

The Cult of Cinderella:

A Perennial Princess in Fourth-Wave Feminist America

By

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ABSTRACT

Cinderella can either be considered a beloved staple of film, fairy tales, and childhood or a character whose portrayal as a persecuted heroine makes her a keen target for feminist critique. Her continuous presence on screen and in print attests to her popularity, yet many new versions of “Cinderella” draw ire as the character is typically depicted in need of a (male) savior. Current trends are shifting Cinderella away from this damsel-in-distress role, ensuring her relevancy to modern audiences. This dissertation examines Cinderella through a feminist lens and explains her permanent placement in feminist discourse and popular culture.

Chapter One examines the history and evolution of “Cinderella” and variants of the Cinderella-tale as defined by Marian Roalfe Cox and classified by the Aarne-Thompson-Uther tale type index. This chapter scrutinizes the best-known variants of “Cinderella,” as written by Giambattista Basile, Charles Perrault, and the Brothers Grimm and discusses how the popularity of these three tales helped cement Cinderella’s continued relevance in both academic study and popular culture. Chapter Two examines feminist criticism of “Cinderella” and explores the shifts in that criticism through the second, third, and fourth waves of this movement. The changing focus of feminist critique towards this tale is reflected in modern retellings, which present a heroine with more depth and greater agency. Chapter Three examines these modern retellings, focusing on trends which shape the new “Cinderella,” presenting the tale through the lens of gender inclusivity, sex positivity and young adult expectations. This chapter also follows a trend which presents the tale from the perspective of previously supporting characters, such as the stepmother or the prince. Chapter Four follows Cinderella’s

representation in film over the past seventy years, both as retellings which are true to the traditional fairy tale version or as retellings which present a Cinderella-story. Several films are examined through the lens of feminist criticism in an attempt to determine if that criticism has an effect on how Cinderella is presented in future adaptations. Chapter Five discusses the effect that Walt Disney's *Cinderella* has had on how Americans view Cinderella, how this character has been monetized, and how she launched the idea of happily-ever-after, via a Disney wedding. This chapter examines feminist criticism which claims that viewing this film or engaging with Cinderella through games or make-believe will foster gendered behavior in children. Chapter Six discusses Cinderella's relevance in popular culture, focusing on digital platforms which allow both academics and non-academics to offer defense or vitriol towards this princess. The continued relevance of Cinderella is demonstrated through her presentation in various pop culture formats, which offer the tale with changes that reflect current social ideology and shifts in feminist thinking.

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Introduction

“Cinderella” is one of the most familiar fairy tales; there are over 350 variants of this story, which crosses cultural, generational, and geographical boundaries. It has been thoroughly indexed, catalogued, and examined from various angles by major folklore and literary scholars, yet no one has examined the story on a broad scale, following the continuum of the story from early oral tales to current print and film retellings and popular culture responses and references to the story. For the purposes of this project I will discuss the fairy tale “Cinderella,” Cinderella retellings (which I define as a story or film which adopts several easily recognizable elements of “Cinderella” while not remaining faithful to the entire plot), and lastly the Cinderella-stories. The Cinderella-story is broadly understood to mean a rags-to-riches tale, or a story about someone who overcomes insurmountable odds to achieve success (for example, we hear this term every spring during March Madness when a basketball team comes from behind to secure a victory over the team which was greatly favored to win). We also understand the term “a Cinderella-story” as a popular culture reference which means, in very general terms, a trope in which “poor girl unexpectedly marries rich man and becomes a metaphorical princess.”

The messages in “Cinderella” can be insidious: this story may plant ideas into the heads of children about women’s roles in society, namely that a woman belongs in the kitchen where she can be abused by the household, and that it is a man’s job to seek out the prettiest girl (with the fanciest clothes) and claim her for his own. It is possible that in a child’s formative years the Cinderella tale can imprint certain fixed ideas about what is acceptable behavior between the sexes: that a man can have whichever woman he

chooses and that he does not have to do anything special to convince this woman of his authority to choose; he merely must *decree* it. If a child sees that the prince, who desires Cinderella solely because of her beauty and finery, can go about the kingdom snatching up any woman he wishes, with no consequence other than the implied happily ever after, does this not impress upon that child the desire to imitate the prince and take what belongs to him? “Cinderella” teaches that boys can exert their power and take what they want and that girls should be sweet, beautiful, and submissive, as discussed in Danielle Paquette’s article “The Unexpected Way Disney Princesses Affect Little Boys.” As the struggle for gender equality and the fight against sexual harassment continues well into the twenty-first century, it is possible to locate the roots of both of these injustices in the pages of our well-worn fairy tale books and the Cinderella films that Hollywood continues to churn out?

Even today, post #MeToo and post-post-post-feminism, women still cannot get enough of the fairy tale princess story which reminds generation after generation that beauty and meekness are the only female currencies necessary for success, and which offers men the storybook validation that women need rescuing (or capturing, depending on which book or movie we are absorbing). It is no secret that feminists and feminist scholars abhor this tale; the book *Cinderella Ate My Daughter* is a hilarious memoir of a feminist mother who tried (and failed) to keep all things pink and princessy away from her daughter. Radical feminist Andrea Dworkin delves deep into the power that fairy tales have over children’s understanding of gender roles in her book *Woman Hating*, and she gives no quarter to Cinderella or her family members. In her book *The Cinderella Complex: Women’s Hidden Fear of Independence*, Collette Dowling ascribes numerous

failures in the lives of women to their belief, instilled from childhood, that either a magical being or a strong external presence (husband, boss, prince) will alleviate their need to take control of their own lives: “Like Cinderella, women today are still waiting for something external to transform their lives” (31). As recent as 2019, in the book *Discussing Disney*, Kodi Maier examines the continued fascination with becoming a fairy tale princess bride, regardless of the fact that this “infantilizes the bride, urging her to indulge in her deepest childhood fantasies” (182).

Early feminist scholarship by Marcia Rowe, Marcia Lieberman, and Marlene Boskind-Lodahl was written at the crest of second wave feminism.¹ Lieberman’s article “Some Day My Prince Will Come” was an attack on an article published by Alison Lurie in *The New York Review of Books* in which Lurie claimed that radical feminists would surely approve of traditional fairy tales; Lieberman disagreed in no uncertain terms. Boskind-Lodahl compares the Grimms’ stepsisters and their willingness to mutilate themselves for a husband and a crown to young women affected with eating disorders.

Third wave² feminist critique and scholarship was provided by Angela Leeper and Ealasaid Munro. Leeper’s article, “Beyond Fairy Godmothers and Glass Slippers: A

¹ Second wave feminism gained traction with the publication of such books as *The Feminine Mystique* by Betty Friedan in 1963 and *The Female Eunuch* by Germain Greer in 1970. *The Second Sex* by Simone de Beauvoir, while published much earlier in 1949, was also instrumental for second wave thinking. Several second wave platforms were pay equality, education equality, and a woman’s right to control her reproductive health. The second wave, while not marked by exact start and end dates, is usually defined as a time period from the early 1960s through the mid-1980s.

² Third wave feminism is generally considered to be the period from the early 1990’s to the mid 2000’s. This period is concerned with the political reform, coming on the heels of Anita Hill’s testimony against Clarence Thomas. Several third wave platforms were ending violence against women, the “micropolitics” of gender equality and the broadening of the “feminist” ideology to include women from all socioeconomic backgrounds.

Cavanaugh, Lynn. “A Brief History: The Four Waves of Feminism.” *Progressivewomenleadership.com*, 28 Jun, 2018.

Look at Multicultural Variants of Cinderella,” focuses on newly published multicultural versions of the Cinderella fairy tale (such as *Domitilia* by Jewell Coburn and *The Gift of the Crocodile* by Judy Sierra), explaining the need for inclusivity in the classroom while encouraging children to explore folk and fairy tales with characters who are more similar to them than a white European member of the bourgeoisie. While the exact definition of fourth wave feminism is still in flux, scholars such as Dr. Martha Rampton, Director of the Center for Gender Equity at Pacific University in Oregon, note that the beginning of this period appears to coincide with the creation of the #MeToo movement. Munro provides insight into some areas of concern for this phase of the movement: “several key issues animate contemporary feminism. Intersectionality and the exclusionary nature of mainstream feminism remain a real concern. The political potential of the fourth wave centers around giving voice to those women still marginalized by the mainstream” (24). Karyln Crowley, John Pennington, and Shin-ying Huang have continued the feminist discourse surrounding “Cinderella” into this new wave, exploring social and emotional relationships with the story as it firmly marches past midnight into yet another century. One of the questions that will drive this dissertation is how, or to what extent, feminist criticism of “Cinderella” has changed over the decades: are the concerns voiced by third and now fourth-wave critics the same as those expressed by Rowe and others in the 1970s and 1980s? Has the impact this story has on its audiences changed with the times? If not, why not? Has feminist criticism of the classic tale had any effect on how modern-day authors and filmmakers adapt the story for modern audiences?

Exploring the feminist criticism of “Cinderella” necessitates the study of gender roles which this tale promulgates among children. In her book *From Mouse to Mermaid*,

Elizabeth Bell discusses the pains Disney animators take when drawing their heroines, giving little girls unachievable standards to try to emulate, and Sarah Coyne's 2016 article in *Child Development* magazine furthers that argument. The intersection of feminist study and gender role study seems to be aligned with one of the main tenets of fourth wave feminism, which is the acceptance of broadening gender roles. How can we calculate the effects fairy tales have on children and their perception of societal expectations? In her article "Some Day My Prince Will Come," Marcia Lieberman states: "we must consider the possibility that the classical attributes of 'femininity' found in these stories are in fact imprinted in children and reinforced by the stories themselves. Analyses of the influence of the most popular children's literature may give us an insight into some of the origins of psycho-sexual identity" (395).

This present study is an examination into our prolonged fascination with this antiquated tale. I begin with a study of the history of the Cinderella fairy tale in Europe, beginning with its roots in Italy, France and Germany. I analyze the changes in feminist and academic critique of "Cinderella" and this story's effects on gender role comprehension in children. I also explore presentations of the "new" Cinderella – how retellings in print and media have adapted to shifts in feminist theory. Finally, I examine the Disney wedding complex, its marketing of Cinderella and where Cinderella falls in today's popular culture spectrum. My ultimate goal is to understand Cinderella's continual relevance in areas of feminist study and popular culture.

The "new," and I argue, pro-feminist, Cinderella who is presented in updated books and film cannot be appreciated fully without an understanding of her centuries-old forebearers. Though Perrault's is the most pervasive tale, as it is the one upon which the

Walt Disney studios purportedly based their 1950 film of the same name, the history of the Cinderella tale, that of a put-upon daughter who is abused at the hands of her stepfamily and is then rescued through the aid of heavenly or magical intervention, is not confined to northern Europe; versions of this story exist in many variations from societies around the globe. Her story is universal: in China, Yeh-hsien is aided by a magical fish; Scotland's Rushen Coatie is aided by a little red calf; Russia's Vasilisa the Beautiful is aided by an enchanted doll, and Vietnam's Tam is aided by the Goddess of Mercy. In all these stories, she is vulnerable but receives magical aid from a vast pantheon of mother-substitutes, once she has demonstrated the appropriate desirable feminine attributes of kindness, patience, obedience, and so on often enough to prove her worthy of reward. The sheer span of this tale's geographical and cultural identities offers the first step in understanding the relevance of its continued study: just as immigrants bring their own traditions and cuisine to America, so too they bring their versions of fairy tales which we can see morphing into the collective and continuous reinvention of this tale.³ This story is absolutely ingrained in the collective worldwide dialogue; by tracing its origins through its most recent iterations we can understand just how pervasive Cinderella is in our natural lexicon and how she, above all her fairy tale sisters, continues to be relevant well into the twenty-first century.

Retelling Cinderella's story for a modern audience is a trend which has been around for some time. The "traditional" Cinderella-based books (those that followed either the Grimms' or Perrault's tale fairly closely) have given way to new versions

³ A recent Cinderella-story set in Russia yet written and published in America, Katherine Arden's 2017 *The Bear and the Nightingale* shares many similarities with tale 129 in Cox's book, "The Orphan and the Fairy," which Cox notes originated in Nowogródek, a town in Belarus.

wherein the Cinderella character does not wait for the prince, does not need a prince, or ends up with another princess. She is no longer meek: she is a huntress, a fighter, a robot. A recent novel by Marissa Meyer portrays Cinderella as a cyborg in a post-WWIV world that is preparing to fend off an attack from the moon. I will focus on trends and changes in the Cinderella retellings and will follow the trajectory of positive feminist influences on the Cinderella character to see when (and if) she stopped being portrayed as a photocopy of Grimms' and Perrault's princess (gentle, beautiful, and waiting for a savior) and starts to become a heroine in her own right.

Modern retellings seem to have made one significant change in motif: the heroine is still typically orphaned and seemingly persecuted by members of her stepfamily, and she still receives some form of magical help, but she is not always rescued by the prince. Today's Cinderella, presented for a young adult audience by authors such as Malinda Lo and Sarah Pinborough, is focused on her own self-preservation and does not stay at home bemoaning her ill treatment as did the well-bred Cinderella of days past. This revision is more likely to resonate with young women today, who (while still likely to want love and security) have a much greater capacity for breaking free of unpleasant situations and securing a future on their own. It appears that the years of negative feminist attention which this tale has received have led these authors to represent Cinderella in a way which is more in keeping with several of the tenets of fourth-wave feminism: sex positivity and acceptance of and support for gender inclusivity.

It might appear the glass slipper and pumpkin coach are relics of the past, yet new film versions that retell the "romantic," traditional version reappear every decade or so. The non-traditional Cinderella films, those with protagonists such as Vivian, the hooker-

with-a-heart-of-gold from *Pretty Woman*, or Marisa, the single mother/hotel maid with big dreams in *Maid in Manhattan*, update the story settings and reduce the leading ladies' reliance on magical helpers, but the Cinderella aspect is very clear. Even the 2008 film version of *Sex in the City* shows main character Carrie reading “Cinderella” to a friend’s daughter and telling her that real life doesn’t always happen in a fairy tale manner, only for the movie to end with Carrie’s fiancé on one knee, placing an expensive shoe on her foot in lieu of an engagement ring, literally using the term “happily ever after.” A study recently prepared by Rosalind Sibielski examines the “revisionist, popular media versions of ‘Cinderella’ in order to explore the ways in which they reshape the fairy tale in light of, and in reaction to, American cultural responses to late twentieth and early twenty-first century feminist activism” (585). The rags to riches, poor girl swept off her feet by a rich (and obviously handsome) man trope in filmmaking is standard fare for Hollywood: this project will follow storyline’s evolution over the last several decades and also consider what aspects of the original fairy tales can be seen in the Cinderella-story films.

Disney’s *Cinderella* is America’s Cinderella. So much feminist criticism of Cinderella is directed at the Disney film, its heroine, and the Disney Princess industry which she helms, that it must be considered separately from the larger body of feminist criticism towards this fairy tale. As noted previously, “Cinderella” ends with a wedding. Marcia Lieberman argues that “millions of women must surely have formed their psychosexual self-concepts, and their ideas of what they could or could not accomplish, what sort of behavior would be rewarded, and of the nature of reward itself, in part from their favorite fairy tales. These stories have been made the repositories of the dreams, hopes, and fantasies of generations of girls” (385). The 1950 Disney film ends with Cinderella

and her prince emerging from the palace, tripping lightly down the long flight of stairs on which she lost the shoe which led to her reunion with her now husband; amazingly enough, she steps out of the shoe again. The happy couple set off for parts unknown in a gilded coach, and much to the delight of her mouse coterie, they engage in a kiss as the choir swells into song and the end page of the story book reads, “. . . and they lived happily ever after.” In their book *Cinderella Dreams: The Allure of the Lavish Wedding*, authors Elizabeth Pleck and Cele Otnes devote a chapter to the advent of lavish weddings in America and the part they feel Disney’s Cinderella plays in this phenomenon. They claim that “however one interprets the meaning of the fairy tale, it was central both to romantic consumer culture and to advertising. The tale of Cinderella came first, then the idea of romantic love, and after that, a consumer revolution in part fueled by the belief in romantic love” (46).

Lieberman presents the feminist perspective of the fairy tale marriage thusly: “marriage is the fulcrum and major event of nearly every fairy tale; it is the reward for girls, or sometimes their punishment” (386). When grown women decide they want to have their fairy tale wedding and they use Cinderella as their inspiration, they are not remembering the more gruesome aspects of this character’s life but rather the idealized wedding at the end of the story. I posit that *Cinderella* built the Disney wedding industry, and will discuss the women whose millions of dollars keep it afloat, and their association (or dissociation) with feminist choices. While it is certainly one of the easiest corporate targets for the slings and arrows of feminist ire, it is still necessary to objectively examine Disney’s place in the center of America’s wedding landscape in an attempt to determine

if the Cinderella princess wedding is a mere moment of joyful escapism or an actual (but possibly unintentional) anti-feminist gesture.

What can be concluded about Cinderella's place in fourth wave feminist America? Is she still a viable candidate for feminist studies, in view of the myriad ways in which she has been (and is being) reimagined and re-envisioned? Perhaps, considering the labels of the fourth wave offered by online commentator Constance Grady, "queer, sex-positive, trans-inclusive, body-positive, and digitally driven," the new Cinderella will be embraced as a feminist heroine.

The academic conversation about feminism and Cinderella is alive and well. Numerous articles and scholarly books that focus on the princess fantasy and its relationship with feminist reality have been published in the last ten years, all continuing and refreshing the argument which began with Marcia Lieberman and Alison Lurie in the early 1970s. Each new iteration of the Cinderella tale, in film, book and real-life (much has been written about Kate Middleton⁴ and Meghan Markle⁵ as modern-day Cinderellas), brings a fresh burst of discussion and another chapter in the love/hate saga that academia and the feminist community have with this beleaguered princess.

The Disney Cinderella of years past has been easily marketed to a white, upper-middle class audience; Tiana, Jasmine, Pocahontas, and Mulan do not even come close to their white princess sisters in terms of trinket opportunities. Sony's latest Cinderella will be played by Camila Cabello, a Cuban-American, surely a boon to fourth-wave feminist

⁴ Barsamian, Edward. "Kate Middleton Has a Cinderella Fashion Moment in Alexander McQueen." *Vogue.com*, Oct 23, 2018.

⁵ Fuentes, Tamara. "Prince Harry and Meghan Markle Had a Literal Cinderella Moment and It Was Beautiful." *HarpersBazaar.com*, May 19, 2018.

thinkers in terms of inclusivity (although one doubts this will make a dent in Disney's loyal Cinderella spenders). The Cinderella tale crosses continents, centuries, languages, and lately, sex and gender boundaries. Despite enduring decades of feminist ire, this princess appears more popular (and profitable) than ever; I will attempt to see where this perennial princess fits (or doesn't fit) within the American pop culture landscape.

Chapter One

The History and Evolution of “Cinderella”

“Fair maid and true, no blood in her shoe”⁶

Who exactly is Cinderella? Is she the daughter of a wealthy man, relegated to the fireside and covered in ashes? Is she a take-charge young woman, willing to go to any lengths to achieve her own ends? Is she a lucky animated princess, befriended by mice and beloved by little girls everywhere? There are as many answers to this question as there are authors with imagination, and her story seems to have its own unique version in countries all over the world. To understand the relevance of the fairy tale commonly titled “Cinderella,” the character Cinderella, and the Cinderella-story⁷ in both twenty-first century American feminist discourse and popular culture, one must first know the history of this tale and its title character. This chapter will provide the historical context necessary to understand decades of feminist and academic critique. Cinderella’s story spans centuries and continents in a surprisingly vast and diverse array.

Cinderella’s story seems universal: the child of a dead mother and an uninterested father is ill-treated by the second wife and that wife’s natural children. The fairy tale

⁶ “Cinderella.” Grimm, Jacob and Wilhelm. *The Annotated Brothers Grimm*, edited by Maria Tatar. W. W. Norton and Company, 2004.

⁷ The phrase “Cinderella-story,” so common in the American lexicon, is born from the magical intervention which the down-on-her-luck heroine receives and is often applied to any rags-to-riches success story. Any woman who makes a seemingly impossible marriage (regardless of her background) can be aligned with the fairy tale heroine — even Oscar-winning actress Grace Kelly’s romance with Prince Rainer of Monaco was dubbed a Cinderella-story. In the world of sports this phrase is part “magical intervention” (or luck, in today’s thinking) and the rest is attributed to the team or athlete’s ability to seize a victory which seemed impossible. For the purpose of this study, the term Cinderella-story will be used to describe a retelling which, while not faithful to the traditional “Cinderella” storyline, bears enough similarities that a reader can recognize Cinderella themes throughout the piece.

element arrives with the appearance of heavenly or magical helpers, and the child, due to her goodness and faithful heart, is raised to a position of the highest social status. How has Cinderella's tale, or even her mere name, come to be perhaps the most recognizable name in fairy tales? Part of the answer lies in the tale's longevity, reaching back centuries. Perhaps Ruth Bottigheimer says it best:

Modern girls incarnating Cinderella do not know that their Cinderella is the product of a nearly four-century-long evolution that began with a very different heroine, one who was fully characterized and singularly complex. In this form Cinderella came to life in early 17th century Naples but subsequent Cinderella figures were envisioned in increasingly generalized terms until Walt Disney created Cinderella as an Everygirl figure, a princess of and for the people ("The People's Princess," 27).

The seminal work which collected and catalogued hundreds⁸ of "Cinderella" variants found in Europe, Asia, Africa, and America from medieval times through the 1880s was produced by Marian Roalfe Cox in 1893, at the behest of the Folk-Lore Society of Britain.⁹ A few decades later, the ATU index¹⁰ codified those tales into four distinct categories: "Cinderella"/The Persecuted Heroine (AT 510A); "The Dress of Gold, of Silver and of Stars"/Unnatural Love (AT 510B); "One-Eye, Two-Eyes, Three-Eyes"/Indeterminate (AT 511) and "The Little Red Ox"/Hero Tales (AT 511A). The Persecuted Heroine is the Cinderella with whom we are most familiar: she is the orphan

⁸ Three hundred and forty-five, to be exact.

⁹ In his introduction to Cox's work, vice-president of the Folk-Lore Society Andrew Lang wrote: "the fundamental idea of 'Cinderella', I suppose, is this: a person in a mean or obscure position, by means of supernatural assistance, makes a good marriage" (vii). As this study progresses, I will show how Lang's definition — while appropriate for folk- and fairy tale versions of "Cinderella" at the time — has been reenvisioned by new authors and artists in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries.

¹⁰ The Aarne-Thompson-Uther Tale Type Index is an alpha-numeric system which lists thousands of fairy and folk tales into related categories and groupings. Created in 1910 by Finnish folklorist Antii Aarne, expanded upon in 1928 by American folklorist Stith Thompson, and further revised in 2004 by German folklorist Hans-Jörg Uther, this system groups tales according to a central motif or other similar variants.

(or semi-orphan) who is mistreated at the hands of her stepfamily but who bears all this bravely and whose various attributes, be they superficial (beauty) or internal (kindness), eventually win the heart of the prince with the aid of magical interference.

The Unnatural Love tale (written by Perrault as “Donkeyskin” and by the Brothers Grimm as “Allerleirauh,” among others) presents Cinderella’s mother as a queen or at least a beautiful wife, who on her deathbed wrangles a promise from her devoted husband that he will not marry again unless he can find someone either more beautiful or accomplished than she or who can wear an item of hers (a ring or perhaps a shoe). Of course, the only girl in the kingdom who is more beautiful than the queen is her daughter and the only one whose finger is slender enough to wear the dead woman’s ring (and therefore the only woman fit to marry Cinderella’s father) is the Cinderella figure. Typically, shocked and grieved by her father’s indecent proposal, the girl disguises herself and runs away, finding work as a scullery maid or lowly servant in a noble house where she wins the prince’s affection by baking him a treat with a piece of jewelry baked inside to announce herself as the true recipient of his affections.

While Cox’s book is a catalog and not a collection of entire stories, recent works have been published with a similar goal — to collect numerous variants of “Cinderella” and offer them to new audiences for consideration and comparison. Paul Fleischman’s *Glass Slipper, Gold Sandal: A Worldwide Cinderella* (2007) is an impressive picture book which integrates the Cinderella tale from numerous countries into one fluid story; Germany and France are represented as may be expected, but also Laos, Zimbabwe, the West Indies, Mexico, Iran; even the Appalachian version of this fairy tale appears in its pages. Fleischman and illustrator Julie Paschkis skillfully weave the differences of the

multicultural tales together so that children (and adults) can appreciate the many similarities (poor Cinderella cannot seem to shake her evil stepmother) and differences (for example, shoes of glass, straw or gold, or in India, diamond anklets) in this continent-crossing princess's story. A.S. Byatt, in the introduction to *The Annotated Brothers Grimm* edited by Maria Tatar, also comments on the numerous cultural variants of the Cinderella tale, some more grisly than others. Byatt notes that the Filipino version of the tale ends with the "stepmother and stepsister pulled apart by wild horses" while in the Indonesian version, "Cinderella forces her stepsister into a cauldron of boiling water, then has the body cut up, pickled, and sent to the girl's mother as 'salt meat' for her next meal" (viii). These works show that as diverse as all these countries and their cultures might be, the Cinderella tale is a work firmly ensconced in the global fairy tale canon. More importantly, this information is being offered outside of strictly academic texts, allowing for an understanding and appreciation of the tale's history and range by a broader audience.

In her recent book *The Heroine with 1,001 Faces*, fairy tale scholar Maria Tatar argues for a broader scope of study into Cinderella's story. She claims that this character's importance is more far-reaching than just the genre of fairy tales, pointing to literary discussions of this princess which far pre-date her Disney renaissance:

There are two powerful gendered plots in our culture. F. Scott Fitzgerald captured them in his pronouncement that 'the two basic stories *of all time* [italics mine] are Cinderella and Jack the Giant Killer—the charm of women and the courage of men¹¹.' 'Charm' is, of course, a loaded term ... but the author of *The Great Gatsby* was not invested in nuances when he drew a sharp distinction between

¹¹ As this study continues, I will discuss the premise of Fitzgerald's idea, that women succeed through their charm (which is largely associated with their beauty) while men need only be courageous. Feminist critique rightly attacks this sentiment and I will show how new iterations of this heroine are foregoing her historical charm for more egalitarian courage.

innocent persecuted heroines and giant slayers. (25)

Cinderella has certainly moved beyond the limited sphere of fairy tales and she is well on her way to shrugging off the mantle of the persecuted heroine under which she has labored for ages. Her transition to empowered heroine, which has only come about in recent decades, could easily be seen as reaction to fourth-wave feminist thought, yet by studying the history of this tale we can track the slow evolution which leads to her updated representations today.

While this present study focuses on the Western European variants of “Cinderella,” some folk and fairy tale scholars claim that the first Cinderella tale was written by Greek historian Strabo in the first century B.C.E. The tale is of Rhodopis, an Egyptian girl who was bathing in the Nile when an eagle swooped down, snatched up one of her sandals and carried it away to Memphis. The eagle dropped the sandal in the pharaoh’s lap, who then decreed he must have the woman who fit the beautiful sandal. A search for the owner of the sandal ensued; Rhodopis was found, brought to Memphis, and married to the pharaoh. This very short tale might have *some* elements which mirror the more familiar Cinderella tales, such as magical intervention (the eagle, similar to Ashputtel’s doves) and the sandal which could only fit one woman in the whole kingdom, yet it is missing many others, mainly the strife Cinderella suffers before she is rescued by the prince and the evil aspect of her step-family. Yet wouldn’t a reader who came across this one sentence, “the king, stirred both by the beautiful shape of the sandal and by the strangeness of the occurrence, sent men in all directions into the country in quest of the woman who wore the sandal” (Tatar, *Classic Fairy Tales*, 146), immediately associate Rhodopis with “Cinderella”?

The Brothers Grimm mention Strabo in their 1812 version of *Kinder- und Hausmärchen* as “one of the historical ‘witnesses’ to the general existence and usefulness of fables and children’s stories” (Murphy 85), yet for some reason they fail to mention “Rhodopis” specifically. They acknowledge but dismiss their French predecessors’ versions thus: “Perrault’s ‘*Cendrillon* or the Little Glass Slipper’ does not belong among his better told tales; the countess d’Aulnoy’s *Finette Cendron*, despite being even worse from the point of view of form, has many particular details of its own that are richer.” They seemingly approve of Basile; “we will note what must be said about the incomparably more beautiful *Cennerentola*” (Murphy 87). It is quite interesting that the Brothers Grimm favor Ashputtel’s Italian counterpart over her French, considering that in Basile’s “Gatta Cenerentola,” Cinderella is quite active in determining her fate — openly murdering her stepmother, which allows her *second* stepmother and six (heretofore unknown) stepsisters to turn her into the familiar drudge. The Grimms’ tales are far more violent as a whole than Perrault’s (numerous characters meet their ends in a violent fashion, being chopped into bits, forced to dance to their death, torn in half, or worse), yet their Cinderella is the meekest of the three. Similar to Perrault, however (and unlike Grimms), Basile’s tale has a moral, something along the lines of “whatever happens, it is as fate wills it,” and his heroine, unlike her French and German sisters, was very willing to seize every opportunity to improve her circumstances, setting the stage for today’s Cinderellas, who unabashedly take charge of their own destinies. A deeper dive into the three Cinderellas who established the Cinderella tradition in western Europe can help the reader appreciate how Cinderella has evolved over the centuries.

Bawdy Basile

Giambattista Basile's tale "The Cinderella Cat" was included in his collection *Il Pentamerone*, published in the early seventeenth century, and is the first European version of the tale to appear in writing. The heroine is named Zezolla, and like most of her later sisters, she chafes under the ill treatment of the woman her widowed father has taken as his second wife. Zezolla complains of her sorrows to her governess, wishing aloud that the governess was her stepmother instead, prompting the governess to suggest that Zezolla should murder her stepmother to hasten this situation along. Zezolla promptly agrees to this plot, does away with her ill-fated stepmother, and quickly convinces her father to marry the governess. Apropos of nothing, on the day of the wedding a magic dove appears beside Zezolla and says, "If you ever desire anything, send to ask for it from the dove of the fairies of the Island of Sardinia, and you will at once have it" (Basile 57). Of course, true to form, Zezolla's new stepmother turns out to be worse than the last, producing not two but six stepsisters to torment her, quickly relegating her "from the royal chamber to the kitchen and from a canopied bed to the hearth [...] not only did her status change, but her name as well, for she was no longer called Zezolla but Cinderella Cat" (58). Similar to Grimms' tale, the father goes on a trip and brings the girl back a magic tree (gifted to her by the Sardinian fairies, no less), which she uses to dress herself to attend a feast, where naturally she catches the eye of the king. The king's servants cannot discover her identity, and on the third feast day, at which Cinderella "was magnificently dressed and placed in a golden coach accompanied by so many servants that she looked like a whore arrested in the public promenade" (60), she finally drops a shoe while fleeing the scene, which leads to her reunion with the king

and her ascension to the throne. Her stepsisters are wild with rage and envy, yet they bow to the dictates of fate as they say amongst themselves that “he is mad who would oppose the stars” (62).

Basile’s Cinderella is no sweet, charitable, inactive miss.¹² She is ill-tempered (constantly complaining about her stepmother); she kills her stepmother,¹³ thereby setting the wheels in motion which lead to her fall from noble status to kitchen wench; and she anticipates that she will be chased while fleeing the feast, so she carries coins and jewels to throw in her pursuer’s path. She could be a model for many of today’s literary and screen heroines: she is selfish, clever, able to think one step ahead and ultimately (albeit with a *deus ex machina* tree which is full of fairies who apparently all went to esthetician or fashion school) hiding an ace up her sleeve which she knows will help her glam her way out of her current drudgery. Additionally, Basile (whose tales were *not* written for children, even though the translated title of his work is *The Tale of Tales or Entertainment for Little Ones*) peppers his work throughout with sexual puns and innuendo – where else do we see our virginal heroine compared to a whore or read of the king lavishing kisses upon the lost shoe in what today would be a scene clearly made for a fetish movie? Finally, Basile’s heroine, as noted before, is a *murderer*, yet she rises to the level of queen at the end of the tale, because the fates have willed it should be so. Most fairy tales end with the “evil” character suffering a punishment and the “good” character receiving a reward; Basile’s Cinderella is presented as neither good nor evil, but

¹² In *Why Fairy Tales Stick* Jack Zipes plainly asserts that Basile’s Cinderella is far from passive, as “she did not hesitate to kill to get what she wanted” (112).

¹³ Not content with daydreaming about ill-luck befalling her stepmother, Cinderella actively ends the woman’s life and does so on her own, with only the slightest nudge from her governess.

rather as a complex young woman whose actions are governed by her own desires and her ending resolved by fate – again making her a model for heroines of the twenty-first century.

Proper Perrault

Charles Perrault's heroine's story was also not written for young children, but rather as part of his collection *Histoire ou Contes du Temps Passe Avec des Moralites* (Stories or Tales of Bygone Times with their Morals) published in the late seventeenth century during the reign of Louis XIV. These tales were written to be shared in upper class salons, as is obvious when one considers the underlying themes which Perrault presents: arranged marriages, filial loyalty, and the importance of grace, beauty and fashionable attire (all highly prized during the reign of the Sun King). As fairy tale reteller Ellen Datlow observes:

Few people today recounting the tale of 'Cinderella' for their children realize that only parts of the story come from the anonymous folk tradition (from the pan-cultural variants of the 'Ash Girl' tracing back to ancient China). Some of 'Cinderella's' most familiar elements (the fairy godmother, the midnight warning) were the invention of a single man, a seventeenth-century French civil servant by the name of Charles Perrault. His version of the tale [...] so delighted its audience of French aristocrats, and so entranced successive generations of listeners, that it remains the best-known version of the Ash Girl tale in Western culture. (7)

Similar to Basile, Perrault's tales were not intended for a child audience. While writing *Histoire ou Contes du Temps Passe Avec des Moralites* he "embarked on the ambitious project of transforming several popular folk tales with all their superstitious beliefs and magic into moralistic tales that would appeal largely to adults" (Zipes, *Why Fairy Tales*, 72). Also akin to Basile's *Il Pentamerone*, Perrault's tales end with a plainly

spelled out moral, which was meant to reiterate the tale's lesson for its intended audience: marriageable girls of good family. For "Cinderella," Perrault offers the following as a moral:

Though beauty's a treasure that women desire,
For everyone's fond of a pretty young face,
Cinderella had gifts with a value much higher,
As she showed in behaving with charm and with grace ...
You have a great advantage, I admit,
If you receive from Heaven at your birth
Good breeding, courage, sense, a ready wit,
And other things of comparable worth;
But that is not enough, unless you know
How best to use such precious gifts: you need
A godfather or godmother to show
What you must do in order to succeed. (140)

From Perrault comes the Cinderella whose main characteristics are perseverance, patience, charity, and beauty; this is the Cinderella who embraces the stepsisters who were so mean to her, so that all three girls may have a "happy" ending. This is the Cinderella who shows how a proper young lady behaves, with patience and reticence, and only the smallest spark of personality. Similar to Basile, Perrault uses fairy magic to transform Cinderella from a kitchen maid to an elegantly dressed lady: however, instead of a tree offering forth gifts of clothing and transport, Perrault utilizes the personage of a godmother — an illustrious individual for young ladies of the time, whose influence and connections were sought to ensure a good marriage — and simply ensures that his readers know that the godmother is magical. Perrault's is the version of the tale with which most American audiences will be familiar as it is the version most closely mirrored in Walt Disney's 1950 animated film. Similar to the transformation scene in Disney's film, in this tale the coach is magicked from a pumpkin, and the horses, footmen, and driver are

transformed from creatures in the garden (mice, rats and lizards in Perrault's tale; mice, dogs and horses in Disney's film).

Perrault's Cinderella is so kind and good that when presented with the opportunity of spoiling her stepsisters' hair and clothing before the ball, her better nature prevails: "Anyone but Cinderella would have done their hair all askew, but she was good by nature and did it very nicely" (131). She shows a little spunk by teasing her sisters about the events of the ball afterward, but other than this, she is satisfied to wait until she is recognized as being the mystery girl the prince seeks. Perrault stresses the importance of fashion throughout the tale; Cinderella's clothes are described as dazzling and magnificent, and while at the ball, "all the women were studying her hair and her dress, so that next day they could look the same themselves, provided they could find cloth sufficiently fine and dressmakers sufficiently skilled" (134).

This tale was perfectly written to encapsulate the virtues of the time: young women must be kind and obedient but above all beautiful. The importance which Perrault places on material beauty (specifically the expensive jewels and clothing worn by his main characters¹⁴) and on the fairy magic-assisted transformation is his lasting legacy to this tale: most twentieth and twenty-first century American Cinderella-stories and films focus heavily on these two aspects; consider the shopping scene in the 1990 Cinderella-story film *Pretty Woman*, wherein the Cinderella character is transformed into a person of value once her fairy godfather/john gives her the money to dress like a modern-day princess. The one feature of this tale which has seemingly vanished in recent

¹⁴ Perrault is to thank for the motif of a slipper made of glass — possibly the most instantly recognizable symbol of Cinderella today.

retellings is Cinderella's loving treatment of her stepsisters. After they beg her pardon for treating her so poorly, she immediately forgives them, hopes they will always love her, and marries each off to a lord of the court. Today's audiences seem to desire a less charitable ending for these two; they are often seen in reduced circumstances after Cinderella's revelation or they simply vanish from the story outright. At least they do not suffer the dreadful punishment which befalls the sisters in the version presented by the Calvinistic Brothers Grimm.

Gruesome Grimms

The Grimms' version of Cinderella, "Aschenputtel," unlike Perrault's or Basile's, is rife with religious symbolism. Their tale begins with the heroine sitting at her dying mother's bedside and being told to remain good and devout throughout her life and to always say her prayers. By doing this, she will have her mother's spirit always there to protect her. In his book *The Owl, The Raven and the Dove: The Religious Meaning of the Grimms' Magic Fairy Tales*, G. Ronald Murphy delves into what he considers to be Cinderella's spiritual transformation. By studying the syntax of the 1810 and 1812 versions of "Aschenputtel," Murphy notes numerous instances which were changed in later versions but which originally served to make Cinderella seem even more saintly. For example, while we know that she was made to dress in rags when she worked in the kitchens, the Grimms' early versions actually say she was "made to wear an old gray coat (*einen alten grauen Rock*) (104); Murphy notes that in the Grimms' library were six books about the holy coat of Trier, which was a relic supposedly belonging to Christ and described as an old gray coat. Later versions show the Grimms to have changed *Rock* to *Kittel*, a simple indoor coat, as the allusion to Christ's garment was too obvious. Murphy

feels the brothers did not mean to show Cinderella as a Christ-like figure, but they *did* mean for her to appear saintly.

Readers of the Grimms' version know that after the first two nights of the ball the prince chases Cinderella to her home and her own father destroys the dovecote and pear tree where she has hidden herself, all the while wondering to himself if Cinderella could be the girl the prince seeks but then dismissing that thought outright. Later, when the prince comes back to the house with the twice-bloodied slipper¹⁵ and asks if there are no other girls, the father says, "There is only a daughter of my late wife's, a puny, stunted drudge¹⁶" (Grimm 85). The prince finally recognizes that she is his true bride, yet Murphy points out that per the father's description, perhaps Cinderella is actually not physically attractive — perhaps she truly is puny and stunted — but her *spiritual* beauty is so radiant that this is what the prince actually finds attractive. She is escorted by doves, symbols of the Holy Spirit; these are the birds who have served as her intermediaries between the physical world and the spiritual world which her mother inhabits. She has followed her dying mother's instructions to be good and pious, yet nowhere in the Grimms' tale is she described as beautiful or even pretty until she is draped in her heaven-sent raiment. Murphy's final note about Christian symbolism is that

¹⁵ The Grimms' story ends after Cinderella slips away from the ball on the third night of the festivities, leaving her slipper glued to the palace steps in the pitch spread by the prince to trap her. Upon hearing that whoever would fit into the slipper should marry the prince, Cinderella's stepmother advises the first stepsister to cut off her toes so she could wear the slipper. When she is exposed as a false bride by Cinderella's doves (who tell the prince to look down at the bloody foot) the second sister slices off her heel to fit into the shoe. She too is exposed as a false bride and finally the prince succeeds in securing Cinderella as his true bride. In an effort to share Cinderella's good fortune, her stepsisters escort her into the chapel for her wedding. Cinderella's doves, sitting on each of her shoulders, peck out the eyes of the sisters as they enter and exit the chapel. The sisters suffer, blinded and maimed, for the rest of their lives.

¹⁶ This language changed in latter versions of this tale; introductions of Cinderella by her father after 1822 simply describe her as "the child of my first wife," making mention that she is dirty or that she is the kitchen wench.

the two doves, which alerted the prince to his mistaken bridal choices, ultimately finish their tasks of sorting the good from the bad, just as they did the lentils in the ashes, by blinding the “bad” sisters who try to absorb some of Cinderella’s good fortune without ever repenting of their ill treatment towards her: “And so they were punished for their wickedness and malice with blindness for the rest of their lives” (Grimm 87).

In *The Oxford Companion to Fairy Tales*, Harriet Goldberg notes that the Grimms’ heroine is much more active than Perrault’s: she “calls upon pigeons and turtle-doves to come to her aid to complete her step-mother’s impossible tasks. Not a passive creature awaiting deliverance, she is also a resourceful person who plants the twig, waters it, tends it, and then tells the tree to shake and shower her with silver and gold” (97). The agency which Grimms’ Cinderella has in molding her own destiny has carried forward to twenty-first century tellings of the tale, specifically in retellings aimed at a young adult audience. She is often portrayed as having a skill which sets her apart from others (she is a hunter, a mechanic, an alchemist), rather than her only notable attributes being grace and beauty. While it isn’t normal for the stepsisters of today to be blinded and maimed, they do usually receive some sort of come-uppance — a vast difference from the love and forgiveness shown to Perrault’s stepsisters.

Points of comparison between Basile, Perrault and Grimms

A comparison of central points between the three main European versions of this tale is useful when studying the evolution of this story and understanding its relevance in today’s literary landscape. One point is modes of transportation, which could be considered a means of escape when viewing this tale through a feminist lens, as Cinderella has often been criticized for her lack of action in escaping her dreadful

situation. Grimms' Cinderella "makes her way" to the ball, i.e., walks, whereas Perrault's Cinderella is conveyed in a magical carriage; Basile's rides a thoroughbred horse or is conveyed in a coach. Transportation might seem like a small facet of the tale, but it is worth pondering, especially considering that none of the girls use the transportation to flee their home, only to go to the feast. While the scope of the magic might seem limitless (certainly in Basile's tale, as with each wish Cinderella's tree provides greater and greater largesse) it is revealing that Cinderella uses it in a truly feminine way; not to make a concentrated escape from her poor situation but to enable her to get to a place where a man could intervene and save her from her fate.

Another consideration is clothing; when her stepmother and sisters forced Cinderella to wear rags they took away her ability to be outwardly recognized as a member of the gentry. Both Basile's and Grimms' Cinderella takes her magical clothes back to the tree after the ball, not thinking to keep them; Perrault's Cinderella's clothes vanish with the magic that created them. While we know that the magic shoe remains after the spell is broken and is Cinderella's key to her future, the fact that she retains none of her fine clothes or jewels is another indication that she is a character who cannot survive on her own — again, her wishes for clothing and transport to the ball show that she does not consider any destiny for herself beyond today. She doesn't ask her magical tree or fairy godmother to deliver her from her suffering on a permanent basis; her only desire is to attend a fancy party. As will be discussed in later chapters, the Cinderellas of today have a broader view of their future; we do usually see romance as part of their story but they are more interested in a successful life for themselves outside of their

stepmother's control. Prince Charming is often just the cherry on the sundae of the next chapter in Cinderella's life.

Another comparison point is the role of the father. Basile's father figure has the opportunity to realize his daughter is favored by fairies but pays no attention and treats her with scorn. The father in Perrault's tale barely merits a sentence. The father in the Grimms' tale is active throughout, and menacing; he destroys Cinderella's two places of refuge, all the while thinking that she might be in the tree or the dovecote, yet attacking them with an ax nonetheless. It is worth noting that Grimms' father figure suffers no punishment for his ill treatment of Cinderella; protecting the patriarchy was an important aspect of Grimms' storytelling.¹⁷ Many of today's retellings have an active father figure but the tension of the tale is still presented as solely in the sphere of female relations.

The trial of the shoe can almost be read as comical today. Grimms' prince rides away with both stepsisters and returns them as false brides, not having realized he had the wrong girl until he saw her bleeding foot. Once Cinderella tries the shoe on, he "looks into her eyes" or "looks straight into her face" and recognizes her. Why didn't he look at either of the sisters? Basile's romantic hero actually recognizes Cinderella when she comes to the palace to try on the shoe, even though he doesn't give this knowledge away until the shoe "hurled itself with no help at all onto the foot of that painted egg of Love, just like iron runs to the magnet" (62). Perrault's prince doesn't have to worry over finding the right woman; instead, he sends his men into the kingdom to find her and she

¹⁷ Readers of the Grimms' tales will remember that both the father and stepmother left the children alone in the woods in *Hansel and Gretel*, but when they escaped from the witch's house and returned home, only the father who "had not known one happy hour since he had left the children in the forest" was there to welcome them with open arms: the stepmother had died in their absence (Grimm 42).

is delivered to his doorstep, “dressed as she was in all her fine clothes: he thought that she was more beautiful than ever” (138). While beauty remains an important aspect of all leading ladies, today’s Cinderellas are also usually recognized by their love interest because they have shown an unusual intellect (for a woman) or have a remarkable skill which sets them apart from their peers.

Upon Cinderella’s revelation and subsequent marriage, Grimms’ stepsisters are blinded and maimed, Perrault’s are forgiven and married to lords of the court, and Basile’s “nearly died of anger, and, not having the stomach to stand this heartbreak, they quietly stole away to their mother’s house” (62). The greatest change in the fate of today’s stepsisters lies in the fact that many are presented as sympathetic characters, who actually love Cinderella, and therefore don’t need to seek her forgiveness or charity. One recent retelling¹⁸ does present the stepsister as maimed (à la Grimms’) who then becomes the heroine of the story, realizing that her initial wish for beauty is merely in response to what society expects of young women and who then follows her true wish to become a fearless military leader.

Cinderella is an upper-class young lady; we know this because at the beginning of each tale her father’s status is revealed. Basile notes, “there once was a widowed *prince*” (56) while Perrault declares “there was once a *gentleman*” (130). The Brothers Grimm allude to the father’s status by writing, “the wife of a *rich man* fell ill [...] in the spring, the *rich man* remarried” (123-124) [all italics mine]. Cinderella’s social status is mentioned in the tale so the audience can realize how far she has fallen when she is made

¹⁸ Donnelly, Jennifer. *Stepsister*. Scholastic Press, 2019.

to do menial chores and dress in rags. Retellings of the twentieth and twenty-first century sometimes stick with this narrative or chose to utilize the “rags-to-riches” aspect of the Cinderella-story theme, presenting a heroine who not only marries a prince (or someone of high social status) but who also climbs the social ladder while doing so — the American dream cloaked by fairy magic.

The similarities and differences of these three tales are interspersed in current retellings. Most notably, each of these three Cinderellas are what Marian Roalfe Cox termed a “persecuted heroine,” which makes the shift to today’s empowered heroine easily recognizable. The persecuted heroine relied on magic and marriage to regain her lost status; today’s Cinderellas can eschew both and still find their own happily ever after.

The Forgotten Side of Cinderella

A dark side of the Cinderella story is categorized by the Aarne–Thompson–Uther index as the Unnatural Love tale. These tales are not widely published, retold, or reimagined today, simply because the underlying theme is incest. The young girl runs away because her father has become obsessed with marrying her, or with obtaining some unnatural declaration of love from her, as she is the only one who can allow him to keep his promise to his dead wife to remarry someone more beautiful than she. It isn’t for lack of source material that this version is not retold; of the three hundred and forty-five tales mentioned earlier, one hundred and thirty belonged to the Persecuted Heroine (the Cinderella we are most familiar with) category and seventy-seven to the Unnatural Love category. In her book *From the Beast to the Blonde*, Marina Warner notes:

when interest in psychological realism is at work in the mind of the receiver of traditional folklore, the proposed marriage of a father to his daughter becomes too hard to accept. But it is only too hard to accept precisely because it belongs to a different order of reality/fantasy ... because it is not impossible, because it could actually happen, and is known to have done so. (349)

Perrault's tale "Donkeyskin" fits in this category: the king wishes to marry his daughter, and the horrified girl asks for the hide of his magical gold-spewing donkey (assuming her father will not kill the source of his riches simply to assuage his lust), yet once presented with the donkey's skin she disguises herself in it and runs away to become a servant in a nearby kingdom. Perrault's princess-turned-servant manages to allow herself to be seen by the prince in a moment when she has removed her filthy disguise and arrayed herself in her former finery; he of course falls in love with her, and the story ends with their marriage and her reunion with her father — who has purged himself of all sinful intent towards his child and now embraces her with nothing more than filial pride.

While recent retellings still shy away from the threat of incest which are central to the Unnatural Love tales, there is a trend towards Cinderella taking ownership of her sexuality, embracing its power and not merely being presented as a sexual prize for the prince. In this way there is a small link to the Cinderella of the Unnatural Love tales, who could also be said to have taken control of her sexuality by refusing to become her father's partner, instead running away and positioning herself to wed the prince. Current Cinderella retellings also share numerous other traits seen in the Unnatural Love tales; for example, Maria Tatar says the heroine of the Unnatural Love tales shows "fierce determination" and models "heroic behavior, demonstrating how victims of dreadful family circumstances can find ways not just to survive but to prevail, even after enduring

the unimaginable” (Tatar, *The Heroine*, 128). Incest, even the suggestion of incest, abandonment, physical abuse, mental abuse (as seen in David Lavery’s recent retelling *The Thankless Child*) — all of these instances of domestic violence do appear in some recent retellings of Cinderella’s story, and these iterations of her tale show a princess who doesn’t wait for magical intervention to escape these abuses.

The much-maligned “American” Cinderella

The Americanization of “Cinderella” oftentimes presents a watered-down version of her European forebearers; there is no violent comeuppance presented against the stepsisters, and if the father is present, he is generally loving yet unaware of the stepmother’s actions (we see this in both versions of Walt Disney’s Cinderella and in retellings such as *Cindy Ella*). In her essay “Of Souls as Birds,” Margaret Atwood describes how distilled fairy tales were when she was growing up:

Once upon a time, long, long ago — to be precise, in the 1950s—the body of European folktale as it was known in North America was severely constricted; most of it was kept veiled from view, and only a few tales were popularly circulated. These were pinkly illustrated versions of ‘Cinderella’ or “The Sleeping Beauty,” stories whose plots were dependent on a female servility, immobility or even stupor, and on princely rescue ... Even these few stories have been censored — all vengefulness, all pecked-out eyes and nail-studded barrels removed: the wicked sisters danced at the wedding, but not in red-hot shoes. It was thought wrong at that time to encourage or even to acknowledge the darker emotions. (23)

Atwood was given the unabridged Grimms by her parents and devoured the more gruesome stories which American society deemed unfit for widespread publication (her parents had to order this copy by mail). We remember that the Grimms' version of “Cinderella” ends with both stepsisters being blinded and maimed: of course, this does not happen in the Perrault tale which, as mentioned before, is the version Disney

ostensibly used as the inspiration for its 1950 *Cinderella* film. Have the Grimms' fairy tales, with their more gruesome details, fallen out of favor in the twenty-first century in lieu of Disney's more sing-song, animal friendly, everyone wins in the end fairy tales? I would argue that, in fact, the opposite is true, that as the viewing (and reading) public become more desensitized to characters coming to a bloody end, audiences are demanding that new versions of this tale end with not only a happily ever after, but also "justice" towards those who have wronged Cinderella.

Jane Yolen notes that Australian folklorist "Joseph Jacobs, the indefatigable Victorian collector, once said of a Cinderella story he printed that it was 'an English version of an Italian adaptation of a Spanish translation of a Latin version of a Hebrew translation of an Arabic translation of an Indian original'" (Yolen 154). She argues that America's Cinderella is a completely watered-down version of her intercontinental forebearers. The blame cannot be solely laid at Disney's door; there were children's books published early in the twentieth century which presented a milder version of the tale (no maimings or blindings) and the beautiful blond image began to emerge there. However, Disney has forever cemented America's image of the insipid girl whose best friends and most stalwart companions are rodents and house pets and who stands meekly by while her stepsisters rip the very dress off her shoulders. *This* is the Cinderella whom feminist scholars decry. This Cinderella is still very much alive, both in text and on screen; her stronger, more self-assured doppelganger is a fairly recent development. Close readings of the European Cinderella tales present a character who isn't always docile and dependent upon magic, yet those characteristics are the most prevalent ones brought forward and embedded into the American Cinderella. A notable shift away from

docility in the story has occurred when it is retold by female authors; certainly second-wave feminism and the scholarship which that movement inspired can be credited with that change. Following the trajectory of second-, third-, and fourth-wave feminist thought will create a greater understanding of how the American Cinderella has begun to evolve.

Chapter Two

Feminism, Criticism, and a Pretty Princess

“Cut off your toe. When you are Queen you won’t have to walk any more.”¹⁹

Feminist critique of literature can focus on numerous aspects of a work: the author’s intent, a character’s behavior, the overall plot, themes which may seem misogynistic, etc. Understanding the history of “Cinderella” — when this tale was written, by whom and for whom — provides necessary context when viewing her story through the lens of feminist criticism. Just as essential is understanding how the shifting ideals of feminism have contributed to the continued conversation regarding “Cinderella.”

Feminist criticism of this tale is not solely focused on the heroine, though she has certainly drawn the ire of critics who find she is too passive,²⁰ too easily manipulated by her stepfamily,²¹ and (specifically in regards to Disney’s animated version) that her story perpetuates gendered behavior.²² The body of feminist criticism related to this tale also includes studies of the family element: critics also consider the “good” mother/”evil” stepmother element in “Cinderella,” the absent father, and female dynamics between Cinderella and her step-family. As mentioned in the previous chapter, the story of

¹⁹ “Cinderella”. *Grimms’ Fairy Tales by the Brothers Grimm*. New York, 1945.

²⁰ Explaining her distaste for Cinderella to her daughter, author Peggy Orenstein says: “It’s just, honey, Cinderella doesn’t really *do* anything” (*Cinderella Ate My Daughter*, 62).

²¹ Madonna Kolbenschlag finds that: “Cinderella has been brainwashed into a ‘supportive’ mind-set, persuaded that the chief end of work is service rather than work for its own sake” (*Kiss Sleeping Beauty Good-Bye*, 84).

²² Lori Baker-Sperry conducted a study to find how first-grade children reacted to *Cinderella*: “Through the girls’ discussion of the story, traditional expectations for femininity were identified, reified, and reinforced. The strong identification with the tale, as evidenced by the girls, is an indication of the social importance of traditional expectations of femininity” (“The Production of Meaning through Peer Interaction: Children and Walt Disney’s *Cinderella*,” 726)

“Cinderella” is evolving and criticism is evolving as well. This chapter will discuss the four waves of feminism and how feminist critique of “Cinderella” was presented during each wave while noting shifts in the focus of criticism, as retellings are presenting the tale in a way which accounts for and counters early feminist critique. While we are still in the early days of fourth-wave feminism, I find that criticism is slowly becoming more favorable towards Cinderella, especially as her story continues to be reenvisioned with more and more emphasis on an empowered heroine who tosses her head at outdated, pro-patriarchal ideas.

Riding the Waves

When discussing feminist theory and criticism, understanding the various ‘waves’²³ of feminism helps a reader place the criticism in context with the feminist movement’s goals or talking points at the time a piece was written. The first wave belonged to the suffragettes at the turn of the twentieth century, who weren’t writing much literary criticism, at least not of the type which is relevant to this work.²⁴ They were the crusaders who worked towards securing legal rights for women, such as voting, owning property, employment rights, and the right to sue for divorce. Beginning in the late 1960’s, second-wave feminists broadened the scope of the women’s rights movement. They demanded the right to control their own bodies (through legal

²³ The term “wave” in reference to feminism was first used by Martha Weinman Lear in a 1968 article for the *New York Times Magazine* entitled “The Second Feminist Wave,” in which she wrote; “Feminism . . . is again an issue. Proponents call it the Second Feminist Wave, the first having ebbed after the glorious victory of suffrage and disappeared, finally, into the sandbar of Togetherness.”

²⁴ Not that Cinderella didn’t have her detractors in the early 1900s: in the introduction to her 1921 *Here and Now Storybook* — notably devoid of fairy tales — Lucy Sprague Mitchell notes, “The fairy story, the circus, novelty hunting, delight the sophisticated adult: they excite and confuse the child. Red Riding-Hood and circus Indians excite the little child; Cinderella confuses him” (16).

contraception and abortion), protection from sexual harassment in the workplace, pay equality with their male counterparts and protections for low-income women and children. During this bra-burning phase of the feminist movement, women demanded sexual freedom — freedom from the patriarchal ideals they were raised with and freedom from the notion that they were reliant on men for their own fiscal and societal success. Is it any wonder that Cinderella became a target for feminist critique; she whose very story embodied all the things these women decried as sexist and outdated?

The second wave is broadly categorized as the political wave. In her 2019 work *The Feminist Handbook*, Dr. Joanne Bagshaw notes that second wave feminists “focused their work on women's liberation from discrimination and oppression, to create equal opportunities for men and women. They argued that the personal issues that women faced, like violence at home, sexual harassment at work, and unwanted pregnancies, were systemic and therefore political” (23). In a 2013 article for *Political Insight*, Ealasaid Munro also discusses the second wave, noting that these women “coined the phrase ‘the personal is political’ as a means of highlighting the impact of sexism and patriarchy on every aspect of women’s private lives” (22).

Annis Pratt’s 1971 article “The New Feminist Critique” provides detailed instructions for feminist analysis of literature. While she makes an argument for the necessity of feminist critique specifically in regards to works of fiction written by women (she lists Porter’s *Ship of Fools* and Banning’s *The Dowry*, among others), her reasoning for such criticism can easily lend itself to the study of folk and fairy tales. She writes, “the bringing of feminist fiction to the light of day will involve two critical skills: the *textual analysis* necessary to determine which works are . . . successful, and the

contextual analysis which considers the relevance of a group of works, even if artistically flawed, as a reflection of the situation of women” (873). While the three major versions of “Cinderella” discussed in this dissertation were written by men, the “situation of women” presented in each version lends itself to much discussion and dissection by feminist critics. Pratt further clarifies her vision of feminist criticism by noting that the critic “should be ‘feminist’ in going beyond formalism to consider literature as it reveals men and women in relationship to each other within a socio-economic *context*, that web of role expectations in which women are enmeshed” (873). The socio-economic context in “Cinderella” is especially poignant in relation to the actions of the “wicked” stepmother, whose aim is to make a successful match for her own daughters, success being equated with marriage to a man of elevated social standing and wealth. While a feminist reading of “Cinderella” might initially focus on the man/woman dynamic of the tale, another important aspect is the mother/daughter dynamic, which will be discussed in detail further in this chapter.

In 1975, folklorist and author Kay Stone published “Things Walt Disney Never Told Us,” a piece of feminist criticism directed solely at folk- and fairy-tale heroes and heroines, pointing out how the Americanization of these mostly European tales had reduced or eliminated the heroine’s agency while hiding the hero’s sole source of success: action. She writes:

Heroes succeed because they act, not because they are. They are judged not by their appearance or inherent sweet nature but by their ability to overcome obstacles, even if these obstacles are defects in their own characters. Heroines are not allowed any defects, nor are they required to develop, since they are already perfect. The only tests of most heroines require nothing beyond what they are born with: a beautiful face, tiny feet, or a pleasing temperament. At least that is

what we learn from the translations of the Grimm tales, and especially from Walt Disney. (45)

Stone notes that there are numerous English and American folk- and fairy-tales with strong heroines, such as “Kate Crackernuts,” “Mossycoat,” “How Toodie Fixed Old Grunt,” and “Bully Bornes,” but the prevalence of collections by Grimms and Perrault — and Disney’s reliance on the French and German tales as the basis for his animated films — meant that the general public was glutted with the image of a weak female, waiting for rescue. In a later essay, “Feminist Approaches to the Interpretation of Fairy Tales,” Stone again posits that feminist authors of the 1950s and 1960s found that fairy tales “discouraged females from reaching their full human potential” (56). Not only were written fairy tales presenting versions of heroines tied to home and hearth; film versions presented the same housebound heroines and (specifically when presented by Disney) cemented this idea into the collective viewing conscious. In *Fairy Tale as Myth/Myth as Fairy Tale* (1993), Jack Zipes notes, “the power of Disney's fairy tale films does not reside in the uniqueness or novelty of the productions, but in [Walt] Disney's great talent for holding antiquated views of society *still* through animation” (94). While the audience of 1950 would have perhaps seen nothing amiss with Cinderella weeping forlornly in the garden, at a loss of how to help herself, feminists of the 1970’s were outraged that she didn’t hustle herself right off to the ball (or wherever else she chose) and shrug off the coils of domesticity without waiting for magical intervention.

One such outraged feminist was Andrea Dworkin who tackled fairy-tales in their entirety in her book *Woman Hating* (1974), writing that “fairy tales are the primary information of the culture. They delineate the roles, interactions, and values which are

available to us. They are our childhood models, and their fearful, dreadful content terrorizes us into submission – if we do not become good, then evil will destroy us; if we do not achieve the happy ending, then we will drown in the chaos” (34). Dworkin’s comment about the delineation of roles is one of the central themes in second-wave criticism of “Cinderella.” It was believed that this tale fostered gendered behavior. The poor heroine sits placidly at home, wringing her hands until the prince shows up to save her.²⁵ Thus, in order to achieve the same happily ever after ending, women must remain in the home (in beautiful servitude), patiently waiting for men to escort them to a better situation.²⁶ In her book *The Cinderella Complex* (1981), Claudette Dowling continues the discussion of gendered behavior. She uses Cinderella as a mirror in which women view themselves and see only unhappiness staring back at them. These women have been ‘freed’ from the oppressive chains of sexism by the women’s rights movement of the 1970’s and they now believe they can “have it all”, but Dowling finds “we were not trained for freedom at all, but for its categorical opposite — dependency” (15). Dowling believes the “Cinderella Complex” to be “a network of largely repressed attitudes and fears that keeps women in a kind of half-light, retreating from the full use of their minds and creativity. Like Cinderella, women today are still waiting for something external to

²⁵ In her 1975 book *Womenfolk and Fairy Tales*, Rosemary Minard claims that Cinderella “certainly didn’t show much gumption by meekly accepting the abuse of her stepmother and stepsisters. She would still be scrubbing were it not for her fairy godmother” (viii).

²⁶ Readers must consider that when these tales were written, young girls truly had no agency of their own. If we try to imagine other choices Cinderella could have made rather than submit to the will of her stepmother we must remember where she was and when the tale was written(ish). Could she have called child services? Could she have hopped on a bus and gone to the city to follow her dreams? A young unmarried woman, especially one of good family, could not just wander off to live on her own. If she had been raised to be a milkmaid or housemaid, then she possibly could have made her way to a local estate and attempted to secure a position, but if she failed? Where would an unmarried, unwanted girl go? The following chapters of this study examine current retellings which offer a heroine who is empowered to rescue herself, using all the agency available to a twenty-first century girl — agency which simply didn’t exist for earlier versions of the cinder-girl.

transform their lives” (31). Echoing Kay Stone’s thoughts about folk- and fairy-tale heroines lacking action and agency, Dowling finds that women “avoid taking credit for success” yet “leap at the opportunity to take responsibility for failure . . . Women are also poor risk takers. We resent being in the position where risk is even a possibility . . . Most shockingly of all, women are less likely than men to fulfill their intellectual potential” (127-128). Dowling’s final bit of advice to women like herself, who wish to break free of the Cinderella cycle, is to “keep a running balance” — of one’s finances, one’s goals, one’s relationships and one’s psyche; “To keep a running balance means to engage with life’s possibilities, to activate one’s own change and growth rather than waiting for ‘something to happen’ — to become, in effect, one’s own prince” (215). This idea of becoming one’s own savior and rejecting the prince was embraced by numerous Cinderella-tale authors writing in the era of third-wave feminism, such as Tanith Lee and, in a humorous turn, Roald Dahl.²⁷

Beginning in the early 1990’s²⁸, third-wave feminism brought about a shift from the second-wave movement of denying femininity on the grounds that it chained women to the hearth and home. This group is classified by Dr. Bagshaw as lipstick feminists; women who did not feel the need to reject traditional standards of femininity in order to demand equal rights. She frames this wave as celebrating diversity and centering its focus on class, race and sexual orientation (47). Feminist/activist Rebecca Walker’s 1992 article in *Ms. Magazine* claims, “To be a feminist is to integrate an ideology of equality

²⁷ Lee’s Cinderella aims to see the prince driven mad and murdered, while Dahl’s realizes the prince is a bit loony so she marries a jam-maker instead.

²⁸ A starting point for the reinvigoration of the feminist movement at this time was the Anita Hill/Clarence Thomas hearings.

and female empowerment in the very fiber of my life . . . I am not a postfeminist feminist. I am the third wave” (87).

In an essay for *Hypatia* published in 1997, Deborah Siegel finds the term “third-wave feminism” is used “in reference to expressions and activities ranging from the rapid proliferation of girlzines and the rise of the riot grrrl underground to the establishment of a movement culture that is disparate, unlikely, multiple, polymorphous” (52). *Vox* writer Constance Grady also comments on the emergence of the riot grrrls²⁹, young women who were taking over the punk music scene in the 1990s and bringing the feminist fight to a new generation. The riot grrrl movement also brought about new ways of communicating the feminist message. The second wave had nationally published *Ms. magazine*³⁰, helmed by Gloria Steinem; the third wave spread its message underground, through self-published zines and email lists. The riot grrrls were taking the feminist discussion online: in a 1998 article for *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society*, Jessica Roseberg and Gitana Garofalo found that this new sect of the feminist movement had “formed a community on the Internet . . . discussion topics range from racism to music, from zine production to company boycotts and legislative politics” (811). In her book *Cinderella’s Big Score*, Maria Raha discusses how the riot grrrls were redefining the second-wave feminist ideals to include themselves and other women whom they considered

²⁹ A leader of the riot grrrl movement, feminist punk band Bikini Kill’s lead singer Kathleen Hanna wrote an article for the band’s self-published ‘zine titled “The Riot Grrrl Manifesto” in 1991. She wrote: “BECAUSE doing/reading/seeing/hearing cool things that validate and challenge us can help us gain the strength and sense of community that we need in order to figure out how bullshit like racism, able-bodiedism, ageism, speciesism, classism, thinism, sexism, anti-semitism and heterosexism figures in our own lives. BECAUSE we are angry at a society that tells us Girl = Dumb, Girl = Bad, Girl = Weak.”

³⁰ A timeline of *Ms. magazine*’s movement from the beginning of the second wave until today can be found at <https://msmagazine.com/about/>.

marginalized:

While many principles of feminism have come to be accepted by popular culture, there are also many reminders in the media that women continue to bear the brunt of beauty complexes, stereotypical assumptions about what constitutes women's cultural taste, and the burden of strict codes of acceptable behavior. The message is that women can only be so transgressive. Radical behavior is still a threat . . . 'Cinderella' invokes the fairy tale's disenfranchised main character, foiled by her circumstances at every turn, and sneaking out to the ball that ultimately leads to her emancipation. The difference between the Cinderella stories here [in this book] and that of the fairy-tale version lie in who holds the glass slipper. The mythic Cinderella's escape lies in a perfectly fitted shoe held by a prince, while these real-life Cinderellas spun their magic out of thin air. (xv)

British educator Dr. Ella Westland questioned second-wave feminist criticism that fairy tales and princess play led boys and girls to specific gendered behavior. In a study³¹ designed to test this theory, she worked with 100 middle-school aged children, asking them to respond to oral fairy tales by creating drawings and by writing stories of their own. Westland noted that there was no shortage of fairy tales available for children to read and watch and there were "new" pro-feminist versions readily available. She found "the new wave of feminist fairy-tales has not altered the [anti-feminist] argument against the older stories, or undermined their popularity" (239). She saw that during the drawing activity, while more girls than boys drew princess figures, these girls had no desire to *be* princesses or live a fairy tale life. Westland found "the girls were almost unanimous in denying that they would like to be princesses themselves . . . what came across strongly in many of the girls' comments was the desire for independence. No-one was prepared to admit that the 'best thing' about being a princess was having a prince to protect you" (241). Her final conclusion was that perhaps adults project their own ideas — specifically

³¹ "Cinderella in the Classroom. Children's Responses to Gender." *Gender & Education*, vol. 5, no. 3, Oct. 1993, pp. 237-249.

that fairy tales are antifeminist and will encourage über-masculine behavior in boys and helpless homemaker behavior in girls — onto children. The children, in turn, form their own opinions on which parts of fairy tales they will emulate and which they will enjoy for enjoyments sake: “we have imagined what girls and boys see in the magic mirror, but our vision is not theirs ... girls are now ‘resisting readers,’ to borrow a term from feminist literary criticism, able to criticize and manipulate (as well as enjoy) the gender images presented to them in the dominant fairy tales of our culture” (244).

Third-wave criticism continued to shift away from the second-wave focus on gender role expectations. Elisabeth Panttaja’s 1993 article in *Western Folklore* recommends “reading the Grimms’ ‘Cinderella’ as an exploration into what was (and still is) a common cultural experience--i.e., class ascension/descension through marriage” (103). D. Soyini Madison discusses transcendence and oppositional gaze in the film *Pretty Woman*³² — which she claims “reinscribes in live action the Cinderella fairy tale of heterosexual love and marriage as the ultimate resolution for a fulfilled life, particularly for women” (227) — through the lens of Black feminism. Feminist criticism of “Cinderella” during this wave grew towards a solid focus on empowerment, paralleling *Ms.* magazine’s comment on Rebecca Walker’s article: “Women of the Third Wave raise their voices through their global activism, their political savvy — and their culture-bashing arrival in mainstream media” (87).

The fourth wave, beginning in the early twenty-first century³³, is still inventing and defining itself. This is the technological wave, spreading its message via Twitter and

³² This film will be discussed in Chapter Four.

³³ The beginning of the “metoo” movement, started by activist Tarana Burke in 2007, is considered by many to be the start of the fourth wave. In 2017, actress Alyssa Milano is credited with broadening

Instagram — Hashtag Activism, as Dr. Bagshaw titles it. This is also the era of inclusivity, in which the former narrow spectrum of ‘feminists’ (typically white, middle and upper-class women) has grown not only to embrace women of all races, classes and backgrounds, but also to offer a voice to those in the LGBTQ+ community and even to bring focus to sexism, sexual harassment and abuse suffered by men. In an article for *Social Work Education*, Ruth Phillips and Vivian Cree note that: “social media has opened up significant spaces for the rebirth of feminist debates and resistance and it has been argued that this is the birthplace of fourth wave feminism . . . while zines and songs were innovations of the third wave, the fourth wavers introduced the use of blogs, Twitter campaigns and online media with names like Racialicious and Feministing” (938).

The fourth wave tenet of inclusivity is explored in numerous current retellings of “Cinderella,” both on screen and in literary formats. Authors Malinda Lo and David Lavery present characters which were traditionally female as male (or vice versa) in their works *Ash* (2009) and *The Merry Spinster* (2018). The latest iteration of “Cinderella” on film is the first to feature a Latina actress in the princess role. The YA novel *Cinderella is Dead* presents a lead character who is Black and a lesbian. This trend will be discussed in greater detail in Chapters Three and Four; as inclusivity becomes more the norm, I predict we will continue to see new iterations of “Cinderella” by authors whose audience no longer relate to the sweet blond princess who must rely on a prince as savior.

Today’s feminists have come a long way since Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Lucretia Mott led the charge at Seneca Falls. Members of the fourth wave, through the

Burke’s message as she began the Twitter campaign, #metoo. That same year, TIME Magazine named Burke, Milano, and many others who had shared their #metoo story as its collective “Time Person of the Year.” <https://www.womenshistory.org/exhibits/feminism-fourth-wave>.

infinite technology available at their fingertips, concern themselves with feminist issues on a global scale. With the shift towards inclusion and the reconciliation of feminism *and* femininity, should we expect a change in the feminist critique of “Cinderella,” as each new wave crashes upon her fragile shore?

The Criticism Continuum

Feminist criticism of “Cinderella” focuses on numerous elements of the story. The presentation of Cinderella as a mere object of beauty who has no drive to free herself from her life of penury and the notion that Cinderella is a damaging role model for young children were main points of criticism during the second wave. While the previously mentioned third-wave study by Westland attempted to disprove this criticism (which had been levied against many fairy tales, not just “Cinderella”) this criticism remains so prevalent that it cannot be dismissed. A study published as recently as last year³⁴ attempts again to disprove that Cinderella and her Disney princess sisters negatively impact gendered behavior in young children.

Another large point of feminist criticism revolves around viewing “Cinderella” as a pro-patriarchal tale and how this affects the presentation of women in this tale. The stepmother and sisters are villainized for their mistreatment of Cinderella, yet in the tales by Basile, Perrault and Grimms the father lives but does nothing to prevent his daughter’s demotion in the household. This following discussion will address both the gendered-behavior criticism mentioned earlier as well as criticism written regarding family conflict and the mother/daughter dichotomy as presented in “Cinderella.”

³⁴ This study authored by Sarah Coyne will be discussed in greater detail in Chapter 5, as it is Disney specific.

Warning: Cinderella May Be Harmful for Children

The feminist claim³⁵ that “Cinderella” teaches gendered behavior can be applied to most fairy tales: the heroine’s main characteristics are beauty and goodness while the hero is clever and courageous. Andrea Dworkin illustrates the way in which gender roles are taught through fairy tales: “The roles available to women and men are clearly articulated in fairy tales. The characters of each are vividly described, and so are the modes of relationship possible between them. We see that powerful women are bad, and that good women are inert. We see that men are always good, no matter what they do, or do not do” (45). Cinderella’s hero (the prince) doesn’t display much cleverness nor courage, but why should he? He is royalty and if he wants to claim a girl as his bride, that is his right. The powerful stepmother and sisters are mean and Cinderella, while inert, eclipses these women in beauty and kindness. Beauty is what catches the prince’s eye and patience is what allows Cinderella to wait for him to rescue her. Should we therefore assume that young girls, reading this story, will believe that fancy clothes and fortitude are the only keys to a happy life?

Sociologist Lenore Weitzman’s 1972 article, “Sex-Role Socialization in Picture Books for Preschool Children,” discussed the skewed appearance of male and female characters in a group of prize-winning picture books.³⁶ Weitzman claims:

boys and girls are socialized to accept society's definition of the relative worth of each of the sexes and to assume the personality characteristics that are ‘typical’ of

³⁵ In her 1972 article “Some Day My Prince Will Come,” Allison Lurie notes that fairy tales, “focus on beauty as a girl’s most valuable asset, perhaps her only asset. Good-temper and meekness are so regularly associated with beauty, and ill-temper with ugliness, that this in itself must influence children’s expectations. The most famous example of this associational pattern occurs in ‘Cinderella,’ with the opposition of the ugly, cruel, bad-tempered older sisters to the younger, beautiful, sweet Cinderella” (385).

³⁶ All books surveyed were Caldecott award winners published within five years of the study.

members of each sex; that children learn that boys are more highly valued than girls; and, most important, that children's books are a vehicle for the presentation of societal values to young children. (74)

Her study noted 261 male characters versus only 23 female characters in a comparison of 18 books: Weitzman noted that, “children scanning the list of titles that have been designated as the very best children's books are bound to receive the impression that girls are not very important because no one has bothered to write books about them. The content of the books rarely dispels this impression” (1129). A major point of second-wave feminist criticism of “Cinderella” is centered around her passivity: this study found that “in the world of picture books boys are active and girls are passive. Not only are boys presented in more exciting and adventuresome roles, but they engage in more varied pursuits and demand more independence” (1131). She further noted that when girls were present, they were solely dedicated to activities such as “loving, watching and helping” (1130).

Weitzman discusses the Little Golden Book version of *Walt's Disney's Cinderella*³⁷; in that book Cinderella “helps” her stepsisters prepare for the ball, she “watches” as they leave and she is the loveliest creature ever, winning the prince at the end of the day (without much effort on her own part.) She is shown sewing, sweeping, baking and sorting the laundry, but none of these actions directly result in her happy

³⁷ Criticism aimed directly at Walt Disney's animated film *Cinderella* has been a constant over the years (Stone, 1975) (Wood, 1996) (Rozario, 2004) (Golden, 2017) and will be discussed in chapter five. Building upon Weitzman's analysis, we can see that all the “adventurous” or “dangerous” aid given to Cinderella in the film is given by male, albeit *animal* male characters, while the female characters help in traditional feminine ways. During the dressmaking scene, when mouse Gus Gus drags over a pair of scissors and mouse Jaq exclaims, “I can do the sewing!” a girl mouse snatches the needle away, singing “Leave the sewing to the women, you go get some trimming!” Cinderella's faithful male dog Bruno bounds in at the last minute like the proverbial knight on a charging stallion to chase away the last remaining barrier to Cinderella's freedom.

ending. While Cinderella remains locked in the attic bemoaning her fate, her *male* mice friends Jaq and Gus Gus succeed in stealing the attic key away from Lady Tremaine.

Weitzman points out that “male characters engage in many exciting and heroic adventures which emphasize their cleverness” (1131). The two clever mice are given an entire page to themselves in The Little Golden Book rendition of the story; in fact, they are depicted on 8 pages of the book whereas Cinderella herself is only seen 12 times. Interestingly enough, Weitzman notes “the fairy godmother is the only adult female [in this study] who plays an active leadership role. The one nonstereotyped woman is clearly not a ‘normal’ woman — she is a mythical creature” (1140). The study concludes by pointing out that not one woman pictured in any of these books had a job (homemaker was not considered a job) and that “the women in picture books have status by virtue of their relationships to specific men — they are the wives of kings, judges, adventurers, and explorers, but they themselves are not the rulers, judges, adventurers, and explorers” (1146).

The gendered behavior criticism is difficult to separate from criticism focused on Disney’s *Cinderella*, for the blond princess surrounded by helpful birds and mice is so prevalent that any criticism of Cinderella can seem to be directly aimed at her. In her 2009 article “Damsels in Discourse: Girls Consuming and Producing Identity Texts through Disney Princess Play” Karen Wohlwend notes:

identity messages circulate through merchandise that surrounds young consumers . . . immersing children in products that invite identification with familiar media characters and communicate gendered expectations about who they should be . . . The pervasive availability of consumer products associated with the Disney Princess films blurs the line between play and reality, allowing children to live in-character: One can be Cinderella all day long, sleeping in pink princess sheets, eating from lavender Tupperware with Cinderella decals, and dressing head to toe

in licensed apparel. (57)

In her 2011 book *Cinderella Ate My Daughter*, self-proclaimed feminist author Peggy Orenstein bemoaned the hold that princess-culture has on little girls all across America. Orenstein shielded her own daughter from all things pink and frilly as she grew from a baby to a toddler, but once the child was old enough to have play dates, she realized that other little girls had “princess” toys (dress-up outfits and sparkling gee-gaws of glittery pink and purple) and she wanted them herself as well. Orenstein and the group of mothers whom she interviewed for the book all agreed that princesses (Cinderella in particular, and more specifically, Disney’s Cinderella) were bad role models because of their general inactivity and their reliance on the prince as savior. The author admitted to a moment of consternation that perhaps, in her attempt to explain to her three-year-old daughter *why* Cinderella wasn’t worthy of emulation, she may have offered an equally negative message: “In retrospect, I fretted: what if, instead of helping her realize ‘Aha! Cinderella is a symbol of the patriarchal oppression of all women, another example of corporate mind control and power to the people!’ my daughter had been thinking ‘Mommy doesn’t want me to be a girl!’” (62). Orenstein claims that a major concern for her as a parent when considering her daughter’s relationship with the Disney princess universe is that, rather than encouraging imagination, Disney’s portrayal of princesses *limits* imagination. She found that girls want to mimic what they see on screen, but not take the princess to any new levels. Wohlwend came to a similar conclusion, noting that children playing with Disney princess dolls tend to use the dolls to act out scenes from Disney movies or to play pretend games with very gender-specific roles (mommy and baby games, for example). Wohlwend further noted that gendered messages are not

solely coming from images on screen: teachers and parents were complicit in encouraging this behavior. She suggests that these adults “need to educate ourselves about popular culture and self critically examine our own assumptions about media and gender so we can help children critically read toys as texts” (80).

Gendered-behavior criticism has waxed and waned over the past fifty years yet remains a constant source of feminist critique aimed at “Cinderella”. While retellings of this tale with an active heroine who isn’t stuck in the kitchen waiting for rescue abound, I anticipate this criticism will continue, as it is seemingly tied to Disney’s *Cinderella*, whose popularity shows no sign of decreasing.

Subverting the Patriarchy?

Critically examining literature through the lens of feminism can be accomplished, on the surface, by simply comparing the female character’s agency, power, rights, ownership of ... anything really, to the male character’s. A closer examination of the tale can help discover the *reasons* the female character is written differently — whether it is truly with misogynist intent by the author or whether the piece merely reflects the attitude of the time in which it was written. Regardless of the author’s intent, feminist criticism of “Cinderella” has another target aside from the heroine: her evil stepmother.

Author Maria Tatar notes that “the enduring appeal of ‘Cinderella’ derives not only from the rags-to-riches trajectory of the tale’s heroine but also from the way in which the story engages with classic family conflicts ranging from sibling rivalry to sexual jealousies. Cinderella’s father may not have much of a part in this story, but the role of the (step)mother and (step)sisters is writ large.” (*The Annotated Classic*, 29)

Although Cinderella’s mother has died, her spirit remains active in providing (with the

help of magical trees and birds) her daughter with the fine raiment needed to present a spectacular appearance at the royal festivities. With her beloved (and good) mother dead, her “evil” stepmother loses no opportunity to undermine Cinderella’s chances to prosper, albeit with little success. Tatar notes that psychologists believe the splitting of the mother figure into a “good” and an “evil” character offers children a mechanism to process the maternal and mental conflicts which are created as the child matures into a young adult and envisions the potential separation from their primary caregiver. Preservation of the loving and nurturing “good” mother’s image is achieved while any feelings of resentment, confusion and helplessness can be focused on the “evil” stepmother.

While it is easy to cast Cinderella’s stepmother as the villain in her story, Andrea Dworkin points to that woman’s own maternal cares (for her two natural daughters) and surmises that Cinderella is the unfortunate speed bump in the road to the stepmother’s most important societal goal: a successful marriage for her less desirable daughters. Convincing her daughters to maim themselves in the hopes of making the ultimate matrimonial match doesn’t seem that far-fetched to Dworkin: she points to centuries of Chinese mothers who bound their daughter’s feet, as their mothers had bound their own, in the hopes of one day having the tiniest feet which could wear the tiniest slippers which would in turn help snag a rich husband (99). Viewing the stepmother as a sympathetic character might be difficult for a modern audience, but Dworkin’s referral to centuries of women effectively maiming their daughters in order to secure a husband presents an

interesting argument. In a critical response to Angela Carter's retelling³⁸ which paid special attention to the foot-cutting scene, Michelle Ryan-Sautour asks: "Imagine the devotion of the mother? Imagine the horror of the scene? Imagine what a woman must do to marry? Imagine how ridiculous this story really is?" (38). Of course, the stepmother is the unequivocal villain of the tale *if* one discounts the father's complete dismissal of or disinterest in his own progeny's fate. Whether he notices his daughter has been cast down to the level of servant or not, he leaves the drama and the rule of the household to be contested between the women (not really a contest since Cinderella, without the backing of her father, has no power).

A final note about the evilness of the stepmother comes from Kay Stone's book *Someday Your Witch Will Come*. Stone found that in notes written about the 1950 *Cinderella* film, Walt Disney – needing to create a greater villain for the big screen – created an evil character out of Lady Tremaine, whereas she had much less of a presence in the stories: "In *Cinderella*, Disney lays the whole blame for Cinderella's suffering on the stepmother: 'I feel that the stepsisters are under a domineering mother. They are spoiled brats, but it's the mother who is forcing them'." (29) Imagine how we would perceive the "evil" stepmother today if only Walt Disney had decided she should be a sympathetic character!

As this chapter has presented the various waves of feminism, and the critique of

³⁸ "Ashputtle, or, The Mother's Ghost," by Angela Carter (1994). Ryan-Sautour's comment is in response to the following scene in this short story: "The other woman wants that young man desperately. She would do anything to catch him. Not losing a daughter, but gaining a son. She wants a son so badly she is prepared to cripple her daughters. She takes up a carving knife and chops off her elder daughter's big toes, so that her foot will fit the little shoe. Imagine."

“Cinderella” which has flowed through those waves, it appears the criticism has no end point. Criticism decrying this tale for promulgating gendered behavior is cast and refuted, and cast again. Criticism focused on the passivity of Cinderella and the evilness of the other women in her tale appears to know no bounds, even as more progressive retellings of the tale appear. I find this anti-feminist criticism will always exist, because “Cinderella” in all her sexist and misogynistic forms will always exist. The older versions of this tale with their antiquated themes and morals will always be the starting point for a discussion of this character, but this starting point can now be used to measure how far the reenvisioned “Cinderella” has progressed.

Chapter Three

Rewriting the Age-Old Tale

“Perhaps you have heard the story?”³⁹

Why continue to discuss Cinderella, either as a character, trope, or tale? The answer is simply that her story refuses to die. Some of Grimms’ and Perrault’s fairy tales, for example “The Goose-Girl” or “Griselda,” fell out of fashion and have not been made into movie after movie or rewritten time and again. It would be very easy to point to the marketing juggernaut that is Disney as the reason that Cinderella continues to be so prevalent in our collective purchasing consciousness: it is impossible to walk into a big-box store without finding several items embellished with the likeness of Disney’s Cinderella and other Disney princesses. However, well before the 1950 animated film brought *that* version of Cinderella to millions of adoring fans, others had told her tale as well. The acclaimed British illustrator Arthur Rackham provided illustrations for a version of her story which was published in 1919. Italian composer Gioachino Rossini (perhaps better known for *The Barber of Seville*) presented his opera *La Cenerentola* in 1817. He used composer Nicolas Isouard’s *Cendrillon* (which was based on the Perrault tale and debuted in 1810) as inspiration. These are just a few examples; Cinderella’s continual presence in popular culture, aimed at both children and adults, has been notable for centuries.

This chapter will focus on literary retellings of “Cinderella,” and will explore changes to not only the heroine herself, but to other notable characters. Retellings which

³⁹ Lee, Tanith. “When the Clock Strikes.” *Red as Blood, or Tales from the Sisters Grimmer*. Daw, 1983.

present the point of view of the stepmother and sisters or the prince have grown in popularity over the past few decades — their stories not only offer the reader a different point of view for this tale, but also assist in maintaining the relevancy of “Cinderella.” This chapter will also link the evolution of this tale to the shifts in the feminist waves as the timid housemaid progresses into a self-sufficient princess. Finally, this chapter will discuss “Cinderella” retellings which are meant for a young adult: for these readers, fourth-wave feminist ideals (most notably, the ideals of inclusion and the acceptance of a wide range of sexual identities) are the norm as they operate in an almost post-gender society.

I have previously presented the feminist criticism (and at times, acceptance) of Cinderella. In the preface to his book *Don't Bet on the Prince* (1986), Jack Zipes discusses feminist fairy tales, those which have been written with an eye to subverting the traditional patriarchal story lines that have dominated these tales for centuries. He finds that:

the feminist fairy tale conceives a different view of the world and speaks in a voice that has been customarily silenced. It draws attention to the illusions of the traditional fairy tales by demonstrating that they have been structured according to the subordination of women, and in speaking out for women the feminist fairy tale also speaks out for other oppressed groups and for an *other* world, which may have appeared Utopian at one time but is now already within the grasp of those people seeking to bring about more equality in social and work relations . . . The feminist tales themselves have emerged from the struggles of the women's movement and are being used to elaborate social choices and alternatives for both females and males. (xi-xii)

Recent feminist versions of “Cinderella” can be found which present a heroine who is no longer meek, but invested in her own sexuality; who is not willing to turn the other cheek but is active in seeking vengeance against those who have wronged her; who is active in

pursuing social change; or who is a mere side character in a story which focuses on those who were previously supporting players. The traditional Cinderella is still easy to find⁴⁰; in this chapter, however, I will explore numerous retellings which have updated the heroine in keeping with current trends in feminist discourse.

What are the motifs that identify a story as a “Cinderella” retelling? In her collection of Cinderella-tales produced in 1893, Marian Roalfe Cox lists numerous characteristics which she uses to qualify a tale as fitting into the “Cinderella” category — among these are the “ill-treated heroine; recognition by means of a shoe; aid (various) or help from a dead mother; a menial heroine; a helpful animal; a false bride; the hearth abode; magic dresses; a meeting-place [a ball or festival]; a lovesick prince; mutilated feet; a happy marriage” and many more (xxvi).⁴¹ Is a retelling truly “Cinderella” if one of the motifs is missing? Literary scholars believe so, if the reader can easily recognize the story as “Cinderella.” Folklorist Vladimir Propp noted that “functions of characters serve as stable, constant elements in a tale, independent of how and by whom they are fulfilled. They constitute the fundamental components of a tale” (10). In her book *Picturing the Rose: A Way of Looking at Fairy Tales*, author Marcia Lane points out in her discussion of tale types and motifs that what distinguishes a tale as a “Cinderella” tale can be very broad:

If you look at the ‘umbrella’ of Cinderella-type stories, you’ll see myriad different tales which share certain primary features and can all be identified as the same type. But the differences in plot structure, characters, objects that act (like

⁴⁰ Robin Palmer’s 2008 YA retelling *Cindy Ella* is a retelling which stays fairly true to Perrault’s tale, while updating the setting to modern day Los Angeles.

⁴¹ As previously mentioned in Chapter One, the Aarne-Thompson-Uther index mirrors many of Cox’s “Cinderella” characteristics in its “Persecuted Heroine” category.
<http://www.mftd.org/index.php?action=atu&src=atu&id=510>

slippers, hazel wands, and such), can be defined as motifs, with many of them occurring in each story. The type is the largest defining factor, the umbrella that encompasses many stories. The motifs are the moments, the elements that distinguish between variants. (41)

The following discussion focuses on changes of motif throughout numerous retellings, each chosen as a representation of a specific stylistic or thematic change⁴². The continuous changes seen in each retelling again points to the relevance of this tale in both popular culture and feminist discourse: with each new version produced, “Cinderella” continues to progressively evolve.

Retellings fall into numerous categories; those which are faithful to the “original” version of the tale (usually using Perrault or Grimms’ as inspiration) yet update the setting or characters while still presenting a story which is easily recognizable as Cinderella’s are the most prominent. Some present Cinderella as a minimal character and choose instead to focus on other actors, such as the stepmother and sisters or the prince or a new character entirely. Some change the narrative and present a dark Cinderella, a heroine whose traditional characteristics of kindness and gentleness are replaced with anger and violence. Some are written with an aim to entice readers of fantasy or science fiction, some are written specifically for children, or a broad young adult audience⁴³. Regardless of the type of tale or the intended audience, each retelling can be viewed critically through a feminist lens. While there are literally thousands⁴⁴ of retellings to

⁴² The online folk- and fairy tale database [surlalune.com](https://surlalunefairytales.com/a-g/cinderella/cinderella-modern-interp.html) lists over fifty “Cinderella” retellings which have been published in the past twenty years alone, many of which easily fall into the categories of discussion noted in this chapter. <https://surlalunefairytales.com/a-g/cinderella/cinderella-modern-interp.html>.

⁴³ For further information, see *Why Fairy Tales Stick: The Evolution and Relevance of a Genre* (Zack Zipes, 2006); *The Truth about Cinderella: A Darwinian View of Love* (Martin Daly and Margo Wilson, 1998); and *Cinderella: A Casebook* (Alan Dundes, editor, 1988).

⁴⁴ Amazon.com shows over 4,000 books under the search criteria “Cinderella” in the subcategory “Literature and Fiction”. <https://www.amazon.com/s?k=cinderella>.

choose from, those selected for this discussion fall in the following categories: the tale told from the point of view of a supporting character, dark Cinderella tales, tales which focus on Cinderella as a sexual being, and Cinderella specifically for a young adult (YA) reader.

The Poetic Princess

The feminist conversation regarding Cinderella retellings does not begin with works produced solely after the beginning of the second wave. This discussion would not be complete without early retellings which hint at the changes to come in Cinderella's tale. While this chapter is focused mainly on books and short stories, the inclusion of poems by Anne Sexton and Sylvia Plath⁴⁵ — whose collective works are included in feminist discourse⁴⁶ — offers a look at pre-second-wave shifts in the Cinderella narrative. Biographer Gail Crowther writes:

Plath and Sexton established a position that would last for the rest of their lives and afterlives — that of women who refuse to be silent. Their voices were not just asserting some louder version of the oppressed female experience; their voices were confrontational ... they started to draw on their own life experiences and then linked these to bigger, more universal themes, a true precursor to the feminist 'personal is political' mantra that would follow years later. (9)

Both of these poets presented a version of "Cinderella," and while these poems were written prior to the sweep of second-wave feminism across the literary field, either work can be read as feminist critique of this fairy tale.

⁴⁵ Sexton's poem was published in 1971; Plath's was written while she was still a student at Smith College in the early 1950's but published posthumously in 1981.

⁴⁶ See Fenglin (2020) and Looser (1993).

In Sexton's retelling⁴⁷ readers can hear the voice of a woman who is tired of fairy stories; who assumes that whatever magical tales one hears can no longer cause awe since the story, like the reader herself, is *tired*. Sexton's poem is conversational, reminding the readers that they already know "that story," yet she will tell it again, likening Cinderella's fortune to any other person who wins life's lottery. Her poem unfolds along the exact lines of Grimms' tale, with a twig planted on mother's grave, a hearth full of lentils, golden slippers, and an adoring suitor. Sexton does not shy away from the foot mutilation or blinding of the stepsisters. These facts are not presented in a horrific way; instead they are told as if such events are normal affairs of the day:

The eldest went into a room to try the slipper on
but her big toe got in the way so she simply
sliced it off and put on the slipper.
The prince rode away with her until the white dove
told him to look at the blood pouring forth.
That is the way with amputations.
They don't just heal up like a wish. [...]
At the wedding ceremony
the two sisters came to curry favor
and the white dove pecked their eyes out.
Two hollow spots were left
like soup spoons. (Sexton lines 80-99)

Sexton finishes her poem with the traditional happily ever after, the usual ending for "that story." Whereas Sexton presents her poem in an almost bored manner, Plath's⁴⁸ is full of frantic, frenetic motion — whirling dancers, raucous music, chatter over cocktails — and a panicked heroine who is out of time: "near twelve the strange girl all at once / Guilt-stricken halts, pales, clings to the prince / As amid the hectic music and cocktail talk /

⁴⁷ "Cinderella," presented in the poetry collection *Transformations*, 1971.

⁴⁸ "Cinderella," presented in the poetry collection *The Collected Poems*, 1981.

She hears the caustic ticking of the clock.” (303) Sexton assured her audience that Cinderella and the prince kept “their darling smiles pasted on for eternity” (57), whereas Plath’s Cinderella focuses on running out of time — the ticking of the clock not only symbolizing the end of her evening but perhaps also the limited time remaining before the grave (or worse, before her beauty fails). Both poems hint at the fallacy of the happily-ever-after myth, a myth that continues to erode with each new retelling.

(Step)Mommie Dearest and Prince “Charming”

What better way to reinvigorate the story that everyone knows than to tell it from someone else’s point of view? Numerous versions of the Cinderella-tale have surfaced told in the stepmother’s voice, such as Sarah Maitland’s “The Wicked Stepmother’s Lament” (1987) and Danielle Tellers’ *All the Ever Afters: The - Untold Story of Cinderella’s Stepmother* (2018): what is most interesting in these is not that the stepmother’s tale turns into one of redemption, but rather that Cinderella is presented, continuously, as weak. She is a silly little doll who needs a strong-willed woman to whip her into shape, to give her the tools she will need to survive in the cold world. These Cinderellas are in line with their Disney twin — mild, loving, passive, and beautiful. In her book *Some Day Your Witch Will Come*, author Kay Stone points out that Disney greatly inflated Cinderella’s stepmother’s role, making her more of a presence than in the Perrault tale or even Grimms’. While this may have been done to fill time (the original tale wasn’t long enough to make a feature film), it certainly helped cement the “wicked stepmother” trope and create a greater antagonist in that character than we see in the written fairy tales.

Sara Maitland offers a modern-day stepmother explaining her abuse of the heroine while not apologizing or shying away from the truth of her actions. She admits to weariness over Cinderella's unflinching *goodness*, the very trait that drove her to abuse the girl: "I just wanted her to *see*, to see that life is not all sweetness and light, that people are not automatically to be trusted, that fairy godmothers are unreliable and damned thin on the ground, and that even the most silvery of princes soon goes out hunting and fighting and drinking and whoring" (133). Anna Fisk, writing for *Women: A Cultural Review*, points out that "this story is a comment on fairy tales and female passivity . . . although the child [Cinderella], and her mother, commit the 'women's sin' of self-abnegation . . . the feminist reader can identify with the narrator's desire to provoke Cinderella into fighting back and becoming powerful through anger" (26). Maitland's stepmother rails against the very things feminist critics have complained of for decades: Cinderella's passivity and refusal to take action. Can this obviously feminist stepmother be forgiven for trying to beat some backbone into the girl she sees as so weak the outside world will certainly destroy her? The strong-arm technique obviously fails ("Even when I beat her, even as I beat her, she loved me, she just loved and smiled and hoped and waited, day-dreamed and night-dreamed, and waited and waited and waited ... I couldn't save her and I couldn't damage her. God knows, I tried" [134]), and the reader is left to decide whether the stepmother's actions are truly meant to help Cinderella.

Many retellings discussed in this dissertation have offered a tale which follows the trends of feminist progression, yet this is not always the case. Priscilla Galloway's tale⁴⁹ is told by the prince; readers will recognize it as a Cinderella retelling because there

⁴⁹ "The Prince," from her 1998 collection *Truly Grim Tales*.

is a marriage ball and the prince dances with a girl in glass slippers who runs away as the clock chimes, leaving her shoe behind. While this retelling presents many new facets to the tale — a prince who may or may not have homosexual tendencies; an undeniable foot fetish; a disregard for Cinderella’s traditional beauty, and might be hailed as an intriguing update due to its focus on the prince and his desires, it conforms to the antiquated, anti-feminist style so obvious in traditional versions. However, this tale can be considered progressive if viewed through the lens of gender construction; as noted, the prince does not behave in a traditional “manly” sense typical of fairy tale princes. In her article “The Mirror’s New Message? Gender in the Adolescent Postmodern Fairy Tale,” Judith Franzak notes: “feminist gender theory questions the binary opposition of male and female, arguing that gender is a social construct that intersects with other identity constructs such as race, class, and sexuality. Gender is not a static entity but a process” (56). This prince’s struggle to conform to the gendered expectations placed upon him by his father tentatively explores the third-wave focus of sexual orientation. These tales, which do not give voice to the traditional heroine or seem to advance her narrative, engage with feminist ideals and address second-wave criticism from a broader perspective than readers receive from tales which are told solely from Cinderella’s perspective.

Cinderella’s Dark Side

The concept of darkness in relation to Cinderella’s tale is not new; articles such as “The Darker Cinderella: Murder, Cannibalism and Incest in Some Cinderella Variants” (Knight, 2016), “Resistant Rituals: Self-Mutilation and the Female Adolescent Body in Fairy Tales and Young Adult Fiction” (Cowdy, 2012), and the humorously titled but

surprisingly in-depth “7 Really Dark Versions of Cinderella That’ll F*ck You Up!” (Vermon, 2017), remind readers of Cinderella’s somewhat violent past. In *Once Upon a Time (She Said)*, author Jane Yolen claims that “Cinderella” is the most changed fairy tale, specifically in regards to how this tale is rewritten and marketed for American audiences:

for the sake of Happy Ever After, the mass-market books have brought forward a good, malleable, forgiving little girl and put her in Cinderella’s slippers. However, in most of the Cinderella tales there is no forgiveness in the heroine's heart. No mercy. Just justice. In ‘The Cinder-Maid,’ (a European variant) the elder sisters hack off their toes and heels in order to fit the shoe. Cinderella never stops them, never implies that she has the matching slipper ... Cinderella never says a word of comfort. (224)

Perhaps tired of the dreamy, dreaming girl who has come to embody Cinderella, authors such as Tanith Lee and C.J. Redwine are returning this tale to its roots⁵⁰ reviving the old cinder-maid who wasn’t above a little murder and mayhem now and again.

Tanith Lee’s “When the Clock Strikes” (1983) is unabashedly dark; this Cinderella (Ashella) is vengeful, clever and murderous. A wonderfully feminist retelling, this is a macabre, satanic version in which Ashella’s mother was a witch who had schooled her in the black arts and who killed herself to save her daughter’s life when the townspeople came to slay them both. In order to regain her place as the last scion of the former ruling family, all having been killed by the current ruler, Ashella begins to play mad, covering herself with sackcloth and ashes to atone for her sin in being her mother’s daughter. The “prince” is the son of the man who killed all her relatives, so of course, the story ends with his murder — not *by* her but *because* of her. There are sufficient tropes

⁵⁰ Specifically, its Germanic and Italian roots, as the Grimms’ version is the tale Yolen references in the previous paragraph and readers will remember that Basile’s Cinderella killed her first stepmother.

to recognize this as a Cinderella-story, but it is unique enough that the author keeps making reference to the “other” story, as in “I hazard you have begun to recognize the story by now” (53), when remarking that Ashella plants a hazel tree over her mother’s ashes, and “Shall I finish the story, or would you rather I did not? It is not the ending you are familiar with” (62), after Ashella has cursed the prince and fled.

Yolen notes that the Cinderella of old had stood by while her stepsisters mutilated themselves, perhaps in retaliation for their poor treatment of her. Some second-wave retellings began to shift that narrative. In her 2009 article “Sisterhood Revisited During the Second Wave of Feminism,” Karen Kraulik notes that this wave, while fighting outwardly for equality with men, strove inwardly towards solidarity, towards forming coalitions which would highlight “the alliances women of different backgrounds formed to combat gender, race, and class inequalities,” looking for the intersectionality of “bridge issues such as poverty, abortion, and rape, that united women across differences” (142). In an attempt to distance her tale from those which pit women against each other, as the traditional pro-patriarchal tales did, Lee’s stepsisters actually try to befriend Ashella on numerous occasions, but after she continuously shuns them, they leave her alone. The stepmother complains to the father about her odd behavior, saying “Can you do nothing with that girl? People will say that I and my daughters are responsible for her condition and that I ill-treat the maid from jealousy of her dead mother” (52).

It has been noted that many fairy tales, Grimms’ in particular, are dark; they deal with subject matter which includes incest, bodily injury, rape, and murder. Through the Disneyfication of the Cinderella-tale, readers have come to expect some version of a happily-ever-after for this story, yet given the subject matter — death of beloved parents,

a physically and/or mentally abused child, self-mutilation, blinding, marriage to a practical stranger — turning this story into a dark tale takes little work. Presenting an alternate Cinderella with a feminist agenda (as Lee did with a heroine who worked actively to subvert the patriarchy and also by presenting a secondary storyline of women caring for each other) can be seen as a response to much second-wave Cinderella feminist criticism when this story was published in 1983.

Another point to consider in this genre of Cinderella stories is that the darkness in the character is brought about by trauma. In most Cinderella tales, the heroine has suffered, at a minimum, the loss of a beloved mother and misuse/abuse at the hands of her stepmother. In her article “The Thorns of Trauma: Torture, Aftermath, and Healing in Contemporary Fairy tale Literature,” Jeana Jorgenson contemplates the many instances of physical and mental trauma that the heroines of traditional fairy tales have suffered and how current retellings address these circumstances that, in times past, were accepted as a matter-of-fact part of the story: “I assert that retellings and adaptations from recent decades have made this implicit focus on trauma more explicit, with a grisly and morbid devotion to aspects considered dark and gruesome, and further, I argue that this shift has arisen in response to real-world feminist concerns with sexual violence and trauma” (50). Neither Grimms’ nor Perrault’s makes mention of the fate of Cinderella’s stepmother, but it is completely fathomable that the heroine would want revenge against a woman who treated her so miserably, repaying darkness with darkness.⁵¹ Empowering the heroine, even if it is through violent means, is not only, as Jorgenson claims, a response to actual

⁵¹ C.J. Redwine’s *The Blood Spell* (2019), modeled slightly after Perrault’s tale to include a pumpkin coach and magic slippers, portrays a heroine whose parents have been murdered and who actively pursues and kills the stepmother character, after suffering physical abuse at this woman’s hand.

feminist concerns, but is also a response to second-wave feminist criticism⁵² of Cinderella, which marked her as a passive creature reliant on others to act on her behalf.

Sex-Positive Cinderella

The Cinderella of Grimms' and Perrault's tales was from a good family; her sexuality is never mentioned overtly but, as a young lady of good family and because of the social mores of the times these versions were written, it can be assumed she is a virgin. In order for Cinderella to be more active, more intelligent, more embracing of her own potential, authors have fleshed out this previously one-dimensional character, bringing her sexuality to the forefront of her story. She is now represented in all spectrums of the sexual rainbow in true fourth-wave fashion: she is a lesbian; she is bisexual; she is transgender; she is promiscuous; she uses sex as a weapon; she is making her own choices.

Emma Donoghue's Cinderella is presented in her fairy tale collection *Kissing the Witch*.⁵³ There is no mention of an abusive step-family, but this heroine — plumbing the depths of despair after her mother's death — appears fully capable of punishing herself, forcing herself to do housework until the brink of exhaustion. She suffers a crisis of self, not daring to believe in a future and wondering why she lives when her mother is gone. The "fairy godmother" appears as an older woman, a friend of her late mother, who helps the girl go to the ball after bringing some rest to the girl's mind by showing her the mother's tree in the garden, allowing the girl the realization that she is not alone.

⁵² See Dworkin (1974); Weitzman (1972); and Thacker (2001).

⁵³ Donoghue's collection, published in 1997, offers a new take on thirteen traditional fairy tales, such as "Cinderella," which becomes "The Tale of the Shoe"; "Snow White," which becomes "The Tale of the Apple"; and "Sleeping Beauty," which becomes "The Tale of the Needle."

Ultimately, after three nights of dancing with the prince and the expected proposal of marriage, the girl returns home to the woman, whom she chooses over the prince.

Christina Bacchilega notes that:

the final line of ‘The Tale of the Shoe’ — the tale in which the Cinderella-like girl rejects the prince for the older and wondrous woman who showed her ‘how to waltz without getting dizzy’ — intimates an ephemeral or tentative happiness: ‘She then took me home, or I took her home, or we were both somehow taken to the closest thing’. For YA readers who for various reasons do not identify with the ubiquitous Disney princesses, Donoghue’s tales offer non-normative possibilities for coming-of-age experiences, including those of coming out, but no set paths or utopias. (59)

In an article for *Forum for World Literature Studies*, Qui Xiaoqing points out that while this tale ends in a non-traditional way, the more important focus is that it allows the reader to see the girl’s newfound maturity. Not only is the girl no longer lost, needing her mother’s presence in order to imagine a future for herself, but she has also outgrown the expected social norms and chooses with whom she will end her story: “Since the two female characters have bonded sufficiently, it does not make any difference whether it is the girl who takes the woman home, or it is the woman who takes the girl home. The social mind of the girl and the woman empowers both of them” (113).

Angela Carter’s seminal fairy tale collection *The Bloody Chamber* focuses unabashedly on the sexual nature of the characters, exploring their primal sides in a way her critics claimed verged on pornographic⁵⁴. In an article for the *Journal of the History of Sexuality*, Robin Sheets finds that Carter’s writing portrays her “protests against the repression of women’s sexual desire, her determination to break the ideological link between sex and romance” (641). In *American Ghosts and Old World Wonders* (1993),

⁵⁴ See (Lewallen:1988) and (Lau:2008).

Carter offers several approaches to Cinderella, delving into the carnal side of this traditionally sexless story. She begins exploring Grimms' Ashputtle, focusing intently on the mother. The nameless child who becomes Ashputtle finds herself now (perhaps unhappily) beholden to her mother's ghost — she is, after all, the one who has given her mother's spirit a place to roost by asking her father to bring back a tree branch. Carter skirts the unspoken sexual nature of mothers and fathers and also considers the removal of the stepsister's toe a symbolic castration, as the stepmother will go to any lengths to catch a son. She even hints that the stepsisters are Ashputtle's *half*sisters, perhaps explaining how her father was able to find a new wife so quickly. The next chapter in her Cinderella saga presents a heroine who steals away the man her stepmother was attempting to seduce. This work “offers a fairly unambiguous feminist document which . . . deconstructs the complicity of women themselves in the processes of patriarchy via a self-conscious rewrite of the Grimms' ‘Cinderella’” (Tiffin 71).

Transgender author Daniel Lavery re-envisioned Cinderella in his short story “The Thankless Child,” wherein the Cinderella character is written as a girl named Paul whose stepsisters are Gomer and Robin. The tale is modeled after Grimms' in some aspects (a tree planted over Paul's mother's grave provides a place of comfort and there is the requisite scene in which the birds aid Paul in doing, not the stepmother's bidding, but the godmother's) and after Perrault in others (the godmother provides Paul with clothes to attend the fancy party). While neither sex nor sexuality are directly written about, the naming conventions of the characters could imply the girls are transgender or non-binary (the author transitioned from female to male while writing this book). Also, in this world, when a couple marries, they decide jointly, regardless of sex, who will enact the part of

“husband” and who will be the “wife” – Paul marries the “prince” in the tale, who is the rector’s son.

Written in 2018, Lavery’s Cinderella-tale aligns with several fourth-wave ideals: inclusivity and acceptance are writ large on its pages. Carter’s and Donohue’s works, both published during the third wave, do not merely present Cinderella as a sexual being, but offer a deeper look into the sexual politics at play in her story. Neither of these works offer a traditional happily-ever-after ending (no prince, no wedding), yet Cinderella finds happiness elsewhere; responding to second-wave criticism, this princess’s sexuality offers her agency and power.

Not a Girl, Not Yet a Woman

Retellings directed specifically towards a young adult audience are not a new trend: what is new, however, is the change in storyline seen in YA versions of “Cinderella,” which have been published during the fourth-wave. The prince-as-savior trope seems to be losing favor, as Cinderella no longer waits for aid from the outside. Traditional sexual roles are cast aside, as is the virginal heroine. Cinderella is no longer relegated to the fireside; rather, her focus is turned outwards towards her community. Is it important that the changes in the new Cinderellas — the stories wherein the heroine shows an interest in social and sexual equality — offer less princess and more protest? In the past, a young reader might have easily allied herself with Cinderella, a member of a newly created family unit with strange siblings and an “evil” stepmother replacing the beloved mother who has passed. Today’s YA audience, members of Generations Z and

Alpha,⁵⁵ are more socially conscious than their predecessors; not only do they appreciate a shift in family dynamics, but they have an active interest in societal issues, believing in their ability to make a difference while also insisting that businesses and government work together to ensure a better future.⁵⁶

Among the modern retellings of Cinderella are *Ash* by Malinda Lo and *Charm* by Sarah Pinborough. In both versions the Cinderella character behaves with a much greater sense of autonomy than her Grimms or Perrault forebearers. Her sexuality is pronounced and she struggles with depression, disappointment, disillusionment, and doubt, yet she strives to make her own decisions. Rather than the pious morality of the older versions, the new tales bear an updated moral lesson: don't rely on a prince to make your dreams come true.

A pervasive theme throughout *Ash* is the shift among traditional gender roles and behaviors. Almost immediately we see that women hold a unique role in the court, that of the King's Huntress (typically the hunt is led by men). Additionally, instead of an indulgent fairy godmother we have a male fairy who will only grant wishes for a (sexual) price. Upon freeing herself from her stepmother's clutches, this crossdressing Cinderella shares intimate moments with both the male fairy and the female leader of the hunt.

In *Charm*, Sarah Pinborough's Cinderella is petulant, disillusioned, and most importantly, very sexually forward. The word virginity is never used; the reader is not sure if Cinderella is completely inexperienced but learns quickly that in her mind being

⁵⁵ Generation Z includes those born between 1997 and 2012; Generation Alpha are those born after 2012. <https://www.kasasa.com/exchange/articles/generations/gen-x-gen-y-gen-z>.

⁵⁶ <https://www.forbes.com/sites/deloitte/2021/07/22/for-millennials-and-gen-zs-social-issues-are-top-of-mind-heres-how-organizations-can-drive-meaningful-change/?sh=18381747450c>.

touched by boys is “just a game, and Cinderella was not the sort of girl to feel any shame over her body” (24). This frank acceptance of sexuality with no shame mirrors sentiment expressed by Sonya Barnett and Heather Jarvis, leaders of the SlutWalk⁵⁷ movement, who claimed that “women are tired of being oppressed by slut-shaming; of being judged by our sexuality.” This ownership of sexuality has resonated through the waves of feminism and continues to be of importance to fourth-wave authors and audiences.

Both of these coming-of-age Cinderella stories feature heroines whose escape from home is tied closely with sex, but neither heroine’s story ends in marriage. Regardless of the sexual revolution that has settled over the YA retellings, the focus is on the female’s autonomy. Her sexuality is her own, and she is not a prize for the prince to capture. Following a theory suggested by Betty Friedan in the seminal second-wave feminist guidebook *The Feminist Mystique*, these girl’s sexual identity is the key to their ability to leave a bad situation and forge their own lives.⁵⁸

A recent blog post on the Annie E. Casey Foundation⁵⁹ website reports that two of the top seven social issues of importance for Generation Z are civic engagement (specifically in regards to government taking a more active role in addressing problems) and economic security. *Disenchanted* by Megan Morrison addresses these issues within

⁵⁷ The SlutWalk movement began in 2011 after a group of students at the University of Toronto were told by a police constable to “avoid dressing like sluts” if they wished to prevent sexual assault. (Dow, 2014)

⁵⁸ “Psychoanalysts have long suspected that woman’s intelligence does not fully flower when she denies her sexual nature; but by the same token can her sexual nature fully flower when she must deny her intelligence, her highest human potential? . . . [woman’s] struggle for identity, autonomy — that ‘personally productive orientation based on the human need for active participation in a creative task’ — is inextricably linked with her sexual fulfillment, as a condition of her maturity” (271).

⁵⁹ According to linkedin.com, “The Annie E. Casey Foundation is a private national philanthropy that creates better futures for the nation’s children by strengthening families, building economic opportunities and transforming neighborhoods into safer and healthier places to live, work and grow,” www.linkedin.com/company/annie-e.-casey-foundation.

its Cinderella narrative. Morrison presents a modernized Cinderella — one who is striving to correct what she sees as social injustices and standing up for herself and others — in a fairy tale setting full of magical helpers and handsome princes.

Disenchanted reads a bit like an after-school television special; Morrison (a middle-school teacher) offers a didactic tale about sweat-shop labor. Her heroine, Ella, lost her mother due to harsh conditions in a garment factory and is determined to make changes for the poor people who still work there. Ella is paired with the prince for a class project in which the two propose a system of fair wages and treatment for the working-class (much to the king's chagrin). Ella convinces the prince to tour a factory so he can see first-hand the amount of child labor exploitation that is occurring: taking a page from history⁶⁰, Morrison places her hero and heroine in real danger as they are trapped in a factory fire, from which many do not escape. This tale has plenty of fairy magic — charmed shoes, dresses and even faces — but the true storyline is Ella's struggle to ensure the rulers of the kingdom realize the issues faced by the working class. Just as American consumers are encouraged to purchase items bearing a "Made in America" logo, Ella (and the prince) come up with a similar strategy to ensure fair labor practices. This Cinderella is a fourth-wave dream, socially conscious and courageous. These retellings all follow the current feminist-leaning YA trend of eschewing the traditional, helpless-heroine Cinderella-storyline for one whose heroine is clever and active, and whose prince (or lover) is a partner, not a savior.

This chapter has traced the feminist evolution of Cinderella retellings from works

⁶⁰ This incident mirrors the tragedy of the Triangle Shirtwaist factory fire (see Marsico: 2010).

produced before feminism was a widely articulated concept to those which embrace the newest fourth-wave ideals. Cinderella continues to gain agency, continues to shrug off her patriarchal coils and continues her march towards autonomy. There appears to be no end in the retelling and feminist revisions of this fairy tale.

Chapter Four

Filming Cinderella's Feminist Reformation

“You know this is just a fairy tale, right?”⁶¹

Cinderella's relevance in the twenty-first century can be attributed to numerous factors such as nostalgia, marketing, or pop culture; however, her continuous presence in America is easily correlated with her continual renaissance in film and print. In this chapter I will explore Cinderella's representation on film over the past seventy years, from Disney's 1950 animated *Cinderella* to the most recent film adaptation, Sony's 2021 live action *Cinderella*. I will analyze films produced during each of the feminist waves, paying particular attention to the shifts in character presentation and storyline that occur as filmmakers respond to feminist criticism and cultural shifts. This group of films will fall into one of two categories, the first being films which adhere closely to the Cinderella storyline as written by Grimms or Perrault and the second being films which present a Cinderella-story.⁶²

There are no shortages of movies which are based on the Grimms' or Perrault fairy-tale or which tell a Cinderella-story: IMdb.com⁶³ lists one hundred fifty-seven titles under the search term “Cinderella” and eighty-seven films under the term “Cinderella-

⁶¹ *Sex and the City*. Directed by Michael Patrick King, New Line Cinema, 20 May 2008.

⁶² As stated in Chapter One, for the purpose of this study the term Cinderella-story will be used to describe a retelling which, while not faithful to the traditional “Cinderella” storyline, bears enough similarities that a reader can recognize Cinderella themes throughout the piece.

⁶³ The International Movie Database “launched online in 1990 and is a subsidiary of Amazon.com since 1998 ... Our searchable database includes millions of movies, TV and entertainment programs and cast and crew members.” <https://help.imdb.com/article/imdb/general-information/what-is-imdb/>

story.” The films I selected for discussion in this chapter obviously represent a very small slice of the cinematic confection that is Cinderella. While there are countless presentations of Cinderella on film, I chose those which mirror shifts in feminist theory and ideals with the intention of examining pop culture reactions to feminist movements.

In the preface to “Cinderella” in the 2004 version of *The Annotated Brothers Grimm*, Maria Tatar acknowledged Hollywood’s reliance on this well-known story to provide a vehicle which can showcase a rising starlet and capture the rom-com cinematic market’s dollars:

If Cinderella has been reinvented by nearly every known culture, her story is also perpetually rewritten *within* any given culture. *Working Girl* with Melanie Griffith, *Pretty Woman* with Julia Roberts, *Ever After* with Drew Barrymore, and *Maid in Manhattan* with Jennifer Lopez: these films offer striking evidence that we continue to recycle the story to manage our cultural anxieties and conflicts about courtship and marriage. Few fairy tales have enjoyed the rich literary, cinematic, and musical afterlife of ‘Cinderella’, and even when the story is not reinvented in imaginative ways, it provides opportunities for new dialogues about what is at stake in romance. (115)

Romance is certainly an expected plotline in a Cinderella film. It is also, from a storytelling point of view, a necessary element when reminding viewers that the heroine is a Cinderella⁶⁴ — there must be a happily ever after, after all.

The Penultimate (Disney) Princess

In his book *The Enchanted Screen*, Jack Zipes traces Cinderella’s cinematic lineage back over one hundred and twenty years, noting that the first time she graced the silver screen was in a short film directed by Georges Méliès in 1899. Numerous versions

⁶⁴ Specifically in Cinderella-story films.

of the Cinderella fairy tale were filmed during the silent era — Walt Disney even produced a version in 1922 — but it wasn't until the 1950 animated Disney film was produced that America (and cinema viewers all over the globe) found a version that would provide this princess the springboard to cinematic longevity. Zipes cannot fathom why this, of all the versions, is the most beloved:

It is difficult to understand why this film, which resuscitated the Disney production of fairy tale films, had so much success. The music is mediocre; the plot is boring; and the themes are trite. The character of Cinderella, who loses both her parents within minutes of the beginning of the film, is that of embodied sweetness and helplessness. If it were not for the animals, the two cute mice Jac and Gus, the wonderfully mean cat Lucifer, and the loyal dog Bruno the bloodhound ... the film would not be worth mentioning in the Cinderella discourse. (180)

Zipes fails to see that the very things he dismisses — mediocre music, charming animals and a sweet heroine — are the things that made this a beloved *family* classic. Children who loved the silly animals and who memorized the simple songs when the film was initially released watched it with their children upon the film's re-release, who then rented it for *their* children at the video store, etc. In her article “‘Some Day My Prince Will Come’: Female Acculturation through the Fairy Tale,” Marcia Lieberman claims: “we know that children are socialized or culturally conditioned by movies, television programs, and the stories they read or hear, and we have begun to wonder at the influence that children's stories and entertainments had upon us, though we cannot now measure the extent of that influence” (384). I find that influence *can* be measured through Cinderella's endurance in film: Disney's charming, if saccharine, happily-ever-after ending created a longing for the same in viewers' own lives, and directors have

spared no effort in offering their audience this opportunity, if only at the theater or on their television screens.

Yet for all the family-friendliness of this film, folklore and feminist scholars alike attack it on all sides. Folklore purists, such as Zipes above, complain that the coy and clever Cinderella of Perrault's fairy tale is missing in this bland representation, and feminist scholars complain of her lack of gumption. In her book *Kiss Sleeping Beauty Goodbye*, Madonna Kolbenschlag sums up one recurring point in Cinderella's feminist critique: "Cinderella believes that she belongs where she is" (86) — in other words, she relies on rescue from outside saviors since she has no concept of leaving her situation and rescuing herself. Jane Yolen, who believes Cinderella to be a character of action and of relatability,⁶⁵ disparages this saccharine presentation: "The Walt Disney film set a new pattern for Cinderella: a helpless, hapless, pitiable, useless heroine who has to be saved time and time again by the talking mice and birds because she is 'off in a world of dreams'" (225). While the feminist criticism of Disney's *Cinderella* is not without merit, it must be noted that the film was produced well before "feminism" was a byword and certainly before second-wave critics were influencing creative decisions. My discussion of Disney's 1950 animated *Cinderella* will be continued in Chapter Five, which focuses on the industry which grew from this animated film and the feminist discourse surrounding this growth.

Disney's live action version of the same film, produced in 2015 (well into the

⁶⁵ Yolen finds that, "Cinderella speaks to all of us in whatever skin we inhabit: the child mistreated, a princess or highborn lady in disguise bearing her trials with patience, fortitude and determination" (221).

fourth wave) had an opportunity to address all the slings and arrows the 1950 version had suffered. Director Kenneth Branagh's *Cinderella* offered a slightly changed heroine, yet she was still lambasted for many of the same reasons as her 1950's forebearer. Ella is admonished by her dying mother to "have courage and be kind": in a 2019 article regarding recent Cinderella revisions, Rosalind Sibielski finds that "the protagonist in the 2015 Disney *Cinderella* insistently models a return to her passive predecessors, internalizing her mother's dying words to "have courage and be kind" to mean accepting the abuse of her stepmother and stepsisters with-out as much as a single protest" (596). Ella's courage seems very faint until the very end of the movie, when she presents a showing of pluck as she refuses to go along with Lady Tremaine's plan to be the power behind the throne should Ella marry the prince: "I was not able to protect my father from you, but I will protect the prince --and the kingdom." Throughout most of the film Ella relies predominantly on kindness to make it through her days as the new family drudge. In an article for *Soletras Revista* Mark Macleod finds that Ella's kindness is actually the characteristic which gives her agency, the lack of which has long been pointed out as Cinderella's greatest weakness by feminist critics. He finds Ella's focus on kindness throughout the film as akin to self-help; by nourishing this trait she finds strength within herself. He claims: "Ella's . . . agency consists first in being kind to others, as her mother begged her to be . . . The emphasis on self-help in Branagh's *Cinderella* derives from the social agenda set by US daytime television talk shows, principally by Oprah Winfrey . . . You will eventually express your inner goodness, even if by hard workshopping rather than physical labour, and it will be acknowledged" (264).

Whether Ella's kindness as agency led to her reception as a more progressive

character or not, her appearance seems to have generated the most criticism for this film. Like her animated predecessor, she is presented as a beautiful doll even while doing the chores. When her magical night comes, she is the picture-perfect, wasp-waisted princess. According to numerous interviews, star Lily James admitted to several weeks of an all-liquid diet and tight corsetry to fit into the magical ball gown: “The dress that [costume designer] Sandy Powell created -- I mean I think she's a genius and I'm grateful for that dress -- but it was like torture," James said. "It was so tight and delicate” (Yahr). Even *Vogue* magazine, which celebrates fashion above all else, noted: “with the waist suffocated in a tiny corset, the long filming times were a physical challenge for the actress, who could not breathe well” (Reynaud). While we expect movie stars to be glamorous and thin, having a beautiful young girl admit to starving herself for a few scenes makes any feminist progression Disney may have made with film seemingly vanish.

Lady Tremaine’s character is the biggest change in the film; she has shifted from a rigid, grey-haired matron to a fashionable, fête-able woman of gorgeous middle age. And yet . . . she is too old. Too old to compete with Cinderella’s beauty, too old to contemplate love again, too old to have hope.⁶⁶ The unspoken ageism is a fair point for current feminist discussion/criticism against this film. When asked by Ella why she has always treated the girl so cruelly, Lady Tremaine answers; “Because you are young and innocent and good and I . . .” and then she turns on her heel to lock the girl in the attic. Of

⁶⁶ Lady Tremaine details her misery as she tells Cinderella this story: “Once upon a time, there was a beautiful young girl who married for love . . . But, one day, her husband, the light of her life, died. The next time, she married for the sake of her daughters, but that man too, was taken from her . . . and so, I lived unhappily ever after.”

course, she mentions “young” first; even Kate Blanchett, beautiful and stylish, is no match for the allure of youth.

In a *Women and Therapy* article on media representations of older women, authors Dafna Lemish and Varda Muhlbauer note that the blatant ageism shown on screen, even directed towards classically beautiful representations of older women, is decidedly anti-feminist:

These media-created fantasies of equality [presenting an older actress as equally beautiful to a younger co-star] appear to be feminist in their outward appearance, but in actuality are dedicated to the undoing of feminism: They build upon ageism in their efforts to promote eternal “youth” through a blooming industry of cosmetic products, plastic surgery, beauty parlors, diets and pills, fashion, and an unattainable life style of leisure and perfect health. This insistence on presenting women who live, effortlessly, a highly successful life ignores the majority of older women who are not rich, not White, not ‘hot’” (174).

While this film took the tiniest step towards a more active Cinderella, it seems that such a small step was barely worth putting on the glass slipper. Viewers of the film, while noticing many stylized differences, will find the film closely follows its 1950 predecessor in storyline. Disney has had some success with presenting princesses who are very active in securing their own happy ending (Merida from *Brave* and the two *Frozen* sisters are recent examples); it seems there is no need for a feminist take on Cinderella, who still remains the most popular of all Disney’s princesses. Although Disney chooses not to present a more progressive Cinderella, other filmmakers have made an attempt to do so, with varying degrees of success.

#woke Cinderella

In a recent collection of essays focusing on twenty-first century retellings of “Cinderella,” editor Suzy Woltmann explains how the term “woke” applies to this perennial princess. The term signifies:

an adaptation that destabilizes traditional forms of authoritative voice and extends the legacy of the ‘Cinderella’ fairy tale for a contemporary audience. This may be because the adaptation reframes the tale to point out gender and sexual identity-based oppression and allow for feminist viewpoints; creates space for divergent and diverse forms of representation; reproduces the tale in a manner that creates new avenues for analysis; or encourage us to post-human and post-truth narratives ... Woke is a term that indicates societal awareness of traditionally oppressive practices and the ways in which contemporary literature tries to subvert or otherwise destabilize them.” (6)

Transforming Cinderella from the model of virtuous femininity to an unruly, rebellious and strong figure can be seen as mirroring the grrrl power movement-within-a-movement of the third-wave. According to Rosalind Sibielski, this shift in portrayal “ostensibly offered an alternative to hegemonic constructions of adolescent femininity by linking [the old and new depiction of the Cinderella character’s] individual identities as girls and their social empowerment within patriarchy to their cultivation of toughness, self-confidence, and assertiveness” (585).

While “woke” is certainly a twenty-first century term, the 1998 film *Ever After* presented third-wave audiences with a Cinderella character who broke with traditional Cinderella-like behavior. While Danielle (Cinderella) is a far cry from Disney’s princess (openly displaying her mental and physical strength), the feminist representation is shallow, as nothing changes in the underlying patriarchal structure of the story.

Additionally, Danielle is the only woman in the film who offers an exception to the rule of feminine behavior, and while she proves herself to be both clever and resilient, she remains caught in the princess trap — marrying the first handsome man who comes her way. In the book *Fairy Tale Films: Visions of Ambiguity*, Christy Williams explains how this film, while presenting a progressive princess, fails to present a progressive story:

The reversal of the passive-heroine trope — while certainly offering an alternative to the weak-minded Cinderellas of the past — actually naturalizes gender expectations and the idea that demonstrations of female strength are akin to gender equality. Danielle’s power surfaces in reaction to and is enabled by heteropatriarchal ideology . . . Female power in *Ever After* is contained, undermined, and erased. The men are still in control, and despite Danielle’s strength, she has no more options than the passive Cinderellas from whom she supposedly differs.” (114)

In an article about postmodern approaches to fairy tales, Cathy Preston describes *Ever After* as an “American popular culture production of the Cinderella tale that cleverly blurs the boundaries between folktale and legend in an attempt to retrieve the romantic possibilities of ‘true love’ for the generation currently raised in the aftermath/afterglow of second-wave feminism and post-Marxist critique” (200). This Cinderella is clever and caring (she masquerades as a noblewoman to buy back an aged family servant whom her stepmother had sold for tax money), quick-witted and strong (she hoists the prince over her shoulders in an attempt to free him from brigands) and of course she is beautiful. Feminist critics might find this film lacks a progressive agenda, but this strong and savvy heroine begins the movement towards a more fem-positive princess.

The most recent installation in the Cinderella film canon is Sony’s 2021 *Cinderella*, presenting Hollywood’s first Latina actress (Camila Cabello) in the leading

role. Attempting to soar into the fourth-wave woke stratosphere, this film presents a heroine who can't imagine marrying the prince if it means she won't be able to own a dress shop; a prince who doesn't want to rule the kingdom and his highly capable sister who does, but is overlooked due to her gender; a stepmother who preaches love of money over all else; and a fairy godmother who tells Cinderella that if she can just get to the ball she will "meet a bunch of rich people who will change your life." Unfortunately, while pushing Cinderella to chase her dreams, she is provided the message that she can't succeed unless a stranger bankrolls her. In an article for the Cornell Sun, Sophia Gottfried points out that the "glorification of bourgeois patronage of entrepreneurs is uncomfortable, to say the least, the implication being that Cinderella needs to rely on the enlightened upper class to save her from her ignorant peasant village." While finding a wealthy patron to support a fledgling business makes practical sense, vocalizing it in such a way betrays the notion of Cinderella's independent success.

This film does succeed in presenting the fourth-wave message of inclusivity; the cast (apart from the four members of the ruling family and Cinderella's own family) is racially diverse and the fairy godmother, played by Emmy-winning actor Billy Porter, is now titled the *fabulous* godmother. Discussing the role, Porter recalled: "it evolved and the thing that came out of the evolution was 'magic has no gender,' so make it genderless, gender-free, gender-fluid whatever you want to say. There is no gender."⁶⁷ Previously, the 2015 film *After the Ball* offered a crossdressing Cinderella and a prince who didn't mind kissing her male alter ego. This film didn't offer a commentary about the

⁶⁷ Adekaiyero, Ayomikun. "Billy Porter explains why he's playing a genderless Fairy Godmother in 'Cinderella' remake: 'Magic has no gender'." Insider.com, 03 September 2021.

character's sexuality, yet openly embraced homosexual and non-binary characters: it is less woke than playful. It might be reaching a bit too far to say that *After the Ball* paved the way for greater representation and inclusion of LGBTQ characters in Cinderella films; what can be said, however, is that neither of these two films made any character's sexuality a point of discussion. The characters simply *were*, and there was no thought of their being accepted (or not) due to their personal identities which is in keeping with the fourth wave tenet of inclusivity.

Second-Wave Success

In the early years of the second wave, Cinderella's fairy tale was presented on the silver screen numerous times. Small changes began to be seen in the story, changes which showed progression towards a more pro-feminist Cinderella. *The Slipper and the Rose: The Story of Cinderella*⁶⁸ was a musical romp through the kingdom of Euphrania. Cinderella's father has died and she is banished to the kitchen, only this heroine does not suffer to hold her tongue when her new place in the household is defined by her stepmother, telling the lady and her daughters in no uncertain terms that she hates them. The prince has refused to make a match with a princess of the nearest kingdom, so naturally the king declares he must choose a wife at an upcoming ball. This prince finds the idea of a "bride-finding ball" distasteful, telling his father: "I totally refuse to take part in such an embarrassing charade . . . the very idea of giving a ball and inviting a selection of titled wall flowers to vie for my hand is utterly repulsive — degrading to all concerned." The story progresses in a predictable manner; Cinderella and the prince fall

⁶⁸ This 1976 musical, directed by Robert Forbes, starred Richard Chamberlin as the prince and Gemma Craven as Cinderella.

in love and he presents her to his father as his bride-to-be. In an unusual twist, Cinderella is told that the kingdom will be at war if the prince does not make a royal alliance, so she agrees to flee and clear the way for another bride. Of course, the fairy godmother sets everything to rights in the end and Cinderella is reunited with her prince.

Several notable changes occur in this film which set it apart from its pre-second-wave predecessors. Echoing Alison Lurie's comment noted earlier in this chapter, the prince rails against the upcoming ball: "It's like some sordid beauty contest with me as the grand prize." This prince wants to marry a woman of his own choosing and wishes the neighboring princesses to be free to find a love-match on their own, championing (in a regal manner) the second-wave ideal of sexual freedom. Later in the film when Cinderella has fled and he agrees to marry the woman of his father's choosing, he assures his father that the marriage will be in name only and that he will not force the princess to bear a child, which aligned with the feminist fight against marital rape.⁶⁹ The viewer also sees a change in Cinderella, who not only stands up to her stepmother (until threatened with the orphanage) but sacrifices her own happiness to prevent war in the kingdom. These changes might have gone unnoticed in the frothy confection of song and romance that this film presented, but they show decided progression in shifting Cinderella's tale in a feminist direction.

⁶⁹ Published by the University of Chicago Law School in 2000, Jill Hasday's paper "Contest and Consent: A Legal History of Marital Rape" notes that: "The vision of marital rape as uncontested terrain until the last quarter of the twentieth century effaces a vibrant movement in opposition. Feminists, in the first organized woman's rights movement and on its left-ward periphery, demanded a woman's right to control her own person in marriage, arguing for both an enforceable prerogative to refuse marital intercourse and palatable socio-economic alternatives to submission. This campaign was intense, public, and remarkably frank" (36).

In the grand style of Benny Hill, Britain's Danny La Rue led the cast of *Cinderella: The Shoe Must Go On* (1986), a slapstick presentation full of performers in drag. La Rue played the evil stepmother, Countess Voluptua, who married Cinderella's father strictly for "your money and your title / I married you for your home and your title / your companionship and your title." Her daughters Magnesia and Amnesia were no match for Cinderella's blond beauty, and the tale ends as expected. While it might be easy to dismiss these amusing performances as bearing no relevance to critical discourse, lampooning what can actually be a quite dismal tale (except for the last few moments) reduces the violence on the part of the stepmother and sisters. Presenting these characters as buffoons instead of the traditionally "evil" women, and placing an emphasis on comedy, robs the villains of their power and therefore lessens the stigma of the wicked (female) characters. Yes, the stepmother still refuses to let Cinderella go to the ball and yes, Cinderella must still be rescued by her fairy godmother and by the prince, but the vitriolic animosity normally emitted by the stepmother and sisters is missing. This film and its changes, albeit done for laughs, was a forerunner for third- and fourth-wave retellings which diminish the evil connotation of the older woman (and her ugly daughters).

Cindy Sings the Blues

Numerous musical versions of *Cinderella* have been produced and many are fairly faithful to either the Grimms' or Perrault tales. Famed musical duo Richard Rogers and Oscar Hammerstein brought their version to television in 1957 starring Julie Andrews. This Cinderella appears even more passive than the Disney version as she

sings, “I’m as mild and as meek as a mouse / When I hear a command, I obey;” her only escape from drudgery coming when she imagines herself as a grand lady. In typical pre-second wave fashion, the prince sings to Cinderella, “Do I love you because you’re beautiful / or are you beautiful because I love you? / Am I making believe I see in you / a girl too lovely to be really true? / Do I want you because you’re wonderful / or are you wonderful because I want you? / Are you the sweet invention of a lover’s dream / or are you really as beautiful as you seem?⁷⁰” In this film, Cinderella’s beauty is merely a reflection of the prince’s interest in her; without his focus she might as well be invisible. The reliance on beauty as the main characteristic of a fairy tale princess has long been decried by feminist critics: Alison Lurie writes that “the beautiful girl does not have to *do* anything to merit being chosen; she does not have to show pluck, resourcefulness, or wit; she is chosen because she is beautiful . . . Cinderella instantly captivates her prince during a ball that amounts to a beauty contest . . . since the heroines are chosen for their beauty, not for anything they do, they seem to exist passively until they are seen by the hero” (386).

Rogers and Hammerstein’s musical was produced again in 1965 with few changes from the 1957 version and yet again in 1997. The latter version, while remaining closely faithful to the original script, brought about one great change which aligned with the third-wave focus of broadening the feminist movement to be more racially inclusive.

⁷⁰ These lyrics are comparable to those from a 1968 Cinderella-story film, Barbra Streisand’s *Funny Girl*, “You are the beautiful reflection / of his love’s affection / the walking illustration / of his adoration / His love makes you beautiful / so beautiful / You ask your looking glass what is it / makes me so exquisite / the answer to that query / comes back ‘Dearie / His love makes you beautiful / so beautiful / so beautiful’” — yet another example of a character whose beauty is only relevant when it is appreciated by a man.

Teen popstar Brandy Norwood, Grammy-winning superstar Whitney Houston, and Oscar winner Whoopi Goldberg headlined a multi-racial cast which not only portrayed a Black Cinderella and fairy-godmother, but also featured several racially diverse families.

Although the casting was a huge departure from previous Cinderella films, the script was purposely not altered to point out this fact, save for a small revision in the stepsister's song which had referred to Cinderella's white complexion.⁷¹ "Evil stepmother"

Bernadette Peters noted during a recent cast reunion that "it was an honor to be part of something so wonderful back then . . . it was multicultural, and it was just so wonderful that children watching it could just enjoy it and all the different kinds of people that were in it, and not even question it." Cinderella's prince, Philipino-American actor Paolo Montalban, remarked "to all the people who were wondering how an African-American mother and a Caucasian father can have an Asian son⁷² . . . the genetic math is love plus love equals love" (Jones, ew.com). While the first presentation of Rodgers and Hammerstein's *Cinderella* was televised pre-second-wave and offers a woefully anti-feminist heroine, this third version with its multi-racial cast certainly worked towards third-wave demands for diversity.

⁷¹ Screenwriter Robert Freeman discussed changing the lyrics: "I also knew that in "The Stepsister's Lament," they talk about Cinderella's skin being pale and her neck white as a swan's. I just thought it would be horrible to have them sing that stuff, so I judiciously changed some lyrics. I never told anybody. I never got permission from the Rodgers and Hammerstein Organization. We're talking maybe three to four words at the most, but it was my secret." <https://www.shondaland.com/inspire/a13138172/brandy-whitney-houston-oral-history-cinderella/>.

⁷² In this film, Whoopi Goldberg portrays the queen and Victor Garber the king.

Working Class Cinderella-Stories

Tess⁷³ and Marissa's⁷⁴ Cinderella-stories are centered around their jobs: secretary and maid. Theirs are rags-to-riches tales; as adults they are not hampered by the dictates of parental figures, although Marissa's own mother does provide a negative voice in *Maid in Manhattan*, reminding her daughter that she is not good enough to date her Prince Charming and that she should be satisfied being a maid. Each character has an evil stepmother-figure who is determined to keep her from her fairy-tale ending, one a scheming boss, the other a well-meaning but classist mother. Each character also has the defining Cinderella-at-the-ball moment, when her heretofore hidden beauty is revealed with the help of a makeover and a fabulous dress. In addition to the Cinderella aspects of these films, both are centered around a female character who wants to advance at work and both are held back by another female character. The plot of *Working Girl* revolves around the second-wave tenet of equality in the workplace while an underlying theme of *Maid in Manhattan* follows the third-wave struggles against classism and racism.

Working Girl, the Staten Island Cinderella-story from famed 1980's director Mike Nichols, presents an uncultured but intelligent and highly motivated heroine (Tess) and a villain (Katharine) who serves as both fairy godmother and evil stepmother. Katharine's character is the more interesting of the two (in terms of the Cinderella-story), as in Katharine we see the blending of the two most powerful female figures in "Cinderella." Her fairy godmother traits shine (albeit a bit insincerely) at the beginning of the film when she advises Tess to dress for success, which ultimately leads to Tess's makeover

⁷³ Melanie Griffith's character in the 1988 film *Working Girl*

⁷⁴ Jennifer Lopez' character in the 2002 film *Maid in Manhattan*

and wardrobe update. She also offers Tess a bit of self-affirming advice: “Tess, you know, you don't get anywhere in this world by waiting for what you want to come to you: you make it happen.” At this point in the film viewers have already seen Katharine’s shift to evil stepmother: Tess finds a note Katharine has written detailing her plan to pass off Tess’s business idea as her own and, in a scene which will put viewers in mind of the moment Cinderella’s stepmother refuses to let her attend the ball, Katharine bursts into a boardroom, denounces Tess as an imposter and forces Tess to run away in tears. In an article for *Christianity and Literature*, Russell Peck examines how *Working Girl* fits into the Cinderella-story framework. He writes that:

after the 1950s and 60s it has been the fashion to rewrite fairy tales, particularly the Cinderella narrative. Those attempts that have been most successful have addressed emotional politics; those that fail function solely as propaganda. The agenda of *Working Girl* is situated in the circumstances of its heroine as she yearns to cross barriers, rebounds from false starts and perverse princes, but maintains both her dream and a clear head despite the weird twists of fortune. (466)

The “perverse princes” in this film are myriad: Tess’s boyfriend Mick is unfaithful; her male boss sends her to a “meeting” with a man who immediately tries to assault her; even her prince (Jack) initially leers at her at the cocktail party before approaching her at the bar. Jack comments that he notices her because of her designer dress and they engage in small talk without exchanging names. While this exchange mirrors the charming moments in “Cinderella” in which the prince and Cinderella interact without knowing who the other is, in this film the encounter comes across as predatory and sexist.

The male gaze is further delighted in a scene where Tess prepares for Katharine’s return by frantically cleaning Katharine’s apartment while wearing only a pair of

underwear. Peck claims that “*Working Girls* speaks efficiently through the conventions of cinema and mythology to explore life in the 1980s, particularly the hollow interchangeability of business and gender exploitation. Tess attempts to keep sex and business separate [...] sexism is a hobble she struggles with” (474). Peck is blind to his own sexism — he quotes Pauline Kael who describes the scene as “a pecky porno tease as she bustles about cleaning Weaver’s house while wearing undies” (80) — but sees the scene instead as Tess preparing to embark on the final phase of her Cinderella journey. He claims that “Tess is still Cinderella, stripped of her masquerade and cleaning up for her stepsister” (477), while I find that if the same scene had been shot with Tess wearing shorts and a t-shirt there would have been no difference in the narrative of the story. Tess’s Cinderella ending comes not when she marries the prince, but in true second-wave style when she gets a big office with an assistant of her own, having finally been seen as a business asset by the company’s leadership rather than as merely a pretty secretary.

Maid in Manhattan’s (2002) Marissa⁷⁵ portrays a single mom with a dead-beat ex-husband and an immigrant mother who believes Marissa’s desire for a better life means she is striving above her station. Her struggles against classism and racism — challenges tackled during the third-wave — are summed up through an encounter she has in the upscale hotel where she works as she is dismissed by a guest: “She’s a maid⁷⁶ . . . she barely speaks English.” Through a comic case of mistaken identity in which she meets a visiting politician, she is asked to attend a gala event as his guest. The efforts of

⁷⁵ Played by Latina actress Jennifer Lopez.

⁷⁶ Marissa’s co-worker secretly submitted an application on her behalf for the hotel management program, for which Marissa believed herself to be unqualified. She was accepted and began the training program prior to this encounter.

the entire hotel staff assist in turning her into a princess — her dress is a gorgeous gauzy pink, reminiscent of the dress Disney’s birds and mice made for Cinderella. She even has the fleeing-from-the-prince-down-a-long-stairwell scene, minus losing a magical slipper. Her mistaken identity catches up to her and she loses her job, going home dejectedly to her tiny apartment where her mother is babysitting Marissa’s son. Her mother knows about the whole situation and advises Marissa to call a friend who owns a cleaning service to beg for a job:

Mother - “What were you thinking going out with someone like that . . . you had to pretend to be somebody else so he would go out with you?”

Marissa - “It must really burn you that I think I have the right to go out with him.”

Mother - “You don’t . . . you want to end up back in the projects? Keep dreaming dreams that will never happen. You want to put food on the table, call Señora Rodriguez.”

Marissa - “I’m gonna find a job as a maid in some hotel. After some time passes, I’m gonna apply for the management program, and when I get the chance to be a manager — and I will Ma, I know I will — I’m gonna take that chance . . . without your voice in my head telling me that I can’t.”

In keeping with the Cinderella-storyline, Marissa and her politician embark on their happily-ever-after in the ending scene of the movie, but the viewer also sees a copy of *Hotel Management* magazine with Marissa on the cover, next to an article titled “The Maid Also Rises: Growing Your Own, The New Breed of Manager.” Also featured on the cover are some of her former co-workers, now managers as well, several of whom are women of color. This Cinderella-story has managed to tackle third-wave issues in a charming rom-com way, yet the scene in which Marissa tells her mother she knows she can be a manager — overcoming race and class divides in doing so — offers a heartfelt look into the very issues third-wave feminists worked to overcome.

Do these working-class Cinderella films take a stance for feminism by providing the heroine the opportunity to make her own choices, which, in both cases, include choosing a very wealthy prince? In his 2016 article “The Triumph of the Underdog: Cinderella’s Legacy,” Jack Zipes calls this idea ridiculous, claiming that simply because these heroines are active and assertive does not make their stories progressively feminist: he finds that such thinking:

merely rationalizes the sequence of demeaning behavior that the female protagonists must exhibit: they must obsequiously learn the male rules of the game to attain status and wealth, while believing they are making a stand for women’s souls. A true rebellion is out of the question. They mount their male trophies while being mounted themselves as complicit in ways males fantasize about new kinds of Cinderellas. (384)

I find Zipes’ condemnation of these heroines callous: certainly Tess, struggling to find her corporate footing in the late 1980’s, *had* to learn the male rules of the game, as there were very few women in positions of power from which she could seek mentorship. Marissa looked up to her female manager and wanted to emulate her, never considering how a man might go about becoming a manager. The fact that these characters had romantic attachments in the film, and the fact that both men were successful in their career fields, does not negate the women’s success, achieved through their own hard work. These films, depicting women achieving equity with male counterparts and success despite poor beginnings, are second- and third-wave depictions of feminist success.

Fairy Tales *Do* Come True

The television series *Sex and the City* has been praised as a sex-positive feminist depiction of women in the twentieth-century and decried as an anti-feminist depiction of

women whose entire existences revolved around a traditional television marriage plot.⁷⁷

The 2008 leap from small to big screen offered viewers the chance to view this story through a fairy tale lens:

many early twenty-first-century films, regardless of their classification as comedy, drama, or fantasy, make use of fairy-tale elements drawn from a range of canonical images and topoi, such as ... the magic slipper in the happy ending of *Sex and the City*. What is new here, as I see it, is not the reproduction of isolated fairy-tale symbols and images in new contexts, but that their utilization in branding “new” products often rests on the marketability of mixing and parodying these iconic bits.” (Bacchilega 111)

While the television series was not presented as a Cinderella-story except by the farthest stretch of the imagination (the heroine *did* land her prince in the very last episode) the movie quickly played into the Cinderella theme of fairy tale endings. In an early scene, Carrie⁷⁸ is seen reading a Cinderella storybook to a friend’s young daughter. The audience watches as she recites “and Cinderella and the Prince lived happily ever after” before passing along some grown up wisdom to this toddler; “You know that this is just a fairy tale, right sweetheart? Things don’t always happen like this in real life. I just think you should know that now.” Moments later Carrie receives some happy news from the child’s mother and we hear her voiceover: “I guess in certain houses fairy tales do come true.” At the end of the film, after much tumultuous romantic drama with her prince, he finally proposes. Instead of a diamond ring, however, he seals the deal by placing a designer shoe on her dainty foot, in the most modern-day Cinderella ending one could

⁷⁷ In the book *Reading Sex and the City*, Astrid Henry discusses this show “in the light of third-wave feminism and concludes by saying that the series reflects an important but limited vision of female empowerment, a feminism that mirrors contemporary third-wave attempts to celebrate both women’s power and sexuality” (Adriaens, 180).

⁷⁸ Carrie Bradshaw, played by actress Sarah Jessica Parker, is the lead character of the *Sex and the City* television series and films.

imagine. Regardless of whether critics see the character of Carrie Bradshaw as feminist or not, none can deny that even this contemporary woman (and her millions of faithful fans) is susceptible to the romantic dream provided by “Cinderella.”

Popular culture platforms such as film and television are often used to mirror societal issues and changes. While the viewer might not expect to receive a lesson in feminist theory when watching a fairy tale film, some filmmakers and directors have attempted to change Cinderella and her tale to reflect the ideals of current feminist thought. While feminist criticism is still largely negative as a whole in reference to Cinderella’s onscreen presence, the films discussed in this chapter show a continued attempt to incorporate feminist ideals into their presentations.

Chapter Five

Examining Disney's *Cinderella*

“Did you ever see such a beautiful dress?”⁷⁹:

The previous chapter began with what fairy tale scholars and fans alike would generally agree to be the quintessential Cinderella film, Walt Disney Studios 1950 animated *Cinderella*. This chapter will undertake to examine Disney's Cinderella both as a film character and as a merchandising opportunity, as well as the various ways that feminist critics have responded to this seemingly unassuming but tremendously powerful childhood icon. Not only has Disney built a film empire on the back of this petite princess (and her princess-sisters, Snow White and Sleeping Beauty), but the promise of happily ever after which *Cinderella*⁸⁰ delivers has blossomed into a billion-dollar wedding industry, with Cinderella's castle at the Disney World theme park being the dream wedding destination for many starry-eyed Cinderella brides. This chapter will also examine the desire for Cinderella's fairy tale wedding and discuss feminist response to such events.

America's Cinderella

Scholars and fairy tale purists know that the Cinderella story varies from nation to nation, while European Cinderellas take the form of the German Ashputtle or the French Cendrillon, the American Cinderella is clearly the one created by Walt Disney. Folklorist

⁷⁹ *Cinderella*. Directed by Clyde Geronimi, Wilfred Jackson and Hamilton Luske, Walt Disney Productions, 4 Mar 1950.

⁸⁰ Unless otherwise noted in the text, any reference to the *Cinderella* film in this chapter refers specifically to the 1950 animated Disney film.

Kay Stone discusses Disney's Americanization of the traditional märchen⁸¹ tales in general by noting that the studio "makes the heroines and heroes more interesting, adding humor, subtracting magic and downplaying royalty" (*Some Day Your Witch Will Come*, 27). While there have been innumerable retellings, revisions, re-castings, and reformations, the sweet blonde with a heart full of dreams and a house full of mice is undoubtedly the first image that comes to the typical American mind when the name Cinderella is heard.⁸² In his book *Fairy Tale as Myth/Myth as Fairy Tale* (1994), Jack Zipes writes of Walt Disney:

His technical skills and ideological proclivities were so consummate that his signature has obfuscated the names of Charles Perrault, the Brothers Grimm, Hans Christian Andersen, and Collodi. If children or adults think of the great classical fairy tales today, be it *Snow White*, *Sleeping Beauty*, or *Cinderella*, they will think Walt Disney. Their first and perhaps lasting impressions of these tales and others will have emanated from a Disney film, book, or artefact. (74)

Concurring with Zipes, Naomi Wood relates her experience of introducing the literary versions of Cinderella to her university students: "after dutifully reading the variance of 'Cinderella' by Perrault and the Grimms, my students will often politely tell me that these new versions are all very well, but that they prefer the 'original', by which they mean Disney" (25).

Disney's Americanization of Cinderella is more nuanced than Kay Stone's

⁸¹ I use the German term "märchen" which simply means fairy- or folktale (the original title of the Grimms' collection is *Kinder- und Hausmärchen*) to speak collectively of the traditional European Cinderellas.

⁸² To test this theory, I decided to type "Cinderella" into the search function of that all-American retailer Wal-Mart's online store – resulting in over 1000 items available for purchase. The first search page shows forty items for sale of which twenty-eight showcase Disney's princess. Of the twelve items which do not feature Disney's Cinderella, eight are a doll or dress-up outfit which mirror the Disney character or her clothing, <https://www.walmart.com/search?q=cinderella&typeahead=cindere>.

depiction above, however. More than simply making Cinderella more funny or interesting, she became a romantic figure. The Disney film opens with the song lyrics “Cinderella, you’re as lovely as your name” — this is in direct contradiction to both the etymology of the name (formed from the ashes or cinders in which the truly nameless märchen girl is forced to work and sleep) and the fact that the märchen Cinderella is portrayed as perpetually dirty⁸³, while Disney’s Cinderella is very clean. One of the last actions Cinderella takes in Grimms’ tale is to wash her face and hands before presenting herself to try on the shoe, but such actions are unnecessary in the tidied-up Disney version which has Cinderella begin each day with a (avian-aided) shower. Cinderella is the perfect 1950’s American woman, able to manage a household full of “children” (her mice friends, whom she names, dresses and disciplines) while keeping the home tidy, the kitchen functioning,⁸⁴ and herself in a state of charming, albeit downplayed, beauty.

Cinderella further emulates the 1950’s American woman by only leaving her father’s house for her husband’s, with no time spent chasing the single life (or dating around). While there were certainly many women in the workforce or at college in the mid-twentieth century, it was still quite normal for women to marry young, without having lived outside of their childhood home. Considering those women who worked and those in college, we can appreciate the potential to view them from a class divide: a young woman from a lower-income home had to work to help her family while a girl from an upper-class home was free to go to college. At least Disney ensured that

⁸³ The Grimms’ tale notes that “in the evening when she had worked till she was weary, she had no bed to go to, but had to sleep by the fireside in the ashes . . . on that account she always looked dusty and dirty” (81).

⁸⁴ In *The Oxford Companion to Fairy Tales*, Jack Zipes notes that “initially oblivious embodiments of what Betty Friedan was to denounce as the Feminine Mystique, Disney’s fairy-tale heroines have a great affinity for housework and care-giving” (133).

Cinderella wasn't viewed as a gold-digging, title seeker! Just as the prince in the Grimms' version of this story can't be bothered to remember what Cinderella looks like and therefore twice rides off with the wrong girl, in the Disney version Cinderella accepts the prince's offer of a dance and immediately sings about being in love with him without asking his name. As Cinderella tries to escape the prince to preserve the midnight fairy magic, he demands to know why she must leave. Searching for a plausible excuse, she exclaims, "Well, I, I, oh...the prince! I haven't met the prince!" to which he dumbfoundedly replies, "The prince! But didn't you know...?" as she sprints away. Downplaying the recognizability of the prince is truly an American twist to this tale: European versions of the tale presume that Cinderella would know the prince upon first glance. One can assume that members of the royal family would stand apart from other guests at the ball. As an American girl, Disney's Cinderella displays no knowledge of royalty; she simply falls for the most handsome man in the room.

Another change that Disney made to make the American version stand apart from others is that he chose to present Cinderella as a true orphan: unlike her European sisters she lost both her mother *and* her father. Coming so soon after the end of World War II, when hundreds of thousands of children had lost their fathers⁸⁵, Cinderella's sense of isolation and loss likely resonated with many of the younger viewers of this film. This change allowed Disney to emphasize the villainy of the stepmother and sisters. Much

⁸⁵ In the book *Lost in the Victory: Reflections of American War Orphans of World War II*, authors Susan Johnson et al., note that the United States government did not keep a count of all children who had lost a father during WWII: "The only estimate of the number of American children left fatherless by World War II comes from Department of Veterans Affairs' statistics on the number of dependents receiving benefits. Their records show the number of dependent children receiving benefits as a result of their fathers' deaths from all causes in World War II peaked at over 183,000. This number, of course, does not include those dependents not receiving benefits because they did not apply for them or because the children were illegitimate" (xix).

more than the tales of Grimms' and Perrault, this film accentuates actual, physical abuse: Disney's narrator comments, "Cinderella was abused, humiliated and finally forced to become a servant in her own house." The film's portrayal of Cinderella doing chores is not far removed from the traditional fairy tale, but what is shocking is the way she is physically attacked by her stepsisters the night of the ball, who fly at her, ripping off her jewelry and shredding her dress while her stepmother looks on coldly. Later, determined to forward the cause of her own daughters at all costs, Lady Tremaine locks Cinderella in the attic rather than let the Grand Duke see her. Failing in her attempt to keep Cinderella hidden, Lady Tremaine does the one thing which will ensure that Cinderella won't be realized as the mystery girl — she causes the duke to trip, shattering the glass slipper. Naomi Wood points out that "Disney's version of *Cinderella* is the only version in which the glass slipper is actually broken, accentuating not only its fragility, but also the villainy of the stepmother, who is responsible" (26). This statement was true when Wood wrote it in 1996; however, the 2015 Walt Disney live action version of *Cinderella* enhances the stepmother's determination to destroy Cinderella's chances. Actress Kate Blanchett (as Lady Tremaine) doesn't facilitate an accident to prevent Cinderella's recognition; rather she herself smashes the slipper to bits as Cinderella looks on, horrified. While a mean stepmother is not specific to American versions of "Cinderella," Disney's portrayal of this "evil" character is certainly in keeping with the presentation of female family conflicts so decried by second-wave feminists.

The Most Popular (and Profitable) Princess

While Cinderella is one of twelve *official* Disney princesses⁸⁶, it is obvious from a marketing perspective that she is the most popular. While not the first Disney princess (Snow White claims this title), Cinderella's status as leader of the pack can be quickly judged by the number of items for sale on any Disney website. In 2021, if one were to type "Cinderella" into the search bar of the "shop" section of Disney.com, one would see 142 items for purchase: the cheapest is a tote bag at \$3.99, while the top two items come in at a whopping \$7,000 (for a 1.01 CT engagement ring which is not returnable) and a limited-edition replica of the Walt Disney World Cinderella Castle which will only set the discerning consumer back \$37,500.00. She is much more marketable than any of her princess sisters (Belle and Ariel each have around 125 items) and surprisingly, in higher demand than Disney's most recent cash cows, Elsa and Anna, who only have 117 and 91 items listed, respectively. This could easily be explained away as generational spending; women who grew up with *Cinderella* may buy these items for their daughters and granddaughters and may also purchase items for themselves. There are any number of items aimed at adult consumers – artwork and picture frames, articles of clothing and jewelry which are too sophisticated for children. It appears that the fantasy that Disney provides (anyone can be Cinderella) may outweigh the reality presented by feminist scholarship; namely, that the princess fantasy offered by Disney “preserves the unifying text-code about a female protagonist in search of happiness” (Menise, 544), which can only be found in the arms of a prince.

⁸⁶ According to the website <https://princess.disney.com/>. While there are many princesses in the Disney canon, only Belle, Rapunzel, Ariel, Tiana, Cinderella, Aurora, Merida, Pocahontas, Jasmine, Mulan, Moana and Snow White enjoy the title of official *Disney Princess*.

Another nod to the adult consumer can be found in Disney’s publishing branch: a new collection of fairy tales considered to be “adult romance novels” titled the *Meant to Be* series is led off by *If the Shoe Fits*, a modern-day retelling of — no surprises here — Cinderella’s story. Embracing the fourth-wave tenet of inclusivity, this heroine is not the typical slender princess, rather she is *fat*. There is no doubt in the reader’s mind that Cinderella is fat; the cover art shows a fat Cinderella, the first page introduces the child Cindy whose once-upon-a-time thoughts run to a girl waiting “for her Prince Charming carrying the most precious cargo ... her pizza,” and the selling blurb on Amazon.com reads:

Being the first and only fat contestant on *Before Midnight* turns her into a viral sensation—and a body-positivity icon—overnight. Even harder to believe? She can actually see herself falling for this Prince Charming. To make it to the end, despite the fans, the haters, and a house full of fellow contestants she’s not sure she can trust, Cindy will have to take a leap of faith and hope her heels— and her heart—don’t break in the process.⁸⁷

In addition to a body-positive princess, this heroine and her Prince Charming engage in some very adult behavior (explicit details are left to the reader’s imagination, in true Disney style) but *don’t* end up together, as he isn’t willing to commit and she isn’t willing to wait. She lands her dream job and moves on to greener pastures, a decided shift in the traditional ending.

While *If the Shoe Fits*, published in late 2021, can be seen as a progressive spin in Disney’s presentation of Cinderella, it comes on the heels of a regressive collection of princess stories put out by the Disney presses. In 2018, Disney Enterprises released

⁸⁷ <https://www.amazon.com/If-Shoe-Fits-Meant-Novel/dp/1368053378/>.

Disney Princess Comic Strips: The Enchanted Collection, one of many in their series of cinestory comics⁸⁸ published by Joe Books Limited. Cinderella had her own cinestory comic published in 2015, which was simply a retelling of the classic Disney animated film in comic book form. This new collection, however, has the princesses engaging in various new adventures (never together, of course; each princess has her own section of the book which is presented in chronological order of which princess came to life on the silver screen first). Cinderella, unrecognizable in a maroon gown with her hair down, is doted on to the point of impossibility by Prince Charming; Cinderella has a cold and can't make it to the ball, but her fairy godmother appears with tea and soup — “When it comes to the flu, rest and fluids work like magic” (32); Cinderella (in a yellow gown) is pestered by her fairy godmother's attempts to make her life more perfect; Cinderella (dressed in a shirtwaist and blue skirt, à la Mary Poppins) decides to give the King and the Grand Duke etiquette lessons (and fails); Cinderella has to do her princess chores, which seem to consist solely of mending socks for her mouse friends; and lastly Prince Charming wants to take Cinderella for a sleigh ride in the snow, but Lucifer has torn up her new winter coat, so the fairy godmother magics her an ermine trimmed fur cap and cloak (mimicking Belle's outfit, except in blue, not red.) Other “adventures” include taking tea with her stepsisters and giving the cat a bath. It seems as though Disney has reverted to the 1950's; Cinderella never sets foot outside her home, except to take a stroll along the balcony. She mends, she washes, she dances and preens. She is a good wife who is made miserable at the thought of failing her husband by not appearing at a party

⁸⁸ Cinestory Comics are a series of graphic novels published by Joe Books. Cinestory Comics are comic book adaptations of films and television episodes made using film stills instead of artwork. https://disney.fandom.com/wiki/Cinestory_Comics.

due to illness. The men talk over her and tell her to take her own advice and stop interrupting them. She is waited on by her fairy godmother and aided in domestic affairs by her legion of mice. She advocates journaling but is never shown reading a book.

These books, unlike the *Meant to Be* series, are marketed for a tween audience.⁸⁹ Even the more “progressive” princesses (Jasmine, Tiana, Merida) are stuck in traditional girl dramas; flirting with boys and crying over ruined dresses, quarreling with siblings and fretting over chores, playing with pets and finger painting. Is Disney regressing, or, in their true marketing-genius style, are they selling a product that is imminently relatable to their target audience? As the noted change in Cinderella’s traditional clothing colors and styles have prompted the sale of several items depicting Cinderella not wearing her normal blue gown⁹⁰, this appears to be a sales-centered maneuver rather than an intentional anti-feminist construction.

In “Where Happily Ever After Happens Every Day,” author Clare Bradford focuses on Disney’s use of the romantic film trope in its animated movies, seemingly aimed at children but presenting an adult fantasy:

The narrative shape that defines Disney Princess films and products is that of heterosexual romance ... the Princess films incorporate a bundle of conventional components, including love at first sight; the propensity for lovers to daydream, sing romantic songs, and search for the beloved; sequences in which mistaken identity temporarily blinds one or other of the lovers; and obstacles that prevent or delay “love's first kiss.” ... The films’ set-piece finales comprised weddings, celebrations, and scenes in which newly married lovers depart for their new lives. (180)

⁸⁹ ages 8-12, according to Amazon.com. <https://www.amazon.com/Disney-Princess-Comic-Strips-Collection/dp/1772757500>.

⁹⁰ <https://www.amazon.com/Disney-Cinderella-Premium-Light-Up-Inches/dp/B08MVRVKBZ/> and <https://wertoy.com/cinderella-winter-dreams-special-edition-kb-toys-exclusive/> offer several Disney Cinderella dolls which are wearing outfits not seen in the Disney film.

If a modern cinema-goer were to review the components listed here, she would surely see that they are the same as those used in the (now) traditional romantic comedy, chick-flick film trope beloved by a certain demographic — typically women who harbor a belief in happily ever after against all odds.

Just as Disney cleverly markets a comic book series towards tween consumers (who might be too old to still request the purchase of dress-up clothes or dolls but still wish to participate in the princess fantasy), they also play on the nostalgic love of all things princess and Disney when marketing another Cinderella dream: a fairy tale wedding. In her article “The Princess and the Magic Kingdom: Beyond Nostalgia, the Function of the Disney Princess,” Rebecca-Anne Rozario discusses what she terms Disney’s “nostalgia industry,” pointing out that “Disney’s creation of a sense of timelessness ... offers fascinating opportunities for understanding the relationship between Disney and its audiences, and, in particular, the multiplicity and diversity of possible readings and constructions of the princess” (37). The website IMDb.com allows viewers to leave a review of the films they watch, and a quick scroll through the one hundred and seventy-eight user reviews for *Cinderella* shows numerous review titles which use words such as “childhood,” “nostalgic,” “princess” and “romantic.”⁹¹ While not a scientific survey of viewer’s reactions by any means, these unprompted and unscripted reactions are very telling of the reception of this film and the emotions it illicit.⁹² For anyone finding this film romantic and wishing they could be a princess for

⁹¹ Several examples are “A true Disney classic from my childhood,” “Never Gets Old!!! Nostalgic,” “Cinderella, Cinderella. Any Girl Can Be A Princess,” and “Absolutely romantic Disney masterpiece.” https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0042332/reviews?ref=tt_ury.

⁹² Not all reviews were glowing; one viewer found the film to be “A very problematic Disney classic” while another titles his review “I know I’m going to take heat for this...” and proceeds to discuss why he finds Disney’s representation of Cinderella very bland and sexist.

a day (especially for their wedding day), Disney can make their wish come true in spectacular fashion.

Princess for a Day: the Disney Wedding

What is the appeal of the fairy tale wedding? I again point to the nostalgia that many feel when they think of Disney; this is something they fully enjoyed as a child. Is the fantasy of a magical wedding that will result in happily ever after to be taken seriously? A cynical mind might have little belief in this possibility, but that great purveyor of fantasy, J.R.R. Tolkien, wrote about the willing suspension of disbelief in his treatise *On Fairy Stories*. Tolkien notes that the storyteller⁹³ creates a “Second World which your mind can enter. Inside it, what he relates is ‘true’: it accords with the laws of that world. You therefore believe it, while you are, as it were, inside” (12). Disney World sells the magic of that world which the bride inhabits and which allows her to believe, albeit only for a short time, that she is the princess in the fairy tale film.

Of the twelve Disney princesses that make up the current Disney Pantheon, a wedding is seen in only three films: *Cinderella* (1950), *The Little Mermaid* (1989), and *The Princess and the Frog* (2009). Viewers can remember Cinderella’s wedding scene; bells ring out the joyous news as Cinderella and her prince trip down the palace stairs while birds hold her veil aloft. Although she and the prince climb into the carriage together, viewers see her alone as she graciously waves to the adoring masses — her first

⁹³ For the purpose of this discussion Walt Disney is the storyteller; Tolkien was referring to the storyteller in general.

act as a royal. The final scene is the last page of the storybook⁹⁴, highlighting Cinderella and the prince sharing a kiss above the words “and they lived happily ever after” while Cinderella’s first song “A Dream is a Wish Your Heart Makes” plays in the background. As noted, there are two other Disney princess weddings, but if viewers compare Cinderella’s dreamy wedding to Ariel’s ceremony aboard a frigate or Tiana’s ceremony in the swamp, it is easy to see that the fairy tale “princess” wedding that most Disney fans wish to emulate is Cinderella’s. This recollection and the nostalgia it enables leads directly into a discussion of the women who wish to recreate this wedding on their special day, how Disney enables this dream to come true, and the feminist conversation regarding playing a princess on one’s wedding day.

Carrie Hayward, author of *PassPorter's Disney Weddings and Honeymoons: Dream Days at Disney World and on Disney Cruises*, notes that not all weddings held at a Disney venue have to be princess themed, but if that is what a bride wants, there are plenty of options. A bride can "have Cinderella's royal coach, or a Fairy Godmother come to your wedding ... I've interviewed people who got married in front of Cinderella's Castle and spent \$200,000 ... I think the main misconceptions are that if you get married at Disney, it's going to be childish, or it has to be 'princess-y,' and sort of backward, and anti-feminist. You can actually have any kind of wedding you want at Disney!"

Hayward’s book, published in 2012, stated that “Walt Disney World hosts more than 1,500 weddings each year” (7). A mere seven years later, tourist website

⁹⁴ The opening scene of this film depicts an ornate, golden storybook titled “Cinderella,” which opens to reveal a colored drawing of a manor home and the words, “Once upon a time in a faraway land” which the narrator reads aloud.

touringcentralflorida.com reported that number had eclipsed 4,000 each year.⁹⁵

In the book *Discussing Disney* (2019), Kodi Maier explores the fairy tale fantasy of brides whose desire for a dream wedding centers on their wish to be a princess, if only for a day. The bride-to-be's search for her magical gown, that one garment that will transform her life from sad, single gal to the proud "wife of" easily conforms to the Cinderella story; just as the magical gown (and shoes!) transformed Cinderella from household drudge to princess, so too will the perfect gown transform any girl into the bride of her dreams. With the Cinderella narrative seemingly built into today's wedding culture, the Disney wedding complex has made itself available to any bride who wishes to fulfill her princess fantasy. Maier notes numerous extravagances available to the bride wishing to realize her Cinderella dreams:

Should she so wish, the bride has the option of renting a horse-drawn carriage ... the real-life version of Cinderella's Glass Coach comes complete with a pumpkin-inspired crystal carriage (so everyone can admire the bride as she arrives) pulled by six white ponies, with a driver and two footmen in all-white regalia to escort her from the coach. The couple can also request a Major Domo to act as their ring bearer, who will carry the rings down the aisle in a glass slipper on a red pillow reminiscent of the climactic scene from Disney's animated Cinderella ... At the reception, they can serve a cake decorated with the phrase "They Lived Happily Ever After" and/or topped with glass slippers, Cinderella's coach, or Cinderella's castle ... All of these details further serve to evoke an enchanted, fairy-tale atmosphere, allowing the bride to embody the ultimate Cinderella fantasy. In this way, Disney's Fairy Tale Weddings platform is an adult extension of the Disney Princess franchise, allowing grown women to realize their childhood fantasies (real or assumed) of being a Disney princess bride. (186)

⁹⁵ Wedding data is presented for the Florida theme park, Walt Disney World, as this park features Cinderella's Castle at its center. Disney's original theme park, Disneyland, features Sleeping Beauty's Castle as its central attraction. Although Disneyland opened in 1955, only five years after *Cinderella* was released, Disney studios had begun production of *Sleeping Beauty* in 1953. Perhaps Walt Disney had hoped to open the park simultaneously with the release of his third princess film; however *Sleeping Beauty* did not arrive in theaters until 1958. As *Cinderella* far outperformed *Sleeping Beauty* at the box office, it made sense that the Florida theme park, opened in 1971, feature her castle instead of mirroring what was already built in California (Koenig 106).

Maier's recognition of the Disney Wedding as an adult's ability to engage with the Disney Princess franchise—for their own pleasure, not for the sake of children or in jest, as a Halloween-costume—hearkens again to nostalgic consumerism. A young girl who watched as Cinderella dreamily transformed into a princess can live this fairy tale for herself, and Disney will spare no effort encouraging her to do so.

To further inspire brides to choose a Disney venue and indulge their inner princess, Legacy Productions teamed with Disney+ to produce *Disney's Fairy Tale Weddings*, a reality style program with the tag line "Every love story can become a fairy tale." Episode after episode is filled with Disney magic; weddings in exotic (Disney) locals complete with more over the top details than an average bride could dream of. The first episode shows a nighttime wedding in front of Cinderella's Castle, after the park has closed for the day. The bride arrives in a carriage and the follow-on ceremony; reception and fireworks display are gorgeous and magical. The one thing missing from this "reality" show is any discussion of price per fantasy. This ceremony is one of the higher end packages that Disney offers (those in front of the castle start at \$30,000). A quick glance at the official Disney wedding website⁹⁶ only reveals the \$30,000 "ceremony fee" for the after-hours castle venue and that Disney transportation is required for this location. What isn't detailed is the rest of the "required" expenses. The downloadable "Disney's Fairy Tale Wedding" brochure (available for download *after* signing up as an interested party) does not include a pricing guide either, only photos of beautiful couples having a beautiful time at various beautiful Disney locations – there is even a very artful black and white photograph of a groom on one knee holding out a slipper to his

⁹⁶ <https://www.disneyweddings.com/florida/pricing/>

Cinderella bride. Just enough to whet the appetite, but not enough to scare a frugal princess away. For that, she must reach out to a real-life Disney employee.

The Dream That You Wish *Can* Come True ... For a Price

It is no secret that marketing to susceptible children via television ads is an easy way for companies to create consumers at the earliest opportunity. Adults, however, need more than singing animals and brightly colored breakfast cereal to precipitate spending their hard-earned dollars. The “Cinderella” fairy tale, when viewed from a twenty-first century lens, *is* a story which prompts thoughts of consumption. In her article “Cinderella Stories: The Glass of Fashion and the Gendered Marketplace,” Regina Blaszczyk discusses all of the expensive trappings which were required for Cinderella to catch the prince’s eye:

Cinderella captured her prince's attentions and secured his devotion by aptly using her godmother's bequest, an ensemble of fanciful consumer products. Cinderella's luxury vehicle and her exquisite evening clothes, including her one-of-a-kind glass slippers, were fashioned to make a queenly impression. Only with the aid of this constellation of things was Cinderella's natural beauty amplified into the courtly good looks that caught the prince's eye, turned his head, and held his gaze. The material message in this rags-to-riches romance is clear; objects are levers that women can use to set agendas and to achieve ends within the gendered realms of courtship and marriage.” (140)

If a girl wants to be a princess, she *must* have the most exquisite dress and shoes: as there is no fairy magic today to produce those goods, they must be purchased. Having the right garments can change a girl’s life and the right garment might just be the Cinderella gown from Allure Bridals, which is “as magical as Cinderella’s transformation. This stunning ballgown features a flattering portrait neckline and 3/4 length sleeves. Layers of glitter tulle under a soft tulle skirt is embellished with over 4,600 crystals and 44,000 additional

sequins and beads evoking the sparkle and fantasy of the glass slipper.”⁹⁷ This gown will cost the bride-to-be \$9500 — and since she has the magical gown, she might as well go all in with the \$4700 Jimmy Choo “Ari” shoes. These made-to-order shoes, which were originally commissioned to be worn by Disney’s 2015 Cinderella⁹⁸ at the film’s premiere, are described by luxury retailer Harrods as “showered in Swarovski crystals. The Ari pumps from Jimmy Choo belong in your wildest fairytales. Sitting atop a towering stiletto heel, each individual embellishment has been hot fixed for longevity, while the Cinderella-inspired transparent flower sits atop the elegantly pointed toe for a dazzling finish. Style with your most glitzy dresses for a real princess moment.”⁹⁹ Jimmy Choo’s creative director Sandra Choi told the *Hollywood Reporter* that she thinks “every girl desires a ‘Cinderella’ moment in their lives. This story ignites a love affair and fascination with shoes that never die. I wanted to create a shoe that felt magical, with alluring sparkle and a feminine, timeless silhouette evoking those childhood emotions” (Cleary). Choi, perhaps unwittingly, makes an excellent point about consumerism when paired with the Cinderella-princess-wedding fantasy: the nostalgia that comes with youthful memories of watching Cinderella emerge from the castle as a newly minted princess and dreaming about that fairy tale scenario can equate to loosening of the purse strings when wedding bells are heard.

Disney, master of the spectacular, used its marketing genius to initially sell the Disney Wedding experience to its greatest potential customers, women watching women-

⁹⁷ <https://allurebridals.com/style/dp253-cinderella>.

⁹⁸ Actress Lily James.

⁹⁹ <https://www.harrods.com/en-us/shopping/ari-110-embellished-pumps-15500726>.

focused programs on a women-centric television network. To celebrate the first wedding in its newly built Wedding Pavilion in 1995, Disney teamed with Lifetime Television to air the event on the popular show *Weddings of a Lifetime*. Kodi Maier describes how the wedding teamed with Cinderella imagery: “the actual ceremony opens to a row of trumpeters heralding Brian’s princely arrival on a white horse, followed by Anne’s entrance in Cinderella’s Crystal Coach.” This marketing strategy paves the way for ever-increasing consumerism as women seek to buy into their childhood princess fantasies.

Maier notes that:

the deeply ingrained gender bias within the wedding industry is further entrenched with Disney’s *Weddings of a Lifetime*. Data reveals that when the show aired, ‘Lifetime held the enviable position of being the only cable network exclusively targeted to women’, and was able to capture ‘the most sought-after demographic, women aged 18 to 49 with an average household income exceeding \$40,000’. By primarily focusing on women in what was essentially the grand opening of Disney’s Wedding Pavilion, Disney further glorified the princess bride. (180)

While the allure of a Cinderella-themed wedding at an amusement park might not be to the taste of every bride¹⁰⁰, there is no shortage of women who fulfill their childhood princess dreams in the most Cinderella-like fashion possible. Countless Disney brides have uploaded videos¹⁰¹ on YouTube detailing their special day and advising others on how to make the most of their Disney wedding. In their video “Planning our Disney Fairytale Wedding – Disney Cost, Vendors, Do’s and Don’ts,” newlyweds Cassandra and Brandon discuss their decision to marry at Disney World, how they used other YouTube

¹⁰⁰ Even after a trip to Walt Disney World to scout the park as a potential wedding venue for herself, British actress Michelle Keegan wrote a cheekily titled op-ed piece for the *Daily Mail*: “A Mickey Mouse Wedding? Sounds a Bit Goofy to Me.”

¹⁰¹ Cinderella-bride Abrial had so much to share she uploaded a four-part series detailing her \$125,000 event https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sJUCaGI7_6k while budget conscious bride Taylor’s video describes her \$3500 event <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Kjq7CE-axHE&t=338s>

videos to help plan their day, and of course, “*Disney Fairytale Weddings* — we love that show!” Numerous vlogs feature both bride and groom discussing their special day – while it might seem that the Cinderella wedding is solely the prerogative of the bride, many grooms appear just as delighted with the event as their princess-spouse. Never letting a marketing opportunity go to waste, Disney also offers an online blog where couples share their experiences. The company has certainly met the fourth-wave inclusivity benchmark by featuring couples of every size, shape, color and creed — the first couple visible when clicking the *Ever After* blog link¹⁰² is multiracial and a few more clicks reveal two gentlemen sharing their first kiss as a married couple. What is never mentioned, in any Disney sanctioned or personally created video, is a feeling of shame or silliness at wanting a Cinderella princess wedding; no mention of feminist or anti-feminist considerations entered the conversation. Perhaps this means that women living in the fourth wave *and* living their best Cinderella lives simply don’t consider or question whether their behavior can be deemed anti-feminist.

Fourth-Wave Findings: Princesses Aren’t the Problem

Sarah Coyne, Associate Director of the School of Family Life at Brigham Young University, was inspired by Peggy Orenstein’s anti-princess work¹⁰³ and dedicated a five-year period to answering a question that Orenstein’s book posed — what effect, if any, do Disney princesses have on children’s behavior? In 2016, she co-authored “Pretty as a Princess: Longitudinal Effects of Engagement with Disney Princesses on Gender Stereotypes, Body Esteem, and Prosocial Behavior in Children,” which was followed in

¹⁰² <https://www.disneyweddings.com/ever-after-blog/>.

¹⁰³ Discussed in Chapter Two, Peggy Orenstein wrote the books *Cinderella Ate My Daughter* (2011) and *Don’t Call Me Princess: Essays on Girls, Women, Sex and Life* (2018).

2021 by “Princess Power: Longitudinal Associations Between Engagement with Princess Culture in Preschool and Gender Stereotypical Behavior, Body Esteem, and Hegemonic Masculinity in Early Adolescence.” Coyne attempted to discern, over a five-year period, the impact of “princess culture on gender stereotypes, body esteem, and adherence to hegemonic masculinity” (“Princess Power”, 2413). Coyne and her associates disproved several of their initial hypotheses: the first being that a girl who associates with a specific princess (Cinderella or Snow White, for example) would have a greater tendency to portray gender-specific behavior: viewers will remember that both Cinderella and Snow White were portrayed as nurturing, house-keeping, in-need-of-rescue damsels-in-distress. While these traits have been the center of the feminist critique of those two particular Disney princesses, Coyne found that the children viewed these two characters as the films’ *stars*, and therefore did not view them as unequal to men; by virtue of their protagonist role, they were, in fact, more important. Another disproved hypothesis was that girls indulging in princess play would have greater instances of body esteem issues. What little girl actually looks like Cinderella? The opposite proved true: Coyne’s findings supported previous research that princess exposure does not negatively impact body esteem ... indeed, it strengthens body esteem longitudinally and during a developmental period when the pubertal process makes body esteem concerns particularly intense¹⁰⁴ (“Princess Power”, 2427).

A final hypothesis that Coyne disproved was that viewing princess films would make girls more likely to engage in prosocial behavior. Prosocial behavior is depicted in

¹⁰⁴ To strengthen her findings in this area of her article, Coyne cites studies published in the *Journal of Adolescent Health* by Elizabeth Hughes et al. (2018) and in the *British Journal of Developmental Psychology* by Sharon Hayes and Stacey Tantleff-Dunn (2010).

the films when a princess is shown in a nurturing, self-sacrificing and kind light; Cinderella's care for her animal friends and her general air of servitude falls directly in line with this behavioral expectation. However, the study surprisingly found that this expectation was reversed in reality: viewing the films "encouraged boys, but not girls, to adopt the prosocial behaviors portrayed by Disney Princesses" ("Pretty as a Princess", 1922). Coyne and her associates surmise that, due to the lack of prosocial behavior in films aimed at boys (superhero films or G.I. Joe-style cartoons), the behavior on screen is novel and thus the boys absorb this behavior and emulate it, whereas girls' behavior isn't affected, as princess kindness is a norm to which they are accustomed.

To Watch or Not to Watch: What Is a Poor Princess to Do?

Is Disney's *Cinderella* a bad influence on little girls, fostering feelings of helplessness and the desire for a man to swoop in and solve all of life's problems? I cannot find conclusive proof that this is true: what I have discovered is that as viewers get older and understand gender politics, they view childhood classics with an informed and more discerning eye. Numerous critical analyses discussed in this chapter have had one notion in common, that there is not a conclusive study which proves that princess play leads to young girls feeling confined by gender expectations. Is the feminist criticism directed towards the mouse-nurturing, sweet-voiced, much maligned Cinderella deserved? Possibly, although it must be pointed out that *Cinderella* is not a propaganda film, aimed at keeping women chained to hearth and home. It is a children's film, meant to entertain. Judging by Cinderella's continued marketability and the growing number of women who can't wait to step into her magical slippers on their wedding day, I find that the gap between feminist critique and princess worship might simply be too far to breach.

There is no right way or wrong way to view this princess – for every critical voice raised against her there is another voice raised in her defense. Perhaps she is destined to remain, as her theme song claims, “a sunset in a frame” — simply a beautiful image to be appreciated. Or not — the decision lies in the eye of the beholder.

Chapter Six

Happily Ever After: Is “Cinderella” Here to Stay?

It has been over 70 years since Cinderella became firmly ensconced in the American cultural zeitgeist. Certainly, her story has been told in America for centuries, but Walt Disney cemented her place in the forefront of film, fantasy, feminist conversation — the list goes on. Were it not for Disney’s animated film classic, “Cinderella” could very well be relegated to dusty bookshelves and an odd film appearance now and again. I have already discussed how her story has continuously been presented in literature and on film, with a new film or retelling popping up with predictable frequency every few years. She has evolved from an Egyptian bathing beauty into a tempestuous Italian murderer; from a teasing French beauty into a pious German ash-girl; from the singing staple of children’s films to the #girlboss of today. The newest *Cinderella* film is presented with a decided feminist lean (whether this was successful is for the viewer to decide¹⁰⁵), and star Camila Cabello gushed that “fans are going to love that she's a modern woman ... She has dreams and she has ambitions, and she's staying true to herself and her voice and what makes her happy. I think that it's reflective of women nowadays” (Bergeson). The representation of Cinderella as a modern woman has been greatly influenced by how she is viewed through the lens of popular culture. While it can take years for a film to be produced or a book written, a television skit can be

¹⁰⁵ NPR correspondent Linda Holmes considers the attempt to make this film feminist less than successful: “instead of anyone on any side of the equation thinking that it matters that he's a prince and she's a commoner, the issue is that she doesn't want the constricting position of princess, because she wants to sell dresses. In other words, the stakes are no longer really part of Cinderella folklore where the question is the viability of love across status divides; they are part of Hallmark-movie folklore where a woman wants to fall in love and also have a successful small business.”

<https://www.npr.org/2021/09/02/1033373099/cinderella-camila-cabello-amazon-review>.

created in mere days and can portray a snap shot in time of where Cinderella is in cultural conversation at any given moment. Cinderella has been portrayed numerous times over the years in sketch comedy shows such as *Saturday Night Live* and more recently, on various YouTube channels, offering versions of the princess which reflect whatever is trendy in the cultural conversation.

The Pop Culture Princess

While there are many ways to present a story, television and the internet are the fastest paths to offering an idea to a mass audience. Cinderella's pop culture journey can be traced through decades of cartoons and televised variety shows. Prior to televised cartoons, Betty Boop appeared on the big screen as "Poor Cinderella" in 1934, and *Merrie Melodies* presented "Cinderella Meets Fella" in 1938. *The Flintstones* presented Fred as a Cinderella character in the episode titled "Cinderellastone"; a Fractured Fairy Tales segment of the popular 1960s *The Bullwinkle Show* depicted Cinderella trying to sell cookware to the prince; Cinderella was captured by terrorists on a *South Park* episode; and *Family Guy* patriarch Peter tells Stewie the story of "Cinderella" with an (almost) typical ending: "And so, two people who danced together one time entered into an ill-advised long-term relationship. And they lived happily ever after for seven months, and then separated with the goal of fixing themselves and getting back together. They got into a huge fight when his mom got sick and now they don't even follow each other on Twitter." While these Cinderellas were presented in cartoon form, they were not meant solely for children. With a flick of the magic wand, Betty Boop is seen in her bra and knickers and *Family Guy* and *South Park* are definitely not meant for young viewers. The inclusion of a Cinderella-storyline in adult-oriented cartoons keeps her story from

remaining solely in the realm of children's entertainment.¹⁰⁶

A version of the story was told by Archie Campbell¹⁰⁷ on *Hee Haw* in the early 1970's. Several years later *The Carol Burnett Show* aired an Emmy-winning episode called "Cinderella Gets It On." Burnett introduces the episode by cataloging the various recent incarnations of "Cinderella," such as Disney's animated movie, Rossini's opera, and Rogers and Hammerstein's television film. Following Perrault's story, Burnett's Cinderella is a drudge who has to help her sisters dress for the ball (rock concert) but isn't allowed to go (not because she has no clothes, but because she is a "square"). With the requisite fairy godmother magic, Cinderella is off to the concert: instead of a ballgown she is dressed like Cher and instead of the prince, we have "Elfin John," who falls in love with Cinderella's groovy new dance moves. When the prince comes a-knocking, he seems disenchanted by her return to her "normal" square self, so he leaves, throwing "glad you got your shoe back" over his shoulder as he makes for the hills. The fairy godmother intervenes once more, bringing Elfin back in the form of a door-to-door cleaning supply salesman who thinks Cinderella is "keen".

Saturday Night Live star Kristen Wiig portrayed Cinderella in a 2012 skit mocking Bravo's "The Real Housewives" franchise. As one of "The Real Housewives of Disney," she is a princess with modern-day issues: she gets into a fist fight with Rapunzel and in her confessional moments she appears drunk and disillusioned. Apparently, Prince

¹⁰⁶ Cinderella's appearance in children's media remains constant, however: aligned with *The Flintstones* and *Merrie Melodies*, *Sesame Street* presented child-friendly "CinderElmo," capitalizing not only on the fame of Cinderella's story, but also on their best-loved star, Elmo.

¹⁰⁷ Campbell also recorded "Rinderella" on his 1967 album *Have a Laugh on Me*, https://heehaw.fandom.com/wiki/Archie_Campbell.

Charming wasn't all she dreamed of — he is more into fashion and gossip than a prince should be (the subtext being that he is homosexual). Hoping to prevent other women from marrying a stranger, she quips: “Here’s some good advice: never marry a guy who’s really into shoes.” While this portrayal is meant to be flippant, it actually offers a rather anti-feminist Cinderella who remains in a loveless marriage and drinks her days away while neither offering nor receiving support from her fellow princesses.

She’s Gone Viral

As the internet and streaming services have made great inroads into replacing the family television as the sole source of home entertainment, YouTube has become a platform where content creators post short films which can quickly reach a world-wide audience, much as ham radio allowed anyone onto the airwaves in years past. Performer and video producer Whitney Avalon rose to fame with her *Princess Rap Battle* YouTube series. In “Cinderella vs. Belle,” actress Sarah Michelle Geller plays Cinderella opposite Avalon’s Belle. The skit makes some astute observations about the popular culture impact of these two blockbuster Disney films: Cinderella, dressed to the nines and backed by her stepsisters, raps: “I’m the American dream / with a fairy tale wedding / You’ve got teapots for friends / and I think your man’s shedding / ... / Here’s a history lesson, honey / My movie saved the studio when Walt was out of money / You followed in my footsteps, without me there’s no you / Disney built an empire on these tiny glass shoes.”

YouTube offers many films and skits depicting and dissecting “Cinderella.” The Young Actors Project channel offers “The Girl Without a Phone – A Cinderella Story” and the ModernGurlz channel focuses on fashion with the piece “Ranking 10 different versions of Cinderella’s ballgown.” More interesting than the retellings and fashion

reviews, however, are the feminist/antifeminist discussions of “Cinderella,” which can be found on YouTube, videos which are an interesting mix of academic research and factual data with unabashed personal responses. Most importantly, these videos are published by a range of creators. Men and women of varied ages and multicultural backgrounds are entering into the discussion of Cinderella and feminism. Of course, just as there is pro-Cinderella content available, the traditional anti-feminist view is presented as well.¹⁰⁸ Outside of the YouTube platform, any number of caustic cartoon-style memes¹⁰⁹ can be found which portray anti-feminist Cinderella sentiments. YouTube videos, memes, and cartoons take feminist critique solely out of academic settings and deliver it to a wide audience; while some of these offerings may be silly, they can certainly offer the viewer a moment to consider Cinderella’s story in a new light.

One of the more innovative venues for sharing knowledge outside the bounds of traditional academic institutions is TED Conferences. Established in 1984, TED (the acronym for Technology, Entertainment, and Design) is a media organization whose website¹¹⁰ claims that: “our goal is to inform and educate global audiences in an

¹⁰⁸ “Why Disney Princesses Are Problematic” expresses the idea that Cinderella and her princess sisters who sit about weeping and bemoaning their fates until Prince Charming dashes in to rescue them is subconsciously harmful for child viewers while “10 Terrible Lessons Disney Movies Shouldn’t Be Teaching Kids” points out that Cinderella running off with a man who never asked her name in their hours of dancing is far from ideal.

¹⁰⁹ The Facebook page “Alternative Disney” offers a meme which shows Prince Charming entreating Cinderella to stay at the ball; the next scene shows her facing him with the caption “okay, let’s get one thing straight, I can do whatever the fuck I want.” <https://www.facebook.com/263253950515536/posts/827578134083112>. *Cosmopolitan* magazine published an article about these memes, highlighting one which shows Jac and Gus Gus tagging a portrait of Lady Tremaine with cans of spray paint, scrawling “You fucking bitter old bitch” while Cinderella scowls at the painting and gives it the finger.

<https://www.cosmopolitan.com/uk/entertainment/news/a28539/disney-princesses-misbehaving-gives-us-major-shocked-face/>.

¹¹⁰ <https://www.ted.com>.

accessible way.” TED conference sessions (TED Talks) are available to be viewed individually and in an effort to discuss ideas on a more micro level, the organization initiated TEDx: “created in the spirit of TED’s overall mission to research and discover ‘ideas worth spreading.’ TEDx brings the spirit of TED to local communities around the globe through TEDx events. These events are organized by passionate individuals who seek to uncover new ideas and to share the latest research in their local areas that spark conversations in their communities.” This platform has welcomed numerous creators to the stage to discuss their ideas relating to “Cinderella” and feminism. In her 2018 TEDx talk, author Erin-Claire Barrow discussed her love of fairy tales as a child while also admitting her feeling of failure when she didn’t live up to princess standards: not beautiful, no prince, etc. In her book, *The Adventurous Princess and Other Feminist Fairy Tales*, Barrow re-envisioned Cinderella’s story. Instead of being the *child* of a man who marries a worthless woman with two equally worthless daughters, Cinderella is his aged mother who is turned into the family drudge upon his remarriage. Barrow provides a notable twenty-first century update to the tale, which is focused on ageism (and which presents a Black Cinderella, as Barrow wanted the princesses in her book to be representative of the people in her community). Indian author Ariana Gupta’s 2019 TEDx talk, “Why We Should Teach Children Feminism,” is another example of an author who couldn’t find herself or her ideals represented in the pages of a fairy tale book, so she wrote her own.¹¹¹ Gupta brings the feminist fairy tales conversation to a younger audience; she gave this globally published talk at the age of seventeen and her message can certainly resonate with others of her generation. Offering this level of thoughtful

¹¹¹ *New Age Fairy Tales: For Little Girls with Big Dreams*. StudioPoint, 2018.

discussion in a pop culture format makes the discussion of feminism in regards to Cinderella much more accessible than it has been in the past, and as additional content is created, the conversation continues to reach more people every day, maintaining Cinderella's relevancy in modern discourse.

Conclusion

This study has focused on Cinderella's continued relevance in the areas of feminist and pop culture studies related to fairy tales. Following Cinderella's journey through the second-, third- and fourth-waves of feminism has shown that "Cinderella" cannot be merely viewed as a target for feminist angst; rather, the growth and change in the representation of this character in literature, films and various pop culture formats can be seen to mirror the progression of feminist discourse. The much-maligned Cinderella of the 1950's has a staying-power which might infuriate those who decried her during the second-wave, yet the fourth-wave representations we have seen thus far appear to present a Cinderella much aligned with progressive feminist thought. The continuing discussion of this fairy tale, both academically and socially, proves that the feminist debate surrounding this perennial princess is far from over.

Where does "Cinderella" fit in twenty-first century, fourth-wave America?

One of the most common themes in online reviews and blog posts about the most recent *Cinderella* film was something along the lines of: "Do we really need another *Cinderella*?"¹¹² While it may seem that this tale has been filmed so many times that

¹¹² Carol Dyhouse's 2021 article for *Time.com*, "What the Rise and Fall of the Cinderella Fairy Tale Means for Real Women Today," traces the popularity of this fairy tale from its heyday in the 1950's to present day. She finishes her piece questioning whether yet another revision is necessary: "Cinderella dreams an impossible dream: she isn't a helpful role model for today's young girls thinking about their future, and is

another version is overkill, I would point out that Cinderella is *evolving*. Perhaps there are no new ways to present the centuries-old *European* versions of the story, but a new take on “Cinderella” will always be on the horizon: each new version reflecting the author’s attempt to offer a princess who is relevant to a particular audience. Over the past few decades, we can begin to track noticeable changes in the presentation of Cinderella¹¹³ and one can only assume that as society becomes more inclusive, her story will do the same. While purists may argue that the old version (whichever version that might be for any one person) shouldn’t be changed, I could certainly point out — with absolutely no intended sacrilege — that the Bible has been rewritten and reinterpreted innumerable times, to make the stories and lessons easier for people to understand and follow. There is much in the Bible that may have seemed at one time unmalleable, but as societies evolve and people question the rules they were taught to follow, new ways of understanding and applying that sacred text have come about. It is reasonable to assume that “Cinderella” will continuously be rewritten, refilmed and reimagined as long as creative minds struggle to present the tale in a way which seems relatable to them. The willingness to believe in, or hope for, happily ever after seems to persist in even the most cynical of times.

In his book *Why Fairy Tales Stick*, Jack Zipes lists the innumerable ways fairy tales permeate our lives (citing examples such as films, toys, and clothing) and comments:

unlikely to regain the intense hold over the female imagination that was evident in the 1950s. Is it time to call time on the threat of the midnight curfew, and maybe on Cinderella stories altogether?”
<https://time.com/5956136/cinderella-story-meaning/>.

¹¹³ New versions of this tale present the #girlboss, the orphan who refuses to be bullied by her stepfamily, and the girl whose intellect rather than beauty attract the prince, to name a few.

it would appear that we are living in a fairy tale universe . . . fairy tales act on us in infancy and continue to play a role in our lives through old age . . . The appeal of fairy tales still has a great deal to do with utopian transformation and the desire for a better life . . . The more social relations make us discontent and feel as though we were objects alienated from our own communities, the more we seek a haven in mental projections of other worlds” (106).

Perhaps this is an answer to the question of why Cinderella’s story is told and retold again and again: we seek escapism and the desire for a better life, a dream life, a fantasy life — all with a fairy tale ending.

The Relevance of “Cinderella”

If we wonder why Cinderella and her story seem to constantly be revised and repackaged for new readers and if, as academics, we additionally wonder how this old tale can ever be written with a fresh point of view (how many ways can a damsel in distress be saved?), then perhaps we are focusing on the wrong aspect of the story. Zipes remarks upon what he considers a recent “epidemic” of picture books about Cinderella and notes that all of these tell a fairly similar version of the French or German version of the tale. He provides the first few sentences of no less than eight different books, one of which is an Appalachian version, one Cambodian, one in which the main characters are pigs — there is even a cowgirl version and a Cajun version. All of these paint the story of the put-upon young girl whose father remarries and whose step mother and sisters treat her ill. The father is benevolent but fairly absent and the stepmother and sisters are evil and frightening. Citing a study by Martin Daly and Margo Wilson titled *The Truth about Cinderella: A Darwinian View of Parental Love*, Zipes notes that just as the stepmother figure was prevalent at the time the brothers Grimm and Perrault were writing their tales due to the high rate of mortality in childbirth and the subsequent remarriage of a

widowed father, she is no less prevalent in twenty-first century America, with so many families blending after repeated divorces. He writes that Daly and Wilson “reveal that the risk factor for child abuse is greater in families with stepparents than in those with two genetic parents, and this situation is widespread and has probably existed for centuries” (113). As adults we may assume that young girls love Cinderella books and films because they want to grow up and become a princess, but Zipes’ discussion would have us consider that perhaps these children actually *relate* to Cinderella’s position in the family and understand the perils of navigating step-siblings while trying to maintain the memory of a happy family before this *other* woman came along and ruined everything.

The Cinderella tale remains relevant today because it is a story of family dynamics, which, regardless of generations or geography, is universal. “There is something primordial about Cinderella and her tale. Seated in her nest of ashes, she speaks to us of misery in archetypal terms . . . She is, in fact, so much the very essence of the noble that we can accept the fact that she is an enviable creature, and is envied, by her stepmother and sisters, even in her condition, down with the grease and dirt, doomed to endless service and suffering” (Ulanov, 14). The story of a less-favored child is universal, the story of an aging woman is universal, the story of a jealous girl is universal. Readers of this tale can see themselves in the characters (whether in the flattering role of Cinderella or the unflattering role of the others, although latter renditions of the tale present the sisters and stepmother as three-dimensional characters with their own sorrows and ambitions beyond the obvious marriage to royalty). Focusing on the element of envy in the tale again highlights its broad appeal – who among us hasn’t succumbed to the sin of envy? Ann and Barry Ulanov exhaustively explore envy in their book *Cinderella and*

Her Sisters: The Envied and the Envyng, focusing on the obvious (the ‘wicked’ stepmother envying the fresh-faced, innocent Cinderella) and a more obscure, Freudian emphasis.

The Feminist Conversation Continues

This dissertation contributes to the study of feminism and fairy tales through its focus on the shift (and potential dismissal) of the long-held notion that “Cinderella” is bad for little girls. Even Peggy Orenstein, author of *Cinderella Ate My Daughter*, noted: “There are no studies proving that playing princess directly damages girls’ self-esteem or dampens other aspirations” (“What’s Wrong,” 18). While the tide has been slow to turn with regards to the anti-feminist backlash which has dogged Cinderella through her myriad representations on screen and on the page, it appears that fourth-wave discourse and reinterpretations of this tale may lead to a new conversation regarding her role in the feminist conversation.

Critical feminist discussion of “Cinderella” began in earnest with Marcia Lieberman’s 1972 article, “‘Some Day My Prince Will Come’: Female Acculturation through the Fairy Tale,” written as a rebuttal to Alison Lurie’s 1970 article “Fairy Tale Liberation.” While Cinderella certainly had her detractors prior to the crest of the second wave¹¹⁴, these two women moved the conversation to the forefront of feminist and

¹¹⁴ In the introduction to the *Here and Now Story Book*, published in 1921, author and founder of the Bureau of Educational Experiences Lucy Sprague Mitchell claimed: “For brutal tales like Red Riding-Hood or for sentimental ones like Cinderella I find no place in any child’s world. Obviously, fairy stories cannot be lumped and rejected en masse. I am merely pleading not to have them accepted en masse on the ground that they “have survived the ages” and “cultivate the imagination.” . . . It is only the jaded adult mind, afraid to trust to the children’s own fresh springs of imagination, that feels for children the need of the stimulus of magic.”

critical study, where it remains today. Lurie, believing that fairy tales must be feminist because the original tellers of most tales were women, claimed that:

the traditional folk tale ... is one of the few sorts of classic children's literature of which a radical feminist would approve. ... These stories suggest a society in which women are as competent and active as men, at every age and in every class ... To prepare children for women's liberation, therefore, and to protect them against Future Shock, you had better buy at least one collection of fairy tales. (42)

Lieberman points out numerous flaws in Lurie's thinking. Giving voice to the feminist view that fairy tales perpetuate gender stereotypes and teach young girls that beauty and meekness are the only tools needed to weather the storms of life, she asserts:

Because victimized girls like Cinderella are invariably rescued and rewarded, indeed glorified, children learn that suffering goodness can afford to remain meek, and need not and perhaps should not strive to defend itself, for if it did so perhaps the fairy godmother would not turn up for once, to set things right at the end The child who dreams of being a Cinderella dreams perforce not only of being chosen and elevated by a prince, but also of being a glamorous sufferer or victim. (390)

The critical discussion of Cinderella blossomed after this point-counterpoint conversation. The number of books and articles dedicated to this discussion is in the hundreds, with most authors and scholars skewering Cinderella (especially her Disney variants) for all the reasons Lieberman mentioned and more; she's too pretty, she should stand up for herself, she ruins little girl's thoughts of independence, etc. Review of scholarly articles from the past few years, however, show a new trend towards feminist reprise: finding *positive* associations with Cinderella. Authors are pushing back on the second-wave notion that Cinderella and her fairy tale sisters offer only anti-feminist, pro-patriarchal dogma which should be hidden from the easily manipulated eyes of children.

As discussed in the previous chapter, Sarah Coyne conducted a five-year study¹¹⁵ of the effects Disney princesses had on the social behaviors of children. She found that all her initial hypotheses¹¹⁶ were proven wrong, as the children in her study did not allow the Disney princesses to influence their attitudes regarding gender. She concludes “that early engagement with Disney Princess culture tends to be positive for children in the long run” (“Princess Power,” 15).

Ruth Bottigheimer has explored Cinderella’s relatability in film and literature, but also online. In “Cinderella, The People’s Princess,” Bottigheimer discusses new Cinderella retellings, written by children, which are available online at the website multiculturallcinderella.blogspot.com. She notes that in these retellings the familiar beginning to the tale, which marks Cinderella as wealthy or from an upper-class family, is absent but the ending — the heroine marrying a prince — remains standard: “An ordinary girl’s marrying up the social scale is fundamental to the modern Cinderella plot. She becomes whatever her evolving future requires, a goal more easily achieved if her persona remains inchoate, unspecified, generalized, universally and undifferentiatedly female” (45). In 2021, Rosalind Sibielski published an article focusing on feminism portrayed in twenty-first century adaptations of “Cinderella.” She concluded that these versions of the tale were written to present an “empowered” heroine, *not* a feminist heroine: “It is, in fact, reflective of the conflicting— and conflicted—attitudes that surround feminism in 21st-century American culture more generally . . . these revisionist

¹¹⁵ The initial article, written in 2016, and the subsequent article, written in 2021, were both published in the *Child Development* journal.

¹¹⁶ One hypothesis claimed that by identifying with a specific Disney princess, such as Cinderella, girls would conform to gender-specific behavior and upon reaching adolescence would maintain a pre-scripted attitude towards the gender specific roles of men and women.

versions of “Cinderella” are symptomatic of the highly contested views of—and value placed on—feminism in the United States in the 21st century” (606). My analysis of the current feminist discussion shows that, while Cinderella will doubtfully ever be seen as a feminist icon, she is well on the way to removing her pariah-princess crown.

Perennially Popular

This dissertation contributes to the combined study of popular culture and fairy tales through its focus on the shift from a conversation once relegated to academic discourse to one which is now available to anyone with an opinion and a web presence. Cinderella’s journey on film across the first-, second-, third- and fourth-waves — and the reactions to her portrayal — offers unique insight into the feminist discussion without relegating that discussion solely to academia. Carl Jung famously identified (though he did not create) the idea of archetypes, those universal patterns or images that speak to the human collective consciousness across time and place, or those characters or symbols that have meaning for the human mind no matter when or where they are encountered. Cinderella, it can be argued, has grown beyond her cultural, folkloric tale type contexts into an archetypal role: she speaks to us today not just in fairy tales but in film, novels, art, popular culture, and even the performance art of those young women who serve in the Disney cast at the theme parks. Cinderella’s portrayal in popular culture mimics the sentiment of the times. We have seen the early depictions of the persecuted heroine morph into the girlboss of the future. She has graduated from a 1946 advertisement for Shell gasoline, featuring a modern woman stepping out of the pumpkin coach, to a 2021 advertisement for the six-figure Mercedes G-class SUV with the caption “Live fearlessly

ever after.” Cinderella has thus far survived being #cancelled¹¹⁷ and is taking steps towards #wokeness; Tony award-winning actor Billy Porter noted that the most recent *Cinderella* film “is about inclusivity and moving the needle towards self-acceptance and humanity and self-care and all those things” (Steinberg). Cinderella’s continuous presence in all aspects of popular culture is driving the change we see in how she is perceived through the feminist lens.

Suggestions for Future Study

This present study has charted the history of “Cinderella,” her continuous presence on the big and little screens and her ever present literary revisions. The slow and subtle shift of feminist discourse related to “Cinderella” and her prevalence in pop culture are two areas I would recommend for further study. The beginning of the fourth wave seemingly coincides with a greater number of revisions and retellings featuring multicultural heroines and numerous plotlines revolving around LGBTQ+ characters.¹¹⁸ In addition to these changes in the Cinderella character, noticeable changes have been made regarding the family dynamics, with more works offering a heretofore unseen view of the “evil” stepmother and sisters. Finally, Cinderella herself is more frequently portrayed as a character with drive and agency, looking less for a man to marry than for a way to fulfill her own goals and desires. An in-depth character analysis of the “new” Cinderellas and their reception by not only the academic and feminist communities but

¹¹⁷ *The New York Post* did, however, recently report that a Minnesota dinner theater company has cancelled their upcoming production of “Cinderella” because the director felt the cast was “too white,” while noting that the town’s population is 92% Caucasian.

¹¹⁸ Examples include the recent *Cinderella* film starring Camila Cabello and Billy Porter and books such as *Cinderella is Dead*, featuring a heroine who is Black and lesbian, and the *Cinders and Ashes* collection, which features gay protagonists.

also by those who simply view or read the remake and offer their commentary would give insight on whether Cinderella 4.0 affects how this princess is viewed.

Additionally, a study of how Cinderella's pop culture image has changed over the years could be aligned with the shifts in feminist thinking across the different waves. A 1952 commercial for Bab-O cleanser shows Cinderella sobbing at her inability to scrub the kitchen sink clean, while a 1978 commercial declares Mop-N-Glo to be "the next best thing to a fairy godmother" as Cinderella finishes her chores in plenty of time to head to the ball. She has been used to sell tires, cars and Happy Meals® and of course, all things Disney. Singer Gwen Stephanie and actress Zendaya have both recently attended events dressed as Cinderella, and as previously noted, she is frequently written into television programs and presented across numerous pop culture platforms. Showing her progression from sobbing kitchen maid to foul mouthed rapper and how the changes align (or not) with shifts in feminist thinking would be another way to discuss how Cinderella permeates the American cultural landscape.

What is next for Cinderella?

In the relatively short time I have worked on this present study, "Cinderella" has been freshly represented on the big screen, in numerous academic works, and across a myriad of pop culture platforms. While feminist criticism of the tale and the character herself is still largely negative, it is becoming easier to find discussions which offer different insight than the traditional arguments. As the character of Cinderella is revised and rewritten to suit new audiences, it is possible that the pendulum of feminist critique may swing in a positive direction. It is also possible that the "Cinderella" of generations past may be eradicated in favor of a new, empowered, feminist-approved heroine. Just as

there were notable changes across the centuries as “Cinderella” was presented by Basile, Perrault and the Grimms’, we can expect her story — and its reception — to continue evolving. Her evolution will surely mirror the ideals and expectations of new creators and audiences who are forever in search of tomorrow’s happily ever after.

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