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

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

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Recommended Citation
Fairytales need a reboot, and comedy queens Laura Lane and Ellen Haun are the women to do it. In Cinderella and the Glass Ceiling, they offer a rollicking parody of classic (read: patriarchal) tales that turns sweet, submissive princesses into women who are perfectly capable of being the heroes of their own stories. Mulan climbs the ranks in the army but wages a different war when she finds out she's getting paid less than her fellow male captains, Wendy learns never to trust a man-boy stalking her window, Sleeping Beauty's prince gets a lesson in consent, and more. Every tangible and intangible part of my being fell head over heels for these short, funny and supremely feminist fairytale retellings featuring kickass females and deeply important messages. Surprisingly, The Little Mermaid can actually be viewed as a feminist film, and Ariel as an empowered heroine. We even got the endorsement of Jodi Benson, the actress who brought Ariel to life. Watch it above. Scene from Disney's The Little Mermaid, which opened on Nov. When The Little Mermaid came out in 1989, it was the first Disney princess film since 1959’s Sleeping Beauty. The filmmakers wanted 16-year-old Ariel to be a more modern kind of fairy-tale heroine. And she is. Compared to Cinderella, Sleeping Beauty, and Snow White, who pine away for love until magic spells and handsome princes intervene, Ariel is a rebel, unapologetic about pursuing her own dreams and desires.

Still, Ariel does find love by sacrificing a key part of her identity: her voice. At once the quintessential fairy tale and a curious subversion of the fairy-tale form, 'The Little Mermaid' requires some careful analysis to unpick its various strands and meanings. Before we offer an… Or should we offer a feminist interpretation of the tale, which sees the price that young women pay for marriage and motherhood (the intense pain to her lower body which the little mermaid must undergo if she is to join the prince) being muteness, physical pain, the loss of an outlet for her talents (giving up her singing voice), and a curtailing of her freedom? That she must leave behind the world of her family to marry into his? One of the reasons why 'The Little Mermaid' is such a rich tale is that it invites these and other interpretations. One day, she finds a handsome young man adrift in a shipwreck and takes him to shore. More obsessed with the surface than ever, Lotte jumps at the chance to become human when a demon named J offers her a magic potion. But there's more to J's potion—and his intentions—than meets the eye... Lotte has always been fascinated by the surface world, but mermaids are forbidden to ever have contact with humans. One day, she finds a handsome young man adrift in a shipwreck and takes him to shore. More obsessed with the surface than ever, Lotte jumps at the chance to become human when a demon named J offers her a magic potion.