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English 351

20 April 2015

From Ball to Prom: *Before Midnight*, A Retelling of Cinderella

"From wild to romantic, don't miss these prom stories from Simon Pulse: *How I Created My Perfect Prom Date, Prom Crashers, Fat Hoochie Prom Queen*—oh, and let us not forget, *Prama!*" Clearly, the publisher was marketing this paperback (IMAGE 1) towards a specific audience, and that audience did not include a pretentious, high-brow, if-it's-not-Austen or Dostoevsky-it's-not-literature English major. I cringed at the thought of this pulp "tween" fiction infiltrating the hearts and minds of today's teenagers just as I am certain the academicians of the 1600 and 1700s would have cringed to know that in 2015, les *contes des fées*—fairy tales—are apart of an undergraduate literature curriculum. However, a novel such as Cameron Dokey's *Before Midnight*, a retelling of Charles Perrault's, Jacob and Wilhelm Grimm's "Cinderella" though principally intended for adolescent readers, entertains any audience (a literary cleric or a *Prama* reader) while still achieving a level of merit that warrants analysis. On the surface, *Before Midnight* focuses on the heroine's human need for family as a chief principle in identity formation; Dokey's reinterpretation includes an overarching nature metaphor to reveal the heroine's underlying, covert quest for fulfillment, self-knowledge, and love. In turn, this adaptation offers both a unique reboot of the classic story despite leaving readers with lingering reservations regarding the quality and content of literature for today's teenagers.

In *Before Midnight*, Old Mathilde, the cook and midwife to Constanze d'Este, delivers a baby girl on a windy, stormy night just before midnight. In her last breaths, Constanze names the child Cendrillon, whose infantile cry restores the fires of her home to life—the "child of cinders" as the new godmother Old Mathilde quips. Unable to cope with his grief, Etienne de Brabant, Constanze's distraught husband, abandons his daughter and flees to his station at court but not before bringing a mysterious young infant named Raoul to live in the family home. Under the watchful eye of Old Mathilde, Raoul and Cendrillon grow up together, becoming teenagers who wrestle with the struggles of adolescence and identity formation. Just before Cendrillon's fifteenth birthday, a royal diplomat named Niccolo arrives to announce the troubling details of the kingdom's politics. Shortly after, news comes that Etienne has remarried for political gain and sends his new wife, the graceful, warm-hearted Chantal de Saint-Andre, and her daughters to the cottage. Chantal becomes a second-mother to Cendrillon, positively impacting her discovery for redemption and love.

The transcribed fairy tales of both Perrault and the Grimms are trademarked by their brevity in both descriptive details and in-depth characterization, which is indicative of the stories' origins in the oral tradition. Thus, novelists are free under artistic license to create new additional literary elements or deepen certain elements under-developed in the original tales. For her retelling of "Cinderella," Dokey expands the immediate setting, a wavering Gothic landscape, a stone house

> ...huge, drafty, gorgeous. Rising straight up from the center of a great sheer cliff of stone so pale you could see your hand through it on a piece cut thin enough. Even in the darkest hours of the darkest night, the house seemed to give off its

> own faint glow. Veins of color ran through it, red and green, and a gray that turned to shimmering silver just as the sun went down. One bank of windows faced outward, toward the sea. A second, back toward the land that sustained us. (Dokey 16)

Dokey's setting provides an ideal locale for the story she crafts. A house constructed of *stone*, a natural material of constancy, fortitude, and impermeability which is also connected to the physical geography (the cliff) itself, insulates its occupants from the sea, a body of water, fluid and penetrable that vacillates, changing continually. Although created of stone, the house has a human-like personality, featuring exterior foliage ("veins") of assorted colors. While the house does *insulate*, it also *reflects* the mood of the interior, that "faint glow." This landscape offers the characters places for moments of discovery with an appropriate balance of both security and instability necessary for positive personal development. By extension, the landscape provides information about its inhabitants: Old Mathilde is the only constant parental figure in Cendrillon's life, much like constancy of "the great stone house." A diplomat from an enemy kingdom, Niccolo arrives not by land but by sea, a bellwether of forthcoming change in the kingdom and in the lives of the story's characters.

Dokey's Gothic landscape would be incomplete without turbulent weather to foreshadow impending events and underscore the narrative journeys of her characters. Storms portend "change": Cendrillon is born "just before midnight" as a "a great storm arose"; upon his arrival to the stone house, Niccolo, who is mistaken as an enemy mercenary, is struck down by Old Mathilde and topples "over like a storm-felled tree"; the night that Etienne's new wife, Chantal de Saint-Andre, learns that Cendrillon is not a servant but her step-daughter is foreshadowed by a

thunderstorm (Dokey 1, 36, 101). The introduction of the heroine, Niccolo's information regarding the troubling politics of the kingdom, and the revelation of Chantal's stepdaughter are all foreshadowed by the story's weather patterns. Furthermore, Dokey makes frequent use of the literary technique of pathetic fallacy[1] to mimic her characters' emotions. When Etienne arrives at the stone house after his wife has died, he rushes to her grave in the garden. Cendrillon narrates:

> My father fell to his knees beside my mother's grave, and now a second storm arose, one that needed no interpretation, for all who saw it understood its meaning at once. This storm was nothing less than my father's grief let loose upon the world. His rage at losing the woman that he loved. The tress in the orchards tossed their heads in agony; the clear blue sky darkened overhead, though there was not a single cloud. At the base of the cliffs upon which my father's great stone house sat, the sea hurled itself against the land as if to mirror his torment. (Dokey 8-9)

In this passage, the trees and sky and sea, personified as humans with great emotional depth, reflect the inner turmoil and tragedy befallen Etienne. Moreover, Dokey's use of weather as a means of foreshadowing and a vehicle for pathetic fallacy contributes in two ways to the Cinderella mythology. Like Andy Tennant's *Ever After*, *Before Midnight* is devoid of traditional magical elements (no fairy godmother with a magic wand) contrary to the pervasive

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[1] *The Oxford Dictionary of Literary Terms* defines **pathetic fallacy** as "the convention whereby natural phenomena which cannot feel as humans do are described as if they could: thus rain-clouds may 'weep', or flowers may be 'joyful' in sympathy with the poet's (or imagined speaker's) mood. The pathetic fallacy normally involves the use of some metaphor which falls short of full-scare personification in its treatment of the natural world."

contemporary rendering of the tale, which literary critic Rob Baum explains in his article "After the Ball: Bringing *Cinderella* Home" that "magic, not maturity, is lauded" (Baum 69). However, the weather itself does lend an "air" of magic to the text, maintaining the tone and atmosphere of a fairy tale without compromising its integrity. Secondly, Dokey's setting builds upon the atmospherics of classic literature; she stands on the shoulders of writers such as Mary Shelley and Emily Brontë and their seminal works *Frankenstein*[2] (IMAGE 2) and *Wuthering Heights*[3] (IMAGE 3). In each of these novels, weather and nature play distinct roles in shaping characterization and the trajectory of the plot. I do not accuse of Dokey of deliberately copying these well-regarded authors; however, her use of weather creates an additional literary atmosphere that affords a reader the opportunity to delve deeper in analyzing this particular adaptation of Cinderella.

Both the Gothic landscape and the symbolic weather work in tandem with one last element of nature in shaping Dokey's retelling. During her life, Cendrillon's mother maintained a bountiful garden surrounded "by a high stone wall to protect it from the cold sea winds" (Dokey 8). During the storm in which Etienne grieves over his wife, he

> did not shed a single tear, nor make a single sound. He threw himself across my mother's grave, his fists striking the earth once, twice, three times. As his fists landed for the third and final time, a single bolt of lightning speared down from the cloudless sky. It struck the tree which sheltered my mother's grave, traveled down its trunk, up into all its limbs, killing the tree in an instant, turing the new green grass beneath it as brown as the dust of an August road. (Dokey 9)

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[2] http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Frankenstein

[3] http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wuthering_Heights

Each year on her birthday, Cendrillon wishes that something she plants would grow in her mother's garden, but "the rage of grief my father had called down into our lands still held on and would not let go" (Dokey 18). For her fifteenth birthday, Cendrillon decides to plant pumpkins (Dokey's evident nod to Perrault's version) from the estate's pumpkin patch in her mother's garden only to find:

> The vines I had planted were still there, and so were the gorgeous orange pumpkins. But now the vines were withered, as if a killing frost had wrapped its icy fingers around them. The pumpkins were split open. Inside, their flesh was black, the plate white seeds gleaming like fragments of bone. From the moment they had come up, all the while that they had grown, their beautiful outsides had all been concealing the very same thing: Inside, they were festering and rotten. (Dokey 32)

With details such as "killing frost" and "fragments of bone," Dokey's imagery of death and decay in this passage elicits empathy for the heroine—a stronger emotional reading response in comparison to the "sympathy" readers feel for Cinderella's familial mistreatment in the Perrault and Grimm versions. Extending the traditional archetype, Dokey's heroine experiences outrage—not docile passivity—as she cries to Old Mathilde, "What can grow amid so much hate?" (Dokey 32).

The answer to Cendrillon's question lies in the conceit of the garden which operates as an extended metaphor for love. For this tale, Dokey asserts that there are two distinct types of love. Old Mathilde explains to Cendrillon, "Your mother's love was much like her garden. Its roots went deep, though it wasn't always showy. But your father's love was like a diamond, hard and

bright, so dazzling it hurt the eyes to look upon it" (Dokey 88). The garden-love of the mother nurtures and replenishes without ostentation while the diamond-love of the husband is so forceful, glaring, and devoid of a life-giving source (a "root") becoming an objectified love personified as an object of material possession (the "diamond") which can—to use Old Mathilde's word—"blind" (Dokey 90) a person to the pervasiveness of the love like a bountiful garden. Old Mathilde continues to Cendrillon, "It [love] is all around you. This is what your mother knew your father would never understand, for she saw him truly, and she foresaw that his grief would dazzle just as his love did. It would blind him" (Dokey 90). Immediately following her birth, Cendrillon's father *blindly* responds in a mixture of grief and hatred towards both his wife's death and his daughter's birth, which in turn, kills the garden while metaphorically blinding him to the love his daughter desperately needs. Thus, he abandons his daughter to be raised by Old Mathilde.

For gardens to grow, the ground needs water; for love to grow, tears are oft required. As Old Mathilde says, "To heal, we must do more than grieve. We must also find a way to mourn" (Dokey 90). Cendrillon herself learns this lesson about love when she spends time in the garden weeping, wishing, "Let me find a way to make my father's pain, his grief, release their hold. Let me find a way to help love flourish. Let me understand what it means to mourn" (Dokey 92). In this moment, Cendrillon acknowledges her vulnerability, her need for love to be fulfilled as a budding young adult, moving past the outrage she feels towards her father's curse. Overnight, sunflowers sprout from the garden—a signal of progress and change within Cendrillon's character and the storyline. Cendrillon reflects: "My father had shed no tears, and on the grave of my mother not a plant would thrive. But I had wept, and with my tears

I brought something to life that had never been seen on the grounds of the great stone house before...Old Mathilde was right. Love was all around me. I simply had to find a way to make it thrive" (Dokey 94). Again, water and tears as coping mechanisms can transcend hatred and anger, bringing new life to dead matter and relationships. In a climatic scene between Cendrillon and her father, Cendrillon roots out the bitterness rooted in her father's heart, forcing him to mourn the love he has lost from both his wife and his daughter. When she returns to the garden, she discovers, "It [the garden] was covered with pumpkin vines. Pansies with brave faces. Bee balm. Every single thing that I had ever tried to grow upon my mother's grave had come to life, watered by my father's tears" (Dokey 190). From this textual evidence, Rob Baum's dictum can be sufficiently reversed: maturity, not magic, is applauded in this adaptation, revealing that no Disney magic nor even a pure heroine's inherent goodness—both found in a plethora of retellings—can trump her tears and her vulnerability. These distinguishing qualities make Cendrillon a human rather than an archetypal Cinderella. In fact, Cendrillon's wish is one of learning, as she says "let me understand" and "let me find" twice; she is not simply "wishing" her problems away, another aberration from an archetypal Cinderella. In essence, the garden as a literary device marks the character development of the heroine, establishes certain truths about love, and works as an agent to carry the central theme of the text: What can grow amid so much hate? Why, only love, of course.

Any retelling of "Cinderella" would be incomplete without a Prince Charming who enters just thirty pages before the story's conclusion. In order to end her adaptation and fulfill the major plot points of the classic fairy tale (which entails matching Cinderella with her prince), Dokey introduces the notion of "love at first sight"—a notion incompatible with the text's nature

elements. (NOTE—this isn't the only time she does this—see pages (Dokey 88, 105, 163, 190)) Dokey concludes *Before Midnight* with a tableau of a beautiful garden and a visibly distraught weed in the background.

The story is finished, but the book isn't over until readers are encouraged by an advertisement to purchase *Prama: What's PROM without a little DRAMA?* It is no coincidence that an advertisement for "prom novels" occurs at the end of *Before Midnight* (IMAGE 4): Cinderella's exquisite gown, glass slippers, prince, and experience at the ball are easily codified and reinterpreted as the David's Bridal dress, the uncomfortable wedges, the perfect date, and the high school prom. In her article "Cinderella Goes to the Prom: Constructing Rituals of Youth Culture through Teen Media," Sidney Eve Matrix expertly notes that, "Just like Cinderella who is rescued from domestic slavery and the wasteland of her mundane peasant life through the acquisition of a magic gown and glass slippers, the promland mystique advertises beauty products and fashions as the tickets to a girl's enchanted metamorphosis" (Matrix 30). Matrix emphasizes that "Cinderella's rags-to-riches (or ordinary-to-fabulous) story operates as one node in a discursive network that is targeted toward an audience occupying the liminal space between girlhood and young womanhood (Matrix 28)," and in Dokey's novel, her Cendrillon and her targeted audience occupy this liminal space—a period of formative development in the hearts and minds of adolescents.

Bearing Matrix's sociological criticisms in mind, it is imperative to discuss *Before Midnight*'s status as an effective retelling of "Cinderella" in tandem with the message the novel sends to its readers. Jane Yolen, the esteemed author of children and adolescent literature, has criticized the "mass-market American 'Cinderellas'" who "have presented the majority of

American children with the wrong dream...offer[ing] the passive princess, the 'insipid beauty waiting [...] for Prince Charming'" (Yolen 303). *Before Midnight* does raise some flags with regards to the conflicting presentation of true love. Dokey's portrayal of a love that nurtures and requires nurturing sustains itself through the garden metaphor; "love at first sight" deliberately undermines the idea that love must be cultivated, watered, and *gardened*. And honestly, is it appropriate to tell hormonal, impressionable, prama-drama teenagers that love at first sight is true, pure, and grounded? Is this the "wrong dream" Yolen warns against?

Historically, each era's Cinderella sends a different message, or "dream," to its readers. Critic Justin Platt examines the evolution in his article, "Breaking the Glass Slipper: Changing Cultural Norms & the Cinderella Story": "To seventeenth century readers, *Cendrillon* [Perrault's iteration]" reflects "society's concept that a young woman's marriage is a means to a fruitful end" both socially and financially (Platt 45). He continues, "The nineteenth century Cinderella in *Aschenputtel* [the Grimm variant] sees marriage as the inevitable end state that caps her transition from child to adult, showing young readers a different purpose for marriage that includes both a desire to end childhood, and a transition to a productive role in society" (Platt 45). Summarily, is prom and its commercialized features (such as the right dress and the right date) the rite of passage for today's teens who project and explore themselves within an Americanized Cinderella archetype on their adolescent quest for fulfillment and identity formation?

Perhaps, but make no mistake: Dokey's effective retelling of Cinderella trumps its categorical or genre distinction. Dokey's use of nature vis-à-vis the Gothic landscape, weather imagery as well as the garden-as-love extended metaphor lend distinct new features to the

Cinderella retelling. Collectively, they work as an indicator of the story's atmosphere and plot progression while underscoring the theme that true love does indeed conquer all. Cendrillon understands that neither marriage nor magic can solve her problems or even define her identity: only a love that enables introspection, self-reflection, and reconciliation can achieve this goal—a unique, timely goal imparted to readers by the author with a solution contrary to both the "marriage ends all problems" from the seventeenth and nineteenth century renderings and even Yolen's criticism of "mass-market Cinderellas." If Dokey mixes her messages about true love, I will forgive her because in the end, her story is a fairy tale both familiar yet timeless and fresh for the budding teenager (or the prescriptive literary critic) in everyone.

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Note: For the project, the Works Cited will be digitized.

IMAGE #1: https://books.google.com/books?id=jwN3lAEACAAJ&dq=before+midnight&hl=en&sa=X&ei=4tI1VbqwIoafsAXKg4CwCw&ved=0CCkQ6AEwAg

IMAGE 2: http://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/b/b9/Caspar_David_Friedrich_-_Wanderer_above_the_sea_of_fog.jpg

"Caspar's Wanderer Above the Sea"

IMAGE 3: Annotated Edition of *Wuthering Heights* http://ecx.images-amazon.com/images/I/51Pzut-rTEL._SX258_BO1,204,203,200_.jpg

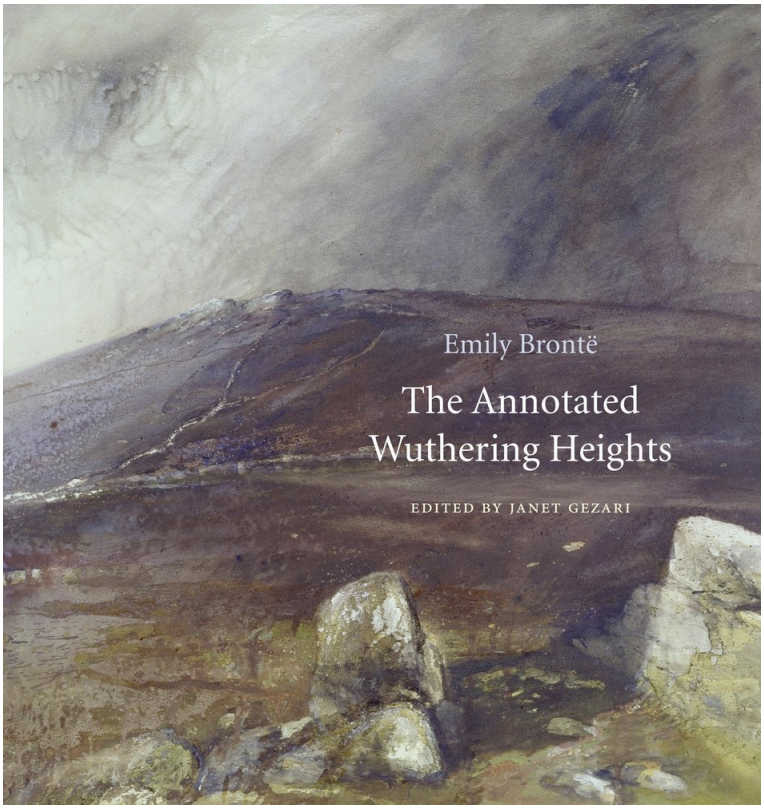

IMAGE 4: page 199, *Before Midnight*