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■ Introduction

In the happy country of fairies, one leaves it only to find one's way back. One suffers only to become happy, whereas pain is for us an enigma and life a struggle without end where the better people are the first to fall. There, in the country of fairies, one does not get old, and one always loves. Here, no sooner does our heart barely recover from those foolish acts of our youth than it turns serious and begins to love an object worthy of our heart. Then, our face becomes wrinkled, and our hair turns white leaving us with the feeling of ridicule. There, in the country of fairies, one knows everything in one hour or one day. Here, we pursue truth at the cost of our lives as it evades us. It flees like the marvelous bird, and when, at last, after thirty years of pain, we feel it near us, when our hand lowers to seize it, another hand more powerful freezes us and carries us off to the country from which nobody has ever returned.

—ÉDOUARD LABOULAYE, *Contes bleus*, 1863

As a longtime scholar of folklore and fairy tales, I have dedicated a good deal of my research to the discovery and rediscovery of neglected writers and their collections of folk and fairy tales. In particular, I pride myself on finding and translating into English significant works by foreign authors who have not received the attention they deserve. In both my first edition of *The Oxford Companion to Fairy Tales* (2000) and the second

revised edition (2015), however, I somehow omitted any reference to the fairy tales of the remarkable French writer Édouard Laboulaye (1811–1883). Moreover, I have not been the only one to neglect him. Almost all American and English encyclopedias and handbooks of fairy tales published in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries make no mention of Laboulaye. In fact, scarcely a word has been published about his fairy tales, even in French. Nor have modern editions of his fairy tales appeared in either French or English.

Why such neglect when Laboulaye, one of France's foremost jurists and politicians of the nineteenth century,¹ published highly unusual political fairy tales? His production of stories and novels is stunning in its variety. It includes three collections of tales, *Contes bleus* (Blue Tales, 1863), *Nouveaux contes bleus* (New Blue Tales, 1868), and *Derniers contes bleus* (Final Blue Tales, 1884); experimental works of fiction, such as the moralistic novel *Abdallah, ou Le trèfle à quatre feuilles* (Abdallah, or The Four-Leaf Clover, 1859), based on traditional Arabic folk tales; the time-travel fantasy novel *Paris en Amérique* (Paris in America, 1862); and the fairy-tale novel *Le prince-caniche* (The Poodle Prince, 1867–68).

Laboulaye was a great admirer of American democracy, supported the antislavery cause of the North, wrote several books on the history of the United States and American constitutional law, and played a key role in developing the plans for the Statue of Liberty. Some of his American contemporaries considered him America's greatest friend. John Bigelow, the American ambassador to France in the 1860s, wrote: "Mr. Laboulaye's

value as a friend of the Union, and of representative government was not long in being recognized in the United States. The press proclaimed his sympathetic utterances wherever the Federal mails could carry them; the Union League Club, of New York, ordered his portrait by Fagnani, which now adorns its walls, a bronze bust of him was placed in the Union League Club in Philadelphia, and at the close of our war, his name was more widely and more generally known in the United States than in Europe.”²

So why isn't Laboulaye better known today in the United States and elsewhere? And why have his literary accomplishments gone unnoticed since the beginning of the twentieth century?

Many of Laboulaye's books were translated in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries by Mary L. Booth, editor of *Harper's Bazaar*, and by an anonymous translator, probably Mary E. Robinson, who published Laboulaye's tales under the titles *Old Wives' Fables* (1884) and *More Old Wives' Fables* (1885). His fairy tales, however, ostensibly published for and dedicated to children, were actually too sophisticated to be classified as children's literature or to be read by children. Indeed, before including them in books, Laboulaye published most of them in the distinguished *Journal des débats* (Journal of Debates), a weekly newspaper for highly educated readers,³ who would have noted their political significance. Indeed, they were quite successful mainly among adults. Given his extraordinary past, I believe it is time to reconsider Laboulaye's achievement as a writer of unusually wry fairy tales filled with biting social

commentaries, philosophical reflections, and strong notions of social justice.



Born into a renowned bourgeois family in Paris in 1811 during the First French Empire, Laboulaye received a classical education at the Collège Louis-le-Grand and the University of Paris School of Law. He then began working with his brother Charles, who had bought a type foundry in the early 1830s. Although Laboulaye was successful in this business, he had other, more intellectual and political interests. He continued to study and write about comparative jurisprudence and the evolution and history of law. He made trips to Germany to deepen his understanding of social justice, and was influenced by the German historical school of law fostered by Friedrich Carl de Savigny, who played an important role in the education of the Brothers Grimm at the University of Marburg. Savigny's aim was to demonstrate through meticulous historical research that laws were not "natural" but originated in the customs and practice of the people in a given society, and that these laws changed as people transformed their social values. In 1839, under the influence of Savigny, Laboulaye published *Histoire du droit de propriété foncière en Occident* (History of Landed Property in Europe), which was awarded a prize by the Academy of Inscriptions and Belle-Lettres. Three years later he was received at the bar as a lawyer and in 1849 was appointed professor of comparative law at the Collège de France.

All of these accomplishments resulted from his pioneering research and publications during this period. In 1840, he published *Essai sur la vie et les ouvrages de Savigny* (The Life and Works of Savigny), which introduced the German scholar's historical and interdisciplinary methods to French scholars. Laboulaye himself applied these methods in his famous book, *Recherches sur la condition civile et politique des femmes depuis les Romains jusqu'à nos jours* (The Civil and Political Condition of Women from the Time of the Romans to Our Present Days, 1843), and also in the significant study *Essai sur les lois criminelles des Romains concernant la responsabilité des magistrats* (Essay on Roman Criminal Laws Concerning the Responsibility of the Magistrates, 1845). These early works reveal Laboulaye's strong democratic inclinations and ethical principles, which led him to support the French revolution of 1848. Although he did not support the violent overthrow of the monarchy, Laboulaye later wrote that the turbulence caused by the 1848 revolution changed his life. Gradually, he became a Left liberal who opposed violence and believed in peaceful reforms of the government. Therefore, he was disappointed that the legislature failed to revise the French constitution to grant autonomy to communes and regional districts. Laboulaye believed that the centralization of government would always lead to autocracy, if not tyranny. Indeed, this was what happened in 1852, when Louis-Napoleon Bonaparte (Napoleon III) brought about a coup d'état and established the autocratic Second Empire, which was to last until 1870.

Laboulaye became one of the foremost critics of the Second Empire, which he more or less regarded as a despotic reign. In *The French Second Empire*, the historian Roger Price notes, "The 1860s would be characterized by a rising tide of opposition stimulated by criticism of the Emperor's foreign policy and commercial treaties. Irreconcilable liberals . . . were able to appeal to a variety of groups anxious to defend their 'vital' interests by imposing parliamentary controls over the errant monarch. The essential liberal position of the liberals was expressed by Édouard de Laboulaye in a pamphlet on *Le parti libéral, son programme et son avenir* published in 1863. According to Laboulaye, the objective for liberals was 'above all to spread liberty throughout our institutions, because it is liberty alone which identifies the problems and which resolves them.'"⁴

Since Laboulaye believed that the sovereignty of the French people was endangered by laws that brought about censorship and oppression, he sought another constitutional model for democracy. He turned to the United States to explore the possibility of adopting in France some American legal principles and practices. As Walter Gray has pointed out in the most thorough study of Laboulaye's political works, *Interpreting American Democracy in France*, "Two themes dominated his writings during the Second Empire: liberty, religious and political, and America, her history and institutions. For Laboulaye, who was disillusioned with the aftermath of 1848 in France, the study of American history and politics furnished a model of liberty and a stable political system that he hoped his fellow Frenchmen would emulate and establish American democracy

in France. Furthermore, the course of American history in the 1850s and 1860s, the period of the American Civil War, illustrated for him the heroic efforts necessary to preserve liberty and to maintain a stable government.”⁵

Laboulaye wrote a three-volume history of the United States, *Histoire des États-Unis d'Amérique* (1855–66), and also published more than a hundred essays and studies, up through the foundation of the Second Republic in 1871, on a range of topics, among them the revolution in Germany, slavery in America, religious liberty, secularism, the limits of the state, libraries and literary property, and political liberty in France. As a scholar, Laboulaye was remarkably knowledgeable about diverse subjects. As an activist, he helped to found the French antislavery society in the 1860s, influencing the French government's decision to remain neutral during the American Civil War and thereby depriving the South of important materials and financial support.

It was also during the late 1850s and 1860s that Laboulaye turned to fairy tales to critique the abuse of power by the French hierarchical state and to embed his moral and ethical principles in strikingly political narratives. That is, he hoped to draw attention to well-known European, Asian, and African folk tales by transforming their messages into unusual stories of social justice relevant to the situation in France. This can be seen in his *Contes noirs et blancs* (Tales by Black and White Storytellers, 1858), *Abdallah, ou Le trèfle à quatre feuilles* (Abdallah, or The Four Leaf-Clover, 1859), “Perlino” (1859–60), “La bonne femme” (The Good Woman, 1861), *Contes bohêmes*

(*Bohemian Tales*, 1861–62), *Pif Paf, ou L'art de gouverner les hommes* (Smack-Bam, or *The Art of Governing Men*, 1862–63), all published in the *Journal des débats*. Later, he collected the majority of these tales and published and republished them in his books *Contes bleus*, *Nouveaux contes bleus*, and *Derniers contes bleus*, until his death in 1883.

While Laboulaye's fairy tales and other fictional works, such as *Paris en Amérique* (1862), in which a Frenchman and his family are transported mysteriously to America to experience "true democracy," were unusual critiques of French social and political conditions, Laboulaye used his fiction to reinforce his political convictions and to avoid censorship. As Napoleon III loosened his authoritarian control in the 1860s, Laboulaye felt freer to publish overtly political works such as *L'état et ses limites* (*The State and Its Limits*), and *Le parti libéral, son programme et son avenir* (*The Liberal Party, Its Program, and Its Future*), both of which went through more than seven editions after their initial publication in 1863. These works presented key ideas that guided his political activism as well as the themes in most of his tales. He argued that all citizens, including women and serfs, were meant to enjoy full individual rights. He also advocated for the separation of state and religion, free education, complete freedom of teaching, freedom of association, freedom of the press, commerce, and industry, and independent municipalities.

By the time the Franco-Prussian War erupted in 1870, Laboulaye hoped France would emerge victorious and transform itself into a modern democracy. Consequently, he sup-

ported the French regime that he had always despised, expecting that the Napoleonic government would bring about reforms. After the Prussian victory, however, Laboulaye withdrew to the countryside in shame and disappointment. When he returned to Paris in 1873, he was elected deputy to the national assembly and he helped defeat the monarchists and guarantee the formation of the Third Republic. He was one of the primary writers of the new constitution, and was elected a life senator in 1875. The following year he was appointed administrator of the Collège de France and continued to hold lectures there until his death in 1883. While his legacy as a great jurist, historian, and political figure in France ultimately overshadowed his literary work, he deserves recognition as a writer of ironic, pithy, and philosophical fairy tales published, in part, to provoke and delight readers of the *Journal des débats* and even the conservative thinkers of his times.



In 1869, Laboulaye wrote an introduction to an important collection of fairy tales, *Contes allemands du temps passé* (German Fairy Tales of Olden Times), translated and edited by Félix Frank and E. Alsleben. In this introduction, Laboulaye not only demonstrated an extraordinary knowledge of folk and fairy tales but also made an interesting declaration that, I believe, served as the purpose for his own unusual political tales: “If ever a true scholar appears on earth, that is to say, a man who, instead of collecting old stones or labeling old bones, has the

saintly ambition to write the history of the human spirit and ideas which, in turn, have been perpetuated throughout generations, one of the first subjects that will necessarily concern him will be the geography and chronology of fairy tales. The day when an erudite scholar will have done this considerable work, people will be astonished to see what role the tales have played in the development of civilization.”⁶

Laboulaye was by no means this scholar, but he certainly was moved to demonstrate that universal and popular fairy tales played a major role in the civilizing process of every country in the world. This is why he rewrote and adapted folk and fairy tales from Senegal, Iceland, Estonia, Spain, Italy, Germany, Scandinavia, Greece, Turkey, and other nations. He did *not* translate these tales: instead, he adapted them freely to draw parallels with conditions in other countries and also to develop a particular critique of social and political conditions in France. Laboulaye was an ironic critic who delighted in mocking hierarchies, asserting the rights of women, deploring the exploitation of the poor and needy, revealing the hypocrisy of elites, and explaining how power was often abused by the wealthy. He imbued all his tales with a strong sense of social justice and compassion for the oppressed. Though his stories took place in another time and place, it is clear that he always had French politics and social practices in mind when he adapted his tales. In three of his longer, innovative works—*Abdallah, or The Four-Leaf Clover*, *Paris in America*, and *The Poodle Prince*—which might also be considered political tracts, and which were very popular during his lifetime, Laboulaye employed meta-

phorical narratives to convey both his hope for reform and his dismay at the tactics used by elite groups to block the constitutional rights of ordinary people. All three books were written during the Second Empire, when authoritarianism in France caused thousands of people to be arrested and banished from the country. Laboulaye's use of subversive fiction and fairy tales during this period enabled him to vent his displeasure with the ruling classes, and perhaps to stir more people to take action against the Caesarism of Napoleon III.

In his earliest novel, *Abdallah, or The Four-Leaf Clover*, Laboulaye, a devout but progressive Catholic, who was critical of the church as an institution, sought to shame Christians in France by depicting the great moral humanity of the Muslim faith. He spent well over a year reading and rereading the Koran and doing research on customs and values in the Middle East. The novel clearly is based on typical folk-tale motifs and plots involving rivalry among friends, competition for a beautiful young woman, and treachery.⁷ The narrative concerns two young boys—Omar, which means ass in Arabic, and Abdallah, which signifies the servant of God in Arabic—and how their upbringing and environment shape their destinies. Omar's father, Mansour, is a wealthy Egyptian merchant, a freethinker, who believes more in the devil than in God. He wants his son raised with Abdallah, the son of a Bedouin woman, Halima, whose husband was killed while protecting one of Mansour's caravans. Although Mansour himself does not believe in the ways of Muslims, he wants his son, Omar, to adapt to their customs because he thinks it will make Omar a stronger and

smarter merchant when it comes time for his son to take over his business. He worries when a dervish reads Omar's horoscope and tells Mansour: "His best friend will be his worst enemy."⁸ Still, he is somewhat relieved when the dervish grants him three wishes. He asks that the baby Omar be rich all his life, have good health, and love no one, but think only of himself. In contrast, Halima wishes only for her son Abdallah to be happy and virtuous. The dervish informs her that the only way Abdallah can achieve these goals is to find a four-leaf clover. Then he disappears.

For the next sixteen years Omar and Abdallah grow up in the desert, learn the sacred Muslim values of the Bedouins, and become the best of friends. At sixteen, Mansour takes Omar back to Egypt, where the young man gradually becomes one of the wealthiest and most powerful merchants in the Middle East after his father's death. Indeed, Omar lives according to the creed of avarice and has feelings for no one but himself. Meanwhile, Abdallah becomes one of the most venerated Bedouins in the desert, often helping others in need. In his search for the four-leaf clover, he lives according to the Muslim principles of kindness, hospitality, generosity, and respect of God. When he and Omar meet as young men, they still feel a deep friendship for one another, but their moral principles clash. Moreover, Omar becomes incensed when a young woman named Leila, whom he wants for his wife, decides to wed Abdallah. Consequently, Omar brings about the deaths of Halima, Abdallah's adviser Hafiz, and Leila. Although Abdallah has an opportunity to kill Omar, he cannot bring about the death of

the man he loved as a brother, and is left to die alone in the desert. Later, a slave loyal to Abdallah kills Omar and then goes into the desert to die next to Abdallah.

In many respects Laboulaye's "religious" novel is more a Bildungsroman than a folk narrative. In fact, one could say that *Abdallah* is a "twin" novel of education that traces the development of two young men whose moral development depends on their education and advisers. Tragically, there is no happy resolution to their differences, but it is clear that Laboulaye favors Abdallah's ethical principles as the preferred values he wishes people, in particular, the French, would cultivate in a liberal and just society. That this would prove to be impossible is the message he delivered in his next intriguing novel of magic realism.

Paris in America was written in the ironic style that became characteristic of most of his fairy tales. The novel is composed for the most part in the first person by Dr. René Lefebvre, Laboulaye's alter ego, who doubts the powers of an American mesmerist, Jonathan Dream, who delivers a speech on magnetism in Paris. In a heated exchange with Dr. Lefebvre, Dream declares that he will transport not only the doctor but also his family and the entire city of Paris to America. Indeed, the next morning Lefebvre wakes up in Massachusetts along with his family. At first, the doctor thinks that he is dreaming, but then he must admit that he, his family, and the population of Paris have somehow been brought to America. What is most strange is that his family and the Parisians act as though they have always lived in America: they are Americans. Since the doctor has always held negative opinions about America

and considered the people and the country somewhat anarchical and coarse, he is surprised to find that the Americans he meets have strong family and social values, believe in religious pluralism, support freedom of the press, and seek to promote education for all people. As he gradually sheds his anti-American prejudices, he is elected first as inspector general of transportation and then as attorney general. He visits churches, newspaper offices, schools, and hospitals and realizes that Americans embrace different creeds and respect different ways of life more than the French. Finally, he becomes a dedicated democrat and, like most of the people in "Paris, Massachusetts," he supports the North as the Civil War erupts. It is at this point that Lefebvre, his family, and the residents of Paris are whisked back to France, where Lefebvre begins to espouse the democratic way of life and hopes to bring about reforms in France.

When Dr. Lefebvre talks about his experiences in America, however, and advocates for change in France, his family and a medical doctor named Olybrius believe that he is ill and had suffered from the effects of opium that was allegedly used to cure him. In discussing America, Olybrius tells him:

Your brain is not in a normal state. A society without administration, without army, without gendarmes, with the savage liberty of praying, thinking, speaking, and acting, each in his own way, is, you must grant, one of those abominable nightmares, which opium alone can bring forth. Your system would not last a quarter of an hour; it

is the negation of all the principles and conditions of that civilization which makes the unity of our grand nation. By constituting a hierarchical and centralized administration, the wisdom of our fathers long since raised France to the first rank, and taught Frenchmen that liberty is obedience. In this is our glory and strength; do not forget it, my dear friend, and return to yourself. These anarchical ideas which trouble your brain, and which never before entered the head of a Frenchman, tell you plainly that you are ill,—and the more ill that you do not feel it.⁹

Dr. Lefebvre protests, but the more he protests, the more he is considered dangerously mad and consequently is incarcerated in an insane asylum. The novel ends ironically with Lefebvre writing from the madhouse: “My fate is fixed; I have played a dangerous game, and lost. A fool, who entitles himself a physician, has declared me mad; my good friends joyfully confirm the decree of ignorance. Here I am shut up, and forever. Can I extinguish the flame which illuminates my brain? Can I deny the truth? No; I have known liberty; I have tasted on my lips this intoxicating honey, I have caught a glimpse of the eternal ideal, I am mad! I will not be cured!”¹⁰

The ending of *Paris in America* evokes a phrase uttered in Hermann Broch’s post-World War II trilogy *The Sleepwalkers*, in which one of the characters asks: Are we insane because we have not gone insane? Laboulaye anticipates this critique by one hundred years, and is more specific in his comments: “Frenchmen have even more wit than they attribute to themselves. To

imprison those who think, speak, and reason is a master-stroke, the success of which is infallible. Where force is, there is public opinion. Go, happy sheep, browse in silence; bleat to yourselves that you are the kings of the world, your shepherds will not be the ones to refuse you this innocent pleasure. Amuse yourselves, enjoy life, you have nothing to fear; the mad men are under bolts, they would disturb your quietness; the wiser one is, the more he laughs.”¹¹

Though a professor at an esteemed institution, the Collège de France, and a respected member of the establishment, Laboulaye wrote from the margins. His fiction granted him “fool’s freedom,” allowing him to speak freely about the hypocritical and savage ways of the civilizing process in France. His third novel, *The Poodle Prince*, also translated as *The Spaniel-Prince*, is another vigorous and comic commentary about the absurd customs of the French ruling class and government. In this case, it takes the form of a long, delightful fairy tale based on the deep tradition of tales about magical transformation of humans into animals. Laboulaye was probably familiar with Apuleius’s second-century Latin novel *The Golden Ass*, in which a young man is turned into a donkey for having insulted the goddess Isis and must undergo various tests before he is turned back into a human.

He sets his fairy-tale novel in the once-upon-a-time kingdom of the flycatchers or ninnies. He uses the French term *Gobe-mouches*, which connotes simpletons who will believe almost anything they hear. These people are ruled by the royal family Tulips (read Bonaparte). At the beginning of the story,

the queen has not been able to have a child until heaven grants her a son named Jacinth. She and her husband invite the Fairy of the Day to become godmother. After this fairy's malicious sister, the Fairy of the Night, suspiciously bestows the baby with strength, beauty, and intelligence, the so-called good Fairy of the Day surprisingly tells the king and queen that she will turn Jacinth into a poodle when he turns sixteen. From then on, she says, she will change him from poodle to young man and back again whenever she wishes, until he learns more about democratic governing and the treachery of his advisers and courtiers.

Indeed, after his father, the king of the ninnies, dies, and Jacinth, the new king, turns sixteen, the boy is advised by three ministers—that is, by three conniving nincompoops, who swindle him. As a dog, however, Jacinth is often present at secret, treacherous discussions, including a conversation that involves the beautiful daughter of one of the ministers, who pretends to love him but actually disdains him. After overhearing their conversations in his canine form, Jacinth in his human form exposes them and takes control of the government, a king who wants to abolish the monarchy. He calls upon the Fairy of the Day to help him invent a constitution that will promote the happiness of his people. The fairy advises him to grant freedom, work, and autonomy to his people, but Jacinth wants more consultation and views on democracy. The fairy takes him to visit Aristotle and Ahasuerus and young democracies such as Liberia and the United States. In the end, “he drew up a constitution in twelve articles, which . . . was exactly the same as the charter

of Liberia. In reality, it was the fortieth edition of the constitution of the United States, which is going through all the countries of the new world, and which will some day arrive in Europe, after having regenerated the Chinese.”¹² There is no “typical” happy ending to this strange fairy-tale novel, but it is clearly an optimistic work that resonates with a utopian spirit characteristic of Laboulaye’s fairy tales.



Laboulaye’s hopeful or utopian spirit distinguishes his work from others in the history of the literary fairy tale in France, if not in Europe. In the context of his times, he was unique. First, he was one of the few writers during the period, 1855–1880, who experimented with fairy tales of diverse types to mock the emperor and the government. Second, none of the fairy-tale writers were more seriously engaged in the politics of France, and none sought to confront the drastic measures taken by Louis Napoleon in the 1850s and 1860s by writing fairy tales in a popular weekly newspaper and then publishing them in books. Finally, no other French writers displayed a critical utopian ideology in their fairy-tale works that sustained central tenets of the liberal party as Laboulaye did. As Sudhir Hazareesingh points out in *From Subject to Citizen: The Second Empire and the Emergence of Modern French Democracy*, “there were two distinct clusters of liberals during the Second Empire, and on one side were the optimistic liberals, who saw themselves as the inheritors of the Enlightenment values of reason

and progress. Liberalism has a faith, in the belief of progress, as well as the conviction that freedom is valuable and beneficial, that truth can emerge from discussion, and that infinite perfectibility is the natural trend of humanity. This progressive liberalism was open, tolerant, trusting, and humane; it was a liberalism of hope. Its practitioners were men such as Prévost-Paradol, Laboulaye, and Ollivier, who were often not far removed from the values espoused by moderate republicans; like them, in particular, they rejected conservatism and believed in the possibility of incremental change and political accommodation.”¹³ This liberalism of hope is essential to understanding the viewpoints that Laboulaye took in his fairy tales, even when he was reluctant to write happy endings.

Fairy tales created and published later in France, during the rise of the Third Republic in the 1870s and turn of the twentieth century, were totally different from Laboulaye’s radical tales. In *Fairy Tales for the Disillusioned: Enchanted Stories from the French Decadent Tradition*, Gretchen Schultz and Lewis Seifert write, “Trends in literature during the second half of the [nineteenth] century would also seem to have been inhospitable to the genre of the fairy tale. . . . The fairy tale nonetheless thrived at the end of the century: one critic writes of an ‘invasion of fairies’ around 1880. This burst in production of fairy tales coincided with the decadent movement. . . . Beyond its literary and artistic manifestations, decadence could be called a philosophical position that took issue with the celebration of progress. . . . Although it was much more innovative and experimental than was the stylistic conservatism of

naturalist fiction, decadent literature followed a logic that was *politically* conservative.”¹⁴

Laboulaye was anything but conservative in his fairy tales, which preceded the work of the “decadents.” Above all, he was exceedingly moral. In his introduction to the Icelandic tales, which he published in *Nouveaux contes bleus*, he wrote: “In fairy tales imagination reigns with absolute domination. It is there that it establishes an ideal of justice, and it is through this process that the tales, no matter what one says, become a moral reading.—But they are not true, people say.—Certainly, but it is because of this that they are moral. Mothers, if you love your sons, do not let them study history too early. Let them dream while they are young. Do not shut their souls to the first breath of poetry. Nothing could be worse than a wise rationale child who only believes in what he can touch. Such precocious children at ten years of age will be fools by the time they turn twenty, or what is even worse, selfish egoists. Let them feel indignant by Bluebeard so that they will later still bear hatred of injustice and violence even when it does not affect them personally.”¹⁵

In the present collection I have selected sixteen unusually just and political tales, taken from those originally published in the *Journal des débats* and in his three fairy-tale collections. They are arranged in chronological order to show how they stem from the conflicts over liberty and justice in the period in which Laboulaye wrote them. In addition, these tales represent Laboulaye’s style and ideology, and reveal his effort to change the world through fairy tales, or at the very least, to mock and

critique the ruling elites of his times. Change for the better, he thought, was inevitable. Though he often noted that he was adapting a folk tale from some other country, he very rarely gave the exact source, and when he did, it is clear that his method of translation and adaptation heightened the political aspects of the tale.

“Briam the Fool,” for example, draws from Jon Arnason’s “The Story of Brjám” in *Icelandic Legends*.¹⁶ Arnason was one of the foremost Icelandic folklorists of the nineteenth century, and his version of “Briam the Fool”—he also published a variant of “The Little Gray Man”—was much more simplistic, terse, and conciliatory than Laboulaye’s adaptation. Arnason’s was much closer to the oral tradition, and his tale includes a princess, whom Brjám weds after he has taken revenge by causing the death of the king, after which he himself becomes king. Laboulaye’s protagonist Briam has much more agency than Brjám, and the narrator of the tale is deft and ironic. Most important, after the king and captain of the guards are killed, the narrator explains that Briam refuses the good queen’s offer to live in the castle. Instead, he returns to his mother and then disappears. His rejection of the aristocracy is the “happy end” of the tale. Indeed, in the 1860s, Laboulaye himself wanted very little to do with the French monarchy, and his tales strike a note for liberty, especially for the common people.

In “Zerbino the Bumpkin,” adapted from a Neapolitan collection Laboulaye does not name, he depicts the king and his prime minister as arrogant fools, more stupid than Zerbino, the simple woodcutter, who unwittingly is granted the power to

have all his wishes fulfilled after he acts kindly to a fairy. Without realizing it, he causes the king's daughter, Aleli, to fall in love with him. The king banishes Zerbino and his daughter from his kingdom with an irritating prime minister as company. Eventually, Zerbino and Aleli get rid of the prime minister and choose to abandon the pretentious court society for life on an enchanted island. It is quite possible that Laboulaye based his version of this tale on either Giovan Francesco Straparola's "Pietro the Fool" in *Le piacevoli notti* (The Pleasant Nights, 1550–53) or Giambattista Basile's "Peruonto" in *Lo cunto de le cunti* (The Tale of Tales, 1634).¹⁷ In these variants, the woodcutter gets angry at the princess and wishes her to become pregnant, and the king then sends the two of them, with their child, off to sea in a barrel. Thanks to the woodcutter's magic powers, however, they make their home on an island and eventually reconcile with the king. Laboulaye dismissed such reconciliation because of his more defiant political perspective. Instead of a comic tale about a miraculous pregnancy that baffles a princess and her father and causes their "King Lear" separation, Laboulaye's version focuses on the unjust, absolutist king and his opportunistic prime minister, and their conflict with a woodcutter, whose integrity makes the king and minister look like fools.

Laboulaye firmly believed that it was only through moral education and human compassion that politicians could bring about good government. This is the major theme in one of his longer fairy tales, and the title story of this collection, "Smack-Bam, or The Art of Governing Men," which more

than likely was based on amusing Italian stories such as Laura Gonzenbach's "Sorfarina" in *Sicilianische Märchen* (Sicilian Fairy Tales, 1870) and Giuseppe Pitre's "Catarina la Sapiienti" (Catarina the Wise) in *Fiabe, novelle e racconti popolari siciliani* (Popular Sicilian Fairy Tales, Novellas, and Stories, 1875). In the Sicilian versions, which were told and disseminated in the first half of the nineteenth century, a prince is sent to a school taught by a bright, attractive young woman from the middle class, who smacks him when he does not pay attention to her lessons. He vows revenge, weds her, and imprisons her when she refuses to apologize for the smack. He then decides to leave and spend time in Rome, Naples, and Genoa. Thanks to the help of a fairy or her father, depending on the version, the young woman sails to these cities and seduces him. When he wants to marry a princess, she still does not want to apologize, and she confronts him with his three children. The prince then realizes how much he really loves his wife. Although Laboulaye keeps many of the comic aspects of this tale type, he makes incisive political changes that expose the shallowness of the prince, who must be groomed to learn how to govern more seriously and to oppose corruption that almost leads to a coup d'état. Laboulaye weaves familiar themes throughout this tale: the aristocracy is shallow and basically seeks to gain wealth and power; the aristocracy needs to learn how to govern these tendencies to enhance the independence and liberty of the people; women are just as intelligent, if not more intelligent, than men and can govern wisely; there are not any conclusive

happy endings in life, only struggles that reveal the moral integrity of the people engaged in conflicts.

Laboulaye weaves philosophical and political proverbs and comments in his tales to critique the decadence of the French civilizing process while also suggesting that there is room for optimism. Some of his proverbs in “Zerbino the Bumpkin” are

There is nothing finer than glory, but it has its
disadvantages.

As the song says, after three refusals, good luck.

One tires of everything, even of happiness.

Proverbs in “The Eve of St. Mark” include

A woman does not like to have her heart and mind read.

Do not scratch others, if you don’t want to be flayed
alive.

To be loved is the privilege of youth.

Life is the dream of a shadow.

Sickness is the monopoly of humans.

Life is a dream that begins and ends in nothingness.

Such is the destiny of humans.

Laboulaye gives strong hints that the world would be a better place if women asserted themselves to determine their rights, or if they reigned instead of men. This can be seen in such tales as “The Young Woman Who Was Wiser Than the Emperor,” “The Lazy Spinner,” and “The Story about the Tailor and His Daughter.”

In his early introduction to *Contes bleus*, Laboulaye explained why fairy tales were just as valuable as political and philosophical tracts:

Where does this particular taste that people have for the marvelous come from? Is it that a lie is sweeter than truth? No, a fairy tale is not a lie. And the child who is amused by fairy tales or frightened by them is not deceived by them for an instant. The tales are the ideal, something truer than the truth of the world, the triumph of goodness, beauty, and justice. Innocence always wins. Often, it is true, that the victim spends thirty years in a dungeon with serpents. Sometimes the victim is even cut into pieces, but in the end things work out. The villain is always punished. It's not necessary to wait for a better world to punish crime and to crown virtue.

The secret of these marvelous tales can be found there! It is what constitutes the charm of the fairies. It is not gold or silver that spreads the tales everywhere but the magic wand which restores order on earth and at the same time annihilates those two enemies of human life, space and time. What does it matter that Griseldis suffers fifteen years of exile and desertion! In the final test, she will be young and kind as she was on the first day.¹⁸

Through suffering and struggle against injustice, many of the protagonists in Laboulaye's tales develop self-awareness, along with an awareness of the evil in the world. In "Fragolette," the

young maiden suffers abuse from a nasty witch until she realizes how love can save her. In “The Little Gray Man,” a small prince endures various trials until he wins a princess. But suffering and human compassion do not always bring about happiness.

Laboulaye was particularly critical of greedy people. Consequently, the comic tale “The Fairy Crawfish,” a tale that resembles the Grimms’ “The Fisherman’s Wife,” mocks a peasant’s wife who wants to become God. “The Prudent Farmer” portrays a man who resists greed and chooses wisdom, which enables him to avoid murder and achieve happiness. In these tales, learning to know the world through magic enables “good” people to succeed in their effort to live just lives.

Despite this “utopian” perspective, Laboulaye was disenchanted by the sociopolitical changes in France and was often skeptical about the possibility of humane change. In fact, his tales also show his great disappointment in the failure of human beings to establish societies in which everyone receives just treatment. In such stories as “Falsehood and Truth,” truth is mocked and buried, and in “The Eve of St. Mark,” a young boy dies after realizing how cruel humans are to one another. Only through tender love and kindness can people, who embody the moral imperative “Do unto others as you would have done unto you,” survive and find happiness.

Ironically, or perhaps, unfortunately, everything negative that Laboulaye depicted in his fairy tales—corrupt governments, war, exploitation of the poor, greed, murder—is familiar to twenty-first-century readers. Laboulaye was a sensitive and per-

ceptive critic of his times. He also was an ethical philosopher who foresaw the deeply rooted social and political problems that continue to haunt us. Strikingly, his ideas and tales remain relevant in our present conflicted times.

Notes

1. Laboulaye's significance as a politician is often recorded in histories of the Second Empire and Third Republic. See the bibliography. Recently there was an entire colloquium titled "Pensée Juridique et Politique d'Édouard Laboulaye (1811–1883)," dedicated to his work and influence at the Centre de Philosophie Juridique et Politique, Université de Cergy-Pontoise, on December 9, 2016. The talks from this conference will be published in the *Revue française d'histoire des idées politiques* in 2018.
2. John Bigelow, *Some Recollections of the Late Édouard Laboulaye* (New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1889): 17.
3. Published between 1789 and 1944, the *Journal des débats* played a leading role in influencing French culture and politics during Laboulaye's lifetime. In fact, Laboulaye contributed not only his fairy tales to this weekly but also his political essays, lectures, and book reviews.
4. Roger Price, *The French Second Empire: An Anatomy of Political Power* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001): 298.
5. Walter D. Gray, *Interpreting American Democracy in France: The Career of Édouard Laboulaye, 1811–1883* (Newark: University of Delaware Press, 1994): 32.
6. Édouard Laboulaye, introduction to *Contes allemands du temps passé*, trans. and ed. Félix Frank and E. Alsleben (Paris: Didier, 1869): vii.
7. The tale type is called "Best Friend, Worst Enemy," ATU 921B, and numerous variants can be found throughout the world. See Hans-Jörg

- Uther, *The Types of International Folktales*, vol. 1 (Helsinki: Academia Scientiarum Fennica, 2004): 547.
8. Édouard René Lefebvre-Laboulaye, *Abdallah; or The Four-Leaved Shamrock*, trans. Mary L. Booth (Chicago: A. C. McClurg, 1892): 17.
 9. Édouard Laboulaye, *Paris in America by Dr. René Lefebvre, Parisian*, trans. Mary L. Booth (New York: Scribner, 1863): 355.
 10. *Ibid.*, 363–64.
 11. *Ibid.*, 364.
 12. *The Spaniel-Prince*, trans. Mary E. Robinson (London: Simpkin, Marchall, 1895): 221.
 13. Sudhir Hazareesingh, *From Subject to Citizen: The Second Empire and the Emergence of Modern French Democracy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1998): 187–88.
 14. Gretchen Schultz and Lewis Seifert, eds., *Fairy Tales for the Disillusioned: Enchanted Stories from the French Decadent Tradition* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2016): xx–xxi.
 15. Édouard Laboulaye, *Nouveaux contes bleus* (Paris: Furne, Jouvet, 1868): 6–7.
 16. See Jon Arnason, *Icelandic Legends*, vol. 2, trans. George Powell and Eiríkr Magnússon (London: Longmans, Green, 1866).
 17. There are other similar tales that Laboulaye may have known such as Marie-Catherine d'Aulnoy's "Le Dauphin" (The Dolphin) in *Suite des contes nouveaux ou des fées à la mode* (1698), Christoph Martin Wieland's long poem "Pervonte" (1778–79), and Jacob and Wilhelm Grimm's "Hans Dumm" (Simple Hans) in *Kinder- und Hausmärchen* (1812).
 18. *Contes bleus* (Paris: Furne, Charpentier, 1863): 11.