanish culture nor are they an attempt to promote to French culture over that of Spain. However, by observing the culture and customs of the Spanish Other her observations allow her to define her own identity as a French women. This article will examine how this French female writer, Madame d'Aulnoy, portrays Spanish women and to what extent the prejudices and practices of classical travel literature are present in her descriptions.

Key-words || Marie-Catherine d'Aulnoy (1650-1705) | *Relation du voyage d'Espagne* (1691) | French literature | Travel literature | Women writers | 1600-1699 | Spain.

A traveller and an adventurer, Madame d'Aulnoy tells us her adventures in another country, as a foreigner in Spain, with the publication of the *Relation du voyage d'Espagne* in 1691. Less known nowadays than her practice of fairytales, the *Relation du voyage d'Espagne* by Madame d'Aulnoy had a great literary importance and can be considered not only as the mirror of the Spanish world but also as a reflection of the French world during the classical period. The author portrays Spain when its culture and its literature had penetrated France and when the descriptions of the Iberian exoticism were all the rage among French readers. This *Relation* not only takes advantage of the vogue of the travellers' tales, but also of the epistolary writing. Written in the form of letters for a female cousin in France, the narration only provides one perspective, the one from a French woman traveller in front of the Spaniards. Observing the culture of Spanish women, she lends it some value and she does not content herself with valuing her own. In addition, she defines her own identity as a woman and as a French citizen.

In order to approach the *Relation du voyage d'Espagne* (1691) by Madame d'Aulnoy, one of the most appreciated travellers' tales of the 17th century, one has to know the story of this woman writer, such a memorable one and, at times, as controversial as her narratives. Marie-Catherine Jumelle de Barneville, Countess d'Aulnoy, was born in 1650 in Normandy and died in Paris on 14th January, 1705. In 1666, when she was sixteen, she married the Baron François de la Motte d'Aulnoy, a nouveau-riche who was 46 years old. In 1669, an accusation of lese-majesty was made against the husband of Madame d'Aulnoy by Madame de Gudannes, Madame d'Aulnoy's mother. This was the consequence of a number of financial débâcles that had destroyed the reputation of the husband (Seguin, 2005: 399). On 4th November of that same year, the innocence of the baron d'Aulnoy was claimed by the Conseil du Grand Châtelet, but because of her role in the accusation of the baron, the mother of the Countess d'Aulnoy went into exile in Spain. Nothing is certain in what refers to the participation of Madame d'Aulnoy in this affair, but what is unquestionable is that she remained hidden since the trial of her husband until the publication of her first books in 1690. As to her place of residence during these years veiled of mystery, some critics believe that she had to spend some time in prison followed by a year in a convent (Thirard, 2006: par. 1), and another source establishes she went into exile in Spain with her mother because of her guilt (Foulché-Delbosc, 1926: 13). Although no document whatsoever enables to certify this fact, it is probable that Madame d'Aulnoy travelled around Spain between 1679 and 1681 (Seguin, 2005: 7), without a doubt in order to escape from the rumours that spread because of the scandal (Hester 89), but also to pay her mother a visit, who had settled in Madrid (Seguin, 2005: 400). So it is thanks to the consequences of this dramatic and unforgettable

event in the story of Madame d'Aulnoy that the narrative of the most famous travel in Spain from the 17th century (Mcleod, 1989, 91) was published.

Very famous during the 17th and the 18th centuries, the *Relation du voyage d'Espagne* has been forgotten during the following centuries, overshadowed by the success of the two anthologies of tales by Madame d'Aulnoy¹. Nowadays, critics begin to grant this work a literary value (Mcleod, 1989: 93), but a great part of the analysis attempts to determine if Madame d'Aulnoy really travelled to Spain, or if her descriptions are a creative plagiarism. Let us not tarry over the truthfulness of this piece of work, since what merits more attention is the critical and descriptive look at the culture of female Spaniards and at Spain in this narrative. This traveller's tale, full of detailed observations, provided such a new knowledge about the country, the Spanish customs and morals, that this narrative was used to enrich the dictionaries of that epoch, as well as the *Encyclopédie* by Diderot and d'Alembert (Melzer, 2006: 42). Born from the probable experience of Madame d'Aulnoy in Spain, the *Relation du voyage d'Espagne* is recognized as the most famous and the most instructive narrative of a travel in Spain during the 17th century (Prud'homme, 1995: 166).

An evolving genre, the travel narrative is the result of a very ancient tradition, going from the medieval journey of Marco Polo² to the narrations of exploration in America and outside Europe of the 16th century by travellers like Jacques Cartier³, André Thévet⁴ and Jean de Léry⁵. Instead of the faraway travel, the French of the 17th century explored the neighbouring not much known countries (Requemora, 1997: 128). Because of the novelty of their subjects, travelling writers of that time all had the advantage of some descriptive freedom (Grélé, 2003: 209), but at the same time this freedom compelled them to prove the veracity of their works, and to fight for their reputation. The proverb "a beau mentir qui vient de loin" ("long ways, long lies") proves par excellence the disadvantageous prejudice against which some travelling writers have to fight against (Chupeau, 1977: 540). Madame d'Aulnoy approaches the question of the veracity of the traveller's tales in her address "To the reader":

Je n'ai écrit que ce que j'ai vu, ou ce que j'ai appris par des personnes d'une probité incontestable. Je n'en allègue point des noms inconnus, ni des gens dont la mort m'ait fourni la liberté de leur supposer des aventures. [...] je me contente d'assurer que ce qui est dans mes Mémoires, et ce que l'on trouvera dans cette Relation, est très exact et très conforme à la vérité (d'Aulnoy, 2005, 31).

On top of this address, Madame d'Aulnoy justifies the veracity of her narratives several times in her letters⁶.

NOTES

1 | *Les Contes des Fées* (published in 1697) and *Les Contes Nouveaux, ou les Fées à la mode* (published in 1698).

2 | *Devisement du monde*, 1298.

3 | *Bref récit et succincte narration de la navigation faite en 1535 et 1536 par le capitaine Jacques Cartier [...]*, 1545.

4 | *Cosmographie et singularités de la France antarctique*, 1557.

5 | *Histoire d'un voyage fait en la terre du Brésil*, 1578.

6 | Madame d'Aulnoy adds, in a letter, that she had to enquire about several aspects in order to present the Spanish current affairs in a better way to her cousin: "L'exactitude que j'ai à vous apprendre les choses que je crois dignes de votre curiosité, m'oblige très souvent de m'informer de plusieurs particularités que j'aurais négligées, si vous ne m'aviez pas dit qu'elles vous font plaisir, et que vous aimez à voyager sans sortir de votre cabinet" (d'Aulnoy, 2005, 157). She uses the style of her writing as a justification of the veracity of her writings, consequently: "Je vous dis les choses à mesure qu'elles me viennent dans l'esprit, et je les dis toutes fort mal ; mais comme vous m'aimez, ma chère cousine, cela me rassure contre mes fautes" (d'Aulnoy, 2005, 218). In other words, her mistakes and the spontaneity of her writing are precisely what creates the natural style and the plausibility in her travellers' tale.

The new celebrity of the traveller's tales required, in order to maintain the interest of the French readership, to emphasize entertainment and intrigue, and for that reason, the works dedicated to the Spanish society – exotic and fascinating – attracted readers in large numbers. So, Spanish literature penetrated more and more in France and the French started to read it in its original form, therefore, in Spanish. For example, the *Don Quichotte* by Miguel de Cervantes, a text that was read and appreciated by Madame d'Aulnoy (d'Aulnoy, 2005: 339), reflected an exotic and mysterious image of Spain. (Palmer, 1971: 223-224). Even French literary salons were interested in all that was Spanish (Rogers, 1926: 208-209). In other words, Spain was *à la mode*. French interest came not only from the question of the Spanish Succession – which would determine the future of Spain – but also from the decline of power that Spain lived at that period, and, also, owing to the mysterious death of Marie Louise d'Orléans, the spouse of Charles II, King of Spain (McLeod, 1989: 94). Owing to this “French taste”, the writing of travels in Spain and the descriptions of these travels often brought some harm to the country and its people. The stereotypes that repeat themselves from one text to another are those of the *auberge espagnole*, of their vices and their not much civilized customs, of their passion in love, of their excessive violence and revenge, of their superstitious beliefs, and eventually of their barbaric customs. These unfavourable images of the primitive Spain that come from the preconceived ideas of the travellers are equally obvious in some observations made by Madame d'Aulnoy.

Although the *Relation du voyage d'Espagne* by Madame d'Aulnoy tries to create a portrait of 17th century Spain, this narrative only provides one perspective, the one from the French woman traveller in front of Spanish women. The majority of the descriptions provided by this traveller's tale only deal with one part of the Spanish society – the members of high society, and more accurately, women – and then provide an image not really fair about Spanish women in their totality. As she observes the culture of Spanish women, Madame d'Aulnoy grants it some value and does not content herself with giving value to her own. According to Emmanuel Lévinas, as soon as someone has access to only one perspective over a culture, there is a lack of reciprocity, necessary for an identification with the Other. Even if it is obvious that the observed individual is observant in his/her turn — in other words, the Spanish Other observes the female traveller too —, this does not appear, neither in the text nor in the descriptions by Madame d'Aulnoy.

In order to take up the idea by Tzvetan Todorov, according to which exoticism is divided into two categories – either the idea of a nation that is more advanced and superior, or the idea of a nation less advanced and inferior to another one—, it seems that the descriptions

by Madame d'Aulnoy enrol at the heart of both tendencies at a time; she sometimes describes Spanish women as being superior to French women, sometimes inferior in what refers to the biggest cultural differences. Then, the gaze of the narrator over Spanish women oscillates between objectivity and value judgment, which is obvious in the following quote :

Vous m'allez dire que les Espagnols sont fous avec leur chimérique grandeur. Peut-être que vous dirai vrai ; mais pour moi qui crois les connaître assez, je n'en juge pas de cette manière. Je demeure d'accord, néanmoins, que la différence que l'on peut mettre entre les Espagnols et les Français est tout à notre avantage. Il semble que je ne devrais pas me mêler de décider là-dessus, et que j'y suis trop intéressée pour en parler sans passion. Mais je suis persuadée qu'il n'y a guère de personnes raisonnable qui n'en jugent ainsi (d'Aulnoy, 2005, 285).

All the judgments of the female narrator come from her story and her own experiences, and it is then from her own value system that she can express a judgment on the Other. The notion of cultural relativism is then very important, since it does not always imply a negation of the Other, as is moreover shown in the narrative by Madame d'Aulnoy. Indeed, the female narrator observes the differences between the two cultures and takes care of putting those differences in their societal context. The writing by Madame d'Aulnoy also corresponds, in her approach to the Other, to the definition of ethnography: to write the culture of the Other.

Madame d'Aulnoy emphasized, in regarding the situation of Spanish women, that women were victim of a limited freedom and of submissiveness to men. She noticed the oppressive restraints over women travelling since her third letter, in which she explains that women are not allowed to stay more than two days in a hotel business on the roads in Spain. The isolation of women in Spanish society applies even to the court in Madrid, where women stood in front of the balconies and the windows on any opportunity; where carriages always had their curtains closed; where mistresses were sent to a convent when the king was done with them, so "they can become nuns" (d'Aulnoy, 2005: 285); and finally, where women wear magnificent clothes to make the most of any occasion to show themselves.

Madame d'Aulnoy illustrates the subordination of women with an example that strikes imagination. The matter is the rules of dinner à l'espagnole, where men ate on their own at table and their women on the floor, on a carpet with children. According to the narrator, it was not because of respect that they ate this way (d'Aulnoy, 2005: 310), but this way to dine pointed a difference between the sexes. Madame d'Aulnoy explains more this custom when she tells the readers the episode in which she had to sit down on the carpet in order to eat:

Le couvert était mis sur une table pour les hommes, et il y avait à terre, sur le tapis, une nappe étendue avec trois couverts pour doña Teresa, moi et ma fille. Je demeurai surprise de cette mode, car je ne suis pas accoutumée à dîner ainsi. Cependant, je n'en témoignai rien et je voulus y essayer, mais je n'ai jamais été plus incommodée ; les jambes me faisaient un mal horrible ; tantôt je m'appuyais sur le coude, tantôt sur la main ; enfin, je renonçais à dîner, et mon hôtesse ne s'en apercevait point, parce qu'elle croyait que les dames mangeaient par terre en France comme Espagne. Mais [les hommes], qui remarqua ma peine, [...] me dirent [...] qu'absolument je me mettrais à table. Je le voulais assez, pourvu que doña Teresa s'y mît ; elle ne l'osait, à cause qu'il y avait des hommes, et [...] elle nous avoua [...] qu'elle ne s'était jamais mise dans une chaise [...] (d'Aulnoy, 2005, 195-196).

Madame d'Aulnoy criticizes even more the behaviour of Spanish women at court when she examines the lack of formality of their behaviour compared with the court in France:

[les femmes] ne se baisent point en se saluant. Je crois que c'est pour ne pas emporter le plâtre qu'elles ont sur le visage ; mais elles se présentent la main dégantée ; et, en se parlant, elles se disent *tu* et *toi*, et elles ne s'appellent ni madame, ni mademoiselle, ni Altesse, ni Excellence, mais seulement doña Maria, doña Clara, doña Teresa. Je me suis informée d'où vient qu'elles en usent si familièrement, et j'ai appris que c'est pour n'avoir aucun sujet de se fâcher entre elles [...](d'Aulnoy, 2005, 211-212).

For the female narrator, who has a French experience of the world, this indifference towards the politeness of society seems shocking and also shows the difference between the female behaviour of the two courts. Madame d'Aulnoy adds that

[c]'est la coutume à Madrid que le maître ou la maîtresse du logis passent toujours devant ceux qui leur rendent visite. Ils prétendent que c'est une civilité d'en user ainsi, parce qu'ils laissent, disent-ils, tout ce qui est dans leur chambre au pouvoir de la personne qui y reste la dernière (d'Aulnoy, 2005, 371).

This description of otherness leads to a representation of the exotic Spanish woman, an image equally reinforced by the representation of doña Teresa, where Madame d'Aulnoy introduces the ideal female behaviour:

[L]es trois chevaliers demeurent là, parce que ce n'est pas la coutume en Espagne d'entrer dans la chambre des dames pendant qu'elles sont au lit. [...] Doña Teresa me reçut avec un accueil aussi obligeant que si nous avions été amies depuis longtemps. [...] [Q]uand il fut question de se chausser, elle fit ôter la clef de sa chambre et tirer les verrous. Je m'informai de quoi il s'agissait pour se barricader ainsi ; elle me dit qu'elle savait qu'il y avait des gentilshommes espagnols avec moi, et qu'elle aimerait mieux avoir perdu la vie qu'ils eussent vu ses pieds. Je m'éclatai de rire, et je la priai de me les montrer, puisque j'étais sans conséquence. Il est vrai que c'est quelque chose de rare pour la petitesse, et j'ai bien vu des enfants de six ans qui les avaient aussi grands (d'Aulnoy, 2005, 191-192).

Even if Madame d'Aulnoy laughs at this rule according to which men should not see the feet of a woman, this description is not used for ridiculing the custom, but for showing the ideal woman who respects and considers the habits and the cultural practices of the times to be important. Madame d'Aulnoy also introduces an image of the Spanish woman that is more balanced, since she exposes the two poles, as seen in 17th century literature. But one has to be aware of the fact that the author writes down extreme examples in order to convey more exoticism to her anecdotes.

Thus, the book by Madame d'Aulnoy gives information to us about the way French people perceived another culture. For her sometimes "[l]e voyage n'est que la confirmation de ce que [elle] pensait savoir d'avance ou de ce que [elle] avait lu dans un livre antérieur" (Cioranescu, 1983: 57) and she often puts emphasis on French women's superiority compared with Spanish women. For example: the castles in France are more beautiful than in Spain (d'Aulnoy, 2005: 55, 170), France is more civilized because women do not eat on the floor (196), French princesses have more freedom in France (210), and the French respect the formality in their behaviour (212) to quote some examples. Often, the comparisons with France are used to establish the inferiority of Spain, but still there are, on rare occasions, some critical passages in which the author makes a comparison that reverses the status. For example, in comparison with Spain, where the members of a social class do not mingle with the others, French high society allows, to some extent, the mixing of social classes and, for this reason, is judged to be inferior. She also points out that Spanish women possess an incomparable beauty (d'Aulnoy, 2005: 213), that the women of Spain walk better than French women when they wear heels and, in fact, they walk as if they flew (200), and that love is much more passionate and witty in Spain than in France (314-315). Therefore her judgments are not always negative or derogatory.

Regardless of the question of the prejudices and the stereotypes enclosed in the *Relation du voyage d'Espagne*, the text by Madame

d'Aulnoy is remarkable not only because of the descriptions of a long and arduous travel undertaken by a female traveller in the 17th century, but also because of the fact that as a woman of letters, she had such a big success in a genre previously dominated by men. Her travellers' tale is part of those that, in the 17th century, initiated the fashion of travelling through Spain and influenced the future of this genre. Madame d'Aulnoy owes her success to the genre as well as to the subject. She gives witness of Spanish people at a period when the descriptions of Iberian exoticism were all the rage among French readers, chiefly because of French interest in the cultural, political and economic situation of Spain at the end of the 17th century. The lively and detailed descriptions by Madame d'Aulnoy show at the same time some discoveries and some preconceived ideas related to Spain and Spanish women, and this, in a feminine and French perspective. Contrary to the custom of that period, Madame d'Aulnoy is in general terms fair-minded in her descriptive choices, and the image of the Spanish woman perpetuated by the travellers' tale by Madame d'Aulnoy is not only an image of the exotic or inferior Spanish woman. In other words, it is obvious that Madame d'Aulnoy, in her descriptions, appreciates the differences between the two cultures.

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