

AFTER THE BALL IS OVER: BRINGING CINDERELLA HOME

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Cinderella, a popular children's story, features a woman of ideal proportions elevated to myth. This is not the ubiquitous folktale's nature but derives from mistranslation and application. The contemporary Cinderella's most memorable and crucial features – glass slipper and ugly sisters – have little original relevance; now magic, not maturity, is lauded. Feminist phenomenology reveals Cinderella as a primer for moral and gender role conventions, leeched of race, gender and class. Sub-textual messages train girls in anti social behaviors and antipathetic family relations. Despite the almost thoroughly female content of Cinderella, the end-result of this instruction is the eventual absence of female agency and identity.

The Cinderella Myth

The tale of *Cinderella* is encoded as a text of patriarchal moral instruction in which a sense of female agency will always by definition be absent. In this folk tale, which is also a fairytale, female character is positioned in terms of what it is not: not dominant, not powerful, not male. Cinderella herself, non-hero of a dubious tale, evinces more depth than most archetypes. She is capable of developing relationships, meting forgiveness, manipulating her own destiny, even of attracting magical help. This latter suggests a divine personage, with whom ancient myth is rife, but in fact there is never any indication that Cinderella is inhuman. On the contrary, her essential humanity is her salvation.

These qualities on their own make Cinderella an anomaly among fairytale principals: she is given no journey, no quest, no troll to enrage or woo, but permitted to stay at home (albeit in a life of unrelieved drudgery). Although one of three sisters, she does not best them in riddles or games of strength or chance; even the sewing for which she is punished is not her own. Cinderella does not return from the party with a prize but (as I will show, I will shout) the opposite: she comes home missing what she had when she set out. Cinderella does not experience any perceivable growth or transformation with the exception of the tangible one directed by her magic guide – one which is also undone. We can read *Cinderella* as a mythical character only because of what she means to us as women.

But that is enough. By virtue of what *Cinderella* represents to contemporary women, the character of Cinderella passed from her fairytale origins to mythical proportions. Cinderella has escaped the bounds of her own story. *Cinderella* defines girls' first choice for a romantic partner, the strictures of friendship and obedience that girls are trained to uphold, unconditional family love and, not least, ideals of personal appearance and deportment. *Cinderella* demonstrates the potential of even the least socially advantaged female to achieve public success, the ability of the meek to triumph over the (female) competition, the trick of appearing to be what one is not. These are important techniques in the battle for male approval. If we have impressed Cinderella into service as a myth, it is because we need to look up and forward to a figure who has successfully navigated the obstacles on the distinctly female journey. Cinderella's rags-to-riches story inspires females to prevail against improbable odds. We do not believe in myths because of some inherent truth in them, but because they substantiate what we most wish to be true: *Cinderella* is a falsehood painted as possibility. What we worship in her is not what she is but what she gets; by

subscribing to the myth of *Cinderella*, we sustain our collective female belief in wealth, beauty, and revenge.

New Origins

Folktales had their origins in oral accounts, stories told by people before the advent of writing, or before someone determined them worthy of literary transcription. Grimm Brothers Jacob and Wilhelm did not, in an original creative act, write the tales published under their names, but went out as folklorists (before there was such a profession) into the countryside, like anthropologists in their wilds, and listened. What they brought back they then edited, like the good ethical binary German men they were: anything that didn't suit their "Christian" standards simply disappeared. I have read transcriptions and abstracts of their notes and wondered at the absence of certain types of tales. Stories about children surviving on their own, or women leaving the husbands who beat them, somehow never made it to press; concurrently, stories about Jews being robbed and hung in thorn trees, or torn apart by dogs while (mendacious) villagers laughed, stayed in. The Grimms were very careful not to let what they heard get in the way of what they wrote. Charles Perrault held the same view, concerned lest women and other children go astray. Both Perrault and the Brothers Grimm published these folktales as if they were their own – under their own professionally upstanding names, and not as anthropological records but as literary fictions.

The performance of meaning for fairy tales ... becomes both an intratextual and an extratextual matter, one enacted by (re)writers of the tale, who rescript stories passed on to them, and by its readers, who collaborate with the (re)writers to negotiate yet another production of textual meaning (Tatar 277).

Although "old wives" may have originally imparted the stories we read today, the power and authority of writing sat fast in the hands of male scholars; publication, moreover, was granted to the wealthy. For each fairy tale, *Kindermärche*, folk legend and myth with which we are now familiar, there are possibly thousands for which there is no record. Folk legend, like history, is selected. *Cinderella* was similarly written (or transcribed) from oral accounts as a piece of moral instruction. A *Cinderella* by any other name exists in a variety of languages and cultures,¹ with many culturally-revealing alterations to the basic storyline, most telling us of a poor but beautiful girl who, by going to a party on the hill, wins the attention of a wealthy man. Look what the right pair of shoes will do for you.

Cinderella's story is a curious one. Many of us know this tale in its modern extensions but cannot say how we know it – whether we read it in a child's picture-book, watched Disney's animated version, saw a movie with human actors unanimated by comparison, or "fell in love with" the ash-girl in her other forms (including in Dickens' revival). Indeed, *Cinderella* is legion: as Barbie in diversely perfect incarnations, the "heroine" of almost any romance novel, new and sometimes relevant literary concepts (for instance, the "*Cinderella* complex," the "whore with a heart of gold").² Bernard Shaw's drama *Pygmalion* presents another instance of male bonding conducted through the service of a woman, in this case one who believes that she can only win by trying, as she has started with nothing. To his credit, Shaw allows the character to shove off at the end, bearing her body away, but to have true love and devotion this *Cinderella* must give up all pretenses to education. Education therefore becomes a pretense. Further transformed as the Lerner and Lowe musical *My Fair Lady*,³ the music ends with a new-made woman who newly makes man: Eliza converts her creators. The underlying message is one Mary Shelley crafted a hundred years earlier: Frankenstein has no loyalty. But in this case the monster manages to marry one of the scientists.

Both *Pygmalion* stories are commercial perversions of an ancient Greek myth that performed a service for its culture. In the original, a male artist falls in love

with his own sculpture, surely an intriguing commentary on the power of art to seduce even its own creator, and a warning to gaze on verisimilitude with suspicion. This brings us to Hollywood's contemporary *Pretty Woman* and another Disneyized threat, *The Little Mermaid* (if there is a hell, then Hans Christian Anderson is now in it). In these movies Cinderella transforms from foul and fish into a lady that only proves how far women will go to change for their men. As *Oedipus* provides a model for the male (kill Daddy, bed Mommy), so *Cinderella* serves the female, directing us to similarly anti-social behaviors and antipathetic familial relations: to hate and compete with other females, suffer in silence, and seek *rappport* with males through the mysteries of flirtation, fashion and marital fitness. Fortunately for women, this involves only virtuous activities, easily enough acquired in the observance of girlhood duties: cleaning, cooking, sewing, nurturing and displaying ourselves publicly, all the while taking up little space. Taken to its logical conclusion, woman herself at last disappears from view. This is true in the story of Cinderella, as we shall see.

Absence

Let it be known that the ballerina is not a woman dancing: that, within those juxtaposed motifs, she is not a woman, but a metaphor that summarizes one of the elemental aspects of our form, sword, goblet, etc., and that she is not dancing, suggesting, by the wonder of ellipses or bounds, with a corporeal writing, that which would take entire paragraphs of dialogued as well as descriptive prose to express in written composition: a poem detached from all instruments of the scribe (Mallarmé, *Oeuvres Completes*⁴).

One of the first absences in the text occurs in translation of *Cinderella* from an earlier publication in French⁵ to English – the absence of a word. It is a simple word and a little loss that heralds an enormous and important one: exchange of the French *velours* (velvet) for *verre* (glass). In the centrality of the image conjured by its sign, this Word reads as Logos for the remaining popularized text. It is an understandable mistake given the hardships of transcribing in the field (from which Charles Perrault, at least, copied out his manuscripts), of hearing and absorbing frank orality and then transforming it to arid print. The terminological difference, however, leaves women literally walking on glass, each step a *faux pas*. How does one navigate on such a fragile basis? This may be interesting to women who wonder how Cinderella got through the night in those shoes. Cinderella's new shoes are truly, clearly, invisible, her feet naked to all eyes. But worse – she must dance in an unforgiving shoe (dancing for the first time in public, mind you) – which at any moment threatens to break, replace her barefoot, bloody, and utterly helpless. How carefully she must step. A good thing the Prince has learned to dance.

To comprehend the magnitude of this error – estrangement of the word and actions of our young charwoman – we are forced to retrace the steps of that perilous slipper, magicked into being with the rest of Cinderella's fancy outfit. There is no honest explanation for why the slipper remains as testimony – why, if the shoe fits, it drops. Moments earlier, we are told, the young woman was gaily dancing in this very shoe; surely it would have fallen off then, in the endless (and, as dancers know) breathlessly swift rounds of the older Austrian waltz. But after a night of aerobics indoors, the woman rushes outside and immediately loses a shoe. This mistranslation points us towards understanding the slipper as a prominent signifier, rather than towards seeing some more substantial object: "glass" operates as a red flag, leading us to a fanciful but ultimately unnecessary correction of an image. Glass breaks, it is true (although in the story it does not, at least overtly). But in the French source material the shoes were velvet. Velvet, a word strongly associated with skin (more so than glass), tears. It is strong, soft, stretchy and pliable. A velvet slipper can be left on the road and retrieved and can still be worn in a ragged condition. Not so glass. So while glass attracts our attention, velvet rubs us better. Something velvet has been lost. And found.

If the slipper's loss signifies another loss, the slipper signifies another slip. It is troubling that only one item retains its shape (the shape of magic) after the ball, when everything else has returned to its poor normalcy, right down to the golden pumpkin. If everything is magical, then the slipper's exclusion makes no logical sense in the story. But without the slipper as a calling card, a sort of invitation to be stepped on, the Prince may never find Cinderella in the sea of women vying for his notice. Conversely, it is not clear to me now why the Prince has to find her. The story dazzles us with finery, which we all too readily see as refinement. In the spell of the lost slipper, we overlook the more obvious intrusion of the Prince himself, and in the absence of honest cogitation conclude that he must be the one for Cinderella. (It's true he is the only one, but in modern times that is not as good a reason as it once was.) Having had no time to know Cinderella as a woman apart from her unpleasant family, we have certainly failed to meet the Prince, and know nothing of this man except that he is extraordinarily superficial, a late bloomer, and wholly dependent upon his parents. In the remainder of the tale he develops as a foot fetishist. At no point in the story are we logically convinced that these two should be together, that the Prince is worthy of our supposed "heroine," or heroic himself. *Cinderella* is not particularly romantic, even after the finding of the slipper that initiates a sordid (wo)manhunt. The objective of this search is a stranger who clearly wants to hide; otherwise she would have answered the call. (Her sequestration at home in a locked house is far from likely, given that a principal domestic duty is emptying the char outside, and her name signifies her as that domestic.) And despite his hunting, there is no reason to think that a prince is going to be excited to end up with a poor ragged girl with ashes on her hands – never mind the in-laws.

On the face of it, what Cinderella lost at the ball is a shoe, but we do her an injustice if we look only at her instructions (particularly as she has already ignored those of her stepmother) and neglect her feelings at the moment of flight. Cinderella is now in a palace, a place of possible refuge, safe from her family. The Prince likes her. But at the striking of the clock – no, the calling of the watchman or ringing of the bells – she gets scared and runs away. Modern detectives would phrase this differently: Cinderella exits the party late, leaving behind material evidence of her existence. (Without this the Prince might have thought that Cinderella was a fantasy.) She runs as fast as she can in an effort to beat time and find a way home. (If she'd had a mother she would have known better than to go to a party where she doesn't know anyone: anything can happen at a party.) Then Cinderella loses her velvet, and the Prince gets it. (You decide what went on at that party.) And there is another ending, suggested by what is not stated in the story: Cinderella disappears from the party, last seen in the company of a prince. Passers-by report having seen a poor woman in tattered clothes, sitting in the middle of the carriage-track massaging her feet. This is the last either woman was seen. Police are now searching for this beggar whom, they believe, may have murdered a foreign princess as she left the party, probably for money. Anyone knowing the whereabouts of (but what is her name?) an anonymous princess, please contact this writer.

Presentation of any story results in commission of at least two versions – the story that is told and the one we hear. I propose a tertiary rendition, that of the story we do not hear because it is not told – not, that is, forcefully sounded. Were we to listen to the spaces, as artists from Aaron Copland to Noah Ben Shea have reminded us, we would hear those speaking parts. The heard *Cinderella* is, despite its magic and fantasy, the authoritative edition; the unheard *Cinderella* is the practical, plodding story that might bring us to furious tears rather than ecstasy. A moment ago I suggested how Cinderella might seem to an outsider, one not as privy to events as she. Underlying that suggestion is another one, that the writer or teller of the well-known *Cinderella* is either Cinderella herself or a close companion, as indicated by the naïve credulity of the story itself. But that quality we have come to accept in the folktale genre, one which causes us to reflect upon the medieval notion of story-telling and which tells us much about religious tradition of belief in that period.

Now I wish to produce something different: a case history of poor Cinderella, the pieces and bits of her life which may have been discarded by her "original" creator/story-tellers. Again this is an unheard story, but now it is also unspeakable. I speak as a caseworker in the Women's Shelter:

Cinderella gave Intake the following story:

Her mother died when Cinderella was perhaps five. Her father remarried a year later. Two older stepsisters were at the wedding, aged between eight and twelve; the stepmother's first husband died when a nearby witch's cottage burned down *suspicion of arson*. Almost immediately, and for the next twelve years, Cinderella was beaten regularly by her stepmother; she showed us an early scar, located on the upper left thigh, from a fire poker. Cinderella's father fell ill *probably Plague* and died *date uncertain*. The sisters began to kick, taunt, pull her hair and feed her bugs. When Cin began her menses, she was locked in a closet for...? some extended time. There seems to have been a change in the family's finances at this point; the last remaining servant was let go, or left, and Cin took over all chores. She was probably eleven years old when she was first sexually assaulted, by the eldest stepsister. The abuse was repeated periodically until this day. *Cin believes that her stepmother does not know of this, but C- does not dare tell her.* C- sneaked off to watch the Grand Ball and, once in the estate and aided by strong drink *says she had a "bout" with a stableboy* she made it upstairs disguised as a maid, entered a room and "borrowed" a gown. She then appeared in the ballroom. The Prince danced with her, drew her into a private room, and "seduced" her *not rape? C- won't say the word* then returned to the party. C- fled wearing only underclothing and carrying her shoes in her hands. Outside she dropped a shoe without noticing until she got home; the other shoe is in her garter. *We have all received, of course, the Royal Proclamation, and know that Prince Ode is hunting for the owner of something in his possession.* Cinderella came to the Shelter because she believes that he means to find her, take her away, and kill her.

The "case" above, common enough in the lives of women, is not what we know as *Cinderella* but, given the circumstances of the folktale, its bizarre elements and strange silences, it could have been. In re-telling it I invite the reader to think how reading that as a child might have influenced her life, her love for housework, her attitudes towards men, and her desire to marry early.

My Cinderella Confession

A current trend in scholarship, at least printed scholarship, is self-reflexivity. The speaker is expected to identify herself, admitting her biases (as if the reader could not detect them) so as not to hide behind the formality of academic writing. In this vein I step forward and make confession, presenting some personal limitations regarding the story of Cinderella. Despite all I know about Cinderella, regardless of all that currently annoys me in the story, I confess that as a child I did identify with Cinderella. I liked animals. I liked pumpkin. I lived in a small room. When I went to parties I had a curfew – and it was unreasonable. I couldn't sew, and needed help in home economics. I went barefoot most of the time. It seems I never got dessert, possibly because I often lost things on the way home. I had to do such hard chores that I investigated child labor laws. I had two older sisters and, although they are regular sisters rather than stepsisters, they often seemed very wicked indeed. So what if they weren't ugly, my feet were much smaller than theirs. (Then.) Because of them I wore hand-me-downs. (Then.) You see how it all fits. So although I was not a beautiful golden-haired orphan (my natural color is sun-bleached brunette), kept in a dungeon or an attic (I adored my aunt's basement), forced to clean ashes from the hearth (we had a wall furnace) and befriended only by mice (we had large dogs), I did think that eventually someone would come and take me away from all this. I even

learned to waltz. But I didn't meet any princes.

The Conventions of Class

Cinderella begins with Cinderella's primary absence: her mother. In fairytales, motherlessness indicates an absence of quality attention and the necessity (given the staggering amount of handiwork done at home) for men to remarry. Their second wives are invariably brutish, and fathers die off like flies. Female children raised by these monstrous women are lucky to be married, while still children, to ugly old men – thus escaping beatings, beheadings, being poisoned, cooked, frozen, sold, or accidentally left somewhere awful. Male children with stepmothers tend to seek their fortunes at an early age, so as to find their own women to punish.

The next absence in Cinderella's life is a father. Is it only that absent parents are common to the childhood fairytales which govern our memories and learning patterns, thus wending their way into our literary texts, or does this trope stand for more a "founding absence," like the "founding murder" *Oedipus* is said to represent? The next absences we hear about in *Cinderella* are, in order: clothes, shelter, appropriate work, friends, and opportunities to socialize (with humans). It is at this point in the story that Cinderella encounters magic, something generally absent beyond fairytales. Or does she merely recognize the magic in her life? For it seems as if the Fairy Godmother were always there, available, like Glinda the Good Witch, to drop in when you needed direction. From that point on it is apparent what else Cinderella lacks: transportation, a formal dress and decent shoes. The final absence is Time. Even her Fairy Godmother gives her very little – as we find out later, just enough. After Cinderella loses the shoe in escaping (too late) from the party, she is plunged back into the animal world she dominates, shorn of finery, reduced to essentials. She returns to the level of minimal survival. Thank goodness the Prince is already searching, his spies canvassing for little feet. Cinderella will soon be lifted up, placed on a horse or in a carriage, and transported to a world of wealth and satisfaction with a big house and a good family. (I hope I didn't ruin the story for you.)

On a basic moral level the instructions are clear as glass: good triumphs over bad, beauty over its repulsive opposite. Cinderella is intimately associated with nature, as we are told several times: through the animals which, like she, become domesticated; through her beauty which, in the tradition of the Aesthetic experience, demonstrates its superiority over homeliness. ("Homeliness?" What is "homely," really, but housewifely, comfortable, and familiar – and therefore contemptible?) From our perspective of identification with Cinderella (we'd hardly choose to identify with ugly, nasty women) these females, older than she and more mature, are females prepared to party, women rather than girls, and not "real" (biologically real) sisters. Partly because of the brevity of the story and paucity of detail, this suggests that they, mere "step-sisters," are somehow "unnatural." Beyond the "natural" beauty that testifies to Cinderella's (yet unrealized) status, her elevation over this unconnected family is physically represented by spatial signifiers: imprisonment in an attic, conveyance in a horse-drawn coach, and finally marriage into a royal family. Above all, Cinderella's most natural gift is magic: the girl's beauty and (its) charm shine brightly through mere rags. This is so apparent that it is noticed immediately by a prince – a man born into an entirely different milieu, to wealthy and indulgent parents. The story asks us, among other things, to anticipate that such a wedding of opposites will work. In fact, fairy tale happenstance and happily-ever-afters aside it just might, and because of Cinderella's "nature." The Prince, culturally her Other, is the aesthetic brother of Cinderella. The kinkiness is just beginning.

We customarily avoid class in reading and rewriting folklore, but *Cinderella* affords a remarkable discussion. Before the Prince lays eyes on her, Cinderella does not exist in the legal and economic awareness of her country. She pops into being at a party, relatively mature, decorated, and provocatively displayed. It is not a party for poor people; poverty is absent from the ball. But that in itself

is an absurd notion: naturally the castle is full of servants, and most are penniless; [redacted] can only say that no poor people are "present" because poor people are beneath the notice of the wealthy population, invisible. This fact has not changed. Cinderella gets the invitation because it goes to the house in which she lives, a place where she is kept captive by her poverty. She seems not to have been born into the lower class (otherwise she would never have been able to get through the castle gates, let alone waltz), but fell into deprivation through the death of her parents. Who can really blame the stepmother for not wanting to take care of a girl with whom she had no real relation? Biology speaks: woman must protect her own offspring – particularly if the physical attractiveness of another female threatens their own reproductive success. The absence of Cinderella's own mother is unremarkable, superficial, unless one regards it as a fundamental absence, the one upon which the half-orphan's rags-to-riches story is initially built: through the father's emotional absence, Cinderella's mother is replaced by a non blood-relation whose own issues of reproductive success create class strife and difference within the family; the girl is faced with rival kin; and finally a mystical figure intrudes from the other world, faintly identifiable as her mother (the magic helper styles herself a "Fairy Godmother") but granting no more than material assistance.

Transformation of animals into human servants,⁶ and their disappearance at midnight, symbolically expresses the absence of the lower classes, which serve the upper class as if animals. When we observe how Walt Disney attempted to fill in the absences in the text with additional animal habitation, this concept becomes clearer. Disney explains Cinderella's primary absence by the increased presence of animals that evidently take the place of a mother. With the appearance of the stepmother and two daughters the animals are replaced, and abandoned as Cinderella had been. An absence of family acknowledgement is discernible in Cinderella herself who, regaining the humble form of a scullery maid, becomes unrecognizable – virtually invisible – to her own family. The means by which Cinderella will eventually succeed is over-determined by class: she must physically impress her Prince and lord at court, and later fit his image of the perfect (small) woman at home. Still she requires a bit of magic.

The story presents an array of questionable absences, none of them textually answered. Why is there a ball? Only because of the Prince's failure to get a date on his own. His folks have to arrange something, to find women for him. Cinderella attends a party meant not for her but the "beautiful people" associated with money and fame. We privately know that Cinderella really belongs to this group; therefore we suspend our disbelief at the unlikelihood of her ever getting there. At the moment of Cinderella's entry, a representative of the poor actually becomes visible to rich people. But she is not really poor, is she? The tale does not end with Cinderella speaking in the public square, peasants invited up to the castle for lunch – in short with the French Revolution. (If it did, Cinderella's own head would roll.) She ascends, making *aliyah*; the rest of the lower-class remains in *galut* (the Diaspora). In fact, in the hands of Disney, Cinderella turns into a girl (few of Disney's female heroines are women)⁷ who sings as she is dressed – oh, those happy peasants! – in accordance with the tradition of musical theatre to sing instead of enjoying a useful discussion. Everything stops while we listen to the same few lines being repeated. The formula recurs in nearly every Disney movie: when animals, peasants and racial minorities show up it's time for a song.⁸

Do children want a story interrupted with a song? As a child I hated that sort of thing. Surely we must question for whom these stories, and their cinematic adaptations, are truly meant, written, animated, shown and sold. Jacqueline Rose points to the "impossibility" of children's literature as a genre ostensibly for children, but written by adults, while in the marketplace it is adults who (because of their economic position) are the true consumers. It is even the adult who reads the book (aloud) to the children. Thus it is an adult's version of the child's world which is manufactured through the aegis of children's literature. Children's fiction, says Rose, "sets up a world in which the adult comes first (author, maker, giver) and the child comes after (reader, product, receiver)" (Rose

1-2). So what is it that adults want children to understand from the story of Cinderella?

Female Relationships

One of the horrors of Cinderella's tale is the moment when she flees the castle and its famous ball. She is running, running, running away from the bright lights, the fun, the food, the nice guy, running to keep a date imposed by the Good Witch. This is a moment of horror not because she has to leave the party: she's pretty young, high time she went home. (Anyway she wouldn't want the Prince to think she was easy.) No, it is horrible because of the Fear of Public Exposure. If there is one thing that would compel me to leave a good party it would be the fear that my clothing would disappear. She runs out the door, the gate, goes down those steps, she's just off the grounds, and poof! there it goes.

Fortunately she is not standing there naked, but we couldn't be sure of that beforehand. For a child to imagine being naked in public is terrible; so what if only the animals can see? There is no good explanation why the Fairy Godmother add this potential punishment to the assistance she gives Cinderella, there is no point. In my mind, something is missing from the story, something vitally important. Why is she set up in this way? What we do see in *Cinderella* is a tale of perfidy and female treachery. The bad characters are all female. How can one speak of a female absence in Cinderella, when it would seem that almost all of the characters are female? But these people consist of a good but romantically stupid girl who prefers to accept the ill treatment of her step-family rather than to pack up the mice and leave; two step-sisters, ugly mean and very ugly, who are indistinguishable from the other, except through Disney's putrid use of color; an evil step-mother, also ugly; a strange woman who shows up once in a lifetime, twice if you subscribe to the Disney account. (Where was she the previous sixteen years? Thanks a lot, "Mother.")

Female hatred. Female sabotage. Female jealousy. These are all shown us repeatedly in *Cinderella* as is. We discover that the way to win a prince is over the ugly bodies of our competitors, who are similarly trying to cut our throats. Beauty on its own is not enough: you have to be seen by the right people. You must triumph over those who would hide your beauty. You must outdo them. No wonder female friendships are so problematic, when this is how we are trained to see our relationships with other women. Hatred, sabotage and jealousy are also present in earlier tellings of the story which, though present in the current Disneyized version, is absent at its end, when Cinderella rides off into the horizon and the bad family vanishes from sight and mind. In *Aschenputtel*, the Grimm version of *Cinderella*, birds attack the evil stepsisters and bite out their eyes. But in many other accounts Cinderella's goodness is almost saintly: she forgives her stepsisters' horrible behavior and sometimes even manages to match them up at court. This is certainly not what I would do – but I also have an opportunity to rewrite this story at the point of my retelling it. I have already reinterpreted the story for you using a metaphoric polemic on absence. In my story, what is most important about Cinderella is the shoe.

Ways of Seeing

This article concerns metaphors and ways of seeing, particularly ways of seeing what others are not looking at. The logical assumption is that a non-subject is therefore trivial, unworthy of serious study. Conversely, my response was and is to question why these are non-subjects, to investigate decisions made by others about what is likely to be important to me or to anyone else. So my work begins with a rejection – of the canon, of the politics of literature and its publication, of academic appropriateness, of the legislation of opinion. One of the ways that academics seem to operate is through the posing of binary or structural opposites. It is comforting to know that if a thing is not this it must be that; what is not cold is hot. Never mind that we are capable of thinking about

and experiencing an enormous range of temperatures, that heat is a relative term as is cold; structural opposition (Levi-Straussian construction) enforces binary coding, usually with the additional motivation of fixing, or affixing, moral values. Because one is already conditioned to look at things as this or that, cold or hot, the value indicators are similarly binary: negative and positive. We need both, of course, and not only in our flashlights: polarity is a dependent relationship. But because of this tendency towards a tension of opposites, we end up limiting our transactions, our thinking, to bad and good. This is the outcome – if not the point – of children's literature: it conditions us to distinguish bad and good, and to make a number of other associations with these terms; that which is considered good is that which beautiful, smart, nice, polite, fair or even white, obedient, tall, slim, quiet, and so forth. In fairy tales, the basis of what we now call children's literature, a person's inner qualities are instantly discernible from external attributes. Good and bad are physiologically, physiognomically manifest: the dark little crooked old woman in black with the wart on her nose is not going to be the hero. Thus a good person is also pleasant to look at and (as we know from television) has clean clothes, fresh breath, and carefully styled hair.

I have gone into an extended discussion of binarisms and ethics because I invite you to suspend binary judgments, to move beyond an evaluation of "absence" as the opposite of "presence," and to consider absence in a different way: as something present – but not. That which is "not not present" is absent. When something present is not looked at, not recognized, not seen, it acquires a certain invisibility – in part, what I call "absence." Absence is what is always there but overlooked, or there but unheard, or seen and heard but never mentioned. We do not immolate the story in reconsidering what it conceals.

We literally unveil nothing of her, nothing that in the final account does not leave her intact, virginal (he loves only that), undecipherable, impassively tacit, in a word, sheltered from the cinder that there is and that she is (Derrida 41).⁹

Those characteristics of *Cinderella* left un-addressed support this view of absence: somewhere behind the story sits another story, the one we are not meant to hear. Were we to hear it we would walk away with an entirely different perception of the poor beaten Cinderella – or several different perceptions.¹⁰ We might be inspired to question the value of the hidden features, to wonder where issues of class, aesthetics, nature, superstition, parenting, hunger or politics fit in our founding myths, to wonder at the importance of such a myth as *Cinderella* in our female lives. We might be sufficiently moved to overturn the patriarchal texts, insert others in their place (Nature filling its vacuum). Not, that is, to rewrite *Cinderella*, but instead to find a more feasible model for contemporary female behavior. Perhaps even to acknowledge that there can be no models except those we embrace through personal experience.

Absence is something more than its frail partner "presence" – a location for the political, for what is challenging for societies and social conditions, for what must not be looked at, not seen, not noted, not touched. Not "presented." Absence is dangerous. To locate absence is to chart life, history, sociology, in a specific way. The *Cinderella* story presents an array of questionable absences, textually unanswered because unquestioned. This discussion does not pretend to provide closure, but rather to enjoin readers to ask questions of their own. Unlike other ways of seeing, this strategy does not limit or eliminate the text, but it does subvert it. By examining our essential stories, those we encountered at the knee, and those we "teach" to children, we begin to see in other ways, to discover culture as a tool for moral education, sexual regulation and female containment, and to locate female absence very close to home

Notes

¹I do not wish to repeat the excellent extensive historical scholarship on *Cinderella's* origins here. *Cinderella's* lengthy and interesting histories, irrelevant in this discussion, can be found in the following brief bibliography: Bruno Bettelheim, *The Uses of Enchant-*

ment: *the Meaning and Importance of Fairy Tales* (New York: Knopf, 1976); Alan Dundes, ed., *Cinderella: A Folklore Casebook* (New York: Garland Pub., 1982); Walt Disney, *Cinderella* [Videorecording], (Burbank: Walt Disney, 1949); Nai-Tung Ting, *The Cinderella Cycle in China and Indo-China* (Helsinki: Suomalainen Tiedeakatemia, 1974).

²A cursory review reveals these addenda: Colette Dowling, *The Cinderella Complex: Women's Hidden Fear of Independence* (New York: Summit Books, 1981); Barbara Einhorn, *Cinderella Goes to Market: Citizenship, Gender, and Women's Movements in East Central Europe* (London: Verso, 1993); Eugene Paul Nassar, *The Rape of Cinderella: Essays In Literary Continuity* (Bloomington : Indiana University Press, 1970); a curious history of something entirely other – D. C. M. (Desmond Christopher St. Martin) Platt, *The Cinderella Service: British Consuls Since 1825* (Hamden, Conn: Archon Books, 1971); Cinderella considered as an “anti-fairy tale” in Robert Walser, *Robert Walser Rediscovered: Stories, Fairy-Tale Plays, and Critical Responses*, ed. Mark Harman (Hanover, NH: Published For Dartmouth College by University Press of New England, 1985); Margarita Xanthakou, *Cendrillon Et Les Soeurs Cannibales: De La Stakhtobouta Maniote (Grece) A L'approche Comparative De L'anthropophagie Intraparentale Imaginaire* (Paris: Editions De L'ecole Des Hautes Etudes En Sciences Sociales, 1988). For a subversive and extensive recovery of what “cinder” (*endre*) is (or to what cinder is reduced/reducible), see Jacques Derrida, *Cinders*, ed. and trans. Ned Lukacher (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1991).

³Rodgers and Hammerstein's music backed a movie produced as a musical in the same year: Richard Rodgers and Oscar Hammerstein, *Cinderella* [Videorecording] (Hollywood: Samuel Goldwyn Company, 1964).

⁴Mallarmé, *Oeuvres Completes*, Pléiade edition (Paris: Gallimard, 1945) 3-4.

⁵It would be difficult to ascertain where the fable had its first expression, as scholars trace it to Germany, France and even China; a student tells me of the Hungarian version, in which the young woman is named “Hamupipoke,” and her shoes, curiously enough, are made of white diamonds. The symbolism could not be clearer. On form and structure, see also Vladimir Propp, *The Morphology of the Folktale*. Translated by Laurence Scott (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1968).

⁶This is given greater consideration in my article “Travesty, Peterhood, & The Flight of a Lost Girl,” *New England Review*, forthcoming (August 1988). James M. Barrie also wrote a play named *Cinderella* – not very surprising in view of the fairytale quality of *Peter Pan* and many of his other writings.

⁷One of the few exceptions is Mary Poppins, who is also depicted as an aberrant, desexualized creature. For one thing, she is a woman without children of her own, who literally takes, and seduces, other people's children. Here again is a magical woman, a witch, dressed in black, like a widow; appropriately, her boyfriend is also a witch of sorts, having the “luck” of the chimneysweeps. Does it not seem curious to anyone that he is able to impart good fortune through physical contact – and is this not somehow frightening? (As parents wouldn't you tell your children, “Just say no?”) Mary's relationship with Bert does not stray from what we expect, even demand, of her class – her “boyfriend” (neither is married, nor do they discuss it, at least onscreen) is also a working-class Victorian London stiff (which is to say that he is also poor), with the robust happiness we need to ascribe to poor people, as well as a tendency to copulate below stairs; still we never see or are even permitted to imagine the content of their romantic holidays, interrupted by a song or some bit of magic. Because of her magic, and an understanding of what children really need that surpasses the ordinary, Mary is cleverly depicted as being able to breach the class zone: here her magic characteristics are essential for an explanation of this otherwise scandalous, and (in terms of class distinctions) uncomfortable flexibility. She doesn't know her place – the moral that the children's father ends in teaching, as he “rescues” his children from the unsavoriness of their relationship with this queerly unmarried woman and her odd friend. Mary's ability to tread between classes, however, elevates her even from Bert's league: we know that she will leave him too, and are secretly satisfied. He is, for one thing, truly from the lowest class, as his mangled Cockney accent tells us, while Mary's impossibly perfect speech distinguishes her as

something quite different (though this is never really acknowledged); Bert is also, if only figuratively, black, while Mary is, however trenchantly, white.

⁸The modern movie *Ace Ventura, Pet Detective* contains a wonderful quotation of a scene from Disney's *Snow White*. Actor Jim Carrey stands in the center of a room and the animals fly, run, walk, creep and slither to him as he belts out a high note.

⁹I have re-rendered the parenthetical phrase (only), which Ned Lukacher translates as "that's the only thing he loves," because of its (increased) ambiguity in the context of a feminist reading.

¹⁰In her book *Cinderella on the Ball: Fairytales for Feminists* (Dublin: Attic Press, 1991), editor Margaret Neylon offers re-readings of the classic folktales. In the Cinderella story, it is the two sisters who emerge supreme: ugliness is a cover for intelligence and political feminism.

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Cinderella Undisciplined: A Response to “After the Ball is Over: Bringing *Cinderella* Home.”

Rob Baum’s examination of *Cinderella* is inventive in the way retellings of tales can be, looking between the lines of the “heard *Cinderella*, . . . the authoritative edition.” She offers us as one alternative a “practical, plodding story, which might bring us to furious tears rather than ecstasy,” in the form of a transcript assembled by a caseworker at a women’s shelter. Baum’s *Cinderella*, like Virginia Woolf’s Shakespeare’s sister, is undisciplined, transgressing behavioral boundaries not only of gender (What do women do?) but also of textual genre and academic expectation (What do folklorists do? Literary critics? Cultural historians?) Like Woolf, Baum raises questions about the (im)proper exercise of imagination in a critical/analytical/theoretical context (such as this journal affords). To whatever point one is willing to follow her lead (and I for one enjoyed following her to the end), Baum, by speaking as *Cinderella*’s case worker, reminds of the innumerable ways this tale can be and has been constructed, deconstructed, reconstructed, and reframed.

Because of the extraordinary popularity of *Cinderella*, Baum observes that it has moved beyond folktale, its heroine having been elevated to mythic proportions. The entertainment industry (and mass media generally) has so emphasized the *Cinderella* story that it has become an influential guidebook for the training of girls and the control of women. Indeed, *Cinderella* has “escaped from the bounds of her own story.” To look at the situation another way, the tale has become a kind of virtual reality that invites us to enter, play the role, and try on the costume. We can test this proposition by looking at advertisements directed at women of products from panty-liners to credit cards: *Cinderella* is evoked metonymically by her glass slippers or through the slenderest shards of plot. Like the two dots and upward-turning semi-circle that we are able to read as a smiley face, *Cinderella* (and by extension her narrative) can be recognized by means of the barest details.

Reflecting on what the story teaches, Baum comments that it directs women “to hate and compete with other females, suffer in silence, and seek rapport with males through the mysteries of flirtation, fashion, and marital fitness,” these (in)activities all somehow promoting, leading to, or leading from the virtuous duties of housekeeping and nurturing. Ultimately, according to Baum’s argument, “woman herself at last disappears from view.” Is this disappearance the consequence of silence, bondage, self-abnegation, self-hatred, or is it (as Baum’s enumeration of women’s lessons suggests) rather a heaping up of contradictions that ultimately fuse into a great blankness? I offer this as an alternative interpretation of women’s disappearance, my own path for arriving at the locus of Baum’s conclusion – for her article has gaps. Following her lead, however, the reader is encouraged to construct bridges.

Along with the contradictions, we have the superabundance of *Cinderella* tales to contend with – perhaps particularly in the form of “modern extensions,” whose origins are frequently obscure (unknown or forgotten, but we can be pretty sure that Disney looms large among them). Since at least one modern extension exists in the mind of everyone who has experienced the tale, Baum can reasonably grant herself the liberty of offering her own versions. We can, she reminds us, each rewrite our own *Cinderella*, giving it a focus of our own choosing; we needn’t put up with the story we started out with.

As an undisciplined reader, I’m prompted to look more closely at the pumpkin, which even transformed into a coach retains its cozy rotundity, providing a warm conveyance that bears and births *Cinderella* into a brave new world. The pumpkin’s disenchantment, however, signals the practical problem of relative magnitude – one of the dilemmas of growing up. The child grows; the mother’s womb no longer accommodates; it’s just a pumpkin. In such ways *Cinderella*’s story marks points of no return.

The transformed animals also offer a focus of interest for a child reader. Baum connects them to a child’s nightmare fears by suggesting that the animals might become the observers of a speculatively naked *Cinderella*: “For a child to imag-

ine being naked in public is terrible; so what if only the animals can see?" Since her article concerns "ways of seeing, particularly ways of seeing what others are not looking at," let's take a closer look at those observing animals, watching naked Cinderella in this fragment of a retelling. What would invest those animals with the qualities or the status of observers? In their transformed state as servants, they are not expected to look at the people whom they serve; moreover, as Baum points out, they are supposed to disappear when their jobs are done. Yet when we reinvest them with their animal status, we assume their lack of interest in our nakedness. But isn't this what adults tell children about (certain ostensibly "safe") humans who might see them naked? "Oh, Uncle John doesn't care. He's seen naked bottoms before!" For a child, the point may not be whether animals, or human adults, "care" whether one is naked but being allowed some meager measure of privacy.

If these remarks about Cinderella's potential nakedness seem digressive, Baum's own approach invites such digression. She observes that "Somewhere behind the story sits another story, the one we are not meant to hear." Since "the story" itself is, by her own argument, not singular but a web of retellings, whereby the (female) listeners/(re)tellers become complicit in their own indoctrination, one wonders who guards the entry to that other realm, the realm of the forbidden story, or stories? Who tells those stories? What might we learn from them? We might, for instance, gain a radically different perspective on issues of class, and on the distribution, the uses, and the misuses of resources, including "human resources," a direly expressive term.

One of the "hidden features" that Baum encourages us to question is nature. Accepting that invitation, let's start from the notion, employed in *Cinderella*, of borrowing from nature to create an illusion of wealth, of material prosperity, of gracious living. The pumpkin, plucked from its vine, makes a coach for a night. And then what happens to it? No bread for the cinder-wench? Let her eat pie. Or perhaps it goes to the compost heap, or into the plastic trash-bag. More striking yet, the story rests on a presumption that animals (and others who perform "service functions"?) can be removed, redesigned to fit a particular service, and then returned, disenchanting, to the ground of their being. These borrowed beings, as instruments in the service of the greater good, are assigned uses that are narrowly functional, yet paradoxically their assignment to roles is based on appearance rather than capability, on homological rather than rational (much less ethical or moral) considerations. Paradoxical, yet hardly unusual in the "service sector."

By escaping from the discipline of disciplines, Rob Baum's article reminds us both directly and by example of "ways of seeing what others are not looking at." Even working across disciplines, we find ourselves bridging gaps. To get at what lies between, what resources have we? The guidance of one's child-self (if she had the foresight to leave enduring markers for us to follow)? The sisters we confront unexpectedly, encamped in doorways or muttering on street-corners? Baum's article suggests that these undisciplined ones may help us locate the absence(s) she finds in the authorized, authoritative versions of *Cinderella*.

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Empty Slippers, Empty Heads

Winnifred the Woebegone, heroine of Mary Rodgers' 1959 musical, *Once Upon a Mattress*, sings her envy of all the other princesses who find ways to live "Happily Ever After," and, with the patented croaking indignation of Carol Burnett, interpolates the ultimate protest – "Cinderella had outside help!" What is all this stuff with fairy godmothers? Winnifred has to face her secret test (the pea hidden under piles of featherbeds) with nary a prior clue or hint, much less a set of metamorphosed helping animals or even much hope of being the object of a

post-terpsichorean quest. Winnifred has to make her own opportunities (and might even stop to wonder if the potential rewards are worth all the trouble, after all – the potential mother-in-law is a fast-talking monster and the prince is, at best, a guy that only his mother aspires to love).

But more. What a shocking charge – “outside help” with all its distressing connotations. Peeking at the neighboring kid’s geometry quiz; paying the girl with glasses to write her paper on Angela Carter; discreetly palming the answers to the questions, provided by a leering intern, before the quiz show starts; depending on the kindness of strangers who represent “special interests”; possibly concealing a non-native housekeeper with no green card – and neglecting to pay social security taxes for her; allowing a soft-money PAC to go negative at a crucial moment in the campaign. This Cinderella, Winnifred tells us, lacks the character of a true Olympic athlete in the game of life (and probably depends on steroids to keep those delicate toes in shape; no chance she could pass a urine test!). What’s a normal princess to do when confronted with such a negative role-model? Sing louder, it would seem, and forge ahead toward that female identity.

But this is not exactly what Rob K. Baum tells us about Cinderella (so perhaps Winnifred was caught in one of those timewarps or historical eddies and missed the full impact of Disney’s fascistic clutch – who’s to know?). Unlike Winnifred, Cinderella knew how to work the system, at least in Mary Rodgers’ world. But Baum gives us a somewhat more familiar version of that overworked myth of a kid – the exploitive role-model who convinces young girls of the importance of simpering prettily, obeying patiently, and collaborating in the forces of erasure that leave them bodiless bodies, mindless minds, personless personalities. Cipher me no ciphers, says Baum, but Cinderella’s powers will have it so (or the patriarchal powers that really be, so to speak, will have it so and make our sweet little urchin participate in the process), and absence will be the space provided for disappearance, leaving the fonder heart to coo over the empty and invisible glass slipper, emblem of the place provided (as we know from the history of lotus feet among traditional Chinese women) for the replacement object of the prince’s affections – his own self-stimulated phallus, which just might assert its presence when it gets around to noticing her absence. Or so we might imagine. What is an empty shoe to do in response to unwelcome advances?

The evils men do with their poppets (hand-jive?) – Cinderella or, as Baum also mentions, Barbie, just to cement the contemporary context (but what was the point of that somewhat garbled stuff about the Grimms and the Perraults?) – may not be confined to the interiors of glass slippers. (But how about those shoes! *Velours? Vair? Verre?* Folk tradition colonizes space by refusing tired restrictions and picky proofreading, so we get a whole Papagallo catalogue if we don’t care to trek the mall, and who but the prince would find the varieties so intriguing?) To some extent, Baum’s focus on relationships of power (class, gender) and regulation (sexual, moral) helps to clarify the somewhat muddled connections (really, that girl has to lift those skirts crossing the courtyard or get someone to carry her) among the Cinderella of folk tradition, the Cinderella of courtly *contes*, the Cinderella of Jungian construction, the Cinderella of Disney, the Cinderella of Hollywood (contiguous with Disney, but not congruent), the Cinderella of my Saturday morning radio world, “Let’s Pretend,” and all those Little Golden Books. One assumes it is all, but also none, of the above that we are dealing with here; the Cinderella of Baum’s discourse has in common with Carter’s Sadeian woman the intriguing “universalism” of the pornographic mythic mono-woman, object of the affections of the mono-man who has a hard time telling his elbow from a shoehorn, but knows a seductive vacuum when it signals its come-on-up-and-see-me-sometime. But just as such universalism is rebuked in Carter’s explorations, in Baum’s the procedure is a stripping away of all the complexities of the story (an un-tease blamed on the patriarchal popular cultural expropriation of only the characteristics that serve to reinforce absence and valorize emptiness – presumably to make space for the deposit) in order to critique the absence of complexities. In other words, we must re-tell the story in skeletal-universal terms in order to assert its value to the other side, but in the process, we create what

we condemn rather than re-dressing what is still present to refute and rebuke the celebration of absence. If we say the tale can be reduced to a myth that is then reduced to a tool for creating absence, do we deprive the tale of its potential for renewal. If in Lerner-land the king tells the prince "how to handle a woman," (which denies her humanity but acknowledges her desirability), over in Sondheim-land, the Baker's Wife (who is, at the moment, dead and invisible except to those who are by convention not "present" – that is, the audience) claims that "no one is alone" – so if no one is alone, then someone is presumably in the presence of someone or something but not of no one. But of course that is not the point – if no one is alone it is because, with all the force of the cliché, all ones have some ones – even Cinderella, unless the teller is a pornografella.

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