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Ella Evolving: Cinderella Stories and the Construction of Gender-Appropriate Behavior

This article considers the cultural messages embedded in the patriarchal canon of fairy tales and their implications for the construction of gender-appropriate behavior. The characteristics of feminist revisions of fairy tales are discussed, and studies that explore the importance of access to alternative discourses in order for children to challenge dominant ideology are reviewed. Finally, four versions of Cinderella are analyzed, considering if and how they provide children with alternative positions to occupy.

KEY WORDS: fairy tales; Cinderella; gender; feminist literary criticism.

M. Tartar, *The Classic Fairy Tales*

E. Westland, "Cinderella in the classroom: Children's responses to gender roles in fairy-tales"

In today's high-tech, mass-media culture, considering the importance of fairy tales may seem passé. Fairy tales are often "deemed of marginal cultural importance and dismissed as unworthy of critical attention" (Tatar, 1999, p. xi). Teachers have reported that fairy tales are not an integral part of children's culture, and, therefore, their messages are of little consequence (Westland, 1993). This dismissive attitude underestimates the pervasive power of the tales. Indeed, in our high-tech, mass-media culture we are *surrounded* by the vestiges of fairy tales from the marketing of Disney products to the perpetuation of romance ideology, the binary positioning of women and men, and women's and girls' obsession to manifest socially defined beauty.

Fairy tales are sites for the construction of appropriate gendered behavior. Although fairy tales are certainly not solely responsible for the acculturation of children, they are an integral part of the complex layering of cultural stories and influences that affirm and perpetuate cultural norms. Fairy tales constitute a kind of "script" (Rice, 2000, p.

P. S. Rice, "Gendered readings of a traditional 'feminist' folktale by sixth-grade boys and girls"

V. Walkerdine, "Some day my prince will come: Young girls and the preparation for adolescent sexuality"

P. Gilbert, "'And they lived happily ever after': Cultural storylines and the construction of gender"

215) for acceptable forms of feminine and masculine behavior, and they facilitate the production of such behavior by "creating positions to occupy" (Walkerdine, 1984, p. 182). Fairy tales contribute to the formation of the boundaries of agency, subjectivity, and anticipated rewards. They are powerful cultural agents that tell us how *to be*. Yet it is impossible to know the exact role stories play in shaping the unconscious and in creating positions for us to take up. While we cannot know precisely how and to what extent fairy tales affect the unconscious, we do know that fairy tale storylines are specific to historical and cultural contexts, and because we ourselves are products of those contexts, we tend to accept the gendered discourse embedded in them as natural, essential, and conclusive.

The embeddedness of appropriate gendered behaviors masks the fact that fairy tales are created and reproduced through the dominant discourse. A primary goal of gender construction in patriarchal culture is to prepare young girls for romantic love and heterosexual practices. Girls come to know that their value lies in men's desire for them, and the characteristics and qualities that will assure their desirability are revealed in cultural storylines (Gilbert, 1994). Girls do not adopt these positions passively, however, but actively construct their subjectivities in response to the power of discourse and ideology.

Fairy tales establish appropriate desire as well as appropriate behavior. As the reader's or listener's attention is drawn to desires, values, and sanctioned behaviors, young girls and boys appropriate them as their own. Taking up sanctioned patterns of desire and conventional subject positions in the patriarchal order are concomitant processes. As children recognize themselves and their friends as well as their desires, struggles, and fears in fairy tales, they identify with the characters, especially when those characters reaffirm what they already know through cultural discourse. Thus, young girls appropriate the position and subjectivities of the heroine. What is possible and acceptable for the protagonist becomes possible and acceptable for the reader.

Fairy tales and their influence are alive and well and with us today, and it is indeed important that we examine the messages embedded in them: messages that help define the subject positions available to our children. It is with this in mind that I examine the messages in the traditional canon, the characteristics of feminist re-visions of fairy tales, and the importance of access to alternative discourses to challenge dominant ideology. Finally, I analyze four versions of Cinderella and the messages they convey.

The Traditional Canon

R. Darnton, "Peasants tell tales: The meaning of Mother Goose"
L. Paul, *Reading Otherways*
P. Gilbert, "The story so far: Gender, literacy and social regulation"

A. Lurie, *Don't Tell the Grown-Ups: Subversive Children's Literature*
J. Yolen, "America's Cinderella"

Fairy tales have been called historical documents (Darnton, 1999), cultural barometers (Paul, 1998), and cultural artifacts (Gilbert, 1992). Each term alludes to the fact that fairy tales are culturally specific and evolve according to the shifting values of a society. The tales that form our popular canon have been edited and selected to reflect and reproduce patriarchal values. The tales best known today are not representative of the genre but are a result of "the skewed selection and silent revision of subversive texts" (Lurie, 1990, p. 20). Jane Yolen has stated that "the magic of the old tales has been falsified, the true meaning lost, perhaps forever" (1977, p. 29). Fairy tales in the patriarchal tradition portray women as weak, submissive, dependent, and self-sacrificing, while men are powerful, active, and dominant. Feminist criticism of fairy tales underscores the fact that the traditional canon reflects sanctioned patriarchal values and norms, while tales that portray heroes and heroines who stretch the boundaries of gender-appropriate behavior have, for the most part, been "lost."

A. M. Trousdale, "I'd rather be normal: A young girl's responses to 'feminist' fairy tales"
M. Tartar, *The Hard Facts of the Grimms' Fairy Tales*

A high premium is placed on feminine beauty, and beauty is equated with virtue in the majority of tales in the canon. Women are positioned as the object of men's gaze, and beauty determines a woman's value (Trousdale, 1995). In stories with a male protagonist, the helper often gives him strength, knowledge, or courage, while female protagonists are most frequently given beauty (Tatar, 1987). When the heroine is beautiful she need not do anything to merit being chosen by the prince; she is chosen simply because she is beautiful. As this message is repeated story after story, we come to accept as natural the notion that passive, beautiful females are rewarded.

M. K. Lieberman, "Some day my prince will come": Female acculturation through the fairy tale"

Fairy tales also convey the message that women must suffer, if not be humiliated, before they are rewarded. "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" (Lieberman, 1986, p. 194). In many traditional tales, being rewarded with the prince and the security of marriage is the result of the heroine's submission and suffering, along with her beauty, rather than her agency. The embedded messages of suffering in silence, attaining beauty, being chosen, and living happily ever after encourage young girls to adopt these desires, which are deemed appropriate within patriarchy. The subjectivities promoted in fairy tales limit positioning for women and men, and their acceptance as natural and irrefutable is of concern to a feminist reader.

Women are divided with the designation "good" or "evil." There is controversy among feminist readers about the portrayal of feminine

K. S. Evans, "A closer look at literature discussion groups: The influence of gender on student response and discourse"

power and agency in fairy tales. Karen Evans (1996) notes that in the traditional canon, a powerful female is most often ugly if not evil. Marcia Lieberman agrees that "women who are powerful and good are never human; those women who are human, and who have power or seek it, are nearly always portrayed as repulsive" (1986, p. 197). Another view, however, is that when real help comes to the female protagonist, it is usually from a fairy godmother or other wise woman, and when real trouble is created, it is usually by a witch or wicked stepmother (Lurie, 1990). Feminists reclaim the powerful women in fairy tale, yet the traditional tales do equate feminine power with being unwomanly if not inhuman. They tell us that it is not natural for a woman to be active or powerful.

M. Mendelson, "Forever acting alone: The absence of female collaboration in *Grimms' Fairy Tales*"

Rather than being empowered through sisterhood and community, the heroines in traditional tales are most often isolated: intensifying their submission and lack of power. They are disassociated as good or evil and also as women who must vie for the one prince. Furthermore, women suffer at the hands of other women. Michael Mendelson recognized "evil women's groups" (1997, p. 115), typically older sisters and/or stepmothers who collaborate to victimize the protagonist, as the sole instance of women working together in the Grimms' tales. He observed that even the wise women and fairy godmothers in stories did not work *with* the protagonist but merely bestowed rewards upon them. The lack of feminine collaboration perpetuates patriarchal values by separating women from men and from other women as well.

Feminist Re-Visions

J. Zipes, *Sticks and Stones: The Troublesome Success of Children's Literature from Slovenly Peter to Harry Potter*

Grimms' or Perrault's versions of fairy tales are customarily thought of as original tales because of their widespread popularity in Western culture. This tendency disguises the fact that fairy tales were told and retold in many cultures before they were written down and that they have subsequently been written and rewritten by many authors for many reasons. Quite simply, there is no genuine or authentic version of a fairy tale. Jack Zipes (2001) discusses contamination: a term used by folklorists to describe foreign augmentation to what appears to be a pure narrative tradition. Contamination has traditionally had a negative connotation, but Zipes opens up the possibility that it has positive aspects as well. "Contamination can be an enrichment process; it can lead to the birth of something unique and genuine in its own right" (p.102). In essence, therefore, for better *and* for worse, all fairy tales are contaminated. Re-visions are one form of contamination. The term re-vision is grounded in feminist poststructuralist thought and indicates the author's agency in creating a new vision of possibility and sharing that vision with the reader. It indicates the author's conscious and unconscious decisions about which elements to retain and which

to remove or refute and what constructions to make visible. It also implies that the reader will extend the author's re-vision.

Given the oral tradition of fairy tales and its connection with women, it is apt that women now reclaim fairy tales in an attempt to disrupt binary gender construction and to re-vision possibilities for women and men. Although they have been appropriated and subverted to promote patriarchy, it can be argued that fairy tales are women's literature. Historically, there has been an intimate connection between spinning, weaving, and telling stories, as women have used tapestries and tales to tell of "the silent matter of their lives, which is culture itself" (Rowe, 1999, p. 300). Sheldon Cashdan contends that psychologically fairy tales are maternal documents "about women and the important role they play in the child's emerging sense of self" (1999, p. 29). Fairy tales may even be the remnants of "an older, matriarchal culture and faith" (Lurie, 1990, p. 19), for it is women who are the central figures of the tales, and it is women who most often wield the supernatural powers.

K. E. Rowe, "To spin a yarn: The female voice in folklore and fairy tale"

S. Cashdan, *The Witch Must Die: The Hidden Meaning of Fairy Tales*

Fairy tales and other cultural texts influence children's subject positions, but simply reformulating traditional fairy tales cannot change the sanctioned gender binary and power hierarchy. Feminist re-revisions of fairy tales, however, can be one forum through which patriarchal structures are critiqued and alternatives to gendered subject positions are envisioned. Literary fairy tales written during the second wave of feminism often relied on a simple reversal of gender roles, but this practice did not necessarily result in a feminist text (Crew, 2002; Davies, 1993; Walkerdine, 1984). Simplistic role reversals often present a comedic rather than an empowering, realistic view of possibility and lack the subtlety that is most effective in challenging stereotypes. While these texts may disrupt gender construction by calling attention to what seems essential, they are *not* feminist texts.

H. S. Crew, "Spinning new tales from traditional texts: Donna Jo Napoli and the rewriting of fairy tale"

B. Davies, *Sards of Glass: Children Reading and Writing Beyond Gendered Identities*

Creating a feminist text is a symbolic act within a social context, and the author's ideological viewpoint is necessarily embedded in the text. A feminist text deals with issues of freedom, choice, and expanding the subject positions available to women and men, and it makes visible the fact that the tales have functioned historically to reproduce social values. The meaning of fairy tales has been understood to be "wholly natural and unpremeditated" (Bottigheimer, 1987, p. 17), and feminist re-revisions illuminate other possibilities. They expose the text as a construction within discourse, an expression of the author's ideology, and a negotiation based on the reader's positioning. Issues of subjectivity, agency, voice, autonomy, and power are focal issues in feminist re-revisions of fairy tales.

R. B. Bottigheimer, *Grimms' Bad Girls & Bold Boys: The Moral and Social Vision of the Tales*

A concern in feminist texts is who is positioned to exercise power and with what consequence. Lissa Paul (1998) contends that sanctioned power structures have been implicitly reproduced as the natural order within traditional patriarchal fairy tales, and concomitantly, as the natural order in the existing social structure. In traditional tales, the male hero is in a position of power, and that power is often exercised to dominate and rule others. In feminist fairy tales, the heroine assumes a position of power to attain independence and to forge mutual respect. In most feminist fairy tales the use of power raises moral questions.

Hilary Crew (2002) created guidelines for identifying and analyzing feminist texts. The guidelines include asking how power relations are subverted or questioned, how males and females are represented as gendered subjects, how they are empowered, how relations are revised, and how feminist ideology is embedded in the text. An ethic of caring that values family and community and promotes equality and interdependence figures prominently in them. Crew cites what Andrea Schwenke Wylie has termed "immediate-engaging-first-person narration" (1999, p. 185) as a frequent narrative convention in feminist texts. Here, the female protagonist displays agency and voice by narrating her own story: controlling what is revealed and what is concealed.

A. S. Wylie, "Expanding the view of first-person narration"

R. S. Trites, *Waking Sleeping Beauty: Feminist Voices in Children's Novels*

Roberta Seelinger Trites (1997) defines a feminist text as one in which the protagonist is empowered *regardless* of gender, and she discusses several characteristics that distinguish feminist texts. The protagonist assumes a subject position in which she is an active agent. A frequent theme is that women must achieve autonomy in order to determine their own destiny, and the protagonist's self-determination drives the plot. Another characteristic is that the protagonist often employs imagination, creativity, or trickery to transcend gender roles. This indicates the character's ability to employ agency, which involves making choices about and accepting responsibility for what one does.

The issue of agency is often evident in the strong voice of the protagonist. The goal of agency is self-discovery and personal development rather than domination over others, and human interdependency, rather than competition, is stressed. The protagonists in feminist texts often embrace and celebrate traditional feminine characteristics as a counterbalance to the hegemonic order, which has devalued most things feminine. Thus, writers of feminist texts seek to empower women, conceive a new vision of the world, value what has been devalued, and give voice to the silenced.

The Importance of Discourse

We are situated in and constructed by the discourses to which we have access, and these discourses allow us to organize, understand, and explain our experience. In any culture, at any given time, we are positioned within competing discourses as we constantly form and reform our subjectivities. In re-visions of fairy tales, the author takes up a “particular speaking position in a discourse, and . . . then [brings] certain subject positions into existence” (Gilbert, 1992, p. 194). In order for the text to be believable, the author must work “within the bounds of the belief system and gender ideologies of her settings while showing how her protagonists—male and female—push at the boundaries that constrain them” (Crew, 2002, p. 84). It is extremely difficult to write completely outside the familiar and recognizable patterns of the discourses that shape how we think, how we view the world, and how we come to know ourselves. Thus, the writer must work simultaneously within and against dominant discourse.

It is also difficult to read texts if they cannot be readily identified as belonging within a familiar discourse. When a discourse has been taken up as one’s own it seems transparent, and any text situated within that discourse is comprehensible; the world it describes is recognizable. Narrative relies on a set of progressive transformations where certain events conventionally transform into subsequent events, and we find it difficult to accept those events that fall outside the parameters of what we anticipate as probable. Unexpected transformations cause us to step outside the created world of the story to adopt an analytic stance as we consciously check the validity of the transformation against the discourses with which we are familiar. Readers expect characters to behave in what they consider to be culturally appropriate ways (Galda & Beach, 2001) and will resist texts in which characters do not do so (Enciso, 1998). The heterosexual, romantic storyline incorporated in most fairy tales is so much a part of our being-in-the-world that it is extremely difficult to read and write outside it.

L. Galda & R. Beach, “Response to literature as a cultural activity”
P. Enciso, “Good/bad girls read together: Pre-adolescent girls’ co-authorship of feminine subject positions during a shared reading event”

Readers take up a position in relation to the text based on the narrative conventions of the story. When we position ourselves within the discourse of the text, we accept the narrative conventions the author has employed and recognize anticipated transformations while dismissing gaps and silences. We can only take up reading positions that exist within our discursive histories. Therefore, we must know the discourse within which the text is written if we are to recognize and understand the text, and we can only challenge the text based on discourses to which we have access.

L. Wason-Ellam, "If only I was like Barbie"
 B. Davies, *Frogs and Snails and Feminist Tales. Preschool Children and Gender*

There are several studies that illuminate the necessity of access to discourse in order to challenge storylines and to envision alternative positioning. Ann Trousdale (1995) found that her 7-year-old female participant relied on patriarchal discourse to judge strong female protagonists. While it was enticing to push gender boundaries, the child's positioning within the dominant discourse made it a difficult position for her to sustain. The girls in Linda Wason-Ellam's study located themselves in the discourse of feminine beauty rather than explore other possible positions. Wason-Ellam reported that "although feminist stories provided an alternative to the sexist world, they were not powerful enough to disrupt it" (1997, p. 436). Bronwyn Davies (1989) discovered that the preschool children with whom she worked struggled to understand fairy tales in terms of storylines that were familiar to them. Davies concluded that preschool children did not have the discursive histories necessary to accept a storyline that challenged the patriarchal order.

E. Yeoman, "How does it get into my imagination? Elementary school children's intertextual knowledge and gendered storylines"

Other studies confirm that children can begin to resist the dominant discourse once they have the discursive history to do so. Ann Rice read feminist fairy tales with sixth-grade boys and girls and determined that while the boys in the study had taken up traditional gendered positions "a small shift from stereotypical positioning was signified by the girls, suggesting that the discourses available to the girls [had] enabled them to broaden their cultural definitions of gender" (2000, p. 230). Working with children in a 4/5 classroom, Elizabeth Yeoman (1999) found that the students were able to understand disruptive texts and were also able to write their own. She attributed their ability to their age and the fact that they had been exposed to similar texts in popular culture and in their classroom.

Ella Westland found that 10- and 11-year-old girls were able to disrupt the "Cinderella" storyline. She believes that children at this age have developed a greater awareness of gender roles and restrictions and are able to understand the concept of stereotypes. While the girls in her study almost unanimously denied wanting to be a "princess" because they aspired to greater agency, the boys were content with the traditional storyline and viewed the position of prince favorably. Westland concluded:

We can speculate that [the boys] had little incentive to alter the standard fairy-tale structure . . . because they had more to lose than gain from the changes. Independent princesses might be a risk, even a threat, and get in the way of the hero continuing to do as he liked. (1993, p. 244)

From this brief review of research it seems that children are able to resist positioning and challenge stereotypes *if* the discourses through which to do so are available to them. Upper elementary age children

have reached an adequate level of maturity and have sufficient discursive histories to begin to critique stereotype and to envision alternative positioning. Research indicates that girls, more than boys, may be willing to engage in this disruption of discourse.

Considering Cinderella

B. Bettelheim, *The Uses of Enchantment: The Meaning and Importance of Fairy Tales*

Bruno Bettelheim (1976/1989) contends that “Cinderella” is the best-known and most-loved fairy tale with over 700 documented versions, the earliest in AD 850–860 in China. A very narrow brush is used, however, when the messages embedded in “Cinderella” are considered. In contemporary Western culture, “Cinderella” has become synonymous with Perrault’s “Cendrillon,” in large part because it is the version on which the Disney (1950) animated movie was based. There are significant differences between the Perrault and the Grimm versions of “Cinderella.” Although the storylines are similar, “each implies a radically different pattern of female behavior” (Bottigheimer, 1987, p. 36). The Grimm version is based on female empowerment enabling its reclamation by women, while the Perrault version embodies a patriarchal point of view rendering it all but impossible to reclaim (Knoepfelmacher, 1999). It is important to note the very different tales these two *original* versions tell and the very different subject positions they create for the reader. It is with this in mind that I briefly examine these two versions.

U. C. Knoepfelmacher, “Repudiating ‘Sleeping Beauty’”

G. C. Levine, *Ella Enchanted*
M. P. Haddix, *Just Ella*

I also consider some of the feminist elements and messages in *Ella Enchanted* (Levine, 1997) and *Just Ella* (Haddix, 1999). These too will necessarily be brief analyses, as a complete interpretation would be beyond the scope of this article. These particular texts were chosen from among the many quality re-visions of “Cinderella” for several reasons. First, they are novels that allow for more complete character and plot development than do picture books, and they are targeted to the age when, according to the research reviewed, children are able to recognize disruptive texts and question patriarchal stereotypes. Second, I believe that *Ella Enchanted* is a feminist text. Although *Just Ella* appears to be, and includes many elements characteristic of feminist texts, the male character development and the resolution of the storyline disrupt a feminist reading. Marjorie Orellana cautions that “dominant gendered discourses may appear in new ways even in spaces that look like they are challenging traditional approaches to gender” (1995, p. 703). *Just Ella* seems to be an example of this phenomenon. I also chose novels based on my belief that one of the reasons younger children do not position themselves with the independent princesses in many picture books has to do with the comedic presentation of the characters. While the heroines in *Ella Enchanted* (Levine, 1997) and *Just Ella* (Haddix, 1999) may be hu-

M. F. Orellana, “Literacy as a gendered social practice: Tasks, texts, talk, and take-up”

morous at times, they are not comedic caricatures but “princesses” who construct viable subjectivities and help us explore our own possible positioning.

“Cendrillon” (Charles Perrault, 1697)

Perrault, *Cinderella: A
Folklore Casebook*

It is apparent that the Perrault version of “Cinderella” was written from a position in patriarchal discourse “to please an aristocratic audience” (Tatar, 1987, p. 189). Perrault’s (1697) version of “Cinderella” begins when Cinderella’s father marries a proud and haughty woman who has two equally proud and haughty daughters. This beginning severs the link between Cinderella and her mother. It masks the fact that the helper (in this case fairy godmother) is representative of the dead mother, and it minimizes Cinderella’s grief, which would serve as a driving force for personal agency. Perrault focuses on descriptions of the setting and wardrobe more than on Cinderella’s overwhelming loss or even the stepsister’s envy (Cashdan, 1999). Relationships and maternal power take second place to parquetry and diamond stomachers.

Messages about women and submissiveness, dependence, and beauty are embedded in this version of the tale. Cinderella submits meekly to her servitude. When her work is done, she voluntarily takes up a position in the cinders. When the upcoming ball is announced, the stepsisters consult Cinderella because of her good taste, and she willingly gives them excellent advice and offers to help style their hair. She toils away happily and selflessly. She is so self-sacrificing that at the end of the tale she not only forgives her stepsisters’ cruelty but arranges advantageous marriages for them.

Cinderella exhibits neither agency nor voice. As the stepsisters leave for the ball, she follows them only with her eyes and begins to cry. She is disconsolate and incapable of action. When her fairy godmother appears and asks what is wrong, Cinderella is unable to speak; she cannot even voice her desire to go to the ball. Her godmother directs her to get a pumpkin, six mice, a rat, and six lizards that she turns into the coach, horses, coachman, and footmen. She also clothes Cinderella and tells her when she must leave the ball. Cinderella is an object acted upon. The fact that a messenger of the prince discovers Cinderella and she is transformed once again by magic and beautiful clothes before meeting the prince indicates that in her humble state she would not be worthy of the match. She must be beautiful to be worthy.

This Cinderella cannot speak for herself, she cannot act on her own behalf, and she cannot function autonomously: yet she is rewarded

with the ultimate prize. After meek submission, humble acceptance of her fate, being good to those who abused her, and becoming beautiful, she is rewarded with the prince, yet she *did* nothing.

“Aschenputtel” (Jacob & Wilhelm Grimm, 1812)

The Complete Fairy Tales of the Brothers Grimm

In the Grimm’s version of “Cinderella” (Zipes, 1987) we see the effect of a different intent. The Grimms “sought to capture the authentic voice of the common people” (Tatar, 1987, p. 189), and the result is a Cinderella who takes destiny into her own hands, uses speech in powerful ways, and overcomes the abuse heaped upon her by cruel stepsisters. The Grimms’ version of Cinderella is rooted in a matriarchal tradition and begins with the death of Cinderella’s mother. On her deathbed, she admonishes Cinderella to be good and pious, and she vows to watch Cinderella from heaven and to take care of her. Many elements of the story support the fact that Cinderella’s power comes from her dead mother and that the mother does, indeed, continue to look after her.

Upon the father’s remarriage, Cinderella is banished to the kitchen and forced to complete the domestic work alone while “her sisters did everything imaginable to cause her grief and make her look ridiculous” (Zipes, 1987, p. 87). These stepsisters are not merely envious; they are cruel and abusive. Unlike Perrault’s Cinderella, who endures all with a smile, this Cinderella goes daily to her mother’s grave to weep and pray and rage against her situation. The bitterness she feels is palpable. This Cinderella gives us permission to experience a full range of emotions.

Once, when her father was going to the fair, he asked his daughters what they would like. The stepsisters asked for dresses and jewels, but Cinderella asked for the first twig that brushed her father’s hat. Her father brought her a hazel twig, which she planted on her mother’s grave and watered daily with her tears. The twig grew into a tree, and whenever Cinderella requested something of it, a white bird came and gave it to her. The tree and the bird are strong maternal symbols. The tree is a common motif in Cinderella stories as an essential life force with connections to the earth and to the mother (Cashdan, 1999, p. 89). Furthermore, the hazel tree is symbolic of female wisdom (Walker, 1988). The tree grows out of the mother’s grave and represents her body, while the white bird that helps Cinderella is symbolic of the mother’s spirit. Thus, the tree stands as a conduit of the mother’s wisdom and guidance directed toward her daughter.

B. G. Walker. *The Woman’s Dictionary of Symbols and Sacred Objects*

On hearing that there will be a 3-day festival at the palace, the stepsisters force Cinderella to help them prepare for it. She begs her step-

mother to let her go, and the stepmother gives her the task of separating lentils from the ashes. Cinderella calls to the birds and instructs them to separate the good seeds from the bad. Although the tasks are completed, Cinderella is still not allowed to go to the festival. After the family departs for the palace, Cinderella goes to the tree and asks for gold and silver to fall upon her, whereupon the bird provides her with magnificent clothing. Through these events we can see that this Cinderella is an active agent in her destiny and uses her voice in powerful ways. Not only does Cinderella speak up and ask for permission to go to the festival, but she also conjures help from the birds. "At its most powerful, conjuring power resides within the conjurer, who generates her own incantation rather than having it prescribed for her" (Bottigheimer, 1987, p. 42). Cinderella does not merely repeat a formulaic spell; she calls on the power within her to summon the help she needs.

When Cinderella goes to the ball, the prince will dance with no one but her. When it is time to leave, Cinderella evades the prince, who is trying to establish her identity. On the third night, however, the prince coats a stairway with pitch, causing Cinderella to lose her golden shoe as she flees. Later, it is the prince himself who searches for her. After the stepsisters have attempted to wear the shoe, he insists that Cinderella be allowed to try on the shoe despite her disheveled appearance. The shoe fits, he recognizes her as his true love, and they marry.

The prince in this version of the tale exhibits several commendable characteristics. During the ball, when others ask to dance with Cinderella, his response is, "She's my partner" (Zipes, 1987, p. 89). It could be argued that Cinderella should speak for herself, yet it is a positive move for the prince to use the word *partner* with its connotation of equality. He also exercises agency in trying to establish Cinderella's identity and in going to seek her himself. Perhaps the most liberating element for both women and men is his acceptance of Cinderella in her unkempt state. This Cinderella does not need to be transformed into a beauty for him to see her intrinsic worth.

In this version, the stepsisters are not rewarded for their abusive treatment of Cinderella. At their mother's insistence, they mutilate their feet in an attempt to make the shoe fit. Then, birds reveal them as impostors as they ride away with the prince. The story does not end here, though. The stepsisters attend the wedding to ingratiate themselves with Cinderella and the prince. On the way to the wedding the birds peck out one of each of the sisters' eyes. Then on their return home, they peck out the other eye. Thus, the sisters are punished for their envy and wickedness.

Ella Enchanted (Gail Carson Levine, 1997)

When Ella was just hours old, a fairy cursed her with the gift of obedience, but, as Ella tells us, "Instead of making me docile, Lucinda's curse made a rebel of me" (Levine, 1997, p. 5). In this re-vision of "Cinderella," Ella tells her story in a voice that is at times strong and at times uncertain but always determined and always believable. The mother's presence at the beginning of the story situates it in matriarchal tradition. Ella's mother dies early in the story, and on her deathbed, she addresses Ella as precious and tells her that she loves her. This affirming statement is the last Ella's mother speaks to her, sustaining her and strengthening her for what is ahead.

Ella goes to a tree to wish for her mother's recovery, wanting to make the wish "where it would have the best chance of being granted" (p. 9). Ruth Bottigheimer (1987) has noted a link between women, trees, and casting spells or making wishes which may be attributed to the connection to the earth and to the life giving forces associated with both women and trees. Later, during her mother's funeral, Ella escapes to a weeping willow tree to cry out her grief. Willow bark has long been recognized as a source of relief for pain, and willows are symbolic of mourning (Walker, 1988), so this is a very powerful haven for Ella. It is here that she first meets Prince Charmont, who has also escaped the crowd to mourn her mother's death more privately and to find Ella.

This text calls into question the use of magic as a corollary to social responsibility. Mandy, Ella's fairy godmother, refuses to use big magic because of its unpredictable ramifications. In contrast, Lucinda flaunts her use of big magic with disastrous results. In addition to highlighting the responsibility inherent in the use of magic, Lucinda's gifts call into question the desirability of many of the elements of traditional romance ideology. We see that Ella's gift of obedience is indeed a curse, the newlywed giants are distraught as a result of her gift of being together always, and Ella's father becomes even more absent after he and Dame Olga are given the gift of eternal love. Breaking stereotypes regarding appearance and a respect for diversity are evident in *Ella Enchanted*. Mandy does not fit the common image of a fairy. When Ella finds out that Mandy is her godmother she muses, "She couldn't be a fairy. Fairies were thin and young and beautiful. Mandy was as tall as a fairy was supposed to be, but who ever heard of a fairy with frizzy gray hair and two chins?" (p. 24). On the other hand, Lucinda, who is not a very good fairy, does look the part. She is "tall and graceful, with huge eyes, skin as unblemished as satin, lips as red as pomegranate seed, and cheeks the color of early sunset" (p. 121). So we

come to know that value and competence are not related to appearance.

The book is peopled with a multitude of fantasy beings, and Ella respects them and learns from them. A gnome has the power of prophecy, and an elf is able to look inside Ella to judge her worth and character. Ella voices respect for the powerful, positive ways these women wield power. Ella is adept at mimicking and learning languages, adding strength and power to her voice. She calms a young gnome in the royal menagerie and later subdues a group of ogres through her use of language. While seeking Lucinda to ask her to remove the curse, Ella comes upon a group of elves. Interdependence is obvious as they "cobbled together a language understood by all" (p. 91). Ella's voice is strong and her agency is apparent.

Her subjectivity accentuates the absurdity of being sent off to finishing school to learn to embroider, dance, write, sing, and employ proper manners. The prince believes that the school teaches "paltry tricks," and that Ella will be made "less admirable" (p. 84). Ella takes advantage of his comments to discuss agency. She says, "It is helpful to know the proper way to behave, so one can decide whether or not to be proper" (p. 108). Ella thus subverts patriarchal positioning. The finishing school serves as a mirror to help us explore how preposterous are many of the behaviors and characteristics deemed appropriate for young women.

The prince and Ella's father stand in opposition as models of male behavior. Roberta Seelinger Trites (1997) has pointed out that in feminist novels, there is often a woman stuck in stereotypical positioning who serves as a foil for the protagonist's progress toward agency and independence. In *Ella Enchanted*, male as well as female roles are explored, and the father serves as a foil to the prince. Ella's father is always absent: away for her birth, away for her mother's death, and away during her debasement in servitude. He is unfeeling and self-centered. In contrast to a pervasive acceptance of diversity, her father pejoratively refers to the elves as "greenies" (p. 69). He views Ella as a mere object as evidenced when he loses his fortune and tells Ella that he will have to sell her in marriage.

Char is everything the father is not. He is kind, considerate, and sensitive to others' feelings. He is smart and steady. He is also a man other men admire. He looks forward to his first military duty and is viewed by the older men under his command as a "toiling prince" (p. 113), one who is eager to learn how to do things correctly. He also helps us see that being a king is a thankless job rather than a position of glamour and adventure. He is sent to a neighboring country for a year,

as is customary to foster amenable relations, and while he is there, he writes to Ella about the monthly sings in which the people engage. He admires their sense of community and wishes it for himself. Char displays many characteristics that are typically masculine, but he also exhibits characteristics that reflect feminist concerns. In short, his subject positions are varied, and his agency takes many forms.

Standard elements of the “Cinderella” plot are included in this re-vision: cruel stepsisters, forced servitude, and falling in love with the prince. Hattie is a cruel stepsister who figures out that Ella must do what she is told and orders Ella to work for her and to give her things, yet Ella does not acquiesce meekly. She puts mice and toads in Hattie’s bed and even takes her wig in retaliation. When Dame Olga realizes that Ella’s father was penniless when he married her she forces Ella into servitude. Ella also falls in love with the prince, but this is not a love-at-first-sight-based-on-beauty love. Ella and Char become friends, correspond through letters for a year, and eventually come to love each other.

When the prince professes his love for her, Ella realizes that her curse could jeopardize the entire kingdom, and she vows to refuse to marry him. This text is an example of the difficulty of writing outside romantic discourse, yet the ending re-visions gendered roles. When Char asks her to marry him, Ella is dressed in rags and covered in cinders. He understands that she is distraught about something and assures Ella, “You needn’t be Ella if you don’t want to be” (p. 223). This opens up multiple subject positions for her. Because Ella must overcome her curse to refuse him, she ends up breaking the curse. Mandy explains, “You rescued yourself when you rescued the prince” (p. 228). Although the story reflects romance ideology, it ends with happily ever after with a twist.

Just Ella (Margaret Peterson Haddix, 1999)

While most versions of “Cinderella” end with the princess being chosen for her beauty, her marriage to the prince, and assurance of happily ever after, this re-vision begins a month before the marriage. Ella has been chosen and is living in the castle learning the proper behavior of a princess. Three themes are evident in Haddix’s re-vision: the positioning of women as objects in the patriarchal structure, making the fairy tale storyline visible as a fiction, and a concern for social responsibility. Through Ella’s voice we come to understand these themes, and while her voice is strong and assured, it is not always believable nor is it always authentic. There are times when Ella uses contemporary phrases that do not ring true in the novel’s setting: “You mean it’s a dirty job, but somebody’s got to do it?” (p. 3). Refer-

ring to her stepmother and stepsisters as the “step-evils” seems just a bit too cute, and at times her insolence toward authority goes beyond voice and agency to rudeness. Despite this criticism, however, it is *her* voice that tells *her* story and claims agency in determining *her* destiny.

During her stay at court, Ella learns that women are objects to be protected as well as protected against. She finds the castle incredibly dim and gloomy and longs to be in the sunshine. Therefore, she is eager to attend a tournament until she learns that the women are to remain in a tent with the flap closed during the competition. Madame Bisset tells her that the “combination of virginity and beauty” (p. 87) would distract the competitors. Men must be protected against women. Alternately, when Lord Reston suffers an apparent stroke in her presence, she is subsequently concerned to know his condition. She is infuriated that she will be told what is considered appropriate rather than the truth. She is told that women are to be protected from unpleasantness because they have been “created to be like flowers, providing color and beauty to the world” (p. 19). Ella realizes the absurdity of this view because she has observed how women toil in the villages. The text makes visible the construction that only certain women are to be protected.

The concept of beauty is critiqued in the contrast between Ella and a young servant, Mary. Ella realizes that it is not fair that she has been elevated to princess solely because of her beauty, while Mary is destined to a life of servitude because she lacks beauty. Later in the story, when Ella refuses to marry Charm and is put in the dungeon, Mary brings her food and a shovel. Ella worries that Mary may be discovered, but Mary tells her that being ugly is like being invisible. The fact that beauty is a social construction is evident when Ella's stepsister marries Charm. Being fat is the new standard of beauty since the new princess is overweight, and all of the courtiers begin to gorge on food in order to become beautiful. We also see that beauty can be found where one looks for it. Ella observes a group of children playing in a refugee camp and realizes that despite their disheveled appearance and the squalor surrounding them, they are beautiful.

Ella is infuriated that she will never have any real power in the palace. She realizes that all she will have is the “power of pillow talk . . . not real power, not the right to make any decisions . . . , but the power of persuasion” (p. 42). This is in contrast to the power she claimed, the decisions she made, and the agency she employed to shape her destiny by going to the ball. She tells us explicitly how she managed to get a gown, the glass slippers, and a carriage in order to attend the ball. She says, “I'd made something happen. I'd done something

everybody had told me I couldn't. I'd changed my life all by myself" (p. 56). Ella realizes, however, that she has not really changed her destiny singlehandedly but has had the support of many people. This realization stresses the feminist recognition and appreciation of interdependence. The thing about Ella that is most threatening to the courtiers is that she has taken charge of her own destiny. They tell her repeatedly that ladies wait and men have adventures, yet Ella proves this to be a falsehood. Rather than believe in Ella's agency, however, the people of the court prefer to create and believe a fairy tale.

My reading of *Just Ella* as a feminist novel breaks down when I consider the development of the male characters and the story's resolution. Neither Charm nor Jed open possibilities for male positioning. Their character development can certainly be read as a parody of existing structures, but they do not help construct viable subject positioning. They do not help the reader know how to *be*. For example, Charm is a classic beauty with absolutely no brains and no concern for others. Ella realizes that she has been a beauty contestant, that Charm was the prize, and that the ideology of beauty is not enough to sustain a marital relationship. There is nothing redeemable in Charm that could help young boys explore alternative positioning. Jed is similarly lacking. His commitment to refugees is commendable and raises issues of social responsibility. He is also positioned as the oldest male child, and the restrictions traditionally inherent in that position are evident in the expectation that he will follow his father's career path while his younger brothers can follow their passions. Yet he is indecisive and initially allows the protocol of the court to dissuade him from his passion.

Finally, Ella becomes lost at the end of the story. Although her voice is still strong and she is still positioned to determine her own destiny, she capitulates to romance ideology. After escaping from the castle, she seeks refuge in the camp Jed has organized, believing that she can truly be of service. Yet it is not *her* passion she follows. She even states, "If I have no life's goal of my own, is it such a bad thing to do the life's work of the man I love?" (p. 178). Although Ella considers the impact love and marriage will have on her future choices, and she does delay any commitment, it seems apparent that she defers to Jed's desires rather than exploring her own. The strong, assertive, determined young woman who changed the course of her life submits to someone else's passion.

Re-Visioning New Possibilities

While entire texts can and have been devoted to analyses of "Cinderella," this brief interpretation reveals the very different messages em-

bedded in these versions. Perrault's Cinderella shows us that we should be submissive, passive, and beautiful. Grimms' Cinderella shows us that we can be agents in our destiny, that we can use our voices in powerful ways, and that there are severe consequences for cruel intentions. It also shows us that we can experience a full range of emotions and that our appearance is secondary to our inner being.

Ella (Levine, 1997) shows us that we can direct our destiny and overcome obstacles that bar the way. She helps us understand that there is strength in diversity and that power must be wielded judiciously. She also teaches us that while we may not be able to disrupt romance ideology, we can learn to see beyond appearance and recognize love based on friendship and mutual respect. Ella (Haddix, 1999) also shows us that we can be in control of our destiny, that our lives are intertwined with those of others, and that fairy tales are mere constructions. She also serves as a caution that romance ideology is pervasive and seductive, and one can become lost in it. I would contend that no one of these Cinderellas can open up the multiplicity of subject positions to which we need access. However, taken together, perhaps they can help us appreciate the range of agency available to women and men and lead us to appropriate what is best in each Cinderella.

As researchers and teachers we need to continue to work with our students in an effort to better understand how they read texts and how they construct meaning within the discourses available to them: how they adopt a discourse as their own and how they resist. We need to identify and promote feminist texts that are liberatory and encourage children, girls *and* boys, to construct alternative positions from which to understand their world and from which to act as agents in the construction of their own subjectivities. We ourselves need to be able to identify and disrupt the dominant discourse within a text, and as part of the everyday lived experience of the classroom we need to help children read within and against hegemonic discourses. We need to listen to children as they construct meaning and guide them in that construction in ways that open possibilities for us all.

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