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After the Shoe Fits: A Rhetorical Analysis of Four Versions of the Cinderella Narrative

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ABSTRACT

Fairy tales hold the power to influence societies and to challenge societal injustices, and the story of Cinderella exemplifies both of these roles. In this study, I conduct a rhetorical analysis of four different versions of the Cinderella narrative: Charles Perrault’s “Cendrillon,” the Brothers Grimm’s “Aschenputtel,” Anne Sexton’s “Cinderella,” and Disney’s Cinderella (2015). I examine Perrault’s “Cendrillon” and the Grimms’ “Aschenputtel” using constitutive rhetoric. This theory operates around the basic premise that rhetoric holds the power to aid in the shaping of societies. While analyzing “Cendrillon” and “Aschenputtel,” I specifically look for themes of classism and nationalism, respectively. I then examine Sexton’s “Cinderella” and Disney’s Cinderella (2015) using feminist standpoint theory as my theoretical lens. Within this analysis, I particularly analyze how the two rhetors offer more nuanced views towards gender roles and stereotypes within their respective texts.

Within “Cendrillon,” I found that Perrault places value on position, possessions, and peacekeeping, and within “Aschenputtel,” the Brothers Grimm seem to emphasize hostility towards the outsider, the need for order, and the potential for self-determination. While examining the two more recent Cinderella tales, I found that Sexton offers more nuanced views towards gender through her deconstruction of the Cinderella narrative and through her portrayals of both Cinderella and the Prince. Disney accordingly provides a feminist standpoint through Ella and Kit’s equality and through the portrayal of Ella’s stepsisters. Ultimately, I found that the tales of Perrault and the Brothers Grimm
potentially had profound effects on their respective societies, and that the tales of Sexton and Disney offer valuable critiques of social hierarchies and the effects of those hierarchies.
After the Shoe Fits:
A Rhetorical Analysis of Four Versions of the Cinderella Narrative

A Thesis
Presented to
The Faculty of the Graduate School
Abilene Christian University

In Partial Fulfillment
Of the Requirements for the Degree
Master of Arts

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

I once asked one of my professors, whose daughter was four-years-old at the time, how she and her husband dealt with “the whole princess thing.” I was curious whether they tried to avoid exposing their daughter to these stories, or if they did not believe the stories were detrimental and therefore allowed her to read, watch, and hear them. In short, my professor’s response was that it is unavoidable. She went on to say that children are exposed to these princess stories through school, friends, other family members, and stores even if they do not hear them in their own homes. This example makes an important point about the many different ways children are exposed to these fairy tales today. From books, to movies, games, music, clothing, toys, lunch boxes, and even entire theme parks, and fairy tales, particularly Disney fairy tales, are manifested in countless avenues of a child’s life in the United States today.

Whether these tales are told to him or her orally, read from a book, or watched in a movie, fairy tales are omnipresent. These encounters generally begin at a young age, at such a young age that most can probably not recall the first fairy tale they ever heard, read, or saw. These fairy tales inevitably become part of the literary canon of childhood. John Saunders explains that because everyone has been a child at one point, “children’s literature is the one body of work that most human’s share.”¹ He goes on to explain that

as we get older, our literary tastes become more specific and the interests we all share as children develop in different ways. However, the stories from our childhood become permanently embedded into our literary canon, a bond that does not break. For example, everyone knows the Cinderella story, even if the main character is not explicitly called “Cinderella.” We were all exposed to stories such as Cinderella and Snow White at a young age, and this shared literary canon has perhaps partially sparked the hundreds of scholarly books, essays, and studies concerning fairy tales. If all children are exposed to these fairy tales and carry these tales with them their entire lives, then scholars should examine what these fairy tales are teaching and what effect they are having.

The Importance of Fairy Tales

Not only are the stories read in childhood significant because they help create a bond among everyone who has been a child, but many scholars also believe children’s literature, particularly fairy tales, are crucial to a child’s development. While explaining the importance of children’s literature, Saunders states that

while some children’s books primarily function to teach children vocabulary and rudimentary reading, others [sic] books advance the child’s ability to read, and yet others prepare children for the next stage of their lives physically, emotionally, academically, and socially. But these books do more than that, they also help children to understand elements of the world they are continually encountering.

The stories young children read and hear are not solely for entertainment; they can have profound effects on children’s physical, emotional, academic, and social development. Ideally, these stories have positive effects, but how are we to know if these stories are not


closely examined? Child psychologist Bruno Bettelheim supports the views mentioned by Saunders, claiming that for a story to hold a child’s attention,

it must stimulate his imagination; help him to develop his intellect and to clarify his emotions; be attuned to his anxieties and aspirations; give full recognition to his difficulties, while at the same time suggesting solutions to the problems which perturb him.  

Fairy tales play a unique role in that they simultaneously entertain, or stimulate the imagination, while helping the child develop and work through various stages of life. Not only that, but these stories are practically universally heard, read, or seen, which also makes them more unique than other forms of literary genres.

The oral and literary history of fairy tales is long and vast, and a significant number of scholars have dedicated their work to determining if fairy tales do more harm than good. In recent decades, scholars have argued that fairy tales simply perpetuate stereotypes about men and women and instill these roles unknowingly in young children, with whom fairy tales are typically most popular. However, some scholars believe this way of thinking is rather two-dimensional. In fact, they even operate on the assumption that fairy tales are not only helpful for adolescents, but necessary for healthy development. Bettelheim, a child psychologist known for his work with fairy tales, believes that “more can be learned from [fairy tales] about the inner problems of human beings, and of the right solutions to their predicaments in any society, than from any other type of story within a child’s comprehension.”

Bettelheim understands that fairy tales help children make sense of the world in a way that no other literature can. Fairy tales are unique because they address universal elements of the human experience in a

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5. Ibid.
way that is digestible for young children. Bettelheim continues by arguing that “safe stories mention neither death nor aging, the limits to our existence, nor the wish for eternal life. The fairy tale, by contrast, confronts the child squarely with the basic human predicaments.”

Every individual must deal with death at some point in his or her life, often at a very young age, and fairy tales can help children make sense of such experiences in a way that most other literature is incapable of. Most fairy tales deal with the death of a parent or parents, but the stories then demonstrate that the heroines or heroes do not let this cripple them, but that they emerge from this grief and are still capable of overcoming other obstacles. According to Bettelheim, fairy tales do not seek to teach children unrealistic expectations about life, but to teach them the realities of life in a comprehensible way.

Fairy tales are also a unique art form. Bettelheim explains that the novelty of fairy tales lies in their ability to be understood by children and that a “fairy tale’s deepest meaning will be different for each person, and different for the same person at various moments in his [or her] life.” This argument is very similar to one a person might make about any famous painting or piece of classical music, but most children are incapable of gathering any clear understanding from a piece of art or classical music. The novelty of fairy tales does not simply lie with their ability to be comprehended by children, but that each child and adult alike will receive a different meaning from a given fairy tale because fairy tales are complex works of art. Davidson and Chaudri claim that the fairy tale brings “wonder and fantasy” unlike any other art form, stating that “it seems there is a psychological need for something that only the fairy tale can give us, for all its apparent

7. Ibid., 12.
naivety, certain facets of our imagination are left unsatisfied by other forms of literature."8 Inexplicably, we are interested in fairy tales starting at a very young age, and many scholars have wondered about this attraction. Renowned fairy tale scholar Jack Zipes even believes that “we want to know more about ourselves by knowing more about fairy tales. We want to fathom their mysterious hold on us. Perhaps this is why there are literally hundreds of scholarly books and essays about the tales.”9 Fairy tales simply fascinate and appeal to humans in all cultures and throughout centuries. Indeed, Zipes goes on to explain that “the tales of Perrault, Grimm, and Anderson have been translated into practically every language in the world, and together vie with the Bible as the most widely read literature in the world.”10 The fact that our fascination with fairy tales rivals that of the Bible might be the best possible exemplar of the importance of fairy tales.

**Defining Fairy Tales**

Altogether, the world of folk and fairy tale scholarship has debated the inconsistencies of defining the actual term “fairy tale.” *The Oxford Companion to Fairy Tales* claims that “there is really no set definition of a fairy tale, and the definition itself keeps evolving.”11 The definition keeps evolving because both the context surrounding fairy tales and how they are studied is also constantly evolving. The term “fairy tale” is often interchanged with the term “folk tale;” however, the two differ in some regards. Bottingheimer explains that

10. Ibid., xxix.
Folk tales differ from fairy tales in their structure, their cast of characters, their plot trajectories, and their age. Brief, and with linear plots, folk tales reflect the world and the belief systems of their audience . . . more to the point, a very large proportion of folk tales don’t have a happy ending.¹²

Folk tales, therefore, differ from fairy tales in both structure and content. One of the most crucial parts of Bottingheimer’s explanation is that folk tales do not generally have happy endings, whereas fairy tales often do. Bottingheimer goes on to claim that

the tales of magic that end in weddings all share the welcome ending of two people’s difficulties and the beginning of a life lived happily ever after. Common usage and scholarly terminology both recognize these tales as fairy tales.¹³

A common theme throughout most fairy tales is a happy ending, or as Bottingheimer words it, “the welcome ending of two people’s difficulties.”¹⁴ The phrase “they lived happily ever after” is not tied to fairy tales by accident; rather, fairy tales are often defined as such because the main characters indeed “lived happily ever after.” This pervasive phrase is one of the dead giveaways of a fairy tale, along with the traditional “once upon a time” opening.

According to the *Oxford Companion to Fairy Tales*, the term “fairy tale” first originated with the French court in the seventeenth century. The French term *conte de fée* was coined by a contemporary of Charles Perrault, Mme d’Aulnoy, in her own collection of tales.¹⁵ Although the contemporaries of Perrault, rather than Perrault himself, coined this term, they were all a part of the same literary circle that met in “salons” and recited their written fairy tales. Many of Perrault’s own works at this time, including

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¹³ Ibid., 6.
¹⁴ Ibid.
“Cendrillon,” can then be considered fairy tales. In his introduction to *The Oxford Companion to Fairy Tales*, Zipes states that “it was not until the 1690s in France that the fairy tale could establish itself as a legitimate ‘genre’ for educated classes.”\(^{16}\) Up until this point in history, “magic tales” had often been told amongst the lower classes. However, this changed with the late-seventeenth century French court, which deemed it fashionable to write and recite these stories that they themselves would come to call “fairy tales.”

The term “Märchen” in the title of the Brothers Grimm’s collection, *Kinder– und Hausmärchen*, actually refers to “the literary fairy tale as well as the traditional folk tale.”\(^{17}\) This definition is rather confusing considering the collection is often called *Grimm’s Fairy Tales* in English. However, Bottingheimer explains that the Grimm’s stories include animal tales, warning tales, folk tales, and religious tales, in addition to fairy tales.\(^{18}\)

So how can we distinguish among fairy tales and these other types of tales? As noted earlier, fairy tales generally close with happy endings. In their introduction to *A Companion to the Fairy Tale*, Davidson and Chaudri explain that fairy tales “usually have a happy ending but the hero or heroine may have to overcome enormous obstacles, often by supernatural means and assisted by powerful helpers of various kinds, while other characters impose demanding tasks and threaten destruction.”\(^{19}\) This explanation both supports Bottingheimer’s definition of “happy endings” and adds new elements to

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the definition. Davidson and Chuahdri claim that fairy tales generally involve supernatural powers, the main character overcoming hardships, and threats from other characters. Bottingheimer explains that one key to defining fairy tales are fairy tale motifs such as Davidson and Chaudri’s characteristics. Bottingheimer also mentions that fairy tale structure and “compact narratives” are two other defining characteristics.\textsuperscript{20}

According to Bottingheimer’s definition, the stories themselves should be “compact narratives” or relatively short in nature. Bottingheimer additionally mentions that fairy tale structure” is a key to defining fairy tales. Davidson and Chauhdri give an example of this when they state that within fairy tales, “rhythms and patterns are established, for example the use of the number three, the balance between the number of adversaries and helpers, the use of stock phrases and characters.”\textsuperscript{21} For instance, the previously mentioned phrases “once upon a time” and “they lived happily ever after” are both “stock phrases” found in most fairy tales. The evil stepmother is also a “stock character” who plays a role in multiple fairy tales.

Altogether, there is not a specific set definition for a “fairy tale.”\textit{The Oxford Companion to Fairy Tales} states that “after nearly 200 years interest in the fairy tale has not been exhausted and scholarly definitions will continue to evolve as new perspectives and approaches are explored.”\textsuperscript{22} Because of these indefinite definitions, the best way to spot a fairy tale is to identify the themes and elements that are common to fairy tales.

With this rather nuanced and complicated definition of fairy tales in mind, I turn to defining the Cinderella narrative.

\textsuperscript{20} Bottingheimer, \textit{Fairy Tales}, 9.
\textsuperscript{21} Davidson and Chaudhri, “Introduction,” 4.
\textsuperscript{22} Zipes, “Grimm, Brothers,” 167.
Defining the Cinderella Narrative

Marian Roalfe Cox was perhaps one of the most influential figures involved in defining the Cinderella narrative. Cox lived during the nineteenth century in London, England, and joined the Folk-Lore Society in 1888.\(^\text{23}\) Her early work with the society was so impressive that they asked her to “undertake a project of classifying and analysing variants of the story of ‘Cinderella,’” which led to her collecting 345 different versions of the tale spanning from the sixteenth to seventeenth centuries.\(^\text{24}\) The vast reach of her work on any single tale or group of tales was unprecedented up to that point in the history of fairy tale and folktale study, and scholars since have continued to use her methods and techniques in researching folk lore and fairy tales. Her work was so significant, that renowned folklore scholar Alan Dundes states that “even today, serious students of Cinderella still have to consult this 535-page pioneering compendium.”\(^\text{25}\) Needless to say, Cox’s work with the Cinderella narrative has been the bedrock of Cinderella scholarship for over a century, and continues to be so today. With this in mind, I use her definition of the Cinderella narrative for this study.

In her excavation of Cinderella-like narratives, Cox primarily separated the stories into three major groups: Cinderella, Cap O’Rushes, and Catskin. She claims that the only essential elements of the Cinderella narrative are an ill-treated heroine and recognition by


\(^{24}\) Ibid.

the means of a shoe. However, she also notes elements that are common, although not necessary, within many of the Cinderella stories, including a happy marriage, hearth abode, helpful animals, heroine disguise, heroine flight, shoe marriage test, and magic dresses. The four versions of the Cinderella narrative I analyze in this thesis feature most of these elements. In his explanation of the Cinderella narrative and Cox’s work, Schaefer mentioned many of these same elements, adding that the stories often contain supernatural help and that the heroine is generally of royal birth or is the daughter of a gentleman. Again, these are elements present within the four stories this study explores.

**Evolution of the Cinderella Tale**

The story of Cinderella has transcended time and space so significantly that a version of the story can be found in most cultures, and remnants of the story can be traced all the way back to the ancient cultures of Greece and China. One of the first most notable written versions of the Cinderella tale was drafted in 1636 by Italian author Giambattista Basile, in Italian. About sixty years after this version, in 1697, Perrault wrote his French version of Cinderella, “Cendrillon,” which would have profound effects on later versions of the story. The Brothers Grimm’s first version of “Aschenputtel” was released in 1812, one hundred and fifteen years after Perrault’s “Cendrillon.” This, of course, is the first of many editions of the tale that the brothers themselves would release in their lifetimes. More recent twentieth- and twenty-first-century versions of Cinderella

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27. Ibid.
have been rather prolific and eclectic. Children’s literature scholar Margot Blankier states that the Cinderella tale has “seemingly infinite adaptations and permutations,” which have become increasingly prevalent in the later twentieth and early twenty-first centuries.31 Twentieth-century versions include Disney’s Cinderella (1950), Jerry Lewis’ Cinderfella (1960), and Roger and Hammerstein’s stage musical Cinderella (1965).32 According to Blankier, “the women’s movement of the 1960s and 1970s infused fairy-tale scholarship with feminism,” which influenced many writers of the time, such as Anne Sexton.33 The late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries also furnished film adaptations of Cinderella such as the movies Ever After (1998), A Cinderella Story (2004), Enchanted (2007), and most recently, Disney’s Cinderella (2015).

Simultaneously, numerous romance and young adult novels have been written with the Cinderella motif as the main storyline. Moreover, the Cinderella motif has not only been transmitted through movies, musicals, and books; events such as the marriage of Grace Kelly to Prince Rainier III, the 1950 NCAA men’s basketball championship, Kate Middleton’s marriage to Prince William, the rise of Selma Hayek in Hollywood, and many other celebrities and sport teams’ rise to acclaim are now considered “Cinderella Stories.” Needless to say, society continues to reinvent the Cinderella tale.

Crowley and Pennington argue that “fairy tales have always been in a state of reincarnation,” which is perhaps why we now consider a waitress’ journey to becoming an actress a “Cinderella story.”[34] Blankier explains that

When the vehicle is no longer suitable for the propagation of the story, a new vehicle must be created. Thus when a narrative idea meets a new cultural environment, an adaptation occurs. . . it emphasizes the continuous change a narrative experiences in response to cultural pressures.[35]

Modern versions of the Cinderella tale are no longer confined to the narratives told by Perrault and the Brothers Grimm because as culture has evolved, the story has evolved with it. Blankier outlines a system proposed by Jack Zipes that classifies evolved fairy tales based upon the modifications that have been made to those tales. The two basic classifications are “duplicates” and “revisions.”[36] Blankier explains that a story is considered a duplicate when the “sensibilities of the original tale are merely repeated, with only superficial modifications,” meaning the “deep structure” of the story remains unaltered.[37] Blankier goes on to describe revisions as narratives created “with the intention of producing something new.” Most modern adaptations of Cinderella can be classified into one of Zipes’ two categories. Now that I have established the importance of fairy tales and reviewed the definition of fairy tales and the Cinderella narrative, I will preview the four different versions of Cinderella I will analyze within this study. I will also briefly look at each of my selections in addition to the theories I use to analyze these selections.

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34. Ibid., 298.
37. Ibid.
Methodology

In the second chapter of this thesis, I examine Charles Perrault’s “Cendrillon” and the Brothers Grimm’s “Aschenputtel” through the lens of constitutive rhetoric. Specifically, I explore how these two texts influenced their respective societies. In the third chapter, I then analyze Anne Sexton’s “Cinderella” and Disney’s 2015 Cinderella to discover how the Cinderella narrative can be changed to tell the story from other standpoints. The following sections examine the four artifacts I have chosen to analyze, and succintcly look at the rhetorical situation surrounding each individual version of Cinderella.

Selection of Perrault’s “Cendrillon” and the Grimms’ “Aschenputtel”

Charles Perrault’s version of Cinderella, or “Cendrillon” as it was known in its time, is one of the many popular fairy tales that he wrote in the late seventeenth century. Perrault’s fairy tales resonated with a larger audience than his contemporaries’ tales because they were more digestible for the lower classes and held gentler views towards women.38 Because of this, Perrault’s stories had a long-lasting effect on French society. Fairy tale scholar Ruth Bottingheimer claims that “Perrault’s tales were incorporated into French school curricula in the nineteenth century and memorized by generations of French schoolchildren.”39 These stories were told for centuries, and Perrault’s version of Cinderella became so influential and pervasive that it is the basis of Disney’s 1950 movie, Cinderella. The popularity of Disney’s 1950 version has led Perrault’s “Cendrillon” to become the most recognizable version of Cinderella in modern American

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culture. His tale is at the root of the American conception of Cinderella, which is the main reason I chose to analyze “Cendrillon” in this thesis.

In Chapter II, I specifically examine the version of “Cendrillon” written by Andrew Lang in his collection of fairy tales published in 1889. Andrew Lang (1844-1912) was himself a folklorist and scholar who was one of the first individuals to study the intersection of anthropology and myth. He was so influential in the folklore world that he was asked to write an introduction for Cox’s book of Cinderella variants, which was distributed by the London Folk-Lore Society. Cox even considered herself honored to have Lang introduce her book and “lavished gratitude on him for enriching her work.” Lang’s collections of fairy tales, which he published in a series of books, were highly regarded during their time, as was Lang himself. Since the release of his collections, other scholars have used his version in their own collections. It is for these reasons that I have chosen to analyze his version of “Cendrillon,” which he calls “Cinderella or The Little Glass Slipper,” as one of my artifacts.

In Chapter II, I also examine the Brothers Grimm’s “Aschenputtel,” which they originally published in their first edition of “Märchen,” released in 1812. According to Zipes, perhaps the most prolifically published and well-known scholars of the Grimms and their tales, by 1857 the tales had been “heavily edited by Wilhelm” over the 40 years

42. Schaefer, “Unknown Cinderella,” 139.
43. Ibid.
since the first edition was released. Some members of the initial audience to whom the first edition was released believed that “the stories were too crude, were not shaped enough to appeal to children, and were weighed down by the scholarly notes,” because the brothers had annotated the first edition. These criticisms led the brothers to “make the tales more accessible to a general public and more considerate of children as readers and listeners of the stories.” The tales were edited with each new edition; the final 1857 edition is the most edited of the seven and the most widely circulated in the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries. According to Zipes, “Germans and also British and American readers generally read the seventh or final edition of *Kinder- und Hausmärchen*.” Therefore, to specifically examine the influence of “Aschenputtel” on nationalism and classism in Germany, the 1857 edition of *Kinder–und Hausmärchen* will be the most relevant edition because it was the most widely circulated and accessible edition during very turbulent times in German history. More specifically, I will analyze D. L. Ashliman’s English translation of the original 1857 Grimm edition.

According to Bottingheimer, the work of the Brothers Grimm made an impact similar to Perrault’s tales in that

beginning in the 1830s, the Grimms’ tales were built into German elementary school curricula, with the result that by the end of the nineteenth century, first-year pupils were memorizing the simplest tales and older pupils were explicating the longer and more complex ones.  


45. Ibid., xxviii.

46. Ibid., xxxi.


So significant were the Grimms’ tales that allied forces felt it necessary to ban these stories following the Second World War.\textsuperscript{49}

The Brothers Grimm and Perrault each clearly had a profound influence within their own country and region, but their influence does not end there. Zipes claims that “the tales of Perrault, Grimm, and Anderson have been translated into practically every language in the world, and together they vie with the Bible as the most widely read literature in the world.”\textsuperscript{50} These tales are seemingly omnipotent in the modern world, which is a primary reason why I chose to study the versions of Cinderella written by Perrault and the Brothers Grimm.

**Selection of Sexton’s “Cinderella” and Disney’s *Cinderella***

In Chapter III, I examine poet Anne Sexton’s “Cinderella.” Anne Sexton was part of the confessional poetry movement of the 1960s and 70s. During this time in her career, Sexton published *Transformations*, a collection containing retellings of several Grimm’s fairy tales. Sexton included many different fairy tales in *Transformations*, such as renditions of Cinderella, Snow White, Red Riding Hood, Rumpelstiltskin, and various others. Although she rewrites sixteen fairy tales, one of her most well-known retellings is “Cinderella.” Sexton released this poem in 1972, 22 years after the original Disney movie based on the fairy tale had been released. Unlike the 1950 Disney version of Cinderella, Anne Sexton’s retelling closely follows the original Grimm’s fairy tale, chopped heels, toes, and all.

*The Oxford Companion to Fairy Tales* explains that Anne Sexton’s retelling of traditional fairy tales in her book *Transformations* is “one of the most significant

\textsuperscript{50} Zipes, “Introduction,” xxix.
‘subversive’ adaptations of the Grimms’ tales from a woman’s perspective.” The 1960s and 70s were a significant period of change in American society, and Sexton’s poetry reflects some of these changing views towards women. It is also interesting to note that Sexton chose to rewrite the Brothers Grimm’s version of Cinderella, which is known to be much more graphic than Perrault’s, despite the well-known 1950 Disney movie being a retelling of Perrault’s tale. Sexton came to embrace many of the characteristics associated with second-wave feminism—themes that can be found in her poetry. She offers a unique perspective on women’s roles and attitudes towards these roles that were desperately needed during this unstable and changing time in American history. This unique perspective is a key reason why I chose to analyze her “Cinderella.”

The last artifact I examine in Chapter III is Disney’s 2015 film, Cinderella. This adaptation transforms their 1950 animated film into a live-action film. This Cinderella includes the basic elements of Disney’s animated film but adds more backstory and incorporates elements from the Grimms’ tale throughout the film. The film premiered in a time when movements for equality, inclusion, and political correctness were prevalent within American culture. Disney’s choice to remake this movie is interesting considering the decades of criticism surrounding their 1950s version. Despite the negativity that may arise when critics analyze the original film, many parents and young people alike still revere the original Cinderella, a fan base Disney appealed to in the 2015 film. Palmeri and Sakoui of Bloomberg Businessweek stated in 2015, before the initial release of the film, that Disney “revive[s] classic characters for a new generation of kids, and their


already smitten parents may be especially willing to shell out for related merchandise.”

In releasing live adaptations of their own traditional films, Disney has the opportunity to reach their original fan base while adding new, younger viewers.

Unsurprisingly, Disney’s 2015 Cinderella was a box-office success. The movie itself had a $95 million budget. According to Boxoffice.com, the movie made around $68 million in its opening weekend and had a total worldwide gross of more than $500 million. Cinderella (2015) not only did well at the box-office, but it was also liked by the general public. According to Rotten Tomatoes, the most well-known American movie review aggregator website, Cinderella received a “Tomatometer” score of 83%, based on critics’ reviews, and a 78% rating from the general audience. Not only did Disney’s 2015 Cinderella do well at the box office, but also it was highly regarded by movie-viewers and critics alike.

Theoretical Foundations

The two basic theories that guide my analysis of these four versions of Cinderella are constitutive rhetoric and standpoint theory. Constitutive rhetoric operates around the basic premise that texts have the power to influence individuals, ideologies, and collective groups of people. This theory is particularly useful when retrospectively examining texts. Standpoint theory offers the perspectives or “standpoints” of marginalized members of society and works to identify and challenge oppressive forces within the social hierarchy. Standpoint theory is very helpful in examining how modern

54. Ibid., 31.
rhetors challenge current power structures. In the following section, I provide a brief introduction to each of these theories, which I will review more comprehensively in later chapters.

**Constitutive rhetoric.**

Communication scholar Katje Thieme states that “a text constitutes not only a form of action but also an anticipation of further action . . . texts attempt to shape the response they will receive; they do so by interpellating their readers.” According to constitutive rhetoric, a rhetorical text embodies certain ideals or ideologies. When the text is shared, these ideologies and expectations are then laid before an audience who is generally expected to act according to those ideologies and expectations. In this way rhetoric plays two roles: it embodies an action and elicits an action from the audience. Althusser’s “interpellation,” which is the concept that someone can be “hailed” into or called into some kind of subject position, is closely tied to this dual function of rhetoric. Thieme explains that “public discourse at certain historical times creates subject positions that inescapably contain directives for action.” This explanation indicates that the audience does not choose to be interpellated into these positions; rather, these individuals find it natural to act according to the rhetoric because those actions coincide with their own identities. In their examination of Martin Luther King Jr.’s “Letter from Birmingham Jail,” Leff and Utley explain that “the ‘Letter’ produced an immediate, unified response

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57. Thieme, “Constitutive Rhetoric,” 42.
that restructured and reframed their perception of a complex situation.”

In viewing rhetoric as constitutive, I argue that rhetoric is not simply persuasive; it reshapes the narrative and constructs the role the audience should play in that narrative.

**Standpoint theory.**

Feminist scholars Stoetzler and Yuval-Davis explain that all standpoint theories are rooted in the idea that “it is vital to account for the social positioning of the social agent.”

Every individual who holds a different position in society will have a different perspective or “standpoint” on that society than other members who hold different positions. Littlejohn and Foss explain that a “standpoint arises when an individual recognizes and challenges cultural values and power relations that contribute to subordination or oppression of particular groups.”

According to this definition, the unique perspective of a social agent only becomes a standpoint when that agent realizes that his or her standpoint has been created because of various power relations in society.

Feminist standpoint theory is a common academic focus for the application of standpoint. Rather than focusing on the standpoint of all marginalized people, feminist standpoint theory focuses specifically on the standpoint of women. Littlejohn and Foss explain that “feminist standpoint hinges on realizing that the conditions and experiences common to girls and women are not natural, but are a result from social and political


forces. Again, these views are considered standpoints because the women in question realize that social forces shape their positions. Once a standpoint has been recognized, the second focus of this theory is “highlighting the distinct knowledge cultivated by activities that are typically assigned to females.” Altogether, feminist standpoint theory seeks to give a voice to women, who offer a unique perspective on all aspects of society.

**Research Questions**

The Cinderella narrative can be traced all the way back to ancient Greece and Ancient China. And yet, thousands of years after the first record of the story, people continue to create new adaptations of it. In his collection, *Cinderella: A Casebook*, Alan Dundes claims that “no other single tale is more beloved in the Western world, and it is likely that its special place in the hearts and minds of both women and men will continue for generations to come.” In this thesis, I aim to shed light on the enduring and influential story of Cinderella and will use two basic research questions to guide my analysis. First, how did the Brothers Grimm’s “Aschenputtel” and Perrault’s “Cendrillon” help to shape national and classist identities in Germany and France, respectively? And second, how do Disney’s *Cinderella* and Sexton’s “Cinderella” communicate more nuanced standpoints about gender than previous versions of this narrative?

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61. Ibid., 466.
62. Ibid.
Conclusion

To best answer the two research questions mentioned above, my thesis includes two analysis chapters. I dedicate the second and third chapters to analyzing my four artifacts. In Chapter II, I analyze Perrault’s “Cendrillon” using the theory of constitutive rhetoric while focusing on a classist perspective. Within this chapter, I also analyze the Brothers Grimm’s “Aschenputtel” through the lens of constitutive rhetoric but focus on a nationalist perspective. In Chapter III, I move into the twentieth and twenty-first centuries by examining Anne Sexton’s “Cinderella” and Disney’s 2015 Cinderella. I use standpoint theory as a lens through which to analyze these two artifacts. I specifically use feminist standpoint theory to examine gender within both Sexton’s “Cinderella” and Disney’s Cinderella. Ultimately, I seek to understand the role that each of these versions of the classic Cinderella narrative plays in shaping and reflecting societies, past and present.
CHAPTER II

FAIRY TALES AS CONSTITUTIVE RHETORIC

The artifacts I examine in this chapter are Charles Perrault’s “Cendrillon” and the Brothers Grimm’s “Aschenputtel.” Perrault’s “Cendrillon” was crafted in 1697 and released in his collection of tales known as Histoires ou contes du temps passé. In 1812, one hundred and fifteen years later, the Grimm’s “Aschenputtel” was released in the brothers’ collection of “märchen” known as Kinder– und Hausmärchen, which was then edited and re-released seven different times until the final edition of the collection was printed in 1857. I have chosen to look at these two variations of Cinderella because they are the most-well known versions of the tale. Additionally, they were both written and released during time periods when fairy tales were instrumental in their respective societies. This influential role of fairy tales in seventeenth-century France and nineteenth- and twentieth-century Germany also contributes to my choice of analyzing the two versions of Cinderella with the theory of constitutive rhetoric.

I begin this chapter by looking at the life and times of Charles Perrault and examining the role that fairy tales played in late-seventeenth century France. This will be immediately followed by a review of the Brothers Grimm, the world in which they lived, and the role fairy tales played in nineteenth- and twentieth-century Germany. Once I have examined the authors and their respective time periods, I overview the theory of constitutive rhetoric, which is the lens I use to analyze “Cendrillon” and “Aschenputtel.” I then apply this theory to the two fairytales, specifically looking at classism within
“Cendrillon” and nationalism within “Aschenputtel.” I begin my literature review by examining the influential author whose work would one day inspire one of the most beloved Disney movies, Charles Perrault.

**Charles Perrault**

Charles Perrault (1628-1703) was an up-and-coming figure in French society during the latter half of the seventeenth century. Perrault was born into a bourgeois, Catholic family and would have been considered a “commoner” during this time. Although Perrault is generally known for his fairy tales, he did not begin writing fairy tales until the last decade of his life. Throughout his career, Perrault also held roles as an academician and politician in addition to being a writer and a poet. During this time, King Louis XIV had a policy of “choosing public servants from commoners rather than the aristocracy.” This position gave Perrault the opportunity to be involved with other courtiers and aristocrats, so despite his “commoner” status, Perrault rose in popularity and significance in the French Court. His roles in court included being a secretary of the “Little Academy,” whose goal was to help “create a public persona for Louis XIV as a brilliant king.” Additionally, Perrault held the position of overseeing the renovation of the Louvre, the construction of Versailles, and later became the director of the French Academy, which is still in existence today. French historians Saupé and Collinet claim

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5. Ibid., 50-55.
that his career “epitomized that of a successful court functionary.” His prominent roles in court aided in granting his writings and poetry traction amongst courtiers, particularly because his writings reflected some of the major issues of the time.

Between 1648-1653, France went through a civil conflict known as The Fronde in which the Court (Royal) Party and Parliament Party were pitted against one another. This conflict ended in victory for the Court Party and reinforced the monarchy’s power. King Louis XIV came to the throne in 1661, and sparked by paranoia following this conflict reinstituted an absolute monarchy. As Christopher Betts describes, the new king “took the reins of government into his own hands.” This reinstitution of the absolute monarchy influenced the literature of the time, and Perrault himself often encouraged the King’s power and praised his accomplishments through poems and other writings.

This period in French history also gave way to continued religious conflict between Catholics and Christians. In 1685, Louis XIV revoked the Edict of Nantes, which the government had previously instituted to protect the rights of the French Protestants, known as Huguenots. This action caused Huguenots to either leave France or be forced into Catholicism. Interestingly, Perrault was also known to support this enforcement of Catholicism because, as French folklorist Lydie Jean explains, he

believed “that progress was possible only through the Catholic faith.”\textsuperscript{11} Some of his writings during this time clearly referenced the importance of Catholicism and even strove to welcome new converts. Despite the religious unrest, this period is also referred to as “one of the most glorious reigns, artistically speaking, that France had ever known”; accordingly, the 1690s became known as the first generation of the French fairytale.\textsuperscript{12} Louis XIV encouraged the literary and artistic accomplishments of this time through his minister of finance, Jean Baptiste Colbert. By working under Colbert, Perrault had a direct connection to the minister who encouraged “arts and letters” in the French Court.\textsuperscript{13} These conditions created the perfect atmosphere, not only for Charles Perrault’s success, but also for the rise of fairy tales.

**French Elements of Fairy Tales**

Writers of late seventeenth century France generally paid homage to current events and popular issues within their writings. These topics were diverse, but modern authors argue that a few themes arose more often than others. In her review of seventeenth century fairy tales, Allison Stedman claims that the most significant motif of this time was medieval nostalgia. Stedman argues that

\begin{quote}
dismayed by the waning cultural influence of the worldly nobility, and apprehensive of the noble identity’s increasing instability, late seventeenth-century salon authors used fairy tales to sublimate the present,
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refashioning in its place an idealized medieval past, traditionally associated with oral genres and folklore.\textsuperscript{14}

Presumably, because these “salon authors” were uneasy about the instability of nobility during their own time, they were nostalgic for a time when nobility was more concrete. In her examination of France under Louis XIV, Dorothy Thelander states that fairy tale writers of this time, particularly Perrault and his niece Mme L’Héritier,

reflect a vision of the past as somehow better than the present . . . it is as though ‘One upon a time’ were not enough as an opening formula, and one ought to use ‘In the olden days, when wishes really mattered.’\textsuperscript{15}

These fairy tale writers, as members of the aristocracy, were becoming increasingly dissatisfied under the reign of King Louis XIV. They became more nostalgic for idealized times in history when the government and country were not in disarray. They accordingly wrote this utopic, idealized past into their tales. One specific element of this idealized past is the role of a king. According to this lore, all kings should be absolutely good, but if the king is bad within these tales, then “the despotic ruler is clearly condemned and sometimes killed.”\textsuperscript{16} Thelander explains that although monarchies were consistently encouraged in the fairy tales, the monarch himself was expected to be kind, benevolent, and good. These writers longed for an idealized past with a more concrete hierarchy, but they also longed for the idealized king that was altogether good. This could explain why absolute monarchies and social hierarchies were two other major themes commonly found in literature during this era—these authors longed for a romanticized past.\textsuperscript{17}


\textsuperscript{16} Ibid., 493.

\textsuperscript{17} Betts, “Introduction,” xi.; Saupé and Collinet, “Charles Perrault,” 54.
Much of the writing during this time also reflected current or recent turmoil. Events such as the food shortage of 1693 and 1694 were incorporated into fictional stories to anchor the stories socially and heighten their credibility.\textsuperscript{18} Religion and supplication were also themes commonly found in French writing during the late seventeenth century.\textsuperscript{19} Knapp argues that this “heavily religious tenor and supplicant mood of the time” were the consequences of King Louis XIV’s marriage to the very religious and devout Mme de Maintenon.\textsuperscript{20}

The last common French literary theme I will mention here is injustice. In a time when members of the nobility saw their stability slipping away, they chose to include the topic of injustice in many of their fictional writings. Although one of the main goals of the fairy tale authors during this time was to entertain, they also wished to educate. This education often came in the form of social commentary found within the tales. Thelander explains that “these tales reflect the serious concerns of particular social and intellectual circles in late seventeenth-century France, and they reveal a mood of hostility or ambivalence toward important elements in the official culture of the age of Louis XIV.”\textsuperscript{21} The fairy tale was a suitable and subtle outlet for these writers to express their societal frustrations. Additionally, Thelander posits that one reason for the popularity of fairy tales at the end of the seventeenth century is that the fairy tale was “an unobtrusive, politically safe vehicle for some of the muffled aristocratic disaffection that we know

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\textsuperscript{18} Saupé and Collinet, “Charles Perrault,” 54.


\textsuperscript{20} Ibid., 108.

\textsuperscript{21} Thelander, “Mother Goose and Her Goslings,” 492.
\end{flushleft}
surrounded the Sun King.” Scholars recognize that France under Louis XIV was less than ideal, and the fairy tale writers wove their criticism of Louis VIX and the unjust society and government into their tales. However, the tales were written and performed with “wit, spiciness, and enchantment,” so those negative societal reflections were acceptable and digestible.23

**Status Quo of French Fairy Tales**

Amidst all of the changes under the reign of King Louis XIV, fairy tales began to flourish among the French elite in the 1690s. Betts suggests that one reason for this popularity is that the “dazzling achievements of Louis XIV’s early reign were fading into decline, and that in a decade marked also by a series of national disasters (royal deaths, military defeat, spreading poverty, famine) escapist literature was popular.”24 This escapist literature often transported contemporary issues into magical lands in which the cruelties of reality could be modified or overcome, and with the “diminishing grandeur of King Louis XIV’s court and the decline of France,” the French people needed escape. The aristocracy most commonly circulated these escapist tales in “salons.” Betts describes salons as “regular gatherings, in a drawing-room, of friends and acquaintances of the hostess.”25 Salons were so impactful that they became the center of French literary culture. Knapp explains that these “salons, begun in the sixteenth century and developed in the seventeenth, retained their popularity in the eighteenth,” going on to explain that the “salonnières,” members of the salon, “exerted great influence on taste and on new

22. Ibid.
25. Ibid., xiii.
currents of thought.” During these gatherings, men and women would recite fairy tales that they had rewritten into long narratives, with the best and brightest receiving prestige and accolades from their peers. Men and women used these opportunities to reflect on the many changes within King Louis’ court and French society. These salons also afforded unique opportunities for women who had limited roles in this society.

Betts explains that laws in France “gave husbands almost unlimited power over their wives,” and women were expected to simply grin-and-bear it. However, according to Zipes, the salons of 1690s France “afforded [women] the opportunity to perform and demonstrate their unique prowess at a time when they had few privileges in the public sphere.” In the salons, women became literarily equal to men. Women would rewrite traditional fairy tales into long narratives and then perform these tales in the prestigious salons. Writing and performing fairy tales provided women with an outlet that allowed them to express themselves artistically and gave them an opportunity to discreetly express their criticisms of society. Despite the prolific narratives written by women in the 1690s, Perrault’s tales became more popular with the lower classes and were integrated into the French literary tradition. Jean believes Perrault’s popularity rose because he “used folktales and did not make drastic modifications in their structure: people easily recognized the stories they knew so well.” His writing was decidedly different from the fairy tales written by the female writers of this time who constructed their narratives in

ways the “common people” could not understand. Bottingheimer explains that the comprehensibility of Perrault’s tales is likely what led to their being “incorporated into French school curricula,” and is likely a significant reason why his version of Cinderella remains the most popular version in Western contemporary society.\(^{30}\)

**The Brothers Grimm**

Jacob and Wilhelm Grimm have become household names thanks to their work with fairy tales, and yet, very little is widely-known about the world in which they lived or the influence of their historical context on their writing. Jacob and Wilhelm were born in a small German town in 1785 and 1786, respectively, into a well-educated and highly religious family, a background that would have a tremendous influence on their later writings.\(^{31}\) In 1807, around the time when the brothers first began to collect fairy tales, Napoleon invaded the Germanies, which made a profound political and cultural impact.\(^{32}\) Bottingheimer explains that it was at this point in Germanic history that a “German national consciousness” began to coalesce.\(^{33}\) With French forces invading their lands, the German people found it more crucial than ever before to maintain their German identity, rather than adapting to French customs. This “Francophobia,” as Bottingheimer labels it, was deeply felt by Jacob and Wilhelm.\(^{34}\) It was during this tumultuous period of German history that the brothers began to collect fairy tales and folktales to help unify Germany.


\(^{32}\) Ibid., xx.

\(^{33}\) Bottingheimer, *Fairy Tales*, 43.

According to Bottingheimer, the brothers believed that their collection of tales “not only embodied German-ness, but that they showed Germans how to be German.” Jacob and Wilhelm sought to revitalize German culture because of the constant threat that French culture might seep into their own. Their solution to this threat was to collect tales from the German folk.

Zipes explains that, as scholars in German literature and philology, the Grimm Brothers’ actual purpose behind collecting the tales, known today as the Grimms’ Fairy Tales, was “to trace and grasp the essence of cultural evolution and to demonstrate how natural language, stemming from the needs, customs, and rituals of the common people, created authentic bonds and helped forge civilized communities.” The Brothers Grimm saw this collection as an analysis of folktales’ effect on culture, rather than a group of stories that had the sole purpose of entertaining the masses. Zipes further explains that the brothers sought to uncover “linguistic truths that bound the German people together.” Jacob and Wilhelm believed that fairy and folktales held tremendous power and influence, which sparked their efforts to collect genuine “folk” tales. Interestingly, Zipes explains that for centuries, “it was believed that [Jacob and Wilhelm] had wandered about Germany and gathered their tales from the lips of doughty peasants and that all their tales were genuinely German.” This belief added to the authenticity of their collection because people believed these stories accurately reflected the lives and beliefs of the folk people, whose “German” customs and values were yet to be altered by the German higher

38. Ibid., xvii.
society or French values. The brothers did indeed function as “transmitters, retellers, or adapters” of fairy and folktales, as James McGlathery describes, but these tales were not from the “folk” people, as many originally believed. Instead, fairy tale scholar Walter Sherf explains that the brothers wrote down stories told by young women within their own social circle. These genteel, well-educated, and religious women told the brothers stories in a way that would have been appropriate for their situation, which is why the first edition of the fairy tales excludes most of the crude and seemingly uncouth material for which the later version of the tales are known.

However, Bottingheimer explains that after the first edition, Wilhelm attempted to make the tales more reflective of the common people. Bottingheimer claims that this led to a “harsh pattern of conduct towards girls and women” within the stories because “it is the dictates of hard peasant and artisan life that produce domestic tyranny, female silence, and isolation in *Grimms’ Tales*.“ According to Zipes, between 1812 and 1857, Wilhelm Grimm continued to edit the tales, adding Christian references and “models for male and female protagonists according to the dominant patriarchal code of that time.” Although modern criticisms concerning misogynist tones in the tales are quite valid, the Brothers Grimm included these elements because they were a reflection of the time, especially among the folk population


Germanic Elements of Fairy Tales

As Zipes mentions, the Brothers Grimm believed that their collection of tales were a collection of “linguistic truths that bound the German people together,” indicating that many themes throughout Kinder– und Hausmärchen are characteristics that the brothers believed to be inherently German. 43 Folklorist Louis Snyder agrees with this argument, claiming that various “attitudes” throughout the stories were “particularly Germanic.” 44 Some notable Germanic elements of the tales listed by Snyder are authoritarianism, militarism, violence towards the outsider, enforcement of discipline, and a strict division between social classes. 45 Snyder also mentions that a positive view of the king or other monarch figure is dominant within the Grimms’ stories. Because of this, the king is often portrayed as being mighty, wise, generous, and kindly, among other positive characteristics. 46 Snyder also mentions the desirability of order, obedience, courage, and anti-Semitism, which he ties back to distrust of the outsider. 47 Other scholars have also identified characteristics in the Grimms’ tales. For instance, Zipes believes Christian morality, Protestant work ethic, patriarchalism, social injustice, and possibilities for self-determination are all themes in the Grimms’ stories. 48

45. Ibid.
47. Snyder, “Cultural Nationalism,” 44-49.
Fairy Tales’ Influence on German Identity

The Grimms’ tales, born out of the German Romanticism movement, played an instrumental part in the growth of German Nationalism. Snyder claims that the Grimms offered a kind of “critical scholarship” with their work that had previously been missing from German Romanticism, even claiming that their stress on “folk language, customs, personality, and the idea of Volksgemeinschaft (community of the people) . . . was an important factor in the historical evolution of modern nationalism.”49 The tales of the Brothers Grimm became the face of German Romanticism’s concepts of nationalism.

It is perhaps because of how the Brothers Grimm wrote these stories, in addition to their German nationalistic themes, that these tales were incorporated into German school curriculum in the mid- to late-1800s. Although Germany itself was not a single unified nation at this time, Zipes claims that “by the 1870s the Grimms’ tales had been incorporated into the teaching curriculum in Prussia and other German principalities.”50 These tales were so pervasive in the German school system that as Bottingheimer states, “by the end of the nineteenth century, first-year pupils were memorizing the simplest tales and older pupils were explicating the longer and more complex ones.”51 These stories were not simply read to children during story time or before their naptime; they were memorized, studied, and ingrained into the children’s education. Bottingheimer believes the tales were so influential that they “became an integral part of the expanding Prussian empire,” and goes on to claim that the tales “thus became part of the

49. Snyder, “Cultural Nationalism,” 40.
51. Bottingheimer, Fairy Tales, 40-41.
unquestioned national heritage and national canon.” These tales contained and perpetuated what can be considered inherent German traits, which were then taught to children from the beginning of their entrance into the German school system. The Grimms’ *Märchen*, therefore, had a profound impact on late-nineteenth century Germany. This impact carried through into the early twentieth century, particularly before and during the rise of the Nazi Regime.

Following the First World War, Germany was in a state of disarray. During the war, German rhetoric had insisted on Germany’s triumph and accordingly prepared the people for this success. However, “seemingly overnight” the German people received news of their defeat, and this defeat eventually became associated with the Weimar Republic that was established immediately following the war. Snyder explains that “the architects of Weimar worked in a hurry to produce a government which they believed would be regarded with favor by the Allies and which would assure them of easier terms of peace,” and he goes on to explain that this government was “not strong enough to withstand political chaos, economic trials, social distress, and psychological anxiety.” Altogether the inadequacies of the Weimar government led to complete dissatisfaction and disorder amongst the German people. This would of course present the opportune moment for the Nazi Party’s rise to power.

*Kinder– und Hausmärchen* was heavily abused and misused by Nazis in the early twentieth century. *The Oxford Companion to Fairy Tales* explains that “after the Nazis

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52. Bottingheimer, “From Gold to Guilt,” 199.
54. Ibid.
55. Ibid., 157-158.
rose to power, fairy tales and folk tales were interpreted and used to spread the Aryan ideology throughout Europe.”  

56. Already existing themes of authoritarianism, violence towards the outsider, and anti-Semitism were exploited by the Nazis and used to encourage their ideologies of hatred towards the Jewish people. During this time period, Jews were commonly seen as outsiders who were invading the German nation, which as the tales taught, could not be tolerated and must be actively fought. Also, Snyder claims that “all the cruel pieces of the fairy tales, which had been eliminated under the Weimar Republic, were restored in Hitler’s Germany, and the study of folklore was raised to a special place of honor.”

57. Not only was the violence re-introduced into these tales, but the stories themselves became revered by German leaders and “honored.” For decades, Germans had believed that these fairy tales held elemental truths about the German people. The Nazis took this already existing belief and twisted it for their own purposes—making Germans believe that the tales they had heard since their childhood encouraged hatred towards the outsider and hatred towards the Jew. The tales also demonstrated the importance of authoritarianism, which fortified the Nazis’ hold on the German people.

The tales of Kinder- und Hausmärchen were not the only works of the Brothers Grimm to have lasting effects on Germany. Snyder explains that Jacob and Wilhelm’s devotion to and study of the German language “fashioned the early framework of philology which was used later by some of the linguistic paleontologists in their search for the elusive Aryan by ‘race.’”

58. The brothers themselves were seen as the pioneers of

identifying and perpetuating Germanic attitudes and traits, which were then interpreted by Nazis as Aryan attitudes and traits. So influential was the *Kinder– und Hausmärchen* under the Nazi Regime that, as Bottingheimer explains,

> after World War II Germany’s Allied conquerors evidently shared Wilhelm Grimm’s view that the tales in the collection could and would impart Germanness to the German nation, and in 1945 Allied Forces banned the Grimm tales as a whole from school curricula in Germany, removed copies of the tales from school and library shelves, and shipped them abroad, many to American municipal and university libraries.\(^5^9\)

At this point, the German tales and the characteristics of “Germanness” they contained, were too closely related to Aryan ideologies to be acceptable, according to the Allied forces. Of course, banning the tales from curriculum did not eliminate the impact the tales had already had on the German people and German nation. As I have striven to demonstrate, the two different time periods surrounding my chosen texts were pivotal moments in history. Accordingly, fairy tales played an influential role in each of these historical moments. Because fairy tales had such momentous roles in seventeenth-century France and nineteenth- through twentieth-century Germany, I have chosen to use the theory of constitutive rhetoric to examine these artifacts. Before beginning my analysis, the following section will explain constitutive rhetoric and establish the framework for my analysis.

**Constitutive Rhetoric**

Although the theory of constitutive rhetoric has ties to Burke and Althusser, Maurice Charland’s groundbreaking work analyzing Québécois rhetoric cemented and shaped this theory. At the foundation of constitutive rhetoric is the idea that “audiences

\(^5^9\) Bottingheimer, *Fairy Tales*, 41.
are constituted as subjects through a process of identification with a textual position."\(^{60}\) In other words, texts and narratives work to shape the identity of a group of people. Sarah Stein further explains this idea by stating that “audiences are not considered to exist outside rhetoric as the subjects of its address, but rather to ‘live inside’ the rhetoric that constructs them.”\(^{61}\) The audience is not merely onlookers or hearers of constitutive rhetoric; their ideologies are shaped and constructed by the rhetoric. Therefore, the ideal communicated through the text or narrative will become the ideal for the group of people as well.

At the root of the theory of constitutive rhetoric is Althusser’s concept of “interpellation.” In explaining this term, Althusser claims that ideology “acts” or “functions” in such a way that it “recruits” subjects among the individuals (it recruits them all), or “transforms” the individuals into subjects (it transforms them all) by that very precise operation which I have called interpellation or hailing, and which can be imagined along the lines of the most commonplace everyday police (or other) hailing: “Hey, you there!”\(^{62}\)

When a person is “hailed” by the police, he or she turns in expectation, knowing that he or she has become the subject to whom the police is referring. Althusser argues that ideologies have the same effect on individuals. People get “hailed” or “interpellated” into the ideology and become a subject of that ideology. Along these same lines, Charland claims that “one cannot exist but as a subject within a narrative.”\(^{63}\) Charland and Althusser believe that we are all subjects of various ideologies and narratives—they

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provide context for our lives and beliefs. The two scholars also believe that we are inevitably hailed into these ideologies, and that we inevitably act according to these ideologies. Constitutive rhetoric functions around the idea that a piece of rhetoric interpellates individuals, who inevitably inhabit the subject positions crafted and intended by that rhetorical text. Once the individuals are hailed into these subject positions, “correct actions are assumed to follow from these subjectivities.”64 According to this theory, when the individual has inhabited his or her inevitable role, he or she is “destined” to act according to that role—it is inescapable.

Charland clearly argues that persuasion is not involved when people are inescapably hailed into their subject positions. He claims that

the process by which an audience member enters into a new subject position is therefore not one of persuasion. It is akin more to one of conversion that ultimately results in an act of recognition of the “rightness” of a discourse and of one’s identity with its reconfigured subject position.65

The basic idea here is that an individual is interpellated into a preexisting position, as if someone had finally given name to their identity which they had before then been unable to label. Persuasion is not involved because the individual, theoretically, comes to realize that his or her own past and future make sense under the umbrella of the new subject position he or she inhabits. The individual is not being persuaded, he or she is merely realizing what his or her natural state is. And once the individual accepts his or her subject position, he or she must inevitably act in accordance to that position. When referring to the Québécois, Charland argues that “a subject is not persuaded to support

sovereignty. Support for sovereignty is inherent to the subject position.” Once the individual realizes and accepts his or her subject position, he or she then acts accordingly by taking on the characteristics and expectations of that position. These identities then become what Charland names a “collective subject.” This collective subject creates a unified group of people that transcends the individual through shared beliefs, goals, and characteristics.

Charland claims that the “process of constituting a collective subject” has three ideological effects, the first being “an ‘ultimate’ identification permitting an overcoming or going beyond of divisive individual . . . concerns.” Constitutive rhetoric allows and requires the audience to overcome individual prejudices to identify as a collective group. In his study of religious communication, Theon Hill explains this well, stating that constitutive rhetoric “enables the transcendence of traditional barriers between individuals and groups.” The second ideological effect Charland mentions is the “positing of a transhistorical subject.” Thus, constitutive rhetoric accordingly transcends group and historical barriers. Charland goes on to explain that “the narrative form provides a continuity across time in which the practices of the past are increasingly identified with the present day order.” The collective group strives to connect with the ideological past in an attempt to live these ideologies in their present. As Hill explains, “the narrative appears as an always-existing reality,” a reality into which the collective

66. Ibid., 134.
67. Ibid., 139.
70. Ibid., 145.
group is “interpellated” or “hailed.” The last ideological effect Charland posits is the “illusion of freedom.” Within this theory, Charland claims that “the subject is constrained to follow through, to act so as to maintain the narrative’s consistency.” One of Charland’s basic axioms within this theory is that the collective acts towards the ideologies of the rhetoric, which is the base of constitutive rhetoric’s power. Because subjects must adhere to the ideologies of their group’s rhetoric, they are given “freedom from previous subject position(s) while constraining their freedom with new constitution(s).” Subjects are interpellated into ideologies of the rhetoric without being aware of the sway of the rhetoric, which maintains their illusion of freedom.

Altogether, constitutive rhetoric operates on the assumption that a text can constitute its audience as subjects. The text interpellates the audience into subject positions that support the ideology of the text. Theoretically, persuasion is not required in this process because the individuals being interpellated will simply see their new identification as having always existed, but never having been examined or labeled. The audience will also not need to be persuaded to act according to their subject position. According to this theory, their actions will inherently be consistent with the position they inhabit. To act against the position would be to act against their beliefs and predispositions. Within the theory of constitutive rhetoric, texts also work to create a collective subject. This collective subject allows members to overcome individual prejudices, to transcend group and historical barriers, and to maintain an illusion of

73. Ibid.
74. Ibid.
75. Hill, “(Re)Articulating Difference,” 32.
freedom. Constitutive rhetoric argues that rhetorical texts have the power to constitute identities within a group of people and to guide those people towards action.

Analysis

Using constitutive rhetoric as my theoretical lens, I now turn to my analysis of Perrault’s “Cendrillon” and the Brothers Grimm’s “Aschenputtel.” The first question I answer is how Perrault’s “Cendrillon” helped to shape classist identities in France. Secondly, I examine how the Brothers Grimm’s “Aschenputtel” helped to shape national identities in Germany. To address these questions, I examine several reoccurring themes within each text that will help to establish how “Cendrillon” promoted classism and how “Aschenputtel” promoted nationalism. I begin my analysis by examining Charles Perrault’s “Cendrillon.”

Classism in Perrault’s “Cendrillon”

In his “Cendrillon,” Perrault incorporated three major themes that I argue demonstrate the importance of class in French society: the value of position, the value of possessions, and the value of peacekeeping. These three themes explain the importance of wealth, social hierarchy, and maintaining peace within that hierarchy. All three of these themes seemingly work together to promote a classist system. In this section of analysis, I demonstrate how “Cendrillon” includes all three of these themes to illustrate how these ideas rhetorically influenced French society. I begin by examining the value of position in “Cendrillon.”

Value of position.

In “Cendrillon,” Perrault emphasizes the value of position in three different ways. First, he establishes Cinderella as a gentleman’s daughter at the beginning of the tale.
Then, Perrault associates Cinderella’s good personality traits with royalty/nobility. And finally, he continuously puts Cinderella’s sisters “in their place.”

In the opening lines of “Cendrillon,” Perrault establishes Cinderella as the daughter of a gentleman, therefore identifying her as a member of the French gentility. The opening lines of “Cendrillon” are as follows:

Once there was a gentleman who married, for his second wife, the proudest and most haughty woman that was ever seen. She had, by a former husband, two daughters of her own humour, who were, indeed, exactly like her in all things. He had likewise, by another wife, a young daughter, but of unparalled goodness and sweetness of temper.76

Perrault’s establishment of Cinderella as a gentleman’s daughter is significant for two basic reasons: 1) the hard times that befall her are unjust because she should not be treated as if she is a peasant when she is actually part of the gentility, and 2) Cinderella rises from gentility to royalty, rather than peasantry to royalty. Perrault’s readers would have been more likely to sympathize with a girl who is a gentlewoman being treated as a peasant, than a peasant girl who is being treated in a way that was socially acceptable to her station. This opening heightens the sense of injustice throughout the story because the heroine is not only treated poorly, but is treated below her societal station. Unlike other versions of Cinderella in which she is initially a peasant and rises to royalty, Perrault’s Cinderella is never a peasant and begins the story as a gentlewoman. This story, particularly the opening lines, encourage the idea that no one can rise too far above their station (i.e., peasant to princess); they can only rise a socially acceptable amount (i.e., gentlewoman to princess).

76. This, and all further references to “Cendrillon” come from: Andrew Lang, ed., The Blue Fairy Book (London, UK: Longmans, Green, and Co., 1889), 64-71.
Additionally, Perrault continuously shows the value of position in society through Cinderella’s own positive characteristics. Cinderella’s personality proves that even if one manages to rise in society (i.e., gentlewoman to princess), she is still expected to conform to the ideals of the royalty and nobility. As soon as Cinderella walks into the ball, she is believed to be a princess because of her beauty. In this story, only royals could possibly be as beautiful as Cinderella. To maintain this façade, Perrault had to be clear that Cinderella was a manifestation of royal attributes. Throughout the tale, Cinderella is described with many positive traits, some of the most reoccurring ones being goodness, beauty, and loveliness. At the end of the very first paragraph, Perrault describes her as being of “unparalleled goodness and sweetness of temper.” He again describes her as being “good” after her sisters ridicule her because instead of dressing “their heads awry,” she “dressed them perfectly well.” While at the ball, Cinderella is described as “beautiful” numerous times. At first, all of the guests become quiet because they are contemplating “the singular beauties of the unknown new-comer, and then the king tells the queen that “it was a long time since he had seen so beautiful and lovely a creature.” The last example of Cinderella’s beauty comes after her sisters arrive home after the first night of the ball, and they explain to Cinderella that “there came thither the finest princess, the most beautiful ever was seen with mortal eyes; she showed us a thousand civilities.” In these excerpts, Cinderella’s beauty, civility, and goodness seem to be intrinsically tied to her title of “princess.” Together, these characteristics demonstrate that identifying an individual’s social status is tied to the characteristics associated with royalty and nobility.
Within “Cendrillon,” Perrault also expresses the value of position through the stepsisters’ treatment of Cinderella. Throughout the tale, most of the sisters’ interactions with Cinderella end with them “putting her in her place.” While the sisters are getting ready for the first night of the ball, they have the following interaction with Cinderella,

“Cinderella, would you not be glad to go to the ball?” “Alas!” said she, “you only jeer me; it is not for such as I am to go thither.” “Thou art right of it,” replied they; “it would make the people laugh to see a Cinderwench at a ball.”

At the first sign that Cinderella is interested in rising above her station (or what they perceive her station to be), the sisters immediately put her down and use the derogatory name “Cinderwench.” After Cinderella asks to borrow a dress for the second night of the ball, the sisters have a similar response and say, “‘lend my clothes to such a dirty Cinderwench as thou art! I should be a fool.” Again, Perrault has the sisters use the nickname “Cinderwench” to attack Cinderella when they believe she is getting “too big for her britches.” The last example of the sisters’ ill treatment comes when Cinderella asks if she might be allowed to try on the slipper, at which point the sisters “burst out a-laughing, and began to banter her.” Again, the sisters find Cinderella’s “ambition” to rise above her societal station as comedic and ridiculous. Perrault uses the sisters’ interactions with Cinderella to demonstrate the general distaste of individuals rising above their position in society and belief that the established class order would become imbalanced if many individuals, particularly peasants, attempted to better their own situation. The stepsisters demonstrate that positions in society are rigid and immovable, and that an individual who attempts to transcend these barriers will be seen with disgust and hostility.
Value of possessions.

In “Cendrillon,” Perrault also consistently places value on material possessions, particularly those that are demonstrative of grandiosity and wealth. Perrault shows this theme in three particular ways: aligning signs of poverty with negative descriptors while aligning signs of wealth with positive descriptors, repeating the use of “fine” as a descriptor, and describing various elements throughout the story as being the very best quality. I will begin this analysis by examining how descriptors play a key role in developing the value of possessions.

Throughout “Cendrillon,” Perrault consistently uses negative adjectives and adverbs to describe duties and objects that are typically associated with poverty, and positive adjectives and adverbs to describe duties and objects that are generally associated with wealth. The very first example of this comes in the second paragraph of the first page when Perrault introduces Cinderella, her stepmother, and her stepsisters. The text states that

[the stepmother] employed her in the meanest work of the house: she scoured the dishes, tables etc., and rubbed madam’s chamber, and those of misses, her daughters; she [Cinderella] lay up in a sorry garret, upon a wretched straw bed, while her sisters lay in fine rooms, with floors all inlaid, upon beds of the very newest fashion.

Immediately, the text describes Cinderella’s work as being the “meanest,” and this includes tasks such as cleaning dishes, tables, and bedrooms. About halfway through this sentence, Perrault again ties signs of poverty to very negative adjectives: the garret is “sorry,” and the straw bed is “wretched.” Directly following this, Perrault ties signs of wealth to positive adjectives: the rooms are “fine,” and the sisters’ fashion is “the very newest.” The next paragraph continues with other examples of descriptors used in similar ways. In the last sentence of this paragraph, Perrault writes, “however, Cinderella,
notwithstanding her mean apparel, was a hundred times handsomer than her sisters, though they were always dressed very richly.” He describes Cinderella’s apparel as “mean,” while her sisters are dressed “very richly.” Not only is it significant that Perrault uses numerous descriptors that provide negative associations with poverty and positive associations with wealth, but the placement of these descriptors is also very significant—all of these descriptors appear on the very first page of the fairy tale. Their presence so early in the tale sets a tone of negativity towards poverty and positivity towards wealth from the very beginning, which carries through the entirety of the tale.

The descriptor that Perrault uses most often throughout the tale to describe wealth is “fine,” as in superior quality or appearance. As noted earlier, Perrault describes the sisters’ rooms as being “fine.” Two pages later, he uses a variant of this word to describe Cinderella’s choice of pumpkin: “Cinderella went immediately to gather the finest she could get.” He continues by describing how the “mouse was that moment turned into a fine horse, which altogether made a very fine set of six horses of a beautiful mouse-coloured dapple-grey.” Here “fine” appears twice in the span of one sentence to describe the state of the horses that were to pull Cinderella’s carriage. Once Cinderella reaches the ball, the text states that “all the ladies were busied in considering her clothes and headdress, that they might have some made next day after the same pattern, provided they could meet with such fine materials and as able hands to make them.” Finally, Perrault’s last use of this word comes on the second-to-last page of the text after Cinderella’s identity has been revealed, “and now her two sisters found her to be that fine, beautiful lady whom they had seen at the ball. Throughout the story, a sign of Cinderella’s improving status is the increasing presence of “fine” objects surrounding her. At the end
of the story, we see that she has become the “fine” object herself. Cinderella seems to become an objectified “fine” thing based on the “fine” objects that the reader begins to associate her with throughout the story. The relationship is as follows: the more fine the objects that surround her, the finer she becomes.

The last way that Perrault demonstrates the theme of valuing possessions in “Cendrillon” is his assertion that good material things are always of the very best quality. For instance, Perrault describes the sisters’ beds as being of “the very newest fashion” on the first page. While getting ready for the ball, the sisters send “for the very best tirewoman.” Perrault describes Cinderella’s own coachman as having “the smartest whiskers eyes ever beheld,” and the godmother gives Cinderella a pair of glass slippers, which are “the prettiest in the whole world.” Perrault repeatedly emphasizes that the characters have the very best quality of whatever material good they possess; therefore, the best quality of every material thing is continuously glorified.

**Value of peacekeeping.**

Within “Cendrillon,” Perrault also demonstrates the importance of peacekeeping. He shows this in three ways: through Cinderella’s manners, through Cinderella’s treatment of her sisters throughout the tale, and through her eventual forgiveness of her sisters at the end of the tale. I begin this section of analysis by illuminating how Cinderella has good manners at various moments in the text.

Throughout “Cendrillon,” Perrault continuously shows Cinderella’s demonstration of good manners, even at great cost to herself. The beginning of the story emphasizes that even though Cinderella is severely mistreated by her mother and stepsisters, “the poor girl bore it all patiently, and dared not tell her father.” Despite the ill
treatment she receives at the hands of her step-relatives, Cinderella knows that
mentioning her troubles to her father would cause strife and interfere with his relationship
with his own wife; so, she avoids this interference. Later in the story, following the ball,
Perrault states that “she heard the clock strike eleven and three-quarters, whereupon she
immediately made a courtesy to the company and hasted away as fast as she could.”
Although she is running out of time before midnight, Cinderella makes certain to
courtesy before leaving the present company. At that moment, the risk of revealing her
identity does not forgo the importance of being polite and courteous. Another example of
Cinderella’s manners, and the last I will mention here, occurs when Cinderella initially
arrives home from the first night of the ball. Perrault states that “being got home, she ran
to seek out her godmother, and, after having thanked her, she said she could not but
heartily wish she might go the next day to the ball.” Before disclosing her own desires,
Cinderella thanks her godmother for the gifts and opportunities she bestowed upon her.
Cinderella’s constant good manners demonstrate the importance of diplomacy, regardless
of the character’s own unfortunate situation.

The value of peacekeeping is also demonstrated in “Cendrillon” through
Cinderella’s constant superior treatment of her stepsisters, despite their mistreatment of
her. While the sisters are getting reading for the ball, the text states that “Cinderella was
likewise called up to them to be consulted in all these matters, for she had excellent
notions, and advised them always for the best.” Immediately following this explanation,
the sisters ridicule Cinderella, saying, “‘it would make the people laugh to see a
Cinderwench at a ball,’” and Perrault is sure to mention that “anyone but Cinderella
would have dressed their heads awry, but she was very good, and dressed them perfectly
That the sisters are unmistakably awful to Cinderella is one of the basic premises of the story, and yet, Cinderella advises them “always for the best” and dresses their hair “perfectly well.” Cinderella could easily have given them poor advice, or dressed their hair in a bad fashion, but she always takes the higher ground and keeps the peace with her stepsisters and stepmother. This is shown again during the first night of the ball. The text states that while at the ball, Cinderella “went and sat down by her sisters, showing them a thousand civilities, giving them part of the oranges and citrons which the prince had presented her with.” This act is an example of Cinderella giving her stepsisters a peace offering or extending an olive branch to them. At this point in the story, Cinderella has the upper hand over her sisters, but instead of abusing this power, she insists on being kind and offering them a gift. Cinderella’s good treatment of her stepsisters, despite their ill treatment of her, is best exemplified in the forgiveness she offers her sister in the tale’s final scene.

Unsurprisingly, the good treatment of her sisters throughout the story leads to Cinderella’s forgiveness of all their wrongdoing at the end of the tale. When Perrault reveals Cinderella to be the unidentified princess, he states that the sisters threw themselves as her feet to beg pardon for all the ill-treatment they had made her undergo. Cinderella took them up, and, as she embraced them, cried: That she forgave them with all her heart and desired them always to love her. Cinderella, who was no less good than beautiful, gave her two sisters lodgings in the palace, and that very same day matched them with two great lords of the court.

Not only does Cinderella state that she forgives her sisters, but also that she wishes them to live near her and bestows upon them both a marriage of good standing. Cinderella’s forgiving and good nature is exemplified in this section of the text. She is again in a position of power, but instead of using that power to “get even,” she uses her power to
grant forgiveness and happiness to her sisters. Cinderella’s use of diplomacy throughout
the story, and particularly at the end of the tale, shows the value of peacekeeping.

As the theory of constitutive rhetoric posits, texts can aid in the shaping of
societies. I argue that Perrault’s “Cendrillon” helped encourage classism in late-
seventeenth- and eighteenth-century France. As I established in my literature review,
nostalgia for the idealized past was a commonly occurring theme throughout the written
French fairy tales of the seventeenth century. Writers of this time, including Perrault,
sought a past that was more certain and “simple” than their current tumultuous society,
and a stricter hierarchy was the key to this romanticized past. As I have found, Perrault
himself includes three classist themes within “Cendrillion”: the value of position, the
value of possessions, and the value of peacekeeping. All three of these themes work to
promote the idealized past. Positions, possessions, and peacekeeping all seemingly
encourage the strict hierarchy of the “ideal” past: positions produce classes, ownership of
possessions are associated with position, and keeping the peace maintains the status quo.

Evidence suggests that in a time when the aristocracy was feeling threatened, the
fairy tale writers, who were part of the aristocracy, wrote classist values into their tales.
This then worked to encourage classism, and in turn, nostalgia for the idealized past in
their audience. By the early- to mid-eighteenth century, the salon fairy tales began
circulating amongst the lower classes and were read and studied by children of all
socioeconomic levels. Naturally, the values within these tales were circulated, which
meant the classist values, that I argue are present within these tales, were encouraged
throughout all French peoples. These tales demonstrated that strict hierarchies were
beneficial, but also that the King should be all-powerful, benevolent, and good—and
when the king is not good, and does not help support the right hierarchy, a good ruler should replace him. These tales seemingly taught that if the king is a hindrance to their idealized past, then he should be replaced. These values had very tangible effects on French society. For instance, the need for a fair and benevolent ruler sparked the French Revolution in 1789. At this point in history, the classist tales of Perrault and his contemporaries had been circulating for nearly one hundred years. Children read these tales growing up, and because children’s literature is incredibly influential on young children, the values were imprinted upon them. As I have attempted to support, Perrault’s tales demonstrate that the classist values of position, possessions, and peacekeeping should be esteemed. However, when the king is a threat to this rightful order, then he should be replaced. Evidence suggests that the French people began to believe the best way to get back to their idealized past, encouraged by the seventeenth century fairy tale writers, was to revolt against their government in order to reshape it into the idealized mold. It is also possible that in order to get back to these romanticized times, the French people believed they had to revolt against the current unjust government.

**Nationalism in the Brothers Grimm’s “Aschenputtel”**

I argue that multiple traits of German Nationalism are included throughout the Brothers Grimm’s “Aschenputtel.” I found that the most prominent themes of German Nationalism in the text are hostility towards the outsider, a need for order, and the potential for self-determination. I argue that the Brothers Grimm incorporate all three of these themes together to ultimately encourage a sense of German Nationalism in “Aschenputtel.” I first examine the presence of these themes within the text, and then
demonstrate how “Aschenputtel” aided in shaping German society. I begin my analysis by examining the presence of hostility towards outsiders in “Aschenputtel.”

**Hostility towards the outsider.**

I found that hostility towards the outsider is a reoccurring theme throughout the Brothers Grimm’s “Aschenputtel” and is particularly shown through the description, portrayal, and treatment of Cinderella’s stepsisters. In the beginning of the tale, the Brothers Grimm establish the sisters as outsiders coming in and interrupting Cinderella’s life. The text claims that “the wife [Cinderella’s stepmother] brought two daughters into the house with her,” then the sisters immediately “took her beautiful clothes away from her, dressed her in an old gray smock, and gave her wooden shoes.”

From the very onset of the tale, the Brothers Grimm position the sisters as interlopers into Cinderella’s life and home, and take away what is rightfully hers.

Once the rhetors establish the sisters as outsiders, they then describe them as beautiful on the outside, but ugly on the inside. These descriptions demonstrate that the outsiders who come into Cinderella’s lives may look good, but they cannot be trusted.

For example, the first descriptions of the sisters and Cinderella are as follows:

[Cinderella] went out to her mother’s grave every day and wept, and she remained pious and good. When winter came the snow spread a white cloth over the grave, and when the spring sun had removed it again, the man took himself another wife.

This wife brought two daughters into the house with her. They were beautiful, with fair faces, but evil and dark hearts. Time soon grew very bad for the poor stepchild.

77. This and all further references to the Brothers Grimm’s “Aschenputtel” come from: D. L. Ashliman, trans., “Cinderella: Jacob and Wilhelm Grimm,” last modified June 1, 2011, http://www.pitt.edu/~dash/grimm021.html.
The Brothers Grimm describe the sisters as beautiful on the outside but evil on the inside, whereas Cinderella is “pious and good.” The tale also often portrays the sisters as vain. When the father asks his stepdaughters and Cinderella what they would like him to bring back for them from the fair, one sister insists on “beautiful dresses,” while the other wants “pearls and jewels.” Cinderella, on the other hand, simply instructs, “father, break off for me the first twig that brushes your hat on your way home.” Whereas the sisters are concerned with receiving material goods, Cinderella wishes for something that would hold meaning for her. The Brothers Grimm again demonstrate the sisters’ vanity when the prince wishes all the sisters to try on the golden shoe, and the stepsisters were excited to hear this “for they had pretty feet.” The text sets up the external beauty and vanity of the sisters as a façade for their internal evil selves. The Brothers Grimm’s constant comparison of Cinderella’s internal goodness and their internal badness also sets up the idea that the sisters, the “outsiders” of the tale, are inherently bad compared to Cinderella who is inherently good. Altogether, comparing the sisters being consumed with beauty and vanity, while being internally evil, communicates that although outsiders may seem appealing and good, they are bad people.

The text also shows hostility towards the outsider through the sisters’ attempt to “fit” into positions that are not meant for them. When the first sister tries on the golden shoe, the text states that

she could not get her big toe into it, for the show was too small for her. Then her mother gave her a knife and said, “Cut off your toe. When you are queen you will no longer have to go on foot.” The girl cut off her toe, forced her foot into the shoe, swallowed the pain, and went out to the prince. He took her on his horse as his bride and rode away with her.
. . . Then he [the prince] looked at her foot and saw how the blood was running from it. He turned his horse around and took the false bride home again.

A nearly identical exchange happens when the other sister tries on the shoe, but the second sister chops off her heel instead of her toe. The sisters are trying to fill a role that is meant for Cinderella, which is why the Brothers Grimm identify them as “false brides,” and the prince calls Cinderella his “true bride.” Again, we see the sisters as outsiders attempting to disrupt Cinderella’s life. In this specific situation, the stepsisters are attempting to usurp Cinderella, and what is rightfully hers, which is a theme we first noticed at the beginning of this tale. By attempting to take Cinderella’s place as the “true bride,” the sisters demonstrate that we should be wary of outsiders because they might take what is not their own.

Lastly, the Brothers Grimm show hostility towards the outsider through the violent “punishment” of the sisters at the end of the tale. The last paragraph of the text states that

when the bridal couple walked into the church, the older sister walked on their right side and the younger on their left side, and the pigeons pecked out one eye from each of them. Afterwards, as they came out of the church, the older one was on the left side, and the younger one on the right side, and then the pigeons pecked out the other eye from each of them. And thus, for their wickedness and falsehood, they were punished with blindness as long as they lived.

One of the key terms in this paragraph is “falsehood.” The sisters receive punishments because they have attempted to falsely fill Cinderella’s role, a role that is meant for the “true bride.” To rectify this wrong, the Brothers Grimm show that the sisters were violently punished by having their eyes pecked out. The tale portrays this punishment as justice for the sisters’ crimes. Altogether, this passage seemingly encourages and justifies
violence towards the outsider when the outsider attempts to enter where they do not belong.

“Aschenputtel” demonstrates violence towards the outsider in how the sisters are portrayed and treated. The Brothers Grimm establish the sisters as the outsiders in the very beginning of the story. They are then described as being internally evil, even though their exteriors are seemingly appealing and beautiful. The story then goes on to show the immorality of the sisters’ attempts to literally “fill Cinderella’s shoes,” and it ends with the sisters having their eyes pecked out because of their “falsehood.” The text therefore encourages hostility towards the outsider because outsiders will inherently be evil despite their appealing looks and attempt to usurp the rightful roles of inhabitants, and should therefore be justly punished with violence.

As the theory of constitutive rhetoric demonstrates, texts can have a profound influence in shaping societies. I argue that the Grimms’ “Aschenputtel” affected the development of German Nationalism, particularly the theme within the tale of hostility towards the outsider. One of the basic premises of the movement, which has come to be called German Nationalism, is dislike and violence towards the outsider. The Brothers Grimm likely first included this theme in their tales because of the impending threat of the French. When their tales began to circulate in German school systems during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, the theme of hostility towards the outsider naturally began to circulate as well. As evidence suggests, children in these centuries grew up reading these tales and believing that the Märchen held the truth of what it means to be German, which, according to my analysis, would mean being hostile to outsiders was believed to be an inherently German trait. Ultimately, as history demonstrates, hostility
towards the outsider was so pervasive in this culture, that it was a foundational characteristic of Nazi Germany. This can clearly be seen in the treatment of Jews and Jewish sympathizers before and during WWII. The Third Reich’s use of Kinder– und Hausmärchen as propaganda suggests that these tales truly did have power, and perpetuated “Germanic” characteristics.

Desirability for order.

Within “Aschenputtel,” I found that the Brothers Grimm demonstrate a need for order, which is related to the outsider being “out of order.” I argue that they establish this need for order in two different ways within the tale: a repeated theme of order leading to success, and the use of rhythmic and rhyming patterns to draw attention to order. These two themes are particularly present in two specific instances in the tale. The first instance is when Cinderella asks to go to the ball, and the second when the stepsisters are both attempting to make their feet fit into the golden shoe and ride off with the prince. Both of these instances imply that success will follow order. Not only do these two situations both come at pivotal moments in the tale, but they also contain some of the only lines in the tale that are set off by rhythmic verse and rhyme. I will begin this section of analysis by examining the relationship between success and order.

Throughout the text, the Brothers Grimm associate proper order with success. This relationship is first seen when Cinderella is hoping to go to the ball. The text states that Cinderella begs “her stepmother to allow her to go” to the ball, and the stepmother responds with the following instructions, “I have scattered a bowl of lentils into the ashes for you. If you can pick them out again in two hours, then you may go with us.” Upon
receiving these conditions, Cinderella enlists the help of animals to pick up the lentils.

The text explains this encounter as follows:

The girl when through the back into the garden, and called out, “You tame pigeons, you turtledoves, and all you birds beneath the sky, come and help me to gather:

The good ones go into the pot,
The bad ones go into your crop.”

Two white pigeons came in through the kitchen window, and then the turtledoves, and finally all the birds beneath the sky came whirring and swarming in, and lit around the ashes. The pigeons nodded their heads and began to pick, pick, pick. And the others also began to pick, pick, pick. They gathered all the good grains into the bowl. Hardly one hour passed before they were finished and they all flew out again.

The girl took the bowl to her stepmother, and was happy, thinking that now she would be allowed to go to the festival with them.

In this scene, Cinderella’s hopes of going to the ball are dependent upon her ability to literally put things into order. Thus the Brothers Grimm suggest a clear causal relationship: order leads to success. This same relationship is seen later in the text, when the sisters attempt to take Cinderella’s place as the prince’s “true bride.” In this scenario, the sisters themselves are portrayed as figuratively being out of order, which causes their demise. When explaining the first sister’s attempt to fit into the shoe, the Brothers Grimm states:

The girl cut off her toe, forced her foot into the shoe, swallowed the pain, and went out to the prince. He took her on his horse as his bride and rode away with her. However, they had to ride past the [mother’s] grave, and there, on the hazel tree, sat the two pigeons, crying out:

Rook di goo, rook di goo!
There’s blood in the shoe.
The shoe is too tight,
This bride is not right!

Then he looked at her foot and saw how the blood was running from it. He turned his horse around and took the false bride home again, saying that she is not the right one.
Here we see that the sister’s attempt to forcefully make the shoe fit is out of order, making her “not the right one.” The relationship mentioned earlier, order leading to success, is again demonstrated in these lines of text. Because the sister is not in her correct position, or order, she cannot successfully end up with the prince. However, once Cinderella tries on the shoe, she is clearly in the correct position and is rewarded with success. After the shoe fits her, the Brothers Grimm states that

the prince, however, took Cinderella onto his horse and rode away with her. As they passed the hazel tree, the two white pigeons cried out:
Rook di goo, rook di goo!
No blood’s in the shoe.
The shoe’s not too tight,
This bride is right!

The birds echo their original call, but this time, because Cinderella is in the correct position, they say that the “bride is right.” Again, we see the relationship of order leading to success. Cinderella was in her correct position, properly ordered, so she receives success in the form of marriage to the prince.

I also argue that the Brothers Grimm’s use of rhythmic and rhyming patterns in this tale is also a significant indicator of the need for order. Five out of the seven rhythmic or rhyming patterns in this text refer to something either being in or out of order, literally or figuratively. For instance, the already mentioned lines of: “the good ones go into the pot / the bad ones go into your crop,” refer to cleaning up the lentils or putting them in order. Also, the lines of “Rook di goo, rook di goo! / There’s blood in the shoe. / The shoe is too tight, / This bride is not right,” are used to explain that the sister is in the wrong position, and the rhetors use a similar version as an indicator that Cinderella is in the correct position. The sisters were out of their correct order, and Cinderella was in her proper order. The use of these rhythmic and rhyming patterns draw attention to these
messages. This means that the Brothers Grimm placed specific emphasis at those points in the text; indicating that special attention should be paid to the importance of something being in or out of order.

Altogether, I have found that “Aschenputtel” repeatedly demonstrates the importance of order. The Brothers Grimm do this in two specific ways. The tale consistently shows that success comes through order and that a lack of order leads to failure. Additionally, rhythmic and rhyming patters are generally used in accordance with something being either in or out of order. This is significant because these patterns draw special attention to the theme of order.

Evidence suggests that the desirability for order was a characteristic that circulated Germany following the release of the Grimms’ tales. This theme influenced German society in the years following the 1857 release of Kinder– und Hausmärchen. As I have previously established in my literature review, following World War I, Germany was politically and socially in a period of disarray. The rhetoric of the war had not prepared them for failure, and the government of the time was not equipped to handle the devastating fiscal and social tolls WW1 had on the country. All this disorder created the perfect opportunity for the rise of the Nazi Party. The Nazi Party seemingly brought a sense of order and consistency the German people had been lacking following the First World War. One potential interpretation is that the Nazi Party offered the people a familiar sense of “German” order that they had previously been lacking.

**Possibility of self-determination.**

In addition to supporting hostility towards the outsider and the desirability of order, the Brothers Grimm’s stories also demonstrate the potential benefit of self-
determination in “Aschenputtel.” The character of Cinderella herself portrays self-determination in three basic ways: through her initiative in finding a way to go to the festival, through her success at eluding discovery by the prince, and through her successful disguise and eventual reveal. The text also demonstrates in each of these instances that self-determination can lead to success. Throughout the tale, Cinderella demonstrates her ability to determine her own fate, which in itself encourages the potential for self-determination. I will begin this section of analysis by first examining how Cinderella’s initiative shows self-determination.

Cinderella shows self-determination by taking the initiative in finding a way to attend the festival. Cinderella first tries to accomplish this by simply asking, or begging rather, her stepmother if she could attend the festival. At this point, her stepmother tells her to clean up the lentils within two hours in order to go with them. The text then states that

. . . They gathered all the good grains into the bowl. Hardly one hour passed before they were finished, and they all flew out again.

The girl took the bowl to her stepmother, and was happy, thinking that now she would be allowed to go to the festival with them.

Presumably, Cinderella realizes that cleaning the lentils within a two-hour time limit would be impossible. Upon this realization she takes matters into her own hands, and calls in the “birds beneath the sky” to assist her in this task. With their help she is successful, and she believes she will be able to go to the festival. However, the stepmother refuses and tells Cinderella to then clean up two bowls of lentils. Cinderella again calls in the birds, in a very similar exchange as the one mentioned above, and together they again clean up all the lentils, this time in half an hour. The Brothers Grimm
again show Cinderella’s initiative, and subsequent self-determination, when she goes to
the hazel tree for assistance. The text states:

Now that no one else was at home, Cinderella went to her mother’s grave
beneath the hazel tree, and cried out:

Shake and quiver, little tree,
Throw gold and silver down on me.

Then the bird threw a gold and silver dress down to her, and slippers
embroidered with silk and silver. She quickly put on the dress and went to
the festival.

After her stepmother’s continued refusal, Cinderella again takes matters into her own
hands and finds a way to go to the festival, this time through the help of a hazel tree. In
her attempt to go to the festival, Cinderella is continually met with resistance. However,
instead of letting this stop her, she manages to find a way to achieve her desires: first
through the help of birds and then through the help of the hazel tree. Rather than
accepting the fate that her stepmother was attempting to impose on her, Cinderella finds a
way to go the festival—demonstrating a profound sense of self-determination.

Cinderella also shows her self-determination through eluding discovery numerous
times throughout “Aschenputtel.” During the first night of the three-day festival, the text
states that

she danced until evening, and then she wanted to go home. But the prince
said, “I will go along and escort you,” for he wanted to see to whom the
beautiful girl belonged. However, she eluded him and jumped into the
pigeon coop.

Cinderella did not want the prince to know “to whom [she] belonged,” so she
purposefully runs and hides from him. This successful escape demonstrates the
aforementioned theme of self-determination leading to success. Cinderella did not want
the prince to follow her home, so she found a way to hide herself, which ends up being
successful because he never is able to find her. Cinderella again demonstrates this
resourcefulness the second night of the festival. When the prince again follows her home, the text states that

she ran away from him and into the garden behind the house. A beautiful tall tree stood there, on which hung the most magnificent pears. She climbed as nimbly as a squirrel into the branches, and the prince did not know where she had gone.

We see Cinderella successfully running and hiding from the prince when she does not wish him to know exactly where she lives. This scenario again demonstrates how self-determination can lead to success.

The third way in which Cinderella demonstrates the importance of self-determination and how it can lead to success is through her effective disguise and eventual reveal. Each time that Cinderella eludes the prince, she manages to escape back into the house and disguise herself. After the first night of the festival, the text states that

when they got home Cinderella was lying in the ashes, dressed in her dirty clothes. A dim little oil-lamp was burning in the fireplace. Cinderella had quickly jumped down from the back of the pigeon coop and had run to the hazel tree. There she had taken her beautiful clothes and aid them on the grave, and the bird had taken them away again. Then, dressed in her gray smock, she had returned to the ashes in the kitchen.

Cinderella uses her cleverness to disguise her finery and make her family believe she had been amongst the ashes before their return home. This attempt at disguise is successful all three nights that she uses it following each night of the festival. The third night, the prince sets a trap by covering the stairway in pitch. This trap ends up catching Cinderella’s golden slipper rather than Cinderella herself. The prince then takes the slipper and has the stepsisters try them on. When this turns out to be unsuccessful, the prince insists that the “deformed little Cinderella,” as her dad describes her, tries on the shoe. At this point, the text states that Cinderella
first washed her hands and face clean, and then went and bowed down before the prince, who gave her the golden shoe. She sat down on a stool, pulled her foot out of the heavy wooden shoe, and put it into the slipper, and it fit perfectly.

When she stood up the prince looked into her face, and he recognized the beautiful girl who had danced with him. He cried out, “She is my true bride.”

As the text suggests, Cinderella knows that the prince will recognize her once she washes her hands and face. At this point, Cinderella wipes away her disguise, and the prince knows her. Cinderella’s self-determination is noticeable here in her decision of when and where to take off her disguise. Cinderella chooses to use a disguise every night following the festival, and then chooses to take off the disguise when it will seemingly benefit her the most. This self-determination then leads to her greatest success: recognition as “the true bride.”

Self-determination was seemingly a principle of German Nationalism in the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries, and I argue that “Aschenputtel” helped to encourage this characteristic in German society. The concept of self-determination can be closely tied back to Charland’s ideological effect of the illusion of freedom. As I supported in the literature review, following World War I, the German people were in disorder, and evidence seems to suggest that they needed to believe that they had the power, or self-determination, to successfully reorder their lives. The Nazi Party strove to adapt a nationalism that was based on self-preservation that was free from political ties. This seemingly presented an ideology that encouraged the German people to believe they were able to control their destiny and partake in a nationalism that encouraged them to control their own fate, to preserve their best interests. In reality, this ideology would only have twisted the concept of self-determination into blind obedience. It is plausible to
suggest that the Nazi party may have used and twisted the Germanic trait of self-determination to interpellate the German people into an illusion of freedom.

**Conclusion**

In this chapter, I demonstrated how themes within two different versions of Cinderella aided the shaping of two different societies. Upon examining “Cendrillon,” I found the following themes: the value of position, the value of possessions, and the value of peacekeeping. I believe that all three of these themes work together to support the cultural characteristic of classism. I then demonstrated some potential effects of this classism on seventeenth century France, the most significant being the seeming nostalgia for the idealized past. I used this same approach to analyze the Brothers Grimm’s “Aschenputtel” and found three different themes: hostility towards the outsider, a need for order, and the possibility of self-determination. I argue that these three themes all work together to encourage German Nationalism, which had tangible effects on Germany. In particular, “Aschenputtel” seemingly encouraged hostility towards Jews, the need for the Nazi’s rise to power, and the accepted ideology of the Nazi Party. As my analysis and literature review demonstrate, texts can be so influential that they can lead to a unified sense of nationalism and classism, and as history tells us, these movements can lead to unforeseen consequences and destruction.
CHAPTER III

FAIRY TALES AS RHETORIC TO CHALLENGE GENDER STEREOTYPES

The artifacts I will examine in this chapter are Anne Sexton’s poem, “Cinderella,” and Disney’s 2015 live-action film, Cinderella. Sexton originally released “Cinderella” in a collection of tales called Transformations in 1972. This collection includes numerous retellings of the Brothers Grimm’s tales, including their version of Cinderella. Sexton released this collection amidst many societal and cultural changes emanating from the political and social unrest of the 1960s and early 1970s. Many of these changes are reflected in her poems. Disney’s Cinderella (2015) was released 65 years after Disney’s original Cinderella (1950). Disney has received many critiques in recent decades about its earlier films’ two-dimensional gendered characters. However, Disney decided to remake Cinderella in spite of, and possibly because of, the heavy criticism the original film received. This new film undoubtedly reflects some of the cultural changes that have shaped American and Western society within the last few decades.

I begin this chapter by first examining the decades surrounding Anne Sexton’s release of Transformations. This includes a specific look into events of the time period, issues related to gender, and confessional poetry. I then review the society in which Disney released its 2015 Cinderella. I specifically look at Disney’s 1950 Cinderella, gender within Disney films and society, and modern adaptations of fairy tales. Once I review the rhetorical situation surrounding these two artifacts, I provide a brief explanation of standpoint theory, which is the theoretical lens through which I examine
the two texts. Then, through this lens, I analyze my texts in an effort to find how Sexton and Disney both seek to challenge social hierarchies and their consequences, specifically looking at gender within Sexton’s poem and Disney’s film.

Anne Sexton’s “Cinderella”

In her book dedicated to examining the culture of the 1960s, Sharon Monteith claims that this decade was heavily defined by its “social unrest.”\(^1\) Some of the most definitive moments of this decade were the Civil Rights Movement, the Cold War, the presidency and assassination of JFK, and the Vietnam War. All of these had incredibly influential effects on American culture in general—historian Allen Matusow even argues that “issues of race, war, and culture spawned by this decade created divisions that shaped American politics until the election of Barack Obama in 2008.”\(^2\) Monteith goes on to explain that unlike the relatively quiet decade of the 1950s, the 1960s consisted of people being more willing to speak out against injustice, which led to “the cluster of mass protests that characterised the era’s politics.”\(^3\) This decade was rife with conflict that had arguably been suppressed in previous times. One of the most influential elements of this decade came with the election of John F. Kennedy. Moneith argues that he helped craft an image of a “New Frontier” early in the 60s, which “emphasised personal and political courage with Kennedy the charismatic liberal figurehead,” Matusow adds to this claiming that “Kennedy understood that image was power.”\(^4\) Kennedy’s encouragement of the “New Frontier” image inspired a culture of “courageous” acts of the 1960s, such the

Space Race, the Vietnam Conflict, and the Civil Rights Movement. Americans thought it was within their power to improve their situation and strive for a better life, and JFK’s assassination further cemented these beliefs and instituted him as a kind of martyr of the 60s and of these movements.

Amidst the unrest of the 1960s, Monteith argues that poets began to reflect current societal issues within their work. She claims that “poets as different as Robert Lowell, Gwendolyn Brooks and Denise Levertov would engage specifically with contemporary issues, including the war precipitated during [JFK’s] presidency.” Poetry became an avenue through which individuals could express themselves and critique society. All of these conditions produced a culture in which artists could reflect on society, and in particular, confessional poetry could bloom. It was in fact this decade that produced some of the most well known confessional poets, including Robert Lowell, Sylvia Plath, and Anne Sexton.

The 1970s were also a very tumultuous period in American history. Historian Will Kaufman claims that “the 1970s ‘reshaped’ a host of American ‘landscapes.’” Within this decade, America ended its involvement in Vietnam, the Supreme Court made a monumental decision in Roe vs. Wade, and President Richard Nixon resigned—not to mention the innumerable cultural changes that resulted from each of these historical events. Kaufman goes on to explain that

6. Ibid., 16.
8. Ibid.
fiction and poetry, television and drama, film and visual culture, popular music and style, public space and public spectacle . . . were the sites of cultural agitation that made the 1970s one of the most turbulent decades of the post-war period.9

Not only was the nation experiencing major cultural and political changes during this time, but citizens were expressing their agitation about world events through mediums that had previously been generally overlooked. This was incredibly significant for writers during this time period who used their writing as an outlet to communicate their social and cultural dissatisfaction.

**Gender in the 1960s and 70s**

Women’s roles during this time period were also changing and evolving drastically—something that poet Anne Sexton continuously expressed in her writing. Kathleen Ossip, a writer and student of Anne Sexton’s work, claims that women of this generation were “subject to the legacy of decades/centuries of devaluing. Subject to a desperation for the approval of others and an emptiness where the inner life should be.”10

At this time, women were still working on transitioning away from being solely homemakers, and, as Ossip argues, this transition brought uncertainty and a sense of misplacement for many women, including Anne Sexton.

In the decades leading up to the late 60s and early 70s, politicians and the media glorified and manipulated the image of the American housewife. In her examination of Sexton’s life and writings, Clare Pollard explains that amid the threat of the Cold War, American politicians used “the suburban home as part of the fight against the nightmare

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of communism.”\textsuperscript{11} American suburbia was an embodiment of American values and the American spirit, and at the center of this home was the idealized housewife. Pollard goes on to explain that in the 1960s, politicians positioned the “middle-class home as the key to the superiority of the American way of life.”\textsuperscript{12} President Nixon, along with other politicians, used the image of the suburban American family as the incarnation of America’s supremacy to the Soviet Union and communism. Women accordingly felt pressured to fit into the housewife type that kept these suburban homes, and rhetoric during this time made it “un-American” to go against this role. Unsurprisingly, Pollard argues that these issues contributed to the “general sense of dissatisfaction many women felt in this era.”\textsuperscript{13} This dissatisfaction with a woman’s role as the American housewife would come to be one of Sexton’s defining poetry topics. Pollard argues that through her poetry, Sexton “turns the carefully constructed propaganda of the American Housewife against itself.”\textsuperscript{14} Sexton consistently shows the downside of being a housewife, despite the “propaganda” that glorified this role. In accordance with her fellow poets, Ossip claims that Anne Sexton “shed light on the anxieties of the 20th-century United States: class, sex, success, addiction, suicidal depression.”\textsuperscript{15} Before this time, many topics went unexamined by artists, especially women.

Despite the social strides made in the 1960s and 70s, views towards gender roles remained rather stagnant in the early 1970s. A quantitative study conducted by

\begin{flushleft}
\begin{itemize}
\item[12.] Ibid., 1.
\item[13.] Ibid.
\item[14.] Ibid., 2.
\item[15.] Ossip, “Are We Fake?,” 12.
\end{itemize}
\end{flushleft}
Broverman and her colleagues in 1972 demonstrates just how stagnant these gender roles continued to be in the beginning of this decade. The research team hypothesized that because “it appeared in the mid-1960s that traditional sex-role patterns were in a state of flux,” and that a “corresponding fluidity would appear in definitions of sex roles.”16 They assumed that the social movements towards equality in the 60s and early 70s would accordingly affect the equality between men and women. However, through their extensive study, the researchers found that “despite the apparent fluidity of sex-role definitions in contemporary society as contrasted with the previous decades, our own findings to date confirm the existence of pervasive and persistent sex-role stereotypes.”17 The scholars explain that during this time the media perpetuated the idea that gender stereotypes were being demolished, but their findings contradict this portrayal. Interestingly, the study also found that “women’s self-concepts were also significantly less feminine than their perceptions of women in general,” indicating that women often did not believe they matched up to the “feminine” stereotype that they idealized.18 This study is representative of commonly held beliefs of the early 70s. Sex-role stereotypes were pervasive and idealized, even though neither women nor men believed they fit into these molds. Perhaps this is indeed why there was a “general sense of dissatisfaction many women felt in this era.”19 However, the conditions of this time in history created an environment in which confessional poetry could flourish.

17. Ibid., 64.
18. Ibid., 67.
Confessional Poetry

Confessional poetry first emerged in the 1950s and 60s to explore the “taboo” subjects that were not discussed or even generally acknowledged in the mid-twentieth century. These taboo subjects included topics such as domestic abuse, suicide, sex, incest, and even drug-use, which were all overlooked or ignored by the general public during the 1950s and 1960s. Now-famous poets, such as Sylvia Plath and Robert Lowell, found their niche with confessional poetry and inspired many others of their generation, including Anne Sexton. Sexton came to the scene slightly after Plath and Lowell, beginning her confessional poetry career around 1960. Following the tradition of her fellow confessional poets, Sexton used her poetry as an outlet to express the damage caused by abuse, unhealthy relationships, drug addiction, marital affairs, and many other topics. The rise of confessional poetry also closely coincided with the rise of “second-wave feminism,” which most scholars agree began in the 1960s. Sexton herself began writing confessional poetry at that time and demonstrated feminist characteristics within her poetry. This is especially prevalent in her book of poems, *Transformations*, which is a collection containing the retelling of numerous Grimm’s fairy tales.

Transformations

Anne Sexton included many different fairy tales in *Transformations*, such as her adaptations of Cinderella, Snow White, Red Riding Hood, Rumpelstiltskin, and various others. Altogether, she rewrote sixteen fairy tales; one of her most well-known retellings being “Cinderella.” Sexton released this poem in 1972, twenty-two years after the release of the animated Disney movie based on the French fairy tale. Unlike Disney’s version of

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Cinderella, Sexton’s retelling closely follows the original Grimm’s fairy tale. For instance, in Sexton’s “Cinderella,” the two stepsisters cut off various parts of their feet to make the glass slipper fit, which was a detail Disney decided not to include in its version. Grimm’s fairy tales are known for being macabre, a characteristic Anne Sexton whole-heartedly embraced in her retelling. She used her poetry to contribute to the conversation about women’s roles, particularly through rewriting traditional fairy tales from a critical perspective.

**Disney’s Cinderella (2015)**

The second artifact I examine within this chapter is Disney’s 2015 live adaptation of *Cinderella*, a movie released in a particularly interesting period in American history. In her examination of “princess stories,” Sarah Rothschild states that “princess stories have been a part of American popular culture for years, and they will undoubtedly continue to influence and educate American girls and women for many years to come.”

This reflection about the importance and influence of fairy tale films is particularly relevant when analyzing the society in which Disney released its 2015 *Cinderella*.

**Disney’s 1950 Cinderella**

In recent decades, parents have grown considerably more concerned with what traditional fairy tale films, such as Disney’s 1950 *Cinderella*, communicate to young children, particularly girls, and these concerns have ignited backlash against such films. Critics believe that traditional fairy tale films, such as *Cinderella* and *Sleeping Beauty*, enforce white, middle-class, male values that are inconsistent with modern American culture. For instance, all three of the first Disney Princess movies (*Snow White and the
Seven Dwarves, Cinderella, and Sleeping Beauty) follow main characters who are “passive, pretty, heroines” who exhibit “unusually patient, obedient, industrious, and quiet,” traits that folklorist Kay Stone argues were inherent to heroines during the decades when Disney produced these movies. These characteristics fit the “American Housewife” image used as propaganda by politicians during this time. Stone goes on to claim that within these movies, “heroines are not allowed any defects, nor are they required to develop, since they are already perfect. The only tests of most heroines require nothing beyond what they are born with: a beautiful face, tiny feet, or pleasing temperament.” Within the older Disney films, particularly Cinderella, the heroine’s utility is based on her looks and passivity. In the film, Cinderella’s only job is to endure the unjust evil that she faces with beauty and grace, a task which she successfully accomplishes. Within the last few decades, scholars and consumers alike have become increasingly critical of this type of heroine. No longer does the passive, beautiful princess pass for a suitable role model for children. The 2010s in America have seen a rise in dialogue concerning gender roles, which parents increasingly want to see positively reflected in fairy tale films, and this dialogue has made tangible changes in society.

Gender in Disney Films

Gender and sex-roles in fairytale adaptations have been hot topics of conversation for many years. Many parents refuse to let their children watch older Disney movies like Cinderella and Snow White and the Seven Dwarves because they are genuinely concerned that these stories will be detrimental to the identity building of young children,

23. Ibid., 45.
particularly young girls. In their quantitative content analysis of the first nine Disney princess movies, England and her team ultimately found that “gendered stereotypes and behaviors are still very prevalent in the Disney princess line, though their depiction has become more complex over the years, reflecting changing gender roles and expectations in American society.”

Undoubtedly, older Disney princess films contain more gender-limiting language and plotlines, but England’s study demonstrates this problem has not resolved itself with time, but has continued with the newer princess films that have been released in more “feminist” times. These concerns have not gone unnoticed by parents and critics. In her struggle with allowing her daughter to partake in “the princess thing,” Peggy Orenstein states in her *New York Times* article that

> there are no studies proving that playing princess directly damages girls’ self-esteem or dampens other aspirations . . . There is evidence that young women who hold the most conventionally feminine beliefs—who avoid conflict and think they should be perpetually nice and pretty—are more likely to be depressed than others . . . what’s more, the 23 percent decline in girls’ participation in sports and other vigorous activity between middle and high school has been linked to their sense that athletics is unfeminine.

As Orenstein explains, at the time she wrote this 2006 article, there was no research to show the direct detrimental effects between girls’ identity building and the portrayal of gender roles in fairy tales. However, she argues that there is a correlation between the two, and worries that fairy tales will in fact negatively affect the development of young girls. These concerns have only escalated since the release of this article. Gender identity building continues to be a major concern in modern society. For instance, many

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mainstream toy retailers such as Toys-R-Us, Target, Wal-Mart, and Amazon have decided to stop labeling areas of their stores as “boy” and “girl” sections in an attempt to challenge gendered stereotypes.\footnote{Hiroko Tabuchi, “Sweeping Away Gender-Specific Toys and Labels,” \textit{New York Times}, October 27, 2015, http://www.nytimes.com/2015/10/28/business/sweeping-away-gender-specific-toys-and-labels.html.} Fairytale adaptors are becoming increasingly aware that these societal changes need to be reflected in their modernized fairy tales.

\textbf{Modern Adaptations of Fairy Tales}

In her piece for \textit{The New York Times}, Naomi Wolf argues that “the fascination with princesses is never on one level, going to go away; but that the princess icon is changing.”\footnote{Naomi Wolf, “Mommy, I Want to be a Princess,” \textit{The New York Times}, December 2, 2011.} Wolf believes that virtually every girl in her young life will identify with princesses at one point or another and argues that this is not an inherently negative thing.

Wolf explains that

\begin{quote}
if you look closely, the princess archetype is not about passivity and decorativeness: It is about power and the recognition of the true self . . . what other female role model can issue a sentence and have the world at her feet? What other female figure can command an army, break open a treasury, or even . . . bestow, with their presence, a sense of magic, excitement and healing?
\end{quote}

Wolf argues that princesses can in fact be good role models for young children because these characters hold power within their realms and their own lives. In Wolf’s opinion, princesses are not the embodiment of weakness and passivity, but are the embodiment of power and strength. However, not everyone shares Wolf’s optimism about princesses and fairy tales. Matthew Jacobs of \textit{The Huffington Post} explains that “stories based on the Cinderella archetype have had to determine whether to redraft the fairytale for an
increasingly feminist audience.”\textsuperscript{28} Many feminist readers and consumers refuse to accept that traditional princess stories could be anything other than negative towards women and modern goals of gender equality. For this reason, we are seeing more and more fairy tales and princess movies that are centered upon “stronger” female characters who are not simply passive and beautiful.

Recent fairy tale films have begun to push back against traditional gender roles.\textsuperscript{29} Movies such as \textit{Brave} and \textit{Frozen} depict female characters who are not in need of saving, but rather do the saving themselves. Amidst all this critique concerning fairy tale films, Disney released a live-action remake of its animated \textit{Cinderella}, and audiences and critics appreciated Disney’s new approach to the story. In his reflection on the new \textit{Cinderella}, Richard Corliss claims that “65 years after a ‘classic’ animated feature that missed the mark, Disney finally gets Cinderella right.”\textsuperscript{30} This blockbuster film seemingly resonated with audiences, despite negativity in previous decades concerning Disney’s 1950 \textit{Cinderella}. This positive reception is likely in part due to filmmakers’ more positive portrayal of gender roles within the updated film.

**Standpoint Theory**

Standpoint theory was first named and defined in 1983 by Nancy Harstock and has been critiqued and debated ever since.\textsuperscript{31} However, all standpoint theorists agree that “marginalized groups of people have less interest in preserving the status quo and occupy

\textsuperscript{28} Matthew Jacobs, “How Modern Cinderella Adaptations Have Given the Tale’s Outdated Feminism a Makeover,” \textit{The Huffington Post}, March 20, 2015.


a unique position from which to view the culture from which they are marginalized.”

Marginalized groups offer a unique “standpoint” based on their experiences living within a dominant culture. The theory itself seeks to expose instruments of subjugation by taking the “standpoint” of those whom a society has marginalized. “Standpoint,” according to women studies scholar Brook Lenz, “refers not to perspective or experience but to an understanding of perspective and experience as part of a larger social setting.”

One of the basic goals of standpoint theory is to place the perspectives of marginalized groups into a social setting in order to gain political consciousness and awareness. When the perspectives of marginalized groups are examined alongside dominant ideologies, standpoint theory can lead to a more nuanced understanding of society.

According to Littlejohn and Foss, standpoint theory revolves around two basic principles: an individual must recognize and challenge “cultural values and power relations that contribute to subordination or oppression of particular groups.” This explanation demonstrates that simply recognizing these injustices does not constitute a standpoint, but recognizing and challenging these injustices does. Standpoint theorist Sandra Harding claims that “everywhere, seemingly every day, another under-advantaged group steps on the stage of history and says ‘from the standpoint of our lives, what you over-advantaged people think and do looks different . . . and wrong and harmful.’”

Standpoint theorists attempt to understand the experiences of marginalized people and

32. Ibid.
33. Lenz, “Postcolonial Fiction,” 98.
how their experiences differ from those of the “privileged” classes. Harding goes on to state that standpoint theory requires an individual “to either live as a member of an oppressed group, or do the necessary work to gain a rich and nuanced understanding of what such lifeworlds are like.”³⁶ Thus, standpoint theory offers a way for individuals who are not oppressed to seek an understanding of another group’s oppression. For instance, this theory might help a Caucasian person better understand the African-American experience in the United States or aid a man living in the twenty-first century in seeing the world from a female perspective.

Business scholars Neferetti Walker and Nicole Melton claim that a key to standpoint theory is that “knowledge dissemination is influenced and controlled by those with power,” meaning that the societal status quo is shaped by the people in charge of major institutions.³⁷ Harding claims that “the most powerful social institutions, such as the economy, the law, health, education, and welfare systems, are administered and managed so as to distribute their benefits primarily to the already socially advantaged.”³⁸ The socially advantaged, who generally head social institutions, perpetuate a vicious cycle by creating institutions that favor the socially advantaged, overlooking the socially disadvantaged. Walker and Melton state that standpoint theory undermines this cycle by seeking to “challenge traditional assumptions or ‘truths,’” which occur because marginalized “experiences can provide new insights and knowledge into our social

³⁶. Ibid.
world.”\textsuperscript{39} Standpoint theory approaches communication as a way to examine the fabric of society by understanding the experiences of all societal members, including marginalized people.

Standpoint theory revolves around the “deconstruction and decentralization of dominant ideologies,”\textsuperscript{40} and operates based on the concept that dominant ideologies (ideologies of white, protestant males) lead to the “subordination and oppression of particular groups.”\textsuperscript{41} This mistreatment of particular groups lead marginalized people to inhabit “outsider within” positions in society. Lenz explains that these positions are held “by groups who are included in dominant culture practices but are nevertheless, and for various reasons, unable to fully participate in them.”\textsuperscript{42} Thus, Lenz states that marginalized groups must participate in these practices to satisfy cultural norms, but at the same time, they are unable to completely adhere to these norms because they are not the group for whom the norm was created. Communication scholar Myria Watkins Allen and her colleagues explain that because marginalized people simultaneously live in and outside the cultural norm, they “see the world from both their own standpoint and that of those in power.”\textsuperscript{43} Marginalized groups possess a unique perspective on societal structures that the socially advantaged cannot understand. Lenz concludes that variations in perspectives “deepen and strengthen our understanding of the positions at which

\textsuperscript{39} Walker and Melton, “The Tipping Point,” 259.
\textsuperscript{40} Lenz, “Postcolonial Fiction,” 100.
\textsuperscript{41} Littlejohn and Foss, “Feminist Standpoint Theory,” 396.
\textsuperscript{42} Lenz, “Postcolonial Fiction,” 99.
various forms of oppression intersect.”

Without the perspective given by socially disadvantaged voices, oppression can never truly be detected or understood.

One of the more well-known and specific forms of standpoint theory is feminist standpoint theory. Littejohn and Foss explain that “feminist standpoint theory calls attention to the knowledge that arises from conditions and experiences that are common to girls and women.” General standpoint theory refers to all marginalized groups, whereas feminist standpoint theory seeks to examine the specific perspectives held by women and position those perspectives in the broader society. At the root of this theory is the idea that “women’s lives, in general, differ systemically and structurally from men’s lives. Women and men are expected to engage in distinct activities, and the two groups are accorded different rights and opportunities.” Women are expected to engage in particular activities and roles because the structure and culture of society mandate these activities and roles to be “appropriate” for them. However, just because women’s experiences shape their perspectives does not automatically lead to a feminist standpoint. Littlejohn and Foss claim that

\[
\text{to develop a feminist standpoint, individuals must engage in an intellectual struggle to recognize, analyze, and contest broad power relations that account for the subordinate status of girls and women and the activities they are expected to pursue.} \]

In accordance with the more general standpoint theory, an individual can only possess a feminist standpoint if he or she both recognizes the injustices he or she faces and challenge those injustices. What this recognition and challenging looks like will

44. Lenz, “Postcolonial Fiction,” 100.
46. Ibid.
47. Ibid., 397.
obviously differ depending upon the person, but altogether, the individual should strive to identify and challenge social hierarchies and the consequences of those hierarchies.

**Analysis**

I use standpoint theory as my theoretical lens to analyze Anne Sexton’s “Cinderella” and Disney’s 2015 live-action *Cinderella*. The first research question I strive to answer in this section is how Sexton’s “Cinderella” communicates a more nuanced feminist standpoint concerning gender roles. Secondly, I seek to answer how Disney’s *Cinderella* (2015) communicates a more nuanced standpoint about gender within the film. Altogether, I hope to demonstrate how Sexton’s “Cinderella” and Disney’s *Cinderella* specifically challenge social hierarchies and the consequences of those hierarchies. I do this by examining various themes throughout the two artifacts, with gender as the sole topic in Sexton’s poem and in Disney’s film. I begin this analysis by first examining Anne Sexton’s poem, “Cinderella.”

**Gender Inequality in Sexton’s “Cinderella”**

While examining Sexton’s “Cinderella,” I found three basic themes that demonstrate more nuanced views towards gender roles within this version of the Cinderella tale. The first theme is Sexton’s general deconstruction of the Cinderella narrative throughout the tale. The second is Sexton’s portrayal of Cinderella throughout the poem, specifically the offbeat comparisons to Cinderella that Sexton provides. The final theme I include is Sexton’s portrayal of the Prince as a possessive character. All three of these themes together demonstrate an overall negative view towards the Cinderella narrative and its depiction of women’s and men’s roles. I begin my analysis by
examining how Sexton attempts to deconstruct the Cinderella narrative within her poem “Cinderella.”

Deconstruction of the Cinderella narrative.

Sexton artfully deconstructs the gender roles present the Cinderella narrative through her “Cinderella,” which first becomes clear when analyzing the sequence of the poem. The first four stanzas of “Cinderella” begin with four different examples of the archetypical Cinderella “rags to riches” story. In the first and second stanzas, Anne Sexton writes,

You always read about it:  
the plumber with twelve children  
who wins the Irish Sweepstakes.  
From toilets to riches.  
That story.  
Or the nursemaid,  
some luscious sweet from Denmark  
who captures the oldest son’s heart.  
from diapers to Dior.  
That story.  

The next two stanzas continue to use a similar pattern to tell two more “rags to riches” stories concerning a milkman and a charwoman. Sexton uses these four stanzas to set an expectation for the reader. These introductory lines encourage the reader to recall the “rags to riches” narrative, which in turn calls upon the Cinderella narrative.

After reading these stanzas, the reader begins developing expectations for the remaining text, likely expecting a retelling of Cinderella that follows closely with their own memory of the narrative. Because Disney’s Cinderella had already been circulating for 22 years prior to Sexton’s poem, the readers likely recalled this version of Cinderella.

Modern readers are even more likely to recall Disney’s version because, until the newest Disney film was released, it might have been the only Cinderella narrative with which they are familiar. Therefore, the introduction of Sexton’s poem causes the reader to expect the Cinderella narrative they most recognize. In addition to reader expectations, Sexton develops the text in a different direction than she seemingly promises in her beginning. Sexton establishes the well-known Cinderella narrative within the first four stanzas of her poem. However, she then proceeds to violate expectations surrounding that narrative by using unconventional comparisons that break the coherence of the text.

Throughout “Cinderella,” Sexton includes many comparisons that would generally be considered contradictions. For instance, in line 32 of “Cinderella,” Sexton compares Cinderella to Al Jolson: “She slept on the sooty hearth each night / and walked around looking like Al Jolson.” Al Jolson was an early twentieth-century comedian, singer, and actor, who often gave boisterous performances. The poem goes on to include other unconventional comparisons. Sexton writes in lines 41-43: “Next came the ball, as you all know. / It was a marriage market. / The Prince was looking for a wife.” Sexton is comparing the ball, which is a traditional part of the Cinderella tale, to nothing more than a market in which the Prince is shopping for a bride. This very negative comparison shows her clear criticism of the way marriage is presented in the Cinderella narrative. Although “Cinderella” has many other surprising comparisons, one of the more interesting comes towards the end of the poem in lines 99-101 when Sexton writes “Cinderella and the Prince / lived, they say, happily ever after, / like two dolls in a museum case.” By comparing the couple to dolls in a museum case, Sexton suggests that this love story is out of touch with reality and does not exist in the real world. By
examining the sequence and coherence in “Cinderella,” I propose that Anne Sexton purposefully encourages readers to anticipate a traditional Cinderella narrative, only to violate those expectations through negative comparisons. With these techniques, Anne Sexton deconstructs the Cinderella narrative and exposes the flaws within the traditional story.

In the beginning of “Cinderella,” Anne Sexton calls upon the traditional Cinderella narrative, causing her readers to expect her story to follow a similar pattern to the original tale. However, Sexton breaks this pattern of the traditional tale, particularly through her unorthodox comparisons throughout the poem. Through this general deconstruction of the narrative, Sexton challenges the basic principles that form the patriarchal story of Cinderella. By crafting this deconstruction, Sexton offers the reader a chance to view the tale from a new perspective. This new perspective demonstrates to the reader that the original story is flawed and harmful because of the ridiculous boundaries it places on gender roles. This feminist standpoint gives the reader an opportunity to read the Cinderella narrative in a way that criticizes the roles placed upon women and the possessive culture acquainted with men. The following two sections will specifically look at these two themes throughout Sexton’s “Cinderella.”

**Portrayal of Cinderella.**

Sexton repeatedly portrays Cinderella as a character merely inhabiting a performative role, particularly through negative and/or sarcastic comparisons. On multiple occasions, Sexton refers to Cinderella as a performer who is giving a performance. The first example of this performative role comes in lines 30-33 when Sexton writes, “Cinderella was their maid. / She slept on the sooty hearth each night / and
walked around looking like Al Jolson.” As I mentioned previously, Al Jolson was an early twentieth century comedian, singer, and actor, known for being exuberant in all of his performances, so exuberant in fact, that he was dubbed “The World’s Greatest Entertainer” during his time. Therefore, Sexton’s comparison accordingly dubs Cinderella as an entertaining figure and discredits her as someone genuine to be idealized. Instead, Sexton presents her as a character merely playing role to be laughed at by her audience. In these lines, Cinderella filling the role of a ridiculous comedian and actor whose goal is to entertain her audience. Sexton again uses an unconventional comparison to describe Cinderella in lines 56-61 when she writes that

Cinderella went to the tree at the grave
and cried forth like a gospel singer:
Mama! Mama! My turtledove,
send me to the prince’s ball!
The bird dropped down a golden dress
and delicate little gold slippers.

In these lines, we again see Cinderella filling a performative role, this time the role of a gospel singer. By also associating Cinderella with musicians, Sexton seems to communicate that Cinderella is a performer whose purpose is to entertain her audience. In the lines immediately following this comparison, Sexton writes that Cinderella’s performance is rewarded with a gold dress and gold slippers, indicating that Cinderella is rewarded for successfully playing her role as an actor or musician might be for a performance.

Sexton additionally portrays Cinderella and the Prince as being idyllic, but altogether unrealistic, characters within the poem. Sexton does this through her comparison of Cinderella and the Prince to dolls in a museum case, as I have previously
mentioned, and as Bobbsey Twins. Within the last lines of the poem, Sexton writes the following:

Cinderella and the prince
lived they say, happily ever after,
like two dolls in a museum case . . .
their darling smiles pasted on for eternity.
Regular Bobbsey Twins.

These lines give us a very particular view of Cinderella and the prince. Sexton portrays these characters as untouchable and unrealistic, most definitely, but she additionally gives the impression that these two characters are living a façade. The actual Bobbsey Twins were the main characters of a series of books from the early twentieth century, and on many of these book covers, the two twins were shown with huge grins. Sexton’s comparison of Cinderella and the Prince to the Bobbsey Twins demonstrates that they are nothing more than a sham and are living a forced and fake life. These same themes are present when Sexton compares Cinderella and the Prince to “two dolls in a museum case.” The image Sexton brings to mind here is that of two dolls blankly staring at all onlookers who pass by. They have no personality, no concerns, no life—they are simply there to be looked at. This comparison and the Bobbsey Twin comparison portray Cinderella and the Prince as being empty shells whose sole purpose is to satisfy and ingratiate, and that they do not need personalities or independent thought in order to do so.

As we just examined, Sexton portrays Cinderella as a performer and as a character inhabiting an unrealistic and out-of-touch position within the poem “Cinderella.” She specifically does this by comparing Cinderella to Al Jolson and a gospel singer, and by comparing both Cinderella and the Prince to Bobbsey Twins and dolls in a museum case. Altogether, these comparisons can demonstrate the dissatisfaction women felt towards
having to “perform” a role in society and constantly having to live a façade. Throughout “Cinderella,” Sexton consistently challenges the social order that dictates what positions and roles women must fit into and perform. By using her unorthodox comparisons, she also shows how ridiculous and masquerading those roles are. Altogether, Sexton’s portrayal of Cinderella identifies the roles that are placed upon women and challenges these roles by demonstrating their absurdity.

**Portrayal of the Prince.**

The final theme I analyze from “Cinderella” is Sexton’s continual portrayal of the Prince as a possessive character. Sexton often depicts the Prince as the possessor and Cinderella the item to be possessed. When Sexton first mentions the ball, she writes in lines 41-43, “next came the ball, as you all know, / It was a marriage market. / The Prince was looking for a wife.” In this scenario, the Prince is attending the ball to find a wife. Sexton’s use of “marriage market” here brings to mind the image that women are no more important than any other object that could be obtained at a market, and that the Prince has his choice of the goods. Sexton again presents the Prince as a possessor when she first describes Cinderella attending the ball. When describing Cinderella’s arrival to the ball, Sexton writes in lines 63-67,

So she went. Which is no surprise.  
Her stepmother and sisters didn’t  
Recognize her without her cinder face  
and the Prince took her hand on the spot  
and danced with no other the whole day.

Sexton uses aggressive as well as possessive language when describing the prince’s immediate reaction to noticing Cinderella. She writes that the Prince “took her hand on the spot” and danced “with no other the whole day.” Sexton did not include any response or reaction from Cinderella, indicating that Cinderella did not have a choice in the Prince
taking her hand and dancing with her the whole evening. In this situation, the Prince seemingly forces his attentions on Cinderella. Again, we see Cinderella as a possession in the hand of the possessor.

The final instance of the possessiveness of the Prince I mention within this analysis comes when Cinderella has been eluding the Prince for two consecutive evenings following the ball. Sexton writes in lines 75-79:

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However on the third day the prince
Covered the palace in steps with cobbler’s wax
And Cinderella’s gold shoe stuck upon it.
Now he would find whom the shoe fit
And find his strange dancing girl for keeps.
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Within this exchange, the Prince literally tries to entrap Cinderella as if she is an animal to be caught. Sexton follows this immediately by stating, “now he would find whom the shoe fit / and find his strange dancing girl for keeps.” Again, Sexton uses very overt possessive language when referring to the interaction between Cinderella and the prince. The language Sexton uses here brings to mind the old saying, “finders keepers, losers weepers.” Cinderella is “for keeps,” and the Prince is the finder. Within these five lines, we see Cinderella being caught in a trap like an animal and becoming the object “for keeps.” Both of these objectifications of Cinderella again demonstrate that the Prince is the possessor and Cinderella the item to be possessed.

Throughout “Cinderella,” Sexton continually portrays the Prince as possessive. Each of the lines analyzed above, in and of itself, might not seem to promote any particular message. However, when every individual reference to the Prince is analyzed in relation to the others, a clear theme arises: the Prince is the possessor and Cinderella the item to be possessed. Thus, Sexton uses a feminist standpoint throughout “Cinderella” to identify and challenge the cultural norm of male possessiveness and the objectification
of women. Sexton calls attention to the inherent problems with these attitudes towards women and demonstrates the lack of women’s free will when these cultural norms are upheld.

**Gender Equality in Disney’s *Cinderella***

In its live-action adaptation of *Cinderella*, Disney offers more updated and nuanced views of gender. While analyzing *Cinderella* (2015), I found numerous themes that demonstrate the evolution of gender in how we retell fairy tales. Particularly, while analyzing gender within the film, I found that Disney often portrays Cinderella and the Prince as equals, while the stepsisters (arguably the antagonists in the film) embody undesirable traits that are generally associated with traditional ideals of women. Altogether, I argue that Disney challenges traditional roles and stereotypes related to gender, and in the process of doing so, provides a more nuanced standpoint, which addresses the research question I consider throughout my analysis. To begin, I first look at how Disney portrays Ella and Kit as equals within *Cinderella*.

**Equality between Cinderella and the Prince.**

Disney consistently shows Cinderella (whose real name is Ella in the film) and the Prince (whose real name is Kit) as equals throughout the film. Rather than Ella being dependent upon Kit, they are both dependent upon each other. The first way Disney demonstrates this equality is through the Kit’s impressionability. Numerous times throughout the film, Ella makes a statement or observation that Kit then internalizes and repeats to others in later moments. The first instance of this comes during Ella and Kit’s first meeting in the forest. When her step-family’s ill-treatment of her comes up in their conversation, Ella tells Kit that “it’s not so very bad . . . others have it worse I’m sure.
We must simply have courage and be kind. Mustn’t we?”

Courage and kindness become thematic elements of the movie and are repeated throughout the film, but one of the most notable repetitions comes when Kit is later talking to his father about his prospective marriage to a foreign princess. Kit tells his father, “I believe we need not look outside our borders for strength or guidance. What we need is right before us, and we need only have courage and be kind to see it.” In this instance, Kit directly repeats what he heard Ella tell him during their first meeting.

Similarly, during Ella and Kit’s first exchange, she tries to convince him not to hunt a stag that had run by, to which he says, “but we’re hunting you see. It’s what’s done.” This explanation does not prove satisfactory to Ella, who then tells the Prince that “just because it’s done, doesn’t mean it’s what should be done.” Kit again reiterates Ella’s words when he talks to his father later in the film after the King and the Grand Duke decide that Kit marrying a non-royal is out of the question. When the King and Grand Duke encourage Kit to stick with traditional marital rituals, Kit replies with a smile, “just because it’s done, doesn’t mean it should be done.” Again, we see Kit repeating, nearly verbatim, what Ella has told him earlier in the film. These two instances demonstrate that Kit, rather than Ella, is the vulnerable and impressionable person in this relationship. He listens to what she says, takes it to heart, and incorporates it into his own belief system. Ella is incredibly important in shaping Kit’s character. Throughout this film, Cinderella is a strong enough character to play an instrumental role in developing her male counterpart. The impressionability of Kit demonstrates the strength of Ella.

49. This and all further references to Disney’s Cinderella come from: Cinderella, directed by Kenneth Branagh (2015; Burbank, CA: Walt Disney Studios Motion Pictures, 2015), DVD.
Disney also demonstrates the equality between Ella and Kit through Ella’s possession of power. The first instance of this comes when Ella and Kit meet at the ball. Kit says to Ella, “if I may . . . that is, it would do me the greatest honor, if you would let me lead you through this first . . .” at which point he forgets the word “dance.” In this scene, Kit asks Ella’s permission to “let” him dance with her. He also says that it would be his honor to dance with her. In this moment, Kit acknowledges that Ella holds the power, and that the progression of their relationship rests upon her giving him the okay. This same transference of power is demonstrated when Kit becomes King and has his Town Crier release a proclamation that all young maidens in the land will try on the glass slipper. The proclamation ends with the following, “And [the King] requests that she [the owner of the slipper] presents herself at the palace. Whereupon, if she be willing, he will, forthwith, marry her.” First of all, the King (Kit) “requests” that the maiden come to the palace; he does not demand it. Additionally, the proclamation is sure to mention that their marriage will be based upon her willingness. This example, in addition to Kit asking Ella to dance, demonstrates that Kit continuously puts Ella’s desires (and others’ desires in general) above his own, and that Ella holds the power to do as she pleases. Unlike other versions of this tale, Disney writes its Cinderella as strong and capable. She holds the power to say no to the prince, and he acknowledges that Ella has every right to do so. Ella is self-possessed and strong, and Kit is considerate and obliging.

Disney again demonstrates equality between Ella and Kit during the resolution of the film through their physical positioning and dialogue. When Ella first walks down from the attic to try on the shoe, Kit motions to the chair and simply asks, “please?” Upon this request, Ella agrees to sit in the chair, and Kit kneels in front of her so that he
can place the glass slipper on her foot. When Kit kneels down, he is physically level with Ella. The two characters remain eye-to-eye throughout this entire exchange, quite literally visually demonstrating their equality. Their equality is lastly shown in the final scene of the movie when Ella and Kit have just been married and are about to walk onto the balcony to wave at the subjects below. Ella asks Kit, “Are you ready?” to which he replies, “For anything, so long as it’s with you.” The couple then walks out onto the balcony. While standing before their subjects, Kit looks at Ella and says, “My Queen,” and in response Ella says, “My Kit.” These two identifiers do more to equalize the two characters than potentially any of the other instances I mentioned above. By referring to Ella as his “Queen,” Kit brings her up to his level of royalty. Accordingly, Ella referring to the Prince as her “Kit” brings him down to be level with her social position. This exchange is the great equalizer between the two individuals from different backgrounds, social classes, and genders.

Throughout *Cinderella*, Disney offers a feminist standpoint towards gender, particularly through the equality between Ella and Kit. On numerous occasions, Kit respects and esteems Ella’s opinions so much that he internalizes them, and they help develop his character. This portrayal of Ella’s own positive influence and strong character challenges the idea that women are the “more impressionable” gender. Disney’s adaptation provides Ella with the power to either accept or reject Kit’s offers through the film. Many depictions of the Prince in various other versions of this tale portray him as demanding and possessive, characteristics portrayed in many modern movies and shows. However, Disney challenges this stereotype and offers viewers a Prince who is respectful and understanding of Ella’s desires.
**Portrayal of the stepsisters.**

Through its portrayal of the stepsisters, Disney consistently challenges traditional stereotypes about women by associating those stereotypes with the inherently evil stepsisters, demonstrating that superficiality is bad and that beauty does not equate to goodness. In many fairy tales, and particularly in the original Disney princess films, women are two-dimensional characters. They look pretty, but their depth of character is lacking. The sisters in *Cinderella* embody this exact description: they are heard and disliked before they are seen in the film. As their carriage pulls up to Ella’s house for the first time, the sisters can be overheard making observations about Ella, saying, “she’s skinny as a broomstick! . . . And that stringy hair!” and then they laugh together. With these lines, Disney immediately establishes the sisters as superficial and petty. The sisters then step out of the carriage and are physically beautiful, but the viewer already dislikes them because of the conversation they have just overheard.

The sisters’ superficiality is also exemplified while they are getting ready for the ball. Ella and the sisters are considering the prince, and Ella says, “what will he be like I wonder?” The sisters laugh together at this question and one replies, “what does it matter what he’s like?” to which Cinderella says, “wouldn’t you like to know a bit more about him before you marry him?” The same sister then states, “certainly not, it might change my mind.” During this exchange the sisters establish that nothing matters to them above being a rich princess. The Prince himself does not play a part in their desire; they are too one-dimensional for that. The Prince could be anyone so long as they end up rich and royal.
Because the sisters are immediately established as “wicked” in the beginning of the movie, every personality trait they possess is accordingly associated with wickedness. For example, Disney portrays the sisters as incompetent throughout the film, which associates evil with incompetence. The first instance in which this association is apparent comes near the beginning of the film when the sisters and Cinderella find out about the ball. The stepmother (Lady Tremaine) is about to send Cinderella to order dresses for the sisters, and Lady Tremaine says they need a little “Le Parisian,” to which the sisters look at Cinderella and say, “Ha! She doesn’t know what that means.” Cinderella then proceeds to respond with several sentences of fluent French. After Cinderella has gone to fetch the dresses, Anastasia turns to the other stepsister and says, “tell me what she said Drizella,” to which Drizella responds, “I speak French not Italian.” In this instance, Disney undoubtedly portrays the stepsisters as unintelligent and incompetent. In contrast to the sisters, Disney portrays Cinderella as knowledgeable and competent. Through these characters, competence and capability are glorified and incompetence is condemned.

Disney also condemns negativity and superficiality towards men through the language used by the stepsisters and Lady Tremaine. Numerous times throughout the film, Lady Tremaine and the stepsisters objectify men and speak negatively about them. The first example of this comes near the beginning of the movie right after the sisters find out that the Prince plans to throw a ball in order to find a wife. The exceptionally excited stepsister Drizella exclaims, “I shall trick him into loving me! See if I don’t!” In an ironic twist, this film portrays the stepsisters as the predators and the Prince as the prey. This is again shown later in the film when the sisters are descending the staircase, ready for the ball, and Lady Tremaine claims, “my dear girls, to see you like this, makes me believe
that one of you might just snare the prince.” Lady Tremaine’s use of “snare” to describe the sisters here brings to mind hunters waiting for an animal to become ensnared in their trap. The sisters also have a generally negative view of men, which seems to have been passed on to them from their mother. While getting ready for the ball, one sister states that “all men are fools, that’s what mamá says. The sooner you learn that the better.” The sisters clearly have a poor view of men, and therefore believe that men can be “trapped” and “snared,” like animals in their readily set cages.

Because the sisters are established early in the film as wicked, every characteristic they possess throughout Cinderella is accordingly associated with wickedness. The specific traits associated with wickedness I mention in this analysis are incompetence, superficiality of character, and superficial and negative views towards men. I argue that by establishing these traits as wicked, Disney provides a feminist standpoint concerning gendered stereotypes. Throughout history and in various movies, Internet, and media outlets, women have been glorified for being two-dimensional characters. As long as they were pretty, they did not need intelligence or competence and could rely on their superficial character to be the “ideal woman.” However, through their portrayals of the stepsisters, Disney deems all of these traits to be negative and undesirable. In many more traditional fairy tales, the Prince and other male characters are generally the predators looking for their prey. However, Disney turns this traditional role on its head and establishes the sisters as the predators and the Prince as the prey. Because the sisters themselves are portrayed as “wicked,” Disney condemns and discourages this predatory attitude, regardless of the character’s gender. Altogether, Disney constantly challenges
accepted views towards women and men, and demonstrates that not only are these views inaccurate, but they are wicked.

**Conclusion**

Within this chapter, I demonstrated how two different contemporary versions of Cinderella offer more nuanced standpoints towards gender. While examining Sexton’s poem, “Cinderella,” I found that Sexton uses her poem to challenge the Cinderella narrative and the roles of men and women within society. Sexton challenges the Cinderella narrative specifically by deconstructing the narrative itself through the sequence of her poem and the inclusion of unorthodox comparisons. Similarly, she uses offbeat comparisons in her description of Cinderella, which work to condemn Cinderella’s stereotypically “feminine” role within the story. Lastly, Sexton uses very possessive language in her description of the Prince within the poem. This language works to discourage any society that encourages men to objectify women and treat them as possessions.

I also found that Disney offers more nuanced standpoints towards gender within its 2015 *Cinderella*. Within the film, Disney challenges traditional gender roles through the equality between Ella and Kit and through the portrayal of the stepsisters. Equality between Ella and Kit is most clearly demonstrated through Kit’s impressionability and Ella’s possession of power, which contradicts traditional gender portrayals. The relationship dynamic between Ella and Kit exemplifies the breaking of traditional gender roles. Additionally, Disney establishes the stepsisters as “wicked” early in the movie, and then associates the sisters with stereotypically “feminine” characteristics, an association that establishes these traits as “wicked.” Altogether, Sexton’s “Cinderella” and Disney’s
Cinderella seek to challenge commonly held beliefs and attitudes towards gender roles. I argue that they both succeed in their endeavor and offer standpoints that contribute to the evolution of societal views towards gender.
CHAPTER IV
CONCLUSION

Fairy tales hold the power to aid in shaping societies and to challenge societal injustices, and the story of Cinderella exemplifies both of these influential roles of fairy tales. In Chapter I, I briefly introduced Perrault, the Brothers Grimm, Anne Sexton, and Disney as rhetors. I then examined each of their respective versions of Cinderella. I also briefly overviewed the theory of constitutive rhetoric and standpoint theory and established them as the theoretical frameworks for my thesis. Within Chapter II, I provided a more in-depth look into the rhetorical situation surrounding Perrault’s “Cendrillon” and the Brothers Grimm’s “Aschenputtel,” followed by an extensive review of Charland’s theory of constitutive rhetoric. With my introductions of each rhetor, each rhetorical situation, and the theory of constitutive rhetoric in mind, I began my analysis of “Cendrillon” and “Aschenputtel.” This analysis revealed three themes in each text. Within “Cendrillon,” I found that Perrault placed value on position, possessions, and peacekeeping. I also found that the Brothers Grimm seemingly emphasized hostility towards the outsider, the need for order, and the potential for self-determination within “Aschenputtel.” Within each of these analyses, I then used the theory of constitutive rhetoric to demonstrate how these texts influenced their respective societies.

In Chapter III, I examined Anne Sexton and Disney as rhetors and inspected the rhetorical situation surrounding Sexton’s “Cinderella” and Disney’s 2015 Cinderella. I then explained standpoint theory and specifically looked at feminist standpoint theory.
Following this literature review, I analyzed Sexton’s “Cinderella” and Disney’s *Cinderella*, specifically looking at gender within each text. I found that Sexton offered more nuanced views towards gender through her deconstruction of the Cinderella narrative and through her portrayals of both Cinderella and the Prince. Disney also offered more nuanced views towards gender through displaying equality between Ella and Kit and through the portrayal of Ella’s stepsisters. Following my explication of the themes in both “Cinderella” and *Cinderella*, I demonstrated how each rhetor offered more developed standpoints within their texts. With this brief overview of the content of my study in mind, this chapter will specifically review the research and findings surrounding each of my artifacts, beginning with Perrault’s “Cendrillon.”

**Perrault’s “Cendrillon”**

Charles Perrault was a very influential figure in the French Court of King Louis XIV. He held many roles throughout his life, particularly those of academician, politician, and writer. The reign of Louis XIV was rather polarizing. Many consider this period to be one of the most artistic reigns in French history. However, at the same time, the French people were often dissatisfied with the government and the general state of France. During this time, poverty spread rampantly, famine broke out, religious conflict ensued, and the French finances had reached an all-time low by the end of Louis XIV’s reign. The rise in the popularity of fairy tales closely coincided with the tumult of Louis’ reign. Members of the aristocracy began crafting narratives and performing them in “salons” for other members of the aristocracy. In fact, these salons were where the name “fairy tales” was first coined. The social unrest during this period led many writers to express their concerns and frustrations through fairy tales. Fairy tale writers included
many common themes within their tales. One of the most important themes for this study was the nostalgia for the idealized past. I argued that this nostalgia influenced French culture following the release of these fairy tales. This nostalgia for an idealized past encouraged members of the aristocracy to write about times in which their positions in society were more stable. French fairy tale writers therefore incorporated classist values into their stories because they longed for a time when class structure was more definite, “simple,” and stable. These conditions in turn promoted classism within French society. My analysis suggests that Perrault himself often encouraged classism within his tale “Cendrillon,” specifically through the value he placed on positions, possessions, and peacekeeping with the tale.

**Themes in Perrault’s “Cendrillon”**

I argued that Perrault encouraged classism by placing value on position, possessions, and peacekeeping throughout “Cendrillon.” He first encouraged position at the very beginning of the tale by establishing Cinderella as a gentleman’s daughter. This constituted Cinderella as a member of the French gentility from the very beginning of the story, which made her poor treatment more unjust and demonstrated that no one can rise too far above his or her station. Perrault also placed value on position by attributing positive characteristics to Cinderella, particularly beauty, goodness, and loveliness. Cinderella’s personality proved that even if one manages to rise in society (i.e., gentlewoman to princess), she is still expected to conform to the ideals of the royalty and nobility. Lastly, Perrault placed value on position through the stepsisters’ treatment of Cinderella. Any time Cinderella showed initiative to rise above being a “Cinderwench,”
the stepsisters mocked and abused her, demonstrating that individuals who attempt to transcend their societal positions will be seen with disgust and hostility.

Perrault also encouraged classism by placing value on possessions within “Cendrillon.” Perrault showed this theme through his use of descriptors and by describing various elements within the story as being of the very best quality. Throughout “Cendrillon,” Perrault consistently aligned signs of poverty with negative descriptors while aligning signs of wealth with positive descriptors. Additionally, most of these associations were made at the beginning of the tale, which set a tone of negativity towards poverty and positivity towards wealth from the very onset of the story. Perrault’s most commonly used descriptor was the word “fine,” as in something of superior quality or appearance. Throughout the story, he described numerous things surrounding Cinderella as “fine.” At the end of the story, Cinderella herself was then described as “fine.” Cinderella seems to become an objectified “fine” thing based on the “fine” objects the reader begins to associate with her throughout the story. The last way Perrault demonstrated the theme of valuing possessions in “Cendrillon” was his argument that good material things are always of the very best quality, therefore glorifying the ownership of the best quality, and presumably most expensive, goods.

The final theme I found that encourages classism within “Cendrillon” is Perrault’s value of peacekeeping. He shows this through Cinderella’s manners, her positive treatment of her sisters, and her eventual forgiveness of her sisters. Throughout the story, Cinderella continuously demonstrated good manners towards all, even when it meant a great potential loss to her. Cinderella also continually treated her stepsisters incredibly well, despite their constant mistreatment of her. This exceptional treatment was carried
over into the final lines of the tale. Despite the sisters’ hostility and abuse towards Cinderella within the story, Cinderella forgave her sisters at the close of the tale and bestowed them both with marriages of good standing. Instead of using her new power to “get even,” Cinderella used it to grant forgiveness and happiness to her sisters. Cinderella’s use of diplomacy throughout the story, and particularly at the end of the tale, showed the value of peacekeeping.

The theory of constitutive rhetoric posits that texts can aid in shaping societies. I argued that Perrault’s “Cendrillon” potentially encouraged classism within seventeenth and eighteenth century France. As many scholars argue, fairy tale writers of this time often wrote idealized pasts into their tales because they were nostalgic for times in which societal positions were more stable and concrete. Within these idealized pasts, classes were distinct and immovable, which the writers of this time accordingly wrote into their stories. They also showed that if the current king does not support this concrete hierarchy, and is considered “bad,” then the people can rightfully supplant this king. The circulation of these fairy tales in the century following their release could very well have influenced the thoughts and actions of the French people. This need for a more stable society and a king who supported this society, as encouraged in the fairy tales, could have been a contributing factor to the unrest and dissatisfaction felt by the French people in the years leading to the French Revolution of 1789.

The Brothers Grimm’s “Aschenputtel”

Jacob and Wilhelm Grimm began collecting Märchen in the early 1800s. During this time, Napoleon began invading the Germanies, which caused a German national consciousness to form. With French forces invading their lands, the German people found
it more crucial than ever before to maintain their German identity rather than adapting to French customs. The Grimm Brothers themselves were a product of this movement and began collecting Märchen, predominantly from young women within their social circle, in hopes of finding ways in which the German people were linguistically bound. They believed their collection could eventually teach Germans how to be German. The Brothers Grimm included many different themes within their tales that they believed to be inherently German traits. I found that the most relevant themes to this study were hostility towards the outsider, a need for order, and the potential for self-determination.

The Grimms’ stories became influential parts of the German Nationalism movement. Beginning in the mid- to late-1800s, the Grimms’ Märchen were incorporated into German school curriculum, so every generation of children during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries studied these stories and learned what were taught to be “German” traits and behaviors from them. These tales were then heavily misused and abused by Nazi Regime in the twentieth century who took existing themes, such as hostility towards the outsider, and exploited and used them to encourage Aryan ideologies. The exploitation of these stories appears to have convinced the German people during this time that the stories they heard from childhood actually affirmed the behavior encouraged by the Nazis. The Brothers Grimm’s “Aschenputtel” contains multiple traits mentioned previously, particularly hostility towards the outsider, a need for order, and the potential for self-determination, all of which promoted nationalism.

**Themes in the Brothers Grimm’s “Aschenputtel”**

The Brothers Grimm promoted nationalism within “Aschenputtel” by communicating the themes of hostility towards the outsider, a need for order, and the
potential for self-determination. Hostility towards the outsider was particularly shown through the description, portrayal, and treatment of Cinderella’s stepsisters. From the very onset of the tale, the Brothers Grimm position the sisters as interlopers in Cinderella’s life and home who take away what is rightfully hers. This suggested that outsiders can potentially come into the German people’s lives and usurp their rightful place. Once the Brothers established the stepsisters as outsiders, they described the sisters as physically beautiful but ugly on the inside. This supported the theme that although outsiders may seem appealing and good, they were bad people. The brothers also demonstrated hostility towards the outsider through the sisters’ attempts to “fit” into positions not created for them by literally chopping off parts of their feet to “fit” into Cinderella’s slipper. By attempting to take Cinderella’s place as the “true bride,” the sisters suggested that we should be wary of outsiders because they might take what is not their own. The brothers lastly encouraged hostility towards the outsider through the sisters’ final punishment. The sisters attempted to take Cinderella’s role as the “true bride,” and to rectify this wrong, the Brothers Grimm showed that the sisters violently punished by having their eyes pecked out. This punishment seemingly encouraged the punishment of outsiders who unlawfully took what was not theirs, including societal positions. One of the basic premises of the German Nationalism movement was dislike and violence towards the outsider, a theme the Brothers Grimm likely first included in their tales because of the impending threat of the French. Ultimately, the theme of hostility towards the outsider appears to have become so pervasive in this culture that it was a foundational characteristic of Nazi Germany, which can be seen by the mistreatment of Jews and Jewish sympathizers before and during World War II.
A second theme that the Brothers Grimm continuously included in “Aschenputtel” is the desirability for order. I argued that the Brothers established the desirability for order in two basic ways within the text: through order often leading to success, and through the use of rhythmic and rhyming patterns to draw attention to order. Throughout the text, the Brothers associated correct order with success, particularly when Cinderella was cleaning the lentils and when she tried on the slipper and was established as the “true bride.” The Brothers’ use of rhythmic and rhyming patterns also illustrated the need for order. A majority of rhythmic or rhyming patterns in this text refer to something either being in or out of order, which drew special attention to the theme of order. The desirability for order was a characteristic that circulated Germany in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, likely encouraged to some extent by the Grimms’ tales. Following World War I, Germany was politically and socially in a period of disarray, which created perfect conditions for the rise of the Nazi Party. The Nazi Party offered the people what can be considered a familiar sense of “German” order that they had been lacking following the war.

The last predominant theme I examined within “Aschenputtel” was the Brothers’ positive depiction of self-determination. The Brothers seemingly demonstrated the benefits of self-determination through their portrayal of Cinderella. Cinderella took initiative and found a way to go to the festival, successfully eluded discovery, and successfully disguised herself. When her stepmother refused to allow her to go to the ball, Cinderella took matters into her own hands and elicited the help of the friendly birds. Rather than accepting the fate that her stepmother attempted to impose on her, Cinderella found a way to go the festival—demonstrating a profound sense of self-determination.
Cinderella also eluded discovery numerous times throughout “Aschenputtel” as the prince attempted to find her. She decided that she did not want the prince to follow her home, so she successfully evaded him, again showing her self-determination. Cinderella lastly demonstrated her self-determination through her effective disguise and eventual reveal. Each time Cinderella eluded the prince, she managed to escape back into the house and disguise herself. On the final night of the festival, Cinderella decided it was the opportune moment to reveal herself and removed her sooty disguise. Cinderella’s self-determination also led to her eventual success as the Prince recognized her as the “true bride.” By the end of the tale, self-determination was associated with success.

In addition to hostility towards the outsider and the desirability of order, self-determination was a founding principle of German Nationalism in the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries. Following World War I, the German people were in disorder and needed to believe they had the power, or self-determination, to successfully reorder their lives. As history suggests, the Nazi party presented an ideology that made the German people believe they were able to control their destiny, but this ideology used and twisted the seemingly centuries-old Germanic trait of self-determination to interpellate the German people into believing their society was constituted by freedom, a freedom that was ultimately uncovered as mere illusion.

Anne Sexton’s “Cinderella”

The 1960s and 70s were tumultuous times for Americans. Within the 1960s, President Kennedy was assassinated, the Civil Rights movement was in full swing, and America was involved in both the Cold War and the Vietnam War. This decade is known for its social unrest, which came to define the culture of the time as well. People were
becoming more willing to speak out against injustice, particularly through poetry, which became an avenue through which individuals could express themselves and critique society. Thus, the 1970s was a turbulent decade that reshaped many American landscapes. Within this decade, America ended its involvement in Vietnam, the Supreme Court made a monumental decision in Roe vs. Wade, and President Richard Nixon resigned. But while the nation was experiencing major cultural and political changes during this time, citizens also began to more widely express their agitation about world events and social structure through mediums such as poetry.

Women’s roles during this time period were also changing and evolving drastically. Women were still working on transitioning away from being solely homemakers, particularly in the 60s, which brought uncertainty and a sense of misplacement for many women. Sexton herself consistently showed the downside of being a housewife, despite the “propaganda” circulated by politicians and media outlets that glorified this role. Yet despite the all of the social strides made in the 1960s and 70s, views towards gender roles remained rather stagnant in the early 1970s. However, the conditions of this time in history created an environment in which confessional poetry could flourish, and poets such as Sexton began to use their poetry as outlets for societal critique. Within her poem “Cinderella,” Sexton manages to offer a more nuanced feminist standpoint through her deconstruction of the Cinderella narrative and her portrayal of Cinderella and the prince.

**Themes in Sexton’s “Cinderella”**

Through her retelling of Cinderella, Sexton deconstructs the Cinderella narrative. Sexton begins her poem by briefly retelling “rags to riches” stories. Upon reading these
initial stanzas, the reader expects Sexton’s own tale to be a traditional Cinderella retelling. However, Sexton violated these expectations by including comparisons in her poem that would generally be considered contradictions. Sexton developed her text in a different direction than she seemingly promises at the beginning of the poem. Through this general deconstruction of the narrative, Sexton challenged the basic principles that form the patriarchal story of Cinderella and offered the reader a chance to view this story from a different perspective. This new perspective demonstrated to the reader that the original story is flawed and harmful because of the patriarchal boundaries it placed on gender roles. This feminist standpoint gave the reader an opportunity to read the Cinderella narrative in a way that criticized the roles placed upon women and possessive patriarchal culture.

Sexton also challenged traditionally held beliefs towards woman through her portrayal of Cinderella. Sexton repeatedly portrayed Cinderella as a character inhabiting a performative role. The first comparisons in the text compared Cinderella to a comedic actor and then to a gospel singer. By associating Cinderella with these two performers, Sexton demonstrated that Cinderella is herself a performer, whose primary purpose was to put on a good show for her audience. She was not an authentic character, but rather a character merely there for entertainment. Later in the text, Sexton also compared Cinderella to a doll in a museum case and a Bobbsey Twin on the cover of a book. By including these two comparisons, Sexton portrayed Cinderella as untouchable and unrealistic and indicated that Cinderella’s character is nothing more than an illusion. Again, the purpose of this illusion is to entertain. Sexton’s sarcastic and negative portrayal of Cinderella as a performer and unrealistic character demonstrated the
dissatisfaction women feel towards having to perform a role in society. Throughout “Cinderella,” Sexton consistently challenged the social order that dictated what positions and roles women must fit into and perform. By using these unorthodox comparisons, she also showed how ridiculous and masquerading those roles are. Within her poem, Sexton challenged the roles woman often feel pressured to inhabit, demonstrated that these roles are altogether performative and unrealistic, and argued that they serve no actual purpose other than entertainment.

Throughout “Cinderella,” Sexton also challenged traditionally held views towards gender roles and women in her portrayal of the prince. Sexton repeatedly demonstrated that the prince is a possessive character and Cinderella the item to be possessed. Sexton established the prince as a possessive character through her use of possessive language in nearly every reference to him and the fact that his attentions and actions always revolve around possessing Cinderella. Sexton also demonstrated that Cinderella was not able to choose to refute the prince’s attentions: she remained silent when he made advances towards her. Sexton’s continual objectification of Cinderella promoted the idea that she is nothing but a possession to which the prince believes he is the rightful owner.

Throughout “Cinderella,” Sexton continually portrayed the prince as possessive. Through Sexton’s use of a feminist standpoint throughout “Cinderella,” she identified and challenged the cultural norm of male possessiveness and the objectification of women. Sexton called attention to the inherent problems with these attitudes towards women and demonstrated the lack of women’s free will when these cultural norms are upheld.
Disney’s Cinderella

Within the last few decades, parents and critics have become increasingly concerned with fairy tale films. They argue that these films, particularly Disney films, encourage unhealthy and outdated views towards women. They also worry that these movies will negatively affect the identity development of young children, particularly girls. Older Disney films are particularly worrisome to these critics because within these films, the heroine’s utility is often based solely on her looks and passivity. For instance, in Disney’s animated Cinderella (1950), the heroine’s only job is to endure the unjust evil that she faces with beauty and grace. This two-dimensional, superficial heroine is no longer acceptable to viewers and consumers who increasingly advocate for heroines within film and media who offer more realistic and positive portrayals of women.

More recent fairy tale adaptations have attempted to give positive portrayals of women and gender roles. However, studies have found that gendered stereotypes are still pervasive within these more recent tales, indicating that the problem has not been fully resolved with time, but has continued with the newer princess films that have been released in more “feminist-aware” times. Gender identity building continues to be a major concern in modern society. Gender is an incredibly hot topic in 2010s American culture, and critics want to see more positive portrayals of gender in film, particularly films that are meant for children. Parents and critics alike challenge gender stereotypes from every direction, and fairytale adaptors are becoming increasingly aware that these societal changes need to be reflected in their modernized fairy tales. With all of these influences in mind, Disney released its 2015 live-adaptation of Cinderella. Within this film, Disney challenged traditionally held gender stereotypes and offered a more nuanced
feminist standpoint. Disney specifically did this through their portrayal of Ella and Kit as equals and through the portrayal of the stepsisters.

**Themes in Disney’s Cinderella**

Disney challenged traditional gender roles and gender stereotypes in *Cinderella* through the portrayal of Ella and Kit as equals throughout the film. Rather than presenting Ella as being dependent upon Kit, they were both dependent upon each other throughout the film, which is first demonstrated through Kit’s impressionability. Kit often internalized and repeated opinions Ella has mentioned to him, indicating how highly he esteems Ella and her beliefs and opinions. Kit often listened to what Ella says, took it to heart, and incorporated it into his own belief system. Disney also demonstrated the equality between Ella and Kit through Ella’s possession of power. The progression of the relationship between the two characters is always left up to Ella. She chose to dance with him, she chose to sit down, and she chose to accept his marriage proposal. Ella held the power to say no to the prince, and Kit acknowledged that she had every right to do so. Disney again demonstrated the equality between Ella and Kit during the resolution of the film through their physical positioning and dialogue. When Kit knelt to place the shoe on Ella’s foot, they were eye-to-eye and perfectly level. In this instance, they were quite literally equal with one another. Disney also established these two characters as equals in the closing scene through the names they call one another—Kit calls Ella “My Queen,” and Ella calls Kit “My Kit.” This exchange is the great equalizer between the two individuals from different backgrounds, social classes, and genders. Disney’s portrayal of Ella’s positive influence and strong character challenged the idea that women were the “more impressionable” gender. Disney also demonstrated that Ella had the power to
either accept or reject Kit, which was an option not often extended to heroines within fairy tales or even to many women within society. Disney also challenged commonly held stereotypes about men by offering a prince who was respectful and understanding of Ella’s desires.

Disney challenged traditional stereotypes about women by associating those stereotypes with the inherently bad stepsisters. Through their portrayal of the sisters, Disney demonstrated that superficiality of character is bad, that beauty does not equate to goodness, that incompetence is undesirable, and that generic negativity towards men is wrong. Because the sisters were immediately established as “wicked” in the beginning of the movie, every personality trait they possessed was accordingly associated with wickedness. By establishing these traits as wicked, Disney relied on a feminist standpoint concerning gender roles. Disney demonstrated that women should not be glorified for being two-dimensional and/or beautiful, but should be encouraged and praised for being competent and having substantial character. Altogether, Disney constantly challenged accepted views towards women and men and demonstrates that not only were these views inaccurate, but they should be condemned.

Implications for Future Research

Fairy tales are often overlooked within academia, particularly within the field of communication. However, these tales are incredibly powerful and should be treated as vehicles of influence and change and not solely as stories for children. Fairy tales inhabit a unique role because they are stories that nearly everyone within American society has heard or seen, creating a common bond amongst most people who share this common cultural identity. Fairy tales are also simultaneously capable of influencing societies
while being the perfect outlet to critique and challenge society’s oppressive hierarchies. 

The magnitude of their influence cannot be overstated.

Within this thesis, I specifically examined how Perrault’s “Cendrillon” and the Brothers Grimm’s “Aschenputtel” seemingly influenced their respective societies. Particularly, I believe special attention should be paid to the entirety of the Brothers Grimm’s 1857 collection of Märchen and all of the commonly circulated fairy tales of Perrault’s time in an examination of how these stories aided in shaping their respective societies. My own work within this study is a beginning to a larger excavation but should be developed and supplemented by more research. Although I explore how Sexton and Disney offer more nuanced feminist standpoints towards gender within their respective works, these stories have even more to offer scholars. In particular, it would be very valuable to examine the portrayal and inclusion of racial diversity within these two texts.

Fairy tale films themselves are still evolving and adapting, which means their portrayals of gender are accordingly changing. Creators of these adaptations need to realize the influence they have on a wide group of individuals, particularly young children. I myself remember being influenced by these tales from a young age. As a six-year-old, I begged my mom to let me be Cinderella for Halloween. She obliged, and a few weeks later I donned a shiny blue dress my Grammie had made. The next year I decided I wanted to be Snow White, so I again asked my mom, and she again consented. A few weeks later I wore a shiny navy and gold dress that my Grammie had also made, paired with a red hair band and shiny red shoes. Although I do not necessarily remember much from being six and seven, I remember the princess dresses I wore on Halloween: I can attest to how these stories and these heroines leave imprints on impressionable young
children. I am by no means arguing that these effects are always bad; in fact I treasure those memories. However, I am arguing that we should commit serious scholarship to detecting and understanding those effects because, at the end of the day, hundreds, if not thousands of children each year similarly beg their parents to let them dress as Cinderella for Halloween.


Zipes, Jack. E-mail message to author, February 15, 2017.


