A Feminist's View of "Cinderella"

Madonna Kolbenschlag

[Editor's Note: Madonna Kolbenschlag approaches "Cinderella" from a feminist point of view. Feminist criticism attempts to clarify the relations of women and men in a broad array of human activities: for instance in literary works, the structure of family life, and economic and political affairs. The object of analysis in the case of "Cinderella" is a story, and Kolbenschlag brings a unique set of questions to bear: In the world of "Cinderella" what is the relationship between men and women? Among women themselves? How is power divided in this world? How is a woman's achievement defined as opposed to a man's? What would children reading this story learn about gender identity? Feminists themselves might disagree in answering these question; but the fact that these and not Bettelheim's questions are guiding the analysis ensures that Kolbenschlag's treatment of "Cinderella" and what we can learn from it will differ significantly from Bettelheim's.

Note that the essay begins with epigraphs, or brief statements, from other writers meant to suggest something of the content of what follows. Authors place epigraphs to set a context for you, and the author who places two or more before a piece is implicitly suggesting that you make comparisons between them.]

> Overtly the story helps the child to accept sibling rivalry as a rather common fact of life and promises that he need not fear being destroyed by it; on the contrary, if these siblings were not so nasty to him, he could never triumph to the same degree at the end . . . There are also obvious moral lessons: that surface appearances tell nothing about the inner worth of a person; that if one is true to oneself, one wins over those who pretend to be what they are not; and that virtue will be rewarded, evil punished.
>
> Openly stated, but not as readily recognized, are the lessons that to develop one's personality to the fullest, one must be able to do hard work and be able to separate good from evil, as in the sorting of the lentils. Even out of lowly matter like ashes things of great value can be gained, if one knows how to do it.
>
> --Bruno Bettelheim, *The Uses of Enchantment*

> The literature on female socialization reminds one of the familiar image of Cinderella's stepsisters industriously lopping off their toes and heels so as to fit into the glass slipper (key to the somewhat enigmatic heart of the prince)--when of course it was never intended for them anyway.
>
> --Judith Long Laws, "Woman as Object"

> The important factor to us is Cinderella's conditioning. It is decidedly not to go on dutifully sweeping the floor and carrying the wood. She is conditioned to get the hell out of those chores. There is, the American legend tells her, a good-looking man with dough, who will put an end to the onerous tedium of making a living. If he doesn't come along (the consumer must consequently suppose), she isn't just lacking in good fortune, she is being cheated out of her true deserts. Better, says our story, go out and

> make the guy. In other words, we have turned the legend backwards and our Cinderella now operates as her sister did. . . .
>
> The goal of security, seen in terms of things alone and achieved in those terms during the least secure period in human history, has predictably ruined Cinderella; she has the prince, the coach, the horses--but her soul's a pumpkin and her mind's a rat-warren. She desperately needs help.
>
> --Philip Wylie, *Generation of Vipers*

Cinderella, the best-known and probably best-liked fairy tale, is above all a success story. The rags-to-riches theme perhaps explains its equal popularity among boys as well as girls. It is a very old fairy tale, having at least 345 documented variants and numerous unrecorded versions. The iconic focus of the tale on the lost slipper and Cinderella's "perfect fit" suggests that the story may have originated in the Orient where the erotic significance of tiny feet has been a popular myth since ancient times.

The basic motifs of the story are well-known: an ill-treated heroine, who is forced to live by the hearth; the twig she plants on her mother's grave that blossoms into a magic tree; the tasks demanded of the heroine; the magic animals that help her perform the tasks and provide her costume for the ball; the meeting at the ball; the heroine's flight from the ball; the lost slipper; the shoe test; the sisters' mutilation of their feet; the discovery of the true bride and the happy marriage. The variants retain the basic motifs; while differing considerably in detail, they range more widely in their origins than any other fairy tale: Asiatic, Celtic, European, Middle-Eastern, and American Indian versions numbered among them.

The Horatio Alger quality of the story helps to explain its special popularity in mercantile and capitalistic societies. As a parable of social mobility it was seized upon by the writers of the new "literature of aspiration" in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries as a basic plot for a new kind of private fantasy--the novel. Our literary world has not been the same since *Pamela* and all her orphaned, governess sisters. Most Anglo-American novels, early and late, are written in the shadow of *Pamela* and the Cinderella myth. Even Franklin's *Autobiography*, the seminal work in the success genre, owes much to the myth. The primary "moral" of the fairy tale--that good fortune can be merited--is the very essence of the Protestant Ethic.

At the personal and psychological level, Cinderella evokes intense identification. It is a tale of sibling rivalry (and subliminally, of sex-role stereotyping)--a moral fable about socialization. Very few themes could be closer to the inner experience of the child, an emerging self enmeshed in a family network. As Bettelheim observes, it is deceptively simple in the associations it evokes:

> Cinderella tells about the agonies of sibling rivalry, of wishes coming true, of the humble being elevated, of true merit being recognized even when hidden under rags, of virtue rewarded and evil punished--a straightforward story. But under this overt content is concealed a welter of complex and largely unconscious material....

The personality of the heroine is one that, above all, accepts *abasement* as a prelude to and precondition of *affiliation*. That abasement is characteristically expressed by Cinderella's servitude to menial tasks, work that diminishes her. This willing acceptance of a condition of

worthlessness and her expectation of rescue (as a reward for her virtuous suffering) is a recognizable paradigm of traditional feminine socialization. Cinderella is deliberately and systematically excluded from meaningful achievements. Her stepmother assigns her to meaningless tasks; her father fails her as a helpful mentor. Her sisters, inferior in quality of soul, are preferred before her.

But Cinderella does not become a teenage runaway, nor does she wreak any kind of Gothic sabotage on the family. Like many of the Jews who went to the gas chambers in World War II, she has internalized the consciousness of the victim. She really believes she belongs where she is. The paradox of this acceptance of a condition of worthlessness in the self, along with a conviction of the ultimate worthiness and heroism of one's role, is part of the terrible appeal of the fairy tale. For women, especially, it is both mirror and model. Perrault's version of the tale ends with a pointed poetic moral:

'Tis that little gift called grace,
Weaves a spell round form and face . . .
And if you would learn the way
How to get that gift today--

How to point the golden dart
That shall pierce the Prince's heart--
Ladies, you have but to be
Just as kind and sweet as she!

Cinderella's place by the hearth and her identification with ashes suggests several associations. At the most obvious level, her place by the chimney is an emblem of her degradation. But it is also symbolic of her affinity with the virtues of the hearth: innocence, purity, nurturance, empathy, docility. Cinderella has a vestal quality that relieves her of any obligation to struggle and strive to better her world. She must apprentice herself to this time of preparation for her "real" life with the expected One.

Like most fairy tales, *Cinderella* dramatizes the passage to maturity. Her sojourn among the ashes is a period of grieving, a transition to a new self. On the explicit level of the story, Cinderella is literally grieving for her dead mother. Grimm's version of the tale preserves the sense of process, a growth that is symbolized in the narrative. Instead of a fairy godmother--*deus ex machina*--Cinderella receives a branch of a hazel bush from her father. She plants the twig over her mother's grave and cultivates it with her prayers and tears. This is her contact with her past, her roots, her essential self. Before one can be transformed one must grieve for the lost as well as the possible selves, as yet unfulfilled--Kierkegaard's existential anguish.

The mother is also identified in several variants with helpful animals, a calf, a cow, or a goat--all milk-giving creatures. In Grimm's version the magic helpers are birds that live in the magic tree. The animals assist her in the performance of the cruel and meaningless tasks her stepmother assigns. The magic trees and helpful animals are emblems of the faith and trust that is demanded of Cinderella, the belief that something good can be gained from whatever one does. There is a subliminal value implied here that work is seldom to be enjoyed for its own

sake, but only to be endured for some greater end. It is essentially a "predestined" view of work as incapable of redemption. Service at the hearth is not intrinsically worthwhile, but acquires its value through the virtue it extracts from the heroine. Significantly, when the heroine is released from her servitude, the structure of belief--the myth--collapses. Cinderella's father destroys the pear tree and the pigeon house.

The Perrault version places great emphasis on the "Midnight" prohibition given to Cinderella. A traditional connotation would, of course, associate it with the paternal mandate of obedience, and a threat: if the heroine does not return to domesticity and docility at regular intervals she may lose her "virtue" and no longer merit her expected one. Like the old conduct manuals for ladies, the moral of the tale warns against feminine excursions as well as ambition. Too much time spent "abroad" may result in indiscreet sex or unseemly hubris, or both. "No excelling" and "no excess."

As a dynamic metaphor of the feminine condition, it illuminates the double life that many women experience: the attraction of work and achievement, perhaps "celebrity," outside the home, and the emotional pull of the relationships and security within the home. For most women diurnal life is not a seamless robe. There are sharp divisions between creative work and compulsive activity, between assertiveness and passivity, between social life and domestic drudgery, between public routines and private joys. Women are, in the contemporary world, acutely aware of the need for integration. "Midnight" strikes with a terrible insistence, a cruel regularity in their lives.

Cinderella's threefold escape from the ball (Perrault's version) is of course designed to make her more desirable to the Prince. Or is it a reflection of her own ambivalence? (In Grimm's version, she is under no prohibition, she leaves of her own accord.) Bettelheim offers two interesting interpretations:

1. She wants to be "chosen" for herself, in her natural state, rather than because of a splendid appearance wrought by magic.
2. Her withdrawals show that, in contrast to her sisters, she is not "aggressive" in her sexuality but waits patiently "to be chosen."

The latter interpretation is underscored by the "perfect fit" of Cinderella's foot in the slipper, and by the sisters' frantic efforts to mutilate their own feet in order to diminish their size (symbolic of their aggressive, masculine traits). Here we see the two sides of the "formula female." On the surface, perfectly conformed to the feminine stereotype; within, massive lacerations of the spirit. The slipper is indeed the ultimate symbol of "that which is most desirable in a woman," with all of its stereotypical seductiveness and destructiveness.

The slipper, the central icon of the story, is a symbol of sexual bondage and imprisonment in a stereotype. Historically, the virulence of its significance is born out in the twisted horrors of Chinese foot-binding practices. On another level, the slipper is a symbol of power--with all of its accompanying restrictions and demands for conformity. When the Prince offers Cinderella the lost slipper (originally a gift of the magic bird), he makes his kingdom hers.

We know little of Cinderella's subsequent role. In Grimm's version she is revenged by the birds which pluck out the eyes of the envious sisters. But Perrault's version celebrates Cinderella's kindness and forgiveness. Her sisters come to live in the palace and marry two

worthy lords. In the Norse variant of the tale, Aslaug, the heroine, marries a Viking hero, bears several sons, and wields a good deal of power in Teutonic style. (She is the daughter of Sigurd and Brynhild.) But in most tales Cinderella disappears into the vague region known as the "happily ever after." She changes her name, no doubt, and--like so many women--is never heard of again.

There are moments when all of us can find ourselves in the Cinderella tale: as bitchy, envious, desperate sibling-peers; or victim-souls like Cinderella, passive, waiting patiently to be rescued; or nasty, domineering "stepmothers," fulfilling ourselves by means of manipulative affiliations--all of them addicted to needing approval. And then we know that for the Prince we should read "Patriarchy."

(Madonna Kolbenschlag, *Kiss Sleeping Beauty Good-Bye: Breaking the Spell of Feminine Myths and Models*. Harper Collins, 1979.)