

Reading and Writing the Rhetoric of American Identity

Jodi Kantor (2005); The New York Times

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## Love the Riches, Lose the Rags

Once upon a time, Cinderella was one of the humblest souls in the world of children's entertainment. Named for the soot she constantly swept from her wicked stepfamily's hearth, she befriended rodents and warbled patiently until she was rescued by her fairy godmother and her prince.

Lately, though, Cinderella has become another kind of character: a retail giantess and one of the dominant figures of this year's all-important Halloween-to-Christmas stretch. Over the past month alone she has opened her own boutiques in every Toys "R" Us across the country, sold a million DVD copies of her classic animated film in a single day and inspired flocks of little girls to don sparkly light-blue tulle for Halloween. More than a millennium after her creation and 55 years after her Disneyization, Cinderella has gone from a stalwart to a phenomenon with the kind of hypnotic effect exerted by only a few characters per generation. "It's everywhere I turn, and she's obsessed with it," said Suzanne Brady of Wantagh, N.Y., of her 2-year old daughter, Reilly.

But the Cinderella featured in the new crush of products is quite different from the docile, selfless young lady of earlier versions. In the Brothers Grimm and Disney movie stories, the character is distinguished by her modesty and lack of concern with material possessions. These days, she rarely wears anything but a sumptuous ball gown, prefers the company of fellow royals, shops at a glass slipper boutique, and encourages her young charges to primp for hours at her top-selling Magical Talking Vanity (\$69.99).

As a result, many little girls now think of Cinderella as a princess with a gilded lifestyle in-

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stead of a cruelly oppressed wretch. When Lynn Zerbib of Larchmont, N.Y., took her 4-year-old daughter, Alison, to a live theatrical version of the fairy tale, “all she wanted was to see Cinderella in her dress and couldn’t understand why she was in rags for the entire play,” Ms. Zerbib said.

In fact, Cinderella lust causes some young devotees to behave more like her wicked stepsisters. “Literally, the dresses get fought over by the little girls,” said Elaine Harrop of Farmingdale, N.Y., as her 3-year-old daughter, Kaitlyn, repeatedly flung herself at a Cinderella statue in the World of Disney Store in Manhattan on Saturday, clutching at the stiff skirt. (Like several dozen other devotees, Kaitlyn had lined up for a photo session with the princess herself, played by a sweetly smiling actress in a blond bouffant helmet).

According to Ms. Brady, Cinderella getups were so ubiquitous for Halloween they inspired a competitive frenzy. “It’s all about who has the nicest costume,” she said. “I feel like I have to outdo everybody because everyone is going to be Cinderella. It’s who’s got the tiaras, the dresses, the shoes.”

The current interpretation of the character is “Cinderella as Material Girl,” said Gregory Maguire, the author of “Wicked,” which retells “The Wizard of Oz” with sympathy for its supposed villain; and of “Confessions of an Ugly Stepsister,” which does the same for “Cinderella.” Fairy tales, he said, are “secular parables” in which “we can discuss our own desires.” If so, the latest Cinderella says as much about consumers as it does about Disney, and it may be just right for an age in which vanity is rarely a sin, and covetousness is perfectly acceptable.

Alida Allison, a professor at the National Center for the Study of Children’s Literature at San Diego State University, said the rebranded Cinderella inverts the original fairy tale. “The beauty and material possession competition fostered by the consumer Cinderella campaign contradicts the folkloric message that a princess is someone who merits ascendancy, not just someone who can afford it,” she said.

The Cinderella makeover began four years ago, when Disney consolidated several of its animated female characters, from Snow White (1937) to Mulan (1998), into the Princess line, forming a kind of supersorority of Disney heroines. The results were overwhelming: a royalty craze that extended to everything from Halloween costumes (this year, according to the National Retail Federation, princesses outnumbered witches by more than two to one) to movies like “The Princess Diaries,” and worldwide sales of products in the Princess line that reached almost \$3 billion this year.

Cinderella, meanwhile, rapidly became the brand’s first among equals. Next to can-do contemporary heroines like Ariel of “The Little Mermaid” and Jasmine of “Aladdin,” her lilting speech and unprotesting manner seemed quaint. But the success of the Princess brand, said Chris Byrne, a toy consultant, hinged on a particular insight: girls are no longer content

to merely play with dolls or watch movies depicting their heroines; instead, they actually want to be princesses themselves. After all, who wants to sit passively, watching a cartoon character having all the fun, when there are sparkly tiaras to wear and glass slippers to totter in? “When we developed the line, it was around the concept of role play and transformation,” said Mary Beech, vice president of girls’ franchise brands for Disney’s consumer products division. And girls wanted to be Cinderella more than they did any other character. “She has almost everything a girl needs: a fairy godmother, royal ball, fabulous ball gowns, a royal coach,” Ms. Beech said.

The role-play approach encourages fans to use their imaginations to concoct their own Cinderella stories - but it also makes shopping for fabulous accessories central to the fairy-tale experience. In some ways, it’s a natural extension of the Disney film, which climaxes with the heroine’s acquisition of shimmering goodies. “If your parents can buy you this stuff, you are Cinderella,” Dr. Allison said. No wonder they find it hard to refuse: the legend features an evil mother figure who denies Cinderella the accoutrements she deserves, and a beneficent one who makes them magically appear.

At the same time, the emphasis on independent role-playing makes the official tale and its lessons less central. Many recent young fans have sworn their allegiance to Cinderella without ever seeing the animated film that introduced her as a Disney character. The company tightly controls its classic movies, releasing them only every 7 to 10 years. “Cinderella” had last been released in 1995, and while some video stores still rented those beat-up VHS copies, a new, Princess-crazy generation of fans was eager to buy the DVD, which was released on Oct. 4.

But the related products took precedence: girls who may or may not have seen the movie were spending afternoons getting to know her through baubles from the Princess line. Two months before the release of the DVD - restored but otherwise unchanged from the 1950 original movie - Disney introduced more than 250 Cinderella items, promoting them in Toys “R” Us boutiques and in center-aisle displays in every Wal-Mart store. For Simone Bonnet, 4, of Denver, the line of merchandise “has a life of its own,” said her mother, Suzanne. “The movie is just another one” of the many Cinderella items to be purchased, she said. Disney acknowledges this change, but stresses the primacy of the story. “Girls learn about the characters in all different ways,” Ms. Beech said. “It may be through a costume she has a chance to experience at her friend’s house. But at the end of the day, the storytelling is paramount. They want to act out what happened to Cinderella.”

Perhaps because interest in the character no longer requires a full understanding of the narrative, her fans are younger than ever. Even though Ms. Beech tends to keep Princess products out of the house - she is surrounded by them at work, she says - her own 18-month-old daughter, who hasn’t yet seen the movie or read a Cinderella book, is already clamoring for her first pair of glass slippers. A more typical case of Cinderella preoccupation begins around 2, and wanes by 6. “Kids get older younger now,” said Bob Chapek,

president of Buena Vista Home Entertainment. “When I started in this business 12 years ago, kids entered into the Disney Classic range at 6. Now, at 2 to 3 years old, kids are buying the Cinderella classic DVD.”

When they do, they will find a gentle, nonthreatening story. Pre-Disney versions of the legend were gruesome cautionary tales; the Grimm Brothers rendition ends with the stepsisters punished for their glass-slipper fetish by being permanently hobbled, and for their vanity by having their eyes pecked out by birds. But for toddlers, Disney’s telling presents no such terrors, only a badly tempered cat, the petulant stepsisters Drizella and Anastasia, and an elegantly menacing stepmother.

Even women on the other end of the age spectrum seem to adore the character, especially when it comes to the kinds of role-playing exercises so popular with the 4-year-old set. At the Disney parks, the most popular theme wedding is the Cinderella one. For \$2,500, a bride can arrive in a glass coach copied straight from the film, drawn by four ponies.

Younger girls, meanwhile, are watching their movies on special pink-and-blue Cinderella television and DVD players, dressing their dogs in Cinderella costumes and eating breakfast made in a waffle iron that stamps her image into the batter.

“You want to feel like a princess every moment of every day,” Ms. Beech said, “even if you’re riding a bike or kicking a soccer ball.” It is even possible, as one mother at the Disney store confessed, to go to the bathroom the Cinderella way. “There’s Drizella and there’s Anastasia,” her recently toilet-trained daughter remarks when she flushes.