

# Ellen Pandolfo:

## Feminist Critique of Walt Disney's Cinderella

The centuries old folklore that has manifested into the contemporary tale of Cinderella is a fascinating glimpse at the historicization of women. The first full written telling of the Cinderella story appeared in Giambattista Basile's *Il Pentamerone*, published posthumously during the years 1634-1636. This literary work was an encapsulation of age-old Italian folklore, composed in Neapolitan dialect, and it was inaccessible to virtually anyone unfamiliar with that explicit vernacular. Nonetheless, neighboring communities spread the book around, and it eventually made its way, both physically and in rough translation, to the rest of Europe. As it were, the comprising stories shifted to fit respective European cultural traditions and ideals. Interestingly enough, the most popular surviving story was indeed that of Cinderella.[1]

Over the course of the subsequent centuries, the tale continued to morph stylistically and in alignment with various cultural mores. However, the fundamental premise of "young girl marries king" remained at the story's center. But beyond that, the details were far from static. That is, the story remained a relatively open-for interpretation piece of folkloric distraction until Walt Disney, a well-known political conservative and person in favor of "traditional American values," co-opted Cinderella in the mid-twentieth century. Since then, the story has completely lost its linear accountability and instead has become cemented in the American consciousness as a mythical tale of absolute truth and righteousness, particularly one in line with oppressive gender mandates and their many patriarchal and racial/ethnic implications, heterosexism, and an ever-divisive capitalist economy.

Inescapable from notice is the doe-eyed, diminutive beauty that is Walt Disney's Cinderella. With flowing strawberry-blond locks, big, blue eyes, button nose, and tiny body, Disney's child-like woman sets a standard for perfection that virtually no little girl can ever achieve. Simone de Beauvoir speaks at length about women in terms of class, supporting Bebel's theory by comparing women to the proletariat. While this is a vague description, it works well to illuminate the perpetual stratification evoked through the portrayal of primacy in Cinderella. Cinderella is the ideal, and everyone else is but the "other." In de Beauvoir's argument, she validates the parallel between women and the proletariat by acknowledging that, "[N]either ever formed a minority or a separate collective unit of mankind. And instead of a singular historical event it is in both cases a historical development that explains their status as a class and accounts for the membership of particular individuals in that class." [2] But in the case of the American film industry's manifestation of Cinderella in 1950, just at the time of widespread cultural backlash against any and all "women's movements" in the United States, there indeed was a specific historical moment of stratification and an implementation of strictly appropriate gender role. Hence, women who have been subjected to the second half of the twentieth century's characterizations of idyllic "womanhood," by way of Disney's Cinderella and actively continued through a powerful common knowledge of the same subject, are in a class of their own. This class continues to struggle, both consciously and not, with that omnipotent "One" - Cinderella.

According to the Walt Disney archives, Cinderella is indeed a "heroine," and she is idealized even today through the same rubric of discourse that propelled her to primacy in the 1950s:

Everyone orders Cinderella around: her cruel stepmother, her awful stepsisters -- even the big clock in the church tower tells her when to start another day of drudgery. But no matter how her family abuses and humiliates her, they can't stop her from dreaming. For dreams are the wishes of Cinderella's heart, and, despite her sadness and hardships, she has faith that someday her wishes of happiness will come true. When the invitation to the royal ball arrives, Cinderella is sure her time has come -- until the evil sisters, with the sly encouragement of Lady Tremaine, tear not only her gown to shreds, but her hopes and dreams as well. "There's nothing left to believe in," she cries, heartbroken and alone. However, though her own words are forgotten for the moment, they still hold the magic that will fulfill her hopes. "No matter how your heart is grieving, if you keep on believing, the dreams that you wish will come true ..." [3]

Clearly, Cinderella's "hopes and dreams" lie only in acceptance by the prince and in the life that will surely accompany marriage to him. Implicit in this tale is the sublime goodness of heterosexuality and domesticity, a mythical concoction that U.S. feminists have contended with since Cinderella's mainstream induction in 1950.

Perhaps the most resounding and complete critique, however indirect, of Cinderella and the gender-based lifestyle her story championed was issued by Betty Friedan in her work *The Feminine Mystique*, published in 1963. During the fifties, postwar prosperity had afforded middle-class white women a life of ease previously unimagined by their mother and grandmothers. Simultaneously, these women were assailed by a "public discourse that contended they could find true happiness only in domesticity," a discourse enthusiastically re-introduced and authenticated via mass media by Walt Disney in 1950.[4] Any discomfort with the boundaries of women's assigned domestic vocations of the 1950s was experienced internally and evaluated externally as a personal failing. In her landmark piece, Friedan revealed a "noticeable shift against women's autonomy after World War II." Women who had come to know some semblance of independence and "cultural validation," for their contributions to the war effort faced seemingly insurmountable pressures post-war to make home- and baby-making their primary career, and they would go to extreme lengths to satisfy those gender mandates.[5]

Cinderella was but a fairy-tale, and inherent in that classification should be a sound rejection of any transference to the "real" world. Nonetheless, her character was implemented as the cultural norm, and deviation from that quest to be like her was socially reprimanded severely. As a result, Betty Friedan called for nothing short of a "drastic reshaping of the cultural image of femininity that will permit women to reach maturity, identity, and completeness of self." Unarguably, Cinderella would undergo total transformation according to post-war feminist theory, if not eliminated as a subject entirely.

Echoing the sentiment of Friedan, like-minded feminists of the 1960s rejected all that Cinderella represented. One of the more illustrative "movements" was that of "No More Miss America!" Miss America embodies many of the idealized qualities found in Cinderella, and the national protest of the Miss America pageant in 1968 in Atlantic City is emblematic of the general struggle against Cinderella mythology. The organizers of the pageant resistance movement itemized ten points of struggle, all of which work to indict Disney's Cinderella:

1. *The Degrading Mindless-Boob-Girlie Symbol*
2. *Racism With Roses* - an utter an historical lack of non-white representation
3. *Miss America as Military Death Mascot* - she personifies the unstained patriotic American womanhood our boys are fighting for
4. *The Consumer Can-Game* - she is a walking commercial for the Pageant's sponsors; in Cinderella's case, Disney was nominated for several Oscars in 1950 and grossed over \$4 million in sales, not to mention the perpetual royalty income from mass-merchandising of Cinderella up to today[6]
5. *Competition Rigged and Unrigged* - encouragement of an American oppressive myth: win or you're worthless
6. *The Woman as Pop Culture Obsolescent Theme* - women must be young, juicy, malleable
7. *The Unbeatable Madonna-Whore Combination* - Miss America (Cinderella) and Playboy's centerfold are sisters over the skin. To win approval, we must be both sexy and wholesome, delicate but able to cope, demure yet titillatingly bitchy. Deviation of any sort brings disaster: "You won't get a man!"
8. *The Irrelevant Crown on the Thrown of Mediocrity* - she represents what women are supposed to be: unoffensive, bland, apolitical
9. *Miss America (Cinderella) as Dream Equivalent to ---- ?* In supposed democratic society... men are judged by their actions, women by their appearances
10. *Miss America as Big Sister Watching You* - The pageant (Cinderella) exercises through Thought Control, attempts to sear the image onto our minds, to further make women oppressed and men oppressors; to enslave us all the more in high-heeled (glass-slipped) low-status roles; to inculcate false values in

young girls; to use women as beasts of buying; to seduce us to prostitute ourselves before our own oppression[7]

Doubtless, this critique of Miss America is easily transferable to Disney's Cinderella, as Miss America is indeed a manifestation of the primary cultural values set forth by the animated character.

Certainly, implicit in the supremacy of Cinderella is the relegation of all not just like her. However, this assault on self is stronger and more culturally potent among women of color, and indeed for those who assume or have been assigned queer identities. For women of color, this is especially evidenced by the way second-wave feminisms emerged in the 1960s and 1970s in reaction to the repressive 1950s ushered in by Cinderella. While Friedan and other noted white middle-class feminists led the revolt against a Cinderella-consciousness, Black and Chicana struggles, among those of other women of color and of lower-classes, were marginalized. As Benita Roth notes in her work *Separate Roads to Feminism: Black, Chicana, and White Feminist Movements in America's Second Wave*, "Feminists in each racial/ethnic group were affected by their race and class status, by their own experiences within their movements of origin, and by the structure of political choices for activism available at the time." Furthermore, "[t]he emergence of a postwar middle class in the Black and Chicano communities was an incomplete process that did not put feminists of color on an equal footing with white middle-class feminists..."[8]

The emergence of Cinderella and the perfected "feminine mystique" that accompanied her invasion of women's lives throughout the United States in the 1950s worked to compound the pre-existing stratifications among American women. Women of color and those of lower classes fought not only to debunk the "feminine mystique," but to overcome powerful forces of racial inferiority and economic oppression. No matter what, a Black or Chicana prince would never come swooping in to "save" a respective Black or Chicana woman from her life of drudgery - this was a cultural impossibility; in fact, the language simply did not exist to even provide for this scenario. Despite the inherent cultural consequences Cinderella made for white middle-class women, a life of economic discomfort and pervasive social conflict was never a part of it for them. On the other hand, women of color were doubly affected by Cinderella's mythical perfection in that racial degradation and economic subjugation were intrinsic to her story, a conscious reflection of the cultural atmosphere of the American Cinderella's film debut. *Arina*

The continued preeminence of Cinderella and her virtuous character and lifestyle have also labored to assert heterosexuality and patriarchy as the "good" and all so-called queer identities as "bad." Queer studies scholars of the last decade have attempted to reorganize the critique of heterosexism, often choosing to reject traditional binary classifications and instead opting for a broader, more informed analysis of gender identity and construction, in general. Accordingly, "the homosexual is not a stable or autonomous category but a supplement that works to stabilize heterosexuality by functioning as its binary opposite. As such, homosexuality enables heterosexuality to go unmarked, to function as a social norm from which homosexuality deviates." [9] In the story of Cinderella, all of the women characters seek salvation, or assist others to find it, through marriage to a man. This dominant theme leaves no room for an alternative, and while patriarchy and women's submission is overt, the extraction of queer possibilities is perhaps under the surface but nonetheless as powerful in the construction of social knowledge. In effect, this set of norms conveyed through Disney's Cinderella cultivates the dominance of heterosexuality by preempting homosexuality from being a form of sexuality that can be "taken for granted" or "go unmarked" or "seen right in the way heterosexuality can." [10]

Another implicit indictment of the "traditional," non-nuclear family is the horrific depiction of Cinderella's step-family. The wicked stepmother, Lady Tremaine, is vilified and characterized as a dark, manipulative, and evil woman. She encourages Cinderella's step-sisters - painted ugly, stupid, and unappealing to the prince - to interfere with Cinderella's efforts to get to the ball. They clumsily comply, and the dastardly step-family is permanently illuminated in a negative, antagonistic light by Disney. In contrast, the person who champions Cinderella and ultimately leads her to "victory" is the Fairy Godmother. This is a character who intrinsically invokes the moralism of contemporary Christianity as the "good." Further, by abiding the Godmother's wishes and trusting in her powers, Cinderella is rewarded with "all her dreams come true." These themes clearly place the two-parent, undivorced, heterosexual, Christian nuclear family at the top of the American cultural hierarchy. Anything "other" is just plain wrong and results in familial catastrophe.

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Finally, and perhaps the most damaging Cinderella legacy of all, is the concept of "rags-to-riches" success through hard-work, determination, and patience. This ideal reinforces industrialized capitalism, which has been assailed by many "third-wave" feminists as the root of patriarchal hegemony the continued domination of women worldwide. Interestingly enough, Cinderella is the stepdaughter of and under the financial guardianship of her wealthy - albeit wicked -- stepmother. Nonetheless, Cinderella is portrayed as poverty-stricken and down-trodden. Furthermore, it is only through her perseverance and intense-labor that she is ultimately able to overcome trial and tribulation. Ultimately, she not only wins the heart of the prince, but she garners the wealth of a royal family. This, indeed, is the heroic and happy ending to the tale, one that has molded American consciousness since its introduction in 1950. And inherent in this storyline are the superiority of capitalism and the accumulation of material wealth.

Leading contemporary feminist scholar Chandra Talpade Mohanty critiques the mechanisms of capitalism, or privatization, and argues that this system of economy only functions to colonize and recolonize women of poverty and of color. She writes, "Private sector decision making is private - citizens have no right to discuss and make policy. Thus, wealth determines citizenship... So those who lack economic capacities are noncitizens. This results in a profound recolonization of historically marginalized communities, usually poor women and people of color." [11] Given the commercial and cultural success of Walt Disney's Cinderella, the notion that self-sacrifice and hard-work result in unimaginable financial gain has certainly permeated every corner of American society. Thus, the socially constructed and impenetrable barriers to economic independence consistently remind those most unlike Cinderella that they are worthless. Whereas white, middle-class American women can more easily achieve economic independence through self-assertion, education, and "hard-work," women of color and of the lower classes are not afforded that same atmosphere of opportunity. Hence, capitalist idealism, while fruitful for some, is absolutely devastating for many as social welfare and solidarity are pecked apart by materialist ideology, championed through the likes of Disney's Cinderella. Further, the cultural assignment of inferiority to those unable to overcome entrenched opposition to their own economic independence has resulted in the relentless stratification of the rich from the poor, and continually the American middle class shrinks while the poor increase dramatically in number. The very falsehood of Cinderella's material lesson indicts her cultural relevance and damages any semblance of authenticity the character seeks to claim.

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Despite the relentless assault on Cinderella-like mores of perfection by feminist scholars of the past several decades, the myth persists. In the twenty-first century, revivals of the Cinderella story perpetuate the primacy of patriarchy, heterosexism, and capitalist values. Two recent Cinderella-inspired stories made into major motion pictures are *Ella Enchanted* and *The Prince and Me*, and they both reach the same "happy-endings": girl gets the prince, and only then can she realize true fulfillment. Both protagonists are modern enough: educated, ambitious, career-oriented, and seemingly independent women. (Importantly, they are still white and middle class). Nonetheless, the prospects of romance and material wealth throw them off balance and rearrange all of their life priorities. Soon enough, both women revert to modeling their 1950s predecessor: "submissive, invisible, women behind their men." [12] Doubtless, the American incarnation of the Cinderella story has had lasting effects on the shaping and maintenance of oppressive gender identity and roles in the United States since 1950. Nonetheless, continued analysis and critique of the common knowledge and cultural constructors is necessary to offset the antagonizing effects of mainstream media in the form of idyllic fairytales.