

Re-engendering “Cinderella” on Screen: Andy Tennant’s *Ever After:* *A Cinderella Story*

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The enchanted realm of the wonder tale has been gazed upon quite often by novelists, short-story authors and even poets, who have imaginatively translated into their creations their own personal wanderings in wonderland. In the particular case of “Cinderella”, the wonder tale I want to focus on, Anne Sexton, Roald Dahl and Emma Donoghue can be counted among the contemporary authors who have reread Charles Perrault’s and the Grimms’ versions by rewriting them in poems and short stories. In so doing, “they have also stretched the tales, giving them a modern, feminist appearance by reversing or highlighting many of the perverse misogynistic views with which the source texts were imbued” (Bobby 31). The wonder tale realm has also been inhabited by literary scholars and folklorists who continue to find fresh meanings in new readings of old tales and have, more often than not, brought critical attention to neglected or forgotten tales by first making them available for the public in general, thus opening more doors into Wonderland. A case in point is Jack Zipes’s collection *The Great Fairy Tale Tradition: From Straparola and Basile to the Brothers Grimm* (2001), which gathers together the four different versions of “Cinderella” which I will presently bring into discussion. In fact, alongside the well-known Perrault’s “Cinderella; or, the Glass Slipper” (1697) and the Grimms’ “Cinderella” (1857), Zipes has also collected two former, and relatively unknown, versions: Giambattista Basile’s “The Cat Cinderella” (which was posthumously published in 1634) and Marie-Cathérine d’Aulnoy’s “Finette Cendron” (1697). Finally, different generations of readers worldwide keep on breathing “the wilder air of the marvellous” (Warner 3) which breaks free from the renewed wonder of every page filled with familiar motifs that feel nonetheless new. Thus is the old legacy of wonder(ful) tales far from exhausted.

The particular looking glass of literary retelling has therefore brought to attention an interwoven path of mingled directions which converge in a moment and go their separate ways immediately thereafter through different literary paths which depart from an old version of a tale, itself adapted and rewritten from several others. Thus, stories which are quite different and cannot be imitated (because they recall each other but are always another story) are further complicated when transposed into yet another medium, that of cinema. Bearing in mind that, unlike written tales, “film powerfully realizes the transcendence over reality with which magical narrative is intrinsically concerned” (Tiffin 181), I will read four very different wonder tale versions of “Cinderella”, on a par with Tennant’s *Ever After: A Cinderella Story* (1998). Following up the argument that “the magical paradigm of fairy tale finds echoes in the magic of the film experience even without special effects, in film’s ability to create the apparent three-dimensionality of the real on a flat, unmoving screen, through the trickery of light and image” (Tiffin 181), I will focus on the gendered differences between written wonder tale versions and film, as well as on their distinctive narrative techniques. I argue that this feminist revision of “Cinderella” (co-authored by Tennant and a female screenwriter, Susannah Grant) re-engenders identities by being closer to the only version written by a woman author (Marie-Cathérine d’Aulnoy), both in narrative style and in substance, than to any of the male versions — including the alleged Grimm tale it follows.

Tennant’s *Ever After* opens with a frame narrative which firmly writes Cinderella’s story out of the wonder tale realm and into the province of the historical narrative. Tennant does that by changing the supposed timeless quality of the wonder tale into a definite time and place, that of Renaissance France (complete with historical characters such as Leonardo da Vinci, who actually lived in France for the last three years of his life at the service of Francis I). Interestingly enough, Tennant thus chooses the narrative technique of embedding Cinderella’s tale in a frame story, a device the male authors — save for Basile — did not endorse but which was favoured by the *conteuses*. In fact, the aristocratic women storytellers who gave birth to the literary fairy tale in the *salons* in late 17th century France excelled in the art of drawing narrative pleasure in the often self-reflexive, playful interaction between embedded tale and frame story. For the purpose

of this essay, I would like to draw attention to the *salonnière* widely acclaimed as the Queen of Fairies, Marie-Cathérine d'Aulnoy herself, who also coined the term "fairy tales" to describe her narratives.

If "the frames always locate the telling of the stories in a particular time and place, implicitly suggesting connections between the twice-told tales and the particular situation in which they are told", the fact that the time and place of the frame story is Restoration France is not accidental: this was a time marked by the political upheaval which followed the end of the First Empire under Napoleon in 1814 and the restoration of the House of Bourbon under Louis XVIII until 1830. In fact, it both enhances and is enhanced by the Cinderella story through the tension established between the realistic frame story and the embedded wonder tale which is, after all, a true story, in that they both depict strong-willed women. Napoleon would indeed praise the courage of the frame story's narrator, the future Madame la Dauphine de France Marie-Thérèse Charlotte, a daughter of Louis XVI and Marie-Antoinette: she remained in Bordeaux despite Napoleon's orders for her to be arrested when his army arrived, which led him to remark she was the "only man in her family" ("Marie Thérèse of France"). If "the embedded tales and the frame that joins them are always symbiotic, drawing life and sustenance even from their friction" (Harries 107), it is only befitting that such a brave woman should tell the story of the Cinderella of the title (although she is never addressed or referred to as such in the film).

In the frame story of Tenant's film, which takes place after the Grimms had published their *Kinder und Hausmärchen* in 1812 but before 1830, Marie-Thérèse Charlotte de France (Jeanne Moreau) summons the Brothers Grimm to set the record straight on a particular wonder tale: despite claiming she finds their "collection of folk tales quite brilliant actually", she confesses she had been quite disturbed when she read their version of "The Little Cinder Girl". Assuming that Madame Royale de France favours Perrault's version over their own, the Grimms shed some light on the differences: Jacob (Andy Henderson) argues that "[t]here are those who swear Perrault's telling, with its fairy godmother and magic pumpkins, would be closer to the truth," whereas Wilhelm (Joerg Stadler) adds that "[s]ome claim the shoe was made of fur. Others insist it was glass. Well, I guess we'll never know."

In fact, as Jacob makes clear, the Grimms' "Cinderella" does not sport a Fairy Godmother or magic pumpkins; it has instead a little white bird which grants Cinderella whatever she requests. The bird, which nestled in a tree planted by the girl on her mother's grave from the twig of a hazel bush which her father had given her on her request and had been watered by Cinderella's tears three times every day, is a manifestation of her late mother. As such, it will help the girl by lavishly providing her with the rich apparel she wears to three different balls where she dances with the Prince. The Grimms have thus retained Basile's magic tree whereas Perrault favours Basile's fairy as Cinderella's magical helper instead. Wilhelm's mention in *Ever After* of the glass or fur slipper also illuminates a significant variant in the Cinderella story:

It was Perrault, in 1697, who first introduced glass into the Cinderella story. Up to this point the slippers were not glass, though they could be gold. So the collector of the 345 variants of the Cinderella story has established. 'Verre', glass, was a mistranslation of 'vair', fur.' But ... this was no accident. 'There is no doubt [Perrault] himself intended that the shoe should be glass (Armstrong 205).

Thus, Basile's Cenerentola sports "a slipper that was the most beautiful and valuable shoe that had ever been seen" (Basile 448), although the material which it is made of is not specified, whereas d'Aulnoy's Finette Cendron wears a slipper "which was made of red velvet and embroidered with pearls" (D'Aulnoy 465) and the Grimms' Cinderella's slipper "was made of pure gold" (Grimm 471).

Tennant's Cinderella's slipper notably combines qualities of its written counterpart in all the versions except for the Grimms': it is an embroidered silver satin slipper profusely decorated with pearls, whose ornate heel has the sheer translucence of tinted glass. It makes its first appearance in the frame story: Jacob remarks on a painting portraying a young woman whose expression remarkably resembles Mona Lisa's (because, as the viewer will later learn, it was also painted by Leonardo da Vinci). Madame Royale then informs him that "[h]er name was Danielle de Barbarac" (*Ever After*) while she opens a jewelled casket containing the slipper. To the utter astonishment of the Grimms, who thus realise that a true story was turned into a wonder tale, Marie-Thérèse de France then

pronounces it to be Danielle de Barbarac's glass slipper, and starts narrating her story with the wonder tale opening formula "Once upon a time".

Her next words — "there lived a girl who loved her father very much" — mark the transition from frame story to embedded narrative but will also retell a core element in three wonder tale versions, Cinderella's relationship with her father, quite differently in Tennant's film. A quick overview of the written versions will suffice to establish the difference between the markedly unnatural father/ daughter relationship portrayed in all the male versions as well as the passive role assumed by the father in d'Aulnoy's tale and the way Tennant chooses to visually translate it. Thus, Basile's version starts with a prince "who was a widower, and he had a daughter who was so dear to him that he saw the world through only her eyes" (Basile 445) only to "let his daughter fall out of his heart" (Basile 446) shortly after he gets married to his daughter's teacher. This woman has, unbeknownst to him, tricked Zezolla, the Cinderella of this tale, into convincing her father to take her as his wife. The ingratitude of both father and stepmother is such they trample upon Zezolla and favour the new stepmother's six daughters instead. In Perrault's version, Cinderella's father is a gentleman "who would have only scolded her since he was totally under the control of his new wife" (Perrault 450) should she complain of her stepmother. D'Aulnoy chooses to have a passive, down-on-his-luck king who is unable to stop his royal spouse from deliberately trying to harm their three daughters. She thus interestingly twists Basile's and Perrault's neglectful father into a weak father who, although he loves his daughters, is unable to protect them from their own mother, another significant deflection from the usual trope of the wicked stepmother. As for the Grimms', Cinderella's father is positively heinous in their version: not only does he favour his stepdaughters but he also viciously tries to hinder his own daughter from trying on the slipper by disclaiming Cinderella as his daughter and loading her with inexistent physical defects. Thus, to the Prince's question "Don't you have any other daughters?" (Grimm 472) this despicable father replies "No... There's only Cinderella, my dead wife's daughter, who's deformed, but she can't possibly be the bride" (Grimm 472).

However, the father who neglects his child from the moment he gets married to favour his stepdaughters in the male-authored written versions is metamorphosed, in Tennant's film, into a loving father before and after

he is newly married. Unlike the written versions, however, he dies shortly after his marriage, in a gendered twist of the traditional fate reserved for mothers in wonder tales: in fact, it is mothers, not fathers, who are either dead when their child is very young, like Snow White's or Cinderella's mother in the four versions I'm discussing, or else they are rendered totally helpless to protect their child from harm, like Sleeping Beauty's mother. As for the daughter (played by Drew Barrymore in the film), in Tennant's film she has also undergone a marked change from the soul of gentleness, domestic virtue and enduring patience which Perrault and the Grimms encumbered her with to retain the distinctively active resourcefulness that characterises both Basile's *Zezolla* and d'Aulnoy's *Finette*. The first encounter between Danielle and her father, Auguste (Jeroen Krabbé), is quite expressive of this double metamorphosis: on arriving home with his new wife, Baroness Rodmilla de Ghent (Anjelica Houston), and her two daughters, Marguerite (Megan Dodds) and Jacqueline (Melanie Lynskey), Auguste tenderly embraces his tomboyish eight-year-old daughter before he presents her to her new family. Danielle's clothes are utterly soiled because she has bested her best friend Gustave in the mud after he dismissively proffered her to look like a girl in those clothes, but her father does not mind that in the least: while Auguste laughingly remarks he had expected to present a little lady but she would have to do, Danielle eagerly steps forward to meet her new stepmother. Notwithstanding her childish excitement — "It feels just like Christmas! I get a mother and sisters all in one day!", she has delightedly told her servant — the Baroness coldly surveys her and icily expresses her pleasure in meeting her at last, adding that "[y]our father speaks of nothing else" (*Ever After*).

Alas, Danielle's wish that her stepmother would like her is not to be fulfilled: besides being too unkempt for the Baroness's stylish outlook, Danielle keeps her place in her father's heart too noticeably for the jealous stepmother's liking. As he reminds his daughter when he is putting her to bed, he is a husband now "but a father first and for ever" (*Ever After*). Not only does this scene emphasise that nothing has changed between father and daughter notwithstanding the new wife but it is also paramount in revealing a unique feature in this Cinderella: unlike the one in all the written versions, she is a reader — and not just any reader at that. In fact, she is actually a very precocious reader of serious literature as the gift her father

brings her — Thomas Moore's *Utopia* — makes quite clear. Moreover, her father's care in nurturing her mind will bear ample fruit, as Perrault's and the Grimms' patiently domestic Cinderella is metamorphosed into a noble girl forced into servitude who has a thinking mind of her own, which she uses to strike out against blatant injustice and to argue finer social points. I would like to emphasise that this subtle twist in Tennant's Cinderella quite remarkably recaptures a recurring trope in d'Aulnoy's tales: despite Finette not being a reader, many of d'Aulnoy's tales glorify female intellect by upholding the heroines' reading and writing against their devotion to domestic chores, much as the *conteuses* did in the *salons*. (This particular trope mirrors d'Aulnoy's as well as the *conteuses*' willingness to criticise and reform social customs by reclaiming the right to be treated more consistently as intellectuals by their male peers.) In a dialogue with Prince Henry (Dougray Scott), Crown Prince of France (on the run from his court duties including marrying the foreign Princess that his father has chosen for him so as to further state interests), she quotes from *Utopia* to argue a social point: it is the lack of education and poverty which the lower classes are reduced to by royal decree that makes for criminals who should thus not be punished as they were driven into it in the first place by those who mean to punish them.

In fact, it is Danielle's intellect and passion for books which draw the Prince's attention in the first place, rather than her beauty. Later on in the film, he offers to take her to visit a Franciscan monastery which boasts a remarkable library and while they peruse the volumes, he confesses that in all his years of study no tutor ever demonstrated the passion that she has shown him in just two days. This will even make him announce to his parents at a later moment in the film that he wishes to found a University where everyone is welcome to learn. The vitality and resourcefulness Danielle exudes — which cause her stepmother to malevolently remark those are indeed masculine traits — thus prove irresistible for the Prince at the same time that expected gender roles are skilfully subverted in this valiant Cinderella. She evinces her nobility even under rags at the same time that she refuses the traditional but socially accepted status of the submissive Cinderella Perrault had created in his 1697 *Contes du Temps Passé*. Incidentally, so had Marie-Catherine d'Aulnoy as well: she forged a new identity in the tales she told in which metamorphosis equalled magic,

the creative power to change both her and her heroines' lives by overcoming great odds. Therefore, Perrault's Cinderella, a passive object to another's will who waited patiently for her release at the hands of Prince Charming, did not fit in d'Aulnoy's definition of femininity since she had nothing to do with sweet, lachrymose, domestic(ated) heroines, either in her life or in her tales.

Neither does Danielle fit that description: the Prince is clearly not used to having a woman knock him down by hitting him with a well-aimed stone because she has taken him for a common thief, nor is he used to listening to a woman speak her mind so frankly as to rebuke him. Even most significant is the fact that the Prince is not used to being saved by a woman, the way Danielle saves him from a fight with gypsies by outwitting their leader into carrying with her what she could and then bodily carrying him for that matter. Other characters who oppose Danielle do not expect her to overstep the passivity traditionally attributed to women either. Thus, the wicked stepmother who intended to wear Danielle's own mother's ball gown and slippers for the ball is taken by surprise when she is punched in the eye (punches being traditionally exchanged by two opposing males in a fight, whereas women usually use more "feminine" ways of fighting such as slapping each other's faces or pulling the hair of their opponent); on the other hand, the would-be molester whom her stepmother sold her to is positively dismayed when his own sword is used against him by a very resolute damsel in not as much distress as he finds himself to be.

This leads me to another trope favoured by d'Aulnoy which is also portrayed in Tennant's *Ever After*, the fact that unhappy lovers will only be together after they have proved their nobility and tender feelings for each other through great tribulations, not because their relationship had been arranged. In fact, herself the victim of an unhappy arranged marriage, Madame d'Aulnoy was highly critical of forced marriages, so much so that her tales seriously commented on love, courtship and marriage in the characteristic witty style of the *conteuses*. As a matter of fact, Tennant's film also expatiates on this point in two occasions: the first is when Baroness Rodmilla reduces Danielle to the commodity of servant and exchanges her for all the valuables she has sold to Danielle's future owner, a lecherous wealthy older man who has made several innuendoes as to what capacity he expects to be served in. (This situation, incidentally, somewhat mimics

d'Aulnoy's own predicament when she was sixteen, as she was abducted from a convent by a wealthy man thirty years her senior with the connivance of her own father. Unlike d'Aulnoy, however, who was not able to legally disengage herself from her husband, Danielle manages to save herself from the unwanted advances of her master before Prince Henry comes to rescue her.) The second situation which comments on arranged marriages is when Prince Henry, out of spite for believing he had been duped by Danielle, is on the verge of marrying the sobbing Spanish Princess his father had arranged for him to marry. This princess, who is in love with someone else, wails while she walks up the aisle and begs him not to marry her. As he perfectly understands her feelings, he calls off the wedding and leaves the palace in search of his soul mate, his perfect match in every way, as he declares Danielle to be. And so the lovers are reunited at last, the Prince having become a wiser man in the process, and the villains dutifully punished by becoming servants in their turn. This is quite a Disneyesque outcome, since it is Disney's *Cinderella* (1950) which prefigures this ending rather than any of the four written versions I have discussed.

The story ends with Madame Royale's words: "My great-great-grandmother's portrait hung in the University up until the revolution. By then, the truth of the romance had been reduced to a simple fairy tale. And while Cinderella and her Prince did live happily ever after, the point, gentlemen, is that they lived" (*Ever After*). These words, which reveal her own relationship with Danielle de Barbarac, further emphasise the dichotomy between wonder tale and true fact which the frame story has sought to establish from the start. These final words could well be spoken with regard to Marie-Cathérine d'Aulnoy, the *conteuse* who wrote wonder tales — but who, despite not having a happily-ever-after ending of her own and being now quite forgotten, actually lived.

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ABSTRACT

The enchanted realm of the wonder tale has been gazed upon quite often by novelists, short-story authors and even poets, who have imaginatively translated into their creations their own personal wanderings in wonderland. I will thus read four very different wonder tale versions of "Cinderella", on a par with Andy Tennant's *Ever After: A Cinderella Story* (1998). I will focus on the gendered differences between wonder tale versions and film, as well as on their distinctive narrative techniques. I argue that this feminist revision of "Cinderella" re-engenders identities by being closer to the only version written by a woman author, both in narrative style and in substance, than to any of the male versions — including the alleged Grimm tale it follows.

KEYWORDS

Cinderella; Basile; Madame d'Aulnoy; Perrault; Brothers Grimm

RESUMO

O reino encantado do conto maravilhoso tem sido muitas vezes contemplado por romancistas, autores de contos e mesmo poetas, que têm traduzido os seus próprios passeios pelo mundo encantado nas suas criações artísticas por meio da imaginação. Irei, deste modo, analisar quatro versões muito diferentes do conto "Cinderela, ou a Gata Borralheira" a par do filme *Ever After: A Cinderella Story* (1998), co-escrito e realizado por Tennant. Irei focar a minha análise nas diferenças de género entre as versões escritas do conto e o filme, bem como nas suas técnicas narrativas distintas. Defendo que esta revisão feminista do conto "Cinderela" constrói novas identidades sexuais ao aproximar-se mais da única versão escrita por uma mulher, quer a nível estilístico quer a nível temático, do que a qualquer das versões masculinas em análise — incluindo o conto dos irmãos Grimm que, alegadamente, segue.

PALAVRAS CHAVE

Cinderela; Basile; Madame d'Aulnoy; Perrault; Irmãos Grimm
