

Creating a Princess

Research question: How do Disney adaptations of classic fairy tales change the plot, characters, and messages to influence society's interpretation of a princess?

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Abstract:

The purpose of this extended essay is to examine how classic fairy tales, including Charles Perrault's "Cinderella; or The Little Glass Slipper" and "The Sleeping Beauty in the Wood", as well as Hans Christian Andersen's "The Little Mermaid", have been changed in Disney films in order to create an image of a princess. The essay aims to answer the question: "How do Disney adaptations of classic fairy tales influence society's interpretation of the plot, characters, and messages?" Not only does the paper encompass three classic works of literature, but it also includes an examination of film scripts and how changes in the story have impacted society. In my writing, I argue that the removal of certain details included in the original fairy tales has improved the portrayal of Cinderella, but has diminished the feminine power of Sleeping Beauty and the Little Mermaid. I explain how the films often placed more emphasis on romantic love than the classic fairy tales, influencing young viewers to believe that finding true love is the key to happiness and survival. I demonstrate how certain aspects of both the fairy tales and the film are sexist and negative influences for viewers. In my essay, I attempt to reveal how the Disney company has claimed the title of a "princess", overshadowing the beautiful fairy tales that often included more positive messages for young females.

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Introduction:

In 1937, the very first Disney princess movie was released: *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs*. With this film, Walt Disney unknowingly began what would become a massive franchise for the Disney company. More and more Disney princess movies were created, enchanting little girls (and boys) all around the world. Disney princess dresses, books, and castles were all created to allow children to experience the beauty they had watched on the screen.

However, what many don't know is that Disney princess movies are based on classic fairy tales. These stories were written many years before Disney could claim the title of a "princess". The original fairy tales were written by classic authors, such as Hans Christian Andersen, Brothers Grimm, and Charles Perrault, all of whom popularized many of the first princess stories. With stories including ogres, mermaids, and talking animals, the fairy tale genre became incredibly popular for young children around the world. The Disney company took creative inspiration from original fairy tales, often ending with joy and "happily-ever-after" and removing certain aspects of violence. Disney movies popularized princesses and soon many people began to associate the word "princess" with any of the Disney movies.

With the wave of popularity of princess movies also came critics who noticed that women played particular roles in each movie. When *Cinderella* and *Sleeping Beauty* were released following *Snow White's* debut, one viewer noted that the two films continued "to conform to society convention regarding girls and their place in society."¹ Disney princesses were often portrayed as beautiful women who lived boring lives until they met a prince; many of the movies also ended with the princess needing to be rescued by her male counterpart. Princess has become a term that is associated with "selfishness, ignorance, naivety, shallowness, and inequality."² These qualities, though, are not what children would often associate with their favorite princess; they are more likely to use words such as beautiful, kind,

¹ Whelan, Bridget. "Power To The Princess: Disney And The Creation Of The 20Th Century Princess Narrative." *Interdisciplinary Humanities* 29.1 (2012): 21-34. Academic Search Premier. Web. 12 Sept. 2016.

² "There's nothing wrong with being a princess." *Guelph Mercury (ON)* 24 Apr. 2014: *Points of View Reference Center*. Web. 12 Sept. 2016.

and caring as descriptors. A concern for many is the subtle negative influence that princess movies could be having on unsuspecting children, many of whom aspire to be princesses when they grow up.

Disney movies brought classic fairy tales to life, allowing children to visually experience the magic described in the classic stories. Unfortunately, many details of the original fairy tales were altered, manipulating the image of a princess. Many original stories are overshadowed by Disney princesses, losing their impact and charm. The classic princesses in fairy tales are lesser known in today's society, though their stories often included valuable lessons for readers. However, in some cases, Disney versions of the movie improved certain aspects of sexism portrayed in the original stories by conforming to different female roles over time. Disney adaptations of original fairytales alter the plot, characters, and messages in such a way that influences society's perception of a princess in both negative and positive ways.

Cinderella:

One of Disney's most famous princess movies, *Cinderella*, was released in 1950. It was based on the original fairytale written in 1697 by Charles Perrault, a French author, titled "Cinderella; or The Little Glass Slipper". There are multiple versions of Cinderella, but Perrault's most closely inspired the movie adaptation. Perrault's "Cinderella" eliminated violence, placed more emphasis on drama and magic, and used the fairytale for a certain moral purpose.³ The Disney adaptation is similar to Perrault's story, but a few changes minimized the emphasis on beauty that was present in Perrault's version.

In Perrault's original fairy tale, the plot starts with an early introduction to Cinderella. She is described as being of "unparalleled goodness and sweetness."⁴ This initial introduction to Cinderella as a character already outlines what Perrault deems some of her most important qualities. Perrault also

³ Ohmer, Susan. "'That Rags. To Riches Stuff': Disney's Cinderella And The Cultural Space Of Animation." *Film History* 5.2 (1993): 231-249. *History Reference Center*. Web. 12 Sept. 2016.

⁴ Perrault, Charles. "Cinderella; Or, The Little Glass Slipper." *Perrault*. N.p., 2003. Web.

describes Cinderella as “a hundred times more beautiful than her sisters”⁵, further stressing the importance of a princess to be beautiful. This is especially noted in the characterization of Cinderella’s sisters, who were cruel; Perrault seems to correlate beauty with kindness. In the Disney version, Cinderella is characterized as “gentle and kind”⁶, with less emphasis on her beauty. Though she is beautiful, the animated character is dressed and presented in such a way that hides her beauty. Lessening the emphasis on beauty allows Cinderella to be more of a role model in her personality, as viewers aspire to be as kind and caring as she is.

Perrault then introduces a vital character: Cinderella’s fairy godmother. The fairy godmother uses her magic to get Cinderella to the ball, creating a beautiful dress and a pair of glass slippers, which were “the prettiest in the whole world.”⁷ Throughout the story, Perrault consistently stresses the beauty of Cinderella as well as the things around her. In the Disney adaptation, Cinderella is told she can attend the ball if she finishes her chores and can find a suitable dress, so Cinderella alters her mother’s old dress. However, her stepmother and stepsisters destroy it to prevent her from attending, eventually leading to the arrival of the fairy godmother. This differentiation in plot antagonizes Cinderella’s step-family to an extreme. Disney’s version of the tale characterizes her family as evil individuals, which contributed to a common stereotype of the “evil stepmother”. Subtle plot changes in the Disney adaptation shift focus to portray Cinderella’s family in a much more negative light than originally described by Perrault.

When Cinderella finally arrives at the ball, festivities immediately stop as the spectators wondered at the “singular beauties of the unknown newcomer.”⁸ The king characterizes Cinderella as a “beautiful and lovely a creature.”⁹ Once again, Cinderella’s beauty was praised in the story, this time by

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ “Cinderella 1950 Script.” *Scribd*. N.p., n.d. Web.

⁷ Perrault, Charles. “Cinderella; Or, The Little Glass Slipper.”

⁸ Ibid. pg 2

⁹ Ibid.

a male specifically. Perrault constantly presents Cinderella as a thing of beauty. In this instance, she is even referred to as a “creature”. This sends a dehumanizing message, presenting Cinderella as something that is valued solely for appearance.

Perrault’s story continues with Cinderella losing her glass slipper as she leaves the ball. The prince dedicates his time to find Cinderella, whom “he was very much in love with.”¹⁰ Perrault describes minimal interaction between the two characters, yet presents them as being in love. A similar occurrence is in Disney’s adaptation. Viewers only see one interaction between the prince and Cinderella, which is through song and dance. This common point in each story supports an unlikely belief in love at first sight. After Cinderella arrives at the ball, she immediately dances with the prince and they begin to sing a song, in which Cinderella sings, “So this is love, so this is what makes life divine.”¹¹ The lyrics place a lot of importance on being in love, possibly influencing young viewers to believe that finding romantic love is the sole purpose of living.

Both stories end with the marriage of the prince and Cinderella. Perrault writes that “[the prince] thought she was more charming than before, and, a few days after, married her.”¹² In Disney’s version, the final scene of the movie states, “And they lived happily ever after.”¹³ This is a common occurrence in many story endings- when the princesses meet their prince, they are finally happy. This ending might influence viewers to believe they need to find their true love in order to be happy.

Regarding messages presented by both stories, Perrault writes that Cinderella was mistreated by her stepfamily, yet she “bore it all patiently.”¹⁴ This presents the message that women should be passive and do what they are told. Disney sends a similar message through the use of music. As one critic notes, “To mitigate the harshness of Cinderella’s existence, the animators decided to adopt the

¹⁰ Perrault, Charles. “Cinderella; Or, The Little Glass Slipper.”

¹¹ “Cinderella 1950 Script.” *Scribd*.

¹² Perrault, Charles. “Cinderella; Or, The Little Glass Slipper.”

¹³ “Cinderella 1950 Script.” *Scribd*.

¹⁴ Perrault, Charles. “Cinderella; Or, The Little Glass Slipper.”

tone of light opera. Music is used to soften scenes of her working.”¹⁵ Through the use of song, Disney’s adaptation almost makes Cinderella’s cleaning look enjoyable, though she is being treated like a servant. Both stories send unfortunate messages that women are expected to clean and cook; Disney just doesn’t make it as obvious.

On the other hand, Disney also uses the aspect of music to send a more positive message. With the opening song, “A Dream is a Wish Your Heart Makes”, viewers are encouraged to dream and think optimistically. The lyrics include, “Have faith in your dreams and someday your rainbow will come smiling through.”¹⁶ In this song, Disney sends a positive message that believing in yourself and your dreams can help you achieve anything. This musical aspect of positivity is one that Perrault’s story unfortunately lacks.

Perrault, however, explicitly includes a moral at the end of Cinderella. Within his outlined moral, Perrault writes, “Beauty in a woman is a rare treasure... graciousness, however, is priceless and of even greater value.”¹⁷ This is the lesson that Perrault hopes readers learn from his story. In Perrault’s fairytale, Cinderella always treats her stepsisters with kindness and respect, despite how they treat her. In the conclusion of the story, she forgives her stepsisters with all her heart and allows them to reside in the castle with her and the prince. This aspect of graciousness is lacking in Disney’s Cinderella. Cinderella is still shown as respectful, but she does not display as great and outright of an act of forgiveness.

Both Perrault’s and Disney’s versions of Cinderella present society with certain aspects of a princess. Perrault places heavier stress on a princess’s beauty as a defining quality. Disney’s ending to the story sends a message that true love is the key to happiness. Both stories unfortunately “present a heroine who waits for a better life instead of pursuing her desires.”¹⁸ Cinderella is a “passive and

¹⁵ Ohmer, Susan. “That Rags. To Riches Stuff: Disney’s Cinderella And The Cultural Space Of Animation.”

¹⁶ “Cinderella 1950 Script.” *Scribd*.

¹⁷ Perrault, Charles. “Cinderella; Or, The Little Glass Slipper.”

¹⁸ Ohmer, Susan. “That Rags. To Riches Stuff: Disney’s Cinderella And The Cultural Space Of Animation.”

pretty”¹⁹ princess, who allows herself to be treated poorly by her family until she is ultimately saved by the prince. Though both stories present the image of an easily controlled princess, it could be argued that Disney does a better job of disguising negative characteristics.

Sleeping Beauty:

Sleeping Beauty was the third princess movie released by Disney, just 9 years after Cinderella, in 1959. Disney based the adaptation on another fairytale written by Charles Perrault, titled “The Sleeping Beauty in the Wood”, written in 1697. Though Disney’s adaptation cut out the more gory ending to the plot, it also put more emphasis on the power of true love, sending misleading messages to viewers.

At the start of Perrault’s fairy tale, a princess is born and is given gifts by fairies deemed to be most important in life, such as “being the most beautiful person in the world... having the wit of an angel... having a wonderful grace... dancing perfectly well... singing like a nightingale, and... playing all types of music.”²⁰ With this, Perrault outlines the ideal qualities in his princess. The qualities don’t necessarily outline a personality one should adopt, but instead focus on surface characteristics, such as beauty and talent, which does not send a good message to impressionable readers. According to Perrault, these are the qualities that a princess should possess.

Similar characteristics are also apparent in Disney’s adaptation. The plot differs with the curse placed on the new princess, however. In Perrault’s version, the princess is cursed to prick her finger and die, but another fairy changes the curse to make the princess sleep for 100 years, “at the expiration of which a king’s son shall come and awake her.”²¹ Perrault simply describes the act of waking if the prince is present. In Disney’s adaptation, the princess is also cursed to prick her finger, but can wake from her

¹⁹ Whelan, Bridget. "Power To The Princess: Disney And The Creation Of The 20Th Century Princess Narrative."

²⁰ Perrault, Charles. "The Sleeping Beauty in the Wood." *Sleeping Beauty*. N.p., n.d. Web.

²¹ Perrault, Charles. "The Sleeping Beauty in the Wood."

sleep "...when true love's kiss the spell shall break."²² Disney's adaptation places the power to save a life on a kiss. This subtle plot change develops the unrealistic power of true love that could mislead viewers. It sends a message that a simple kiss of love has the power to ultimately save lives.

In both stories, the princess eventually pricks her finger on a spindle and falls into a deep sleep, requiring the prince to come and save her. She is presented by both stories to be helpless, needing a man to rescue her. Both stories also contain the idea of the princess being reserved for a prince. In Perrault's fairytale, the princess must "be waked by a king's son, for whom she was reserved."²³ In Disney's adaptation, the princess is also reserved for marriage. This aspect is clear in both stories, sending a negative message to viewers that women can be treated like objects and set aside for a man. Including this detail makes it seem acceptable to eliminate a woman's autonomy when choosing a loved one.

In Perrault's fairytale, the prince must travel through a complicated forest in order to reach the castle where the princess is. When he entered the room, the princess immediately woke up, saying, "Is it you, my prince? You have waited a long while."²⁴ Perrault's princess must be saved by her prince and her reaction makes it seem acceptable for a princess to wait patiently to be saved, rather than try to save herself.

The act of saving is much more valiant in the Disney adaptation. Disney's version includes the stereotypical image of the prince slaying a dragon to save the princess. This act of bravery further sends the message that a princess must always be saved by her prince, making princesses seem weak and helpless.

One of the most notable plot differences is Disney's removal of Perrault's original ending, which included a conflict with an ogress queen. This alternate ending did not have much of an effect on the

²² "Sleeping Beauty." *Walt Disney's Sleeping Beauty*. Buena Vista Film Distribution, n.d. Web.

²³ Perrault, Charles. "The Sleeping Beauty in the Wood."

²⁴ Ibid. pg 6

story as a whole. The prince and princess still lived happily, as they also did in Disney's adaptation. Similar to Cinderella, Disney's Sleeping Beauty also ends with the words, "And they lived happily ever after." This continuing message throughout multiple films reinforces the message that romantic love is needed to live happily. Disney's adaptations of fairytales constantly place too much importance on love and its necessity to live a happy life.

Though a completely different story, the two versions of Sleeping Beauty continue to support the stereotypical princess narrative. The princess must be saved by her prince in both versions of the story. Both stories also include details of reserving the princess for a man, making a woman seem like an object that can be set aside. Both versions of the story have their flaws and contribute to the stereotype in certain ways, but Disney's version takes it to more of an extreme. With the added details of slaying a dragon and the power of true love's kiss, Disney presents a princess as someone who is helpless and requires rescuing, as well as demonstrating the power of a kiss to be lifesaving. These are similar themes that seem to carry through many Disney adaptations.

The Little Mermaid:

The Little Mermaid was the next princess movie that Disney released in 1989. The movie was based on the fairy tale by Hans Christian Andersen, also titled "The Little Mermaid", written in 1836. The Disney adaptation made multiple changes to the story in order to make it follow the conventions of previous Disney princess movies. Unfortunately, in this process, Disney also reinforced the stereotypical image of a princess and ignored important messages presented by Andersen's original tale.

Andersen's fairy tale focuses on a young mermaid who longs to visit the surface of the sea to see humans in person. The little mermaid is described as "the prettiest of them all; her skin was as clear and

delicate as a rose-leaf, and her eyes as blue as the deepest sea."²⁵ Andersen presents the princess like many other fairy tales: the most beautiful. Once again, importance is placed on a princess's beauty.

The little mermaid is eventually allowed to visit the surface of the sea, spurred by her curiosity. This characteristic is similar to that of Ariel, Disney's mermaid. Ariel also longs to visit the surface after finding many sunken artifacts in the ocean. She sings, "Wish I could be part of that world."²⁶ Both mermaids in the stories share a similar characteristic of curiosity, which sends a positive message of investigating and learning anything you want. It encourages viewers to follow their curiosity in pursuit of knowledge.

Both stories include the little mermaid saving the young prince after a visit to the sea surface during a storm. Andersen writes, "She held his head above the water, and let the waves drift them where they would."²⁷ The little mermaid pulls the prince to safety on the shore and leaves him though she wishes to stay. This is a different event in both stories that goes against aspects of a conventional princess story; at one point, the princess must, in fact, save the prince. This is a more positive message about a princess's power and ability to be more independent. In this instance, someone else is relying on the princess to save them.

Andersen's story continues when the little mermaid longs to see the prince again. Her grandmother explains a difference between merperson souls and human souls that intrigues the little mermaid; she learns that humans have immortal souls, but mermaids do not, and when they die, they become the foam on the surface of the water.²⁸ The little mermaid tells her grandmother, "I would give gladly all the hundreds of years that I have to live, to be a human being only for one day, and to have the

²⁵ Andersen, Hans Christian. "The Little Mermaid." N.p., 1836. Web.

²⁶ Johanningmeier, Corey. "The Little Mermaid Script." *The Little Mermaid Script Dialogue Transcript*. N.p., n.d. Web.

²⁷ Andersen, Hans Christian. "The Little Mermaid."

²⁸ Ibid. pg 5

hope of knowing the happiness of that glorious world above the stars.”²⁹ Andersen’s little mermaid is spurred by the possibility of a mortal soul, which inspires her to visit the sea witch.

Disney’s little mermaid also visits the sea witch, hoping to get human legs to visit the human world. In both stories, the little mermaid must give up her voice in order to gain the human legs she desires. The difference is in motivation; Andersen’s mermaid is motivated by the wish to somehow gain an immortal soul while Disney’s mermaid, Ariel, is motivated to see the handsome prince. Ariel gives up a piece of herself in order to be with a man, sending a very negative message to viewers. Additionally, the sea witch tells Ariel, “You’ll have your looks! Your pretty face! And don’t underestimate the importance of body language!”³⁰ This sends the message that beauty and looks are the only necessity to find love, which could affect young viewers’ outlook on love and life.

In Disney’s adaptation, Ariel has a chance to remain permanently human and regain her voice if she gets kissed by her true love. This appears to be a continual theme throughout Disney princess movies- the lifesaving power of true love. On the other hand, in Andersen’s fairytale, the little mermaid can only remain human if she gains the prince’s complete love and marries him, which could also help her to gain an immortal soul.

In Andersen’s tale, the little mermaid goes to the shore hoping to fall in love and gain a part of the prince’s soul. However, she is devastated to learn he has found his true love in someone else, meaning her deal with the sea witch has ended and she will turn into seafoam. The little mermaid’s sisters make another deal with the sea witch to save the little mermaid, and tell her, “Kill the prince and come back.”³¹ Andersen’s little mermaid considers the idea, but then realizes that he is truly happy with his bride. She decides to sacrifice herself for his happiness and allows herself to turn into seafoam, since

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ Johanningmeier, Corey. "The Little Mermaid Script."

³¹ Andersen, Hans Christian. "The Little Mermaid."

she never gained her immortal soul.³² Though this is an unfortunate ending to the fairytale, it sends a more positive message that sometimes you must sacrifice certain things to save the ones you love. The little mermaids' actions demonstrated how deeply she truly loved the prince.

Disney's adaptation, however, ends on a happier note. Ariel finds her prince on shore, spends time with him, and eventually the two fall in love. The sea witch tries to intervene after realizing that Ariel would get what she wanted and attacks. The prince must defeat the sea witch in order to save Ariel and the other mermaids. This change in Disney's version adds to the stereotype that princesses must be saved by their princes, while Andersen presents the opposite, with the mermaid's sacrifice for the prince.

Ariel's father turns her into a human after noting, "She really does love him, doesn't she?"³³ He allows Ariel to live in the human world with the prince, whom she considers her true love. Unfortunately, Ariel must also sacrifice being a mermaid with her family in order to be with the prince. Ariel does make sacrifices, but it is for her own benefit. Though this Disney movie doesn't end with the exact words, "And they lived happily ever after", it does end with the prince and mermaid kissing, visually showing a happy ending through an image of love.

Though Andersen's tale contains tragedy for the princess, the story ultimately ends on a more positive note that also sends a positive message to readers. The little mermaid is visited by the daughters of the air³⁴, who inform her that she can still gain an immortal soul. They tell her, "...the daughters of the air, although they do not possess an immortal soul, can, by their good deeds, procure one for themselves."³⁵ The little mermaid learns that, through good deeds in the human world, she can ultimately gain an immortal soul and "take part in the happiness of mankind."³⁶ This sends a positive

³² Ibid.

³³ Johanningmeier, Corey. "The Little Mermaid Script."

³⁴ Andersen, Hans Christian. "The Little Mermaid."

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ Ibid.

message regarding good deeds and how they can impact one's life. The little mermaid is offered another opportunity to have an immortal soul through helping others. This teaches readers about the benefits of helping the community, as well as finding other ways to get what one seeks.

The original fairy tale by Andersen presents the little mermaid as a more independent and curious individual. She is characterized by her actions in seeking an immortal soul, compared to Disney's Ariel, who seeks true love. Andersen's tale includes more positive messages for young women on the importance of strength and kindness. Many of these aspects of the original fairy tale are lost in Disney's adaptation, where the mermaid seeks true love and sacrifices her identity for a man. Ultimately, the motivations of the mermaid in Disney's version are more focused on love, influencing young viewers in a negative light on the sacrifices necessary to find true love.

Conclusion:

Classic fairy tale authors have written unique works that initially introduced many to the world of princesses. These beautiful works of literature, however, are often overshadowed by the massive Disney franchise and their development of princess films. Our society is often familiar with the Disney princesses and unaware of the original stories behind them. Disney has altered classic fairy tales by subtle changes in plot, characters, and messages in order to introduce viewers to their idea of a princess. With these changes, Disney films unfortunately present princesses as objects of beauty that rely on men to solve issues; though there are some exceptions, many of Disney's films ultimately place unrealistic value on the importance of true love. The original stories occasionally included important details exhibiting a princess's strength and independence that are lacking in Disney films. Especially disappointing is that with the massive time difference between the films and the original fairy tales, not much progress has been made in the portrayal of women. Society often forms opinions of princesses based on Disney's films and hardly considers the stronger women typically described in classic fairy

tales. The changes made in Disney films influence young children to believe princesses should be beautiful, weak, and constantly in pursuit of true love. Changes in media and films should be made to remind today's youth of the original princesses written about in fairy tales, who were stronger and more independent, and to make young women aware of their power and ability to do whatever they set their minds to.

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