

Cinderella and *Ever After*: A Comparison of Gender Stereotypes

Fairy tales often reflect society's socially accepted values. Charles Perrault wrote what would be known as the standard *Cinderella* to reflect the ideal gender roles of the French court. In his version, his characters' personalities, wealth and status are rigidly based on sex. In today's world, many people believe that we have gone past Perrault's stereotypes, and have achieved a more equalized society with the feminist movement. However, in comparing what was accepted then to the modernized fairy tale *Ever After*, the gender roles have remained the same. *Ever After* portrays the heroine as an active character in lieu of a passive and submissive Cinderella, giving the film a more updated look. Despite this, the changes in *Ever After* are minor compared to its similarities with *Cinderella*. *Ever After* merely depicts these changes to allow the film to be more acceptable and appealing to a modern audience. While disguised as a modern feminist film, under the surface *Ever After* simply reinforces the long standing traditional gender roles and sex stereotyped messages that are communicated to the audiences.

In *Cinderella* and *Ever After*, we see the men portrayed in both films are much better off than women. One criteria Kelley points out in her essay is that the male sex had the higher ranking status and wealth. This is the same with *Ever After*. In the film, the king of France holds the highest level and status one can obtain. Henry the prince is next in line to his father, and the second highest ranking male in the film. As royalty, both males are endowed with wealth. Prince Henry's attitude with money is shown when he pours coins on the ground for Danielle in exchange for her silence. We realize the value of the coins when Danielle shows them to the maids, who have a shocked expression on their faces. Monsieur Le Pieu, a self-proclaimed "well-endowed" man, is also seen to be incredibly wealthy. He returns every item the Baroness has sold to him in exchange for Danielle as his slave.

Women are less wealthy and have less status and class. The highest ranking woman in *Ever After* is the queen of France—a position we do not see in Walt Disney's *Cinderella*. However, her voice is often disregarded and she plays a small role in the movie. The queen does nothing to calm the king when she speaks for her son against his arranged marriage. She is instead largely ignored by him as he storms into their son's room at night. Queen Marie is not seen to be in a position of power; rather, she plays more of a motherly role. Marie tries to console her son when he refuses to marry the Spanish princess and later when he believes Danielle has been engaged. Even then, she is ignored as the prince responds by simply walking away from her. Marie even takes the blame when things aren't going so well. Although comical, the queen is blamed for Henry's insolence and rebellion when the king says "He's *your* son!" The movie portrays her as a soft-hearted mother who is tuned out and willing to assume blame for her husband. As queen, she is what every girl in the movie desires to be (married to the prince and eventually becoming queen). She is the woman of the highest status, and as a role model her character subtly sends out the message to girls what is required to be on top: playing a subordinate role of a mother and spouse, and only being seen, not heard.

Ever After also portrays what is considered acceptable behavior from both genders. In the movie we learn that the queen is unhappy with her life. This is evident when she tells Henry that "[being] born to privilege comes with specific obligations" and her son retorts with "Marriage to a complete stranger never made anyone in this room very happy." Henry implies that like him, her marriage served no other purpose than to fulfill a contract and secure a political alliance. The queen confirms this by falling silent, lowering her eyes and looking upon on the ground. The queen is not even her own person; she is a pawn in a game between others. She is treated like property and must obey the "obligations" set upon her. Even though she is the

highest ranking woman in the film, she is still bound to certain limitations (marriage). Her submissive role as a woman suggests to viewers that girls need to be obedient. Furthermore, while the queen is resigned to her life, it is expected that her son should not be. The queen must obey her duties, her son, on the other hand, can openly and actively fight against the arranged marriage with the Spanish princess. The movie suggests that a male is allowed to break rules; a woman is not. In the movie, the male is even successful in breaking his obligations—he is able to get his own way and marry Danielle instead of the Gabriella. This double standard sends the message to the audience that this type of gender discrimination is acceptable. Unfortunately, this type of behavior is common in society—such as the belief that premarital sex for teenage boys is permissible, but not for teenage girls. It is true that fairy tales serve as “mirror and model” for young audiences today, as people can (perhaps subliminally) identify with the movie’s covert message and look to the movie as to how to behave (A Feminist View of “Cinderella”, Kolbenschlag).

Ever After depicts women of high class as undeserving of their status. This is illustrated by the Baroness, the only other female to hold a prestigious title in the movie. While the role of the Queen is downplayed as a mother and political puppet, the Baroness is portrayed as a woman with money burning a hole in her pocket. The Baroness is buried under debt and is forced to sell her items to Le Pieu, garnish her servants’ wages, and even send a man to the Americas to pay off her taxes. The Baroness’s irresponsible behavior implies that perhaps women should not have wealth, because they cannot handle it. This is emphasized by the Baroness’s ridiculous spending and by Danielle’s contemptuous remark that “[the Baroness] still pretends to have money to burn.” Like Cinderella’s stepsisters who “industriously lope off their toes” (Woman as Object, Judith Long Laws), the Baroness’s frivolous spending illustrates an “ill fit” between her

character and the status she has obtained. It suggests that the status and rank was “never intended for [her]” (Woman as Object, Judith Long Laws) just as the shoe was an ill fit for the stepsisters in Grimm’s *Cinderella*. Not coincidentally, the Baroness is given negative and “non-feminine” character traits as well, such as being selfish, ruthless and greedy.

The Queen and Baroness, the only two women with high rank in the movie are in ill-matched positions, suggesting it is inappropriate for women to be of high status. The Baroness is also punished in the end by being stripped of her title. It hints that she is punished for being in a role or playing a part that she should not have. The Queen and Baroness’s punishments (living unhappily and being stripped of one’s title) can be interpreted that women can not and should not attempt to play the role of men (being wealthy and holding power). By showing women who are irresponsible, immature, unable to handle high ranks, it reflects upon the movie’s attitude that women are not capable to be in high positions and are better suited to playing lesser roles to men.

Ever After and *Cinderella* both have males in the story that are heroes and save the females. It is the Prince who saves Danielle right from the beginning. The coins he gives her during his escape from the castle catalyzes Danielle’s attempt to save a servant from being shipped to the Americas. The Prince’s actions (albeit indirectly) influence Danielle to disguise as a courtier and attempt to save Maurice. Even then, the Prince is the one must help Danielle by stopping the cart from moving on and demand that the servant be released. He is the one, not Danielle, who saves the servant. Danielle does “rescue” the prince in one scene when he is ambushed by winning the sympathy of the gypsies. She also does save herself from the clutches of Monsieur Le Pieu when she is sold to him by the Baroness. However, it is Danielle’s “angel of mercy” who ultimately saves her from a lifetime of hardship by marrying her. By having the Prince end up saving her, it reinforces the notion that women should wait for men to save them.

While some people believe that the “someday-my-Prince-will-come” message blatantly portrayed in *Cinderella* is out of date, *Ever After* proves that this is still being broadcasted to viewers today. It offers the same solution to girls: marriage is the answer to everything.

It can also be said that Monsieur La Pieu is Madame Rodmilla’s savior, but in a very different way than the Prince and Danielle. He saves the Baroness from financial ruin when he purchases the items she sells him (the tapestries, silverware, candlesticks...) so she can continue to finance her campaign in trying to marry off her daughter Marguerite to Prince Edward. Pierre La Pieu does not even need the items he purchased from her. He later returns every single item “down to the last candlestick” in exchange for Danielle. This shows that even the stepmother, who is a powerful and ambitious woman, is helped by a male. The movie *Ever After* makes the point of showing many females in the movie that need the assistance of a man. This ties in with the overall message of the movie that women need to be dependent and reliant upon a man, and find salvation by marriage.

Leonardo da Vinci is a savior as well. Like *Pretty Woman*, the fairy godmother has been transformed into a male role. Signor da Vinci functions as the fairy godmother of the story and saves Danielle by helping her escape the room she has been locked into by her stepmother. He also saves her by talking to the Prince after he had cast her away and influences him to apologize to her. By doing so, he altered the lives of the main characters. Although not wealthy or powerful, Signor da Vinci plays a significant role in having the ability to change the plot and the course of lives in the movie. His importance as a famous painter serves to enhance and emphasizes his significance and role as the fairy godmother. Even Gustave gives tribute to Signor da Vinci’s importance when he comments that Danielle “looks like a masterpiece,” likening her appearance to a work of art. By transforming what was originally a female role into

a male, the movie *Ever After* has illustrated another example of female dependency, as Danielle relies upon the help of Da Vinci in order to be successful in the end (being married). The film has reduced the number of significant roles females play, thus downplaying on the role of women.

Ever After follows that the heroine must wear nice clothing in order to be marriageable. In Walt Disney's *Cinderella*, the heroine is transformed by her fairy godmother. She is given a beautiful dress and glass slippers, and the prince who sees her is instantly captivated by her loveliness. In *Ever After*, Prince Edward doesn't even notice Danielle when she is dressed as a servant. He encounters Danielle by chance when he steals their horse in attempt to get away from what he calls "[his] glided cage." Only when Danielle is dressed as a courtier does the Prince first really take notice of her. The camera shows the Prince gazing at her before he is interrupted by the man dragging the cart, and only distracted does he looks away. When she is dressed beautifully at the masque, Henry pays attention to no one else and cannot wait to announce his plans to marry her. When he finds out that she is just a servant a few moments later, however, he casts her away and "[feed] her to the wolves."

While many people believe *Ever After* portrays a different take on the "Cinderella story" that is implied by the narrator, at its root the movie is actually the same. A lot of people do cheer for Danielle and like her sassy personality. People want to believe that she is not as helpless as Cinderella. But...the changes are just on the surface. The movie is given a facelift; its characters are modified and given more depth. Despite her personality change, Cinderella is still trapped in a world where men are on top of the hierarchy. It's interesting to see that under the exterior, the movie still portrays the same gender stereotypes. While watching this movie, one

would not notice the subtle hints the movie suggests about sex roles. However, I did find this movie to be incredibly delightful and a refreshing take on the Cinderella tale.