The Modern Cinderella in Chains: The Maiden in Servitude

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“Fairy tales have always been in a state of reincarnation” (Crowley); and thematic elements originating in fairy tales, such as portrayals of the female, and interfemale relationships, often reincarnate their way into film, either consciously or unconsciously. These familiar archetypes and motifs reveal important ingrained and conditioned ideologies about women as well as primitive the upwelling of fears and desires from the subconscious. Of the various types of female relations portrayed in fairy tales, the dichotomy of the representation of the older “Wicked Stepmother” in contrast with her young “enslaved” maiden has become an expected staple of the genre. In postfeminist films of the present day, this “Cinderella” theme of enslavement of young females by unjust, draconic, or tyrannical older females who take on a matriarchal role of authority is evident in the Japanese animated film Spirited Away (2001) and the American film The Devil Wears Prada (2006).

There are hundreds of Cinderellas in film. The overwhelming majority of which are modeled off the sanitized and child-friendly animated version of the folk tale created by Walt Disney in 1950. In the creation of his film Disney drew heavily from the tale variation transcribed by Frenchman Charles Perrault in 1697 in his slim anthology Histoires ou contes du temps passé, avec des moralités: Contes de ma mère l’Oye, or Stories or Tales from Times Past, with Morals: Tales of Mother Goose. Disney’s influence on the genre of fairy tale films has been so great that “it has been virtually impossible for any filmmaker born after 1945 not to have been exposed to a Disney fairy tale film as a result of the powerful marketing and distribution of all products by the Disney Corporation” (Greenhill xi). As such, many present day filmmakers often incorporate intertextual references to Disney’s fairy tales. This incorporation of elements from Disney’s films often originates from the animated works that were influential in the filmmaker’s own development either as an individual or as an auteur. Many films we may not recognize as “fairy tales” can contain thematic elements unnoticed at first glance due to Walt Disney’s all encompassing domination of the genre, such as Steven Spielberg’s A.I.: Artificial Intelligence which contains a significant parallel to Carlo Collodi’s Pinocchio (Greenhill). Through his ingenuity and marketing Walt Disney has “established a model of conformity that hundreds of other filmmakers have followed up until today” (Greenhill xi).

In Disney’s further sanitization of Perrault’s already heavily sanitized and didactical tale he preserved the role of virginal heroine for Cinderella and the role of villain for the “Wicked” stepmother. Indeed, it would hardly be “Cinderella” without the wickedness of the stepmother, as “[t]he plots of ‘Cinderella’ stories are driven by the anxious jealousy of biological mothers and stepmothers who subject the heroine to one ordeal of domestic drudgery after another” (Tatar 102). In both Spirited Away and The Devil Wears Prada the false-mother characters of Yubaba and Miranda Priestly (Meryl Streep) inflicts virtual enslavement while the young maiden protagonists must attempt to prove their goodness through industry in order to ultimately achieve independence from her Wicked Stepmother. In these modernized films the third-wave feminist movement’s promotion of the self-fulfilled and independent female have produced more industrious, proactive female characters, who, while seeking a path to independent womanhood, do not find fulfillment (as the elder Cinderella did) in matrimony and conjugal bliss.

In the animated film Spirited Away, Hayao Miyazaki, the auteur, has portrayed Chihiro (voiced by Rumi Hiragi) as a girl on the cusp of adolescence. As she transgresses into the spirit world her true mother is transformed into a pig and is then replaced by the maternal tyranny of Yubaba, the proprietress of the bathhouse and a literal “wicked witch”. Her employment with Yubaba consists of the domestic drudgery, such as cleaning floors, and generational conflict that typifies Cinderella plots. This replacement of the good mother with a bad “mother” is indicative of Freudian theories of childhood growth and attitudes towards Wicked Stepmothers and parental figures in traditional fairy tales. Karen E. Rowe (and Bruno Bettelheim) suggest, “As the child matures, she becomes increasingly conscious of conflicting needs for both infantile nurturing and independence...By splitting the maternal role” the child can safely act out aggressions toward this bad false-mother (Rowe 213). In Spirited Away, The Devil Wears Prada and Disney’s Cinderella this is expressed in their rebellion and expressions of distaste for the mother figure. Another Freudian aspect of the conflict and slavery of the Cinderella is the coveting of, and competition over, males in the semi-Oedipal conflict in Spirited Away over the young male dragon Haku who is apprenticed to Yubaba. This jealous guarding of males is also present in the traditional Cinderella tale in the desire for the presence and attention of the father, and can also be seen in The Devil Wears Prada in a scene where Andrea “Andy” Sachs (Anne Hathaway) accidentally invades the home of Miranda Priestly and disturbs Priestly and her husband in an intimate environment and must cope with a vindictive, retaliatory load of nearly impossible domestic chores foisted upon her by Miranda Priestly. In The Devil Wears Prada, an adaptation of a book by the same name by Lauren Weisberger, the maternal tyranny of Miranda Priestly, like the traditional “Cinderella” is also inflicted through menial tasks and chores upon Andrea. In Perrault’s own words, “She employed her in the meanest work of the house. She scoured the dishes, tables, etc., and cleaned
madam's chamber.”

In both of these films “[t]he stepmother...who invariably appear[s] odious, embod[i]es the major obstacles against [the] passage to womanhood” (Rowe 212). In Spirited Away Chihiro, a ten-year-old is at the cusp of adolescence while Andrea, a woman in her early twenties, in The Devil Wears Prada is seeking a path to maturity and independence through her career. Both Andrea and Chihiro’s progress to womanhood is impeded by the Wicked Stepmothers they encounter, these “stepmothers habitually devise stratagems to retard the heroine’s progress” (Rowe 212). The most prominent stratagem in these Cinderella tales are the domestic chores foisted upon the heroine. However, as in many of the original Cinderella tales, in both Spirited Away and The Devil Wears Prada the stealing of identity and the loss of name also features as an important blockade toward success. This loss of identity is more prominently visible in Spirited Away in which Chihiro must contractually exchange her name with Yubaba for a new one, Sen. But is also touched on in The Devil Wears Prada in a scene in which Miranda Priestly calls Andrea Sachs by an incorrect name, the name of her other assistant, Emily, and is unresponsive and even dismissive to Andrea’s attempts at correction.

As Wicked Stepmothers Miranda Priestly (who is compared to the devil in the title of both the book and film which contrasts ironically with her masculinized clerical name) and Yubaba portray characters that have “become a stock figure, a fairy-tale type that invokes a vivid image at the mention of her role” (Williams). The formation of the intrinsic nature of the stepmother to the fairy tale genre has been solidified, not only by Disney, but by other anthologists of folklore as well. In her article “Who’s Wicked Now? The Stepmother as Fairy-Tale Heroine” Christy Williams notes “the Brothers Grimm made editorial changes to various stories from one edition of their collection to the next. These editorial changes led to the absent mother and the wicked stepmother becoming staples of the fairytale genre” (Williams). The most preferred theory as to the reason the Brothers Grimm inserted the character of the wicked stepmother into their tales is the preservation of the sanctity of motherhood. By inserting the stepmother the real mother remains pristine and maternal in the tales of the Brothers Grimm. The first volume of the Brothers Grimm’s anthologies Kinder- und Hausmärchen (Children’s and Household Tales), which contains their version of “Cinderella”, was published in 1812, over a century after Perrault took up his pen. The movement toward the “wicked stepmother” imploded with the advent of second-wave feminism in the 1950s. Reactionary and alternate feminism narratives (such as Emma Donoghue’s anthology Kissing the Witch: Old Tales in New Skins) explore avenues for Wicked Stepmothers that are mirrored in our third-wave mass media in more generic and “palatable” ways. The feminist movement has also inspired an exploration of the traditional tales where scholars have further analyzed the powerful nature of the Wicked Stepmother. As Alison Lurie states, “The contrast is greatest in maturity, where women are often more powerful than men. Real help for the hero or heroine comes most frequently from a fairy godmother or wise woman, and real trouble from a witch or wicked stepmother” (Lurie). However, other scholars, such as Karen E. Rowe and Maria Tatar are more critical of the possible profeminist nature of these tales. In contrast Rowe seems to believe that despite the leading female roles, patriarchy exudes an invisible iron fist in the tales (particularly in the form of the Oedipal competition between Cinderella and her mother, and the role of the Prince). While the magical power of the witch and the godmother character-types and their influence over the material world cannot be ignored, their characters are representative of marginalized power (particularly in the case of the Fairy Godmother who is often absent for the majority of the tales) in comparison to the ever-present political power of the Prince.

In the postfeminist films Spirited Away and The Devil Wears Prada the Wicked Stepmothers have evolved at the end of the tales. In Spirited Away Yubaba’s identical twin Zeniba demonstrates to the audience that the Wicked Witch and the Fairy Godmother can be two sides of the same coin. Zeniba aids Chihiro, as all Fairy Godmothers aid their Cinderella’s path to womanhood and her escape from the Wicked Stepmother (Rowe). While Chihiro never does go to a fanciful ball, Andrea does. Miranda Priestly’s inclusion of Andrea into her trip to Paris for the Parisian fashion week recasts her into a Fairy Godmother figure that both transforms and transports her ward to the ball. Miranda Priestly’s conditions for allowing Andrea to go to this Parisian ball mirror Perrault’s Fairy Godmother almost exactly. “Well,” said her godmother, ‘be but a good girl, and I will contrive that you shall go.” However, for filmmakers and for audiences the exclusion of the wicked stepmother can bring up troubling issues in plot, for “[i]f the stepmother is no longer simply ‘wicked’ and no longer the villain of the story, who is the villain?” (Williams). And as the villainness loses her wickedness she begins to lose her traditional ugliness as well, which begins to break the traditional dichotomy of youth, goodness and beauty versus age, wickedness, monstrosity and ugliness.

Paradigms of beauty feature heavily in all Cinderella tales and films, and are a notable aspect of the film The Devil Wears Prada. Priestly oversees the fictional fashion magazine “Runway”, and thus fashion and beauty become integral parts of the plot. However, the importance of beauty is not limited to Cinderella, within nearly all fairy tales there are mentions of physical beauty, especially where it concerns young burgeoning females. In Cinderella tales the maturation of the young girl signals the waning of sexual attractiveness for the aging stepmother and by extension her loss of control (Rowe). Lori Baker-Sperry and Liz Grauerholz’s survey of the Grimm’s tales (2003) totaled the times young females, young males, older females and older males
were described as beautiful within the traditional fairy tales. Young females were most often described as beautiful, far surpassing the other categories. Baker-Sperry and Grauerholz also analyzed the tales for significance of beauty and concluded, “this emphasis on a feminine beauty ideal may operate as a normative social control for girls and women” (Baker-Sperry 723). This social control works on a process of rewards versus punishments, rewards for the good (Cinderellas) and punishments for the bad (Wicked Stepmothers). “Many tales connote goodness with industriousness, and both with beauty, and characters are ‘rewarded’ for their hard work” (Baker-Sperry 719). In these tales, as in Perrault’s and Disney’s Cinderellas, Spirited Away and The Devil Wears Prada, ugliness and old age are connected to wickedness and goodness to beauty and youth (Baker-Sperry).

Because cleverness, willpower, and manipulative skill are allied with vanity, shrewishness, and ugliness, and because of their gruesome fates, odious females hardly recommend themselves as models for young readers [and viewers]. And because they surround alternative roles…[such as] fiendish stepmothers with opprobrium, romantic tales effectively sabotage female assertiveness. By punishing exhibitions of feminine force, tales admonish, moreover, that any disruptive non-conformity will result in annihilation or social ostracism. (Rowe 218)

This process of reward and punishment is shown in The Devil Wears Prada, where a confusing mix of surface feminism in the choices made by the down-to-earth Andrea is contrasted with undercurrents that undermine female aggression and ambition, exemplified in the character of Miranda Priestly as her personal life dissolves while the pair is in Paris. According to the Baker-Sperry and Grauerholz study in nearly 20 percent of the tales there are links between beauty and jealousy that almost exclusively concern female characters (719). This jealousy of beauty, youth, and attractiveness exhibits itself most prominently in the mise-en-scène of both Spirited Away and The Devil Wears Prada. The older women, Miranda Priestly and Yubaba, both show symptoms of the Disneyfication process, the process that Disney repeatedly used in his films to signify who is a villain and who is not. Their heavily made-up faces, grey and/or white hair, strikingly arched brows, and obsession with opulent material goods such as rings and clothes exemplify this process and designates from their first appearances on screen that they are not intended to be likable characters to the audience (Mollegaard). As in all “[recent Disney films and even contemporary feminist retellings of popular fairy tales [that] often involve women who differ from their earlier counterparts in ingenuity, activity, and independence but not physical attractiveness” (Baker-Sperry 722). Despite both films’ supposed pro-feminist message and the reoccurrence of strong female leads in all of Hayao Miyazaki’s films, both Chihiro and Andrea are adorable and portrayed as pretty in a modest way.

Feminism amidst the fairy tales has evolved, as has the end of Cinderella’s tale, Cinderella herself, and her Wicked Stepmother. In many modern variations Cinderella’s traditional passivity has been reimagined. As it has in the endings of these films, in which the maiden protagonists free themselves from slavery through action and choice and are catapulted into womanhood: Chihiro by actively seeking solutions and Andrea by making a significant choice. Rather than just proving goodness by obedience like their traditional counterpart, Chihiro and Andrea rebel in their bids for freedom and by doing so gain independence. Andrea and Chihiro vary significantly from their more traditional counterparts and there is no doubt that both Andrea and Chihiro manipulate their own destinies at the culmination of their respective films. However, “simply reversing patriarchal binaries – making the primary female character strong, confident, politically astute, and forceful, instead of weak, doubting, naïve, and self-effacing – is insufficient to create an image of a postpatriarchal world” (Greenhill 21). These modernized versions of happily ever after offer alternatives to outdated chauvinistic portrayals of the female. “[M]any modern women can no longer blindly accept the promise of connubial bliss with the prince” (Rowe 211) and our films reflect this dissatisfaction and disillusionment. Yet, “Even in the ‘liberated’ twentieth century, many women internalize romantic patterns [and the myth of romantic love] from ancient tales”(Rowe 222) and similarly young girls internalize these patterns from films like Spirited Away and their older counterparts internalize the same from so-called ‘chick flicks’ like The Devil Wears Prada. “Today women are caught in a dialect between the cultural status quo and the evolving feminist movement” (Rowe 223). This schism of desires, to be desired (as the passive Cinderella of Perrault) or to desire for ourselves (as Andrea and Chihiro do) is relevant to women’s issues within and without the cinema. “[These] artistic re-creations of fairy tale plots and characters in film...are significant because they mirror possibilities of estranging ourselves from designated roles” (Greenhill xii). Furthering the process of fairy tale reincarnation and reinventing what it means to be a Wicked Stepmother or a Cinderella.
Works Cited


