

Jewel Loya

Jie Zhuang

Humanities Core 1CS

22 May 2022

Doves and Damsels: Patriarchy vs. Feminine Agency in “Cinderella”

In patriarchal society, men dominate both the public and private spheres, while women are considered secondary and dependent on men. The inequitable face of patriarchy is integral to the functioning of social, political, and economic institutions, the organization of the domestic sphere, and is reflected and reproduced through popular discourse and the media. Out of this social organization, gender norms are instated. Accordingly, the Grimm Brothers’ 1812 rendition of “Cinderella,” a product of 19th century German Romantic culture, upheld sexist patriarchal ideologies about femininity. In “Cinderella,” a virtuous young girl lives a tortured life of servitude, one marked by her disgraceful treatment by her stepsisters and stepmother. Betraying her stepmother’s wishes for her to stay home from a royal festival, Cinderella goes anyway and meets a prince who becomes adamant on marrying her. Eventually, they marry; and through their union, Cinderella’s life of belittlement and mistreatment becomes a thing of the past. However, this brief description of the story obscures the complexity of the tale’s depiction of patriarchal culture. Both implicitly and explicitly, elements of feminine revolt manifest themselves throughout the story. While “Cinderella” acts to affirm and promote patriarchal ideologies that construct femininity in terms of religious devotion and purity and idealize female passivity, there remain aspects of feminine agency deriving from Cinderella’s ability to “conjure,” befriend, and even embody nature in resistance of oppressive forces. Didactically inscribing feminine ideals into the character of Cinderella, the story’s male authors unwittingly and paradoxically

contradict the story's thematization through Cinderella's magical willful acts and elements of divine maternal power. Cinderella may be restricted by the structures of patriarchy, but ultimately, she forges a counter-hegemonic, socially deviant affinity with emblematic doves and a totemic hazel tree that allow her to advantageously navigate through her male-dominated world.

Despite their origins in oral folklore, the Grimms' fairy tales reflected their time, place, and authorship, perpetuating ideas about male superiority and appropriate femininity. In her article "Myths of Innocence and Imagination: The Case of the Fairy Tale," scholar of religious studies Jeanette Sky asserts, "The traditional fairy tales as we know them [are]...literary products modified to serve various cultural needs and functions" (370). Taking special notice of the authorship of Romantic fairy tales— "mostly male, middle- or upper-class writers" (370)—Sky argues that the Grimm Brothers wrote their stories under a veil of folkloric authenticity to "[give] a universal value to the morals and gender politics that were related in [them]" (371). The universalization of such ideologies concerned several, if not all, sectors of society: by upholding biblical doctrine regarding femininity, feminine gender identity was pigeonholed; familial arrangements in which domestic life was headed by the father (or "patriarch") were deemed the only rightful way of life; and the male exclusivity of political leadership (as well as general participation in political life) was standardized. Using the vehicle of a seemingly harmless children's tale to communicate sexist tenors allowed the Grimms to "rationalize and naturalize male domination and patriarchy" (Sky 369). Thus, the Grimms' storytelling became a bloodline for patriarchy, feeding the beast of masculinity so that it could live to subjugate another day. Male superiority is made to seem correct through "Cinderella's" subliminal, sexist messaging, and Cinderella's depiction comes to resemble what it means to be a *proper* woman.

As a symptom of the fairy tale's foundational Protestant culture, the Grimms' characterization of Cinderella and her mother as devout Christians idealized femininity in terms of religious purity. In "The Impact of Germany on English Children's Books," a chapter in *Telling Tales*, professor of German David Blamires describes the Grimms' tales as the "epitome of small-town middle-class central Germany, where the values of hard work, thrift, modesty, enterprise and orderliness are underpinned by a simple Protestant faith" (149). Instilling in the reader the importance of faith, the opening of the story serves a rhetorical purpose: Cinderella's dying mother's final words to her daughter "...if you are good and say your prayers, our dear Lord will always be with you..." (Tatar 148) serves as a method of indoctrination, touting the cultural norms of the time period. The pious characterization of femininity extends beyond mere statement; the doves and the hazel tree emblematically evoke the goodness of God by helping Cinderella through the hardships she faces in the story—just as her mother claimed God would. Growing on the grave of the mother, the hazel tree—and the birds which reside on its branches—can be read as representative of the mother and her pious beliefs. Notably, Cinderella's late mother's alignment with natural beings—the tree and the birds—establishes her as the "natural," or rightful, mother—the fertile, biological mother; whilst, inversely, Cinderella's stepmother is positioned as the "artificial," false, deviant mother—the non-biological mother. This characterization of the stepmother as "illegitimate" aids in the maintenance of normative familial arrangements—those arrangements involving blood-connection and supported by biblical doctrine. Disseminating ideas about the importance of devout Protestantism and the mercy of God, Cinderella found solace with the totemic, "motherly" hazel tree; weeping and praying under it three times a day (149); while the doves helped her clean up the lentils her stepmother had left for her to pick up from the ashes. Further underscoring Cinderella's alignment with

notions of religious purity, the Oxford dictionary of the bible claims that doves are symbols of innocence and messengers of promise. On the other hand, proclaimed the antithetical foils of the devout, good, dove-like girl that Cinderella was, the stepsisters are negatively described as having hearts that were “foul and black” (148). As the conclusion of the story clearly sides with Cinderella—she is the one who marries the prince, while the stepsisters are punished for their mistreatment of Cinderella by having their eyes pecked out by these same doves administering the wrath of God—the story affirms the importance of goodness, purity, and Christianity. Thus, the juxtaposition between Cinderella and her “impure” stepsisters is necessary to elucidate Cinderella’s goodness. The story’s modeling of femininity as the one way—pure and angelic—creates a seemingly one-dimensional portrayal of womanhood, instituting a normalized standard of what femininity ought to look like and upholding patriarchal ideas that regard the female in these terms. Anything that strays from this narrow construction of femininity—like the foul-hearted stepsisters and the deviant stepmother—can be deemed “incorrect” or “non-normative,” aiding in the maintenance of male-dominated power structures. Importantly, despite the binaries the story uses to characterize femininity, a more nuanced feminineness is eventually revealed by the text.

Further constructing Cinderella’s femininity in accordance with patriarchy, the Grimms passively characterize Cinderella in relation to her male counterpart: the prince. In detailing how many Grimms’ tales typically include a “heroine [who] is rescued and marries the prince of her dreams” (178), Blamires highlights the role of male dependence in social depictions of femininity. Cinderella’s tortured life, from Blamires perspective, is mended in the marriage to the prince. Continuously mocked, mistreated, and excluded, Cinderella is referred to as a “goose” (148) unworthy of dining with her stepsisters; stripped of her beautiful clothes and

instead dressed in an old gray smock with wooden shoes; forced to work long hours carrying water, starting the fire, cooking, and washing; taunted by her stepsisters for her drab attire as she works; given the tedious task of picking lentils and peas out of the ashes—before and after pleading to attend the festival; and only after being proclaimed the “true bride” (153) of the prince is she avenged by her dove friends and does her suffering end. Seconding Blamires point, literary scholar Ruth Bottigheimer discusses female protagonists in the Grimms’ tales as emblematic figures of silence, passivity, and “powerlessness”: ““To the extent that these tales corroborated and codified the values of a society in which they appeared, they reinforced them powerfully, symbolizing and codifying the status quo and serving as paradigms for powerlessness”” (130). As a fundamental thematic of the story, outlined by the details listed above, Cinderella’s powerlessness in the face of domestic forces comes to define her womanhood and personhood. Furthering this point, scholar of critical theory Teresa L. Ebert argues that in romance narratives, in accordance with patriarchal ideology, a heroine does not become “sufficiently a woman” until her heterosexuality is realized; gender is equivalent to heterosexuality (39). But not only is Cinderella’s gender—an idealized version of femininity—constructed in her relationship with the prince, but much of her social prominence is dependent on this union. Alone she was helpless and “puny,” (Tatar 153) doomed to a “pre-princess” life of servitude.

However sexist the thematics, agentic aspects within the story refute and destabilize the functioning of patriarchy, the most important being the dove-Cinderella affinity. In counter to much scholarship regarding “Cinderella” as a tale of feminine disempowerment, scholar of English Elisabeth Panttaja suggests, “Cinderella’s triumph at the ball has less to do with innate goodness and more to do with her loyalty to the dead mother and a string of *subversive acts*: she

disobeys the stepmother, enlists forbidden helpers, uses magic powers, lies, hides, dissembles, disguises herself, and evades pursuit” (90-91). Panttaja identifies a “structural tension” within the story “between the character that is drawn thematically (the pious Cinderella) and the character that acts in the narrative (the shrewd, competitive Cinderella)” (91). Rather than a prince rescuing Cinderella, her path up the social ladder is marked by non-conformity and the powers of her own will. Sparked by her unjust treatment by her stepfamily, Cinderella’s initial passivity and purity erupts into an oppositional determination. Rather than a tale of the meek inheriting the earth, “Cinderella” tells of a willful ascension from humility.

In conflict with the story’s thematization of female passivity and powerlessness, Cinderella exhibits her divine, supernatural power by “conjuring” her bird allies and calling upon the totemic hazel tree for help. Initially presented as an obedient, religious girl, Cinderella uses magic in counter to her oppressive stepmother. “Closer to paradise and thus possessing a secret knowledge,” children in fairy tales were “surrounded with strong notions of a religious and mythic kind” (Sky, 369). Cinderella summons the “doves, turtle doves, and all [the] little birds in the sky” (149) by stating “...help me put/ the good ones into the little pot/ the bad ones into your little crop” (Tatar 149). Stanzically separated from the rest of the text, Cinderella’s recital, with its poetic meter and rhythm, indicates a type of magical power at work; Cinderella emulates a fairy or a witch casting a spell. Cinderella’s natural affinity expands as she calls upon the hazel tree in a similar poetic manner: “Shake your branches, little tree, / Toss gold and silver down to me” (150). In contrast to the deviant stepmother’s composure, Cinderella’s alliances must be the countering supernatural good. While this resistance against the deviant stepmother may initially seem to uphold ideas about normative familial arrangements, as previously stated, Cinderella’s resistance against her stepmother entails a tactful navigation of the obstacles she is faced with:

she uses the birds to her advantage, summoning them several times throughout the story to help her with various tasks such as the construction of her beautiful dress. Interestingly, the beautiful dress which she constructs with the help of the birds shows that beauty is less a marker of femininity, but proof that Cinderella knows how society works. Repeating her chants and charms, Cinderella navigated her way through her sexist world. To a modern, progressive audience, the Grimms unveil, against their intent, that a vicious patriarchal society can make a young girl deviant and scheming rather than conformist. This is ultimately what most scholars ignore: the fact that Cinderella blossomed from a passive girl to an active supernatural force.

The enchanted feminine power within the text does not just derive from Cinderella, though; the doves within the story, standing in as figures of Cinderella's dead-mother, posit divine maternal power as a key factor in Cinderella's becoming. As aforementioned, Cinderella's mother and her pious beliefs are figured in the hazel tree which grows on her grave and the birds that live in its branches. Despite the mother's portrayal, Panttaja describes the "paradoxical" nature of Cinderella's mother—her connection to religious ideology yet her refutation of it: "[W]hile her power is associated at the outset with the power of the Christian god and while she seems to instruct Cinderella in the value of long-suffering sacrifice, she is also a wily competitor. She plots and schemes, and she wins. She beats the stepmother at the game of marrying off daughters" (90). Cinderella's mother, through her dove and tree proxies, plays a principal role in helping Cinderella into an advantageous marriage. Acting as a catalyst throughout the story, setting into action Cinderella's ascent up the social ladder, she helps Cinderella pick the lentils out of the ashes so that she may have a chance to attend the festival, and when Cinderella finally leaves for the festival, she provides her with beautiful attire so that she may be noticed by the prince. Additionally, when faced directly with the pleas of a man, Cinderella does not obediently

go with him, but escapes his pursuit; when the prince tells Cinderella “I will go with you and be your escort” (151) she evades pursuit and seeks refuge in a dovecote, a house for doves or pigeons. This detail is twofold: not only does Cinderella find solace with the marginalized creatures in society, but the symbolism of the doves persists. Establishing the significance of the dovecote in which Cinderella hides, Elisabeth Panttaja speculates that the location in which Cinderella seeks refuge—due to its association with the doves who are figures of the mother—is supposed to portray the mother’s influence at work in a mysterious manner (89). As a woman in 19th Century Germany, to make it up the social ladder or live a comfortable life, one must marry the “right” man—the man who is wealthy and in a position of power—like the prince. Clearly and without question, this patriarchal society oppressed women and characterized their abilities and worth in such narrow terms. However, Cinderella’s mother’s actions appear strategically geared to traverse these structures: to marry a prince, she had to go to the festival, and she had to look beautiful. The mother “worked the system” so to speak, doing what she could with the abilities afforded to her. Problematizing the indifference which scholars have to the implicit maternal/feminine power within the text Panttaja claims, “psychoanalysis perpetuates a myth of maternal power while at the same time denying a reality of maternal power” (88). Thus, the acknowledgement of feminine/maternal power or a valuing of matriarchal paradigms of power is much needed in scholarship regarding femininity.

Extending on this idea, the element of “romance” within the story can be explained by similar maternal magic, rather than stereotypical heteronormativity. Elisabeth Panttaja refutes claims about the story’s promotion of normative romantic relationships by asserting, “[T]here is actually nothing in the text itself to suggest either that Cinderella loves the prince or that the prince loves her. The prince marries Cinderella because he is enchanted (literally) by the sight of

her in her magical clothes” (91). Panttaja points out the prince’s repetition of the phrase “She is my partner,” (Tatar 151-152) and his “obsessive” (91) pursuit of Cinderella. It also cannot be ignored that the prince’s desperation to find Cinderella led him to coat a staircase with pitch (a sticky resinous substance) so that he would be able to further pursue her. This suggests he is not acting of his own will, but rather he is being influenced to act this way by the beautiful dress provided for by the mother proxied by the doves. This likely was not the intention of the Grimms—to depict a man being duped by a woman—but nonetheless the story implies a man being magically influenced to “love” Cinderella. Within the oppressive system of patriarchy, this manipulative magic by the mother exhibits her profound ability to navigate the disadvantaging landscape of her time. In marrying the prince, Cinderella may be conforming to the patriarchal ideals; but in the system of patriarchy, it is one of the only, if not the only, ways for a woman to progress up the social ladder. It is the way Cinderella enters an advantageous marriage—through magical trickery—that exhibits her feminine agency. Despite the hardships with her stepfamily, she was able to overcome the obstacles she faced. Against all odds, Cinderella rose from her humble beginnings through her mother’s sorcery—a feminine assertion of capability.

Aside from the symbolism of the birds and the hazel tree as figures for Cinderella’s dead mother—and the maternal power which manifests itself through them—Cinderella’s transgressive alliance with nature counter-hegemonically subverts the typical Western binary, hierarchical thinking fundamental to the functioning of patriarchy. In a point which connects to the biblical foundation of “Cinderella,” scholars Adam Weitzenfeld and Melanie Joy in “An Overview of Anthropocentrism, Humanism, and Speciesism in Critical Animal theory” contend that cultural hegemony is rooted in creation stories that “ordained” the dominion of some “creatures” over others (5). Expanding off this, Weitzenfeld and Joy profess that, mainly within

Western cultures, power functions through dualism or the construction of “others” in relation to a superior group, and that women and animals have been mutually exploited and degraded under these circumstances. Connectedly, just as Cinderella forms her subjective femininity, and relative inferiority, in relation to her male counterpart, Weitzenfeld and Joy assert that viewpoints regarding the “ ‘feminine’ vulnerabilities of embodiment, dependency, and affect” are based on the countering “myth” of the “assertive, atomistic, autonomous [male] subject” (13) and that “the exploitation of women and (other others) [is] due to the construction of women as *partially* autonomous [whilst ignoring] the conditions [i.e. Patriarchal culture] that both limit their autonomy and prop up the illusion of men’s full autonomy” (14; emphasis added). While “Cinderella” initially uses various binaries in depicting appropriate femininity, as previously mentioned, the story eventually disrupts this dualistic function of power by depicting prosperous relationships between Cinderella and nature. When Cinderella’s stepsisters dehumanize and exclude her at the opening of the story— ““Why should this silly goose be allowed to sit at the parlor with us?”” (Tatar 148)—Cinderella does not cower at these insults, but instead takes ownership of them, befriending and relying on the nature around her. In a profound exhibition of her agency, Cinderella strips the power from her stepsisters’ insults so they can no longer be used to subjugate. Cinderella converts the words of her stepsisters into her strength, her skill, her *own* power which she employs in her phoenix-like rise from the ashes: she summons the doves to help her pick lentils out of the ashes and to both construct her dress and help her hide it so she would not be caught for sneaking off to the festival, thus forming an animal-human alliance; and she escapes the prince’s pursuit by climbing up a tree “as nimbly as a squirrel” (151), a comparative assertion that posits Cinderella’s skill in terms of the animal. While these animal associations, as outlined above, would usually indicate one’s powerlessness, for Cinderella, they

allow her to make her way through the obstacles she faces on her rise to princess status. Hence, Cinderella destabilizes the typical organization and flow of power in Western patriarchal society—which functions through exclusionary logic and abjection—finding her strength in that which is typically oppressed and “othered.” Cinderella elevates her status by forming an affinity with animals rather than following the usual segregatory paradigm of power that serves as the foundation for both anthropocentrism and patriarchy.

Scholars tend to paint Cinderella as a “passive” character, ignoring her power which manifests itself not through heroic extravagance, but through subtle, and at times silent, femininity. Femininity needs to be redefined in terms that acknowledge feminine power in its various forms, because strength is often shown in unexpected ways, such as the strength which Cinderella derives from her dove kinship. Indeed, the story is greatly problematic in its characterization of women, but the structural problem should not obscure the elements within the text that elucidate feminine competence. When faced with social issues, most women of the time—and arguably, in the current day—lacked the ability to directly refute the structural forces which acted against them; and likely, if they did, their efforts could not disassemble a rich history of sexism and misogyny, or their efforts had deeply damaging consequences. So, it is not in outright and straightforward force that feminism is often manifested. While the Grimms did not intend to foreground elements of feminine rebellion; they, at base, created a text that embodied patriarchy in such a way that it can now be adopted in the process of deconstructing patriarchal power structures. Using the text as a blueprint, one can see how patriarchy functions in many sectors of society; and thus, how it can be banished from those said sectors, such as by changing how marriage and male dependence is viewed, as many modern imaginings of the story

employ themselves to do. In a world so strictly aligned with patriarchal ideologies, a small act of magical resistance is revolutionary.

Works Cited

- Blamires, David. "The Fairytales of the Brothers Grimm." *Telling Tales: The Impact of Germany on English Children's Books 1780-1918*, 1st ed., Open Book Publishers, 2009, pp. 147–80. JSTOR, <https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctt5vjt8c.13>. Accessed 22 Apr. 2022.
- Bottigheimer, Ruth B. "Silenced Women in the Grimms' Tales: The 'Fit' Between Fairy Tales and Society in Their Historical Context." *Fairy Tales and Society*. University of Pennsylvania Press, Inc, 2014. 115–131. Print.
- Browning, W.R.F. "dove." *Oxford: A Dictionary of the Bible*, 2009, <https://www.oxfordreference.com/view/10.1093/acref/9780199543984.001.0001/acref-9780199543984-e-552?rskey=yIe89G&result=530>. Accessed 29 May 2022.
- Ebert, Teresa L. "The Romance of Patriarchy: Ideology, Subjectivity, and Postmodern Feminist Cultural Theory." *Cultural Critique*, no. 10, 1988, pp. 19–57. JSTOR, <https://doi.org/10.2307/1354105>. Accessed 9 May 2022.
- Panttaja, Elisabeth. "Going up in the World: Class in 'Cinderella.'" *Western Folklore*, vol. 52, no. 1, 1993, pp. 85–104. JSTOR, <https://doi.org/10.2307/1499495>. Accessed 22 Apr. 2022.
- Sky, Jeanette. "Myths of Innocence and Imagination: The Case of the Fairy Tale." *Literature and Theology*, vol. 16, no. 4, 2002, pp. 363–76. JSTOR, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/23926824>. Accessed 16 May 2022.
- Tatar, Maria. "Cinderella." *The Classic Fairy Tales : Texts, Criticism* / Edited by Maria Tatar, Harvard University. Ed. Maria Tatar. Second edition. New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2017.

Weitzenfeld, Adam, and Melanie Joy. "An Overview of Anthropocentrism, Humanism, and Speciesism in Critical Animal Theory." *Counterpoints*, vol. 448, 2014, pp. 3–27. JSTOR, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/42982375>. Accessed 3 Jun. 2022.