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Moving Foward?: Problematic Ideologies in Twenty-First Century Fairy Tale Films

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MOVING FORWARD?: PROBLEMATIC IDEOLOGIES IN
TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY FAIRY TALE FILMS

A Thesis

Presented to

The Graduate Faculty

Central Washington University

In Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree

Master of Arts

English Literature

by

Alyson Marie Kilmer

May 2015

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Graduate Studies

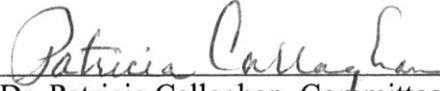
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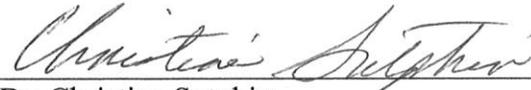
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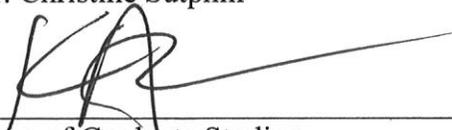
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ABSTRACT

MOVING FORWARD?: PROBLEMATIC IDEOLOGIES IN TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY FAIRY TALE FILMS

by

Alyson Marie Kilmer

May 2015

Fairy tales, as a reflection of our values and belief systems, are crucial in shaping and maintaining cultural ideologies. In the twenty-first century, cinematic fairy tales have the unique position of representing such values in an expansive and expeditious manner. Audiences must therefore be critically conscious of the messages promoted by these tales. An analysis of the five most popular contemporary fairy tale films, Disney's *Princess and the Frog* (2009), *Tangled* (2010), Universal's *Snow White and the Huntsman* (2012), and Disney's *Frozen* (2013) and *Maleficent* (2014), revealed minimal attempts to propitiate critical audiences in regard to changing cultural values, but each film ultimately fails to break away from hegemonic assumptions about gender norms, class boundaries, and Caucasian privilege.

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

Chapter		Page
I	INTRODUCTION AND LITERATURE REVIEW	1
II	FAIRY TALES AND GENDER IDEOLOGIES	9
III	FAIRY TALES AND SOCIAL MOBILITY	25
IV	FAIRY TALES AND CULTURAL PRIVILEGING.....	42
V	FAIRY TALE AWARENESS.....	58
	WORKS CITED	62

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION AND LITERATURE REVIEW

Stories animate human life; that is their work. Stories work with people, for people, and always stories work on people, affecting what people are able to see as real, as possible, and as worth doing or best avoided.

Arthur Frank *Letting Stories Breathe*

Over the centuries we have transformed the ancient myths and folk tales and made them into the fabric of our lives. Consciously and unconsciously we weave the narratives of myth and folk tale into our daily existence.

Jack Zipes *Fairy Tale as Myth / Myth as Fairy Tale*

The power of the fairy tale can be a dangerous thing. When audiences ignore the influence of fairy tales on their daily lives and belief systems, they become vulnerable to the whims of the storyteller, whims which have unclear motivations. Perhaps the storyteller desires to advocate for a better world, or perhaps is simply looking to make a profit. Whatever the author's motivations, it is critical for audiences to actively engage with the stories and to question their inherent messages. Folk and fairy tale scholars have worked to analyze the power of the tales for centuries, but fairy tales, by their very

nature, are constantly adapting and transforming. The task of analyzing messages within the tales, therefore, never ceases.

In the twenty-first century, there has been a boom in cinematic retellings of fairy tales. Companies like Disney, DreamWorks, Universal Studios, and Pixar have become adept at producing films which appeal to audiences' sense of tradition by adapting traditional tales or writing new stories with familiar fairy tale tropes. Cinematic fairy tales, which are vivid and easily shared across vast distances, require the same critical analysis as oral and literary versions. The core texts for this study include Disney's *The Princess and the Frog* (2009; based on Grimm's *The Frog-King*), *Tangled* (2010; a retelling of Grimm's *Rapunzel*), *Frozen* (2013; based on Hans Christian Andersen's *The Snow Queen*), *Maleficent* (2014; a remake of Disney's *Sleeping Beauty* [1959], based on Grimm's *Sleeping Beauty*) and Universal Pictures' *Snow White and the Huntsman* (2012; a retelling of Grimm's *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs*). Each of these films was the top grossing movie based on a fairy tale for its respective year, earning an estimated 104-401 million dollars, and as a group they are the highest grossing fairy tale films since 2000 (IMDB). As the most popular contemporary retellings in America, they impact a wide audience. As such, it is important for viewers to be aware of what values these tales are promoting, and how subliminal messages within the tales may be affecting cultural perceptions. In this thesis, I will examine the ways in which these films attempt to propitiate audiences in regard to changing cultural values, but ultimately fail to break away from hegemonic assumptions about gender norms, class boundaries, and Caucasian privileging. Mainstream perceptions of these films, as well as some critical responses,

suggest that these films promote gender equity, upward mobility and cultural awareness, but a closer analysis reveals tendencies towards the use of gender stereotypes, class restrictions, and cultural insensitivity.

The subjects of gender, class, and race are not unfamiliar in folk and fairy tale studies. In 1970, a heated discussion about feminism and fairy tales was sparked by Alison Lurie's essay "Fairy Tale Liberation," in which she labeled fairy tales as a pro-feminist genre. Marcia R. Lieberman responded to Lurie in 1972, with "Someday My Prince Will Come," where she criticized Lurie's focus on obscure fairy tales. Lieberman claimed that only the popular tales, the ones that people read or heard most, were the ones that truly impacted society, and that many of these tales presented problematic gender images. In "Feminist Fairy-Tale Scholarship," Donald Haase describes these essays as a "catalytic exchange" where

[w]e witness simultaneously the inchoate discourse of early feminist fairy-tale research and the advent of modern fairy-tale studies, with its emphases on the genre's sociopolitical and sociohistorical contexts. Already anticipated in their terms of debate are nascent questions and critical problems that over the next thirty years would constitute the agenda of much fairy-tale research. (2)

As the twentieth century progressed, more and more scholarship about fairy tales and folklore was published. Feminist fairy tale approaches continued with works by Karen E. Rowe, who claimed that modern women were no longer satisfied with fairy tales whose heroines were "unable to act independently or self-assertively" and relied solely on

“external agents for rescue” (“Feminism and Fairy Tales,” 239). In her 1986 text, “To Spin a Yarn: Female Voice in Folklore and Fairy Tale,” Rowe discusses how, originally, women were usually the storytellers, and therefore the ones with power, but when the control of story collection and expression shifted to men, such as the Grimm Brothers, Perrault, and Basile, a patriarchal attempt to divert power away from the female occurred. In 1994, Marina Warner continued to explore female storytellers in her text *From the Beast to the Blonde: On Fairy Tales and Their Tellers*. Many of the initial critical responses to gender in fairy tales focused primarily on the classic texts, and the criticisms sparked a plethora of feminist fairy tale ‘rewrites,’ such as Angela Carter’s *The Bloody Chamber* (1979), Robert Coover’s *Briar Rose* (1996), and Will and Mary Pope Osbourne’s *Sleeping Bobby* (2005). These rewrites, in turn, sparked more critical debate on how effective these revisions were at addressing problematic gender images, as seen with articles such as Leslee Kuykendall and Brian Sturn’s “We Said Feminist Fairy Tales, Not Fractured Fairy Tales!” (2007). A comprehensive overview of the relationship between feminism and fairy tales can be found in Donald Haase’s *Fairy Tales and Feminism: New Approaches*, published in 2004.

Feminism, though prominent, was not the only approach in the study of folklore and fairy tales. Scholars such as Marina Warner and Ruth B. Bottigheimer have produced works concerned with the origins of fairy tales. In *Once Upon a Time: A Short History of Fairy Tales* (2001), Warner explores tales from the Grimm and Perrault classics to the early Disney films and other cinematic adaptations, in an attempt to show how fairy tales contain truths about human history and nature. In *Fairy Tales: A New History* (2002),

Bottigheimer begins with the Grimm collection and traces tales backwards through their literary origins. In 1979, Jack Zipes published *Breaking the Magic Spell: Radical Theories of Folk and Fairy Tales*, a series of essays which explores how fairy tales have developed historically and socially, as well as the ways in which fairy tales are used to shape cultural awareness. By focusing on how tales have influenced social and cultural developments throughout history, Zipes shows how tales were used to educate and inspire people, and how those in power had the ability to use tales to manipulate the masses. Zipes also suggests that the origins of tales may be less important than their influence on “cultural evolution, human communication, and memetics” (“A Fairy Tale is More”). In *Happily Ever After*, Zipes explains that the culture industry creates a referential system and “sets the terms for socialization and education in the Western World” (7). In her 1994 work, *American Folklore and the Mass Media*, Linda Dégh also explores how tales, especially contemporary variants, are used to influence public opinion and group consciousness, particularly in regard to commodification and consumption.

As the twenty-first century progresses, the study of fairy tales has more frequently focused on contemporary adaptations and retellings of traditional tales, particularly those within the film industry. *Fairy Tale Films: Visions of Ambiguity* (2010) is a collection of essays concerning cinematic fairy tale retellings, the contents of which continue to address gender ideologies and cultural perspectives (Greenhill and Matrix). Zipes’s *The Enchanted Screen: The Unknown History of Fairy-Tale Films* (2011) reveals the many ways in which fairy tales and folklore influenced cinema long before Walt Disney

strolled onto the scene. One of the most recently published scholarly books concerning fairy tales and folklore is Christina Bacchilega's *Fairy Tales Transformed?: Twenty-first-century Adaptations and the Politics of Wonder* (2013), in which Bacchilega discusses the ways in which recent tales both conform to and resist hegemonic norms, and challenges audiences to be wary of what these fairy tales reveal about culture and power in the twenty-first century.

As Zipes shows in *The Enchanted Screen*, fairy tales have been a constant presence on the movie screen since the early days of film making. The first three Disney Studios' princess films, *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* (1937), *Cinderella* (1950), and *Sleeping Beauty* (1959), were extremely popular among audiences at the time, but once Lieberman and the other feminist scholars revealed the romance of the films as nostalgic and unrealistic, audiences demanded more from their "princess films." Even outside of the princess narrative, many fairy tale films celebrated "stereotypical gender and power relations" (*Enchanted* 23).

In order to address some of the negative criticisms aimed towards these films, screenwriters began forming original tales that incorporated traditional elements but showcased radical plot changes. For example, DreamWorks' *Shrek* (2001) involved a princess locked in a tower, guarded by a dragon, waiting for a hero to go on a quest to save her, but the hero turns out to be an ogre, and true love does not befall the characters for some time after the rescue, at which time the princess also becomes an ogre. While *Shrek* and its sequels gained popularity amongst audiences and critics alike, other films were not as generously received. Many of the contemporary films based on fairy tales,

while receiving high ratings on mainstream review sites like Rotten Tomatoes and IMDB, unfortunately continue to fall flat with academic critics. For example, Disney's *Tangled* (2010) earned an illustrious 89% on Rotten Tomatoes' Tomatometer and, according to IMDB box office sources, sold over 10 million DVD/Blu-Ray copies. However, many critical texts including "Race, Gender and the Politics of Hair: Disney's *Tangled* Feminist Messages," "*Tangled*: A Celebration of White Femininity," and "Disney's *Tangled*: Fun, but Not Feminist," continue to berate the film for its lack of true feminist and cultural progressiveness. Other films, such as Disney's *The Princess and the Frog* (2009) and Universal's *Snow White and the Huntsman* (2012), have also achieved a popular status with audiences, but were less than favorably considered by scholarly critics. The two most recent fairy tale films, Disney's *Frozen* (2013) and *Maleficent* (2014) are a slightly different story: both films have received a generous amount of praise from audiences, but very little academic feedback, positive or negative. Despite being the top-grossing animated film of all time, *Frozen* has not yet inspired any prominent journal articles or critical reviews. *Maleficent*, however, has at least one response, an article in the *Social Education* journal, written by Benjamin Justice, who claims the film is a "fully feminist retelling of *Sleeping Beauty* that dispenses utterly with every major sexist element of the original" (195). Unfortunately, I believe a closer analysis of these two films, as well as the three other popular cinematic tales from the 2000s, will reveal weaknesses similar to those in the twentieth century fairy tale films.

The analysis of *The Princess and the Frog*, *Tangled*, *Snow White and the Huntsman*, *Frozen*, and *Maleficent* will be divided into three sections. Chapter Two will

explore traditional gender roles and the ways in which both male and female characters are depicted in stereotypical roles of power and submission which perpetuate a patriarchal ideology that is becoming outdated and unacceptable in today's progressive culture. Chapter Three will focus on class hierarchies and the reoccurring pattern of the aristocracy triumphing over the lower classes, and discuss how protagonists and antagonists are ultimately defined by their social status and aspirations. Chapter Four will critique the representations of culture and ethnicity within the tales by exploring the depiction of people of color within the films and the propensity to privilege White European cultural norms. Each chapter will show how these five films all make small attempts to address problematic issues about gender, class, and race, but do not substantially challenge the existing ideologies. Instead, these ideologies are reaffirmed and upheld at the finale of each film, undermining any claim to progress that the films may advertise.

CHAPTER II

FAIRY TALES AND GENDER IDEOLOGIES

Many feminist discussions of fairy tales have been concerned with how the tales perpetuate patriarchal ideologies, particularly through traditional gender roles. The oral sources of the fairy tales I discuss here may not have depicted the same restrictive gender roles that we consider “traditional” today, but when the tales became literary, published by the Grimm Brothers or Hans Christian Anderson, defining the “proper” roles for men and women became necessary for literary success and widespread public consumption. After the initial 1812 and 1819 publications, the Grimm Brothers, particularly Wilhelm, edited their texts “to make the tales more proper and prudent for bourgeois audiences” (Zipes, *Dreams* 72). Wilhelm’s edits not only made the texts less sexual and more religious, they also “emphasized specific role models for male and female protagonists according to the dominant patriarchal code of that time” (Zipes, *Dreams* 74). Hans Christian Anderson also adapted his tales to fit the tastes of the ruling classes in Copenhagen (Zipes, *Dreams*).

After Disney produced *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* (1937), *Cinderella* (1950), and *Sleeping Beauty* (1959), and fairy tales became popular subjects for scholarship and new literary creations in the twentieth century, feminist scholars took notice. Early feminist criticisms of fairy tales began in earnest with the Lurie-Lieberman debate of the 70s, and were often “concerned with the genre’s representation of females and the effects of these representations on the gender identity and behavior of children”

(Haase 2-3). In her seminal essay “Someday My Prince Will Come: Female Acculturation Through the Fairy Tale,” Marcia Lieberman claimed that, through fairy tales, children “learn behavioral and associational patterns, value systems, and how to predict the consequences of specific acts or circumstances,” particularly those related to “the sexual role concept of children” and how tales suggest “the limitations that are imposed by sex upon a person’s chances of success in various endeavors” (249). Other feminists, like Andrea Dworkin and Susan Brownmiller, agreed with Lieberman’s stance, claiming that “fairy tales shape our cultural values and understanding of gender roles by invariably depicting women as wicked, beautiful, and passive, while portraying men, in absolute contrast, as good, active, and heroic” (Haase, “Feminist” 3).

Feminist scholarship in the following decades continued to address how the tales and many of their retellings continued to perpetuate a patriarchal hegemony. The tales not only outlined the accepted, gender differentiated behaviors for children, but also influenced the identity formation of adults, particularly women. In “Feminism and Fairy Tales,” Karen E. Rowe describes how the guidelines delineated within fairy tales influenced major life choices for women:

Few women expect a literally “royal” marriage with Prince Charming; but, subconsciously at least, female readers assimilate more subtle cultural imperatives. They transfer from fairy tales into real life those fantasies which exalt acquiescence to male power and make marriage not simply one ideal, but the only estate toward which women should aspire. The idealizations, which reflect culture’s approval, make the female’s choice

of marriage and maternity seem commendable, indeed predestined. In short, fairy tales are not just entertaining fantasies, but powerful transmitters of romantic myths which encourage women to internalize only aspirations deemed appropriate to our “real” sexual functions within a patriarchy. (239)

The gender roles established by these tales were perceived as harmful not only to women, but men as well. In *Fairy Tales and the Art of Subversion*, Zipes describes the male role in fairy tales as being “the decision maker” who upholds the family and community and acts a savior who is “dominant and protects the virtues of the humble if not humiliated female” (149). In 1999, Lois Tyson further explains:

Feminists have long been aware that the role of Cinderella, which patriarchy imposes upon the imagination of young girls, is a destructive role because it equates femininity with submission, encouraging women to tolerate familial abuse, wait patiently to be rescued by a man, and view marriage as the only desirable reward for “right” conduct. By the same token, however, the role of Prince Charming – which requires men to be wealthy rescuers responsible for making their women happy “ever after” – is a destructive role for men because it promotes the belief that men must be unflagging super-providers without emotional needs. (87)

For over thirty years, scholars and critics have been pointing out the gender prescriptive messages within fairy tales, and yet despite this knowledge, contemporary retellings continue to place characters in the same type of roles, and support the same patriarchal

ideologies. In films such as *The Princess and the Frog*, *Tangled*, *Snow White and the Huntsman*, *Frozen*, and *Maleficent*, both female and male characters reenact roles similar to those found in their literary counterparts from the nineteenth century.

The gender roles in twentieth century fairy tale films remain limiting, but they have undergone some improvements. Linda Woolverton, author of *Maleficent*, claims that “[t]he princesses that were created in the 1940s and 50s, they were the best of what a woman should be then: You’re the good girl. You took abuse . . . and through it all, you sang and were nice. But we’re not like that anymore. We kick ass now” (qtd. in Cohen). And from one perspective, today’s leading fairy tale femmes do kick ass: Tiana is an aspiring business woman, Rapunzel is a daring runaway, Snow White leads an army, Ana and Elsa run a country, and Maleficent is the most powerful guardian of her home, the Moors. Compared with the older fairy tale films and the traditional tales, the new princesses do appear more active and powerful, breaking away from previously assumed ideologies about female submissiveness. The two newest films in particular have received positive feedback from feminist audiences. Melissa Leon claims that *Frozen* “debunks outdated tropes like love at first sight and damsels in distress,” and Justice, speaking of *Maleficent*, suggests that “offering female role models who work hard, improve their minds, and do not define themselves in terms of men are an encouraging sign that American patriarchy may finally be cracking” (198).

However, while the ideologies of a patriarchal system are beginning to crack, I maintain we are a long way from completely breaking down the restrictive assumptions and harmful gender notions that these ideologies promote. Through the actions of the

main characters, these five films reveal how women are still considered emotional, frail, and nurturing, while men are still expected to be the protective heroes.

In order to maintain a male hegemony, the patriarchal system has often left the dichotomous relationship between emotion and logic unchallenged. For centuries, women have been deemed too emotional to be rational, while men are defined as more intelligent and therefore more suited to positions of leadership. In the nineteenth century, these restrictions were described as “spheres,” public and private, where men and women could find their “natural” place in society. Alexis de Tocqueville, famous for his massive text *Democracy in America*, claimed that “nature had made man and woman so different in physical and moral constitution, its clear purpose was to assign different uses to the diverse faculties of each” (705). He described man’s duties as “outside affairs,” within the “sphere of politics,” or conducting “hard labor” and “arduous activities that require the development of physical strength,” while women are “not permitted to escape from the quiet circle of domestic occupations,” nor do they feel “compelled to leave it” (706). Tocqueville was writing in the mid-1800s, and since then a great deal of progress in regard to women’s roles has been made. Women are now able to vote and work in most careers, but they face restrictions in regard to maternal leave and pay scales. As Susan Sturm points out in “Race, Gender, and the Law in the Twenty-First Century Workplace,” “the classic forms of deliberate exclusion based on race and gender that were characteristic of the early stages of the civil rights regime have not disappeared” (21). Women are still implicitly encouraged to remain in the private sphere as much as

possible. Within contemporary fairy tale films, these principles are superficially challenged during early scenes, but are ultimately upheld by the conclusion of the tale.

In *The Princess and the Frog*, for example, Tiana aspires to enter the realm of business, and in *Tangled*, Rapunzel is discontent with remaining within her confining tower with only domestic tasks like baking, sewing, and artwork to occupy her time. By the end of each of these films, however, each female lead has settled for a role within approved patriarchal spheres: Tiana does have a business, but that business is purchased by her husband, thus she remains in a subservient position. Additionally, the restaurant serves as a glorified kitchen, an “acceptable” space for a woman. Throughout the film, Tiana is encouraged to work less and love more, suggesting that even if women do enter a working sphere, they must be careful not to become cold hearted and thus abandon their role as emotional nurturers. As the *Gagging on Sexism* blog puts it, “while Tiana does get her business in the end, the lesson in this movie is finding out what we **want** vs. what we **need** . . . [Tiana] *needed* love while she only *wanted* a career [emphasis in original]” (Erin). Such a concept promotes the sense that having career goals reduces the possibility of having love, and encourages young women to give up any professional goals for the sake of romance. These notions rely on outdated gender dichotomies, limit women’s vocational choices, and potentially reduce the number of women who may choose to pursue an active career. This debilitating message works to maintain a patriarchal agenda where women are restricted from the public sphere and from pursuing careers in which they might be more successful than men.

Rapunzel also fails to break away from the female domestic sphere. She does manage to escape her tower, but she simply trades one confined space for another. She marries Eugene and takes her place as princess of the kingdom, where she will be held to the patriarchal restrictions of marriage. Lieberman notes that “marriage is the fulcrum and major event of nearly every fairy tale; it is the reward for girls, or sometimes their punishment” (251). Through fairy tales, women are taught that marriage is the end goal, the prize for being a “good girl,” but, in a patriarchal system, marriage is also limiting. As Tocqueville wrote, “the independence of woman is irrevocably lost in the bonds of matrimony” (695) and her actions and beliefs are inextricably connected with her husband’s. In *Tangled*, Rapunzel’s marriage to Eugene effectively silences any voice or agency she may have had when she first left her tower. In the early 1980s, Ruth B. Bottigheimer showed how fairy tales often “rendered heroines powerless by depriving them of speech,” and *Tangled* is no different. The film opens with the voice of Eugene, who claims that the film is the story of how he died, immediately labeling the film as a male centered piece. The end dialogue also closes with Eugene, who asserts his as the last word of the tale, despite Rapunzel having already delivered the expected “happily ever after” line. Such a framework entraps Rapunzel’s tale within a patriarchal dialogue, ascribing to her husband the authority to tell her story, and thus any “alleged power she possesses is undermined by the reality that Rapunzel’s story reaches us as audience only through a male narrator’s voice” (Lester, Sudia, and Sudia 96). Rapunzel, silenced, is not allowed to speak in a public domain because her husband retains all of the authority.

Similar silencing occurs in *Snow White and the Huntsman*, where the female lead has one scene where her voice is prominent in the public sphere: after she awakens from her near death experience, Snow delivers her call to arms speech, and the warriors agree to follow her. The choice to follow Snow into battle, however, is not due to her skills as a logical or fierce leader, but is attributed to her supernatural position as “life itself” and her rightful claim to the throne, which I will discuss in a following chapter. By the end of the film, though, Snow’s voice is cut off. During the final scene, her coronation, Snow has no uplifting words for her subjects, no ruling orders to make. She has nothing to say at all, hinting that, although queen, she, as a woman, is incapable of being an effective ruler. Such a plot implies that women may inspire action, but they do not have the wherewithal to maintain governance of an entire kingdom without male support.

The more recent fairy tale films, *Frozen* and *Maleficent*, do not silence their female leads, but each female character is shown being controlled by her emotions rather than making rational decisions. Elsa, for example, is so controlled by fear of her powers that she shuts herself off from her family and her kingdom. When her power is exposed, her response is to run away in terror, despite having just been crowned queen. Ana, whose romantic aspirations have already proved her to be illogical, also abandons her position of authority, placing the kingdom in the hands of a stranger. She is convinced that she can bring Elsa back based solely on the fact that they are sisters. While the familial bond is a nice change from the predictable romance, the female characters are still shown as primarily concerned with their own feelings rather than with the wellbeing of their subjects or the running of their kingdom. Similarly, *Maleficent* is shown as an

irresponsible ruler of the Moors because she also lets emotion overrule logic and responsibility. After Stefan betrays her and marries another, Maleficent is so overcome with pain and jealousy that she surrounds her home in thorns and darkness, without considering the effect such actions would have on the other fairy inhabitants. She also curses an innocent child as an act of revenge towards the man who wronged her. Later in the film, Maleficent tries to revoke the curse, not because she realizes the immorality of her actions, but because love for the child inspires her to do so. Despite being placed in a position of power, physically and politically, Maleficent is depicted as a poor ruler because every action and decision is based on emotion. *Snow White and the Huntsman*, *Frozen*, and *Maleficent* all show how women who do enter the public sphere will be ineffective and potentially harmful rulers.

The depiction of male characters in these films also perpetuates the notion that public spheres of leadership and business should be reserved for men. Prince Naveen, throughout most of *The Princess and the Frog*, is depicted as a naïve, lazy philanderer, but his knowledge of music and foreign languages suggests that he has been educated. During the scene in the swamp when Mama Odie, the voodoo priestess, tries to teach both Tiana and Naveen that love is more important than work or money, Naveen understands the lesson right away, while Tiana is not enlightened until the end of the film. Because Naveen is capable of learning his lesson quickly, he is soon restored to his position as prince and is then able to purchase Tiana's business. In *Tangled*, Eugene is a clever and resourceful thief, who, despite his crimes, is rewarded with a kingdom after he marries Rapunzel. Lieberman notes that, typically, "the boy who wins the hand of the

princess gets power as well as a pretty wife, because the princess is often part of a package deal including half or all of a kingdom” (351), so Eugene’s transition from criminal to royalty appears natural by the conclusion of the film.

In *Snow White and the Huntsman*, *Frozen*, and *Maleficent*, the male deuteragonists may not find themselves in positions of rule, but they are more readily capable of making decisions or behaving more logically than the female characters. The huntsman, for example, is the one who decides Snow’s dress is not practical for traveling through the wood, and so cuts off the skirt (without permission). Kristoff criticizes Ana for not thinking before becoming engaged. Diaval is constantly questioning Maleficent’s motives, implying that she is being irrational or stubborn.

Depicting men as more logical, however, seems less of a prerogative for the filmmakers than showing men as capable protectors. As long as a man can provide for and protect his family, he is considered a “real” man. The ideology that “men are not permitted to fail at anything they try because failure in any domain implies failure in one’s manhood” (Tyson 86) places an exorbitant amount of pressure on young men, and these films do little to alleviate that pressure. In *The Princess and the Frog*, Prince Naveen begins as a broke playboy, cut off from his parents’ money, but once he discovers his love for Tiana, his entire character transforms into a determined, responsible worker. He is willing to learn new skills and make sacrifices just so he can support Tiana’s dream, because “failure to provide adequate economic support for one’s family is considered the most humiliating failure a man can experience because it means that he has failed at what is considered his biological role as provider” (Tyson 86).

If the male is unable to support his family economically, he will display his protective capabilities in other ways. During the climactic scene in *Tangled*, the need to protect and defend is so ingrained in the male mindset that Eugene is driven to sacrifice himself in order to rescue Rapunzel from a future of slavery. Eugene's act of rescue, however, is extremely problematic:

Flynn [Eugene], without Rapunzel's awareness or permission to do so, abruptly and violently chops off her hair, allegedly to save her from Gothel's continued control. Such a moment undercuts any truly feminist representation of Rapunzel as this violent action by a male is physically and psychologically akin to the sexual violation of rape. Flynn's divisive action implies and signals that Rapunzel cannot free herself from Gothel's evil hold without his paternal intervention and his decidedly masculinist violent action even as he himself flirts with death from his bleeding wound and even as Rapunzel tries to heal and save him with her hair. Physical salvation . . . positions masculinist violence as appropriate and desired for this version of a damsel in distress. After all, his action is paternally in her best interest. (Lester, Sudia, and Sudia 88-9)

In other words, a man's need to demonstrate his ability to rescue and protect takes precedence over any female desire or agency. By cutting off her hair without permission, Eugene is also taking away any choice that Rapunzel has, reinforcing the idea that women cannot make important decisions on their own. Thus does Rapunzel become another woman who is incapable of acting for herself, not because she lacks the

intelligence or the wherewithal to do so, but because the patriarchal hegemony does not give her the chance to make her own crucial decisions. Scenes where a male action and decision making is given priority over female action and decision making, such as the removal of Snow's skirt or the cutting of Rapunzel's hair, are part of a "patriarchal programming" in which the "patriarchy continually exerts forces that undermine women's self-confidence and assertiveness, then points to the absence of these qualities as proof that women are naturally, and therefore correctly, self-effacing and submissive" (Tyson 85).

Despite these rescue scenarios proving to be debilitating for both men and women, they continue to appear in the more recent films, albeit in less clichéd frameworks. In *Snow White and the Huntsman*, for example, the princess' savior is the huntsman rather than the prince. The huntsman acts as Snow's bodyguard throughout the film, successfully leading her through the dark forest and rescuing her from the burning village and the attack in the enchanted wood. It is his kiss that revives Snow. Prince William, conversely, is an example of what happens when a man fails in his protector duties. As a child, William is unable to get Snow out of the castle and keep her from the evil queen, and he fails to prevent Snow from eating the poisoned apple. William's kiss is powerless to revive Snow, implying that, due to his failures, the prince is now impotent. *Maleficent's* male antagonist, Stefan, also fails in his duties as protector, since he is incapable of preventing Maleficent from cursing his daughter. His inability to act and protect, coupled with his fear of vengeance, drives Stefan mad, and he becomes obsessed with defending his kingdom from any attack from the Moors. Stefan is so unwilling to

accept that Maleficent can overpower him that he recklessly attacks her, and ultimately causes his own death.

The rescue sequence in Disney's *Frozen* is perhaps the most progressive of all the films discussed here. While the chain of events leads the audience to assume Kristoff will be the savior of the endangered Ana, a plot twist at the end shifts the role of rescuer to Ana herself, as she sacrifices herself to protect her sister, Elsa. In doing so, the icy curse is broken and Ana is herself restored. This gender reversal is a strategy which can be used to "subvert the associative patterns from the traditional fairy tale and provide a literary answer to the observation that the 'sexes of the rescuer and the person in danger are almost as constantly predictable'" (Joosen 86; Lieberman). In other words, the authors of *Frozen* are making an identifiable effort to refrain from clichéd and problematic gender roles of hero and damsel in distress, though they have not gone so far as to completely reverse the roles by having women rescue men.

Unfortunately, other gender roles depicted in the film continue to reflect the values of a patriarchal ideology. Tyson suggests that patriarchy divides women into two categories: good girls and bad girls. Good girls are supposed to be "gentle, submissive, virginal, [and] angelic," and "if a woman does not accept her patriarchal gender role, then the only role left her is that of a monster" (88). These monsters, or bad girls, are considered "violent, aggressive, worldly," and overly sexual (88). Now, consider the two female leads in *Frozen*. On the one hand, we have Ana, the younger sister who is rather quirky and klutzy, but is gentle enough to befriend ducklings. She has an innocent, feminine excitement about the upcoming ball, and has spent the majority of her life

locked away from the kingdom with little apparent resistance, showing that she is non-confrontational and has little experience of the world. In the rescue sequence discussed above, she also displays her nurturing, self-sacrificing qualities. Elsa, on the other hand, may begin the film as a good girl, an obedient daughter who stifles her own desires in order to protect her sister, also hidden away from society, but by the end of the film she has displayed all of the qualities Tyson attributes to the bad girl. She abandons the rules of her parents and exchanges her kingdom for an unknown wilderness, and when Ana tries to retrieve her, Elsa creates an aggressive snow monster to drive Ana away. Elsa also trades in her modest coronation dress for a glittering, overtly sexual gown. Some reviews of the film have praised this transformation, claiming that Elsa “is powerful, independent of the male gaze . . . finding empowerment in her own feminine physicality, for herself and not the prince” (Leon). Yes, Elsa may revel in her new freedom, finally understanding and using powers which had previously been restricted, but she is far from free from the male gaze. Her body image – blonde hair, blue eyes, thin, busty, imperial – contains elements which can all be attributed to a male (and Caucasian) concept of beauty, and so her empowerment remains defined by patriarchal assumptions of worthiness. Additionally, Elsa’s actions, though seemingly beneficial and liberating for her, are harmful for those around her. She abandons her responsibilities as queen and refuses to address the dangerous freeze that she spread across the kingdom. Her subjects continue to fear her, suggesting that, while individual women may be finding empowerment, society still has not relinquished their prejudices and assumptions about

what it means to be a “good” girl or a “bad” girl, and patriarchal notions of female behavior still reign supreme.

The role that is perhaps the most pervasive throughout all five films is that of woman as nurturing. With the exception of *Maleficent*, every film depicts a female with the power to tame her male counterpart. Tiana inspires Prince Naveen to abandon his playboy tendencies and become responsible, Rapunzel is the reason Eugene gives up the stolen crown and his life of thievery, the alcoholic huntsman cleans up his act to better serve Snow, and the gruff loner Kristoff becomes more sociable just to be with Ana. In “Taming the Men From Mars,” Mavis Huff Mathews writes that “it’s not uncommon these days for a woman to look upon a guy as a ‘fixer-upper’ – literally,” which is exactly what Kristoff is described as in the song “Fixer Upper.” The idea that women are capable of taming men originated during the Industrial Revolution, when the public and private spheres created a division where “the family became a special protected place, the repository of tender, pure, and generous feelings (embodied in the mother) and a bulwark and bastion against the raw, competitive, aggressive, and selfish world of commerce (embodied by the father)” (Keniston 10). Women were assigned the nurturing role not because it was natural, but because the patriarchal ideology deemed it necessary. Fairy tales reflect this ideology by depicting women who lack nurturing traits as hags, witches, or evil stepmothers (Bacchilega; McGlathery; Zipes). This construction of identity can be seen most clearly in *Maleficent*. As a young girl, Maleficent heals trees and befriends Stefan, who initially tried to steal from the Moors. Maleficent remains a “good” fairy so long as she believes she is helping to guide Stefan down a moral path. Once Stefan

betrays her, Maleficent abandons all nurturing sentiments and becomes the “wicked” fairy audiences remember from the traditional story. Only once Maleficent develops a motherly attachment to the child Aurora does she begin to transform back into the “good” fairy and to assume her prescribed role of mother within the patriarchy.

In *Fairy Tales and the Art of Subversion*, Jack Zipes points out that the fairy tales from both the Grimm Brothers and Hans Christian Anderson, among others, “contained sexist and racist attitudes and served a socialization process which placed great emphasis on passivity, industry, and self-sacrifice for girls and on activity, competition, and accumulation of wealth for boys” (46). For decades, researchers have analyzed these roles and identified the plethora of problems inherent within these tales and the ways in which the stories encourage viewers to conform to patriarchal values. And yet, despite efforts to identify and disparage them, these debilitating ideologies endure, exerting themselves within contemporary fairy tale films, subversively eliciting certain behaviors from both male and female audiences alike, which are neither inherently natural nor truly empowering.

CHAPTER III
FAIRY TALES AND SOCIAL MOBILITY

Fairy tales and folk lore have often been the location of inspirational narratives of social mobility. In her 2002 text, *Fairy Godfather: Straparola, Venice, and the Fairy Tale Tradition*, folklorist Ruth B. Bottigheimer identifies the Venetian Giovanfrancesco Straparola as the inventor of the “rise tale,” stories where the heroes and heroines begin in poverty and are elevated, through marriage and magic, to riches (5). Although other scholars, including Dan Ben-Amos, Jan M. Ziolkowski, and Francisco Vaz da Silva, have criticized Bottigheimer’s stance, each contributing to the long standing discussion regarding oral versus literary tales, what seems clear is that the specific rise tale plot became a popular literary format during the 1550s. In her 2010 rebuttal to her critics, Bottigheimer notes that the specific social circumstances in which Straparola wrote provided inspiration for rise tales:

Straparola’s comments about poverty demonstrate that his formulation of an ascent to wealth powered by a magically mediated marriage to royalty was a conscious choice. He was writing in Renaissance Venice, where a legal marriage between commoners and nobles was forbidden by statute and where a marriage between an heir and an urchin was patently impossible . . . The introduction of magic was thus a critical element for fantasies of class-leaping weddings. (Bottigheimer, citing Chojnacki, 449)

Straparola, like many other authors before and after him, wrote tales which reflected the cultural ideologies of his time. In his discussion of Straparola, Zipes notes that, during Straparola's time, "[i]n many city and state republics in Italy, it was difficult but possible to rise from the lower classes and become a rich lord. Such advancement depended on making the right connections, luck, a good marriage, shrewdness, and the ability to wield power effectively" (*Happily* 21-2). During times of social instability and change, rise tales, rags to riches tales, and tales of restoration become particularly popular. Each of these plot types involve a character moving through the social spheres, though with subtle differences. In a rise tale, as mentioned above, characters are allowed upward mobility through magic. A rags to riches tale, however, depends more on the protagonists' wit and intelligence. The mobility in a restoration tale is more twofold in that it involves a fall from the upper classes by the protagonist, who must then find his or her way back to his or her "rightful" position.

Tales with these three plots provided readers with a semblance of hope for improved circumstances. In his essay "Marxists and the Illumination of Folk and Fairy Tales," Jack Zipes notes that fairy tales have been used to "illuminate ways by which we can come to terms with injustice and pursue our dreams of a golden age" (240). Many tales featured protagonists from the lower classes who, after overcoming various obstacles, are welcomed into higher society at the tale's completion. Readers could often relate to the character backgrounds and circumstances, and once they had identified with the protagonists, readers would be able to imagine themselves as rising to the same recognition and rewards as the tale's hero or heroine does. Consumers of the tales were

therefore given hope, an understanding that, given the right circumstances, their world could change for the better. This ability to inspire hope may be one reason why fairy tales became so popular during times of change. During the late sixteenth century, Straparola's rise tales "sold exceedingly well," and, as Bottigheimer remarks, "the handful of new tales that promised access to wealth must have held out meaningful hope for a life beyond the poverty that surrounded and impounded all but a few of Venice's young adults" (27).

However, this hope was tempered with reality. In the same essay where he notes the positive potential of fairy tales, Zipes also points out that those inspirational tales can, simultaneously, "legitimate the interests of capitalist societies" (239). In *Postmodern Fairy Tales: Gender and Narrative Strategies*, Cristina Bacchilega explains that previous fairy tale research "has revealed how the workings of this magic, however benevolent, rely on privilege and repression," noting that "clever and industrious boys, dependent and hard-working girls, and well-behaved 'normal' children in general" are products which "demonstrate how the fairy tale's magic act requires not only social violence and appropriation but a careful balance of threats and rewards" (6). The threat is that any individual who oversteps the boundaries of his or her social position will be marked as wicked, while the reward is marketed as a happy ending or a better life for those who comply with the class system. D. L. Ashliman assents that "upward mobility knows no limits in fairy tales. Heroines move from kitchen to castle. Swineherds and tailors are promoted to kings" (42). However, it is important to note two caveats here: one is that this mobility is often aided by magic or other unlikely circumstances and is therefore not

a realistic aspiration, and two is that there is a limit, even within the tales, to *successful* mobility. If the characters are in any way unworthy, or they reach too far, their elevated social status will be short lived. It is through these means that fairy tales offer hope while simultaneously maintaining societal hierarchies.

I am not suggesting that fairy tales never inspire revolutionary behavior. As Bacchilega suggests, folk tales did serve, during the middle ages, “an emancipatory function because they expressed the problems and desires of the underprivileged” (7). In the modern period, however, “the fairy tale has more often than not been ‘instrumentalized’ to support bourgeois and/or conservative interests” (7). Contemporary tales especially, like those produced by Disney and other corporations, may reflect the desires and motives of their producers more than they reflect shared cultural values. While the other chapters of this thesis concede that creators of contemporary tales often make attempts to address flaws in gender and racial ideologies, it appears that the ideologies about class hierarchies remain virtually unchallenged in today’s popular cinematic fairy tales.

Analysis of how characters in these five contemporary films achieve and/or lose their social status reveals a persistent ideology of inequality, where the higher classes – the rich and royal – maintain control over the lower classes. The tales involving restoration plots each project the notion that those of the upper classes are *naturally* superior, while the rags to riches and rise tales showcase characters of a particularly noble or moral standing who experience unlikely good fortune. While these stories focus on the positive, inspirational aspects of the protagonists, the treatment of the villains

reveals the negative consequences of attempts to move outside the given social boundaries. In *When Dreams Came True*, Zipes explains:

The nature and meaning of folk tales have depended on the stage of development of a tribe, community or society. Oral tales have served to stabilize, conserve, or challenge the common beliefs, laws, values, and norms of a group. The ideology expressed in wonder tales always stemmed from the position that the narrator assumed with regard to the developments in his or her community. (6)

If we assume that the storytellers for the contemporary films are influenced by corporate agendas, then we can explore the extent to which these tales are attempting to “stabilize” and “conserve” certain class ideologies which allow those with money and high social status to remain powerful and prevent the disadvantaged from challenging those ideologies. The plots of these films attempt to show that the current social structure is just and that power is rightfully distributed to worthy and responsible persons.

In the films this thesis addresses, characters who were born to power are considered the “rightful heirs,” are often displaced from their thrones by external forces, and possess a supernatural ability. This gift sets them apart from the common people and reinforces the perception of those born to power as inherently superior. Examples can be found in *Tangled*, *Snow White and the Huntsman*, and *Frozen*. Each film presents a protagonist who is royal, gifted, dethroned, and eventually reinstated, a series of events which implies that the truly powerful will naturally find their way to the seat of rule. By showing only the female royalty (none of these films have a magical male protagonist) as

possessing special abilities, the films attempt to fortify the ideology of power as a natural born gift, inherited by only a select few.

In *Tangled*, the story begins with an explanation of how the queen of a kingdom is about to have a child, but she falls seriously ill. The king then sends his entire kingdom to search for a magical flower with healing qualities. The images of the search party reveal that a massive quantity of people are searching for the flower that can save the queen, commoners and soldiers alike, all with the same look of concern and anxiety. The magical flower, which Mother Gothel had protected for centuries, is destroyed for the sake of a single aristocrat. Since there is only one magical flower, and all but Mother Gothel seem to agree that the queen deserves the flower, the tale has effectively set up a framework where the royalty is loved and obeyed without question, and places the health and happiness of the upper classes above all others. The princess Rapunzel is born with golden hair that possesses the same magical qualities as the original flower, and, on the day she is born, Rapunzel is kidnapped by Mother Gothel so that the witch can continue using the magic to stay young. Both the queen and Mother Gothel selfishly use the flower's magic to stay alive, and yet Gothel, who is not of the upper class, is portrayed as the villain. Gothel's greed and vanity eventually lead to her demise, and the princess is restored to her kingdom, thus reinstating the royal as worthy and the poor as contemptible. During the majority of the film, Rapunzel is able to use her magical hair in almost any way that she chooses and could potentially heal a great number of people. At the end, however, Rapunzel's hair is cut. Rather than completely losing her power, the princess retains her healing abilities within her tears. Now, only those who Rapunzel

cares enough to cry for are able to be affected by her gift. By relocating the power source in such a fashion, the tale limits the magical benefits to the royal family and those closest to the princess, again privileging the ruling class over all others.

While the source of Rapunzel's power is given a somewhat logical explanation, in *Snow White and the Huntsman*, power is simply something that the princess is born with. When Snow escapes from her prison, she is guided to the encampment of the rebel army by the huntsman and the dwarves. During her journey, Snow is repeatedly recognized as the rightful heir because of some inherent quality that allows her to unconsciously heal those around her. The head dwarf refers to her as "life itself," though how Snow has obtained this power is not explained. Audiences are simply expected to believe that Snow, as the true heir, is imbued with a power that will allow her to defeat the evil queen. The queen, Ravenna, who was originally born a peasant, also possesses magical powers, but she was not born with them. Even her powers are of a lower caliber than Snow's, since Snow does not have to exert any effort to use them and Ravenna has to work exceedingly hard. This difference is enhanced during a scene in the enchanted forest where Snow is blessed by a magical white stag, which, as director Rupert Sanders explains, "represents what is good in nature," implying that Snow's position as ruler is natural and just (Ryan). In contrast, Ravenna's power stems from a warped disc of golden metal, an unnatural object from which a sinister, hooded, demon-like figure emerges. In the end, the natural power of the princess defeats the borrowed power of the usurper, and the aristocracy is again placed in its "natural" position of rule.

While Rapunzel and Snow White are similar in that their magical abilities are related to healing, and both were forcibly removed from their aristocratic positions, Elsa experiences somewhat different circumstances: her power is the ability to create snow and ice, and she was driven away from her role as queen by fear rather than tangible outside forces. Elsa's story, however, contains significant parallels to those of Rapunzel and Snow. Elsa is another aristocrat born with magical powers, and by the end of the film she reestablishes her position as queen. Like *Snow White and the Huntsman*, *Frozen* gives no explanation for how the princess acquires her powers, other than the troll king asking if she was born with the powers or cursed. When the audience is told that Elsa was born with the powers, they are again asked to associate natural giftedness with royalty. However, *Frozen* does present this power as having both positive and negative qualities. Elsa is afraid of what her power can do, and she worries about hurting those around her. This fear drives Elsa to flee from the kingdom. By the film's conclusion, though, Elsa has learned to control her power, and her citizens appear overjoyed that their queen has returned, despite the harm she has done, a reaction which seems to imply that the villagers need and welcome a controlling force to govern them. Although this film may offer the first suggestion that the natural born ruling classes may be flawed, the aristocracy remains the only class represented as having magical powers and remains unchallenged by the working classes.

As these examples show, contemporary fairy tales continue to privilege the aristocracy. There are, however, a few characters who are allowed to climb the social ladder. These characters may have impoverished origins, but they demonstrate

commendable characteristics that make their ascension in status acceptable. Zipes describes the process in the following way:

If the hero comes from the lower classes, he or she must be humbled if not humiliated at one point to test obedience. Thereafter, the natural aptitude of a successful individual will be unveiled through diligence, perseverance, and adherence to an ethical system that legitimizes bourgeois domination. (*Dreams* 95)

However, the positive qualities of these individuals alone are not enough to earn a place in the upper classes. Each character is aided by external forces which are not commonplace, thus greatly reducing the possibility of others following the same rising path.

Consider Tiana from *The Princess and the Frog*. At the beginning of the tale, Tiana is the daughter of a seamstress working for a rich sugar baron. As the opening scenes progress, the audience learns that Tiana's family is poor and hard working. When Tiana is older, she works as a waitress in two different restaurants, trying to earn money to buy her own restaurant. Tiana's occupation parallels that of a kitchen maid in older fairy tales, and continues to emphasize her position in the working class. When Tiana does earn enough money to purchase her restaurant, the businessmen she makes a deal with, the Fenner brothers, Mr. and Mr. Fenner, eventually withdraw their support in the following manner:

Mr. Fenner: You were outbid. The fella came in offering a full amount of cash. 'Less you can top his offer by Wednesday, you can kiss that place goodbye.

Tiana: You know how long it took me to save that money?

Mr. Fenner: Exactly! Which is why a little woman of your background . . .
woulda had a hands full, trying to run a big business like that.

While the “background” comment may have racial connotations, which will be discussed in a later chapter, it seems clear that Mr. and Mr. Fenner are at the very least implying that Tiana’s underprivileged background makes her unsuitable as a business owner.

Throughout the rest of the film, various magical events occur which eventually result in the marriage between Tiana and Prince Naveen. Had magic not played a part in the story, it seems unlikely that Naveen and Tiana would have had the opportunity to fall in love before Naveen and Charlotte were wed, underscoring that such occurrences are exceptionally rare, and may be dreamed about but never truly sought after. Once Tiana does marry the prince, and with the King and Queen of Maldonia as benefactors, she is allowed to open her restaurant. Such an ending may seem like a mutually beneficial one on the surface, but the events actually reveal a more oppressive feature. Tiana is only *allowed* to open her restaurant because the ruling class has approved and enabled her to do so. Additionally, though Tiana has achieved her dream, she remains in a position where she is expected to serve others, including the sugar baron and royalty. Tiana has successfully gained a higher position than her previous situation, but her mobility has been limited by its dependence on royal permission as well as its condition of servitude, and is thus non-threatening to the aristocracy.

In *Tangled*, the upward mobility of Eugene is much more dramatic. He begins the tale as a thief and eventually becomes a member of the royal family. Despite being a

thief, Eugene is given a sympathetic background. He explains to Rapunzel that he was born an orphan and dreamed of a better life:

Eugene: There was this book, a book I used to read every night to all the younger kids – “The Tales of Flynnigan Rider.” Swashbuckling rogue, richest man alive, not bad with the ladies, either. Not that he would brag about it, of course.

Rapunzel: Was he a thief too?

Eugene: Uh . . . well, no. Actually, he had enough money to do anything that he wanted to do. He could go anywhere that he wanted to go. And, and for a kid with nothing, I don’t know, it – just seemed like a better option.

This scene reveals that Eugene is protective – he took care of the younger children – and the tone he uses when admitting that Flynnigan was not a thief suggests that Eugene feels remorseful about his unlawful behavior. These redeeming qualities make Eugene’s transition between classes more acceptable, though audiences are never actually allowed to see Eugene in a position of power, since the film ends before he marries the princess. Such an omission could imply that Eugene, considering his “background,” would not be an effective ruler, especially since his improved social circumstances have little to do with actual ability or intelligence. The series of events which lead to Eugene’s advancement mostly stem from improbable lucky breaks: he accidentally stumbles upon Rapunzel’s tower; Maximus just happens to see Eugene taken prisoner and gets the ruffians to rescue him. (How the ruffians sneak into the jail is unexplained.) Also, when

Rapunzel is about to be taken away by the witch, there just happens to be glass on the floor for Eugene to cut her hair with. Achieving advancement through luck is, like magic, clearly unrealistic, so again, the tale offers a hint of hope for lower class individuals while simultaneously discouraging any active attempt at raising their social position.

During her discussion of rags to riches and rise tales, Bottigheimer points out that “in terms of timing, poor heroes and heroines achieved wealth in these tales *after* a royal marriage” (5). Both Tiana and Eugene fit this pattern, which further promotes the gender ideologies discussed in the previous chapter, suggesting that only through marriage can one achieve happiness. The third character who achieves a higher social position, *Frozen*'s Kristoff, diverts from this pattern. His social mobility does not depend upon a marriage and is much more realistic than the two previous examples, though it remains extremely problematic. Like Eugene, Kristoff begins as an orphan, and like Tiana, his aspirations are contained within a blue collar sphere. All Kristoff really wants to do is sell ice. He is depicted at first as working with local vendors in the city of Arendale, and not explicitly trying to expand his business – a behavior which does not indicate motivations for social climbing. Because he happens to run into Princess Ana and helps her reach her sister, Kristoff unintentionally establishes amiable connections within the aristocracy, which eventually earns him the title of “Official Arendale Ice Master and Deliverer,” as well as brand new equipment. Although Kristoff's position is only marginally improved, it is still based on a “the people you know” scenario, rather than on his skills as an ice harvester. The opening scenes of the film reveal that there is an entire group of harvesters near the area, all of whom may have more experience and higher qualifications for the

position. By creating a unique position specifically for Kristoff, the tale suggests that skills and experience, attributes which should come first in determining employees, are subordinate to having friends in high places. While this plot most closely parallels real life situations, the tale does nothing to challenge this ideology of inequality, and instead celebrates Kristoff's reward as a part of the happy ending.

Tiana, Eugene, and Kristoff all possess qualities of kindness, honesty, and generally noble characteristics, traits which, as the tales imply, make them suitable for upper class positions. None of these characters, however, actively pursue extreme social advancement. Tiana wants to remain in the service industry; Eugene wants money, but only to retire to an island, alone; Kristoff's only desire is for solitude and steady business. None of these aspirations threaten the social order, and so these characters are allowed a degree of mobility, the promised reward. In contrast, the characters who do actively pursue a higher and more comfortable social arrangement are punished, labelled as villains and associated with greedy, selfish, cruel, and vain characteristics. Because the ambitions of these characters *do* threaten the social order, they are not allowed to succeed.

In the five films discussed, there are three villains who fail to gain their desired social advancement: Dr. Facilier, Lawrence, and Prince Hans. Dr. Facilier, the Shadow Man in *The Princess and the Frog*, is a voodoo witch doctor who covets the money and social position of Eli La Bouff, who is Charlotte La Bouff's father. His desire to have power above his station leads Dr. Facilier to conspire to kill La Bouff and make a deal with a dark spirit, promising to feed the spirit souls in exchange for control of New

Orleans. Lawrence, an antagonist secondary to Dr. Facilier and the ex-Royal valet of Prince Naveen, has slightly less ambitious desires. Lawrence has been in a position of servitude his entire life and now wants to be in a position where others serve him. He unites with the Shadow Man and attempts to literally take Naveen's role as prince and fiancé of Charlotte La Bouff. In *Frozen*, Prince Hans, though technically royalty, is thirteenth in line for the throne. He travels to Arendale in hopes of marrying or murdering the princesses and claiming the kingdom as his own. He pretends to love Ana and plots to have Elsa conveniently executed for her acts of sorcery. Since each character exhibits negative characteristics, such as cruelty, cowardice, and deceitfulness, their eventual failure seems logical and justified.

There are some villainous characters who are, at least temporarily, successful: *Snow White and the Huntsman's* Ravenna and *Maleficent's* Stefan and Maleficent herself. Like Facilier and Lawrence, Ravenna and Stefan begin their lives in impoverished circumstances. Ravenna is born a peasant, and her village is attacked when she is a young girl. Her mother casts a spell of beauty and youth to save her, and Ravenna uses that power to manipulate kings and take over their kingdoms. Like the Shadow Man, Ravenna also gains a dark power from a demonic source: a cloaked, faceless figure which emerges from a giant golden mirror. Ravenna uses this power to maintain her position as queen, though eventually her power is defeated by the rightful heir, Snow. Stefan is introduced as a thief and an orphan, who aspires to live in the castle. When he is older, he emotionally betrays and physically violates Maleficent during his plot to become king. Stefan reigns for nearly two decades before Maleficent finally defeats him. Maleficent,

who is also an orphan, reacts to Stefan's betrayal by forcibly establishing herself as queen of the Moors, a land which was previously an autonomous collective. Since her position as villain is ambiguous, applicable only when she exhibits jealous and vengeful actions, Maleficent is spared from being violently removed from her throne, and instead willingly abdicates her role as queen. It is interesting to note that during Ravenna's, Stefan's, and Maleficent's reigns, when a character deemed unworthy and inferior has stolen power, their respective kingdoms are visually darkened, apparently suffocating from their poisonous, illegitimate rule. As Lee Artz notes in "The Righteousness of Self-centered Royals," "[v]illains may attain power, but as non-elite, false leaders, they are ill equipped to rule. Their reign is disastrous and temporary. Soon the hero will save the day and the hierarchy" (132). In both films, once the "rightful" heirs assume the throne, the kingdoms begin to heal and are depicted as greener and full of life. This framework suggests that people who come to power from proletariat impoverishment through illegitimate means are incapable of sustaining social health and productivity, and validates the notion of royal governance as natural.

Since all of the villainous characters display ignoble traits, and their nefarious schemes are unsuccessful, the audience can easily make the assumption that the villains failed because the "bad" characters are not, traditionally, supposed to win. However, imbedded within this "good vs evil" plot is the message that lower class individuals who *actively* strive to surpass their stations will ultimately fail, thus sustaining the classist ideology of inequality and validating the idea that class mobility is suspect and potentially dangerous. Each of these plots fits the fairy tale trope of good triumphing over

evil and demonstrates the ability of fairy tales to “promote a sense of justice by narrating the success of unpromisingly small, poor, or otherwise oppressed protagonists” (Bacchilega *Transformed* 4). The storytellers achieve this sense of justice by focusing the audience’s attention on the “villains” as the oppressors who are defeated at the end. As Ashliman points out, however, “these struggles are not class conflicts, but rather individual battles. The final victory is virtually never that of an exploited class over a privileged class, but rather of one hero over one tyrant” (147). The defeat of the villain is not a defeat of classist hierarchies, but a punishment for attempting to disrupt the established class system.

In addition to portraying qualities which characterize the different classes, the tales also juxtapose concepts of hard work, family, and love against greed and selfishness. On the surface, the promotion of such values appears as a positive contribution to society and the civilization process. Yet, promotion of these values, however noble the concepts are in and of themselves, serves a dual purpose which is advantageous for the upper classes: by devaluing monetary and material gain, the tales discourage lower classes from constantly pursuing paths which lead to riches and power, thus maintaining an imbalanced system. As Bacchilega puts it, “the gestures of rebellion, whether they are against patriarchal convention or corporate convergence, are only pretexts setting up the eventual triumphant celebration of family values and consumerism” (*Fairy Tales Transformed* 119). Audiences for these tales must be critically aware of such biased messages and continue to question the effectiveness and legitimacy of current social structures.

Imbalanced class structures are not unique to the twenty-first century. In *The Communist Manifesto*, Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels point out:

The history of all hitherto existing society is the history of class struggle. Freeman and slave, patrician and plebian, lord and serf, guildmaster and journeyman, in a word, oppressor and oppressed, stood in constant opposition to one another, carried on an uninterrupted, now hidden, now open fight, a fight that each time ended, either in a revolutionary reconstitution of society at large, or in the common ruin of the contending classes. (3)

Neither revolution nor ruin have occurred in the twenty-first century class system, but the tension between today's upper and lower classes is rising. The Marxist perspective, as Tyson describes, draws "battle lines . . . between the *bourgeoisie* – those who control the world's natural, economic, and human resources– and the *proletariat*, the majority of the global population who live in substandard conditions and who have always performed the manual labor . . . that fills the coffers of the rich" (50). If these differences were destroyed or denied, the distribution of power would shift dramatically and unpredictably. Whether such a shift is truly necessary may remain a controversial subject. What is clear, as Zipes points out, is that fairy tales have the power to either reinforce or challenge systems of inequality, and audiences should strive to recognize these messages (*Fairy Tale as Myth*). If we do not, then we run the risk of falling under the enchantment of traditional tales, of, as Greenhill and Matrix put it, being lulled "into a deep sleep of political apathy and acceptance of the status quo" (6-7).

CHAPTER IV
FAIRY TALES AND CULTURAL PRIVILEGING

Fairy tales have often been described as a genre which addresses universal desires, a genre that “ministers to the same basic social and individual needs” (Thompson 5). In *Fairy Tale as Myth/Myth as Fairy Tale*, Zipes explains how the classical fairy tales, such as those often associated with the Grimm brothers and Charles Perrault, make it “appear that we are all part of a universal community with shared values and norms, that we are all striving for the same happiness, that there are certain dreams and wishes which are irrefutable, that a particular type of behavior will produce guaranteed results” (5). However, this notion of the fairy tale as a universal is flawed. Consider the following description from Elizabeth Wanning Harries:

In spite of their varied national origins and the varied ways in which they [fairy tales] have been written and published, they *seem* to be evidence for common human experiences, hopes, and fears that transcend nation and class. At a time when the world is splintering into many ethnic factions, fairy tales *seem* to provide some binding force. If we read the history of fairy tales thoughtfully, however, we see that these conventional notions are completely mistaken, part of the nostalgia and traditionalizing that have accompanied our construction of our own modernity [emphasis added]. (3)

In other words, because we as audience have been exposed to the same tales repeatedly and for centuries, we now often assume that these classical tales represent some sort of worldly norm. As folk and fairy tale scholars, such as Zipes, Harries, Bottigheimer, and Bacchilega, have repeatedly explained, however, single tales and individual versions must be analyzed within the context of the time in which they circulated. During the seventeenth century, for example, when the literary fairy tale was popular in French salons, the tales reflected social concerns specific to that time and place and audience. To continue to think of the same classical tales as universal in the twenty-first century poses significant complications, especially in terms of race and ethnicity.

In the *Greenwood Encyclopedia of Folktales and Fairy Tales*, Zolkover points out that concepts of race and ethnicity are “often underutilized in contemporary scholarship on fairy tales and folktales, but their prominence in culture at large has lent them an important role in understanding both the content of folk narrative and the way in which it has been used” (800). In the seven years since the *Greenwood Encyclopedia* was published, more research focusing on race and ethnicity within fairy tales has appeared, most of which has been centered on diversifying texts used in children’s literature and education. In *Fairy Tales with a Black Consciousness*, Yenika-Agbaw explains that “theories of multiculturalism exist,” but the scholarship “remains *White* and is steeped within the Anglo Saxon academic traditions” (6). Despite an apparent lack of scholarship focusing on the use of race within fairy tales, literary authors have made a conscious attempt to diversify the fairy tale genre. Authors such as Jerry Pinkney and John Kurtz produce texts which retell popular tales through different cultural lenses, while

collections of tales from around the globe have been published in the series *The Pantheon Fairy Tale and Folklore Library*.

While the literary world may be making more of an attempt to cross culture boundaries, the cinematic world of fairy tales continues to struggle to break away from Caucasian privileging. Contemporary fairy tales films, including many outside the scope of this thesis, such as *Enchanted* (2007), *Alice in Wonderland* (2010), *Red Riding Hood* (2011), *Beastly* (2011), *Mirror Mirror* (2012), *Jack the Giant Slayer* (2013), *Into the Woods* (2014), and many others, feature primarily Caucasian casts. There are films which feature multicultural versions of the classical tales, including *Year of the Fish* (2007) and Rodger's and Hammerstein's *Cinderella* (1997), but these films are rare, sparsely advertised, and are not usually box office hits. Most of the multicultural fairy tales in film media appear as TV series, such as *Happily Ever After: Fairy Tales for Every Child* (1995-2000) and *Once Upon a Time* (2011-present). Each of these examples of diversification in fairy tales adds a progressive perspective to the genre, but they are mostly overshadowed by the feature films produced by major corporations such as Universal Studios, DreamWorks, and Disney.

Although this thesis is not focused on a critique of Disney films in particular, it seems relevant to note that the Disney Corporation has repeatedly been assailed by complaints about producing an overabundance of White princesses. Neal A. Lester claims that, "as a globally dominant producer of cultural constructs related to gender, race, ethnicity, class and sexuality, Disney reigns supreme, and part of that supreme reign

is an unquestionable privileging of patriarchy and whiteness” (294). This is not to say that Disney has not tried to be more culturally diverse with its fairy tales:

In the last 20 years, Disney has made huge strides in depicting race. In 1997, the company’s television division presented a live-action version of “Cinderella” with a black actress, the singer Brandy, playing the lead. In 1998, “Mulan” was celebrated as a rare animated feature that depicted Chinese characters with realistic-looking eyes; most animated films (even those from Japan) had Westernized versions of Asian people until that time. (Barnes)

More recently, Disney has introduced its first African American heroine, Tiana. The production of *The Princess and the Frog* was regaled as groundbreaking progress towards a multicultural shift in the Disney Corporation. In “Disney’s *The Princess and the Frog*: The Pride, the Pressure, and the Politics of Being a First,” Neal A. Lester describes how an “unmatched anticipation and excitement filled the media airwaves as many, especially African Americans, impatiently awaited the unveiling of Tiana, Disney’s first African-American princess in an animated feature film” (296). When *The Princess and the Frog* was announced in 2009, the film was praised for bringing “diversity to a genre that’s been mostly snow white for seven decades” (Neumaier). Neely Tucker wrote that “[t]he implied message of Tiana, that black American girls can be as elegant as Snow White herself, is a milestone in the national imagery, according to a range of scholars and cultural historians.” While the cinematic appearance of the first African-American fairy tale princess seems like a positive step towards diversification

and cultural awareness, serious underlying messages within the film continue to privilege whiteness.

During the opening scenes of the film, audiences are shown a little Black girl playing in the home of a rich White girl. Tiana and Charlotte grow up to be, apparently, best friends. Then audiences learn that Tiana grows into a working class woman who is determined to own her own business and is an extremely hard worker. At first, the narrative structure seems to mirror narratives from progressive writers like Zora Neale Hurston, who “sought to demonstrate the richness of African American culture and folklore and to emphasize its resilience in the face of oppression” (Zolkover 800). Tiana is certainly resilient, and her friendship with Charlotte creates a pairing which may seem like a progressive relationship transcending the racial stigmas present in the South during the 1920s. Closer inspection of their relationship, however, reveals a parallel to narratives from the nineteenth century where “white authors and folklore collectors” tried to “generate race-based fantasies of a black population not only forgiving for prior slavery but also amicable toward their supposed white betters and eager to be dominated once more” (Zolkover 800). Throughout the film, Tiana allows herself to be directed by Charlotte in regard to what to cook and what to wear, hinting at a controlling relationship which places the White princess in a position of authority over the Black waitress.

One of the most common complaints about *The Princess and the Frog* concerns the fact that Tiana is portrayed as a frog for the majority of the movie (Barnes). Tiana’s transformation literally dehumanizes her. Although human to animal transformations occur often in literature and media, to have the first African-American Disney princess

undergo such a transformation is particularly problematic. In “The Strange Case of *The Princess and the Frog*: Passing and the Elision of Race,” Ajay Gehlawat points out that, historically, human to animal transformations have “tended to be associated with errancy and/or foolhardiness” (418). Gehlawat also notes that “what becomes lauded in the process . . . is the representation of a black girl as an animal, or the conflation of blackness with bestiality” (418). Lester adds that “[w]hile this narrative twist of having both the princess and the prince be frogs romping through the bayou swamp may add humor and intrigue, this animalization of Tiana’s black female body is mired in dehumanizing and even desexing in historical representations” (302). By dehumanizing Tiana, the film implicitly suggests that people of color are somehow inferior to other, White, people. As Gehlawat notes, *The Princess and the Frog* serves as “a continuation of the line of types that Bogle delineates (and that American cinema, including animated films, depicts) – the tom, the coon, the mulatto, the mammy, the buck and, now, the frog” (419). Rather than being the groundbreaking film that it is advertised as, *The Princess and the Frog* is instead a repetition of the derogatory imagery that has been used to depict people of color in media which is influenced by White privileging and ideologies.

Tiana’s frog transformation is not the only racially problematic component of the film; the character of Prince Naveen has also received numerous criticisms. Disney executives claim that Naveen is Creole, and “he’s whatever ethnicity they have in fictional Maldonia” (Hare). The DisneyWiki entry on the prince describes him as having a “Brazilian-esque appearance,” and reviewer Brandon Fibbs notes that Naveen is “neither white nor black, but some sort of mysterious combination of both by virtue of his

fabricated, vaguely European origins.” For some, the ambiguous nature of Naveen’s ethnicity is a positive thing. As one blogger puts it, “Naveen may be the most racially-diverse character that Disney has ever portrayed,” and represents a step towards more racially diverse characters in cinematic fairy tales (Davidson). Other viewers were more offended by the construction of Naveen’s identity: Angela Bronner Helm wrote “Disney obviously doesn’t think a black man is worthy of the title of prince” (qtd. in Barnes). This observation is particularly significant: yes, the film is showing more ethnically diverse characters, but why does Disney choose to make such a broad attempt at diversification in the first African American film? Were the screenwriters simply trying to be as multicultural as possible, or were they purposefully avoiding depicting a Black man in a position of power? Lester suggests that the “interracial pairing of Tiana and Naveen subverts male black power to uphold the standard of white male authority” (300). Lester and Goggin write: “In a patriarchal world view, gender – maleness – holds the power. In a white patriarchal worldview, the racial other complicates the primacy of gender in defining rights to power. Black men thus are a double threat: They are both men and they are Other” (136). By purposefully excluding a Black man from *The Princess and the Frog*, the screenwriters and producers suggest that the only men who can or should be in charge are those with European or White backgrounds, like Naveen arguably has.

There are Black male characters in the film, including Tiana’s father, the chef at Duke’s café, Dr. Facilier, and some of Tiana’s friends. Tiana’s father is perhaps the most honorable and hardworking character in the film, but he only appears in one scene early in the film before he dies. Dr. Facilier is portrayed as the villain, which, like the villains

from the other films, serves to pair dark features and “otherness” with trickery and evil. All of the other people of color within the film present another problem: the association of Blackness with laziness and foolishness. Aside from Tiana and her father, all of the people of color within the film express an objection to work. Naveen is introduced as a lazy leech with no work experience; Tiana’s mother pushes Tiana to focus on romance rather than the restaurant; Tiana’s friends tell her she works too hard; the chef at Duke’s is made to look careless as he literally “horses” around at work; even Mama Odie, the wise voodoo woman, tells Tiana she puts too much focus on work. This depiction of people of color within the film implies that the default for Black people is laziness and that Tiana is the rare exception to the rule (Davidson).

In contrast, the main White characters are depicted as generous, business savvy, and powerful. The La Bouffs have an extraordinary amount of money and do not hesitate to pay extravagantly for small services, seen when Eli tips the young newspaper boy a thick bundle of money. The Fenner brothers hold power over Tiana as businessmen, and can arguably make smart economic decisions. Eli dresses as a Roman emperor for the Mardi Gras parade, symbolizing his position as White and mighty. The imagery surrounding both the Black and the White characters subversively perpetuates harmful racial stereotypes and works to maintain the ideology of Black as inferior and White as the responsible, privileged authority. As Sarita McCoy Gregory puts it, “[e]ven though Disney attempts to produce Princess Tiana as empowered, grounded, and down-to-earth, the colorful film still relies heavily on the reproduction of the ideology of whiteness that sanitizes the everyday lives of African-Americans and normalizes whiteness” (433).

Some critics argue that many of these aspects of the film are unintentional, innocent and harmless (Davidson; Aljoe qtd. in Lester). These critics seem to be giving the screenwriters and producers of the film the benefit of doubt, but claims of innocence seem to crumble when considering how the designing of the film was approached. During the making of the film, Peter Del Vecho, one of the producers of *The Princess and the Frog*, stated: “Every artistic decision is being carefully thought out” (qtd. in Barnes). The entire plot was “the result of a series of carefully calibrated and deeply invested choices, i.e., deliberately designed” (Gehlawat 418). Because each decision was made with such purpose, it is essential for audiences to critically examine the messages imbedded within the film to determine how the filmmakers are trying to represent people of color. Even if the racial components of the film which have been so heavily criticized *were* accidental, they reveal a significant flaw in twenty-first century American society. In “The Black and the White Bride: Dualism, Gender, and Bodies in European Fairy Tales,” Jeana Jorgensen explains:

[T]he social reality of the Western world does not allow for colorlessness. Whiteness is often the invisible, privileged state, whereas any other skin color is marked and laden with ideological judgments. In many cases, this type of racism is unconscious and does not mean that the writer bears ill-will toward people of color, rather, that they have not thought through the ramifications of race in society. (56)

If Disney were truly trying to create a more ethnically diverse fairy tale film genre, then why has there been no further attempt to address such substantial issues, or to produce tales featuring characters from other cultures, where past mistakes could be rectified?

Rather than creating more fairy tales featuring people of color, Disney seems content with a single film for each ethnicity that is not White. As various blog posts have observed, in the official lineup of princesses, nine are White, one is African American, one is Native American, one is Chinese, and one is Middle Eastern. One animated blogger interprets this line up in the following manner:

In the eyes of Disney, there's a Princess for Black little girls to look up to, a Princess for Native little girls to look up to, a Princess for Arab little girls to look up to, a Princess for Asian little girls to look up to, and nine princesses for *all* little girls to look up to. It's no coincidence that in almost all promotional art featuring the "Princess Lineup," Jasmine, Tiana, Mulan, and Pocahontas are all standing in the back, usually obscured by other ~~white~~ Princesses' dresses, while the blonde lady brigade stands in the front. (Sabato)

Of the five films discussed in this thesis, four of them, including Universal's *Snow White and the Huntsman*, flaunt an overwhelmingly White cast of characters. These recent additions to the fairy tale collection have been accused by mainstream critics of "whitewashing" fairy tales. In formal usage, the term "whitewash" means either to literally whiten something, or to cover up flaws. In modern blogging vocabulary, "whitewashing" often refers to the habit of the Disney Corporation to literally whiten

their princesses of color (Pocahontas, Mulan, Jasmine) in product advertisements. A 2013 entry in the media blog *Stop Whitewashing* berates the newly redesigned Disney princess line for physically altering the images of the princesses to make them look Caucasian. The author refers to the redesign as “gross, because it seems like there is no end to women of color being told that in order to be **truly** beautiful, they have to be pale. They have to aspire to whiteness” (Sameera).

The physical alterations are not the only problematic aspect of whitewashing. Another blogger explains that “‘whitewashing’ doesn’t *just* mean ‘taking a character of color and turning them white,’ but also applies to ‘focusing disproportionately on the stories of white people,’ ‘glossing over or altering parts of a story to make it more palatable or make white people look better,’ and ‘treating “white” as the default race’” (Sabato). Considering the number of fairy tale films which focus on stories of White people, as discussed above, it seems clear that representations of White are disproportionately large in comparison to representations of other ethnicities. This pattern is problematic because, as Michael K. Brown and Martin Carnoy put it, “the majority of white Americans today do not comprehend the multiple ways in which their lives are enhanced by a legacy of unequal advantage. They are unaware because their racial position is so much a part of their accepted surroundings that they do not even recognize it” (228). The inability to recognize this disproportionate privileging prevents any real attempt to correct the imbalance. The continued representation of White as a default race promotes what Ghassan Hage terms the “White Nation Fantasy,” where “both White racists and White multiculturalists share in a conception of themselves as nationalists and

of the nation as a space structured around a White culture,” and those considered as outside of that culture, those considered an ‘other,’ are “merely national objects to be moved or removed according to a White national will” (18). By repetitively producing films which feature White protagonists and mainly White supporting characters, the screenwriters and producers are reinforcing the idea of a White nation, where White audiences are implicitly taught to believe themselves to “occupy a privileged position within national space” and “be the enactors of the national will within the nation” (Hage 47). Such imagined power would enable White viewers to believe themselves entitled to control over anyone they perceived as “other” (42).

After *Princess and the Frog* was produced, the next fairy tales films were *Tangled*, *Snow White and the Huntsman*, *Frozen*, and *Maleficent*. Each of these films contributes to the “White as the default race” ideology by featuring mainly Caucasian characters. There are some people of color presented in the films, but they are either blended, anonymous and featureless, into the background crowds, as in *Frozen* during the coronation ball, or they are minor characters who are either killed off or beaten, like the knight in *Maleficent*. That so many films featuring all White casts were introduced after the first African American princess film is problematic. According to an entry on the blog *Womanist Musings*, this structure “makes Princess Tiana seem like an impotent token, with Rapunzel appearing to reset the standard of what princess means” (Martin). By having all White films follow the first Black Disney princess, the screenwriters and producers reestablish the idea that White is the dominant, desirable race.

There are some mainstream critics/bloggers who disagree with this notion of whitewashing in the films, and instead argue that the films are simply attempting to portray the culture in which the tales are set, i.e. German, French, British, Scandinavian, etc. (Ashleah; Beth). Another blogger notes that “all the white Disney princesses come from different cultures, except Aurora and Belle who are both French. Each of them has a distinct history and cultural heritage of their own country and they are all grouped as white” (mahrteLL). Yes, the collection of classic fairy tales can claim to be multicultural, but it is a *European*, a *White* multiculturalism. Both of the above observations have merit, but neither addresses why mainly European based fairy tales have been focused on. One reason for this focus may be that the European tales are the most well-known, since European tales were printed and circulated more frequently than tales from other continents. With the advancements in technology and global communications, though, it seems the time would be ripe to introduce more globally diverse cinematic versions of fairy tales, and yet no such attempt has been made. Instead, screenwriters and producers continue to choose European tales and, with the exception of *The Princess and the Frog*, choose European settings, thus allowing the perpetuation of predominately white characters.

In “Seeing White: Children of Color and the Disney Fairy Tale Princess,” Dorothy L. Hurley observes that “[t]he problem of pervasive, internalized privileging of Whiteness has been intensified by the Disney representation of fairy tale princesses which consistently reinforces an ideology of White supremacy” (223). Hurley’s research sought to determine whether this privileging was evident in the source texts, rather than

simply a construct of the Disney Corporation. Her findings revealed that “there is little evidence in the written source texts . . . of White privileging and/or of a binary color symbolism that associates white with goodness and black with evil” (223). While Hurley does find exceptions in some tales, she notes that occurrences are few, and may sometimes be “a function of the translation” (223). Generally, the use of color within traditional print fairy tales (Grimm, Anderson, Perrault, etc.) may be scant, but the few colors that do appear are used with a particular symbolic purpose and designed to stand out (Vaz da Silva, “Colors” 226). The main color triad found in fairy tales include white, black and red, which typically symbolize purity and otherworldliness, death and enchantment, and blood and womanhood, respectively (Vaz da Silva, “Red”; “Colors”). In the cinematic fairy tales, however, this color system is altered and more prominent; many of the films make clear associations between white as goodness and black as evil. When the discussion of race and skin color is added to the discussion of color symbolism, the white characters are often the good or the royal, while darker characters are considered evil or a force to be defeated. In the films discussed here, the darkness does not always stem from skin color, but negative images and connotations of black are still prominent, and reinforce the notion of dark as a negative and white as an ideal.

In the contemporary fairy tale films discussed here, the villains are often associated with darker colors and depicted in a manner that labels them an “other.” By making the villainous characters representative of the “other,” the characters, though not necessarily people of color, are placed in a position which encourages a racial and cultural suspicion which parallels the older images of “black” and “darkness” with “evil.”

This association in turn allows the dominant society to maintain outdated cultural judgments about white privilege. In *Tangled*, Mother Gothel is drawn with darker features (black hair, dark eyes) than the rest of the characters, and purposefully separates herself from other people. Her isolation and contrasting physical appearance serve to identify her as an outsider to the kingdom, not part of the dominant society, which is represented by the blonde haired, blue eyed Rapunzel. In *Snow White and the Huntsman*, both Ravenna and her brother are foreigners to the kingdom, and appear drastically different from the kingdom's inhabitants: Ravenna is unnaturally beautiful, and Finn is so pale he can almost be considered albino. (Abnormal beauty and pale skin are images which carry their own supernatural, and often negative, connotations.) The villain of *Frozen*, Prince Hans, hails from the Southern Isles, marking him as a foreigner to the world of Arendale. The depiction of "otherness" in *Maleficent* is less clear, though King Stefan does exhibit a Scottish accent which contrasts with the English accents of Maleficent and Princess Aurora. Diaval, in his human form, has an Irish accent, which, though he is not a villain, marks him as an "other" which can be and is manipulated according to the whim of the White Maleficent. Individually, these accents may only be unique characterizations, but together they are reminiscent of historical tensions between Britons and Celts, when the Britons considered the Celtic people of Ireland, Scotland and Wales as barbaric. Each of these characters is treated as "an object to be removed from the space of the nation" occupied by the White protagonists, the dominant social group (Hage 42). By making the protagonists, the characters which audience members most identify with, white, and the villains, the characters audiences want removed or defeated,

a foreign “other,” these tales imbed within the minds of their white audiences the notion that, as Caucasians, they have the power to reject anyone who they deem foreign or “other” while simultaneously associating the “other” with “wicked” or “villainous.”

In order to move away from this pattern of Caucasian privileging, audiences and critics must stop thinking of the European tales as universal examples of human nature. Instead, we must demand films which represent the cultural diversity of our society. There are two ways in which this diversification can be achieved. The first is to recast and restructure the classical, familiar tales in a manner which addresses racial relationships in terms of equality, and the second is to produce films based on tales from non-Eurocentric origins. Zipes explains that new fairy tales, “especially those that are innovative and radical, are unusual, exceptional, strange,” and suggests that audiences cling to the safe, the familiar classical tales because they project the image of a castle which will “protect us from inimical and unpredictable forces of the outside world” (5). While these may be real and prominent concerns, if we are to grow as a society which is culturally aware and welcoming, then we must face our fears of otherness and recognize it as grounded in false assumptions.

CHAPTER V
FAIRY TALE AWARENESS

While I was writing this thesis, Disney's live action *Cinderella* entered theaters around the globe. Less than a month after its release date, the film grossed more than \$170 million, ranking it at the same level of popularity as the other films discussed here. As I contributed my eleven dollars to that sum and settled into the cushy theater seat, I eagerly awaited the beginning of a film which I hoped would demonstrate another attempt to challenge traditional ideologies. In *Frozen* and *Maleficent*, the classic rescue scenes were dramatically altered to focus on sibling and maternal relationships, and, as next in line of the fairy tale retellings, I had hoped *Cinderella* would, at the very least, feature a female character capable of saving herself. I was sorely disappointed. Nearly every aspect of the film asserts all of the problematic ideologies discussed in the preceding chapters.

The first unsettling aspect of the 2015 *Cinderella* is the fact that the story is nearly an exact duplicate of the 1950 *Cinderella*. The main differences include the transition to live action, which allows for a dramatic shift in the tale's aesthetics, slightly more detailed backstories for some characters, and more explanation about the prince's need to marry. The main plot line and character traits remain similar to the animated film. As Zipes explains in *Fairy Tale as Myth / Myth as Fairy Tale*, the appeals of simply duplicating traditional fairy tales are as follows: it takes minimal effort and skill on the part of screenwriters, it is proven to be profitable, and viewers feel a sense of comfort and

safety when faced with a familiar story, since “they are not threatened, challenged, excited, or shocked” (9). Duplicating classical tales confirms a “traditional and socially conservative world” (9). Audiences are not advocating for a radical shift in thinking, nor are twenty-first century screenwriters necessarily looking for ways to challenge a system that has been so richly rewarding for them. Although duplicating traditional, familiar tales in the same ways may be comforting and profitable, it is dangerous for audiences and screenwriters to become complacent and ignore how messages within the films may affect current and future generations. Consider the following examples from the new *Cinderella*:

Cinderella’s mother tells her daughter to always be kind and have courage, and so Cinderella lives her entire life trying to be nice to others and stay positive in the face of adversity. These values may have merit, but Cinderella internalizes them to an extreme. She expresses her kindness and courage by never speaking out against her abuse at the hands of her step family, never standing up for herself. On top of her vapid behavior, Cinderella’s appearance – pale, blonde, blue eyed, and thin – also continues to promote stereotypical ideals of feminine beauty. In his review of the film, critic Anthony Lane claims that audiences are in danger of “being drugged by sexist and imperialist archetypes that lost their potency decades, if not centuries, ago.” Lane’s comment represents a significant instance of misjudgment: if these archetypes had lost their potency, they would no longer be a danger. If audiences continue to assume that such stereotypes have no effect, then they will be unable to recognize the control these messages may have over cultural beliefs.

The step-mother, too, presents another set of problems. She is very self-reliant and pursues her own desires, but is, consequently, depicted as selfish and cruel. The 2015 film does deviate from the 1950 version in that it tries to humanize Lady Tremaine, and gives her a back story involving love and a dead first husband, but as Jaclyn Friedman notes in “Why Disney’s New *Cinderella* is the Anti-*Frozen*,” the film shows how Tremaine’s “unseemly ambition is the driver of her evil treatment of our heroine, who in contrast has no ambitions and is therefore purely good.” Such imagery reinstates the ideology of the “good” woman as silent and submissive and the “bad” woman as independent.

These differences between Cinderella and Lady Tremaine also follow the patterns concerning social hierarchies that are discussed in Chapter Three: Cinderella, the good, beautiful, obedient lady does not appear to desire more than peace in her family’s home, and is rewarded with a kingdom, while her stepmother, who actively tries to find upper class positions for herself and her daughters, is depicted as the main villain of the story and eventually fails.

Problematic racial privileging occurs as well. There is one Black character prominent in the film, cast in the role of the prince’s servant – a high ranking servant, perhaps, but a servant nonetheless. Also, the prince faces a dilemma of choosing a bride, and the Grand Duke wishes him to marry a princess from a foreign land who has rights to a larger kingdom. The prince constantly resists an association with the “other” and eventually chooses to marry Cinderella, a local, suggesting that the prince wishes to retain power for the dominant social group rather than allying with outsiders. Friedman

points out that “the people of color are there, but the only two who speak at all are tertiary characters at best. It’s 2015. Does the Prince really have to be white for the story to work? Does Cinderella?”

Even without a full analysis, these brief observations indicate that the new fairy tale adaptations continue to promote ideologies that prove detrimental to a society which strives to be culturally progressive. Since the popularity and the profit of these cinematic tales are still on the rise, it is likely that retellings will continue to appear throughout the twenty-first century. A live action version of *Beauty and the Beast* and sequels to *Frozen* and *Snow White and the Huntsman* have already been announced (IMDB). Although excitement for adaptations of familiar tales may be high, audiences must be wary of how these upcoming films will portray cultural values. Will the films present truly progressive plots, or will they continue to use subliminal messages which promote harmful ideologies? Will they encourage women to be frail and nurturing and men to fear failure? Will they discourage working class citizens from being ambitious in order to maintain a class system of inequality? Will they continue to privilege a European Whiteness while disparaging anything or anyone that might be considered “other”? In order to resist accepting the ideologies discussed in this thesis as inherent and permanent, audiences must continue to critique these fairy tale retellings, challenge screenwriters and producers to be wary of duplicating tales which repeat such problematic messages, and consciously analyze how subliminal messages within the tales may affect their cultural beliefs.

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