

Cinderella's Transformation: From Patriarchal to 21st Century Expressions of Femininity

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Cinderella's story endures through countless adaptations. In this study, I analyzed the tropes of the patiently suffering heroine, the cruel stepmother, magical help, beauty as female currency, and being chosen by the prince in Cendrillon (Perrault, 1697), Mechanica (Cornwell, 2015), and Cinder (Meyer, 2012). The (re)visions deconstruct binary gender roles through heroines who liberate themselves from their servitude, prioritize independence over marriage, and experience supportive female relationships. The portrayals of the cruel stepmothers disrupt the trope of powerful women as inherently evil, and the storylines critique the injustices of Othering. These (re)visions reflect contemporary discourses that expand expressions of femininity.

We live in a time when technology pervades virtually every aspect of our lives; we control many features of our homes with a few spoken words, information is instantly available via a simple Internet search, media coverage of the rich and famous incessantly touts their triumphs and their transgressions, and a multitude of apps ensure we need never be alone with our thoughts. We live in a fast-paced, modern world, yet vestiges of fairy tales permeate our lives. The “plots, metaphors, and expectations associated with fairy tales pervade popular culture” (Bacchilega, 2013, p. 3), and princes and princesses, fairy godmothers, wicked witches, and cruel stepmothers populate our cultural consciousness. We know that an ‘ugly duckling’ can become a beautiful swan, and ‘Cinderella’ teams can beat the favored opponent. In Western cultures, where weddings constitute “the ultimate female spectacle” (Jarvis, 2013, p. 106), many women (and men) anticipate a ‘fairy-tale wedding’ and ‘happily ever after.’ (Un)happily, women who marry someone with children may find themselves in the role of the ‘cruel stepmother.’ Fairy tales continue to remind us of who we have been, who we are, and who we might become.

Fairy tales contribute to the complex layering of stories that transmits complementary and contradictory cultural messages about gendered behavior norms. Temporally and geographically

specific fairy-tale storylines delineate gendered possibilities and constraints, and they socialize children to take up sanctioned positions (Joosen, 2005; Kelley, 2008; Smith, 2015; Zipes, 1991). The patriarchal gender binary, perpetuated through the tales of the Perrault-Grimms-Disney triad, represents the political and social ideation of gender and the policing of individual expression. These fairy tales provide a cultural script, a de facto metanarrative, for performances of gender that maintains the patriarchal status quo.

Although their pervasiveness and the weight of their authoritative voice naturalizes the messages in fairy tales, readers do not passively assimilate these messages; rather, they actively and critically engage with fairy-tale ideologies to accept or reject them (Joosen, 2005; Williams, 2010; Zipes, 1991). Viewing binary 'truths' through a critical lens allows readers to deconstruct naturalized categories to reveal the often-contradictory nature of gendered expectations. Crew (2002) and Joosen (2005) highlighted the importance of comparing retellings of fairy tales with traditional, patriarchal tales in order to make gender ideologies visible through disruptive, critical readings. With this in mind, I analyzed one traditional and two novelized adaptations of *Cinderella* to determine the ways the contemporary tales might or might not reflect and promote today's shifting gendered storylines and the ways in which they might or might not disrupt patriarchal hegemony.

CONSIDERING CINDERELLA

Cinderella is a well-known and well-loved fairy tale that exists in one form or another in cultures throughout the world. The earliest documented version, *Yeh-hsien*, was recorded in China by Tuan Ch'eng-shih in 850. Giambattista Basile's *Cat Cinderella* was published in 1634 in Italy, the French *Cendrillon* by Charles Perrault in 1697, and the Grimms' *Aschenputtel* in Germany in 1812. *Cinderella* then moved from the page, to the stage, to the screen. In 1945, Prokofiev's *Cinderella Ballet Op. 87* premiered, and Rodgers and Hammerstein's musical adaptation aired in 1957. Cinderella's coach, fairy godmother, and glass slippers became cultural icons after the 1950 release of Disney's full-length animated film based on Perrault's *Cendrillon*. Cinderella's presence in popular culture continued with movies such as *Ever After* in 1998 and a live-action Disney production in 2015. Regardless of the format, enduring tropes include the patiently suffering heroine, a cruel stepmother and stepsisters, transformation through magical help, and attracting the prince with beauty. *Cinderella*, in its many and varied iterations, influences readers' and viewers' understandings of culturally specific, gendered expectations.

I focus specifically on *Cinderella* because of its prominent position in the Western fairy-tale canon, and I analyzed one traditional and two novelized adaptations in this study: Perrault's *Cendrillon* (Tatar, 2002), *Mechanica* (Cornwell, 2015), and *Cinder* (Meyer, 2012). While the Grimm's version, *Aschenputtel*, features a more independent and active Cinderella, I selected Perrault's version since the Disneyfication of *Cendrillon* established it as the definitive version for the general public. To select the YA retellings, I read eight contemporary adaptations of *Cinderella* and purposefully chose *Mechanica* and *Cinder* for a deep analysis because the Cinderella character is the focalizer, Perrault's basic storyline is discernible, and they offer particularly rich comparisons through clear allusions to the iconic tropes in *Cendrillon*. Furthermore, Cornwell and Meyer do not simply reverse gender roles but "rattle the foundational cages of the tales where the power structures reside" (Crowley & Pennington, 2010, p. 304). I also chose *Cinder* and *Mechanica* because of their sustained popularity. *Cinder* is the first book in the Lunar Chronicles series, which was on the #1 New York Times and USA Today Bestselling lists and on multiple state and provincial reading lists. Although less widely known, *Mechanica* is also the first book in a series and was a New York Times Bestseller and on several other best-books lists. Throughout this article, I refer to *Mechanica* and *Cinder*, and other YA *Cinderella* retellings, as 'novelized adaptations,' but use terms such as feminist fairy tales, feminist retellings, and feminist texts when discussing contemporary fairy tales in general.

I employed sociocultural and gender literary theories to examine "the cultural imprint of patriarchy" (Appleman, 2015, p. 70), focusing my initial analysis on Cinderella's servitude, her stepmother and stepsisters, the fairy godmother's intervention, and being chosen by the prince. Comparing *Mechanica* and *Cinder* with *Cendrillon* revealed the ways Cornwell and Meyer employed these iconic elements as touchstones to critique and deconstruct the messages in the classic tale. The novelized adaptations reflect contemporary discourses about personal agency, positioning within community, the complexity of identity, and issues of social justice. It is of note that the male characters also reflect 21st Century discourses, but I focus here on my analysis of the portrayal of female characters¹. In the sections that follow, I present a comparison of the

¹ In "Masculinities in Two Novelized YA 'Cinderella' Adaptations: Disrupting Hegemonic Power and Relationship" (Parsons, forthcoming), I analyze *Mechanica* and *Cinder* from the intersection of feminist and masculinity studies to reveal the ways the princes reconfigure power and relationships to reflect current discourses that embrace qualities of the Sensitive New Man and possibilities for the expression of personalized masculinities.

characteristics of and messages in classic fairy tales and in contemporary, feminist retellings and my analyses of the femininities available to Perrault's and to Cornwell's and Meyer's Cinderellas.

THE CLASSIC CINDERELLA AND HER SISTER HEROINES

Jorgensen (2018) and Smith (2015) suggest that the European, patriarchal canon was popularized during the 17th Century, a period of social anxiety as women increasingly moved into social and political spheres. Therefore, these tales represent a reactionary attempt to codify a gender binary with distinct expectations for women's and men's social and emotional lives and aspirations. Women were constructed as inherently good or evil; they were "able to be princesses or witches but not much else" (Williams, 2010, p. 263). The worth of fairy-tale heroines, and their eventual rewards, was contingent upon their subservience and submissiveness. Good women were to be honest and modest, patient and humble, diligent and industrious, virginal and heterosexual, and selfless and silent (Gilbert, 1994; Walkerdine, 1984; Zipes, 1991). They were not to express anger, rebel against their circumstances, nor long for 'something more.' Furthermore, heroines endured their oppression alone; they were not supported by nor were they in community with other women.

In addition to being compliant and self-sacrificing, heroines also had to be or to become beautiful, so women fixated on their own and others' appearance; identities were sartorially defined and redefined through the power of a bi-directional gaze (Do Rosario, 2018). Beauty was the reward most often bestowed upon the heroine for patiently enduring her plight, and this gift was often realized through a "feminizing reinvention by dress" (Guanio-Uluru, 2016, p. 212). The heroine's beauty attracted the prince and made her worthy of his attention. Lieberman (1989) wrote that the beautiful heroine did "not have to *do* anything to merit being chosen" (p. 188); she was chosen merely because of her beauty. Being thus chosen, the heroine's social status and financial security were guaranteed, and she passively assimilated into her role as wife. An advantageous marriage was the ultimate goal, the major event, and the quintessential happy ending.

Wicked women, on the other hand, were ambitious and strong-willed, and they enhanced their status by dominating those less powerful than themselves (Kelley, 2008; Lieberman, 1989; Walkerdine, 1984). Perhaps the most recognizably evil and powerful women in traditional fairy tales were the wicked stepmothers. Stepmothers and stepsisters were "experts in the art of humiliation" (Tatar, 1987, p. 148) as they relentlessly persecuted fairy-tale heroines. Michael Mendelson (1997) identified these "evil women's groups" (p. 115) as the sole instances of women working together in

patriarchal fairy tales. Thus, the gender binary was drawn not only between men and women but between good and bad women.

THEN: CENDRILLON (*Perrault, 1697 in Tatar, 2002*)

Perrault's *Cendrillon* reflects the values of "the worldly society of [17th Century] aristocratic Paris" (Warner, 1994, p. 48), a society obsessed with spectacles of prestige and luxury. Do Rosario (2018) noted that since women's status was signaled through clothing, Cinderella's public identity was forfeit when her stepmother reduced her to rags. Yet Cinderella still embodied the characteristics of a patriarchal 'good woman.' Although exiled from her rightful place within the family and forced to perform all of the menial household tasks, she "endured everything with patience" (Tatar, 2002, p. 30). She was helpful and solicitous, expressing neither anger nor desire. Her good nature was particularly evident when she helped her stepsisters prepare for the ball and did so with "exquisite taste" (King, 2020, p. 92). Her keen sartorial sense indicated both her goodness and her true aristocratic status. Although Cinderella deeply desired to accompany her stepsisters, she merely "followed them with her eyes as long as possible" (Tatar, 2002, p. 33) as they departed. She cried (a mark of female weakness and irrationality) but simply could not voice her desire to attend the ball, even when her fairy godmother directly asked her. She could not express her need for 'something more.' Her goodness was again evident when she immediately forgave her stepsisters "with all her heart" (p. 43) when they begged her to do so upon realizing *she* was the beautiful woman from the ball. She expressed unconditional forgiveness, and even arranged advantageous marriages for them, despite their callous treatment of her. Throughout her servitude and beyond, Cinderella was submissive and selfless.

Her fairy godmother appeared as Cinderella cried after her stepsisters' departure and told her she might go to the ball *if she were good*; she had to be obedient to be rewarded. Although no explanation is given for the godmother's sudden appearance (Do Rosario, 2018), Warner (1994) interestingly proposed that the fairy godmother represented the networking required to gain access to the Parisian elite. While Cinderella did not have the social capital to attend the ball without her fairy godmother's intercession, there is evidence of limited agency on her part. She dutifully brought her godmother the pumpkin, mice, and lizards that were turned into the coach, horses, and footmen. However, when her fairy godmother was "at a loss for a coachman" (Tatar, 2002, p. 34), Cinderella suggested using a rat. In another example of agency, and possible cunning, Cinderella asked one

stepsister if she might borrow a dress to attend the second ball, knowing her fairy godmother would magic one for her. Cinderella was “pleased” (p. 39) when the stepsister refused, indicating that perhaps this request was a ruse. These two instances raise the possibility that Cinderella was not completely without ingenuity and artifice.

Cinderella secured her future through the currencies of beauty and fashion; people noticed her, and the prince chose her, because she was beautiful. In order to re-enter public life and attract the prince's gaze, she had to be dressed befittingly (Do Rosario, 2018). In an “exercise in fashion design” (Zipes, 1991, p. 27), her first gown was “gold and silver, encrusted with jewels” (Tatar, 2002, p. 35), the second was even more beautiful than the first, and the garments the fairy godmother made after the slipper fit were “more magnificent than ever before” (p. 39). Cinderella's world was one with “a profound emphasis on the gaze and its direction” (Do Rosario, 2018, p. 67), and everyone fell silent to scrutinize “the beauty of the unknown lady” (Tatar, 2002, p. 37) when Cinderella entered the ballroom. King (2020) noted that Cinderella's beauty signaled her exemplary moral character; she herself became more worthy as her clothing became more spectacular.

Cinderella was both active and passive in her relationship with the prince. She *may have* exhibited agency as she fled the ball the second night and lost a glass slipper. Tatar's version states, “... one of the glass slippers fell off” (p. 40). In A. E. Johnson's (1961) translation, however, “She let fall one of her glass slippers” (p. 62), implying that she purposefully left behind this clue to her identity. After this, however, Cinderella simply waited to be found and rescued. In another act of agency, Cinderella asked to try on the glass slipper after her stepsisters' unsuccessful attempts. Although it would be impossible to actually wear a slipper made of glass, this iconic symbol functions as both a “patriarchal vehicle of repression that binds and objectifies, and liberating, carrying the hero out of ignominy and into renown” (Do Rosario, 2018, p. 182). When the slipper fit perfectly, Cinderella's fairy godmother dressed her in “dazzling clothes,” and she was “escorted” to the castle where the prince found her “more beautiful than ever” (Tatar, 2002, p. 43) and married her. Cinderella, as a woman with needs and desires, was virtually absent from this quintessential fairy-tale ending, so whether or not the glass slipper liberated her is debatable. Although she may have shaped her future by leaving her slipper behind and by later asking to try it on, she was a passive object once the prince claimed her.

The stepmother and stepsisters embody the evil women's group Mendelson (1997) identified, and one can hardly read this tale without envisioning Disney's supercilious, wicked

stepmother. In the first sentence of the tale, she is described as “the most vain and haughty woman imaginable,” and her daughters “were just like her” (Tatar, 2002, p. 30). The stepmother began humiliating and debasing Cinderella immediately after the wedding because Cinderella’s goodness “made her own daughters seem all the more hateful” (p. 30). The stepmother and stepsisters did nothing but ostracize, mock, and shame Cinderella, and there is nothing in this tale that mitigates or complicates their cruelty.

There are many blanks in Perrault’s *Cendrillon*. Cinderella’s biological mother is not only deceased but is effectively erased. What was the nature of Cinderella’s early relationship with her mother? We only know that the stepmother and stepsisters relegated her to servitude and were intentionally cruel. Were they inherently ‘bad women,’ or was there more to their stories? We have no idea why the fairy godmother suddenly appeared to help Cinderella. What was her motivation? More broadly, we know nothing about the kingdom itself. What relationships existed between groups of people? Many of these lapses become integral components of novelized adaptations of Cinderella and reflect 21st Century discourses about relationships, complex and intersectional identities, and issues of equity and social justice.

THE CONTEMPORARY CINDERELLA AND HER SISTER HEROINES

Fairy tales are constantly in a “state of reincarnation” (Crowley & Pennington, 2010, p. 298) as each generation shapes and reshapes fairy tales to transmit shifting moral codes and evolving belief systems. The feminist fairy-tale genre that emerged during the last quarter of the 20th Century reflects Western discourses that challenge patriarchal hegemony to promote gender equality in both private and public spaces and to advocate for social justice (Didicher, 2020; Kelley, 2008; Smith, 2015). Thus, retellings and adaptations are often “activist responses to ... authoritative pre-texts” (Bacchilega, 2013, p. 51). Contemporary authors raise important “questions about arbitrary authoritarianism, sexual domination, and social oppression” (Zipes, 1991 p. 179) as they reclaim classic tales with strong females, write retellings, or create new tales with empowered heroines.

It is not surprising that the heroines in feminist fairy tales are no longer compliant, self-sacrificing, and obsessed with beauty. As Didicher (2020) noted, there is a “now-expected feminist transformation of the passive princess into the spunky girl” (p. 49). These spunky girls actively shape their destinies through personal agency, with self-actualization as their ultimate goal (Trites, 1997). Additionally, these heroines do not stand alone but act within interdependent communities of

support. They also reconfigure power as they eschew domination to engage in resistance and advocate for social justice (Kelley, 2008). Unlike their patriarchal counterparts, feminist tales often feature women who hold each other up and work together to overcome oppression and end unjust social practices.

Authors of fairy-tale revisions employ narrative strategies that disrupt the authoritative weight of traditional tales and foster critical readings. Crew (2002) and Williams (2010) noted that authors of feminist texts often employ first-person narration to subvert the primacy of the classic omniscient narrator and position the reader closer to the protagonist, creating fully developed characters readers might relate to and empathize with. This character development pertains not only to the heroine but to hitherto villainized stepmothers and stepsisters. Unlike classic fairy tales, wherein stepmothers were “so demonized that they possess no redeeming features” (Tatar, 1987, p. 182), feminist tales often present stepmothers as complex and human. Authors reveal the stepmothers’ motivations and provide context for their cruelty, fostering understanding and empathy beyond what was possible within classic tales (Williams, 2010).

To be accepted and read as legitimate, however, authors of fairy tale retellings must work within prevailing discourses even as they explore evolving storylines (Crew, 2002; Gilbert, 1994). One way to legitimize retellings is to employ familiar fairy-tale tropes as touchstones for readers; Jack Zipes (1991) contended that authors position readers to engage critically when they employ familiar elements “in an estranging fashion” (p. 180). As Cornwell and Meyer adapted *Cinderella* for the 21st Century, they employed iconic elements in ways that readers familiar with the original tale experience as moments of recognition, as pleasant surprises, even as they discover significant differences.

NOW: MECHANICA (Cornwell, 2015)

In this novelized adaptation of *Cinderella*, *Mechanica* tells her own story, and, although it is set in a fairy-tale past and written in the past tense, there is an immediacy to her narrative. In true fairy-tale fashion, Nicolette Lampton (aka *Mechanica*) is orphaned and forced into servitude by her stepmother. Unlike the absent mother in Perrault’s *Cendrillon*, however, Nicole’s mother is an early source of love and inspiration. While the mother/daughter relationship may be fraught with tension, it is also where daughters may find affirmation and support, so feminist texts often highlight this bond (Crew, 2002). Mother is a successful inventor at a time when “few people thought a woman capable of mechanical brilliance like hers” (Cornwell, 2015, p. 82), and though Nicole sometimes feels less

important than Mother's inventions, Mother inspires her to strive for 'something more.' Mother subverts Father's refusal to apprentice Nicole in Esting City by providing her with an unconventional education, and Nicole continues to study history, engineering, and theoretical physics after her mother's death to become "not a finished or educated young lady in any sense that Father would recognize" (p. 45). Because Mother did not let societal expectations limit her, neither does Nicole.

After she is orphaned and forced into servitude, Nicole exists in a state of resignation until she turns 16 and discovers Mother's workshop, after which she "revels in a bright, sharp kind of exhaustion ... from excitement and engagement and *work*" (Cornwell, 2015, p. 68). This creative work affirms Nicole's identity as an inventor and affords her direction and purpose; she moves from passivity to active resistance to her servitude. Nicole discovers and then teaches Mother's mechanical horse and insects (an apparent allusion to Disney's animal helpers) to complete onerous sewing tasks, enabling her to devote that time to her own inventions. Nicole dreams of entering the Royal Exposition to find a patron, and she enacts her plan secretly and independently. She blows and dyes glass beads and invents a lace-knitting machine to sell to finance her work. For her Exposition entry, she designs and creates a glass carriage and a life-sized replica of her beloved mechanical horse, Jules. Rather than passively receiving magical help, Nicole *uses* magic to animate Jules with Ashes from Faerie found in her mother's workshop. These achievements crystalize her identity as "a real inventor, a real engineer" (p. 231), and she herself networks with Lord Alming, who eventually becomes her business partner.

Nicole approaches fashion with the savvy of a woman creating a professional presence. Her "reinvention by dress" (Guanio-Uluru, 2016, p. 212) is distinctly different from that of her classic Cinderella sister, as she designs her dress for the Exposition to convey her potential as a businesswoman rather than as a prospective wife. Nicole recognizes the correlation between appearance and identity, making purposeful, sartorial decisions in order to define herself (Do Rosario, 2018; King, 2020). She states, "My clothing had to be a part of the idea I was selling, the idea of not only my inventions as good investments, but also myself" (Cornwell, 2015, p. 199). Nicole creates clear glass slippers with visible gears connecting the toe, instep, and heel. Her ingenuity in integrating the gears not only emphasizes her talent, but also makes the impossibility of wearing shoes made of rigid glass seem more probable. It is these shoes that ultimately capture the imagination of Esting's women, establishing Nicole's reputation and ensuring her business and financial success. Although Nicole does not want to attend the ball preceding the exhibition, Jules and the insects

create a gown for her that is “lovelier than even the loveliest gown” (p. 241), another allusion to the familiar trope. It is through her own ingenuity, hard work, and the help of mechanical creatures she herself trains, that she goes to the ball and the Royal Exposition. Nicole is not a simpering beauty but a strategic professional.

Nicole is positioned within community during her servitude, reflecting the fact that feminist texts often focus on the “value of community, the importance of interpersonal relationships, interdependence, and the strength of female bonds” (Crew, 2002, p. 5). The tiny, mechanical horse her mother invented is her first friend. Jules is affectionate, dutiful, intelligent, and a “steadfast companion” (Cornwell, 2015, p. 116), and Nicole grieves the loss of her “very greatest friend” (p. 121) after Chastity destroys him. Yet she knows Jules was not human, and she finds human companionship with Caro. The day Nicole meets Caro, she feels as if they have been “standing together [their] whole lives” (p. 110). Their friendship grows as they share a love of books and write letters back and forth. Even after learning that Fin is in love with Caro, Nicole remains loyal to her. *Mechanica* deconstructs the notion that women are always and only in competition rather than in relationship with each other (Mendelson, 1997).

Gilbert (1994) observed the difficulty of writing outside a romantic storyline, and *Mechanica* reflects this tension. Although Nicole muses that not even the prince could persuade her to give up her longed-for freedom and independence, she indulges in fantasies of heterosexual romance as she daydreams about Fin after meeting him at the market. She breaks with heteronormative positioning and kisses Fin when he catches her as she stumbles. Initially heartsick when he abruptly leaves, working on the Exposition carriage reminds her that her goals are more important than romantic love. Later, she attends the ball after Fin begs her to do so, and it is there that she discovers he is actually Prince Christopher. In fairy-tale fashion, she experiences “space exploding into something bright and rare” (p. 251) as they dance, but her euphoria is short-lived, because she sees Prince Christopher looking at Caro with “reverence ... [and] adoration” (p. 252). At the next day's Exposition, the people look at Nicole with “something almost like worship” (p. 280), but she is dismayed to realize it is not because of her personal accomplishments but because she is rumored to be the next queen. The ball and the Exposition are places where “everyone in the tale is looking and being looked at” (Do Rosario, 2018, p. 67), with profound implications. Nicole's gaze reveals Fin/Prince Christopher's true feelings, and the people's gaze solidifies for Nicole that she cannot marry him. Prince Christopher proposes, even as he acknowledges that he has loved Caro since they

were children, but Nicole refuses his proposal opting instead for a “life of friendship and freedom” (p. 307). Rather than ending with the quintessential fairy-tale wedding, this novelized adaptation reflects feminist tenets as Nicole “does not relinquish her personal power” (Trites, 1997, p. 11).

Betsy Cornwell repeatedly critiques the naturalization of the heteronormative, nuclear family. Caro follows Nicole home after Market Day and sees Stepmother furiously and violently drag her into the house. Caro later tells her, “No one should treat you that way – but especially not your family” (p. 128). Later, Nicole learns that Caro’s mother is slowly dying from Fey’s Croup, the disease that killed her own mother, and she goes to the Night Market with Caro to obtain the exorbitantly priced, illegal cure. When Caro resists Nicole’s offer to help pay for it, Nicole asserts that it cannot be charity since she is “part of her family” (p. 218). The Fey construction of family inspires Nicole; they live with friends rather than in nuclear families, and she wants to believe friends might love “each other enough to live together, to be families together” (p. 46). Unlike her legal family, Nicole realizes that she and Caro share “a kind of love [she] could count on” (p. 259). Nicole, Caro, and Prince Christopher become a chosen family after Nicole leaves her home, and she finds love in lasting friendship rather than in heterosexual, monogamous marriage.

Mechanica includes the trope of the wicked stepmother in a familiar way as it simultaneously deconstructs her as completely wicked. Since the income from Mother’s inventions funded the Lampton’s affluent lifestyle and ended upon her death, Father quickly marries Lady Halving, who has money and is so beautiful it is “impossible not to love her on sight” (p. 46). Nicole anticipates her stepmother’s love, optimistically decorates her stepsisters’ bedroom, and imagines a “blissful haze of new friendship and bonding” (p. 56). Yet Piety and Chastity immediately destroy Nicole’s handiwork and summarily reject her. Nicole is both grief- and panic-stricken when her father dies, and Stepmother immediately relegates her to servanthood. The first time Stepmother orders her to wash the dishes, Nicole screams at her but quickly acquiesces to prove herself a good daughter and earn Stepmother’s love. Stepmother denies her that love, however, and her treatment of Nicole is nothing less than child-abuse; she uses physical punishment and routinely locks Nicole in the cellar. Although Nicole seems to comply and complete all of the household chores, she does so through the clandestine use of spells and her mother’s labor-saving devices.

After discovering her subterfuge, the Steps maliciously destroy the workshop and burn Mother’s journals, and Chastity ruthlessly stomps on Jules until he stops moving. Stepmother locks Nicole in her room for two days with “no food, no water, and not a word” (p. 120) from any of them.

Nicole's heart is broken, but her spirit is not. The stepsisters give her the derisive nickname, *Mechanica*, which she proudly appropriates in an act of self-affirmation as she vows that leaving the Steps will be a "triumph, not an escape" (p. 158). Rejecting the patriarchal construction of a 'good woman,' she lashes back physically at Stepmother and Chastity: hitting Stepmother in the face after Jule's destruction and later slapping Chastity when she insinuates *Mechanica* prostituted herself to attend the ball.

Mechanica critiques the traditional representation of the stepmother as a one-dimensional evil woman; Stepmother *is* inexcusably cruel, yet there are moments when she is vulnerable (Paul, 1998; Tatar, 1987; Williams, 2010). In one scene, *Mechanica* slips into Stepmother's bedroom as she lies sleeping and notices a bit of gray at her temples that belies Stepmother's haughtily perfect appearance. *Mechanica* hears Stepmother murmur Father's name, and she thinks about the times she herself calls out for Mother or Father "knowing no one would come" (p. 265). *Mechanica* empathizes, knowing no one will come to Stepmother either. Although Chastity is the cruelest stepsister, she also has a moment of humanity when *Mechanica* recognizes "something like surrender" (p. 269) after slapping Chastity. *Mechanica* has a momentary vision of her as the girl she dreamed of as a sister, but then she laughs at her and leaves the house forever. She does not accept responsibility for her stepmother's or stepsister's pain; she cannot be self-sacrificing *and* create a life for herself.

Mechanica's world is larger than her personal tragedies and triumphs; she is part of national communities. Esting's subjugation of Faerie highlights the social injustices of historic colonization and oppression. As a feminist text, *Mechanica* deconstructs contemporary discourses that other minoritized populations (Zipes, 1980). Mother was a Fey ally and used Faerie magic in her home and in her inventions, so *Mechanica* knows that the Fey are not a threat. Yet Esting's Brethren preach that Fey magic is "against the Lord's glory" (Cornwell, 2015, p. 28), and Esting history books dehumanize the Fey to justify Esting's domination: "They do not look or act like civilized men. The Lord made them to serve us and made us to care for them" (p. 24). Mother tells Nicole, however, that the history books are wrong and that there is nothing benevolent about the Fey's subjugation. When Queen Nirali dies from an overdose of lovesbane, the cure for Fey's Croup, rumors spread that she was poisoned. Later, rumors circulate that the Crown Prince was also murdered. These royal deaths strain the relationship between the two countries to the breaking point. Reflecting contemporary nationalist sentiments that readers will find all too familiar, Stepmother says, "Perhaps

this will serve as a reminder that foreigners are not to be trusted" (p. 55). In retaliation, King Corsin blocks all ports, stops all trade, and expels all Fey from Esting; the part-Fey who remain in the country threaten rebellion in response to the punitive new laws. The novel ends with the two peoples on the brink of war, as *Mechanica* works against the institutionalized injustices leveled against the Fey and for their right to freedom from Esting's rule.

NOW: CINDER (Meyer, 2012)

Marissa Meyer employs a closely focalized, third-person narration in *Cinder*, and the futuristic setting of New Beijing has a strong sense of "continuous-present rather than time-past" (Crew, 2002, p. 79). In feminist, rather than fairy-tale, fashion, *Cinder* actively resists the restrictions imposed upon her by her stepmother, by society, and ultimately by Queen Levana as she "seeks to define herself" (Zipes, 1980, p. 14). *Cinder* is a cyborg, a human whose bodily injuries were repaired through cybernetics, and as such, she is literally owned by her stepmother; she has "no rights, no belongings" (Meyer, 2012, p. 281). The people's prejudice against cyborgs "conveys the cultural angst that is typically generated in the face of human bodies that transgress established categories of being" (Flanagan, 2014, p. 116), yet cyborgian identity is personalized and humanized through *Cinder*'s focalization.

Unlike Perrault's *Cinderella*, whose dream was to meet and marry the prince, *Cinder* deconstructs this storyline. She meets Prince Kai in the market after being recommended to him as "the best mechanic in New Beijing" (Meyer, 2012, p. 10) to repair his personal android.² Readers see that gender bias still exists in this futuristic setting since he is "expecting an old man" (p. 10). *Cinder* and Prince Kai are undoubtedly attracted to each other, but she resists his many overtures. She imagines that he might cross the social divide between prince and mechanic, but she knows the human-cyborg divide is one he could never cross. Despite her heterosexual fantasies, she refuses Kai's invitations to the ball; escaping while virtually everyone in the city attends the ball is more important to her than romantic love with the prince.

² *Cinder* is in the process of literally removing her outgrown cyborg foot when Kai comes to her stall. Victoria Flanagan (2014) interpreted the emphasis on *Cinder*'s foot throughout the novel, particularly given the New Beijing setting and China's historical tradition of foot-binding, as symbolic of *Cinder* freeing herself from feminine subordination within patriarchy. It is *Cinder*'s foot that initially and repeatedly restricts her freedom but ultimately facilitates her liberation.

Cinder meticulously plans her escape with the help of a personal android, Iko; no magical intervention is required. In a nod to Disney's iconic pumpkin coach, she finds a car that looks like a "rotting pumpkin" (Meyer, 2012, p. 47) in a junkyard and immediately recognizes it as her means of escape, and she employs her mechanical skills in secrecy to repair it. In a conscious act of selflessness, however, she decides to attend the ball to warn Kai after learning of a plot against him. Although she is self-sacrificing, it is an act of rebellion for the good of the empire rather than a testament to her femininity. Iko provides the ball gown and 'glass slipper.' She had kept Peony's gown, after her quarantine for letumosis³, rather than burning it,³ and she also kept Cinder's outgrown cyborg foot. Cinder embodies neither beauty nor fashion when she enters the ballroom "with damp hair and mud splatters on the hem of her wrinkled silver dress" (p. 336), silk gloves "covered in grease smudges" (p. 325), and the small, rusted foot that "might have been made of crystal for how precious it looked to her" (p. 324). When she enters the ballroom, everyone turns to stare and whisper. In true Cinderella fashion, Cinder is the object of the people's gaze (Do Rosario, 2018), but the people stare not because of her beauty and sartorial splendor but because she is so disheveled. Yet Cinder is unapologetic; she got to the ball through her abilities - not her beauty.

Cinder's stepmother, Adri, undoubtedly fits the classic trope of the cruel stepmother who "successfully makes her will prevail in the house" (Lieberman, 1989, p. 197). Although Cinder provides the family's only income, Adri never misses an opportunity to remind Cinder that she wishes her late husband had never adopted her. She blames Cinder for the family's misfortunes and contemptuously tells Cinder she is not "even *human* anymore" (Meyer, 2012, p. 279). She denies Cinder technical upgrades and effectively imprisons her by confiscating her cyborg foot. Cinder is not constrained by a glass slipper but by the loss of her foot itself (Flanagan, 2014). Cinder feels particularly betrayed when Adri sells her as a letumosis research subject, consigning her to certain death rather than being "the one to protect *her*" (Meyer, 2012, p. 131).

As with Stepmother in *Mechanica*, however, Adri's actions are motivated by more than inherent cruelty. As a seamstress fits Pearl's ball gown, Adri asserts that she expects results from the gown; the family desperately needs money, and Pearl must find a husband to secure her place in

³ Letumosis is an incurable disease killing Earthen people in pandemic proportions, and people are terrified of contracting the disease. It is eventually revealed that it is one facet in Queen Levana's plan to conquer Earth.

society. We get a glimpse of a gentler, happier Adri after Peony goes into letumosis quarantine, and Adri looks at a framed portscreen of family photos: "Pictures at their old house, the one with the garden. Pictures with Adri, before she lost her smile. Pictures with their father" (p. 63). Iko later escapes to Cinder's workshop and reports hearing Adri crying in the bath. When she volunteers Cinder as a test subject, Adri tells Cinder she did the best she could since Garan died and "everything fell apart" (p. 64), and Cinder sees "her shoulders tremble ... as she [tries] to stifle the sobs" (p. 65). Adri *is* a cruel stepmother, but she is also a woman in pain.

Unlike her isolated, classic Cinderella sister, Cinder receives love and support during her servitude from her stepsister, Peony: "the only human friend she had" (p. 35). Peony censures Adri's cruel treatment of Cinder and mocks her mother in exasperation and as entertainment. Because of her love for Peony, Cinder extracts a promise from Kai to dance with Peony at the ball, and she makes a deal with Dr. Erland to give Peony the first dose of the letumosis antidote, but it arrives too late to save her. Immune to letumosis, Cinder visits Peony in quarantine where Peony tells her she loves her while struggling to breathe. Cinder also finds companionship with the cheeky, personal android, Iko, who cannot understand why Cinder discourages Prince Kai's advances and refuses to go to the ball. She regales Cinder by coming to the garage workshop draped in a strand of Adri's pearls with lipstick smeared across her sensor, pretending to dance with Prince Kai. Destroying Iko, and robbing Cinder of her friendship, is one of the cruelest things Adri does. Cinder does not accept this passively, however; she sifts through the mangled parts to find Iko's personality chip, and it is one of the few things she takes with her when she escapes. Akin to heroines in classic tales who persevere in solitude, Cinder is without female companionship after Peony's death and Iko's destruction, yet the strength of their love fortifies her.

That Cinder is cyborg and Lunar personalizes the dehumanization of these oppressed Others. A cyborg is "a mutant, an outcast" (p. 178), and their use as letumosis research subjects is indicative of their persecution. It "was made out to be some sort of honor, giving your life for the good of humanity, but it was really just a reminder that cyborgs were not like everyone else" (p. 29). Lunars are hated because they manipulate the thoughts and perceptions of others. Evolved from an old Earthen colony on the moon, Lunars are "a cruel, savage people" (p. 178). While Cinder accepts her cyborg identity, she resists being Lunar, "hated and despised by every culture in the galaxy" (p. 292). Experiencing intersectional and marginalized identities through Cinder's perspective challenges contemporary racist and anti-immigrant sentiments.

Lunar Queen Levana is a powerful, evil woman, representative of “demonic female despotism” (Mendelson, 1997, p. 115). Lunars are “a greedy and violent race, and Queen Levana [is] the worst of all of them” (Meyer, 2012, p. 43). She revels in her use and abuse of power and is rumored to have assassinated all family members who might challenge her right to the throne. Immediately after Emperor Rikan's death, she comes to Earth with enough letumosis antidote to cure one adult male prompting Kai to label her a “witch” (p. 212). She appears on a balcony as the people of New Beijing protest her presence on Earth, and, when the people drop their protest signs and peacefully leave the square, Cinder realizes Levana brainwashed them. As the most powerful woman in the novel, Levana perpetuates the trope of the powerful, inherently evil woman. Her “use of power raises moral questions” (Zipes, 1980, p. 17) that are relevant to contemporary political discourses.

Levana exposes Cinder's intersectional cyborg and Lunar identities during the coronation ball. She attempts to glamour Cinder into shooting herself, but Cinder resists and turns the gun on Levana. The bolts in her too-small foot snap as she attempts to flee, she crashes to the ground, and is taken into custody where she seems to be at the mercy of others. Didicher (2020) argues that Dr. Erland represents the fairy godmother when he visits Cinder in her cell and convinces her that she must escape and meet him in Africa; she is Princess Selene, rightful heir to the Lunar throne. He provides Cinder with a state-of-the-art, technologically enhanced hand and foot to expedite her escape. Although he himself does not free her, he does give her the tools she needs to free herself. An escaped and secreted Lunar himself, he tells Cinder of Lunar rebels who “are not so easily brainwashed into mindless contentment” (Meyer, 2012, p. 170). He talks about the sacrifices that must be made to stop Levana and teaches her how to use her glamour, which her cyborg programming had suppressed. Cinder's eventual willingness to use her Lunar magic to overthrow Queen Levana has the potential to corrupt her and promotes an “ends justify the means' morality, rather than the strict ‘turn the other cheek' morality of Perrault” (Didicher, 2020, p. 590). Cinder determines that her resistance is vital, however, as she considers her role the broader world: “Cinder's yearning for freedom and Pearl's taunts and Adri's whims and even Kai's flirting with her did not fit into that bigger picture” (Meyer, 2012, p. 307). Cinder believes she can make a difference, and she escapes to actively resist Levana's domination rather than passively submit to her fate.

DISCUSSION

Reading novelized adaptations of *Cinderella* alongside Perrault's canonical tale make shifting gender ideologies and 21st Century discourses visible. As feminist adaptations reimagine tales from the patriarchal canon, they "reflect back on them, coloring our view of them, ... and intervening on our earlier readings of them" (Bacchilega, 2013, p. 33). *Cendrillon* perpetuates patriarchal expectations that females should be submissive, passive, virtuous, and beautiful. Cinderella endures her servitude in silence and in solitude, and community among women is nonexistent as they compete for the prince's attention. Women are obsessed with beauty, which establishes their worth and secures their futures through advantageous marriages. Furthermore, the good/evil woman binary is evident in the contrast between the submissive Cinderella and her more powerful stepmother and stepsisters. Cinderella is objectified, and her rescue and redemption require a fairy godmother's magical help, fashionable gowns, and beauty rather than personal agency. Issues of social justice and a world beyond Cinderella's servitude and the prince's infatuation are not evident in this classic tale.

Mechanica and Cinder provide models of expanded possibilities for females through their agency and subject positioning. They challenge the naturalization of the 'good woman' through their expressions of anger, outrage, and rebellion, and they rely on personal agency rather than magical intervention to escape their servitude; in fact, it is *they* who use magic. However, their use of magic/power raises ethical dilemmas. Mechanica uses illegal Fey magic, breaking what she believes to be a discriminatory law, while Cinder uses the feared Lunar glamour, believing she can do so for the good of humanity without being corrupted herself. Both young women take risks as they use power as resistance, "to question oppressive practices," and as agency, "conscious action for the purpose of social justice" (Kelley, 2008, p. 38).

Jarvis (2013) cautions that although today's young women benefit from a feminist heritage, they are still bombarded "by expectations relating to fashion and consumption that require constant attention to what is acceptable and unacceptable" (p. 105). *Mechanica* and *Cinder* provide critical counter-messages. Fin and Prince Kai are attracted to these Cinderellas because of their personalities and abilities rather than their beauty. Mechanica and Cinder are both mechanics, conjuring up images of grease-stained hands and clothing, which stands in stark contrast to the ideal of porcelain-skinned beauty. They are representative of contemporary women who are breaking into, but are still underrepresented, in STEM fields. Although positioned within heterosexual storylines, both

Cinderellas prioritize their goals and independence over marriage, and they determine for themselves what is acceptable and unacceptable.

Unlike the classic heroine who suffers “without the benefit of female companionship, support, understanding, or even contact” (Mendelson, 1997, p. 112), *Mechanica* and *Cinder* both experience supportive relationships. Nicole benefits from her mother's love, the solace of Jules' devotion, and Fin and Caro's acceptance and friendship. Peony loves Cinder as a sister, and Iko is her constant companion and support. It is interesting and important that in this age of artificial intelligence, robots, and virtual realities, sentient mechanical beings are among *Mechanica's* and *Cinder's* dearest friends. Their relationships critique the human/non-human binary “to deconstruct the hegemony of the humanist subject” (Flanagan, 2014, p. 66) and offer alluring possibilities for future and futuristic relationships.

As orphaned children, *Mechanica* and *Cinder* both crave their stepmothers' love, and while *Mechanica* is initially submissive, *Cinder* is defiant from the start. The stepmothers are cruel to the Cinderellas, but we get glimpses of their back-story and of their pain. In *Stepmother* and *Adri*, who are “treated with more sympathy - and humanity” (Paul, 1998, p. 24) than the patriarchal cruel stepmother, we see an evolving discourse that disrupts the portrayal of powerful women as evil. Although *Mechanica* and *Cinder* witness their stepmother's emotional and financial struggles, they make no selfless, climactic reconciliation nor do they retaliate. These young heroines simply turn their backs on their pasts to imagine and realize their futures. *Levana*, however, embodies and perpetuates every brutal, blood-thirsty, power-hungry attribute of the powerful woman of traditional tales.

Betsy Cornwell and Marissa Meyer address the subordination of women along with the marginalization of other groups (Zipes, 1980), and there are issues related to social justice within and across these storyworlds that are relevant today. In *Mechanica*, the Fey are dehumanized to justify Esting's “benevolent” domination, and they are segregated from the Esting population. Esting's treatment of the Fey may remind readers of current sentiments against immigrant populations in the U.S., as some Americans want to close our borders, condone confinement in cages, and believe those seeking asylum are criminals and rapists (Scott, 2019).

These novels also explore intersectionality; the part-Fey are persecuted in Esting, and *Cinder's* status as other “hinges not only on her cyborg origins, but also her racial hybridity and her gender identity” (Flanagan, 2014, p. 61). Importantly, both Cinderellas take an active role in

countering the injustices of such institutionalized racism and discrimination. Additionally, the pandemics in both novels highlight two issues related to health care that many readers will recognize as familiar. In *Mechanica*, only the rich have access to good medical care and expensive medicine, and *Mechanica* critiques this disparity. The COVID-19 pandemic highlighted similar disparities within the U.S. health-care system as the risk of severe illness and death was far greater for the poor and for racial minorities than for affluent, white Americans (CDC, 2020). In *Cinder*, cyborgs were drafted as letumosis test subjects with no regard for their certain deaths. This calls to mind unethical studies, such as the Tuskegee Syphilis Study (Nix, 2020).

"Text beneficiaries' ' (Kelley, 2008, p. 33) of the social ideologies in *Mechanica* and *Cinder* include today's young people who are concerned with equality and dismantling patriarchal hegemony. These Cinderellas reflect and speak to the many young people today, many of them female, who advocate for social change: for Black Lives, for immigrant rights, for gun control, for the environment, for equitable health care.

CONCLUSION

Although I purposefully selected *Mechanica* (Cornwell, 2015) and *Cinder* (Meyer, 2012) for deep analysis, there are many other YA *Cinderella* adaptations that disrupt aspects of patriarchal hegemony. Some challenge heteronormativity, and I suggest that it would be relevant and timely to analyze adaptations such as these to detail how authors queer Cinderella. *Ash* (Lo, 2009) breaks the assumption of heterosexuality by featuring a Cinderella who falls in love, not with the prince, but with his huntress. *Cinderella is Dead* (Bayron, 2020) takes place in a dystopian, patriarchal kingdom where women are subjugated and must attend the King's annual ball to be either chosen or forfeited. Sophia, a queer, Black teen, teams up with Cinderella's sole living descendent to bring down the patriarchy and reveal the truth behind Cinderella's 'official' story. *Sometime After Midnight* (Philips, 2018) features aspiring musicians, Nate and Cameron, who meet in a LA nightclub. After Nate flees, the only clue to his identity Cameron has is a blurry photo of Nate's Sharpied Chuck Taylors. In

Cinderella Boy (Meister, 2018), popular Carter meets and subsequently tries to charm genderqueer Declan. The boys discover truths about themselves and create community as they lead protests against the homophobic policies of their bigoted school principal.

Other *Cinderella* adaptations take readers to other lands or present alternative perspectives. *Bound* (Napoli, 2006) is based on variants of the Chinese *Yeh-hsien* wherein Xing Xing seeks to become 'unbound' from societal expectations. *Rogue Princess* (Myers, 2020) flips the gender-script and blurs the human/machine, natural/artificial binaries in an interstellar setting. Princess Delia must choose a husband to save her planet, but it is an orphaned, Cinderella chore-boy-turned-thief who steals her heart. Based on the Grimm's *Aschenputtel*, *Stepsister* (Donnelly, 2020) gives voice to Cinderella's stepsister who was ordered by her mother to cut off her toes in an attempt to fit her foot in the glass slipper, prompting her to wonder how much of herself she must sacrifice to find acceptance and love.

Classic Cinderella stories might seem irrelevant today, yet authors like Betsy Cornwell and Marissa Meyer reinvigorate them by incorporating cultural struggles around gender and issues of social justice. I analyzed these two particular novelized adaptations because they included but critiqued the tropes of feminine beauty and its association with goodness, the wicked stepmother and cruel stepsisters, a handsome prince, and the ball with its pumpkin carriage and glass slippers. In addition, they go beyond these iconic tropes to explore the complexity of identity, the importance of supportive communities, and issues of social justice. Reading them alongside Perrault's *Cendrillon* makes the possibilities they present for expanded expressions of femininity more visible. *Mechanica* and *Cinder* are young heroines who actively shape their futures, pursue (or don't) romantic love, forge meaningful connections with other women, and work as activists. *Cinderella* is relevant today, and layering her stories reveals her transformation from patriarchal to 21st Century ways of being a female.

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