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“Part of That (Man’s) World”: Analyzing “Cinderella” and “The Little Mermaid” Fairy Tale Variants Through a Feminist Lens

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“Part of That (Man’s) World”: Analyzing “Cinderella” and “The Little Mermaid” Fairy
Tale Variants Through a Feminist Lens

by

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Abstract

Fairy tales are often reduced to nothing more than the moral lesson that can be taught to children. However, when we move past the impulse to search for the simplified moral of the story, we can begin to ascertain the impact of fairy tales on different audiences. This thesis uses both impact theory, which yields a close reading of the textual and cinematic evidence, and reception research, which provides an opportunity to discuss the significance of the material by speculating about the message that readers receive. Under consideration are four variants each of the “Cinderella” and “The Little Mermaid” fairy tales: one of the original fairy tales, the animated Disney film, a non-Disney live-action film, and a twenty-first century young adult novel. I analyze these eight primary sources through a feminist lens, focusing on agency in the “Cinderella” variants and silence in “The Little Mermaid” variants. Among the results of this thesis were the discoveries that “The Little Mermaid” is overall a more complex story than “Cinderella,” there was usually an improvement in the feminist message over time, and even the most progressive “Cinderella” tales presented child audiences with inadequate role models. Through evaluating these timeless fairy tales, I have gained insights into the kinds of ideas and perspectives that have persisted across history.

Keywords: fairy tales, feminism, Cinderella, The Little Mermaid, Disney, Grimm Brothers, Hans Christian Andersen, young adult novel, film, comparative study, impact theory, reception research

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Introduction

From a young age, we are taught to read fairy tales for the moral that they provide, but this limited analysis ignores their complexities. Fairy tales date back prior to the fifteenth century when they were spoken as oral folk tales (Zipes, “Breaking the Disney Spell” 22) and they have continued to be reimagined generation after generation, so there must be more to find in them than a simple moral to keep children in check. Indeed, the enduring nature of fairy tales yields the possibility for studying them in relation to the time period in which they were written to gain insights into the cultural values that were present during that time. Alternatively, one could excavate deeper meaning by looking at the stories through the lenses of these cultural values. One such lens that generates an abundance of results and thus contributes heavily to the scholarly discussion surrounding fairy tales is the feminist lens, which is the overarching theme of this thesis. The power of fairy tales to withstand the test of time does point to a certain level of commercial popularity that one might argue renders them unfit for academia; however, it is this universality that makes them so interesting to analyze because they are continuously changed to suit the author’s purpose. Their popularity is also relevant to my analysis since it unifies them with the other mainstream variants that I have chosen to discuss. Under consideration are four variants each of the “Cinderella” and “The Little Mermaid” fairy tales: one of the original¹ fairy tales, the animated Disney film, a non-

¹ I refer to the Hans Christian Andersen version of “The Little Mermaid” and the Grimm Brothers’ version of “Cinderella” as the “original” fairy tales here and throughout the rest of the thesis for simplicity and cohesion. However, I would like to acknowledge that there is some discrepancy about which version of many fairy tales is the actual original. For “Cinderella,” the title of original is widely believed to be held by the Chinese iteration, “Ye Xian,” which was written around 700 AD, and “The Little Mermaid” is thought to belong originally to Hans Christian Andersen. Due to the fact that fairy tales have such a large oral history, however, there could be traces of these stories from even earlier that have been lost because they were not transcribed.

Disney live-action film, and a twenty-first century young adult novel.

Using close textual and cinematic analysis of the fairy tales, this thesis focuses on agency in the “Cinderella” variants and silence in “The Little Mermaid” variants.

Entering into this thesis, I brought with me expectations for negative results in terms of the message that readers receive from some of the variants. However, I had higher hopes for the more recent iterations of the fairy tales as compared to the outdated versions of the past. While there was definitely truth to my hypothesis about dissatisfactory messages and role models, I was surprised to learn that one fairy tale was more superficial than the other across all the variants. Even the recent adaptations of the “Cinderella” fairy tale fall short of a positive feminist message. Meanwhile, “The Little Mermaid” variants provided a more profound story overall, even if there were several shortcomings to be discussed throughout the texts. The “Cinderella” variants grow increasingly more complex over time, but “The Little Mermaid” variants are a little more difficult to organize. Since these texts started out with a deeper message about the meaning of life rather than the simple reflection of good behavior in “Cinderella,” it is harder to trace their progression of complexity. In terms of the feminist message delivered, however, I would argue that the Disney films ruin my hypothesis about improvement over time since both *Cinderella* and *The Little Mermaid* present even more damaging messages than the original fairy tales that came before them. Careful study of these various fairy tales and their reimagined iterations has yielded insights into how the four variants from “Cinderella” and “The Little Mermaid” compare to each other, but it is also possible to consider the implications of similarities and differences between each “Cinderella” variant and its “The Little Mermaid” counterpart.

For example, when considering the original fairy tales, one discovers dark endings and a need for spiritual guidance in both versions. In the Grimm Brothers' "Cinderella," the final line of the text ignores the fate of the titular character and instead turns toward the harsh punishment that awaits her stepsisters. For affiliating with evil and mistreating Cinderella, the stepsisters get their eyes pecked out by doves in a dark punishment that profoundly affects the rest of their lives. Not only is Cinderella forgotten in the final lines of the tale, but she also does not choose this fate for her stepsisters. The failure to consider Cinderella's perspective on the matter, effectively writing her out of her own story, is one of the reasons this fairy tale falls so flat in delivering any positive feminist message. The dark ending in "The Little Mermaid" features the little mermaid sacrificing herself to save the prince's life. She makes this choice firmly believing that it will be her end, although she is mercifully turned into a daughter of the air who has a chance at an eternal soul after striving for three hundred years to do good. Despite the problems inherent in the little mermaid having to sacrifice her life for the male character in order to earn the right to an immortal soul, this fairy tale's feminist message excels in comparison to "Cinderella." Ironically, the roles of each character are reversed. The "Cinderella" variants are discussed in relation to agency and "The Little Mermaid" in relation to silence. Yet it is Cinderella who is silenced since she has no place in the final lines of her story and no say in the fate that awaits her abusers, and the little mermaid who has agency since she consciously chooses death for herself instead of killing her lover.

The inclusion of spiritual guidance in each fairy tale also points to an overall more positive message from "The Little Mermaid" than from "Cinderella." After her mother

dies, Cinderella relies on the spirit of her mother to achieve anything, from completing her chores to securing beautiful dresses for the ball to winning the prince's hand in marriage. She may plant the branch that sprouts into the tree of her mother's spirit, but her agency stops there. She would not be able to impress the prince or to outsmart her stepfamily without this spiritual guidance from her mother. Meanwhile, the little mermaid is on her own throughout her story and merely seeks spiritual guidance for the afterlife. She decides to visit the sea witch, makes the bargain for a human body on her own, and refuses the help that her sisters try to give her to save her life. The little mermaid willingly makes these choices and sacrifices because she believes in the eternal life that an immortal soul would bring about for her. Where Cinderella uses her spiritual guidance as a crutch to remain meek and passive throughout the fairy tale, the little mermaid sees spirituality as something worth fighting for and thus uses it as motivation for all of her hard work. Additionally, Cinderella's spiritual guidance only exists to unite Cinderella and the prince in marriage, yet the little mermaid's faith in heaven reinforces the profundity of the tale since it introduces themes of death and religion. The rest of the comparisons between the corresponding fairy tale variants will be explored in the conclusion.

In "On the Success of Children's Books and Fairy Tales," Reinbert Tabbert and Kristin Wardetzky use impact theory and reception research to argue that successful children's literature includes the fulfillment of wishes, polarization of two opposites (as with good versus evil or hero versus villain), intense emotion and humor, characters that lend themselves to identification, and action that holds the reader's attention from beginning to (usually happy) end (2-5). This thesis looks at "success" in a less

generalized way and instead in terms of the overall feminist message by analyzing whether the variant empowers women or whether it silences their voices and shackles their actions. According to these authors, the distinction between impact theory and reception research lies with whether the analysis “is more concerned with the book’s share in the reading process (impact)” or “the reader’s share (reception)” (Tabbert and Wardetzky 2). I would argue, however, that these two methods of analysis complement each other because impact theory allows the reader to closely read the textual and cinematic evidence, and reception research provides an opportunity to discuss the significance of the material by speculating about the message that is received by readers. This idea structures the rest of my thesis since I begin by close reading each variant and conclude the section with an assessment of its feminist agenda based on the message readers are meant to receive or that they receive unconsciously.

A discussion of fairy tales’ reception points back to the previous brief mention of the universality of these texts. Indeed, the enduring nature of fairy tales relies on their ability to be received well. Although I discussed universality in relation to the popularity and pervasiveness of fairy tales, this term can also be defined as comprehensive or generalized. It is this meaning of the word that Christine A. Jones and Jennifer Shacker find fault with when applied to fairy tales because it ignores the fact that they are actually “culturally specific” insofar as these “stories ha[ve] emerged as significant, in different ways, in a select number of specific historical and cultural contexts” (24). As such, it is important to recognize that the messages that I perceive in these texts reflect the historical and cultural contexts of the twenty-first century. To consider the potential messages that were received at the time of publication, one must turn to Valerie Paradiž’s *Clever*

Maids: The Secret History of the Grimm Fairy Tales. According to her, the very attributes that I deem damaging for young readers today were expected of and praised in women: “silence and obedience were essential feminine virtues” that “not only turned up in the Sunday sermon in church, it seems, but also fairly saturated the culture” (Paradiž 44). As times change, the original fairy tales remain the same, thus rendering them increasingly outdated and conservative. However, while men perpetuated this idea that women should be silent and obedient, Paradiž also explains that women reveled in the sexual symbolism that lurked beneath the surface of these fairy tales and appreciated the “self-affirming opportunity of communicating” (45) their “real lived experience[s] and the particular ordeals they faced as females” (44), such as raising offspring, being trapped by marriage, and performing menial chores. In this way, an exploration of the feminist agenda within these tales is not a stretch at all.

This thesis tracks multiple fairy tale retellings across history to determine how society has progressed—or regressed—in its depiction of women, so my argument depends on the “impurity” of fairy tales, as U. C. Knoepfelmacher labels it. Knoepfelmacher claims, “Any transmitted narrative that is persistently subjected to multiple cultural revisions must necessarily be impure” (15). Since there are so many iterations of some fairy tales that it is impossible to pinpoint the original version, this genre of literature definitely falls under the definition of impure. The essay also asserts that some purists, such as Charles Dickens, who wrote an essay attacking one author’s retelling of Perrault’s “Cinderella,” take offense at the corruption of the “original” fairy tale. However, instead of condemning the changes that take place in fairy tales, “[w]e may do better perhaps by remembering those stained white stockings [of Cinderella’s

stepsisters who tried vainly to fit into a too-small shoe] as an emblem of all the excisions, transpositions, and refittings that have allowed—and will continue to allow—the fairy tale to endure” (Knoepflmacher 34). The value of impurity is that it immortalizes these fairy tales. It is the reimagining of these stories generation after generation that has allowed them to still be ubiquitous centuries after they were first introduced.

Although fairy tales have certainly endured extensive revisions over time, there are some structural elements that seem to manifest in each retelling. For example, it cannot be a “Cinderella” fairy tale without the death of Cinderella’s mother, the subsequent gain of a stepfamily, Cinderella being mistreated by her new family, attending a ball, fleeing from the prince, and the slipper—which acts as her identification—being lost and found. Meanwhile, “The Little Mermaid” variants have fewer essential plot points since the iterations I have chosen vary greatly from each other, but even still there are some commonalities. The little mermaid’s family is royal to ensure that she is worthy of loving the male character. Indeed, the conflict for her is that she belongs to a different species, so it would be overwhelming to also be in a lower social station like Cinderella. Every variant also includes the little mermaid saving someone’s life, usually that of her love interest, but also on one occasion the love interest’s niece; transforming from a mermaid into a human; sacrificing part of herself to get what she wants; and choosing between her mermaid and human identities. With both “Cinderella” and “The Little Mermaid” fairy tales, each variant deals with these structural elements differently, but they nevertheless show up in some way in every text covered in this thesis.

The stories to which we are exposed during our youth have a huge impact on the adults that we become, and children’s literature is especially prominent in shaping

children because they imitate behavior that they witness. According to Kimberly Reynolds, the effect of children's literature is long-lasting as well: "[j]ust as the children we once were continue to exist inside and to affect us, so writing produced for children continues to resonate over time and to be implicated in the way societies are conceived, organized, and managed" (4-5). Because of the power that stories have, it is important to analyze how they affect society and how society, in turn, responds to the stories. As such, this thesis is significant because it allows me to enter into the critical conversation with a discussion about how fairy tales, in particular, strengthen or silence stereotypes. Although there are countless scholarly works examining fairy tales, my argument extends the conversation by providing an extensive analysis of several different versions of the same fairy tale and an analysis of how these different formats vary when compared to the corresponding text from a different fairy tale. Since this thesis considers many different formats from written texts to films, I will be able to ascertain the impact of stories on a wide range of people with different preferences for how they consume the media. Through evaluating these fairy tales, I can gain insight into the kinds of ideas and perspectives that have persisted across history, in terms of both their immortality and their omnipresence in many different cultures.

Chapter 1: “Cinderella” and Agency

In children’s literature, it is important for children to be separated from their parents or from the authoritative figures in their lives because it gives them an opportunity to work through their problems independently. This demonstration of agency from fictional characters allows readers to understand that, even from a young age, they are capable of much more than they think. For the purpose of this thesis, I am defining agency as “the capacity possessed by people to act of their own volition,” which suggests that both a person’s thoughts and actions should be their own choice (*A Dictionary of Human Geography*). When analyzing agency from four variants of the “Cinderella” tale, it is clear that these stories present very different role models for their audiences, although they all ultimately fail to present the portrayal of a truly independent young woman.

In this chapter, I will trace the progression of agency through four increasingly complex variants: the Grimm Brothers’ “Cinderella,” Disney’s film adaptation *Cinderella*, the film *Ever After: A Cinderella Story*, and Marissa Meyer’s young adult novel *Cinder* (the first installment of a four-book series about different fairy tales). With the Grimms’ fairy tale, the narration assigns power to Cinderella’s mother at the expense of Cinderella’s own agency. The emphasis on the dysfunctional family and the terrible fate of Cinderella’s stepsisters turns the tale into a revenge fantasy and a cautionary tale. Meanwhile, the Disney movie strips Cinderella of all agency, and the fact that she manages to fall into a happily-ever-after despite her inaction suggests that its message is that of a wish-fulfillment fantasy. *Ever After* makes a valiant effort to offer a more feminist narrative, but Danielle’s agency is ultimately belittled. The inclusion of the

epilogue ensures that even the viewer's agency is limited because they are robbed of the chance to imagine their own ending to the film. *Cinder* qualifies as the most complex variant of "Cinderella" because it depicts the difficult transformation from submissiveness to independence. However, considered apart from the rest of The Lunar Chronicles series, even Meyer's novel perpetuates the disempowerment of women that is such a prevalent result of many traditional fairy tales.

Grimms' "Cinderella"

When discussing "Cinderella," many literary critics focus on the absence of Cinderella's biological mother since she dies in the opening lines of the story. However, the Grimm Brothers' version of the fairy tale presents audiences with a mother that is so assertive that she overrides any independence that Cinderella may possess. Elisabeth Panttaja argues that Cinderella isn't motherless at all since the branch that Cinderella plants on her mother's grave flourishes into a "tree that takes care of her, just as her mother promised to do" (89). Panttaja also asserts that the mother is a powerful figure in the fairy tale because "[s]he does for Cinderella exactly what the wicked stepmother wishes to do for her own daughters—she gets her married to the 'right' man" (90). Drawing on the argument that Cinderella's mother is an assertive figure in the fairy tale, I contend that the mother's actions contribute to Cinderella's helplessness and hold her back from gaining the personal agency that might make her a worthy role model for young readers.

It may be Cinderella's wit that brings the branch into her life and her efforts that nurse the branch into a tree of her mother's spirit, but these moments of independence are minimized by the fact that Cinderella needs the spirit of her mother for guidance. Once

she brings the spirit of her mother back from the grave, Cinderella never has the opportunity to act of her own free will nor to save herself from her troubles. When Cinderella's stepmother forbids her from attending the prince's ball unless she can complete her chores in the next two hours, Cinderella turns at once to the birds from her mother's tree to ask them for help. She does not work with them, yet she brings "the bowl to her stepmother and was overjoyed" with her efforts (Grimm 118). Cinderella's stepmother reminds Cinderella that she still cannot go to the ball because she has nothing to wear, so Cinderella again runs to her mother instead of solving the problem on her own: "Cinderella went to her mother's grave under the hazel tree and [...] the bird tossed down a dress of gold and silver, with slippers embroidered with silk and silver" (119). It is not enough that Cinderella relies on her mother's spirit for help once; she repeats the request two more times on the following nights of the ball, instead of being resourceful by recycling the clothing that she had already received from her mother, for example. In providing her daughter with dresses that are each more beautiful than the last, Cinderella's mother manipulates the prince into falling for her daughter and she makes Cinderella worthy of that attention based solely on her physical appearance. The last gift that Cinderella's assertive mother leaves her is the final assurance that Cinderella will receive her happy-ever-after with the prince. When the stepsisters attempt to steal the prince for themselves by cutting off parts of their feet to make them fit into Cinderella's slipper, two doves reveal their lies by calling out that "the shoe's too tight, / the real bride's waiting another night" (121). Cinderella's mother ruins the stepsisters' chances at their own happy endings, sending the message that the stepsisters could never rise to the

prince's level of attention because they are not as deserving as the beautiful martyr Cinderella.

In addition to the moments where Cinderella relies on her mother's spirit to gain the prince's hand in marriage, Cinderella also holds her mother's judgment and opinions above her own. There is very little focus on Cinderella's voice in the fairy tale, so readers remain relatively ignorant of her wishes and opinions regarding her relationship with the prince. While the narrator does reveal that Cinderella wept, "for she too would have liked to go to the ball" (118), readers also learn that "Cinderella danced until it was night, then she wanted to go home" (119). Unlike the Disney version, in which there is an ultimatum that forces Cinderella to leave the prince at midnight, this Cinderella chooses to depart from the ball and thus from the prince. Cinderella's preference for experiencing the thrill of the ball in short bursts and then returning home suggests that she views the ball as merely a brief escape from the burdens of the real world, but that to marry the prince may be too overwhelming for her because it would trap her in the responsibilities of a royal life to which she is not accustomed. Her unpreparedness for royal life is further evidenced by her inability to solve problems on her own and her frugal request for a branch where her stepsisters asked for the more dignified and expensive gifts of "beautiful dresses" and "pearls and jewels" (117).

Additionally, Cinderella does not choose to dance with the prince; instead, the "prince approached Cinderella, took her by the hand, and danced with her [... and] never let go of her hand. When anyone else asked her to dance, he would say: 'She is my partner'" (119). Not only does the prince refrain from asking permission to dance with Cinderella, but he also denies her the ability to speak for herself to accept another

gentleman's more generous attempt to request rather than demand her hand. When the prince learns that there is a third daughter in the household, he "insist[s]" that "she be sent for" (121), yet Cinderella is never given the opportunity to say whether she wants to marry the prince or not. According to Ann Trousdale and Sally McMillan, Cinderella "is surrounded by cultural scripts that depict 'feminine' passivity as normative," and she allows herself to "accept the dictates and examples of her environment" (14). However, I would argue that Cinderella's intentions are silenced not because she is influenced by a passive environment but because she is overshadowed by the assertive figures in her life. Contrary to Trousdale and McMillan's claim, Cinderella is actually surrounded by powerful women in the form of both her stepmother and her birth mother's spirit. As such, her silence is not due to a lack of positive influences but rather from having too many dominant voices that talk over her own. In the midst of her mother's assertive actions—bestowing dresses fit for a queen upon her daughter and stopping the stepsisters from marrying the prince—Cinderella has no choice but to comply. The mother thus manipulates not only the prince's feelings for Cinderella but also Cinderella's feelings toward marriage. Cinderella is left with no agency and no role in attaining the prince's hand in marriage since the spirit of her mother takes matters into her own hands to help her daughter secure a happy and easy life as a princess.

Even this variant's portrayal of the stereotypical "happily-ever-after" ending reinforces Cinderella's mother as the dominant female figure. Surprisingly, the Grimm Brothers' version of "Cinderella" does not end with the famous saying, "And they lived happily ever after." Instead, the fairy tale concludes with the evil stepsisters' eyes being pecked out by doves, and the last line is unflinchingly dark: "And so they were punished

for their wickedness and malice with blindness for the rest of their lives” (Grimm 122). Although the story is titled after Cinderella, she falls out of the spotlight in the final scenes, and the emphasis on the punishment of those who have wronged her turns the tale into a revenge fantasy. The stepsisters may get what they deserve in a rare scene of justice, but it is not Cinderella’s decision nor her actions that lead to this revenge, and the reader does not even learn her reaction to her stepsisters’ fate. Her mother’s spirit in the form of the doves once again takes over Cinderella’s life and punishes the stepsisters without considering what Cinderella may wish for herself.

With this ending in mind, this version of “Cinderella” becomes a cautionary tale for readers in nineteenth-century Europe. According to Jack Zipes, the fairy tale story of “Cinderella” addresses several concerns revolving around the family, such as “issues of child abandonment, family legacy, sibling rivalry, and parental love,” and he also reveals that how to mix families was a particularly pressing question during this time because it was common for women to die during childbirth (*Why Fairy Tales Stick* 115). While the Grimm Brothers did change many aspects of the story and of Cinderella as a character from previous variants, one constant that remains across all versions of the fairy tale is the family problems. For audiences reading this fairy tale at the time of its production, the fairy tale cautioned them about the competition that could emerge between women who must fight for male attention to survive in society’s patriarchal system. Both Cinderella’s mother and her stepmother attempt to secure this male protection for their daughters, but only Cinderella’s mother succeeds. As the two mothers in the story battle for control of the prince’s feelings, Cinderella becomes little more than a tool fought over by the authoritative figures in her life. She is quite content to place her life in the hands of

others, and this sacrifice of her agency suggests that she is not concerned with participating in or contributing to the world at all.

Disney's *Cinderella*

While the Brothers Grimm's version of "Cinderella" features a young heroine who shows traces of agency by asking her father for a branch, planting it by her mother's grave, and crying over it until it grows into a magical tree, Disney's Cinderella becomes the epitome of the helpless damsel in distress. According to Jane Yolen, the image of a "coy, helpless dreamer, a 'nice' girl who awaits her rescue with patience and a song" (297) is a very American idea, and it stems from this nation's confidence in the possibility of "even a poor boy [growing up] to become president" (296). The belief in a rags-to-riches formula makes Americans feel entitled to their own happy ending, and Cinderella's inability to think or act for herself only exacerbates the problem since it creates a "tale of wishes-come-true-regardless" of one's efforts to change the situation (Yolen 303). The ending to the Disney version of the fairy tale also contributes to America's sense of entitlement. Logically, we know that everyone cannot be married to a prince, as evidenced by the fact that the stepsisters lose out on their own chance with the prince. However, the Disney movie refuses to draw attention to any ending that is not happy, so the stepsisters and stepmother get erased from the storyline after they are no longer needed for the development of Cinderella's character. Audiences never learn what punishment befalls Cinderella's stepfamily; instead, the scene cuts from Cinderella placing the glass slipper on her foot to Cinderella and the prince running out of the chapel after they are married. The decision to ignore the stepfamily's unfortunate ending hides the fact that a happy-ever-after is not for everyone. If American viewers can forget about

the stepfamily in the final moments of the film, they can continue to believe that Cinderella's story awaits them all.

From the moment that Cinderella appears on the screen, she passively allows others to do things for her. Two birds wake her from her sleep, and the female animals help her get ready in the morning. While Cinderella completes her chores on the day of the ball, her animal friends make her a dress from the remains of her mother's gown. She allows her fairy godmother to dream up the ideas for the carriage and the horse in addition to executing these ideas, and the mice save Cinderella from her prison after her stepmother locks her up to keep her away from the Grand Duke. As audiences learn in the introduction to the film, "Cinderella was abused, humiliated, and finally forced to become a servant in her own house, and yet, through it all, Cinderella remained ever gentle and kind" (*Cinderella*). Rather than standing up for herself, Cinderella is content to shoulder the mistreatment, sending the message that abuse should be tolerated with kindness and grace. Cinderella also allows her stepmother to interrupt her and talk over her: when Cinderella tries to defend herself, her stepmother tells her to "hold your tongue" and asks for "silence" before returning to her list of chores that Cinderella will need to complete to make up for her mistake. Cinderella grows so used to behaving submissively that she even allows her fairy godmother to speak over her. She repeatedly tries to tell her fairy godmother about how her dress is not suitable for the ball, and when her fairy godmother finally notices the state of her clothing, she acts like it was her idea when she says, "Good Heavens, dear, you can't go in that."

Cinderella plays no role in securing her hand in marriage to the prince but she receives salvation from her sad life anyway, suggesting to American viewers that their

situation will improve even if they make no effort to improve it themselves. This ideology of passivity is amplified by the fact that “currently, children’s understanding and image associations of the fairy tale *Cinderella* are so closely linked with the animated film *Cinderella* (Disney 1950) that they are inseparable” (Baker-Sperry 718). The prevailing image that the mention of Cinderella conjures in children’s minds is that of the helpless Cinderella created by Disney. Additionally, in his study examining the effect of Disney films on seven- to nine-year-old girls, Alexander M. Bruce discovered, “the leading feature of a princess was her beauty: while princesses were often described as kind and helpful, they were more often described as pretty and beautiful” (14). The response from young girls reinforces the idea that Disney controls the definition of “princess” by presenting viewers with female characters that are more beautiful than they are autonomous. Disney’s *Cinderella* thus leaves audiences with the lasting image of a passive and submissive young woman that pervades American culture and teaches generations of children to comply with the outdated gender stereotypes of the 1950s.

Cinderella’s passivity can also be seen in her marriage to the prince. Cinderella is portrayed as the most beautiful girl in the movie, with extra care taken to minimize any “grotesque” elements that are normal for a person’s body: Cinderella does not even have ears, her feet do not have toes, and her glass slipper is only as long as the Grand Duke’s finger in some scenes (Robbins 104). This anti-grotesque, classical appearance of Cinderella is contrasted directly with that of her stepsisters who wear boldly-colored clothing and who have large feet and protruding ears (111). Cinderella did not choose to be beautiful, and she could not change this aspect of herself even if she wanted to, but it is her physical appearance that catches the prince’s attention and encourages him to

propose to her. In fact, the prince chooses to spend his night with Cinderella after simply laying his eyes on her from across the room, and the Grand Duke's monologue in the background further highlights that he does not know her at all when he mockingly says, "Suddenly he looks up, and there she stands, the girl of his dreams. Who she is or whence she came he knows not, nor does he care, but here is the maid predestined to be his bride" (*Cinderella*). Even the king reinforces the traditional ideal of beauty that Cinderella possesses because his daydreams feature two children with blond hair, a little girl with blue eyes like Cinderella and a little boy with brown eyes like the prince. This emphasis on beauty, a character trait that is uncontrollable, is problematic because it correlates beauty with being worthy of being chosen (Lieberman 386). Similarly, marriage is associated with being rich, and from here, "it is easy for a child to infer that beauty leads to wealth" (386). Children begin to believe that some people are rewarded through no effort of their own, while others will always remain unworthy of attaining such riches.

Ever After: A Cinderella Story

After the helpless Cinderella depicted in Disney's film, Danielle from *Ever After: A Cinderella Story* (1998) seems to be a welcome turn for the modern feminist. Although Danielle is fiercely independent and takes matters into her own hands on multiple occasions, the film ultimately fails to achieve a completely feminist message because Danielle's agency is always mocked or turned into a joke. This argument originates from Christy Williams's claim that Danielle's "subversion [of the damsel-in-distress trope] is undercut" because her "decisive action is transformed into a joke and explained away" ("The Shoe Still Fits" 110). Williams highlights only one such occurrence within the film: according to Williams, Danielle's independence is mocked during the scene in

which she saves herself and Prince Henry from gypsies. After the prince is overtaken by gypsies, Danielle surprises them when she fights back and stands up for herself and they reward her with allowing her to leave with whatever she can carry. In a moment of quick ingenuity, she picks up Prince Henry and begins to walk away with him, but the gypsies laugh at her and decide to give them both food and shelter for the night. In this scene, Danielle's ability to outsmart her opponents is transformed into a joke because the audience is expected to join in with the gypsies' laughter, and Williams notes that "the humor only works if the audience and the characters in the film recognize that Danielle is acting out of character for a woman" ("The Shoe Still Fits" 110). The impact of this scene of female empowerment is diminished by the fact that it relies on the backhanded compliment that most women would not be capable of Danielle's pluck, and even Danielle acts differently only for a moment of comic relief in the film.

Expanding on William's argument, I would point out additional moments in the film where Danielle's agency is mocked or otherwise compromised. When Danielle—covered in mud after fighting with her friend Gustav—appears on screen to meet her new stepfamily, Danielle's father says, "I had hoped to present a little lady, but I suppose you'll have to do" (*Ever After*). In this scene, Danielle is teased for being a tomboy because it is considered an inferior state of being to that of a proper lady. Her father's words suggest that exhibiting behavior inconsistent with the distinguished pride expected of a lady is unacceptable. Although her father makes the comment with love, the end result is that her stepfamily's first view of Danielle is a negative one in which it is suggested that it is okay to mock her. The audience feels sympathetic to Danielle's plight rather than joining in on her mockery, but this creation of empathy is problematic for two

reasons. According to Amy Shuman, empathy is a “destabilizing element” because “it rarely changes the circumstances of those who suffer” (as qtd. in Cleto 104). Not only does the audience’s empathy toward Danielle have no productive effect, but her father’s words also set the stage for the rest of the film since Danielle must suffer the abuse of her stepfamily who have come to see her as unworthy of the position of lady. When Danielle travels into town disguised as a noblewoman to rescue Maurice from slavery, she speaks forcefully to the person in charge of transporting the servants. He refuses to comply with her request and begins to yell at her, but Prince Henry comes to her aid and demands that Maurice be released. In this moment, Danielle’s agency falters. While Danielle is able to solve her own problems most of the time, she does still rely on others as other Cinderellas do before her. Danielle also relies on her fairy-godfather figure, Leonardo da Vinci, to break her out of the room where her stepmother imprisons her. Da Vinci takes the bolts out of the other side of the doorframe, and the simplicity of the solution makes the audience doubt Danielle’s independence. Between mocking Danielle’s agency and her reliance on other people to solve simple problems, *Ever After* does not deserve the acclaim it receives for presenting a modern feminist Cinderella.

Despite the film’s belittling of Danielle’s independence, there is also the message that Danielle must be Henry’s equal if she is to marry him. Meanwhile, the audience automatically regards Prince Henry as a suitable match for her because of his nobility and wealth. Throughout the film, Danielle displays intellectual and physical strengths that elevate her social status and demonstrate to the audience that she does not belong as a servant. She challenges Prince Henry to be a better leader and person when she questions his beliefs and actions: “Well, you gave one man his life back, but did you even glance at

the others?” (*Ever After*). The prince himself even expresses that he is impressed by Danielle’s abilities on multiple occasions, such as when he praises her passion—“In all my years of study, not one tutor ever demonstrated the passion you have shown me in the last two days. You have more conviction in one memory than I have in my entire being”—and when he marvels at her independence and her difference from other women by asking, “You swim alone, climb rocks, rescue servants. Is there anything you don’t do?” It is also clear that Danielle and Prince Henry see each other as humans first; he is not merely a way out of an abusive household for Danielle, and she is not merely a pretty face for Henry, as in the Grimm and Disney variants. Indeed, Danielle apologizes that “my mouth has run away with me again” after sharing a profound insight with him, and the prince replies with, “Oh no, my lady. It is your mouth that has me hypnotized,” illustrating that this Cinderella is not silenced like the previous two are.

Because the film gives Prince Henry and Danielle time to interact with one another before the ball, audiences learn that Henry falls for Danielle because he values her mind rather than her physical appearance, and it is Danielle’s mind that elevates her to an honorary position of nobility. When Prince Henry learns that Danielle lied to him about her identity, he rejects Danielle’s advances by saying, “you are just like them,” referring to Danielle’s stepfamily; he compares Danielle to them to critique not her social class but her manipulation and deceit. This fact becomes evident when Prince Henry discusses the situation with Da Vinci later on and implores of Da Vinci, “And love without trust?” after Da Vinci tells him, “a life without love is no life at all.” The moment Danielle does not measure up to the honor expected of Prince Henry’s equal, Henry rejects her.

The film's conclusion reinforces the idea that Danielle is at the mercy of other characters. Not only does Danielle have to prove that she is worthy of Prince Henry's affection, but it is also only on Henry's terms that she can speak up at all. Danielle attempts to tell Henry the truth about who she is on multiple occasions, but he always interrupts her. When the two meet at Henry's secret haven, Danielle tells the prince, "I cannot stay long, but I had to see you" because "there is something I must tell you," but the prince breaks in excitedly to discuss his new project that was inspired by her. At the ball, Danielle again tries to pull Henry aside because revealing the truth is a delicate matter that should be discussed in private, but Henry pulls her along into the crowd. The film places all of the blame on Danielle, even though the prince is also at fault. Nevertheless, misleading the prince is one of the essential elements of a "Cinderella" story. Danielle's mistake shows that she is human, which sets her apart from the Brothers Grimm's Cinderella, whose silence contributes to the superficiality of that version of the fairy tale.

Just as Danielle's agency is compromised by the events that unfold at the film's conclusion, so too is the audience deprived of their own imaginative independence. The film does not conclude after the prince marries Danielle; instead, there is an epilogue that shows readers a distant descendant of the happy couple, which suggests that there have been generations of marital bliss as Danielle and Henry's legacy. This scene comforts readers by proving that they remained happy well into their ever-after, but it also takes away the freedom of the reader to interpret the story on their own and to imagine a unique ending. According to Mike Cadden, the epilogue that is so prominent in children's literature limits a reader's interpretive agency because of the "form of closure that

provides an unquestionable authentication of the textual material,” creating the trade-off that this move “provides more comfort and offers less agency for the reader” (345). Both Danielle and the reader fail to retain their agency, and the film’s conclusion suggests that women today can still be silenced and trapped by the cycle of marriage and child-rearing brought about by a patriarchal society.

Meyer’s *Cinder*

According to Alexandra Lykissas, “young adult readers are in a transitional phase of all aspects of life and the literature marketed for them reflects those changes” (306). Written in 2012, Marissa Meyer’s young adult novel *Cinder* does seem promising because of its realistic depiction of Cinder’s transformation from a scared and submissive girl to a strong and independent young woman; however, the conclusion holds the novel back from providing a positive role model for children. Set in a distant dystopian future, this Cinderella is a cyborg who internalizes the self-loathing occasioned by her less-than-human status. At the beginning of the novel, Cinder falls into the same trap as her fictional predecessors because she allows her stepmother, Adri, to control her. She works at the market as a mechanic and gives the money that she earns to her stepfamily; she lets herself be captured for the cyborg draft; and she cannot stop Adri from selling her best friend Iko. After all of the discrimination that she faces as a cyborg and as an outsider to the Linh family, Cinder even begins to believe that she is not worthy of a better life. She thinks to herself that “she wouldn’t fit in at a formal ball anyway” because of her physical “monstrosities” and her lack of knowledge about social customs (Meyer, *Cinder* 32). She initially makes no effort to convince her stepmother to let her go to the ball because she does not believe that she deserves to attend it at all.

However, Cinder eventually gains the self-confidence that allows her to be more active in deciding her own fate. After she realizes that she is immune to Letumosis, the plague decimating the human race, she makes it clear that she works for Dr. Erland on a volunteer basis and draws up conditions for her service. Cinder has no intention of attending the ball in the end, not because she feels unworthy but because she wishes to escape from Adri and to another country. Once she realizes that Prince Kai is in danger, however, she decides that she must try to save him, even if it puts her in danger of Queen Levana's wrath. She finds her own clothing and transports herself to the ball. When Prince Kai finds out that she is cyborg and Lunar (rather than "Earthen"), Cinder seems to revert back to her submissive self. She allows him to imprison her and is willing to accept her fate of execution until Dr. Erland visits her in jail and gives her an alternative plan. Agency requires one's actions *and* thoughts to be one's own, yet it is not Cinder's idea to escape, nor does she accomplish it on her own since Dr. Erland leaves the door unlocked. Despite Cinder's reversion, her character does become more independent throughout the course of the novel, suggesting that she could transform beyond the end of the novel. As Marie Tatar argues, fairy tales possess a significant transformative power because the "stories themselves function as shape-shifters, morphing into new versions of themselves as they are retold and as they migrate into other media" and they "have transformative effects on us" (56). Not only does the transformative power of fairy tales function in this way, but Cinder also demonstrates that the characters themselves may undergo a transformation.

One way that Cinder changes is in achieving increased agency by working to overthrow Levana, the authoritarian ruler of Luna who can manipulate the bioelectricity

surrounding people to make them see what she wants them to see and do what she tells them to do. Although Cinder's agency is compromised by the fact that she is not completely human, her cyborg qualities also render her stronger than other characters. In her first encounter with Queen Levana, Cinder is brainwashed by the queen's beauty as everyone else is. She thinks, "She was warm. Welcoming. Generous. She should be their queen. She should rule them, guide them, protect them" (Meyer 205). It is only when her "retina display flashed a warning at her" that Cinder realizes Levana's beauty and words are a lie (205). However, the same cyborg qualities that mean "[l]egally, Cinder belonged to Adri as much as the household android and so too did her money, her few possessions, even the new foot she'd just attached" (24) give Cinder the power to overcome Levana's glamour. In this way, it is not her humanity that allows her to keep her agency in this moment. Instead, it is her cyborg abilities that she did not ask for and, in fact, does not even want: she is constantly self-deprecating and thinks of herself as "A girl. A machine. A freak" after Kai recoils from the holographic image of her cyborg body (126). Cinder's ability to overcome Levana's manipulation and retain her agency is thus compromised because it is not her humanity nor even a part of herself of which she approves that saves her from the queen's deceit.

While the Cinderella characters from other variants merely remain silent in the face of their abuse, Cinder internalizes society's contempt for cyborgs and becomes self-deprecating, demonstrating that the difference between silence and self-deprecation is taking abuse and believing abusers. Cinder learns that she is "36.28% not human" when she studies her hologram in Dr. Erland's office (82), and it is her synthetic hand and foot, her metal ribs and vertebrae, the synthetic tissue around her heart, the control wires

bordering her spine, and the control panel in the back of her head that make her so self-conscious. Cyborgs are “hated and despised by every culture in the galaxy” (292), so much so that there is a cyborg draft that forces them to donate themselves to science in an effort to find a cure for the plague. They have already been given a second chance at life through their technological enhancements, so they can be sacrificed without guilt. Society thus teaches that they are disposable, that they are lesser than everyone else. For Danielle, her mistake of misleading the prince about her identity makes her more human, but Cinder’s self-identified flaws come from her machinery rather than her humanity.

In addition to this societal prejudice, Cinder also faces a more direct form of abuse because Adri attacks her as well: “Do *your kind* even know what love is? Can you feel anything at all, or is it just [...] programmed?” (63; emphasis added). Adri suggests that Cinder is not human at all when she separates Cinder from herself and unmodified people in general. After hearing these insults for so long, Cinder internalizes the beliefs. She is shocked to discover her true identity as Princess Selene of Luna, as evidenced by her cry of “[n]o. I can’t. I can’t be a queen or a princess or—I’m nobody. I’m a cyborg” (384). Where other Cinderella figures use their beauty to compete for the prince’s hand in marriage, Cinder does not believe she is human enough and shows up to the ball in a wrinkled and stained version of her stepsister Peony’s gown. With such negative feelings of herself, she remains disempowered at the novel’s conclusion and must rely on help from her fairy-godmother figure to escape her prison. At least with *Cinder*, Meyer falls short of “redefining female worth as rooted in female agency,” as Terri Doughty claims. (49). Instead, young readers are once again presented with a role model who does not stand up against her abusers, leaving them with the message that passively tolerating

abuse is acceptable and even encouraged because there is a happy-ever-after awaiting those strong enough to survive.

It would be an incomplete analysis of this “Cinderella” variant, however, if I did not include a discussion of *The Lunar Chronicles* as a whole. The series merges together characters’ stories from several fairy tales, from “Rapunzel” to “Little Red Riding Hood” to “Snow White.” Alexandra Lykissas explains that the collaborative fairy tale “developed out of trying to understand why popular fairy tale characters like Snow White and Cinderella not only appear in the same story, but also work together to vanquish the main villain in that narrative” (307). It is this collaboration that gives Cinder the opportunity to be a leader while also listening to and following the lead of the other fairy tale characters when it is necessary. When Cinder tells her friends, “You don’t have to go with me. I know the danger I’m putting you in, and that you didn’t know what you were signing up for when you joined me. You could go on with your lives, and I wouldn’t stop you” (Meyer, *Winter* 138), Carswell Thorne replies, “It’s sweet of you to worry, but there’s no way you can pull this off without us” (139). This quote demonstrates how the characters rely on their own individual strengths to work toward their common goal of overthrowing Queen Levana. By collaborating in this way, they can accommodate for each other’s weaknesses and ensure that there are no holes in their plan. *The Lunar Chronicles* taken as a whole becomes a story about families of choice, also known as the “found family” trope.

While the message of *Cinder* may seem overwhelmingly negative, it represents only a fraction of the series. Based on this partial look at Cinder’s story, the message may be that she was ultimately not strong enough to stand on her own as a positive female role

model for young readers. However, by the end of the series, Cinder “ultimately choos[es] to act as a selfless person” (Silvernail 36) by “keep[ing] the welfare of others above her own” (37). Indeed, when Cinder exclaims, “I’m *surrendering* to you [...] if that means I have to lose so these people can go free, so be it. What *you* don’t seem to realize is that this isn’t about me. It’s about the people” (Meyer, *Winter* 357), she sacrifices her wellbeing just as she does in the series’ first installment when she accepts her abuse in silence. However, this sacrifice is not because she is incapable of retaining her agency but because she has learned that strength and agency come in many forms. There is a certain push-and-pull that comes with teamwork, and recognizing that she does not have to be the one to win against the Lunars by herself is the first step. This reliance on teamwork allows Cinder to develop a higher level of agency as the series progresses because she learns that there is a strength in admitting that she needs help and in accepting teamwork.

Conclusion

By focusing on such issues as silence, passivity, beauty, mockery, deception, self-deprecation, and disempowerment in the four selected variants of “Cinderella,” it has become clear that there is still room for improving both the overall message of these tales and the character of Cinderella. These stories seem to have grown more complex over time because the nineteenth-century Grimm Brothers’ fairy tale is the most superficial account of Cinderella’s story and the most recent novel from 2012 presents a more complex tale of growth and transformation; yet even in modern iterations, female agency is still largely ignored or sacrificed. The progression of agency traced through the variants seems to suggest that as one’s agency increases, so too does one’s self-doubt. The Cinderellas from the Grimm Brothers’ fairy tale and from the Disney film have no

agency, but their beauty alone is enough to secure them a happy-ever-after with the prince. Danielle from *Ever After* gains a little more independence yet must face mockery for possessing such power. Cinder, who has the most agency because she is both Lunar and cyborg and thus has the powers that come with those two identities, also has the most self-doubt as she constantly belittles herself after internalizing the hatred of her family and community. In the midst of stories that revolve around revenge fantasies, cautionary tales, wish fulfillment, limited reader agency, and tolerance of abuse, no positive role model or message can emerge for young readers, and generations of children will thus be caught in the cycle of harmful passivity and self-deprecation that is encouraged by these fairy tale variants.

Chapter 2: “The Little Mermaid” and Silence

Hans Christian Andersen’s “The Little Mermaid” certainly leaves audiences with more complex themes than the Grimm Brothers’ superficial tale of “Cinderella.” Andersen’s inclusion of unrequited love, reflections of mortality, and pieces of the Christian religion can be found in many variants of “The Little Mermaid” tale, suggesting a subsequent deeper and more progressive message for audiences than that of “Cinderella.” However, the depictions of silence and agency hold these stories back from presenting entirely positive images for young readers.

In this chapter, I will analyze four variants of “The Little Mermaid” fairy tale: Hans Christian Andersen’s “The Little Mermaid,” Disney’s film adaptation *The Little Mermaid*, the live-action film *The Little Mermaid*, and Alexandra Christo’s young adult novel *To Kill a Kingdom*. In Andersen’s “The Little Mermaid,” the titular character has increased agency at the expense of her voice, and this silence causes the little mermaid to fail at winning the prince’s heart. The little mermaid must also rely on a male character to attain an immortal soul, suggesting that she can never be complete without the assistance of a man. Disney’s iteration of the fairy tale removes most of the complexities of the original tale and leaves viewers with the damaging message that one’s voice is not important or even necessary. The live-action film breaks away from tradition to provide a little mermaid who is confident enough to feel complete on her own since she parts ways with love-interest Cam at the end of the story. However, Elizabeth has limited agency since she is tricked into becoming human rather than choosing such a path, and the story is told from Cam’s point of view rather than her own. In the most progressive variant from either “Cinderella” or “The Little Mermaid,” Christo’s *To Kill a Kingdom* focuses

on the character development between Lira and Elian to depict their journey of self-discovery and maturation. Through various compromises, Lira is able to keep both of her identities—human and mermaid—and both of her families—the sea creatures and Elian—without sacrificing who she is.

Andersen’s “The Little Mermaid”

Where “Cinderella” features the typical happily-ever-after in which the heroine wins the prince’s hand in marriage, “The Little Mermaid” is a more complicated fairy tale in that the little mermaid and her lover usually do not end up together. In Andersen’s version, the little mermaid rescues a prince from his shipwreck, but the prince mistakenly believes his rescuer to be one of the maidens who found him on the shore. As a result, the prince says, “[the youngest maiden] is the only one in the world whom I could love” (Andersen 15), demonstrating that he cannot love the little mermaid in the same way. Instead, as the little mermaid “loved the prince more fondly” each day, “he loved her as he would love a little child, but it never came into his head to make her his wife” (14). Not only does this quote reinforce the prince’s inability to love the little mermaid romantically, but it also brings up the question of the mermaid’s age. Even the title emphasizes that the mermaid is “little,” and the fact that the prince views her as a “little child” solidifies the idea that she must be much younger than the prince. The mermaid’s youth paints her as more vulnerable to danger and as less accountable for her actions since she is presented as nothing more than a naïve little girl. When the little mermaid’s unrequited love is not resolved by the end of the fairy tale, the prince is reunited with the young maiden and chooses to marry her. When the little mermaid refuses to kill the prince despite it being the only way for her to escape death, she is mercifully turned into

a daughter of the air where she will strive to do good deeds for three hundred years until she earns an immortal soul. However, even if she succeeds in securing a place in Heaven where she can see the prince again, their love will remain unrequited since the prince will always have the young maiden as his wife. For this version of “The Little Mermaid,” attaining a soul seems to be more important to the little mermaid than having her love reciprocated by the prince.

Unlike the simple love story found in the variants of “Cinderella,” the stakes are much higher with “The Little Mermaid.” In Andersen’s fairy tale, the sea witch makes it clear that the little mermaid will be risking her life to become human: “But think again [...] for when once your shape has become like a human being, you can no more be a mermaid [...] The first morning after he marries another your heart will break, and you will become foam on the crest of the waves” (12). The little mermaid consciously sacrifices her mermaid body and her family in the sea forever, regardless of whether or not she wins the love of the prince. Meanwhile, this bargain has the potential to cause even more damage in the little mermaid’s life: the prince’s refusal to marry her secures her fate of becoming sea foam, which is synonymous with death for the mermaid species. The little mermaid “became pale as death” after accepting these terms (12), but she does willingly subject herself to the pain and potential death. As A. Waller Hastings asserts, it is “at the mermaid’s insistence” that the sea witch hands over the potion for becoming human, so “[t]he dangers and pain are all generated by the mermaid’s own desire; the sea [witch] assists, but does not actively plan for evil to befall the mermaid” (87). The little mermaid’s difficult decision to become human has the potential for dangerous consequences that cannot be undone, yet she goes through with the bargain anyway,

suggesting that she believes the reward of eternal life is worth any amount of suffering and gambling.

At this point in the story, the little mermaid has enough faith in the joys of having an immortal soul to believe that she can win the prince's love, but once it becomes clear that his heart belongs to another, she is still willing to sacrifice her life, this time for love. Andersen writes, "She cast one more lingering, half-fainting glance at the prince, and then threw herself from the ship into the sea, and thought her body was dissolving into foam" (18). This quote does three things: it illustrates how her love for the prince keeps her from killing him with the knife that her sisters presented to her, it depicts the moment of sacrifice in which the little mermaid officially turns her back on eternal life to save the prince's life, and it shows how her sacrifice is made with the belief that her death would be permanent. However, Andersen presents a third alternative so that her options are not just death or eternal life. Rather, she becomes a daughter of the air who can gain an immortal soul after three hundred years of striving to do good. This third option aligns Andersen's fairy tale with the group of children's literature identified by Francelia Butler that portrays death as "not final, that it is to be accepted, even actively embraced with the sure knowledge that through love, a resurrection will occur" (120); sure enough, the little mermaid's love for the prince earns her a chance at resurrection. In "The Little Mermaid," the subject of death is made more suitable for children since the mermaid's resurrection paints death as an impermanent state of being, which undermines the fairy tale's high-stakes nature. Nevertheless, the inclusion of more substantial themes like the meaning of life and what comes after death makes "The Little Mermaid" an overall more complex story.

From the first lines of Andersen's "The Little Mermaid," allusions to Christianity abound, so it is no surprise that these religious themes play a large role in the story. Andersen is quick to associate the water with divinity when he uses a religious entity to measure its depth: "it is very, very deep; so deep, indeed, that no cable could fathom it: many church steeples, piled one upon another, would not reach from the ground beneath to the surface of the water above" (1). With this connection between the ocean² and spirituality in place, one can see the mermaids' coming-of-age ritual as a type of baptism. On their fifteenth birthday, the six daughters of the king "have permission to rise up out of the sea" (2), which signifies their maturity and the beginning of a new life for them. While the mermaids have lived in the water their entire life and the ritual may seem like a reverse baptism since they exit the water rather than enter it, it is the act of rising out of the water that signifies a new life for Christians. Being submerged in water is a symbol of burying one's old life and coming back up is a resurrection. According to this pattern, the mermaids' fifteenth birthday indicates a spiritual rebirth. The little mermaid, in particular, has a connection to divinity, for she was the only one of her sisters to arrange her flower-bed "round like the sun" with "flowers as red as his rays at sunset" (2). According to Johan de Mylius, "the circle has been considered as the most complete form" since it is a "symbol of eternity, complemented by the sun as traditional symbol of life and of the divine" (27-8). The little mermaid's fascination with both circles and the sun acts as the first clue of her desire for something more, and, in fact, it is later revealed that she longs

² While I have referred to "the ocean" here, the bodies of water vary across the variants of "The Little Mermaid." For example, Andersen's fairy tale refers to "the sea" most often but "the ocean" appears a few times. *The Little Mermaid* (2018), however, takes place in Mississippi and occurs near a "river." I will be referring to the water as "water," "sea," and "ocean" interchangeably throughout the rest of this chapter.

for eternal life and “the hope of knowing the happiness of that glorious world above the stars” that it brings (Andersen 9).

Another important aspect of the little mermaid’s story that connects her to religion is the fact that she must suffer and sacrifice in order to earn her place in heaven because, as Mylius notes, these principles are “two genuine Christian terms” (31) that allow her “to move from one stage to another” (32). Her suffering is part of the price she must pay for becoming human: the sea witch warns the little mermaid that she “will feel great pain, as if a sword were passing through you” upon the transformation (Andersen 12), and “at every step you take it will feel as if you were treading upon sharp knives, and that the blood must flow” (12). Though her voice trembles when she agrees to the bargain, it is the “thought of the prince and the immortal soul” that convinces the little mermaid to bear what is asked of her (12). She acknowledges that her suffering is worthwhile because it will help her earn a chance at eternal life, suggesting that adversity is a natural part of a Christian’s journey. The little mermaid must also make sacrifices to attain the status of human being. The sea witch appropriates her voice to turn her into a human, and it is up to the little mermaid to win the prince’s hand in marriage, which will then earn her an immortal soul. When the prince marries another woman, negating the bargain that was struck between the little mermaid and the sea witch, the little mermaid must ultimately sacrifice her life for the possibility of reaching heaven in the future. Through her suffering and sacrifice and despite the prince’s rejection, she becomes one of the “daughters of the air” (18) who, “although they do not possess an immortal soul, can, by their good deeds, procure one for themselves” (18). In a sort of purgatory, the little mermaid waits for her final judgment about her worthiness of attaining eternal life in

heaven. Furthermore, as sea foam, the little mermaid can reach the ocean's shore, which according to folk legends, is where the "intrusion of the supernatural into the everyday world most often occurs" since it is "along the borders between the wild and the civilized" (Harris 6). She is most connected to the afterlife in this location because she can exist partly in the divine waters and partly on the land that grants humans an immortal soul.

Despite the complexities of unrequited love, the possibility of death, and the religious undertones in this tale, Andersen's emphasis on silence over female empowerment causes the story to fall short of a feminist message. Andersen's decision to introduce an unnamed main character is his first step in silencing the little mermaid because he effectively strips away any individuality she could have had. Additionally, the narration describes the little mermaid as "a strange child, quiet and thoughtful" (Andersen 2), and the only reason her voice is praised at all is because her singing provides "the loveliest voice of any on earth or in the sea" (10). However, a strong female role model would use her voice to stand up for herself and to express her ideas to the world. Referencing the little mermaid's voice, the sea witch demands that "the best thing you possess will I have for the price of my draught" (12), which could be seen as a positive step if the sea witch were praising the strength of the mermaid's voice rather than the beauty of it. A person's voice is their most powerful asset, as the sea witch claims, but this fact is only true if they use it correctly—to stand up for themselves and others.

With her voice gone, the little mermaid has even less of a chance to stand up for herself, and the fairy tale dissolves into the classic trope of the demanding prince and the

submissive girl. The little mermaid is left with nothing but her “beautiful form,” “graceful walk,” and “expressive eyes” (12) to win over the prince. To his credit, Andersen’s prince does not fall in love with her solely based on her beautiful appearance—as happens with Disney’s Prince Eric—but instead views her as a little sister in need of protection. However, with these protective feelings comes the belief that he can control her as he sees fit, and he even refers to her condescendingly with nicknames such as “my dumb child” and “my dumb foundling” (15), which emphasize not only her youth but also her muteness. Failing to take into consideration the little mermaid’s own feelings about the matter, he orders, “You will rejoice at my happiness; for your devotion to me is great and sincere” (16). The prince assumes the little mermaid will remain devoted to him forever, and he also refuses to consider her point of view about his betrothal to another woman.

With all of the silencing of the little mermaid, from leaving her unnamed to stealing her ability to speak, the feminist message in this fairy tale is lacking. For the little mermaid, silence means unrequited love since it impacts her chance at making the prince fall in love with her. Her silence also turns her into a liar, and her inability to tell the prince the truth about saving him from the shipwreck drives him to another woman he believes to be his savior. There are moments of empowerment, such as the little mermaid’s freedom to make her own choices in regard to the bargain with the sea witch and refusing help from her sisters. However, it is disappointing that the little mermaid’s quest for an immortal soul depends entirely on the male character. From the beginning, she is told that she must marry a man to be raised to a status worthy of earning eternal life. When this route fails her, her decision to trade her life for the prince’s rewards her

with the opportunity to then spend the next three hundred years striving for perfection in the hope that she can earn an immortal soul.

Disney's *The Little Mermaid*

Unlike Andersen's "The Little Mermaid," in which the little mermaid and her lover remain unrequited at the conclusion of the story, the Disney version of the fairy tale operates on the understanding that a happily-ever-after love story is required for a successful children's film. Even without her voice, Ariel succeeds in gaining Prince Eric's affection, and her progress urges Ursula to take matters into her own hands to split the couple apart. While Andersen's fairy tale includes another woman as the prince's main love interest, the Disney version's other female character is introduced solely to tear Prince Eric away from Ariel. There is no real threat of permanence to this unrequited love, however, since the audience understands that Vanessa is an illusion created by Ursula. Prince Eric and Ariel receive their happy-ever-after ending, but Ariel's old family is left behind. In the interest of catering to the audience's expectation for a happy ending, the film purposefully does not draw attention to the fact that Ariel's decision to leave with Prince Eric means that she sacrifices her old life in the process. The emphasis centers entirely on the love story, with no regard given to how it affects other characters. In addition to the guaranteed happy ending for the protagonists, Roberta Trites points out, "Disney's representation of love lacks the basic integrity imbued in Andersen's representation of it" (3). The bargain that the little mermaid strikes with the sea witch in Andersen's fairy tale gives the mermaid ample time to forge an intimate relationship with the prince since the terms state that she has until the prince marries someone else. However, Ursula gives Ariel only three days to win the prince's heart, and she suggests

that love is no more than a physical attraction when she says the prince must “fall in love with you—that is—kiss you” (*The Little Mermaid*). By reducing love to this physical display of affection, the Disney version divests the tale of its original depth since the film loses any mention of marriage or earning an immortal soul.

Where Andersen’s little mermaid consciously chooses to become human even knowing about the dire consequences that could befall her, Disney’s version is more child-friendly in its approach to death and mortality. According to Deborah Ross, “[t]here is nothing masochistic about this mermaid’s fantasy; nor is she willing to sacrifice herself to fulfill it, though she is willing to gamble” her voice with every intention of succeeding and getting it back (59). Instead, Ursula’s cunning deceit is at fault for Ariel’s risky behavior. The sea witch from Andersen’s tale explains the details behind the deal before asking the little mermaid to accept, being careful to explicitly talk about the physical pain that she will feel and the very real possibility of death, but Ursula reveals only the bare minimum, and even that is shrouded in deception since she makes everything seem less dangerous. Ursula is not even the one to mention Ariel’s family; Ariel breaks into the sea witch’s song to consider, “If I become human, I’ll never be with my father or sisters again” (*The Little Mermaid*). Ariel is much less willing to lose what is important to her than Andersen’s little mermaid was, and she never would have agreed to such a self-sacrificial deal if Ursula had been honest instead of sly. Ariel does not realize that she shoulders all of the risk of this bargain while Ursula has the power to twist the terms of the agreement to suit her own needs. This unequal distribution of power sets Ariel up as a naïve, innocent young girl who was tricked and victimized by the sea witch, which garners her unwavering sympathy and well-wishes from the audience.

Using Ursula as a villain who deceives Ariel into making such a dangerous decision ultimately makes viewers regard Ariel with more sympathy since it was not her will to risk so much. It also sets the stage for a classic “good triumphs over evil” ending in which death is treated with “simple acceptance” (Butler 120): the hero, Prince Eric in this case, kills off the villain, Ursula, in a death that is more final than that of Andersen’s little mermaid. Meanwhile, King Triton rescues his daughter from her punishment for failing to comply with Ursula’s deal, and he gets turned into an eel as a result. His sacrifice contributes both to the audience’s view of Ariel as sympathetic (since it was her fault that her father faced such a transformation) and to the argument that the stakes are higher in “The Little Mermaid” fairy tales. As with all Disney happy endings, however, King Triton is returned to his former state after Ursula is killed, so Ariel’s mistake has no lasting consequences. In this way, the treatment of death in this variant of “The Little Mermaid” presents children with the idea that death is only permanent for bad people and that a more generous eternal life awaits those who are good and heroic.

Although Disney’s adaptation of “The Little Mermaid” certainly eliminated most of the depth present in the original version and replaced the longing for an immortal soul with a typical happily-ever-after heterosexual marriage, there are some remnants of spirituality present. Ursula and King Triton could be coded as Satan and God, respectively. Laura Sells notes, “[i]t is no accident that Ursula is an octopus, an inverted Medusa figure” (82). The allusion to Medusa conjures images of snakes and the Garden of Eden. Just as the serpent’s cunning nature convinces Eve to eat the forbidden fruit, Ursula manipulates Ariel into making an unfair trade to advance her plan of overthrowing King Triton. She appeals to Ariel’s sympathetic nature while also proving herself to be

less malicious than her reputation might suggest when she sings, “I admit that in the past I’ve been a nasty / They weren’t kidding when they called me, well, a witch / But you’ll find that nowadays / I’ve mended all my ways” (*The Little Mermaid*). She even acknowledges how she has had to punish those who could not pay the price, but strategically downplays the situation: “Now it’s happened once or twice / Someone couldn’t pay the price / And I’m afraid I had to rake ‘em across the coals.” Also worth mentioning is the fact that Ursula has been banished from Atlantica by King Triton, as Satan is cast out of Heaven by God. Additionally, King Triton shares another attribute with God: he forbids Ariel from seeking advice from Ursula, which parallels God’s attempt to keep Adam and Eve from eating fruit from the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil.

Disney’s *The Little Mermaid* falls into the same trap as Andersen’s fairy tale of romanticizing the conservative model of the perfectly meek girl and her authoritative lover. As with Andersen’s fairy tale, Ariel must sacrifice her voice to Ursula in order to turn into a human, but there is no pretense about one’s voice being important at all. Instead, Ursula refers to Ariel’s payment as “just a token really, a trifle” in her villain song, “Poor Unfortunate Souls.” At Ariel’s halfhearted attempt to question how she can win the prince’s heart with no voice, Ursula brushes her away by asserting that silence is a virtue: “On land it’s much preferred for ladies not to say a word [...] It’s she who holds her tongue who gets a man.” While Andersen’s sea witch at least praises the little mermaid’s voice, although for the wrong reasons, Ursula belittles the powerful tool and deceives Ariel into making an unfair trade. This difference between the two sea witches uncovers an important distinction in their motives for granting the mermaid’s wish:

Andersen's sea witch has no real interest in the outcome of the little mermaid's affairs and thus explicitly details the bargain being made, but Ursula is invested in Ariel's plan because it could lead to Triton's downfall (Trites 4).

The promotion of silence as an attractive trait in a woman is exacerbated by the fact that these quotations come from lyrics that children will sing along with again and again, leading to their subconscious internalization of the notion that speaking up is wrong. Such an effect of the lyrics is ironic because while Ariel has been silenced, children will be able to freely sing along to the very song that stole her voice. Not only does the villainous character preach about women being seen and not heard, but Prince Eric's actions also reinforce this idea. Presented with a beautiful young woman who has been stripped of her voice, Eric would have fallen in love based solely on his judgment of her beautiful appearance if Ursula had not intervened by enchanting him to love another woman. When the little mermaid does speak, it is only to express a longing for something that she cannot or should not have; indeed, Ariel utters the verb "want" more often than any other word (Warner 403).

Disney's portrayal of silence places this film as the least progressive iteration of "The Little Mermaid." One positive achievement of note is the fact that the sea witch claims silence as a virtue, and in the dichotomous world of children's literature, the villain's alliance with a certain quality makes this quality negative by association. If the sea witch labels the little mermaid's voice worthless, children will assume that it is actually a powerful asset. Despite this small success, the rest of the film presents the overall message that one's physical appearance is enough to gain the attention and (superficial) affection of a man, that one's personality or voice is not important, or even

needed, at all. As Christy Williams argues, “[t]he film presents a model where physical beauty is more important than self-expression” (“Mermaid Tales on Screen” 198).

Additionally, Ariel is the epitome of the meek and helpless damsel in distress because she is rescued on multiple occasions: from drowning by Flounder, from her bargain by her father who selflessly takes her place, and from the sea witch by Prince Eric who is elevated to a hero when he kills the villain. These missteps are only exacerbated by the fact that Disney’s version of “The Little Mermaid” fairy tale has “supplanted Andersen’s tale in popular culture,” leaving young viewers with the image of the silenced and inactive “Ariel, not Andersen’s nameless heroine, [a]s *the* little mermaid” (Williams, “Mermaid Tales on Screen” 202).

The Little Mermaid

The live-action *The Little Mermaid* (2018) film approaches the love story between the little mermaid character and her mate in a similar way to Andersen’s fairy tale in that the two remain unrequited at the story’s conclusion. Unlike both the Andersen and Disney variants, there is no third person to complicate the characters’ feelings for one another. In fact, there are no outside forces trying to keep Elizabeth and Cam separate from one another at all, and there is the addition of a young girl who is rooting for them to get together; Elle is fascinated by mermaids and is therefore overjoyed about the prospect of her uncle dating Elizabeth, who is a mermaid that has been forced to serve as a circus performer under the control of circus master Locke. Despite the absence of obstacles in their way, Elizabeth and Cam still part ways once Cam helps Elizabeth reunite her stolen soul with her body. Elizabeth mentions her family once during the film to tell Cam she “lived with her family in the sea” once but was “tricked” by Locke and is

now under his control (*The Little Mermaid*). As such, the audience is meant to assume that she has chosen to reunite with her family instead of remaining as a human with Cam when she swims off into the water in one of the final scenes of the film. The actual final scene of the film, however, features two mermaid tails, which is significant because they appear right after Grandmother Elle is seen walking purposefully toward the water. While Elle is never depicted as a mermaid throughout the rest of the film, this final scene suggests that she becomes a mermaid to heal her lung problems and that Elizabeth has handed over the mantle of “the little mermaid” to Elle. However, there are not one but two mermaid tails depicted in that final scene, and one of them could belong to Elizabeth herself. If the audience is in fact meant to assume that the first tail belongs to Elle and the other tail belongs to Elizabeth, then the love story between Elizabeth and Cam becomes even more insignificant. It would mean that the friendship between Elizabeth and Elle is more important to Elizabeth than her romantic relationship with Cam. In other words, Elizabeth chooses her mermaid side definitively over being a human, returning to her real identity and family rather than sacrificing her past as Ariel did. Lori Yamato argues that the “mermaid as a being complete in herself is not an option” for either Andersen or Disney (298), yet this film finds a way to present a happy ending for the little mermaid in which she is allowed to decide that she is enough on her own.

This version of “The Little Mermaid” introduces the concept of mortality to child viewers in a manner that is similar to Disney’s film, although there are some differences to note. Whereas Ariel chooses to enter into a bargain with the sea witch—however innocent of the dangers she may be—Elizabeth does not decide to become human or join the circus on her own. The dangers that befall her as a human are thus even less her fault,

solidifying the idea of “the little mermaid” figure as an innocent and naïve character that deserves the audience’s sympathy. For Elizabeth, the quest becomes about taking back her soul rather than attaining love or eternal life, so the stakes are higher. She has also already lost her life in a figurative sense because her actions are not her own, so she is fighting for the chance to escape death’s hold. In her journey to get her soul back, she turns into a mermaid before they reach the river and experiences the real, rather than figurative, possibility of death if she does not reach the ocean in time. As with the Disney film, the heroine is saved to allow her to live out the rest of her story, while the villainous Dr. Locke is killed. Not only does Elizabeth face peril, but viewers must also come to terms with mortality in the form of young Elle, who has lung problems throughout the film. Her sickness culminates in her having to make her own sacrifice in order to save her friend Elizabeth: after Cam leaves Elle’s medicine on the train and Elle has one of her coughing fits, the young girl valiantly refuses to turn back because they have to reach the ocean for Elizabeth. By presenting children with this image of another child whose own happy ending seems questionable and fragile for a moment, the film allows them to reflect on their own mortality. However, Elle receives her happily-ever-after for being on the side of the virtuous characters, reinforcing the idea that good can triumph over anything, especially evil and even, miraculously, death.

According to Mircea Eliade’s *The Sacred and the Profane*, “nature is never only natural; it is always fraught with a religious value,” and it is this inherent spirituality that allows water to take on symbolic significance as “the reservoir of all the possibilities of existence” that “precede[s] every form and support[s] every creation” (as qtd. in Cummings). In *The Little Mermaid*, water assumes this transcendent and divine role,

which can be seen in how Locke commodifies the element for its magical healing abilities. While his product does not actually cure all ailments as he claims, everyone is willing to believe in the water's healing properties and they thus travel from all over the world to purchase the water. Locke's potion may not be capable of curing all, but the ocean does in fact have the power of curing young Elle's lung problems at the movie's conclusion. Elizabeth instructs Elle to turn to the water whenever her lungs feel tight, and the framing narrative reinforces the idea that the ocean saved and continues to save Elle's life. With this healing ability, water takes on the role of the "sacred" natural element in the film, while land can be seen as an opposite "profane" entity. This dichotomy helps explain the ending of the film, in which Elizabeth parts ways with her found family from the circus and her potential lover Cam to return to her family.

This movie is the only one of "The Little Mermaid" variants that ends with the mermaid and her mate both willingly walking away from one another without exploring the possibility of a potential romance between the two of them. Andersen's little mermaid sees a similar split in her relationship with the prince, but she only leaves him because he has chosen another woman to be his bride. Meanwhile, Elizabeth voluntarily chooses her mermaid identity over her experiences as a human, which is significant because it means that she chooses the sacred water over the profane land. Although it presents a twist on the traditional happy-ever-after, where the endgame for every man and woman is blissful marriage, the film suggests that audiences should feel as satisfied with this ending for Elizabeth. The characters wave goodbye to one another, perhaps a little nostalgic but overall content with their decisions, so the film ultimately poses an equally valid alternative to the more typical fairy-tale ending.

In *The Little Mermaid*, it is Elizabeth's soul rather than her voice that has been stolen away from her by Locke. In this way, Elizabeth loses a greater portion of her agency since she does not choose to become human; on the other hand, Elizabeth shows more agency in the long run because she risks everything not for the love of a prince she met only once, but because she wants her freedom back. While Elizabeth does not lose the ability to speak, her voice is silenced and her actions are controlled because her soul is in another's possession; she is on a leash even if she is not caged since she can neither escape her enslavement as a circus prisoner nor safely tell Cam the truth about who she is. With these higher stakes at risk, however, she has more to gain at her story's conclusion. There are some missteps in terms of female empowerment of the mermaid since Elizabeth relies heavily on other characters to rescue her from her troubles. Cam retrieves her soul from Locke's possession and breaks her and his niece Elle out of their prison cells; the fortuneteller and Ulysses stay back to hold off Locke and his accomplice; and young Elle's belief in fantastical creatures and events ultimately saves Elizabeth by giving the fortuneteller enough magic to defeat Locke. It is also disappointing that the film is told from the man's perspective since it takes away some of Elizabeth's agency. The audience sees the story unfold from Cam's point of view, gaining a greater understanding of his beliefs and motives in the process but losing out on any insight into the mermaid's state of mind. In the end, however, Elizabeth chooses to return to the sea and to her family instead of pursuing the heterosexual romance that typically acts as a happily-ever-after in most other fairy tale renditions. As Elizabeth swims off into the ocean, Elle waves enthusiastically, just happy to have discovered that mermaids do exist,

and Cam smiles sadly, suggesting that he regrets their departure from each other but acknowledges that the memories of their adventure can be enough.

Considering the depiction of silence in this film, there seems to be a balance of strengths and weaknesses. On one hand, the story is told from the male character's perspective, which silences Elizabeth since viewers are robbed of her feelings and thoughts about the events taking place. While the little mermaids prior to this film chose to bargain with the sea witch and were thus silenced of their own free will, Elizabeth does not have this same agency in the loss of her voice. This difference highlights how Elizabeth is tricked, and therefore outsmarted, by Locke, which emphasizes her naiveté and her powerlessness to defend herself. On the other hand, the film does not rely on the typical happily-ever-after that requires a heterosexual marriage to make the female character feel complete. Instead, Elizabeth gives a silent goodbye to Cam and Elle and swims off into the ocean on her own. Additionally, the film suggests that there is a sharing of identity between Elizabeth and Elle in which Elle becomes the new little mermaid figure. This transfer of power immortalizes the little mermaid, giving her the ability to live on in her own right rather than having to rely on a man as did Andersen's little mermaid.

Christo's *To Kill a Kingdom*

Alexandra Christo's young adult novel *To Kill a Kingdom* creates a world with far more complex sea creatures than any discussed previously. Other than the sea witch and her sidekicks in the Andersen and Disney versions and the various fish and small animals that live in the ocean, the other variants only include mermaids as exotic creatures. In this novel, however, there are sirens, mermaids, and mermen. Mermaids steal a human's heart

“because they think that if they eat enough of them, they might become human themselves” (Christo 2), demonstrating that mermaids in this novel are just as fascinated by humans as Disney’s Ariel, but in a much darker way. Mermen are even more brutal than mermaids and sirens because they are even less human: “They’re crafted more from the ocean than any of us, made from the most deadly mixes of fish, with tails of sharks and sea monsters. They have no desire to interact with land, even for the purpose of war” (174). Somewhere between mermaids’ interest in humans and mermen’s rejection of them lie the sirens. They are a beautiful but deadly balance of human and fish, and they despise humans but will interact with them to take their hearts for power because “if there’s one thing my kind craves more than the ocean, it’s power” (1). Although she is not actually a mermaid, protagonist Lira the siren functions as the little mermaid character in this novel.

To Kill a Kingdom presents Lira and her love interest Elian with a compromise to the issues of human versus mermaid and love versus family that does not weaken the novel’s overall feminist message. The characters are not in love at the beginning of the novel because of their own need to work through personal flaws rather than because of outside forces. The protagonists meet when Lira accidentally saves Elian’s life from a savage mermaid attack, similar to how Ariel rescues Prince Eric from a shipwreck. However, this YA fantasy novel presents a much darker story than even Andersen’s fairy tale. A member of the group of sirens who rule the ocean and kill humans who trespass into their territory, Lira only saves Elian’s life because she wants his heart for her own collection. As such, Lira and Elian remain disunited when they first meet because they are enemies, even if Elian is unaware of Lira’s true identity at the time. Far from a three-

day rushed affair as in the Disney film, Elian and Lira then slowly fall in love with one another as Lira opens up to the idea that sirens have been wrong about humans all along and as Elian learns to trust Lira. By the end of the novel, both Elian and Lira have undergone character developments that have made them ready to accept love from one another, yet they also both recognize in their maturity that they cannot turn their backs on those who need them. In a compromise in which both benefit and neither sacrifice, Lira rules over the ocean as Sea Queen and Elian continues to sail the ocean as a pirate, but he visits Lira regularly and Lira, now willingly, transforms into a human to spend the day with him. Christo thus presents a third alternative to the fairy tale, but there is no compromise to the message since Lira does not have to give up anything to be with Elian. She keeps her family and her identity as a mermaid, and she even earns the status of royal on her own without having to rely on Elian.

As a dark fantasy novel reimagining a classic fairy tale and written for an older, young adult audience, *To Kill a Kingdom* has more room to explore complex themes like death and carnage. The novel takes place in a world in which creatures of the ocean and land are at war with one another, so humans and sirens harbor a mutual hatred of each other, each regarding themselves as superior to the other. Because of their negative relations, sirens believe they have a right to kill anyone who dares to enter their terrain, and pirate-prince Elian has taken up the position as siren-killer to try to protect his fellow humans. As such, the presence of death is inescapable in the novel, and mortality is even more an issue for sirens than for humans because “[w]hen a siren dies, she turns back into the ocean” as sea foam rather than ascending to heaven (Christo 12). The mortality of both Elian and Lira is called into question throughout the novel, however. Lira plots in

secret to kill Elian and take his heart, and Elian's ultimate goal is to end the reign of the Prince's Bane. Despite these differences from the other variants, *To Kill a Kingdom* complies with Butler's argument that the "predominant attitude toward death [in children's literature] is simple acceptance" (120) since good prevails while the wicked experience "irreversible retribution" (107). At the novel's conclusion, Lira kills her mother so that she can rule the ocean with a more gentle and honorable hand than the Sea Queens before her. The world in this novel is far crueler than any discussed so far, from "Cinderella" or "The Little Mermaid," including Marissa Meyer's *Cinder*. However, with this brutality comes a greater opportunity for growth, as evidenced by the depictions of humanity and morality in the novel.

Although not strictly dealing with spirituality, *To Kill a Kingdom* invites discussions of morality and ethics, which relates to the purity of characters' souls in a more abstract way. Jason Marc Harris argues, "the beautiful dangers of water [act] as a life-giving and death-dealing element, like the mermaid who is capable of both mesmerizing beauty and murderous malice" (23). This quote perfectly captures the essence of a siren, especially the Prince's Bane Lira. Unlike mermaids who are "[f]ish and human both, with the beauty of neither" (Christo 1), sirens are widely known to be beautiful, and with the royal bloodline of Keto "comes its own beauty. A magnificence forged in salt water and regality" (2). Added to this superior beauty, Lira steals only the hearts of princes for her collection as a power move. However, she was not always so ruthless. Her mother forced her to kill her aunt when she was younger to get rid of any lingering human-like emotions of love and regret, so Lira eventually hardens into what her mother requires of her. When she meets Elian, a prince who would rather be a pirate

sailing the sea with his crewmates, she learns that the human qualities that she was taught were weaknesses are in fact strengths. Elian's refusal to enjoy killing the sirens who so joyously kill humans—"Soldiers don't enjoy war" (113)—gives him the strength to forgive Lira and form a peace treaty with his prior enemy; the loyalty between Elian and his crew saves lives and shows Lira what a family can look like; and Elian's honorable way of leading his followers presents an alternative model for Lira to follow when ruling over the sirens. In fact, her decision to bring humanity back to her realm bridges the sacred and the profane. Lira acts as the link that brings sirens and the water together with humans and the land. At the end of the novel, she has undergone a complete shift in character, taking her mother's insult of humanity infecting her "like a plague" as a compliment (300). Lira even says, "in another life, if I ever had a choice about who to be, maybe I would have been like [Elian]" (300). Lira possesses morality within herself all along, and though the Sea Queen attempts to claw it out of her, it is merely waiting to be rediscovered with a little help from someone like Elian.

Armed with her newfound humanity, Lira sets out to rule her fellow sea creatures with honor that earns respect rather than cruelty that produces fear. She unites the sea with the land, allowing humans to once again sail across the ocean without the threat of siren attacks. While traveling to the Diavolos Sea to spend time with Lira, Elian thinks, "[The sirens] swim with no effort at all, and I almost want to be insulted that the *Saad*'s pace is so easily matched. Instead I take it as a compliment. That the *Saad* can keep step with them is proof of her glory" (338). A change in perspective was necessary for the alliance between humans and sea creatures to work; just as Lira works hard to cleanse herself of her mother's teachings, it is possible for the two old enemies to forgive each

other and start again. While Lira “has forged a new world, as much on land as in sea” with the peace treaties and open-door policies (338), she cannot promise eternal life for the sirens who are destined to turn to sea foam when they die. During the time that they do have, however, she can offer them a better life than what the previous Sea Queen provided. The promise of happier times ahead pushes them to accept her as their new leader. Indeed, there are “[m]urmurs spilling into clear, angry shouts” at first because the sirens fear the Sea Queen’s wrath if they support Lira, but once Lira makes it clear that her reign will be different—“I could strike each of you who holds me with all the power of Keto [...] And yet I’m reasoning with you instead. Asking for your allegiance when I have every right to just take it” (326)—“a new kind of understanding descend[s] on each of their faces” (326) and they agree to help her defeat the Sea Queen. More so than any of the other variants, *To Kill a Kingdom* becomes a story about self-discovery, and the love between Lira and Elian happens accidentally along the way rather than being the means to the end or even the end itself.

Lira may not lose her voice or her soul as the little mermaids do before her, but she is still forced to sacrifice much along the way. While trying to kill the pirate-prince for herself, Lira murders a mermaid, one of her fellow sea-creatures, and her punishment is to be turned into a lowly human to kill Prince Elian as an equal. Just as Elizabeth is enslaved under Locke’s control, Lira is transformed into a human against her will and thus seeks freedom rather than love or eternal life. To be reduced to a human is already sacrifice enough because sirens see vulnerability and emotion as the greatest weakness, but the Sea Queen also takes the singing voice that Lira usually uses to incapacitate princes before the kill. Although it is not the same as losing her voice altogether or losing

her soul, a siren's song gives them power over humans, so Lira still feels the loss strongly.

Additionally, Lira is forced to give up another part of herself once she is rescued from drowning in the middle of the ocean by Elian and his crew: she must trade her native tongue, Psariin, for the universal language, Midasan. No human even knows how to speak the siren language, not because it is so revered but because it is considered so immoral and offensive: one guest at a Midasan ball apologizes profusely for her husband even suggesting that Elian would “sully [his] tongue with such a language” (34). The contempt toward enemy languages goes both ways, as seen when Lira “pounces on the Midasan, like the words aren't enough to convey what she's feeling” (162). Psariin is all daggers where Midasan is soft and melodic, and Lira curses how the enemy language limits her ability to convey the fierce hatred she holds toward the Sea Queen. Having to speak a language that is not her own silences Lira in ways that her mother does not intend. While her voice has not been literally stripped away as with the other mermaid characters, she does lose the ability to communicate in her native tongue, and she even loses the ability to express strong emotions because of the confines of the Midasan language.

In her discussion of William Shakespeare's *King Lear*, the Brothers Grimm's “The Twelve Brothers,” and Hans Christian Andersen's “The Little Mermaid,” Marina Warner concludes that daughters “prove their virtue by their silence” because “[s]ilence is not entirely absence, but another kind of presence” (391). Lira's actions reinforce the idea that silence is a different kind of presence, but her silence breeds the presence of prevarication rather than veracity. Where Warner sees an obedience emerge from

daughters remaining meek and quiet in front of their fathers, I would argue that Lira's deliberate omission of the truth about her identity as a siren is the same as lying to Elian. Lira herself acknowledges her deceit when she narrates, "I had enough practice in [lying] to not think of it as something that needed to be done, but something that always was" (Christo 195). Lira is aware that lying does not have to be a conscious decision to tell a false statement; it could be simply withholding the truth for one's own benefit, as she does with Elian. Furthermore, after spending time in the presence of humans and re-learning the compassion and humility that is torn from her by her mother, Lira regrets her actions, suggesting that she has seen the error of her ways and wishes she could make amends. She says, "It's simple for me to consider making a deal with someone who's shown me nothing but loyalty [...] But how can I expect Elian to do the same when he doesn't even know who I am?" (269). Here, Lira again references her mistake of betraying Elian by remaining silent about her true identity. She also expresses the very human emotion of empathy when she recognizes that it will be much harder for Elian to accept any peace between sirens and humans because he would have to extend forgiveness to her first, as opposed to Lira having been exposed to Elian's loyalty the whole time they have known each other.

By the novel's conclusion, Lira has undergone an extensive shift in character, or, more accurately, she has reverted back to who she would have been if her mother had not forced her to become an unfeeling siren worthy of the title of Sea Queen. She defeats her mother and earns the loyalty of the sea, out of respect rather than fear, because she learns how to be a proper leader from watching the interactions between Elian and his crewmembers. The ending of the novel offers a progressive conclusion to the mermaid's

story: she chooses to become the next Sea Queen, which makes her royalty and a leader in her own right, without having to rely on Elian's status as a prince to bring her up to his level. Additionally, her decision to rule over the creatures of the sea demonstrates a newfound maturity because it suggests that she considers the wellbeing of her family and friends from the past, rather than fleeing from the people who need her most to live out a fantasy with her beloved prince. Lira manages to secure the best of both worlds for herself because she leads her subjects with all the good qualities that she learned from humanity, and she spends time with Elian when he sails his ship to the Diavolos Sea.

As the variant with the most empowering message for female readers, *To Kill a Kingdom* addresses silence in an innovative way: compromise allows Lira to receive the best of both worlds and to not sacrifice herself in the process. For example, Lira accepts her duty to become Sea Queen, but she leads according to her own beliefs since she incorporates humanity into the siren code. Compromise also allows Lira to keep her family of the past—the sirens—and the new family she found as a human—the shipmates aboard the *Saad*—since she rules the ocean as a siren Sea Queen and spends time with Elian and his crew as a human. As such, she does not have to sacrifice her identity as either siren or human in order to live out her happy ending. Furthermore, the novel unfolds from the perspectives of both Lira and Elian, which allows readers to gain insights into both characters since neither is silenced. In addition to the larger themes about love, death, and religion, this complex novel also delivers a satisfying feminist interpretation of the little mermaid's story.

Conclusion

Not only are the themes in “The Little Mermaid” variants more complex than those found in the “Cinderella” fairy tale, but the overall assessment of “The Little Mermaid” variants is also more complicated. While they all address unrequited love, death, religious themes, and silence, there are varying levels of success in terms of the feminist message. Andersen delivers a complex original fairy tale that certainly rivals any variant of “Cinderella,” but when analyzed on its own merit, it still falls short of presenting an acceptable female role model for young readers. Because of the Disney formula, their interpretation of “The Little Mermaid” emphasizes an always-expected requited love, a portrayal of death as only for the evil characters, and a young girl who is rewarded for her silence. *The Little Mermaid* (2018) presents an innovative ending in which the little mermaid character and her lover part ways willingly in the end, although there are some shortcomings in other areas. Finally, *To Kill a Kingdom* is the most progressive variant of either tale since there is a real growth in character for Lira and Elian, and neither has to compromise who they are in order to live their happily-ever-after.

Conclusion

In addition to the commonalities found between the four variants of each fairy tale as discussed in chapters one and two and between the original fairy tale versions of “Cinderella” and “The Little Mermaid” as discussed in the introduction, there are also other significant parallels and disparities worth considering. The two Disney films share an overwhelming simplification of the original tales, especially in regard to the dark endings from Andersen’s and the Grimm Brothers’ versions. In an effort to make the stories fit into their sanitized, child-friendly films, both Disney’s *Cinderella* and *The Little Mermaid* ignore the fate of those left behind in order to promote the happily-ever-after that awaits the titular characters. Where the Brothers Grimm’s “Cinderella” pushes Cinderella’s story to the side to focus on the harsh punishment that befalls the evil stepsisters, the Disney film does the reverse and turns a blind eye to the stepfamily’s fate. There is no acknowledgement of either forgiveness or justice; instead, the final scene leaves viewers with an image of the perfect ending for proper young women—marriage—and Cinderella seems to forget about the years in which she was abused easily and entirely.

Meanwhile, Disney’s *The Little Mermaid* takes away the spiritual significance behind the mermaid’s decision to become a human and exchanges unrequited love for the message that no woman is complete without a husband. The ending, too, loses all traces of tragedy since the villainous character is defeated and the heroes live to see another day. Ariel does not have to sacrifice her life to save the prince because Prince Eric is perfectly capable of killing Ursula and saving both himself and Ariel. Besides these similarities in how Disney childproofs the original stories, this analysis also uncovers one

significant difference between Disney's versions of *Cinderella* and *The Little Mermaid*. The former lacks any discussion of morality or ethics since Cinderella is not allowed to forgive her stepfamily for mistreating her. On the other hand, even the Disney version of "The Little Mermaid" engages with questions of integrity since the sea witch dies for feeling no remorse. In contrast, Andersen's sea witch lives because she does not deceive the little mermaid about the dangers of their bargain.

The two live-action films both take place at a time in history when women were not on completely equal footing with men. *Ever After* is supposedly set in sixteenth-century France, although it is largely influenced by the 1990s, the decade during which it was produced; *The Little Mermaid* seems to make Mississippi during the Jim Crow era its home, but again, there is little historical accuracy present since there is no mention of discrimination or segregation even though there is a black character in the film. Nevertheless, it is interesting to note the gender inequality that was prevalent during both time periods in a feminist analysis of these texts. Danielle from *Ever After* makes a valiant effort to fight against her oppressive society by philosophizing about social injustice, while *The Little Mermaid*'s Elizabeth is not so invested in female empowerment. It is thus surprising that *The Little Mermaid* pulls off a more successful feminist message in the end. One detail from the films that supports this analysis is the fact that Danielle must earn the right to be Henry's equal. To demonstrate that she deserves a higher social status and thus the prince's love, she must possess intellectual and physical strengths above those of a typical servant. However, there are no such expectations for Elizabeth to earn the right to be with Cam. As a "little" mermaid figure, Elizabeth may carry with her fewer expectations because the audience associates her with

childlike innocence. Furthermore, not only is Elizabeth worthy of Cam's love without having to work for it, but she also ultimately decides that she is complete on her own since she parts ways with Cam at the film's conclusion.

An attribute that is unique to the young adult novel versions of these fairy tales is their emphasis on self-discovery. Cinder begins the novel as someone who has internalized the hatred and stigmatization surrounding cyborgs because they are considered less than human, and Lira too could be considered sub-human, or at least inhumane, because of her action of killing princes for power. Both Cinder and Lira reach this point of self-deprecation and self-destruction because of the abuse they shouldered from the family members in their lives. Cinder's stepfamily perpetuates the idea that cyborgs are property by controlling Cinder's actions and influencing her thoughts about herself, and Lira's mother sharpens Lira into a cold and malicious siren by forcing her to kill her aunt. In order to forget the voices of the authoritative figures in their lives, Cinder and Lira must embark on a journey of self-discovery to re-learn that they are more than their imposed identities. By the end of her story, Cinder realizes that being cyborg and Lunar, two enemies in the eyes of Earthens, can be viewed as strengths because they give her power that she would not have as a simple human. Meanwhile, Lira watches Elian with his crew and experiences firsthand the loyalty that comes from ruling with honor, rather than the fear that comes from ruling as her mother does. Through their journey to learn more about themselves, both characters experience a transition in which they come to appreciate themselves for who they are rather than hating themselves for not living up to what others expect of them. This ability to trace the maturation of the adolescent characters, which is unique to the YA novel format, allows these iterations of

“Cinderella” and “The Little Mermaid” to flourish as the most feminist tales under consideration in this thesis.

Where Meyer’s *Cinder* fails and Christo’s *To Kill a Kingdom* succeeds is due to the fact that the former is part of a series and the latter is a stand-alone novel complete with an epilogue. At the end of Meyer’s young adult novel, Cinder reverts back to needing help from her (male) fairy-godmother figure, Dr. Erland, who must rescue her from imprisonment and motivate her to fight for her life. However, by the end of the series, Cinder does mature into a suitable role model for young women since she recognizes that there is strength in knowing when to lead and when to allow her weaknesses to be bolstered by someone else’s strengths. Meanwhile, Christo’s novel is this same story of transformation, but compacted to fit in a single book. In the epilogue, Lira has already become a powerful Sea Queen and a compassionate friend. She rescues herself, the sea creatures, and the humans by killing her evil mother, and she sacrifices neither her mermaid nor her human identities in her happy ending. *Cinder* thus leaves young readers with an only partially-developed protagonist who has yet to fully realize her potential, while *To Kill a Kingdom* completes its story arc and thus presents a more feminist character and message.

While this thesis focuses on just two young adult novels that reimagine fairy tales, there are a plethora of supernatural, romance, and dystopia young adult novels that rely on the fairy tale as the frame of their stories. From “Beauty and the Beast” to “Little Red Riding Hood” to “Snow White and the Seven Dwarves,” fairy tales that were first introduced centuries ago continue to be recycled and revamped in young adult literature. Looking at YA booklists, it is clear that these retellings are a popular trend, but it is less

obvious why authors would choose fairy tales as the frame of their stories. I propose three possible reasons for the presence of fairy tales in young adult literature: fairy tales have already stood the test of time and are thus perceived as an easier sell; young adult fantasy, science fiction, and dystopia novels have more room to reimagine the fairy tales in surprising and groundbreaking ways; and the fairy tales allow YA authors to capitalize on the appeal of repackaged nostalgia.³

In analyzing the depiction of agency, both of one's actions and of one's voice, this thesis highlights one characteristic that appears often in children's literature: the absent authority figure. Many popular stories and fairy tales rely on the archetypal character of the orphan with no parents, "so that the children can be free to make decisions and get credit for their own actions" (Donelson and Nilsen 103). In accordance with this theory that the absence of authority figures yields the opportunity for growth, Cinderella is the most silenced when she has both her father and the spirit of her mother to guide her. Indeed, the Brothers Grimm's variant overwhelms Cinderella with assertive figures, leaving her with no room to voice her own opinions. Meanwhile, the other "Cinderella" variants have no excuse for their disempowered protagonists. Cinderella has ample opportunities for maturation with her lack of parental figures, yet she has limited or no agency throughout the other iterations of the fairy tale. In "The Little Mermaid" variants, the titular character has a mother or father but never both, allowing her to sneak off on

³ Even the other two novelized versions of "Cinderella" and "The Little Mermaid" that I read, Gail Carson Levine's *Ella Enchanted* (1997) and Debbie Viguié's *Midnight Peals* (2003), rely on these three marketing techniques. These retellings did not make it into my thesis because they were more suitable for a middle-grade audience rather than the young adult audience I was seeking for my fourth genre. Additionally, these books were not as contemporary as the novels that I selected, which was an important piece of criteria for me because I wanted each format—the original fairy tales, the Disney films, the live-action films, and the YA novels—to come from a different time period so I could trace the progression of these variants over time.

her own to make a bargain with the sea witch. The little mermaid's distance from authority figures allows her to make her own decisions and to learn from her mistakes, contributing to the greater complexity of this fairy tale over "Cinderella."

Based on the overall success of the Lunar Chronicles and *To Kill a Kingdom*, it would be easy to claim that young adult novels from the twenty-first century are the first time that these fairy tales have achieved a feminist agenda. However, it is a mistake to equate contemporary retellings with being progressive because this assumption is merely a generalization from my small analysis rather than a sound conclusion from a comprehensive study. Even the recent live-action *The Little Mermaid* produced in 2018 disproves this theory since the film failed to present a completely positive role model for young viewers. Texts from the twenty-first century may have a better chance of providing a progressive message because of the various waves of feminism that have advocated for gender equality, but the past has seen some stories that were ahead of their time just as the present has seen conservative stories that ignored women's rights. Regardless of the time period during which the text was produced, readers can use silence and agency as benchmarks to measure how feminist a fairy tale variant is. These two standards are important to analyze because they allow readers to determine if the female protagonists were strong enough to voice their opinions and to maintain control over their thoughts and actions. Only when princesses can achieve such individuality and independence will they be acceptable role models for the young girls who are our future.

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