

## 3.7 Cinderella: Glass Ceilings and Slippers

### Angourie [host]

Before I begin, I would like to acknowledge the Wurundjeri People of the Kulin Nation as the Traditional Custodians of the land on which this work was developed and is presented. I pay my respects to Elders past, present and emerging.

[plucky theme music with violins, clarinet, piano, and twinkly triangle]

### Angourie [host]

Hello and welcome back to The Community Library: a podcast, book club and discussion space. This week, I'm talking about the next fairy tale heroine who was subjected to Disney-fication. That's right, it's that day-dreaming, dainty-footed Cinderella!

[theme music fades out]

### Angourie [host]

Before we get into this episode, I want to thank you all for the wonderful feedback on last week's episode on *Snow White*. I got some really nice messages from people saying they enjoyed it, and I even got to the bottom of the *Golden Hairs and Golden Stars* fairy tale, so thank you to the person who did some digging for me and found out more about it. Now, I am going to reference things I talked about last week, so if you haven't listened to the *Snow White* episode yet, I do recommend! It will be linked in the show notes.

[ominous orchestral music fades in]

### Angourie [host]

Once upon a time, there were two sisters who went to Disneyland, Paris. They had never been to a Disney Land park before, or overseas, for that matter, and so they were excited beyond belief. To make the experience extra-special, the girls' kind parents made their wishes come true with a chance to dine to Cinderella's inn. The girls delighted in the cosiness of the medieval cottage, and were amazed at the fine food that was served. Their dessert even included a miniature golden slipper! And, at the end of the day, they were able to meet the Princess herself, the beautiful Cinderella. The sisters were awestruck by her dazzling beauty and gorgeous dress. They took a photo, and, as they had been told that this particular Cinderella spoke French, whispered "merci" before waving goodbye.

[orchestral music fades out]

### Angourie [host]

Cinderella is one of the most iconic stories in the fairy tale canon, and a big part of Disney's Princess brand. Cinderella's castle is at the centre of Disneyland Tokyo and Disney World in Florida, and, combined with the Sleeping Beauty castle, is the inspiration behind Disney's iconic castle logo. But, to understand where this all began, we must of course go back in time to Cinderella's complicated and convoluted beginnings. The story of the shoe-losing maiden dates back centuries, with

different versions and different missing shoes cropping up all over the world and in all different time periods.

The earliest version of the tale is from ancient Greece, between c. 7 BCE and 24 CE. It was recorded by a geographer named Strabos, who recounted the simple story of Rodophis. She is a poor servant girl, who is bathing when an eagle snatches one of her sandals and takes it to the King. The King is astonished by the beauty and unnaturally small size of the sandal, that he sends his men out all across the country in a quest to find this fairy-footed girl. She is found, and they marry. The end. Pretty simple, but it includes the main elements: servant girl, missing shoe, happily ever after.

Another early version of the story is found in China, during the Tang Dynasty in 850 CE. Duan Chengshi recorded the tale of Ye Xian in his collection of legends and folktales, and here emerges a tale that is more comparable to the Cinderella we know today. There's an evil step-mother, and the introduction of a guiding spirit, or fairy godmother character, which takes the form of a fish. There is also a ball, and the added detail of those magical golden slippers. Ye Xian leaves one of these slippers at the ball, shoe testing ensues, the Prince finds her and they live happily ever after.

To find the first recorded European version of the tale, we must travel to Italy in 1634. Here, Giambattista Basile wrote *Cenerentola*, a story about a young girl named Zezolla whose evil step-mother mistreats her. We have similar story elements to Ye Xian, but this time the guiding spirit is a fairy hiding in a magical tree. Again, we have a missing shoe, an ensuing nation-wide shoe test, and a happily ever after.

And here we come to one of the most famous versions of the tale, and the one that inspired Disney's film. In France, in 1697, Charles Perrault wrote a collection of fairy tales that included *Cendrillon, ou la petite pantoufle de verre – Cinderella, or the little glass slipper*. Here's how it goes...

[fairy-tale-esque orchestral music fades in]

*Once upon a time there was a gentleman who married, for his second wife, a proud and haughty woman. She had, by former husband, two daughters of her own, who were just as nasty as she. He had likewise, by another wife, a young daughter, but of unparalleled goodness and sweetness of temper, which she took from her mother.*

*Soon after the wedding, the step-mother began to show her true colours. So wildly jealous of the young girl was she, that she made her do all the horrible chores around the house. The poor girl became a servant in her own home. But she bore it all patiently, and when she had done her work, would sit in front of the dying cinders and ashes to keep warm. Thus, the girl was nicknamed Cinderella.*

*One day, the Prince gave a ball and invited all eligible young maidens. The step-sisters were delighted, and ordered Cinderella about to help them get ready. Cinderella knew she would not be allowed to go, but it wasn't until she had seen them off to the ball, that she began to cry.*

*Her godmother – who just inexplicably happened to be there – took it upon herself to get Cinderella to the ball. She magicked a pumpkin into a carriage, six mice into horses, a rat into a coachman, and*

*six lizards into footmen. And with a final wave of her wand, she turned Cinderella's rags into a ball gown of gold and silver, and gave her the prettiest glass slippers. Cinderella was ready to go to the ball! But, the godmother warned her to not stay out past midnight, for that's when the magic would wear off, and everything would return to how it once was.*

*Cinderella went to the ball and captured the hearts of everyone there, including the Prince. She had a wonderful time, but when she heard the clock strike eleven and three-quarters, she ran home.*

*The next night, Cinderella went back to the ball, dressed even more richly than the night before. She was so engrossed in the prince, that she did not notice how quickly the time had passed! As the clock struck twelve, she rushed out of the palace, and in her haste, left behind one of her glass slippers. Though the Prince ran after her, he could not catch up, and found the glass slipper and took it back to the palace.*

*The next day, there was a proclamation that the Prince would marry whosever foot may fit into this glass slipper. It was brought to the two step-sisters, who tried to force their foot to fit, but did not succeed. Finally, Cinderella, much to the scorn of her sisters, tried on the slipper. When it fit perfectly, she produced the matching glass slipper from her pocket, and put it on the other foot. Then the fairy godmother came in and transformed her rags to riches once more, and she was recognised as the beautiful mystery girl from the ball.*

*Having now recognised her, and knowing that she would soon become a Princess, the two step-sisters threw themselves at Cinderella's feet for forgiveness. Cinderella forgave them with all her heart.*

*She was then taken to the young Prince, and they were married within a matter of days. Cinderella invited her sisters to live with her in the palace, and matched them with two great lords of the court. And they all lived happily ever after.*

*The End.*

[orchestral music fades out]

Now, Perrault added in those flamboyant details that Disney ate right up: the pumpkin turning into a carriage, the mice to horses, the rat to coachman and the lizards to footmen. He also added the magical midnight deadline – it's good to have a bit of drama – and turned the golden shoe into the iconic image we associate with Cinderella today: a sparkling, fragile, glass slipper. Though Perrault's tale is the version I want to focus on in this episode, as it is the version that inspired the Disney film, I also want to mention another famous version of the tale, by our good friends the Brothers Grimm.

If you remember from last week, Snow White was included in the Brothers Grimm 1812 edition of *Children's and Household Tales*. Another tale in that collection? *Aschenputtel*, or *Cinderella*. The Grimms tell the story of Aschenputtel, whose mother dies when she is young. Her father remarries a cruel woman with two ugly daughters, who treat Aschenputtel terribly, but she remains ever kind and good. When her father goes on a trip, he asks Aschenputtel what gift she wants, to which she replies, quote: "the first branch which knocks your hat off on the way home." End quote. He obliges, and when he brings her a twig from a hazel tree, Aschenputtel buries it over her mother's

grave. Watered by Aschenputtel's tears, the twig grows into a tree with magical powers, and is home to a dove that will grant her whatever she wishes. The plot point of the invitation to the ball stays the same, but this time there are three nights of dancing and revelry. Aschenputtel's magical tree dresses her in the finest silver and golden silks, and she beguiles the Prince with her beauty and charm. But! There is still a midnight deadline! On the first two nights, she escapes just in time, much to the Prince's dismay. So, on the third night, he smears pitch all over the steps, hoping to stop her escape. In her haste to get away from the castle, one of Aschenputtel's golden slippers sticks to the pitch on the steps. Again, a shoe test ensues, but this time the ugly step-sisters are much more cunning. One cuts off a toe, the other a heel, in attempt to get their foot to fit the dainty shoe. The blood soon gives them away, however, and Aschenputtel is discovered to be the real mystery shoe-wearer. They all live happily ever after. Oh, but not before doves peck out the step-sisters' eyes on Aschenputtel's wedding day. I do love a Grimm ending.

[ominous orchestral music sound bite fades in and out to indicate a little break]

But, back to Perrault's *Cendrillon*. I want to first talk about our eponymous character, Cinderella herself, and express my delight and astonishment that Cinderella actually has a bit of a personality! Sure, she's obedient and gracious and of course incredibly beautiful, but she's also a bit cheeky. At the ball, she, quote: "went and sat down by her sisters, showing them a thousand civilities, giving them part of the oranges and citrons which the prince had presented her with, which very much surprised them, for they did not know her." End quote. So, Cinderella's got a bit of bite to her, then! Purposefully sitting down next to her sisters and being all kind and gracious, knowing that, for once in her life, she has the upper hand. And later on, she jokingly asks one of her step-sisters if she could borrow an old dress to go to the second night of the ball. When her step-sister refuses as she expected, Perrault writes she, quote: "was very glad of the refusal; for she would have been sadly put to it, if her sister had lent her what she asked for jestingly." End quote.

So ... what happened? How did she become yet another patriarchal princess we all shit on? Well, it has – in part – got to do with how the Grimms Brothers wrote her. They gave her less and less direct dialogue, and in their version, she is a silent and obedient servant girl, never once daring to play pranks on her sisters or laugh at their expense. But it's also got to do with the morals that Perrault pushed when he wrote the tale. Because, you see, Perrault was very helpful when writing his stories, and liked to make the themes and morals a little more explicit for the reader. So explicit, in fact, that he actually included the morals at the end of the tale.

Now, I find this absolutely FASCINATING, and so I want to discuss these morals, what they mean, and how they're explored in the fairy tale. So Perrault writes, quote:

"Moral: Beauty in a woman is a rare treasure that will always be admired. Graciousness, however, is priceless and of even greater value. This is what Cinderella's godmother gave to her when she taught her to behave like a queen. Young women, in the winning of a heart, graciousness is more important than a beautiful hairdo. It is a true gift of the fairies. Without it nothing is possible; with it, one can do anything."

Now, this seems like a pretty harmless message ... right? The power of graciousness and kindness and good-heartedness can overcome anything? It's what's on the inside that counts? This moral manifests in Cinderella. Our heroine is stuck in an abusive family: outnumbered and overpowered

in her own home, she is forced to do all the chores and is forbidden contact with the outside world. And yet, just like Snow White, she keeps her head held high and her heart pure and good. When Cinderella is forced to help her mean step-sisters get ready for the ball, Perrault writes, quote: “Anyone but Cinderella would have fixed their hair awry, but she was very good and dressed them perfectly well.” End quote. Perrault really just said Cinderella was #notlikeothergirls. And yet, here we run into a similar issue that I had with *Snow White*. Teaching children to be kind and gracious is all well and good, but when it comes to little girls, these virtues are synonymous with passivity and silence. It’s a very gendered message, especially when we contrast this with the kinds of young male heroes we see in stories. They are go-getters, they are warriors, they are loud and active, and they are rewarded for that. In an article titled “Fairy Tales and Feminism: ‘I Don’t Wanna Be Like Cinderella’”, author Antebellum writes that, in order for heroines like Cinderella to succeed, they must, quote: “fit into the narrow view of what [is] beautiful, as well as being kind, generous, self-sacrificing, the epitome of patience and forgiveness.” End quote.

As I mentioned before, we see a more extreme manifestation of this in the Grimms’ version of the fairy tale. In the VOX article “The Slippery Genius of the Cinderella Story”, Constance Grady talks about how the tale was revised with the Grimms’ multiple editions. Quote:

“As the Grimms continue to edit the story, the ‘good’ women – Cinderella and her dead mother – start talking less and less. The men and the ‘bad’ women start talking more. [...] Bad women show their badness by talking, which is unwomanly and hence wicked. [...] Cinderella wins because of her moral virtue, and part of the way we can see she’s virtuous is that she’s silent.”

End quote. Though the direct speech in Perrault’s tale is evenly quite distributed between Cinderella and her step-sisters, it’s important to acknowledge the Grimms’ version because, it, too, is a big influence on how we read the Cinderella story today, and how it’s evolved in our culture.

Another important theme that Perrault brings up in this first moral is beauty. Ah, that fickle friend. We saw this in *Snow White*, as well: Snow’s incredible beauty is the root of the Evil Queen’s jealousy. Perrault tells us that Cinderella is beautiful beyond compare, of course, but – wait. Doesn’t his moral tell us that it’s what’s on the inside that counts? Well ... not really. The only reason Cinderella gets her happy ending is because she’s beautiful. That’s what makes the Prince notice her. When Cinderella arrives at the ball, Perrault writes, quote: “Everyone stopped dancing, and the violins ceased to play, so entranced was everyone with the singular beauties of the unknown newcomer. Nothing was then heard but a confused noise of, ‘How beautiful she is! How beautiful she is!’” And later, during the ball, quote: “A fine meal was served up, but the young prince ate not a morsel, so intently was he busied in gazing on her.” End quote.

So, we can twist it in a way that it reads like Cinderella is the most beautiful at the ball because she’s beautiful and kind. Like, her kindness shines on through and makes her more radiant than ever, but ... Perrault makes it clear that it’s not about being kind for the sake of being a decent person, but rather for the sake of snagging a man. He gives himself away with this sentence in his moral, quote: “Young women, in the winning of a heart, graciousness is more important than a beautiful hairdo.” End quote. This 69-year-old man – yes, that’s how old he was when this book was published – is essentially telling young women to be kind and gracious because that’s what makes you desirable. Assuming, of course, that a woman’s greatest mission in life is to make herself

desirable to men. Contrary to popular belief, though, Cinderella's main objective to go to the ball – at least in Perrault's story – isn't to woo the Prince. She just wants to have a night off, and be included in the family. But the whole story teaches us that, though Cinderella's main objective isn't to get a man, that's her reward for being passive and silent. And thus, in his moral, Perrault presents this reward of a man as an incentive for women to be docile.

Now, with the perfect example of female silence in Cinderella, we must of course have the contrasting example of female loudness, and thus deviance. Enter evil step-mother number two, this time flanked by two ugly step-sisters!

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Last week we talked about the connotations that come with the evil step-mother trope. Traits that make women undesirable – being old and onto a second marriage – are villainised, thus coding female nonconformity as evil and reinforcing patriarchal values. We also talked about the significance of witchcraft, and the promotion of girl-hate. There are similarities between Snow White's evil step-mother and Cinderella's, and the demonisation of nonconforming women still stands. But we also have significant differences, such as the absence of witchcraft, and the addition of the ugly step-sisters. Our increased cast of female villains changes the mother-daughter dynamic into a family dynamic. This makes the story feel less contrived, and therefore more realistic than Snow White. Sure, we still have godmothers and pumpkins turning into carriages, but the abuse and trauma is grounded in reality.

A common criticism that comes up when discussing the feminist politics of Cinderella is that she doesn't stand up for herself, and she's only able to escape once she is saved by a handsome prince. But I think this is failing to understand how a toxic cycle of abuse can trap someone into feeling that they have no way out. In Perrault's story, Cinderella doesn't even consider going to the ball as a possibility for her. To her step-sisters she says, quote: "it is not for such as I am to go to such a place." End quote. She has been taught to put herself down before her step-sisters and step-mother do it for her. There is such a power imbalance, and this abuse has been so normalised from such a young age, that fighting back isn't even an option for her. And the thing that makes it all the more heart-breaking is that this is happening right under her father's nose. Perrault writes, quote: "[she] dared not tell her father, who could have scolded her, for his wife governed him entirely." End quote. So, Cinderella is trapped and powerless in an environment where one is supposed to feel safe and happy: at home, with family. I think the important thing to recognise here, when reading from a modern context, is that maybe we're too quick to victim-blame Cinderella.

The curious thing about Perrault's version of the tale, is that it ends with forgiveness. When Cinderella's ugly step-sisters recognised her as the beautiful princess from the ball, they, quote: "threw themselves at her feet to beg pardon for all the ill treatment they had made her undergo. Cinderella took them up, and, as she embraced them, said that she forgave them with all her heart, and wanted them always to love her." End quote. This moral of forgiveness is something we see mirrored in the evil step-mother's character. She is incapable of forgiveness, and thus she has grown old and bitter. She holds a grudge against Cinderella's beauty and youth, which is significant because it harks back to her undesirability. Cinderella, on the other hand, is able to forgive, which kind of plays into the whole women-must-be-passive-and-gracious-and-preferably-quiet thing, because Cinderella is expected to extend kindness and understanding even when it's not extended

to her in the same way. Women are expected to forgive, because if they don't, they become hard and bitter like Lady Tremaine. You know what happens when men don't forgive, though? It's called a revenge-story. The man goes on an epic adventure to avenge something or someone. But, anyway, moving past this, I think the really interesting thing about Cinderella's forgiveness of her sisters is that it highlights something really important about her character: that all she ever wanted was to feel welcome in a family. And coming back to the issue of being saved by a man to escape her abusive situation, maybe it wasn't so much about a man saving her, but rather about the promise of what she has always wanted: a safe and loving home.

[ominous orchestral music sound bite fades in and out to indicate a little break]

Now, Perrault had a second moral to his tale. He writes, quote:

“Without a doubt it is a great advantage to have intelligence, courage, good breeding, and common sense. These, and similar talents, come only from heaven, and it is good to have them. However, even these may fail to bring you success, without the blessing of a godfather or a godmother.”

End quote. So, this seems like a good opportunity to talk about the guiding spirit, the guardian angel, the fairy godmother. Remember how, last week, we talked about how witchcraft was used to demonise women? Here we have the opposite of that: we have the magical fairy godmother who is the epitome of goodness and light, and makes everything right with a little wave of her wand. So, how come in one story, we have witchcraft, and in the other, we have bibbidi bobbidi boo? Two factors play into it here: 1. Who is casting the spells, and 2. What their motivation is.

The fairy godmother in *Cinderella* and the Evil Queen in *Snow White* are both quote-unquote “past their prime,” which, as we learnt last week, means a woman is no longer beautiful or able to have babies, and thus undesirable and worthless in society. Now, the fairy godmother is “good” because she does not attempt to be youthful again. She knows her place in society is one of undesirability, and ensures the continuation of the cycle by helping a younger woman become beautiful and desirable to men. She conforms. She is good. Her powers are magic. The Evil Queen, on the other hand, defies societal conventions by wanting to be desirable when she is of a barren age and onto her second marriage, which is a big no-no. She doesn't conform. She is bad. Her powers are witchcraft.

But the presence and power of the fairy godmother shouldn't be ignored. She is a powerful female role model and hero, who helps another woman on her journey. The fairy godmother is a physical manifestation of Cinderella's hopes and dreams, and it's powerful that she's represented as a kind and caring maternal figure.

But, back to Perrault's moral about fairy godmothers. He's essentially saying that even if you're super smart, brave, and quick-witted, you might still fail in life without the blessing of a godfather or godmother. What does this even mean? Is he talking about the fairy kind, or the real kind? Or is he talking in a more metaphorical sense – maybe even about faith in God? Well, there are a few ways we can interpret this. One way, is that the blessing of a godfather or godmother means the blessing of good luck. Hard work can only get you so far, you also need luck to work in your favour. You could also read it as a moral about the importance of a good parental role model. Cinderella

doesn't have the loving family she needs and deserves, which is what hinders her from happiness, that is until the fairy godmother appears. Perrault could also be weaving in a bigger, more religious message. Saying that, you must pray and have faith in God, and maybe then he will bless you with good luck and fortune. And yet another reading, Perrault could be asking the audience to keep believing in magic. All of these could be true, and none of them could be true, but my favourite reading is the one that relates back to the theme of families. That sometimes, what you really need to achieve success, is that one person cheering you on.

[ominous orchestral music sound bite fades in and out to indicate a little break]

We need to talk about the Prince. Unlike in *Snow White*, the Prince has more of a role in this story, but he's still only there to save Cinderella ... or is he? As I mentioned before, Cinderella's motive to go to the ball isn't actually to snag herself a Prince, so again, the Prince is kind of a by-product of this whole scenario. Cinderella didn't plan for it, he just happened to be there. And the Prince can also offer Cinderella doesn't have: a happy and loving home. In an article titled "The Ever-Evolving Feminism of Cinderella" for *The Mary Sue*, Anya Crittenton writes, quote:

"She is all at once victim, survivor, and hero of her own story. There is no prince who can ease the lasting effects of abuse, only the spirit of a woman who refuses to give in to what the world would have seen her become had she lost sight of the importance of her own humanity."

End quote. I love this quote, and I love this interpretation ... However. There's a reason Cinderella's story – and all princess stories – end with a wedding. It's implicit that Cinderella finds peace and happiness through her marriage to the Prince. Happily ever after, the end, no hint that her story of healing and survival will continue on.

So, throughout this whole discussion of Perrault's original fairy tale, I've been flip-flopping between feminist lens and feminist critique. Is Cinderella actually our unsung feminist heroine? Or is she just another patriarchal princess? Or is she both? Well, our understanding of who Cinderella is and how feminist or anti-feminist she might be is heavily influenced by Disney's version of her. So, let's jump in our magical pumpkin carriage and embark on a journey from late 17<sup>th</sup> Century France, all the way to mid 20<sup>th</sup> Century America.

[fade in: jazz-age trumpet music that sounds like it's being played through a vintage radio]

Late 1940s America was a nation fresh out of World War II. It had been the deadliest human conflict in history, and the country was still reeling from the effects. During the war, the role of women changed drastically. As the men went off to fight, the women were expected and encouraged to enter the workforce to help the war effort. This is where the famous Rosie the Riveter propaganda poster comes from. But what happened when the war ended and the men came home? Were women just expected to go back to being housewives? Well, yeah. With the idea of the nuclear family being questioned, American society kind of aimed to nudge women back into the status quo and gender roles.

This coincided with a post-war economic boom, and thus began the golden era of advertising. And what can you do with advertising? You can make it gendered! Things like kitchen appliances,



homewares, and house-work related products were marketed specifically towards women to reinforce those gender roles. After the Great Depression and then the war, capitalist America was once again a land of promise and prosperity, which of course came along with lots and lots of oppression.

[jazz music fades out]

And what was Disney doing? Well, after the success of *Snow White* in 1937, Disney continued making animated feature films. *Pinocchio* was released in 1940, as was *Fantasia*, and then *Dumbo* in '41 and *Bambi* in '42. While these films might be well-known and well-loved today, they reached nowhere near the level of success that *Snow White* did, and were actually considered flops. And then, in December of 1941, the United States officially entered World War II with their attack on Pearl Harbour.

Box office sales dropped as international film audiences were cut off, and many employees were drafted and had to leave work. But Disney didn't stop creating content. *Au contraire* – Walt Disney Productions was commissioned by the American government to produce training and propaganda films for the war. Donald Duck was suddenly getting drafted into the army, and encouraging the American public to pay taxes. In addition to this, Disney was working with a limited staff, and decided to release feature films that were “package films”, which was collections of shorts. These performed poorly at the box office, and slowly, yet surely, Walt Disney Productions sank deeper and deeper into debt.

And what do you need to bring your multi-million-dollar company out of multi-million-dollar debt? A fairy godmother, of course! *Cinderella* had been suggested as an animated feature as early as 1938. In 1940, a second treatment was written, and in 1943, Disney put together a team to begin working on developing the story further. By '47, three animated features were in development: *Cinderella*, *Alice in Wonderland*, and *Peter Pan*. A Princess had brought Walt Disney millions at the box office once before, why not again?

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When I started this research project, no one wanted to watch Disney's 1937 *Snow White* with me. Too old fashioned, they said. I thought might have more luck with *Cinderella*. She's more modern, and she's everyone's favourite princess, right? Apparently not. I watched all 74 minutes of Disney's 1950 *Cinderella* alone.

Let's start off by talking about our heroine who keeps wearing shoes that are too big for her. Disney's version of *Cinderella* retains a bit of the cheekiness of Perrault's version, but the most important thing about her is that she's – as the narrator reminds us – quote, “ever gentle and kind”. End quote. She has big blue eyes and corn-coloured hair, a teeny waist and even teenier feet. And, like *Snow White*, she's always trying to see the best in every situation and every person. She endures mistreatment and holds onto the belief that, one day, her, quote “dreams of happiness [will] come true.” End quote. Last week, we talked about *Snow White*'s hopes, and this week we're talking about *Cinderella*'s dreams. Though these concepts often go hand in hand, they're quite different, I think, especially in the context of these two Princesses. *Snow White*'s hope is tied to being saved a prince. She literally sings: “Some Day My Prince Will Come.” But *Cinderella* sings of

dreams: “A Dream is a Wish Your Heart Makes.” She, too, is yearning for something, but her dream is more powerful because it inspires action. A dream is something you make an effort to fulfill; something tangible that can be achieved with action. Hope, on the other hand, is an expectation that something will happen, without the accompanying action it takes to get there. Cinderella’s dreams are also contrasted with her reality. She knows she has to be a servant for the time being, but she believes she will eventually get out and get her happy ending.

Another key difference with Cinderella, and something that I think makes her more modern and interesting, is that she doesn’t scold herself for showing emotion. Remember how Snow White reproached herself for making a fuss? When all hope is lost for Cinderella, she unapologetically sobs and cries, quote: “there’s nothing left to believe in.” It’s such a heart-felt, emotional moment, because it’s the point at which she loses sight of her dream. She gives up trying, and this is always an important moment in a hero’s journey. It’s the moment that breaks her, and she’s *allowed* to break, and I think that’s really powerful.

Cinderella’s personality also comes through in her relationship with the mice and birds. Yes, people, yet again we have anthropomorphised animal side-kicks, and this time they’re wearing human clothes! Our two main animal characters are Jaq, the skinny ring-leader mouse, and Gus, the chubby newcomer mouse. Oh, and we have the horrible and aptly-named cat Lucifer, but we’ll get to that scoundrel later on. Just like with the dwarves and woodland animals in *Snow White*, we see extended gag sequences with the mice and birds – all of which, I have to admit, bored me. But, as we discussed last week, this was key to *Snow White*’s success, and it’s what the public expected when they went to see a Disney feature. And Cinderella’s relationship with the animals is necessary in the story for two reasons. One, it’s used as a dramatic device to get Cinderella to voice her thoughts. With no one to confide in, the film would be a lot of Cinderella just doing housework and looking sad. In live action films, this problem is often solved with narration from the main character, or with a volley-ball with a face drawn on it. The second reason the mice are important is to show that Cinderella is capable of extending kindnesses to others that haven’t been extended to her. Take the story of Gus: the newest member of the mice ... clan? Gang? Nest? Horde? After some googling, accepted collective nouns for a group of mice include “a mischief” and “a plague”, but I don’t know how reliable that is. That’s beside the point, though. The point is, that Gus is a mouse in a strange environment with new people, but he is welcomed into the family with warmth and kindness. It’s a great juxtaposition – if you will – of what Cinderella lacks in her own home environment.

Speaking of Cinderella’s terrible home environment, let’s talk about the people who make it so! Lady Tremaine and her two daughters, Drizella and Anastasia. Oh, and the cat, Lucifer. That bastard. Now, Lady Tremaine is not a witch, but she is no less villainised. She is cast in that classic spinster role: grey hair, thin brows permanently arched into a frown, and a cat. Yes, that bloody cat. Why is the cat so important, you may ask? Why am I so upset about the cat? Well, first of all, I’m more of a dog person. But, the cat lady trope only applied to women who are single – more specifically, older women who are verging on spinsterhood. And where did this link between cats and spinsters begin? Witches! Yes, my dear friends. Everything comes back to witchcraft. And I love it. It of course began with the post-medieval witch-suspicions. In an article for the Boston Globe titled “The crazy history of the ‘cat lady’”, Linda Rodriguez McRobbie writes, quote: “Agnes Waterhouse, the first woman in England executed for witchcraft, in 1566, confessed to owning a cat as a familiar.” End quote. In the late 18<sup>th</sup> Century, the spinster cat lady archetype developed and

was popularised by cartoons in newspapers. McRobbie writes, quote: “Georgian cartoonists denigrated the unmarried woman by showing how her “unnatural” love for her cat usurped the “natural” bonds of marriage, children, and family.” End quote. So, it’s only natural that Lady Tremaine – though not a witch – would have a companion that has ties to witchcraft, and clearly marks her out as an evil spinster lady. Will female Disney villains ever be free from the labels of spinster and witch?

But enough about the women! Never thought I’d say that phrase. Let’s talk about the men. The two most prevalent male characters in this film are the King and his Grand Duke. These two characters do not appear in either Perrault’s or Grimms’ fairy tale. They are there for laughs, I assume. The King has this whole backstory of wanting his son to get married so they can have grandchildren because he misses having children around the house. The Grand Duke, meanwhile, is his hopeless sidekick who just runs around with a monocle and a ridiculous British accent. I’m not really interested in the King and his Duke, but what I am interested in is the Prince’s motivations and character. Which ... we don’t see much of. The Prince has probably less than five minutes of screen time, and I’m pretty sure he only has one line – not including singing. The King hints that his son is a hopeless romantic, and has daydreams of marrying for love. And yet ... we don’t see any evidence of this? Much like in the original Perrault fairy tale, the Prince is bland and boring, and less than a minor character. He’s Cinderella’s shiny reward for being beautiful and obedient. Poor Prince.

[ominous orchestral music sound bite fades in and out to indicate a little break]

We have to talk about the ending. Because Disney doesn’t use Perrault’s ending of forgiveness, nor does it use the Grimms’ ending of gruesome punishment. Instead, Disney opts for cheerful ambiguity, the final shot being Cinderella and her Prince riding off into the sunset on their wedding day. Happily ever after, the end. Whatever happened to Lady Tremaine?

I have an issue with Disney’s decision to deny Lady Tremaine a proper ending, because it suggests what she did wasn’t bad enough to warrant either punishment or forgiveness. She didn’t possess unearthly powers, she didn’t try to have Cinderella killed – and so her actions are so seemingly inconsequential, that she can just be forgotten about. This fails to recognise the lasting effects of abuse, and actually further suggests that everything is solved once Cinderella gets her Prince. Both Perrault’s and Grimms’ tales end with the resolution of the step-sisters’ storyline – whether that’s forgiveness or punishment – which suggests that that is the real conflict of the story. These fairy tales are about abuse and trauma, and not everything is solved once Cinderella gets her Prince; the final judgement is about the step-sisters. Up until the ending, I do think Disney’s *Cinderella* tells a harrowing story of a toxic family environment. But it shifts the perspective so that, once Cinderella is married, all is solved. The Prince was the real objective all along – not learning to heal from her traumatic upbringing.

So, did Cinderella save herself, by believing in her dreams and finding a means of escape from her abusive family? Or was she saved by a charming Prince who made all her problems go away the instant the glass slipper fit? I don’t know, ask me again tomorrow. What I *do* know – or rather think, I don’t actually know anything – is that this is the precise reason why Cinderella has stayed in the literary canon for so long. This is why she’s one of the most iconic Disney Princesses, and one of the most infamous and beloved fairy tales. Her story challenges us, and keeps us thinking and questioning and analysing, even now.

[ominous orchestral music sound bite fades in and out to indicate a little break]

Whether or not Cinderella actually saved herself or was saved by the Prince remains to be seen. But one thing she did save, was Walt Disney Productions. *Cinderella* was released on the 15<sup>th</sup> of February, 1950, and earned \$4 million at the box office. It became the fourth highest-grossing film released in North America in 1950. It also brought Disney out of debt, allowed him to keep making movies, and helped fund Disneyland, which opened five years later. 1950's *Cinderella* continued to be loved by many, and she was the *only* Cinderella. That is, until 2015 ...

While Disney may now be well-known for its live-action remakes of classic animated films, this is a relatively new brand. The first live-action remake Disney made was *Rudyard Kipling's The Jungle Book* in 1994, which was did ... okay at the box office. Then in 1996 we had *101 Dalmatians*, and then *102 Dalmatians* in 2000. But everything changed with Tim Burton's 2010 live-action remake of *Alice in Wonderland*. It was a fresh new take on a Disney classic, with high production value and Hollywood stars. It grossed over 1 billion worldwide, and began the trend of Disney's live-action remakes in the 2010s. Next came *Maleficent*, a villain-centred retelling of *Sleeping Beauty*, in 2014. But it wasn't until 2015 that Disney decided to remake a classic Disney Princess film – from the perspective of the Princess.

*Cinderella* went into development in May of 2010, began filming in late 2013, and premiered February 2015. It grossed almost \$550 million worldwide, and was well-received by critics. It was released 65 years after the animated Disney film, 203 years after the Grimms' fairy tale, and 318 years after Perrault's tale. So, how do you update an old narrative to suit a modern audience? Especially one that is so steeped in patriarchy and white supremacy?

Let's start again with our heroine Cinderella, played by Lily James. Like in Disney's animated film, she is fuelled by her kindness and her belief in her dreams. This time, we get to see more of her life before the step-mother arrives, and the film establishes an important relationship with her mother. At the beginning, Cinderella's mother gives her a message that becomes the thesis of the film: "have courage and be kind." Emphasis on the "be kind" part, because again, we see how Cinderella's kindness is exploited by her step-family, and she is slowly manipulated into doing their bidding. The development of the cycle of abuse shows the audience how Cinderella is unable to defy her step-mother and escape her situation. It demonstrates how this shifting power dynamic was so gradual that it became normalised. And though it all, Cinderella remains ever kind and gracious, saying, quote: "they treat me as well as they're able," and, quote: "others have it worse, I'm sure." She puts others' suffering before her own – to the point where she tells the messenger who delivers the news of her father's death, quote: "That must have been very difficult for you."

Something I loved about the animated Cinderella is that she was allowed her moment of unapologetic emotion. Our 2015 Cinderella doesn't get the same luxury. After being left at home while her step-family goes to the ball, Cinderella does have her moment of crying on the balcony. But she is interrupted by an old woman in the corner. The woman asks for, quote: "a crust of bread, or a cup of milk." And so Cinderella casts her own misery aside, wipes away her tears, and helps the old woman, who then turns out to be Helena Bonham-Carter as the fairy godmother. This is an interesting addition that we see echoed in other Disney films like *Beauty and the Beast*: the magical

woman disguises herself and her powers in order to test a character. If they pass the test of kindness, she rewards them with her magic. This suggests that Cinderella has to earn help from others by letting her needs fall to the wayside. I think it shows incredible strength of character for Cinderella to pull herself together every single time, but I would have loved to see her break completely and let someone else comfort her. Because this is something women are constantly being told: to put others' needs before their own, especially when it comes to emotional labour and mental health.

The thing that makes this Cinderella stand out from all the other Cinderellas we've seen before her, is that there comes a point where she actually does stand up for herself. Right at the very end, she says that powerful word: "No." But ... it's not as powerful as it could be. Because, even at this point in the film – when all hope is lost and Cate Blanchett is going to lock her away in the attic forever and take away the glass slipper – Cinderella isn't actually fighting back to save herself. She's fighting back to save the Prince. She says, quote: "I was not able to protect my father from you, but I will protect the Prince, and the Kingdom ... no matter what becomes of me." End quote. It's admirable that she's saving the Prince in this situation, but it's through her own self-sacrifice. Even in her most radical, outspoken moment, Cinderella continues to put others' needs before her own. She doesn't actually save herself.

Speaking of the Prince, what do we do about him? How do you turn that whole narrative into something that isn't so ... old-fashioned instant-love hero-saves-damsel-in-distress? Well, 2015 Disney had a red hot go. Cinderella encounters the Prince – whose name is Kit – before the ball, at a chance meeting in the woods. He's with his deer-hunting party, and Cinderella is angrily riding her horse after being put down yet again. Think that angry dancing scene in *Footloose*, but with horse riding instead. They have a bit of cute banter – he doesn't reveal he's a Prince, but says he's an apprentice at the palace. Cinderella doesn't reveal she's a kitchen-maid in her own family home, but remains mysterious and elusive. Sparks fly! She thinks he's nice and charming, while he falls head over heels in love. So then when the ball invitation comes around, Cinderella's motivation to go is to see her friend Kit. I mean, she probably wants a night off, too, and to be included in the family, but in the film she says, quote: "I only want to see my friend." End quote. In the interest of making her relationship with the Prince more believable, 2015 Disney made Cinderella's chief motivation to go to the ball centred around a man. But it does kind of take the weirdness out of that first meeting in the ballroom that we see in the 1950 film. In 1950, the Prince only notices Cinderella because she's beautiful, whereas Kit notices her because he's met her before. So ... that's kind of good, I guess? It places less importance on looks. I must admit, Lily James and Richard Madden – who plays the Prince – have great chemistry on screen and I did believe they were madly in love, even though they had just met.

We also see more of the Prince's story – his life at the castle, what he thinks of Cinderella, and the theme of tradition and expectation. This is hinted at in the animated film, but never truly explored. In the live-action film, Kit must choose to either defy tradition for his own happiness, or do what he's told to fulfil his father's expectation. So, in a way, he has a similar arc to Cinderella. And they both choose what they want for their own happiness: each other.

[ominous orchestral music sound bite fades in and out to indicate a little break]

Now, we have to talk about Lady Tremaine, played by Cate Blanchett. The fascinating thing about this depiction of the step-mother is that we get more of her backstory. The narrator tells us that, quote: “she, too, had known grief,” and yet she bears it very differently to our kind-hearted Cinderella. In her villainous speech towards the end she says, quote:

“I shall tell you a story. Once upon a time, there was a beautiful young girl who married for love. And she had two loving daughters. All was well. 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 she was doomed to look every day upon his beloved child. She had hoped to marry off one of her beautiful, stupid daughters to the prince. But his head was turned by a girl with glass slippers. And so ... I lived unhappily ever after.”

End quote. Now we don't have time to unpack all of that, but let's start with her backstory. She reveals that she was heart-broken by the death of her first husband. But instead of managing that grief in the positive way that Cinderella did, she let it harden her and turn her bitter. Thus Lady Tremaine, in part, represents what Cinderella could have become, if she hadn't had love and kindness to save her. The next point: Lady Tremaine marries for her sake of her daughters, and then tries to marry one of her, quote, “stupid” daughters off to a prince. I think this is a very important theme that isn't really touched on in the animated movie. The reality is, that for a long time – we can't determine the exact time period of this film, it's kind of like mid 19<sup>th</sup> Century meets 1950s Dior – what determined a woman's quality of life was her marriage. It's the topic of all Jane Austen's books for a reason: women with no money, no prospects, and no talents had to rely on snagging a rich husband, because there was no other way to earn money or live a comfortable life. And Lady Tremaine recognises this. When she hears of the death of Cinderella's father she says, quote: “We're ruined. How will we live?” Though, in the moment, this is quite ignorant and tactless, I think it highlights the struggles of being a single woman in a time when women could not viably work to make their own living. When Lady Tremaine hears of the Prince's ball, she urges her daughters to win the heart of the Prince, so that, quote: “we can unwind the debt in which we were ensnared when we came to this backwater.” End quote. Again, further evidence that shows the only way for women to escape debt, and live a comfortable life, and succeed in the pseudo-19<sup>th</sup>-Century time-period of this film, was to marry a rich man.

I think this makes Lady Tremaine – maybe not sympathetic, per se – but slightly more understandable. But she is also an undeniably cruel and manipulative abuser. What's interesting here is the motivation behind her cruelty, which is hinted at but never explicitly stated. At the very end, Cinderella asks Lady Tremaine why she has been so cruel. Tremaine replies, quote: “Because you are young, and innocent, and good. And I ...” the words catch in her throat, and she turns and leaves. What was she going to say there? My favourite interpretation of this is that she was going to tell Cinderella that she, too, was once like her. Young, innocent, and good. But she let the cruelty of the world harden her. She didn't have the strength to rise above it and keep believing in goodness. And so maybe she's jealous, not of Cinderella's youth and beauty – like it's suggested in the original fairy tale and the 1950s film – but of the sheer willpower Cinderella has to take everything in her stride and remain good.

So, what about the ending? We have now seen three different endings to *Cinderella*: Perrault's forgiveness, Grimms' punishment, and Disney's ambiguity. And so, Kenneth Branagh, what will it be? Drum roll, please!

[drum roll sound effect]

Forgiveness! After the glass slipper fits perfectly, Cinderella goes to leave with the Prince, and turns to find Lady Tremaine standing on the staircase. Cinderella looks back and says: “I forgive you.” I think this is a powerful moment for Cinderella, and it’s made more powerful because of what we know about Lady Tremaine’s back story. Cinderella’s not saying: “I forgive you for abusing me,” but rather “I forgive you for not having the strength to rise above the grief. I forgive you for letting the world harden you.” But, Lady Tremaine and her daughters are not forgiven enough to be invited to live in the Palace with Cinderella. But, they’re also not punished. Our narrator tells us that Lady Tremaine and her daughters, quote: “would soon leave with the Grand Duke, and never set foot in the kingdom again.” End quote.

So ... is 2015’s *Cinderella* more feminist than her predecessors? I don’t know. I don’t think she’s ever gonna smash through that glass ceiling. There’s only so much you can do to a story to make it more quote-unquote “progressive” before you’re rewriting the whole thing. You might as well just seek out a different story to tell. If that’s the case ... why do we keep telling the story of Cinderella?

[ominous orchestral music sound bite fades in and out to indicate a little break]

I mentioned before how I couldn’t convince anyone to watch the 1950 *Cinderella* with me, but I had more luck with the 2015 adaptation. My mum and sister were both willing to join me, and it was quite a different experience to watching these old Disney films on my own. None of us finds it difficult to lose ourselves in a film, even if that film is something as light-hearted and unrealistic as *Cinderella*. My mum, my sister and I are very willing – especially in these uncertain times – to let go of our cynicism and reconnect with childlike wonder. And so, when we watched *Cinderella*, we got lost in the Prince’s dazzling blue eyes, laughed at the humans turning back into animals at midnight, and “aww-ed” at the end when Cinderella got married in her beautiful dress. This experience really reminded me why I connect with the story of *Cinderella*, more so than *Snow White*. *Cinderella* presents a world in which magic is the *escape* from hardship, not the *cause* of it.

I think I love this message so much because it’s an allegory – if you will – for what story-telling is able to do. So many of us go to the cinema, read a book, watch a TV show or listen to music for escape. And I don’t want to get into a whole discussion about escapism and if it’s good or bad, that’s not the point. My point is that stories get us to believe in something – whether that’s characters, or a magical world, or a new perspective we hadn’t considered before. And believing in that story, to the point where it feels so real you’re crying or laughing over things and people that aren’t real, well, I think that’s pretty magical. And, as the fairy godmother said, it’s good to “believe in just a little bit of magic.”

[plucky theme music with violins, clarinet, piano, and twinkly triangle]

Thank you very much for listening! I am having so much fun researching and writing these episodes for you, so I hope you’re enjoying them. I consulted so many wonderful articles and videos, which will all be linked on the blog [angourieslibrary.wordpress.com](http://angourieslibrary.wordpress.com). And there you can also find a full transcription of this episode. Just a reminder that our book club pick is *Forest of a Thousand Lanterns* by Julie C. Dao, which we’ll be discussing on the 31<sup>st</sup> of August. Next week, I’ll be chatting with friend-of-the-podcast Kali about everyone’s favourite red-headed fish, Ariel! So, tune in next

*The Community Library* – Angourie Rice

week for what I'm sure will be a very fun discussion. Until then, I hope you're reading wonderful books and believing in special stories. Bye!

[theme music fades out]