

TALES AS OLD AS TIME:  
THE ORIGINS OF SELECTED FAIRY TALES  
AND THEIR LEGACIES IN POPULAR CULTURE

by  
Ann Louise Jackson

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Approved by

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Advisor: Associate Professor Alan Arrivé

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Reader: Dr. Timothy Yenter

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Reader: Dr. Jaime Harker

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## ABSTRACT

ANN LOUISE JACKSON: *Tales as Old as Time: The Origins of Selected Fairy Tales and Their Legacies in Popular Culture*  
(Under the direction of Alan Arrivé)

This thesis seeks to analyze a selection of fairy tales and their film adaptations. The research centers on the origins of these selected stories and their cinematic derivatives, with particular focus given to authorial and cultural influences as well as audience perceptions of these works. The evolution of character through these fairy tales is an area of interest in this thesis, with an emphasis on agency and the depiction of the heroines through the stories and their adaptations. Including two well-known fairy tales and one that is more obscure, this thesis aims to understand how each variation is conceived and to investigate the aspects of the fairy tales which persist as well as those which differ from other stories and adaptations.

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## INTRODUCTION

In today's culture, we are surrounded by fairy tales. Whatever one chooses to call them – fairy tale, conte de fée, märchen, eventyr, and so on – the stories these names encompass are ingrained in the cultural mindset on a global scale. Consider the critical and commercial success of director Guillermo del Toro's 2017 fantasy film *The Shape of Water*. It has received hundreds of nominations and accolades, securing the Best Picture Oscar among other Academy Awards, and has been praised as one of del Toro's best films to date. Yet bubbling beneath the briny, blue-green surface of this horror romance film is a fairy tale, a "Beauty and the Beast" story that embraces the magic, the horrors, and the love of a tale concerning the unexpected romance between a compassionate "beauty" and a mysterious "beast."

Although they have expanded to the page, stage, and screen, fairy tales are rooted in the oral tradition and are identified as a subset of folklore. This fairy tale subset often features fantastical elements such as bewitched characters, enchanted castles, talking animals, and magical objects. The origins of most of these stories are not easily tracked due to the intrinsic nature of oral storytelling; thus only recorded forms and versions of these early spoken tales exist today. Despite the inherent differences in oral and written storytelling and the loss of certain aspects of the oral tradition, these recordings are fascinating because they act as snapshots of the places, peoples, and cultures that each variation comes from. The themes and characters often shift with the setting to reflect the origins of the stories.

This reflection is not solely limited to the oldest variations of the stories, however. The same cultural impressions can be seen stamped on the more modern variations and interpretations of fairy tales, with the evolution of themes and characters revealing the present-day cultures that these newer versions stem from. One might see the same fairy tale as a base for countless retellings, with focuses as varied as romance and burgeoning sexuality to environmental concerns and the darker sides of society and human nature. The characters expand beyond archetypal frameworks, and settings are no longer always situated “once upon a time, in a land far, far away.” With each new retelling, there is the chance to approach the timeless tales from another angle.

However, with the presence of fairy tale adaptations often heavily saturating the market – such as the recent wave of live-action Disney remakes of their classic animated films – some people have brought up questions of why these new versions of old tales are necessary. These questions in turn spark even more questions, such as: Why do people so readily return to these stories time and again? What is the function of these modern adaptations of the original fairy tales? Why do certain versions persist and gain immense popularity while others simply fall away into obscurity? Do we truly need so many different versions of the same story? I believe that these questions have answers and that many adaptations and retellings serve a purpose, with each new version presenting the opportunity for the audience and the storyteller alike to use established stories to explore new and evolving visions and treatments of these classic tales.

For this study, I will examine three separate fairy tales – “Cinderella,” “The Little Mermaid,” and “East of the Sun and West of the Moon” – and explore not only their individual origins but also a number of film adaptations for each story. The analysis of

“Cinderella,” focusing on the versions made famous by Charles Perrault and the Brothers Grimm, will be followed by an investigation of the films *Cinderella* (1950), *The Glass Slipper* (1955), and *Ever After* (1998). Hans Christian Andersen’s fairy tale “The Little Mermaid” will follow, with examinations of the retellings *The Little Mermaid* (1989), *Ponyo* (2008), and *The Lure* (2015). The exploration of “East of the Sun and West of the Moon” will focus on one feature film, *The Polar Bear King* (1991), and another feature film that was shelved during production. In delving deeper into these stories and their selected film adaptations, I hope to explore the cultural shifts of each era through evolving characters as well as different themes. I also want to examine the elements that stay in line with the original tales and those that depart to create something new.

## CHAPTER I

The first fairy tale is arguably one of the most universally recognizable fairy tales in the world, “Cinderella.” “Cinderella” is so popularized today that there exists an entire genre subset of “Cinderella stories,” rags-to-riches tales that adhere to the now near-formulaic plot outline of the saccharine heroine (or occasionally hero) who wants to go to a ball and finds love along the way. Marian Roalfe Cox’s 1893 book *Cinderella* collected 345 versions of the fairy tale through her intensive scholarly research. Nearly sixty years after its publication, Anna Birgitta Rooth, with access to more than double the number of variations reported in Cox’s work, investigated the “Cinderella” story even further in her text *The Cinderella Cycle* (Philip ix). With countless adaptations and offshoots, it is a tale that has been seen and told all over the world, in one variation or another.

In the preface to his book *The Cinderella Story: The Origins and Variations of the Story Known as ‘Cinderella’*, author Neil Philip writes “Of all the world’s folktales, ‘Cinderella’ is perhaps the most familiar... Everyone encounters the story in childhood, and recognizes it in adult life, whether in an opera or an advertisement. Yet this familiarity... is partial and misleading. Cinderella’s story is much stranger and much richer than the accepted version” (ix). This quote addresses the tension between the “accepted version” of “Cinderella” and the many, many variations that belong to the tale. For example, the oldest known version of “Cinderella” comes from China, and it features a large fish in the role of the fairy godmother. Another take has the heroine wearing a coat of rushes, prompting the name “Rashin Coatie.” Yet another variant, “Rhodopis,”

hails from Greece and recounts the marriage of a slave to an Egyptian King. However, the versions more commonly associated with the story – or that are often considered to be the “originals” by the average reader – emerged from France and Germany in the 1600s and 1800s: those of Charles Perrault and of the brothers Jakob and Wilhelm Grimm.

Writer Alan Dundes wrote in *Cinderella: A Casebook* that, “If one were to select the single most popular version out of all the hundreds of texts of Cinderella that have been reported, that version would almost certainly be the tale told by Charles Perrault (1628-1703)” (14). This “Cinderella” variant is one of the most widespread and well-known versions of the tale. It tells the story of a good-natured maiden whose hateful stepmother and stepsisters, intimidated by and jealous of her goodness, force her to work as a servant in their home. They call her Cinderwench and Cinderella, and she withstands their abuse with grace, her beauty and goodness visible through her rags and cinders. The prince of the land decides to hold a ball, inviting Cinderella’s stepsisters. Although she helps them to prepare, she is not permitted to go, and her godmother – a fairy – transforms a pumpkin and a number of mice and lizards into attendants. Cinderella’s clothing is enchanted, becoming a rich and beautiful gown.

She goes to the ball, attracting the attention of the prince and the other guests. Her grace and gentility is well-received, and she makes a strong impression on everyone before she leaves. Her stepsisters return and brag about the beautiful princess and her kindness towards them, and they mock Cinderella when she asks to borrow one of their dresses in order to attend the ball the next night. Once again transformed by her godmother, she returns to the castle, and the prince does not leave her side. Distracted by his attentions, midnight strikes suddenly, and Cinderella flees, losing her glass shoe in the

process. Returned to rags but still possessing the second slipper, she hears of the prince's love from her stepsisters. In the following days, the prince makes a proclamation that he will find the girl whose foot fits the slipper. All the ladies of the court try the slipper, and the search eventually reaches the stepsisters. Despite their jeers, Cinderella is permitted to try the slipper, which fits perfectly. She produces the second slipper, and her fairy godmother transforms her rags again, creating for Cinderella the most magnificent clothing. She marries the prince several days later, and out of her inherent goodness, she moves her stepsisters into the palace and finds them both husbands.

Seventeenth century French author Charles Perrault spent much of his time in the parlors of well-to-do women and their daughters, exchanging folk stories and the like that would become known as fairy tales, in a genre that he helped to establish. Due to his audience and his era, his version of "Cinderella" ("Cendrillon" in French) is accented by beautiful gowns, a grand ballroom, and genteel etiquette and manners (Wolkomir 22). In fact, many elements seem to have originated with Perrault, such as the slippers being made of glass, whereas in earlier versions they had typically been made of materials like fur or silk. The similarity of the French words "vair" (fur) and "verre" (glass) appear to be evidence of this, though some argue that the glass slipper was an intentional choice rather than a mistake on Perrault's part. This is because glass is a material that does not stretch, and it makes "a shoe in which the foot could be seen to fit" (Opie 159). While the name of the Brothers Grimm is perhaps more easily recognized today than that of Perrault, his influence on "Cinderella" and fairy tales as a whole cannot be denied. In the centuries following his own, his tale made its way into the hands of the Grimms, playing a key role in their variations of the story.

The Brothers Grimm, in their time of nineteenth century Germany, were a pair of folklorists who compiled versions of popular folk tales and fairy tales, furthering the genre extensively. Perrault's "Cendrillon" was one tale that found its way into their hands, and they soon had an adaptation of their own, heavily influenced by the French version. Interestingly enough, the brothers then produced a second version of "Cinderella" ("Aschenputtel" in German) and would later revise the tale even more throughout the years. This second edition, however, was much more graphically violent than both the French and the first German versions, to the point of being horrific.

This violent adaptation of the popular tale plays out in much the same way as Perrault's "Cinderella," despite some differences. A disenfranchised young waif works as a servant for her ill-tempered and mean-spirited stepfamily. This version stresses the enjoyment that the women, who possess physical beauty and ugly natures, take in tormenting and mistreating Cinderella – referred to as "Ash Girl" in this story. She toils as a scullery maid, and her stepsisters mock her and play cruel and often tedious tricks on her, such as tossing peas and lentils into the fireplace's ashes for Ash Girl to remove. When her father travels away from the home, the stepsisters ask for expensive clothing and accessories while Ash Girl requests the first twig to brush his hat on his return journey. He does as asked, and Ash Girl plants the hazel twig over her mother's grave, watering it daily with her tears. At times small birds would land on the tree, and when they did so, they would drop items that the protagonist wished and prayed for.

When the king announces a three day festival with the purpose of finding his son a bride, Ash Girl begs for the opportunity to go, and her stepmother twice pours lentils into the ashes, believing it impossible for her stepdaughter to remove them all. The

heroine calls out to many birds to help her remove the lentils, and though she successfully completes the tasks with the aid of the birds, she is forbidden to go. Asking her mother's enchanted hazel tree for something to wear to the ball, she dresses in gold and silver and impresses everyone with her beauty, including the prince. On each night of the festival, he tries to escort her home, but she escapes and hides, replacing the beautiful clothes with her rags. The prince spreads tar to stop her and captures her shoe. During the search, the stepsisters are each told by their mother to cut themselves in order to fit within the shoe. Both of the stepsisters cut pieces from their feet –one removes her toe, the other a heel – in order to fit within the shoe. Their plans fail with intervention from Ash Girl's birds, and she at last tries the slipper, which fits perfectly. At the end of the story, while attending the heroine's wedding, the stepsisters walk beside her; and the doves tear their eyes out as further punishment for their cruelty. This gory turn of events was not uncommon in Germany's moralist children's fiction, as seen with the extreme morals and often gruesome endings of the stories featured in Heinrich Hoffmann's *Struwwelpeter*, and many readers today associate this bloody tale with the idea of the "original Cinderella," despite it not even being the first version written by the Brothers Grimm.

It is important to note the gruesomeness of the Grimms' "Aschenputtel" because it especially emphasizes the idea of transformation and of physicality reflecting nature. At the start of the story, the stepsisters are "pretty and fair of face but ugly and black in their hearts." On the other hand, the heroine is forced to wear rags and sleep in the ashes near the fireplace, and thus "she always look[s] dusty and dirty," leading to the nickname Ash Girl (Dundes 24). The story employs not only the heroine's temporary transformations for the festival, but also the permanent, overall physical transformations

for the heroine and her stepsisters. Ash Girl washes herself before trying on the slipper, revealing her “true” beauty as the true bride. The sisters, on the other hand, are crippled by their greed, hobbling themselves for the chance to marry the prince. Evidently, this self-maiming was not punishment enough for the story. The birds proceed to peck out their eyes “for their malice and treachery” (29), leaving the stepsisters blinded by their “ugly” natures, as well. They are now permanently disfigured and impaired, possessing constant physical reminders as retribution for their wicked ways. Unlike Perrault’s version, this “grim” ending holds no kindness or forgiveness for the stepsisters, who neither move into the palace nor gain courtly marriages from their abused sister. There is no reward for bad behavior.

Recognizing this idea of the exterior representing the interior, the transformative element of this fairy tale is not necessarily meant to be interpreted in a literal way. Bruno Bettelheim argued in his work *The Uses of Enchantment* that the tale actually works symbolically as a metaphor for maturation through struggles of sibling rivalry and the Freudian concepts of Oedipus and Electra complexes. Although the story of “Cinderella” does not necessarily need to be read as a reflection of psychological conflicts and strife experienced during maturation, the coming-of-age viewpoint may well be worth noting for the character of Cinderella herself and her evolution through the years. While many of her literary versions can be hardy or cunning, her portrayal on film – notably in American film – can often be viewed as a sweet, deserving character that ultimately needs the help and rescue of others to escape her situation. Some films have worked to counteract this cultural view of the character, which this thesis plans to examine more fully.

## CHAPTER II

The fairy tale of “Cinderella” and its heroine have had a multitude of adaptations across a number of different media. Film versions date back to the beginning of film at the turn of the twentieth century. One 1914 film stars Mary Pickford in the title role of Cinderella. Another version, Lotte Reiniger’s shadow play animated short *Aschenputtel* from 1922, follows closely the Grimm's version of the tale as opposed to Perrault's. It depicts the violence of the Grimm fairy tale and the disfigurement of the stepsisters’ feet with stark cutout figures against a lighted backdrop. Derivatives of the story exist, as well, with the 2004 movie, *A Cinderella Story*, spawning three sequels. Each of the four films centers on a heroine who dreams of pursuing a goal and escaping the reach of her stepmother and stepsiblings. Suffice it to say, the popularity of this fairy tale has not dwindled with audiences, especially in the United States.

One of the films that is most commonly associated with “Cinderella” is Walt Disney’s 1950 classic *Cinderella* and its associated Disney titles. The first film, based on the Perrault novel, has not only added to the canon of the original fairy tale, but has also spawned a Disney franchise out of the Cinderella character specifically. The 1950 adaptation centers on the story of Cinderella, a young girl whose father remarries after his first wife’s death. He then dies himself, leaving his daughter in the care of her stepmother, the icy Lady Tremaine. Working in the home as a scullery maid, Cinderella is a dreamer who is ultimately dissatisfied with her life but occupies herself by befriending the animals of the home and completing her daily mountain of chores. When

news of a ball celebrating the return of the kingdom's prince reaches the chateau, the stepsisters are in an uproar, and Cinderella asks to go. Lady Tremaine gives her permission on the condition that she completes all of her assigned chores and finds suitable clothing. Overloaded with more chores than she is normally tasked with, Cinderella works while the mice refurbish an old dress for her. Unfortunately they use items from her stepsisters, who destroy the dress before leaving for the ball. Crushed by their cruelty, Cinderella weeps in the garden, and her fairy godmother appears to comfort her and provided magical assistance. She transforms a pumpkin into a gleaming carriage, a group of collected animals into coachmen and attendants, and Cinderella's tattered clothing into a glittering blue ball gown. With the warning that the magic will fade at the last stroke of midnight, Cinderella sets off for the castle.

At the ball, the young prince shows little interest in the many eligible maidens in attendance until Cinderella arrives. She does not realize that he is the prince, and the pair dances, with more privacy orchestrated by the king and the grand duke. They spend time dancing and strolling through the gardens, but Cinderella leaves when the clock strikes at midnight, losing her glass slipper in the process. The king proclaims that the glass slipper will determine who will marry the prince and states that every maiden must try it. Lady Tremaine realizes that Cinderella was the girl at the ball and locks her in the attic, forcing the mice to steal the key from the stepmother's pocket in order to free their friend. Having failed to make the slipper fit on either stepsister, the duke is about to leave when Cinderella appears. Tremaine breaks the slipper to prevent Cinderella from trying it on, but her stepdaughter produces the matching shoe. She and the prince are then reunited and married.

*Cinderella* was a major success for Walt Disney and his company, saving the studio from bankruptcy. Its popularity and legacy has endured, with two animated sequels and a live-action remake, all released since 2001. Cinderella is arguably one of the most recognizable Disney characters as well as the most recognizable Disney princess. But with popularity and recognition comes analysis and criticism, as well. Audiences and critics have responded to her within the Disney-verse in a number of ways, not only in her 1950 debut but also in her 2015 return. The argument has often been viewed as whether her sweetness and goodness makes her passive and bland, at least by modern viewers. Reviews of the character in the recent remake have fared better, though they focus on the nostalgic quality of the film compared to its animated predecessor. The focus seems to be on the “traditional” approach to the story, though the same ideas are not so generously favored in the original film.

One critic, Jane Yolen – discussing specifically the “Disney Cinderella” books that followed the original film – refers to Cinderella as “a sorry excuse for a heroine, pitiable and useless” (Yolen 302). Yolen writes, “She cannot perform even a simple action to save herself, though she is warned by her friends, the mice. She does not hear them because she is ‘off in a world of dreams.’ Cinderella begs, she whimpers, and at last has to be rescued by – guess who – the mice!” (303). In this essay, Disney’s version of Cinderella, as well as the mass-market treatment of “America’s Cinderella,” is compared negatively to her literary ancestor, who has the “ability to think for herself and act for herself.” Yolen views the heroine of the original stories as “shrewd” and “witty” (302), driven by justice rather than forgiveness. The heroine of the Disney film thus loses her hardy edge, becoming a fragile creature who weeps at the first sign of trouble and who

ultimately needs saving. *Variety* echoed the sentiments of Yolen in a review from December 1949, noting that “Cinderella... is on the colorless, doll-faced side,” especially compared to the personifications of the animals. Thus Cinderella seems to float through her own film, pretty to look at but fundamentally frothy and vague, seemingly reflecting the insubstantial dreams that she cherishes throughout.

*The Glass Slipper* is another adaptation of “Cinderella,” released only five years after Disney’s animated version. The film centers on Ella, a girl who is constantly teased and rejected by the people of her town for her disregard of her appearance and her generally willful and defiant personality. She frequently lashes out at the cold and cruel treatment she receives, further reinforcing the negative image that the townsfolk have of her. Her stepmother and stepsisters also antagonize her, frustrated by her unruly and headstrong behavior. Despite acting out, she is extremely lonely and often goes to a quiet spot near a pond to cry. There she meets and befriends the eccentric Mrs. Toquet, a woman with her own negative reputation for “borrowing” items without permission. Wishing to meet her new friend the following day, Ella revisits the pond on the local duke’s grounds and meets the newly returned Prince Charles, who claims to be the son of the duke’s cook and who recognizes Ella as a young girl that he saw crying many years before, a memory that has made him weak in the face of weeping women.

Ella runs away when she believes she is being teased, but she returns after realizing that she has left her shoes behind. Both Ella and Charles apologize for their behavior in their first meeting, and Charles teaches her how to dance. They have a pleasant time, but Ella runs away once more when he unexpectedly kisses her. With some of Mrs. Toquet’s borrowing and maneuvering, Ella dresses up and goes to the ball

celebrating the prince's return, planning to sneak into the kitchens to meet Charles. The men of the ball are enamored, but she is distracted by her desire to see Charles, who finds her and tells her the truth about who he is. In an attempt to avoid her stepmother and stepsisters discovering her identity, Ella dashes around the ball and ultimately flees, losing her slipper. The next morning, rumors of the prince's engagement to the beautiful "Egyptian princess" from the previous night devastate Ella, who decides to leave the town once and for all. She says goodbye to Mrs. Toquet and collapses in tears near the pond, only to have Charles appear with the townsfolk, claiming the slipper will fit the princess that he wishes to marry. The pair rides together towards the duke's castle, and Mrs. Toquet is seen walking through the woods only to disappear, having actually been Ella's fairy godmother.

In *The Glass Slipper*, Leslie Caron's character Ella departs from the idea of Cinderella being a kind and well-mannered character. The film's narrator notes her behavior on several occasions as well as gives voice to the negative opinions that the townspeople hold. After an incident involving Ella yelling at a group of young people who refuse her help and tease her with the nickname "Cinderella," the narrator states, "So you see how it was. Oh, well. They can scarcely be blamed, for she was not precisely an amiable child." The fact that Ella lashes out, the result of her mistreatment by the other characters, only furthers the friction between her and the townspeople. The narrator also acknowledges the negative cycle that fuels Ella's behavior and her reputation in the town, saying, "It was the old story of the rejected becoming all the more rejected because they'd behaved badly because they'd been rejected. One of those circles. And there it was again, the heat of tears burning behind the eyes." Ella is extremely hurt by each negative

encounter that she has because she wants desperately to fit in and be accepted, but she is unable to curb her behavior. The shift from sweet to stubborn for the Cinderella character is a departure from the banal Disney treatment that came five years prior, but this does not necessarily improve her character as a young woman or reflect her literary origins more directly than Disney's version.

During an interview that was featured in the 2016 documentary *Leslie Caron: The Reluctant Star*, Caron stated that she based her own performance in *The Glass Slipper* on Marlon Brando's performance in *On the Waterfront*, a film about a guilt-ridden ex-boxer who must decide whether he will testify against a corrupt union boss who has control of the waterfront. Caron's taking inspiration from Brando's could-have-been-a-contender role is a far cry from the "typical" approach to the Cinderella character, especially considering the differences in the genres of the two films. But though it develops and complicates Ella's character a bit more than her 1950 counterpart, she is not the hardy, cunning Cinderella of the original fairy tales. Rather, she is a child, willful and defiant, but starved of and desperate for attention, whether it is positive or negative. She whines, weeps, and lashes out at each rejection that she receives. She is repeatedly referred to as a child and a girl, which is reflected in her behavior. Part of the issue may be Caron herself, whose early career was accented with roles as waifish ingénues whose youth and naïveté were central to the characters, such as her title roles in films like *Lili* and *Gigi*. It could also be the time period itself. Although the filmmakers chose to make a protagonist who was more disagreeable in 1955 than the heroine of the animated adaptation, it would perhaps be inappropriate for an adult to be as willful and offensive as Ella comes across. Thus her childishness is the affliction and the crutch.

*The Glass Slipper* is not the only film centered on Cinderella that defies the idea of the ash-covered protagonist possessing a mild and syrupy nature. In the more modern adaptation *Ever After*, the viewer is presented with the image of a fierce and fiery heroine whose passion and convictions about the world give her drive and a strong spirit. Released in 1998, *Ever After* utilizes a frame narrative, with a woman sharing the tale of her great-great-grandmother Danielle de Barbarac with the storytelling duo, the Brothers Grimm. The film stars Drew Barrymore as Danielle, a plucky young woman who has worked for ten years as a servant for her stepmother and stepsisters after her father's unexpected death. Life is strained for the women due to the continuously dwindling funds in the household. Danielle's stepmother Rodmilla is a cold and calculating woman who is desperate to secure a comfortable position for herself and her two daughters, Marguerite and Jacqueline.

While disguised as a courtier, Danielle unintentionally causes a rift in her stepmother's plans when she catches the eye of Prince Henry, a charming but arrogant young man who feels stifled by the obligations of royalty and his impending arranged marriage. Danielle's bold convictions about the working class and the ill-treatment received by poverty-stricken individuals intrigue Henry, whose sheltered lifestyle has given him little perspective on the lives and the important role of the commoners within his kingdom. The two meet on several occasions over the course of five days, growing closer and developing feelings for one another despite Danielle's continued disguise. Their budding relationship is put to the test when Rodmilla learns about her stepdaughter's deception and exposes her true identity at the ball, which leads to Henry rejecting her out of hurt and humiliation. After the ball, Rodmilla sells Danielle to a vile

landowner as punishment. Meanwhile the prince abandons his wedding to find Danielle, who has already freed herself by the time he reaches her. The two are married, and Rodmilla and her daughter Marguerite are forced to work as laundresses. The film ends with Danielle's descendent concluding the story, stating, "And while Cinderella and her prince did live happily ever after, the point, gentlemen, is that they lived."

*Ever After* takes an interesting approach to the "Cinderella" story by removing all of the strictly magical elements from the film that many people associate with the original fairy tale. There are no enchanted pumpkin carriages, dress-making mice, or wand-wielding fairy godmothers to be found in this adaptation. The film argues that this story is not so much a fairy tale as it is a historical account transformed into a kind of legend. Unlike *The Glass Slipper*, which played with the idea of a "Cinderella" tale without magic before ultimately confirming the fairy godmother's true identity, *Ever After* fully embraces the "reality" within its world of sixteenth-century France. The entire frame narrative of the film sets this up, with Danielle's descendent, the Grande Dame, inviting the Brothers Grimm to her home to tell them the true story behind their version of the fairy tale "Cinderella." Each of the fantastical components of the fairy tale is explained in fairly realistic ways. Danielle's dress for the ball, as well as her famed slippers, is actually an inheritance from her mother. The imposed 12 o'clock deadline shifts from "Cinderella" to her prince, with the king giving Henry until midnight on the night of the ball to choose the girl that he wants to marry. The most outlandish aspect of this reality is that the fairy godmother becomes a sort of fairy godfather in Renaissance artist Leonardo da Vinci, an idea which is arguably as strange as that of a magical being appearing in order to send a young woman to a ball.

Another notable element of the film is the modern, post-feminist style of the film. Danielle is a departure from the saccharine heroine of Disney's *Cinderella* and the willful protagonist of *The Glass Slipper*. She is bold, courageous, and fierce, bucking traditional ideals every step of the way. She has an incredible amount of agency that manifests in a number of ways throughout the film. When faced with the injustice of one of her fellow servants being sold to pay her stepmother's debt, Danielle risks herself to save him by dressing as a noblewoman, a punishable offense. Confronted by a band of gypsies later in the film, she has the leader of the group give his word that she can take anything that she can carry and go free. Surprising all of the men who are watching her, she approaches Henry and tosses him over her shoulder, slowly carrying him away before the gypsy leader calls her back, impressed by her fearlessness and strength. After she is sold to the menacing landowner, Danielle tells him that she belongs to no one and that he should keep his distance. He still invades her space, and she attacks fiercely, brandishing his own weapons against him and informing him that her father was a skilled swordsman who taught her well. Henry appears to rescue her, but she has already saved herself. At every turn, she defies the gender norms that her society attempts to place on her.

In a collection of essays entitled *Fairy Tales and Feminism: New Approaches*, Cathy Lynn Preston discusses the modernized feminist take on "Cinderella" that *Ever After* utilizes. In her essay "Disrupting the Boundaries of Genre and Gender: Postmodernism and the Fairy Tale," Preston writes:

...[T]he movie works to negotiate a different status for the tale: familial (and by extension cultural) legend/history that has been transmitted orally and through the gifting of objects through the matrilineal line. Although one might read and

dismiss this shift in genre as itself a convention of literature and film (which in part it is), I think the shift in ontological status of the Cinderella figure that accompanies the shift in genre of the tale, as well as the shift in gendered transmission, is significant as an engendering of genre. (Preston 201)

Here Preston is discussing the film's approach to have Danielle's great-great-granddaughter be the "keeper of the tale" and the owner of the gifted artifacts that validate the true story as she tells it. This goes against the often patrilineal line of storytelling, as seen with the film's rejection of a version of "Cinderella" from the Brothers Grimm. Preston further notes, "By disrupting genre boundaries, [the great-great-granddaughter] is able to tell a different story, one that played to the competing authority of a popularized 1990s feminism" (Preston 211). This focus and reversal of gender further reflects the feminist treatment of the Cinderella character through Danielle, who in some ways returns to that hardy, clever character of old, while in other ways defies even the original Cinderella with her 90s American gumption. Danielle is powerful, and though she has friends who help her, often it is her own strength of character which she must rely on to get the job done.

### CHAPTER III

Similar to “Cinderella” and its famed animated adaptation, there is another fairy tale that is often associated with the Walt Disney Company, as well. Danish author Hans Christian Andersen penned his story “The Little Mermaid” in the nineteenth century. One of the many fairy tales Andersen wrote in his lifetime, “The Little Mermaid” (“Den lille havfrue” in Danish) tells the story of a young mermaid who gives up her voice and her life beneath the ocean’s waves for a chance at happiness with the prince she loves and for the opportunity to gain a human soul. Unlike many of its fairy tale predecessors, Andersen’s story is an original creation by the author rather than a recorded version of an oral tale. While it has moralist tones, especially in its conclusion, the tale, like much of Andersen’s work, is much more closely tied to Christianity and contains more religious themes compared to earlier folk and fairy tales. This reveals that Andersen’s story reflects the culture of its author and of the Denmark existing at the time it was written.

Andersen’s story tells of the Little Mermaid, who lives beneath the ocean’s waves with her family and who longs to visit the surface just as her sisters have each year on their fifteenth birthday. When the Little Mermaid comes of age, she spots a ship on which a birthday is being celebrated for a prince, whom she falls in love with from the water. The Little Mermaid rescues the prince after the ship is destroyed in a storm, and she leaves him on a beach where he is found by a young woman and a group of ladies from a temple. The mermaid is heavy-hearted when the prince wakes and does not see her, unaware of the role she played in saving him. Eventually she tells her sisters about her

troubles and grows more fixated on humans and the world she cannot reach. She consults her grandmother about the lifespans of humans and learns that humans do not live the lengthy, three-hundred-year lives of mermaids, but humans do have souls which grant them spiritual immortality. Mermaids, on the other hand, dissolve into sea foam when they die. Unable to forget her dreams of being with the prince and of gaining an immortal soul, she seeks out the sea witch, who warns the Little Mermaid that trading her tail for legs will bring her great sorrow and will prevent her from returning to her family underwater. The witch exchanges the mermaid's voice and tongue for a potion, and the mermaid travels to the surface and drinks the draught, collapsing from pain that feels as if a sword has gone through her. She wakes to find the prince and a pair of human legs.

On land, she becomes the prince's most cherished companion. She feels immense pain with each step that she takes, but she endures her physical torment, following the prince on excursions and dancing for him. Despite pressures from his parents to accept an arranged marriage with a princess, the prince tells the Little Mermaid that he loves the young woman from the temple who saved him and that he will marry no one else. Unfortunately for the mermaid, the young temple woman is, in fact, the princess. The royal couple is married and set sail to celebrate their nuptials, and the Little Mermaid is devastated. Her sisters appear with an enchanted dagger, explaining that if she slays the prince and spills his blood on her feet, then she will be able to return to her family as a mermaid. However, faced with having to kill her beloved, she instead casts the dagger into the ocean and jumps into the waves, dissolving into seafoam as the sun rises. But she does not fully disappear with her sacrifice. Instead she becomes a daughter of the air, a

spirit that has the opportunity to gain an immortal soul through good deeds in order to reach heaven.

There is some debate about this somewhat happy ending and what impact it has on the story of “The Little Mermaid” as a whole. In the original ending of an earlier draft, Andersen had the heroine dissolve into seafoam permanently; this was a tragic end that many critics through the years felt suited the tragedy of the fairy tale well. The revised ending has the heroine dissolve just the same, but she is then presented with the chance to gain a human soul as a “daughter of the air,” an ending which Andersen preferred. In their “Ambiguity in Hans Christian Andersen’s ‘The Little Mermaid’,” writers Jacob Bøggild and Pernille Heegaard discussed this issue. In a translated summary of the paper from the website for the Hans Christian Andersen Centre in Denmark, their view is outlined as such:

One of the crucial aspects which any interpretation must confront is the final sequence of the tale, in which the little mermaid, against all odds, is redeemed from immediate damnation and accepted into the spiritual sphere, where the "daughters of the air" reside. In this, she is apparently promised the "immortal soul", which it has been her main motivation to obtain - along with the prince, of course. This ending has baffled critics because the narrative that precedes it points rather to a tragic conclusion than to a happy one. Therefore it has been common to disregard Andersen's choice, and thereby the conclusion of the tale, as a mistake.

Some critics of the tale’s ending, like Bøggild and Heegaard, discount the finale as Andersen’s own sentimental addition to the story, rather than an accurate and fitting conclusion to the inherent tragedy of the fairy tale. Other critics, such as *Mary Poppins*

author P. L. Travers, take issue with the added morality of the amended ending, with Travers citing the change as “blackmail” against the readers, especially the children whose good or bad behavior is said to influence the Little Mermaid’s time spent as a daughter of the air. In a letter addressed to Andersen’s friend in 1837, the author explained his choice, stating:

I have not, like de la Motte Fouquet in *Undine*, let the mermaid's gaining an immortal soul depend on a stranger, on the love of another person. It is definitely the wrong thing to do. It would make it a matter of chance and I'm not going to accept *that* in this world. I have let my mermaid take a more natural, divine path.  
(Frank 104)

With this quote, Andersen addresses his granting of a sort of independence to the Little Mermaid. Rather than losing both of the things she desired so greatly and then ceasing to exist, she instead has the opportunity to work toward a different “path” on her own, without relying on the love of a human being. Although this ending is perhaps not tragic enough for some critics of the story, it is certainly not the typical “happy ending” found in fairy tales. The conflict has not been fully resolved; alternatively there is still some tension in her sentence as an earthbound spirit. But there is also hope, which the young mermaid held so fiercely to from the moment she first rose above the ocean’s surface.

In many ways, Andersen’s life and his personal conflicts were reflected in his stories, such as in “The Little Mermaid.” Andersen often wrestled with feelings of inadequacy as well as with disappointment stemming from failed or unrequited romantic relationships. At the time that he was penning this story, Andersen was struggling with the engagement of his close friend, Edvard Collin. Some scholars believe the story of the

Little Mermaid parallels Andersen's own anguish and feelings of heartbreak as he pined for someone who was unattainable. Author Rictor Norton addressed these feelings in his collection *My Dear Boy: Gay Love Letters through the Centuries*, writing on Andersen, "In the fairy tale, written when Collin decided to get married, Andersen displays himself as the sexual outsider who lost his prince to another." Just as with the protagonist in his fairy tale, he longed for a man who was unable to return his feelings, cherished as a dear companion but rejected as a lover. Although the rumor that the story itself was written as a letter to Collin as a means for Andersen to confess his feelings has proven false, the parallels between himself and the sad, voiceless being he put to page are difficult to ignore. The change that Andersen made to the ending becomes all the more understandable in turn when considering the influence of his own experiences on the story. Rather than damning his mermaid and himself to a tragic, melancholic fate of nonexistence, Andersen chose to address the heartbreak with hope, rewarding his protagonist's suffering and sacrifice with a chance for redemption.

Something interesting to note is that it is a mermaid that was the figure chosen to play the protagonist in this fairy tale. Although mermaids were popular figures in Denmark during Andersen's time, one could argue that his decision was not based simply on the cultural relevance of this particular mythological creature. The inherent duality of the mermaid's hybrid nature seems to suggest a certain division of identity in Andersen's story. A number of critics have recently pointed to the importance of the Little Mermaid's physical body in the story and the lack of attention it has received in regards to scholarly research. Lori Yamato's essay "Surgical Humanization in H. C. Andersen's 'The Little Mermaid'" utilized a disability model in its examination of the story, focusing

on the mermaid's self-mutilation and the perceived values of bodies and disability in children's literature. Through the text, she argues that "...the body is a malleable and ambiguous canvas for the depiction of power and socially constructed moral standards" in Andersen's work (Yamato 296). Yamato writes:

Andersen's story sets up symbolic equivalences between the physical and the spiritual, only to complicate and break them down. Most notably, the end to which the story looks for judgment of the mermaid's sacrifices and trials—death—not only is the spiritual crisis of the story but also is characterized for human and mermaid alike by the moment of *disembodiment*... Correspondences between accepted physical norms (having a perfect human body) and spiritual norms (having a human soul) collapse, and the mermaid's quest—through bodily mutilation—for the physical form that allows for a soul is thrown into question. (296)

Yamato presents her case that the story, just as its mermaid protagonist, is a divided, "unstable compound" (295) that balances on "the notion of a divided or 'doubled world' (*dobbelte Verden*)," an idea which interested Andersen. The argument that this essay gives, centering on the dichotomy of the Little Mermaid and of the story itself, also offers further thought on the role of the mermaid and Andersen's own influence on her. As the fairy tale displays her, she is somehow "incomplete" throughout the story, whether it be lacking legs underwater or lacking a voice on land. This further reinforces the tragedy of the story, that her quest was both sorrowful and futile in life. True, she has the opportunity to earn a soul, but it is only after death and her disembodiment that she is able to become spiritually complete.

Leland G. Spencer takes a different approach to the physical body in “The Little Mermaid,” shifting from a view of disability and mutilation to one of performative and transgender identities. Spencer focuses on “themes of mind-body dissonance, familial tension, and self-censorship” (112) within the story, making an argument that certain elements of the fairy tale align themselves with the narratives of transgender individuals. He notes the problematic nature of the story from feminist readings as well as the more nuanced aspects of a transgender perspective, pointing to the tragic end of the tale as reflective of the difficulties faced by transgender individuals in reality. It also echoes Andersen’s feelings of heartbreak, rejection, and “ugliness” in the face of his bisexuality and failed romantic pairings. But there is again the melancholic sense of hope that the story relies on, with Spencer stating, “The choice to give up her life rather than returning to a body that feels wrong for her illustrates that the mermaid’s journey is not just for love but for a soul and an identity that fits... The final decision of her life is an affirmation of the identity performance she most desires, to live—and die—as a human” (118–9).

## CHAPTER IV

The first adaptation of the fairy tale is Disney's 1989 animated musical film, *The Little Mermaid*. Much like with Disney's *Cinderella*, the popularity of *The Little Mermaid* spawned a number of sequels, garnered a television series, and subsequently created a franchise, with its own live-action remake on the way. Unlike the animated adaptation of the Perrault tale, however, the adaptation of Andersen's work deviates so much from its source material that it has been considered to "betray Andersen's tale" by some. It repurposes Andersen's tragic story of love and loss into a colorful musical fantasy about a mermaid who wins the heart of the man she loves and secures a happy ending, rather than becoming sea foam in the face of heartbreak.

The film version of *The Little Mermaid* focuses on a young mermaid named Ariel whose extreme fascination with the world above the ocean's surface leads her to fall in love with a human prince and to save him when his ship is wrecked at sea. After her father King Triton destroys her collection of salvaged human treasures, Ariel seeks a way to become human through Ursula, a bitter sea witch who secretly plots to use the little mermaid to get revenge on Ariel's father. Ariel is given three days to make Prince Eric kiss her in order to become permanently human, without the use of her voice. Despite the fact that Eric is charmed by Ariel, he cannot forget his rescuer, unaware that it was truly Ariel who saved him before she traded her voice for legs. Ursula transforms herself into a beautiful woman and uses Ariel's stolen voice to bewitch Eric, planning to marry him so that Ariel will fail and be under her control. Sea creatures intervene to stop the wedding,

but Eric realizes too late that Ariel is the girl who saved him as the contract's deadline passes. Triton trades his trident and his rule over the ocean in exchange for Ariel's freedom, and Ursula becomes queen of the ocean. Eric attacks her, ultimately slaying her in a frenzied battle. Once the waters calm and Ursula's prisoners are released, Triton realizes that Ariel and Eric truly love one another. He decides to finally let her go, transforming her into a human and allowing her to be with Eric in the human world.

The success of *The Little Mermaid* launched one of Disney's most successful eras – known as the Disney Renaissance – which featured some of the company's most successful and beloved contemporary films, such as *Beauty and the Beast*, *Aladdin*, *The Lion King*, and *Mulan*, each of which has a live-action remake announced or in production for the coming years. But in the bright, bubbling, colorful world of *The Little Mermaid*, there seems to be something lost in translation from the original fairy tale, just as was seen in *Cinderella*. The scholar Jack Zipes channeled his interest in fairy tales into his 2011 book *The Enchanted Screen: The Unknown History of Fairy-Tale Films*. Commenting on the film as a whole, he states that “This film marked the resurgence of the Disney studio in the field of animated fairy-tale films while unfortunately simplifying the complex meaning of Andersen's fairy tale” (252). Gone is the self-sacrifice and suicide. Gone is the painful mutilation and constant suffering. Disney's film holds few – if any – moral and spiritual quandaries for its characters. Instead it gives the audience light fantasy fare, peppered with catchy musical numbers and a wedding for the spirited princess and her prince.

The treatment of the Little Mermaid also is transformed in some ways in Disney's adaptation. Zipes had this to say about Ariel: “... [Ariel is] a feisty ‘American’ mermaid,

who pouts and pushes until she gets her way: she is the charming, adorable, spoiled and talented princess, Daddy's pet, who demonstrates that she deserves to move up into the real world by dint of her perseverance and silence" (256). She risks her voice rather than sacrificing it permanently, and her deal with Ursula is just as much encouraged by her infatuation with the human Eric as it is spurred on by her father's extreme overprotectiveness and the violent destruction of her property, in some ways "sticking it to the man" by deliberately defying his wishes and doing what she wants. This defiance departs from the original fairy tale, in which she simply pursues her own desires rather than acting against those of another. As seen in "The Little Mermaid," Ariel has an obsession and curiosity surrounding the human world, and it actually begins before she first encounters Eric. Here there is some similarity between the two mermaids. Ariel's song "Part of Your World," which addresses her perceptions of the limitations of a life spent strictly below the water's surface and the dissatisfaction she feels when her dreams of the human world are so great, closely parallels the feelings of Andersen's Little Mermaid, whose dreams of the prince and of a human soul are compounded by her curiosity about the human world and all of the places that she cannot reach in her mermaid form.

Roberta Trites argues against Disney's adaptation of "The Little Mermaid," calling the film "even more sexist than the original story." Her argument hinges in part on characters and their development and motivations in both works, claiming that "Disney weaken[s] the values that determine the dramatic motivations of the Andersen characters" (Trites). Ariel is not in pursuit of a soul; she is in pursuit of a marriage with a handsome prince. Her conflict does not stem from whether she can gain an immortal soul by

winning the love of a prince, but rather whether good will triumph over evil when Ursula attempts to gain power. This has not diminished the popularity of the film, however.

According to an article authored by Chyng Feng Sun and Erica Scharrer, a media literacy program involving the analysis and deconstruction of Andersen's original fairy tale and Disney's adaptation found that many fans of the Disney film were resistant to changing their opinions in light of criticism of the material. The authors conclude their article by stating, "Despite the instructor's facilitation of a critical discussion, [the students] did not want to change their attitudes about Disney's *The Little Mermaid*, which has given them intense pleasure and fond memories since they were children..." (Sun and Scharrer 51). The students gave a multitude of reasons for this resistance, ranging from their belief that the criticism was "overdone" for a children's movie to the argument that they enjoyed the film too much to think of it negatively. No matter the reason, it seems that there is something compelling about Disney's adaptation, even when compared to its source material.

The second adaptation of Andersen's "The Little Mermaid" for analysis is the 2008 film *Ponyo* (*Gake no Ue no Ponyo*, or "Ponyo on the Cliff" in Japanese) from the renowned Japanese animation company, Studio Ghibli. One of director Hayao Miyazaki's many animated features, this film is also a loose adaptation of Hans Christian Andersen's "The Little Mermaid," similar to Disney's loosely-based picture, *The Little Mermaid*. The Japanese director stated that his inspiration was a bit more abstract than simply taking from Andersen's story, and he avoided watching Disney's adaptation to keep any unintentional inspiration from impacting his work (Castro).

*Ponyo* tells the story of a young goldfish, the daughter of the once-human sorcerer Fujimoto and the powerful queen of the ocean Gran Mamare. Despite her youth, she is much larger and more powerful than her younger sisters, and her rebellious nature makes it difficult for her father to keep her under his control. After sneaking away from home, the goldfish winds up trapped in a glass jar. She is ultimately rescued by a young boy named Sosuke, who lives on a high cliff in a small coastal town. Freed from the jar, she licks a small cut on Sosuke's finger, and he names her Ponyo.

Sosuke shows her to several people, most of whom note her beauty; but an older woman named Toki states that Ponyo having a face is a bad omen, and she instructs the boy to return the fish to the water to avoid disaster. Sosuke promises Ponyo that he will protect her, and she speaks, declaring that she loves him. Her father, who has followed her to the area, captures her, and Sosuke is devastated when he cannot find her. Ponyo stubbornly refuses to listen to her father, declaring that she wants to be human. Determined to return to Sosuke, she begins to grow arms and legs, and her father realizes that she has tasted human blood. While escaping, Ponyo accesses her father's well of magic and unleashes havoc. Her newfound power is strong and unruly, triggering a massive and sudden storm, with Ponyo running along the waves to reach Sosuke. Although Ponyo is reunited with the boy she loves and spends the night at his home, her use of magic has thrown off the entire balance of nature.

Ponyo's mother appears and reverses some of the damage, although the moon continues to move towards the earth. Fujimoto apologizes that he could not control their daughter, but she is not upset, suggesting that Ponyo could become human and relinquish her magical abilities to restore balance, as long as Sosuke truly loves her. Fujimoto

worries that the five-year-old boy is too young to feel true love for his daughter, with the result that Ponyo would become seafoam. Gran Mamare assuages his fears, and the two agree to a trial of love for the young pair. The following day, Sosuke and Ponyo go in search of Sosuke's mother, with Ponyo's excessive use of magic rapidly exhausting her. Encountering Fujimoto and Toki, Sosuke runs to Toki after Ponyo returns to her fish form, and they are transported to the town's submerged senior center, where his mother and many of the seniors wait. Sosuke is asked if he loves Ponyo. He declares that he does, and Ponyo's mother instructs him to kiss the bubble containing the goldfish once everyone has returned to land. The balance of nature is restored, and Ponyo, ever the impatient one, kisses Sosuke herself, becoming human once more.

Miyazaki's *Ponyo* includes family and environmental themes, with his love of and concern for nature impacting the overall film. This tension, highlighted through the havoc caused by the eponymous Ponyo's sea-bending powers and the human waste depicted beneath the ocean's surface, adds a more nuanced layer to the film, and brings in the idea that there is a decent cultural divide between the American version and the Japanese adaptation. Adam-Troy Castro cites this environmental aspect of the film, adding commentary from Miyazaki himself. "Miyazaki wants his young audience to appreciate the environment. 'The most important thing, I think, is that even within such an environment, children grow up, they learn to love, and they enjoy living in that environment,' he said" (Castro). The trial of love not only unites Ponyo and Sosuke, but it also restores the chaos that was unleashed when Ponyo decided that she wanted to be human.

This environmental focus could be a factor in Miyazaki's decision to have his protagonist be a goldfish. Although her appearance is more humanized than that of a typical goldfish and she possesses some magical ability, the film is clear about the fact that she is a fish. The duality of her figure comes into play when she first attempts to become human, sprouting arms and legs. In this in-between, dual state, she looks neither fish nor human, her newfound hybridity making her appearance strange, froglike, and almost grotesque. It is only when she comes into contact with her father's store of magic elixir that she fully appears like a human child. But this does not change her true form, as evidenced by the test presented to Sosuke in the underwater senior center. He is asked if he can love Ponyo, knowing that she is a fish. She is accepted for what she is and for what she isn't, landing somewhere between goldfish and human girl.

The use of children in the role of the mermaid and her prince is a compelling change for Miyazaki to make to the original fairy tale of "The Little Mermaid." It adds simplicity to Ponyo's desires – she loves Sosuke and ham, which being human will grant her access to – and to the overall narrative. There is no complication of developing sexuality, varying prospects of marriage, or a scheming sea witch thrown into the film. Instead the story simply focuses on the relationship between two young children and the decisions they must each make in order to be together, whether to become human and whether to love regardless of nature. This does complicate other aspects of the film, with many people simply accepting the mysterious and bizarre occurrences triggered by Ponyo, but in a joyful and youthful world of magic, there is the sense that anything is possible.

Although the previous two films have been adaptations that are designed with children in mind, there are other versions of “The Little Mermaid” which feed more fully into the darkness and tragedy of the story. One such film is another reworking of Andersen’s fairy tale, an ambitious horror musical that focuses on a pair of mermaid sisters. Known as *Córki dancingu* (or “The Daughters of Dance Party”) in Poland, *The Lure* is the debut feature film from director Agnieszka Smoczyńska. Released in 2015, the story centers on two young mermaids, Silver and Golden, who experience life on land in a glittering nightclub in 1980s Poland after being pulled ashore by a band consisting of a singer, a drummer, and a bass player. But beneath the glitz and glam of the discotheque atmosphere, there is a grimy, seedy undercurrent of darkness in *The Lure*. The film highlights the parallel stories of the sisters, with Golden’s increasing loneliness and her feelings of being stifled in the human world contrasting Silver’s romantic attachment to the bass player and her growing desire to be with him at the cost of her tail and voice. In many ways, the film is a coming-of-age story for the two sirens, and Smoczyńska notes that, on one level, the film is working as a metaphor for the girls’ exploration of their maturity, sexuality, and loss of innocence in the human world. The director was influenced by her own experiences of growing up in a Polish nightclub, with the adult-charged atmosphere of the club and the political unrest of the 1980s feeding into her “first” experiences – first kiss, first cigarette, first romantic encounter – as a girl becoming a woman. These tensions and awakenings are reflected through her two mermaid protagonists who balance the line between girlhood and womanhood in a negative but enticing environment.

The use of two characters to convey the story creates an interesting dynamic for the film and its relationship with Andersen's original fairy tale. For one sister, Silver, her story plays out similarly to the young heroine in "The Little Mermaid." Silver embraces the human world, at one point so overwhelmed by the sensory overload that she collapses. Silver ends up falling in love with a bass player named Mietek, who works at the nightclub. In one scene, she climbs into a bathtub, asking Mietek, "You want me to be a girl?" He responds, "Don't be angry... but to me you'll always be a fish, an animal." She painfully rips off one of her scales and grants it to him as a token of her love. Later in the film, Silver ultimately chooses to have her tail removed in order to be with her human lover, losing her voice in the process. After she becomes "human," he still cannot accept her as anything other than a mermaid. Mietek meets another woman and marries her, abandoning Silver as she struggles to adjust to a pair of surgically-attached legs. Her sister Golden and a merman named Triton tell her that she must kill him to avoid dying, but when faced with the opportunity, she instead enjoys her final moments in his arms, fading away to sea foam at sunrise.

Golden contrasts Silver heavily, distrustful of all but her sister and dissatisfied with life on shore. She does not fall in love and contemplate becoming human; rather she feels stifled by the human world and more fully embraces her vicious and bloodthirsty nature as *The Lure* progresses, killing several people in the process. She feels no need to curb her "cravings that aren't quite wholesome," as she sings in "The Fly," a song that addresses her growing loneliness as Silver pulls away from her in favor of Mietek and the human world. Her lyrics focus on the pervasive and contagious sense of sadness that she has encountered on land, noting "we're all gloomy as hell." She does not fit into this

world because she is unwilling to adapt to it, and her sister's neglect as well as her rejection by Triton, another singing merman disfigured by the human world, further feeds into her resentment. Enraged and overcome with grief after her sister's death, she kills Mietek and flees back to the ocean. As Angela Lovell writes in her film essay "*The Lure: One is Silver and the Other Gold*," "In this moment of revenge, Golden looks wild, truly out of control for the first time – and absolutely heartbroken."

As noted by director Smoczyńska, the story of *The Lure* is working on more than one level. The fact that the girls are mermaids is a metaphor for their burgeoning sexuality and for their coming-of-age in an environment that is both dazzling and hostile. The mermaid as a dual hybrid figure reflects this duality of girlhood and womanhood, as the human forms of the sisters are incomplete. In the upbeat musical number "I Came to the City," the pair sing about the exciting, new city that they have found themselves in, with the chorus featuring the lyrics, "The city will tell us what it is we lack / It knows for a fact what it is we lack." They believe that they are missing something and that the city can give them some clarity, signifying the idea that the human, adult world can provide them with answers to help them feel complete on land. However, the shift into this new world is not without cost, and they end up burdened with loneliness and heartbreak. The sisters are forced to face a loss of innocence as well as the destruction of important aspects of themselves like their relationship, their ability to perform, and ultimately Silver's life.

While introducing the girls to the manager of the nightclub, the drummer has them strip and shows off their naked bodies, stating and showing that they are as "smooth as Barbie dolls." This visually represents the metaphor that, on land, the mermaids are

not fully sexually mature, thus “incomplete” women. Rubina Ramji, Film Editor of the *Journal of Religion and Film*, wrote about an interview with Agnieszka Smoczyńska, citing the director’s inspiration for the mermaids as the historical belief that “mermaids were the sisters of dragons”:

They were half ugly, and she wanted to reproduce that in her film, making Golden and Silver beautiful faced beings with bodies covered in mucous and slime – in fact, this represented the bodily fluids that young girls encounter as their bodies come of age: they menstruate, they ovulate, their bodies start smelling and feeling different. (2)

Silver’s decision to trade her tail for legs takes her voice, but it also gives her a vagina and the ability to have sex with Mietek. However, she bleeds from her wounds, which only further disrupts their relationship. He is unable to accept the changes of her body “maturing,” repulsed by both her old fish body and her new human one.

The characters in the film frequently refer to the sisters as kids, at times taking advantage of their youth and naïveté about the human world by having them sing and even strip without pay. Despite his reservations about being with her, Mietek does not prevent Silver from having her tail surgically removed, and he seems to have no hesitation when starting a relationship with another woman. Despite their fierce and at times deadly mermaid nature, the sisters are met with a separate kind of viciousness in the human world, where they are destroyed along with the people who come into contact with them. Although the mythology of mermaids centers on their luring men to their deaths, there seems to be a similar lure working in reverse. The girls’ performance group is “The Lure,” but the human world – the city, the people, the “adult” experiences – all

seem to entice them onto land, where they are each inevitably destroyed by the “siren song” which called them ashore.

## CHAPTER V

The third and final fairy tale is a story that is a bit more obscure than “Cinderella” or “The Little Mermaid” for American audiences. “East of the Sun and West of the Moon” is a folktale from Norway that was collected by Peter Christen Asbjørnsen and Jørgen Moe, a pair of Norwegian folklorists from the nineteenth-century who wanted to preserve their regional history by gathering folktales and legends passed down through the oral tradition. The two then went through the process of standardizing these stories from varied regional versions. Their first publication, *Norske Folkeeventyr*, was influenced by the collections of the Brothers Grimm, who acknowledged the Norwegian work after its release.

“East of the Sun and West of the Moon” was one such story that Asbjørnsen and Moe collected and published. It tells the story of a young maiden who is persuaded to leave her home with a large white bear when he promises her poor family riches, and she is carried on the bear’s back to live in an enchanted castle with him. At night he appears as a man, although she cannot see him in the dark, and the two live happily together, despite the girl’s increasing loneliness while away from her family. During a visit to her family’s new home, the bear warns her that talking privately with her mother will bring the couple unhappiness. Despite the girl’s efforts to keep her distance, she eventually finds herself alone with her mother, and the daughter is advised to confirm that the man is not actually a troll. The girl complies and lights a candle while the man sleeps, but wax

drips onto him, waking him. The man explains that he is a prince who was cursed by his stepmother, a troll who wishes for him to marry a troll princess. He is forced to leave the girl, but he tells her where the troll's castle lies, in a place east of the sun and west of the moon.

Heartbroken but determined to see the prince once more, the girl sets out on a quest in search of him and the castle in which the trolls reside. When the prince and the enchanted castle have both vanished the next day, the maiden finds herself in a wood, and her mission begins. Eventually she comes across an old woman with a golden apple, who gives the girl the apple and sends her on a horse to another elderly woman in order to see if the neighbor knows any more information on where the prince and the castle may be found. The girl encounters two more women in this way, with one giving her a gold carding-comb and the other giving her a gold spinning wheel. The third woman sends the heroine to the East Wind for guidance, and the girl meets first the East Wind, then the West, the South, and finally the North Wind. The North Wind tells her that he once blew an aspen leaf to the castle east of the sun and west of the moon, and though it is a long and tiring distance, he offers to carry her there on his back.

After a long flight soaring towards the palace east of the sun and west of the moon, the North Wind and the maiden manage the arduous task and arrive at the home of the trolls. Outside the castle, the girl plays first with the golden apple and trades it to the troll princess who is set to marry the prince. In exchange for the apple, the girl requests a night with the prince, but she is unable to wake him when she goes to his room. The following day, she trades the gold carding-comb for a second night, but once again she is unable to wake him. A number of imprisoned people hear her crying and inform the

prince of her two visits on the previous nights. Finally, the girl trades the spinning wheel for a third night, and the prince does not drink the sleeping drink that the troll princess gives him. Reunited, the lovers conspire to outwit the trolls by having them attempt to clean the shirt that the maiden dripped wax onto when she first woke the prince, which the trolls are unable to clean. The prince declares that he will marry the person who can remove the wax, and the girl completes the task with ease. The scheme is a success, and the enraged trolls burst, allowing the imprisoned people to escape alongside the heroine and her prince. They gather as much treasure as they can and then leave the castle east of the sun and west of the moon.

“East of the Sun and West of the Moon” has had a handful of English printings since its initial publication, most notably in Andrew Lang's fairy tale collection *The Blue Fairy Book* as well as a version from 1914 featuring illustrations from artist Kay Nielsen. This tale falls under the Aarne-Thompson category of “the search for the lost husband” (type 425A). It shares similarities to the tales of “Cupid and Psyche” and of “Beauty and the Beast.” The story of “East of the Sun and West of the Moon” also progresses in a similar manner to one of Hans Christian Andersen’s other fairy tales, “The Snow Queen.” This fairy tale follows the story of a young girl on her quest to find a childhood friend who has been taken to the palace of the Snow Queen, with her journey involving successive encounters with various characters and obstacles which aid her in her quest. “East of the Sun and West of the Moon,” as well as other tales categorized under the “search for the lost husband” type, share this quest motif. However, while “East of the Sun and West of the Moon” is similar to these three more well-known tales of “Cupid and Psyche,” “Beauty and the Beast,” and “The Snow Queen” and has had a number of

English publications, this Norwegian story has not reached widespread recognition among average readers. With a strong female lead and the framing of the tale through a magical journey, it begs the question of why it was never brought into the mainstream. Yet it is for this reason that this story is of interest to this project.

Similar to Charles Perrault's "Cendrillon" and Hans Christian Andersen's "The Little Mermaid," "East of the Sun and West of the Moon" works as a sort of snapshot for the culture to which it belonged when it was put down on the page. The purpose of Asbjørnsen and Moe's folktale collection was to preserve regional history, and "East of the Sun and West of the Moon" shows this. It is a reflection of the region, with a heroine who is determined and optimistic, even in the face of harsh obstacles and landscapes. Her unyielding persistence leads to happiness and success with a handsome, wealthy prince whom she loves. She is both compassionate and cunning, with a deceptive hardiness that ultimately allows her to rescue her lover and to correct her mistakes. She is a heroine who is flawed and fierce, and her story reflects this and encapsulates the nature of the region and its people that "East of the Sun and West of the Moon" hails from.

Maria Tatar discusses the "bifurcation" of popularity seen with fairy tales about animal grooms and the heroines of these tales in her published collection *Beauty and the Beast: Classic Tales About Animal Brides and Grooms from Around the World*. In the introduction to her book, Tatar writes:

Like tales about animal brides, stories about animal grooms display an interesting bifurcation, with one set of stories going viral and mainstream, the other going dormant and, if not underground, then under the radar. The "classic" version of "Beauty and the Beast" gives us a compassionate heroine who redeems Beast with

her tears. Its less prominent counterpart (the best-known example of which is “East of the Sun and West of the Moon”) features an adventurous heroine on a mission to lift the curse that has turned a man into a beast. These are the stories that show us the heroine as determined agent – wearing out iron shoes or racing to the back of the north wind to liberate men kept prisoner by ill-tempered trolls or diabolical vixens. Both sets of tales bleach out details about the animal groom and give us a heroine enviable in the determined gusto with which she undertakes tasks. (xix)

This excerpt emphasizes the grit and perseverance of the heroine in “East of the Sun and West of the Moon.” Although she makes a mistake, she is not intimidated or disheartened. She does not allow her future and her story to be cemented in an unhappy ending due to her own misstep. Instead she sets out on an expansive and arduous journey, encountering wise women, roaring winds, and fierce trolls and faces it all with strength and determination. She goes to the ends of the earth, searching for an impossible-to-reach place east of the sun and west of the moon, and reaches it, securing a happy ending for her story.

## CHAPTER VI

Due to its lack of mainstream success, there are very few adaptations of “East of the Sun and West of the Moon.” There are a number of novels that were inspired by the tale, and the title has become a phrase associated with fantasy worlds that are extremely difficult or nearly impossible to reach. However, only one feature film has ever been produced that was adapted from the tale, *The Polar Bear King* (*Kvitebjørn Kong Valemon*). The film takes inspiration from both this fairy tale and another Norwegian story that is similar, “White-Bear-King-Valemon,” which is also categorized under the Aarne-Thompson type 425A.

*The Polar Bear King* was released in the early 1990s, a time when princesses were granted more agency in their films as individual characters, as seen with *Ever After* and *The Little Mermaid*. It was directed by Ola Solum, one of Norway’s most celebrated directors. The bewitched King Valemon’s animatronic polar bear form was managed by the Jim Henson Creature Shop. All of these elements coming together would suggest some recognition on the part of audiences for *The Polar Bear King* and the fairy tale on which it is based. Yet this film, like its penned predecessor, is not widely known.

The film is split between two lands, the Winterland of the North – “a world of eternal ice and snow” – and the Summerland of the South – “a region of eternal warmth and fertility.” It follows the story of the Winterland King’s youngest daughter, who dreams of the summer kingdom and of a person who truly understands her. In the south, the king has died, and his son Prince Valemon is set to ascend to the throne. When

Valemon rejects a wicked sorceress, she curses him into the shape of a large polar bear, with the condition that he must marry her if his human form is seen within seven years.

Travelling to the Winterland in search of a woman who can love him in his bewitched form, King Valemon encounters the young princess of the north, who realizes that he is the man she has dreamed of and agrees to leave with him when he returns for her. Her family reacts negatively to the news, especially her father, and the men of the village attempt to attack the bear and prevent the princess from leaving, believing that he is not an enchanted man, but simply a hungry bear looking for a meal. Her older sisters also try to deceive him by disguising themselves as their youngest sister, but she ultimately confronts the situation and climbs on his back, saying goodbye to her family.

As with the tale of “East of the Sun and West of the Moon,” the bewitched prince appears to her as a man at night, although his face is obscured in the darkness. Valemon’s mother, who has some magic ability of her own like the sorceress, watches over the couple under a spell of invisibility. Throughout the years, Valemon and his bride have three children, each of which is spirited away by their grandmother when she senses the witch’s looming presence. The princess is inconsolable with the unexplained disappearance of her daughters; and when a pair of merchants bring her a small gift of snow from the Winterland, her husband tells her to visit her family, asking only that she not accept any gifts from her sisters.

Despite her promise to her husband, the princess accepts the gift of a candle from her sisters; and just as her predecessors in “East of the Sun and West of the Moon” and “White-Bear-King-Valemon” did before her, she cannot resist the temptation. She lights the candle once she has returned to the castle in order to see Valemon’s human form. He

wakes when hot wax falls on his forehead, and the young king is forced to go to the witch to be married. At this point, the film's narrator states that the guilt-ridden princess's "mind [loses] all sense of reality." She abandons the castle and goes into a forest in search of her husband, where she is eventually aided by her mother-in-law and her three daughters, none of whom she recognizes. They give her a pair of scissors that create fabric, a tablecloth that conjures food, and a pair of boots that can magically stick to the side of the cliff she must climb, provided that they do not get wet. Clothed and fed, the princess begins the next part of her treacherous journey, scaling the sheer side of a large mountain that houses the witch's castle at the summit. She loses her shoes near the top, but she is able to climb a rope dropped by one of the witch's prisoners from the Summerland.

Aided by the imprisoned man, the princess gets word to Valemon that she is in the castle. Spying on the witch, she overhears that "too much evil destroys evil" in reference to a potion that the witch concocts for the wedding banquet, and the princess creates her own enchanted wine, intentionally using a massive dose of evil magic. Using the tools that her daughters gave her, the princess manipulates the witch into letting her see the king, although he is drugged by a sleeping potion on the first occasion, and he must pretend he has consumed a small vile of evil in their second meeting in order to deceive the witch. This allows the princess to continue the ruse, maneuvering herself into the banquet hall to conjure the feast and slip the wine overdosed with evil to the witch and her wedding guests, evil creatures from across the land, including the witch's "master." They all vanish in successive pyrotechnic explosions, destroyed by the evil potion, and the princess and her husband are reunited at last as the witch's prisoners are freed from

her power. With the witch destroyed, the princess is able to visit her family in the Winterland with her husband, her daughters, and her mother-in-law. Her family is overjoyed to see her, and her father and Valemon meet on good terms, despite an initial tension. The king meets his granddaughters for the first time, and he presents a pair of connecting figures of a polar bear and a maiden, beginning a story about a bewitched prince and the princess who fell in love with him. The narrator begins a story about a grandfather who had three granddaughters, but he stops quickly, stating that was a different story. He reassures the audience that it has the same ending, though, as all stories do: they lived happily ever after.

With this adaptation, the filmmakers chose to change some of the motivations of their heroine from those found in “East of the Sun and West of the Moon.” Unlike her literary counterpart who chose to go with the bear in order to improve her family’s wellbeing, the young princess of the film has no reason to improve her family’s status because they are the ruling family of the Winterland. Instead she dreams of the warm land to the south and of a person who will accept her and her desires, which no one in the north seems to appreciate or understand. When she first encounters Valemon, she is immediately aware that he is the man that she has dreamed of, and she accepts his offer to go with him of her own accord. Contrasting from the fairy tale, as well, is the reaction of her family who attempt to dissuade her and to attack the white bear. They do not believe in magic and superstition, so they do not understand how she can dream of him or how she can trust his words of being enchanted. The decision to go with the bear, the maiden’s “sacrifice,” of the story thus transforms into a different kind of determination and agency

for the film's protagonist, who consistently pursues her heart's desire, whether that means facing down her own family or a witchy foe.

This pursuing nature of hers can be seen through another creative change that the film makes. In the original story, the maiden wakes in the wilderness after seeing her lover's face, the enchanted castle disappearing with him. Although she chooses to search for her prince, her options seem more limited when considering the situation. The heroine in the film, however, goes in search of Valemon despite the castle remaining to exist and her family likely happy to welcome her home in the north. The movie states that she loses her mind, but this does not prevent her from journeying forth, nor does it prevent her from defeating the witch through a cunning plot.

There is some deviation from "East of the Sun and West of the Moon" in *The Polar Bear King* in terms of the journey and the climax. One notable variation is the fact that the witch's castle does not lie in a place east of the sun and west of the moon. The princess's quest is admittedly arduous, but the goal still seems to lie in the realm of possibility, whereas the fairy tale's focus was on the impossibility of the task and the heroine's determination to continue on her path regardless. The film's protagonist does not meet character after character, following each successive lead in hopes of finding some way to reach her prince in time. In the film, the maiden simply wanders without direction, only encountering her mother-in-law and daughters right before she reaches the mountain of the witch. The princess's plan to defeat the witch is also more cunning and, in some ways, more devious in *The Polar Bear King*. Rather than simply sitting beneath a window to make a trade and see her lover, the heroine disguises herself as a man, scales walls, surreptitiously spies on the witch, feigns the role of the jilted bride, concocts

destructive potions, maneuvers herself into the wedding banquet, and then intentionally destroys a host of evil creatures with her wicked wine. She orchestrates and manipulates the entire situation without the witch even partially uncovering her plan. The hardy heroine possesses the greatest elements of her literary predecessor, displaying courage, cunning, and a fearlessly tenacious spirit throughout each trial and triumph.

An American adaptation of “East of the Sun and West of the Moon” was in production in the 1980s under the direction of Don Bluth, a former Disney animator known for his animated films, such as *The Secret of NIMH*, *An American Tail*, and *The Land Before Time*. The project was eventually shelved and scrapped due to financial issues within Bluth’s company as well as strikes throughout the animation industry, but had the feature film been made, it begs the question of what might have happened to the original fairy tale in terms of its cultural presence outside of Norway. The 1980s saw the Disney Renaissance spring to life, with *The Little Mermaid* at the helm of the proverbial ship. While there is no finished product of Bluth’s film at this moment in time, there still exists some information on the project to form an image of what might have been.

In his 1991 book *The Animated Films of Don Bluth*, author John Cawley – who worked on a number of Bluth’s projects from 1983 to 1986 – cited a Bluth interview penned in Canada regarding plans for his animated film adaptation of “East of the Sun and West of the Moon.” Located in the section entitled “The Video Lair,” excerpts of the interview dialogue were included within the book’s text by Cawley:

“The next picture we're doing is a modern-day fairy tale, but it's based on a very old fairy tale. It's Norwegian, called EAST OF THE SUN, WEST OF THE MOON. And the old fairy-tale is very convoluted -- it has a lot to do with a prince

and princess, of course. The prince is enchanted and he's a polar bear. And the polar bear talks to the princess and says, 'You must never look upon my face, because if you look upon my face, I'll be whisked away somewhere, and you'll never see me again.'

"So she sneaks in through his bedroom in the middle of the night and lights a candle to look at him, because he's in mortal form at night. Consequently, the curse is complete and he is thrown into some land that lies East of the Sun, West of the Moon. And she has to rescue him.

"Now the story that we're telling takes place in the future, about the year 2500, and it has much the same elements in it, except it's about a young boy and a young girl. She gets the boy in trouble in much the same way. He is discovered - he's a fugitive from another world. He is discovered because of her, and is taken away to be put to death, and she sets out to rescue him.

"It has some fantastic visuals in it, too. We go down to the lost city of Atlantis in one sequence; how she journeys to this land East of the Sun, West of the Moon is on the back of the North Wind, so it has, I think, some beautiful things in it."

(Cawley)

It is interesting to note that Bluth was planning to move in a futuristic fantasy direction for this animated project rather than lean towards the historical, "a time once upon a time" period that many fairy tale adaptations tend to use. Though some of the fairy tale film adaptations addressed in this thesis have been situated in more modern times, none made the attempt to move beyond the present-day to explore how fairy tales may be conveyed when looking to the "future." This approach to "East of the Sun and West of

the Moon” expands the story exponentially, broadening its scope by involving not only this world – or even a fantasy fueled version of it – but also other worlds beyond this one. The heroine’s great journey can span galaxies, or perhaps even the entire universe. The decision to portray her as a young girl could also help the fairy tale to expand and evolve, shifting from a quest narrative centered on the search for a lost husband to a more strictly coming-of-age tale. Like *Ponyo*, the youthfulness in this proposed adaptation of “East of the Sun and West of the Moon” removes the popular fairy tale element of romantic love, shifting more to ideas of development and the transition from childhood to adulthood as well as the consequences of decisions and how to take responsibility for choices made. She is still courageous and determined, but she is on a quest motivated as much by the rescue effort as by certain kind of self-discovery and maturation. It becomes a journey more for herself, of taking responsibility for her mistakes and making the decision to correct them by going to rescue the boy whose capture she enabled.

As of today, this young heroine and her story are indefinitely shelved. In his work, Cawley discusses some of the issues that led to the production being put on hold. Although Bluth’s debut feature film *The Secret of NIMH* was a critical success, the distributor’s poor, overall handling of marketing and releasing the film prevented the film from performing as well as hoped at the box office. Cawley notes that “[t]he failure of NIMH was a blow to Don and his followers” after their great gamble to split from Disney in order to form their own animation studio. Despite hopes for *East of the Sun, West of the Moon*, the pressure of their first feature’s commercial failure hung over the project. Compounded with this was a disastrous strike in the animation industry, which saw the union combatting the production studios. Tensions and frustrations fed into strike, with

Bluth's financial backers eventually pulling out of his fairy tale adaptation. He and those who remained at his company moved into video game animation to keep the studio afloat, but production on his version of "East of the Sun and West of the Moon" has not resumed to this day.

The animation industry strike halted production of Bluth's film in 1982. Seven years later, Walt Disney Pictures released *The Little Mermaid*, reviving animated films for Disney and igniting their prolific renaissance. Bluth found success in a brief partnership with Steven Spielberg and had proved that his departure from Disney had not been a mistake with films like *An American Tail* and *The Land Before Time*. One could argue that this was an opportunity to return to *East of the Sun, West of the Moon*, which had already been in the production phase for years. A shifting interest to strong female leads of the 1990s also seemed to be a great foundation on which to place his young heroine, which would see her facing off against the protagonists of films like *The Little Mermaid* and *Beauty and the Beast*. But the film has simply never gotten off the ground.

This is something to consider. All the elements seem to be in place: the brave young heroine, the fantasy setting, the magical quest narrative, and a strong fairy tale backing. It is possible that the production faced similar dilemmas to the original tale. The interest was perhaps not high enough or the story not compelling enough. *The Polar Bear King*, too, saw an interesting story with strong production elements fall to the wayside. "East of the Sun and West of the Moon" is not widely recognized in the United States, so perhaps its obscurity has influenced its adaptations in some way. Perhaps it is simply that the perfect formula for this story has yet to be found to truly bring this heroine and this fairy tale to life.

## CONCLUSION

The goals of this thesis evolved as it was put to page. What began as a simple investigation of fairy tales and their varying approaches became an exploration of character and story, and the influences that each creator and culture added to the adaptations. There is always critique and opposition to be found in response to the depictions of these women and their stories, but there was something compelling in each new version and how each fairy tale and its subsequent adaptations were distinct snapshots that had clear and distinct influences from their varying origins and eras.

The overall driving force of this project was to delve deeper into the fairy tales that are often considered superficial or strictly for children from the average person's point of view. In looking at "Cinderella," "The Little Mermaid," and "East of the Sun and West of the Moon," I have attempted to examine how different cultures approach the same tale and how those adaptations reflect differently on their countries, on their makers, and against one another. In looking further into the histories and backgrounds that shape these stories, I sought to understand how they are crucial for the understanding of a particular tale or one of its variations.

One idea that this research has yielded for me is that fairy tales truly are incredibly malleable. They can range from the light and uplifting to the dark and melancholic, breathing life into peoples and cultures through the art of storytelling itself. Adaptations of these timeworn tales reveal this, with characters who also adapt to reflect the interests of the times. Cinderella can thus be flighty or fierce, the Little Mermaid

despairing or determined. Even a young heroine can fill the role of dreaming damsel, or she can journey into lands unknown, facing trolls and wicked enchantresses and rescuing the prince on her own terms. Although each variation is its own entity, tracing its evolution from the past to the present – and even into the future – reveals the transformative nature of these fairy tales and the influence they have had and will continue to have on audiences around the world.

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