

## Is There an Egyptian Cinderella?

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### Introduction

It is generally believed that the Cinderella story is European and is seen as “a plot that derives from the interaction between Perrault’s and the Brothers Grimm’s literary versions, plus Walt Disney’s film adaptation as if the Cinderella tale had finally reached its clearest and purest form” (Tatar 150). Erroneously taken as the “correct” version of the Cinderella tale, Grimms’ or Perrault’s versions of fairy tales are customarily thought of as original tales because of their widespread popularity in Western culture. This tendency disguises the fact that fairy tales were told and retold in many cultures before they were written down and that they have subsequently been written and rewritten by many authors for many reasons. Quite simply, there is no genuine or authentic version of a fairy tale. Jack Zipes views “Cinderella” as a classical fairy tale, which can be dated back to tales found in antiquity and prehistory that dealt with “rape, sibling rivalry, and mating” (Zipes, *The Irresistible Fairy Tale* 9).

In contemporary literature and cultural studies, great attention is paid to how narratives are created, and how they operate in various contexts. Roland Barthes once asserted in his *An Introduction to Structural Analysis of Narrative*:

Narrative starts with the very history of mankind; there does not exist, and never has existed, people without narrative. All classes and all human groups have their own narrative works, and these works are often enjoyed by people with different, even opposite cultural backgrounds. Therefore, narrative works are not divided into noble and inferior literature. They transcend the nation, history, culture, and exist forever like life itself. (237)

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This is a confirmation that can be applied to the Cinderella story with its long history, universal appeal and ability to transcend the limitations of time and space. It has proved to be a transcultural script with a versatile force that allowed it to be told and retold myriads of times. Folklorists have identified hundreds of distinct forms of Cinderella<sup>1</sup>. According to American folklorist Stith Thompson, there are at least five hundred different versions of the Cinderella tale in Europe alone (128). Giambattista Basile is one of the earliest authors of Western fairy tales, whose collection of tales entitled *Lo cunto de li cunto* or *The Tale of Tales* (1634-36) contains the first recognized “literary” version of the “Cinderella” tale, which is claimed to be much livelier than the other well-known versions (Canepa 7). His story “*La Catta Cenerentola*” or “*The Cinderella Cat*” was afterwards re-worked and published in various other forms in Europe (Basile and Canepa). Scholar Patricia Monaghan, writing on the Cinderella tale, notes:

Cinderella's thousand-year global circulation makes it the world's best-known fairytale, but no one can really say where it began or when Cinderella's magic slippers brought her to Europe. (186 qtd. in Mark).

Bruno Bettelheim contends that “Cinderella” is the best-known and most-loved fairy tale with over 700 documented versions. In contemporary Western culture, “Cinderella” has become synonymous with Perrault’s “Cendrillon,” published in French in 1697 in his collection of fairytales *Histoires ou Contes du Temps Passe´*, in large part because it is the version on which the Disney (1950) animated movie was based (Parsons 138). There are significant differences between the Perrault and the Grimm versions of “Cinderella.” Although the storylines are similar, “each implies a radically different pattern of female behavior” (Bottigheimer 36). “Aschenputtel” the Grimm Brothers’ version (Originally published in 1812; translated by Jack Zipes in 1987) is based on female empowerment enabling its reclamation by women hence we see the effect of a different intent. The Grimms “sought to capture the authentic voice of the common people” (Tatar 189), and the result is a Cinderella who takes destiny into her own hands, uses speech in powerful ways, and overcomes the abuse heaped upon her by cruel stepsisters. In contrast, the Perrault version embodies a patriarchal point of view rendering it all but impossible to reclaim (Knoep-flemacher 17 ). It is apparent that the Perrault version of “Cinderella” (“Cendrillon” 1697) was written “to please an aristocratic audience” (Tatar 189).

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<sup>1</sup> See Cristina Bacchilega’s theory on the fairytale web in *Fairy Tales Transformed? Twenty-First-Century Adaptations and the Politics of Wonder* (2013)

“Cinderella”, as any other fairy tale, grounds its roots in folklore and it can be argued that it is the best-known fairy tale in the entire western world. However, not everyone is aware that its origins are far more ancient than Perrault’s *Cendrillon*, the Brothers Grimm’s *Ashputtle* (Dundes 7), or the Chinese version<sup>2</sup> with its motifs that have been echoed in Western narratives of the story such as the tiny foot size as a mark of extraordinary virtue and beauty, and the slipper made of precious material (Bettelheim 227).

### Origins of the “Cinderella” Story

Although there is no original text to revert to (Tatar 98-99), folktales’ central themes tend to remain stable. As an example, the kernel of the many available versions of Cinderella is the passage from rags to riches (Tatar 150). The tale’s variant elements were analysed and classified first by Marian Roalfe Cox, who in 1893 published the study *Cinderella: Three Hundred and Forty-Five Variants*, and then later by Swedish folklorist Anna Brigitta Rooth in her investigation *The Cinderella Cycle* (1951). These two scholars classified and divided the different plots of the Cinderella archetype, which was later developed by the extensive *Index of Types of Folktales* of Antti Aarne and Stith Thompson (1928). There is no mention of any Ancient Egyptian origin of the tale in any of these works but in some adaptations a Greek version is alluded to by the Greek geographer Strabon of Amaseia (lived c. 64 BC – c. 24 AD) in his book *Geographika*, a massive encyclopedia of historical and geographical information. The first part of the *Geographika* was published in around 7 BC, but the story of Rhodopis comes from the second part of the book, which was published at an unknown later date, but definitely prior to Strabon’s death in around 24 AD. The protagonist in the ancient Greek version of the Cinderella legend is not, of course, named “Cinderella,” but rather Rhodopis.

She is first mentioned by the historian Herodotos of Halikarnassos (c. 484 BC – c. 425 BC) in Book II of his seminal book *The Histories*, which was probably written around 431 BC or thereabouts and also appeared in Aelian’s *Varia Historia* (13.33) around the 2nd and 3rd centuries AD. Herodotos describes Rhodopis as a beautiful Greek *hetaira*, or high-class courtesan, living in the city of Naukratis in Egypt during the reign of Pharaoh Amasis II (ruled 570–526 BC). For the most part, Strabon’s account of Rhodopis is very similar to the one

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<sup>2</sup> In this Chinese version, after Yeh-Hsien’s mother dies, her father remarries, but her cruel stepmother and stepsister mistreat her. When her mother’s spirit returns as a comforting fish, the stepmother kills and eats it. A magical being guides Yeh-Hsien to the fish’s bones, which grant her wishes, including golden shoes. Wearing them, she attends a cave festival, where she loses a shoe. A king finds it, tracks her down, and marries her. In the end, the stepmother and stepsister are killed by flying stones, delivering swift, brutal justice—a common theme in folktales.

given by Herodotos, indicating that Strabon was probably using Herodotos as a source. Strabon, however, goes on to tell another story about Rhodopis that is not mentioned by Herodotos. The crucial passage, which comes from *Geographika*, reads as follows as translated by H.L. Jones:

...They tell the fabulous story that, when she was bathing, an eagle snatched one of her sandals from her maid and carried it to Memphis; and while the king was administering justice in the open air, the eagle, when it arrived above his head, flung the sandal into his lap; and the king, stirred both by the beautiful shape of the sandal and by the strangeness of the occurrence, sent men in all directions into the country in quest of the woman who wore the sandal; and when she was found in the city of Naukratis, she was brought up to Memphis, became the wife of the king... (17.1.33)



Figure 1: The Eagle Brings Rhodopis's Slipper to the King of Memphis (Public Domain)

Although this has been assumed to be the earliest recorded version of the Cinderella story, an even earlier version is found in the Chester Beatty Papyri Collection and was translated by Brooksbank in his book *Legends of Ancient Egypt* (Radwan; Harak). Another mention of an Ancient Egyptian Cinderella could be found in a number of surviving Middle Kingdom tales, preserved by chance on fragile papyri. These papyri are today scattered across museums worldwide. These texts are typically identified by their discovery site (for example, the Ramesseum Dramatic Papyrus, held at the British Museum, is officially cataloged as Papyrus

Ramesseum B). Alternatively, they may be referenced by their current museum location (such as Papyrus Berlin 3008, formally titled *The Lamentations of Isis and Nephthys*, stored in Berlin's Egyptian Museum under inventory number 3008) or by the name of their first known Western collector (like Papyrus Westcar, a series of magical tales acquired by Henry Westcar in 1839, now housed in Berlin under accession number 3033) (Lichtheim). These fictional tales, just a fraction of the stories once told, are fundamental to our understanding of Egyptian mythology. But we need to be careful. In most cases we have a single papyrus giving one version of what we can assume to have been a widely told story. This can bring a false sense of completeness, freezing a tale that once enjoyed a more fluid telling while giving the one preserved version, in this case "Rhodopis: a courtesan of outstanding beauty; the forerunner of Cinderella" (Zipes, *Fairy Tale as Myth/Myth as Fairy Tale*). The story is as follows:

A young girl named Rhodopis who is kidnapped from her hometown in Greece and taken to Egypt. She is then sold as a slave to a kind and elderly Egyptian man who never seemed to notice her mistreatment she was fair and pretty and wasn't dark skinned like the other slave girls. Rhodopis befriended the animals and found joy in singing and dancing. One day when her master sees her dancing joyfully, rewards her with a pair of lovely rose red sandals gilded with gold. When Rhodopis is left behind and doesn't join the rest of the slave girls to go to the Pharaoh's festival she decides to dance and sing with her animal friends when a falcon, symbol of the god Horus, snatches one of her sandals and drops it on the Pharaoh's lap during the festival. Taking this as a sign from the gods, he mounts a nationwide search for the maiden whose foot will fit the sandal and the search eventually leads him to Rhodopis whom he then marries. (Tyldesley).



Figure 2: *The Egyptian Cinderella* (1989), Illustrator Ruth Heller



Similar to that version is Shirley Climos's, *The Egyptian Cinderella* (1989) (Figure 2), and the most recent *Cinderella of the Nile* (2018) by the South African writer Beverley Naidoo (Figure 3).



Figure 3: *Cinderella of the Nile* (2018), Illustrator Marjan Vafaeian

The Ancient Egyptian papyri story is much closer to the Western Cinderella fairytale. In The Ancient Egyptian story before Rhodopis's mother dies she gives her daughter a box of jewels and a pair of silver slippers. This box is then discovered by the evil stepmother who steals the jewels and exchanges them with other jewels. Rhodopis is able to hide the slippers from her stepmother and as she was burying them under a tree in the garden a falcon snatches one slipper which ends up in the King's lap which eventually leads him to Rhodopis. The jewels that he offers her turn out to be her mother's own jewels that were stolen by her stepmother and resold. When the king discovers that he ordered her banishment for ten years only to be surprised by Rhodopis who asked him to pardon her stepmother, as her only condition in order for her to agree to marry him. The king is puzzled by her request and tried to persuade her of the importance of punishment to be an example to others, but Rhodopis insisted on her request and said: "This is the will of my deceased mother. She asked me to forgive those who betray me. This tolerance helps the human soul to get rid of evil" (Zipes, *The Great Fairy Tale: From Straparola and Basile to the Brothers Grimm* 444). The story then ends with a comment by the King that shows that in Ancient Egypt, when slavery was common, and there was little acceptance of class differences, the beginnings of tolerance were present when a pharaoh /king dared to marry a slave and also a foreigner. The pharaoh Amasis describes Rhodopis as "the most Egyptian of all; for her eyes are green as the Nile, her hair as feathery as papyrus, and her skin the pink of a lotus flower" (444).

Prominent archaeologist and author, Enas El Shafie, traced the origins of Ancient Egyptian history and has introduced evidence to illustrate how world literature was inspired by Ancient Egyptian heritage, including the stories of “Snow White” and “Cinderella”, and narrative poems, like *The Divine Comedy* and the *Iliad* (Atef). El Shafie stressed the importance of ancient Egyptian manuscripts and how they provide archaeologists with information about this important era. According to El Shafei, “Cinderella” is originally inspired by the story of “Rhodopis” (Atef). Written in the first century B.C, it revolves around a beautiful girl whose mother gives her a closed box containing a pair of slippers. After her mother’s death, her father gets married to another woman and she delivers two beautiful daughters. Rhodopis’ stepmother and half-sisters continuously abuse her and treat her very harshly. One day, Rhodopis seeks to discover the treasure of her mother’s box, and she finds the pair of slippers. While checking the slippers, a bird catches one slipper and drops it on the Prince’s lap who happens to be on the lookout for his future bride. According to El Shafei, archaeologists do not know how the story ends. She also added that the Prince sees Rhodopis in a vision, and she asks him to build her a pyramid (Atef).

The tale was popularized as an Egyptian Cinderella during the 19th century with several literary retellings. The first version is Kamel Kilani’s translation based on the Perrault version remains very faithful to it. Following that is Attia El Ebrashi’s *Cinderella* published by Dar El Ma’erf as part of the Maktabah el Khadraa Series; once again this was very similar to the French version. Most recently the Disney adaptation of the Cinderella story was published by Nahdet Misr owner of the Disney copyright. A different adaptation of the Cinderella story was written by the well-known Egyptian writer Yacoub Sharouni and published by Dar Elias as part of a series of classical tales beautifully printed with elaborate illustrations by Hani el Masri and was called *The Pharoah’s Bride* (2006) (Figure 4). It tells the story of Rhodopis a poor slave girl, kidnapped from Greece, and is living in Egypt in the company of other slave-women who treat her poorly (the "stepsisters" of the Cinderella tale). She is kind-hearted and long-suffering, communes with animals, and works for a gentle master whose great pleasure is to nap under a favorite tree while his slaves take care of his household. Rhodopis is quite graceful and one day her master sees her dancing while doing her work and is impressed by how she seems to almost glide over the ground. He has a pair of beautifully ornamented slippers made which he gives to her.



*Figure 4: Illustration by Hani El Masri In Y.Sharouni's The Pharaoh's Bride*

Soon after, when news spread that the pharaoh Amasis is holding a grand festival, Rhodopis is excited to attend and imagines herself dancing in her lovely sandals. The other servant girls have never liked her, however, and are now even more jealous that she has been shown such favor by the master. They give her even more work to do and tell her that she cannot attend the festival until all is completed. Rhodopis is hard at work when she sees the master's barge sail away for the festivities with the other girls on board. She sings a sad song which upsets a nearby hippopotamus who splashes into the Nile and wets her slippers. Rhodopis sets these on a nearby rock to dry when a great eagle (sometimes given as a hawk or falcon) swoops down and takes one up in his claws. The girl is distraught over her loss but puts the slipper she has left in her dress for safekeeping and returns to her work. At the festival, Amasis is sitting on his throne, bored and despondent over his lack of a wife, when the bird drops the slipper in his lap. He recognizes this as a sign from the god Horus and decides that whichever maiden's foot fits the slipper will become his queen. He has every single woman at the festival try on the slipper, but none fit. Amasis, like the prince in the Cinderella tale, then travels throughout his kingdom searching for the girl whose foot will fit the slipper. He finally finds Rhodopis who not only fits the slipper but draws its mate out of her dress. The story ends with Rhodopis, soon to be queen.

Although this is the earliest recorded version of the Cinderella story, it is possible that older variants of the story may have existed but were simply never written down. In the ancient world, it was often rare for traditional folk tales of this variety to be recorded because they were not seen as suitable reading material for educated persons and were primarily



transmitted orally from one person to the next. There are many similarities between Strabon's telling of the Rhodopis legend and the modern Cinderella story that we all know by heart, but there are also many differences. The central narrative is basically identical: as in the modern version, a young, beautiful woman loses her shoe, a prince finds the shoe, seeks her out, and, having found her, marries her. This part of the tale remains the same. At the end, it is clear that the Cinderella story has travelled far and near crossing the boundaries of languages, cultures and countries, and has become a universal tale that cannot be reduced to a single narrative, its fluidity is the essence of its continuity and popularity.

It is, therefore, clear that the Egyptian version shares a number of motifs with the "Cinderella" tale (ATU 510A) (Joshua). There is little doubt that the story of Rhodopis stands as an early analogue to that of Cinderella, and that one of the main themes of "Cinderella," that of social upward mobility, is present even in this early analogue from well over two thousand years ago (Hansen).

### **Brief Historical Overview: Charles Perrault's *Cendrillon***

Charles Perrault is indisputably one of the most, prominent figures of the French fairy tale representation. He is best-known for his *Tales and Stories of the Past with Morals: Tales of Mother Goose* (1697) (*Histoires ou Contes du Temps passé, avec des Moralités: Les Contes de ma Mère l'Oye*), which is a collection of the most notorious fairytales that reached the entire world, such as "Little Red Riding Hood", "Cinderella", "Puss in Boots" and "The Sleeping Beauty". In these stories one can find that the behavioural models, presented by the characters, advocate the ideal patterns of decorum desired by the reality of that time. Zipes provides a description of Perrault's idealized picture of a female in the tale about Cinderella, where the main protagonist is viewed as a sweet, gentle diligent and rather reserved girl, who immediately captured the prince's attention with her exceptionally beautiful dress and her graceful femininity. Zipes explains the term "*femme civilise*" and provides a description of such an upper-class lady in Perrault's fairy tales, where his ideal "*femme civilise*" is the composite of upper-class female, beautiful, polite, graceful, industrious, and knows how to control herself at all times. If she fails her obedience test, she is punished, as in Red Riding Hood's case (*Fairy Tales and the Art of Subversion* 40). To further emphasize this, Perrault added a moral at the end of each tale. In the Cinderella story he dictates two morals:

Moral One: “Beauty in a woman is a rare treasure that will always be admired, and, Graciousness, is priceless and of even greater value.”<sup>3</sup>

Moral Two: “Without doubt it is a great advantage to have intelligence, courage, good breeding, and common sense. These, and similar talents come only from heaven, and it is good to have them. However, even these may fail to bring you success, without the blessing of a godfather or a godmother.” (Perrault, *Cinderella, or The Little Glass Slipper* 6)

The *moralité* stresses among other things the role of fairy godmother as a vital element of the possible female, in this case, (Cinderella's) accomplishment. This is explicitly emphasized in the necessity of some kind of "patron", to be a godfather or a godmother, who leads one's steps and helps in achieving success. Marina Warner considers the fairy godmother to be "the principal agent of the transformations that take place" and claims that Perrault "shifts the origin of her powers from supernatural to social: from gods to patricians" (31).



Figure 5: The fitting with the prince onlooking. *Les Contes de Perrault*, dessins par Gustave Doré. Paris: J. Hetzel, 1867

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<sup>3</sup> This is what Cinderella's godmother gave to her when she taught her to behave like a queen. Young women, in the winning of a heart, graciousness is more important than a beautiful hairdo. It is a true gift of the fairies. Without it nothing is possible; with it, one can do anything.

If compared with the oral folk tale, which Perrault used for his inspiration, it is evident that he radically transformed the plots, settings and the characters of familiar folk tales, so that they could correspond to the civilizing process he intended. As Zipes claims that while the folk tale emanated from a matriarchal tradition, depicting young woman's struggles to regain her rights from society, the French Cinderella is quite the opposite "after she is humiliated, forced to put on rags, and compelled to perform hard labour, she does not turn her cheek, but rebels and struggles to offset her disadvantages" (*Fairy Tales and the Art of Subversion* 45). In Perrault's literary fairy tale, Cinderella is changed to demonstrate how submissive and industrious she is. Only because she minds her manners, she is rescued by a fairy godmother and a prince. (45).

### ***Aschenputtel* the Grimm Brothers Cinderella**

After the French huge success of fairytales, approximately one hundred years later, the fairy tale genre appeared in Germany. The great literary activity concerning fairy tales was led mainly by two brothers, Jacob (1785-1863) and Wilhelm (1786-1859) Grimm. Both brothers were scholars, philologists, cultural researchers, folklorists, lexicographers and for the most part the authors of *Children's and Household Tales* (*Kinder- und Hausmärchen*) (1812-1822) also known in English as *Grimm's Fairy Tales*. Their life-work concerned mainly the German folklore as they dedicated most of their lives to compiling collections of folk tales and folk music. At their time, they are claimed to be among the most influential scholars of Germany which, for instance, proves the fact that their 1857 final edition of *Children's and Household Tales* has been for more than a century the second-most-read book in Germany, only next to the Bible.

The Grimms sought mainly for tales that would reflect German cultural identity, convinced that the popular culture and the common folk can contribute to the national identity and deep respect for tradition. It is important to mention that Germany was not Germany as we know now. At that time, there were over 200 German principalities, often at war with each other. The main goal was to unify the parts and create one strong, undivided state similar to France or England. The brothers travelled around the country with the quest for a local, pristine, authentic tradition. They are believed to have collected more than two hundred and fifty Germanic tales. However, the cooperation with the commoners was not always the easiest which also confirms the story of how the Grimm's Cinderella (*Aschenputtel*) was born in Marburg, where they visited the hospital where an old woman was celebrated for her repertoire, but they found she did not want to pass on her lore to the fine young scholars. So

the brothers persuaded the little daughter of the hospital director to ask her for a story and bring it back to them - the result was "Aschenputtel", the German "Cinderella", in which the sisters cut off their toes, their eyes are pecked out one by one by the doves which have acted to help Cinderella throughout, the agents of her mother (Warner 57-58).



Figure 6: the Grimm's Cinderella (Aschenputtel) Illustration by Jenny Nyström, around 1890

In 1812, the first of the seven editions of *Children's and Household Tales*, comprising eighty-six stories, was published. Jean points out that it is interesting to note that they included all the Perrault tales published in *Historie ou Contes du Temps Passé*. According to Zipes, the Grimms are believed to gather their tales mainly from petit bourgeois or educated middle class people who had already introduced bourgeois notions into their versions. Therefore, the tales already had bourgeois views. What the Grimms did, though, was further substantial changes in characters and meanings. Furthermore, they excluded many of the tales that did not correspond with their philosophical and political views. Same as Perrault, the brothers Grimm may be accused of "bourgeoisification" of originally oral tales that had belonged to lower classes. Zipes claims, though, that they did not purposely seek to betray the heritage of the common people in Germany, on the contrary, their intentions were honourable: they wanted the rich cultural tradition of the common people to be used and accepted by the rising middle class (*Fairy Tales and the Art of Subversion* 59). During that time, the tales went through numerous modifications and were constantly revised, enlarged and "cleaned-up" in addition to adding the values that the Grimm brothers wanted to promote.

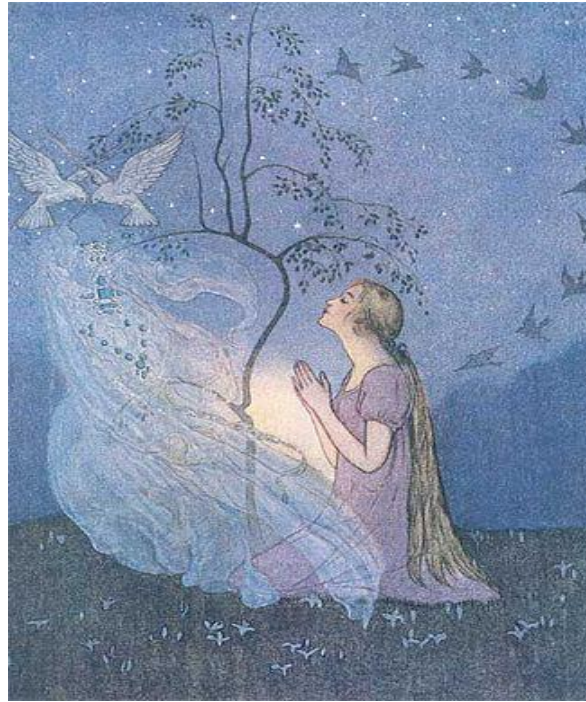


Figure 7: illustration by von Elenore Abbott, 1920

The values were partly based on the religion in which they were raised, the Reformed Calvinism. Zipes in his *The Brothers Grimm: From Enchanted Forests to the Modern World* agrees that it was in part due to their religious beliefs and upbringing that they stressed diligence, industry, honesty, order and cleanliness as the ingredients necessary for success (13). In their efforts to reinforce the patriarchal system, they worked on making all the female characters passive, inferior and without much initiative (Erum 3).

The beautiful, submissive heroines never complain, and they wait patiently for some higher instance or a brave man to help them. Same as Zipes point out in *Don't Bet on the Prince: Contemporary Feminist Fairy Tales in North America*, "Cinderella" plays as passive a role in her story. After leaving her slipper at the ball she has nothing more to do but stay home and wait" (192). This is contrary to Rhodopis who is totally completely unaware that the King is looking for her by in his search for the sandal bestowed on him. In Perrault's classic version of the Cinderella story, Cinderella loses her slipper as she flees from the ball because the prince has covered the steps to the palace in tar, seeking to prevent her from leaving. (The Disney version deviates from Perrault's version by eliminating the story about the tar.) In Strabon's version, however, there is no ball and Rhodopis never meets the pharaoh until after he discovers her shoe. Instead, they are brought together by mere chance when an eagle snatches up Rhodopis's sandal and drops it on the pharaoh's lap. The American classical scholar William F. Hansen notes that versions of the Cinderella story are usually grouped into



two subsets: “western” variants, in which the protagonist meets the prince before losing her shoe, and “eastern” variants, in which she never meets him until after he finds her shoe. The story of Rhodopis as told by Strabon, falls into the category of the “eastern” variants; whereas Perrault’s classic version falls in the “western.”

### **Common Motifs in the Four Cinderella Versions**

As the form of abuse differs throughout the versions, the Cinderellas’ coping with the tough situations changes as well. The “western” versions, namely Perrault's *Cendrillon* and the Grimm brothers' *Aschenputtel* incorporate a strong motif of class distinction, expressed by constantly reminding the reader of Cinderella's inferiority. The Grimm brothers' version, for example, depicts the two older stepsisters in their cruelty towards Aschenputtel as creatures beautiful and "fair of face" (1). Their pale complexion and fine dresses as the symbols of aristocracy are used to emphasize their higher social status and superiority over their youngest sister who was forced to wear "an old grey bedgown" (1). Another significant fact is that in Perrault's, and the Grimm brothers' versions the name of the main protagonist remains unknown, which also indicates her lower status. In the French and German version, she is referred to only by the offensive nicknames - Aschenputtel and Cendrillon, which determine her status among the ashes, dust and dirt. On the other hand, in the Chinese and Egyptian versions the main protagonist's name originates neither from her social position, nor her unkempt appearance, they have ordinary names that have no correlation with their social status in all the versions. The Chinese Cinderella is called Ye Xian and the Egyptian Cinderella of Greek origin is called Rhodopis which means “rose cheeks”. The motif of punishment by giving the girl demanding chores can also be found in the two oldest versions where they are also treated unfairly and are given endless domestic chores that they have to fulfill. Rhodopis works much harder than the other slave girls and similarly, in the Chinese version<sup>4</sup>, Ye Xian’s stepmother makes her gather firewood in the mountains and water in the deep pool.

In the Perrault's version, Cinderella is "employed in the meanest work of the house" (43). She has to scour the dishes, tables and ignominiously clean the luxurious chambers of her stepmother and her daughters. There is a clear distinction that places Cinderella in the position of a maid who serves an upper-class family rather than a member of the family who owns the house. What is more, Cinderella accepts her lower position entirely and does not initiate any

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<sup>4</sup> Duan Chengshi *The Miscellaneous Morsels from Youyang*, a miscellany of folk legends written in the 9th century

resistance so when her sisters teasingly asked her if she would like to go to the ball she replies "Alas! You are only jeering me; it is not for such as I am to go to such a place." (Perrault 44)

In the Grimm's version, Cinderella is not so acquiesced with her fate as in Perrault's version and asks whether she can go on the festival as well, however, her efforts are not successful. What is more, when the domestic chores are not enough, and the stepmother decides to employ a much meaner strategy when Cinderella starts asking for permission to attend the festival and orders her to a humiliating task of sorting out a dish of lentils and ashes. This decision is not only another example of abusing Cinderella as a maid but also an example of psychological torture, since even though she finishes the given task, her stepmother withdraws her permission because "they (stepmother and stepsisters) would be ashamed of her" (Perrault 44).

Another theme shared by the European stories is the necessity of having fine clothes and an adequate appearance which seem to be the most important quality to get a valid pass into upper-class society. The three-days festival in the Brothers Grimm's version, or the ball in the Perrault's version, are presented as prestige social events that everyone desires to be a part of. In Perrault's version the reader can learn that "persons of all fashion" (45) were invited to the King's ball what considerably signifies its exclusivity. From the very moment when the two older sisters find out about the occasion, they become "wonderfully busy in selecting the gowns, petticoats, and hair dressing that would best become them" (45).

In the Grimm brothers' version, the dress is used as a tool of personal control, as if taking all the pretty clothes away from Aschenputtel meant taking away her freedom as well as her social status. The reader gets reminded of the fact that without material support, such as having a fine dress, shoes and other accessories, it is impossible to enter higher society. On the other hand, it is important to notice that while wearing the fine dress, Aschenputtel suddenly becomes a stunning, mysterious, foreign lady once again and even though she interacts with her stepsisters, they would not recognize her due to her magnificent appearance.<sup>5</sup> What is more, she acquires all the necessary manners and civilities of an upper-class lady.

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<sup>5</sup> In the Perrault's version this motif is emphasized even more as putting on "the cloth of gold and silver, along with jewels and a pair of glass slippers, the prettiest in the whole world" (2) does not only mean the moment of becoming the "most beautiful and lovely creature" (3) in the ballroom, thanks to which she deserves "the most honourable seat" (3) chosen by the prince and obtaining everyone's amazement as "there was immediately a profound silence and everyone stopped dancing, and the violins ceased to play" (2).



*Figure 8: Cinderella, from a Berlin edition of Grimms' Fairy Tales, 1865. Color plate*

In the Egyptian version the ball is omitted completely, hence no appearance of Cinderella, no dancing, and no meeting between her and 'Prince Charming'. What we have instead is Rhodopis simply bathing in the river when the falcon snatches her sandal and drops it on the Pharaoh's lap. This puzzles him and leads him to try and find the owner of the sandal. The motif of a magical agent is clear as a sufficiently "supernatural" element in the eagle's (god Horus) unusual aim, of dropping the sandal on the Pharaoh's lap, and this inspires him to seek its owner since she could be the desired wife ordained by the gods (Hansen 86).

In the Chinese version Ye Xian puts on an exquisite dress and golden shoes, granted by the magical fish bone, and attends the festival in secret. When her stepmother and stepsister discover her appearance, she flees back home, losing one shoe on the way. While there are numerous variants of the story, they commonly feature a young woman in unjust and oppressive circumstances whose fortune is remarkably and often unexpectedly changed with the assistance of divine or fantastical elements such as magical animals and fairy godmothers.

As previously mentioned, the Grimm brothers' and Perrault's versions share the notions of exquisite dresses, jewelry, wealth, and luxury along with other crucial elements, specific for a materialistic bourgeois society. What also helps to obtain a complex understanding of the

bourgeois-society value system, particularly in the German version, is the stepmother-character's way of argumentation, trying to persuade her daughter to cut off a piece of their feet in order to fit the slipper. "Cut a bit of your heel, when you are queen, you will no longer need to go on foot". (5) The stepmother profusely emphasizes that once her daughters become members of the higher society, they will no longer need to walk on their feet and therefore they do not to worry need about cutting their heels or toes off, for being a queen probably means eternal comfort without much physical effort and it is rather just lying on comfortable sofas or riding in luxurious carriages. The climax that all the stories share is the moment of meeting, and later wedding of the Cinderella-character with her forthcoming husband. Within all the versions, this male character symbolizes the very moment of reaching an important milestone in all the female-protagonist's unfulfilled lives and in most versions, it also means getting a better social ranking for the formerly underestimated girls.



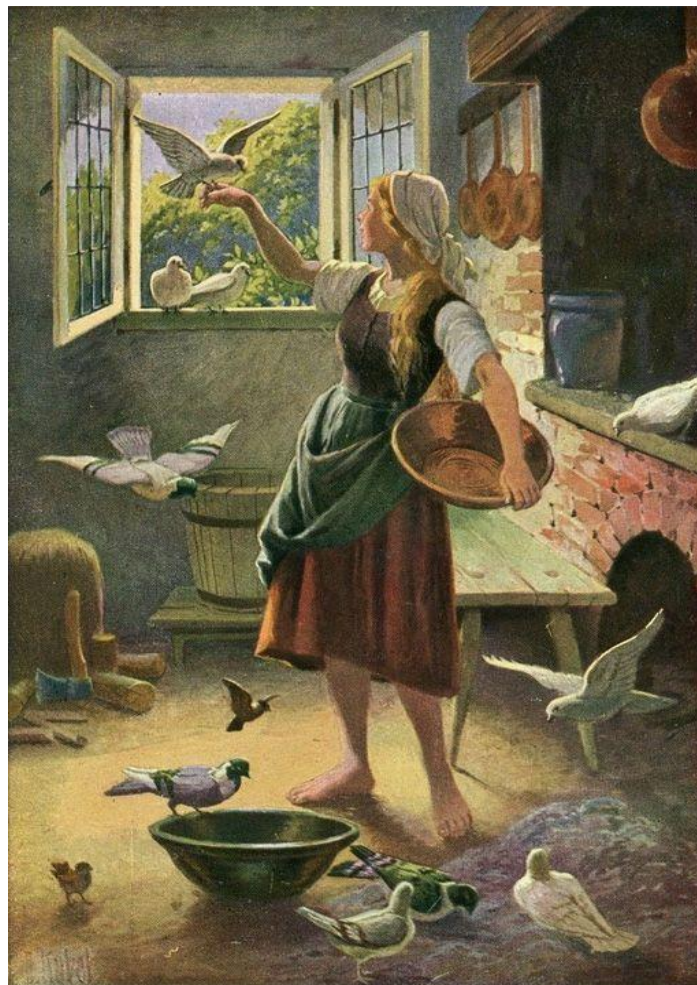
*Figure 9: Cinderella. Guests dancing in the castle in costume, girl surrounded by the king and other men, illustration from Fairy Tale by Charles Perrault, illustrated by Gustave Dore.1867*

Another cultural difference that is vividly brought out when we contrast the Cinderella stories is how different cultures and literary traditions tackle concepts such as life and destiny. Although Ye Xian is honoured with the title of a Royal Lady from the king of Tuohan, the story fails short of giving us the —happily ever after ending a reader often sees in romances and fairy tales. Instead, the author focuses the attention of the story on the fish bones that create miracles and wealth. Here, utility of the fishbone, rather than the romantic element, is emphasized. In addition, the eastern and western texts differ regarding the fates that befall the story's antagonists. The ending of Cinderella in the French text is filled with the beautiful



flare of a fairy tale, —The prince and Cinderella live together happily ever after. The eternal bliss shown by this story reflects the utopian ideal, which allows Cinderella to retain its charm forever from one generation to the next.

In terms of the main protagonist's self-reliance, all the four versions could be put into two separate groups again, the “eastern” tales versus the “western” ones. In the Grimm brothers' and Perrault's version there is a strong notion of some "helping agents" who are crucial for both Cendrillon's and Aschenputtel's accomplishments whereas in the Egyptian and Chinese versions, the ladies are fairly self-dependent.



*Figure 10: Otto Kubel (1868 – 1951)*

In the Grimm brothers' version, it is the birds who play an important role in the story. In my opinion, the birds may not only be identified as Aschenputtel's helpers but also as members of her family, for the birds substitute her dead mother and a father who seems to have abandoned her. Similarly, in the French version, the agents provide her material support when she expresses a wish and the bird "throws down to her what she wishes for" (2). The birds



accompany the young lady throughout the whole story. Same as Perrault's Fairy Godmother, the birds provide Cinderella with the finest dresses and provisions for the festival, however, their most significant intervention is at the end of the story when the prince is struggling to find the right bride. Only thanks to the birds, the prince gets the information that he has chosen wrongly. The story though, does not end with the moment the couple finally meet and declare their marriage. As I have already mentioned the brutality and gore of this particular version closes in exactly the same spirit.

The stepsisters' maliciousness is not forgotten, and they get punished for their vicious behaviour towards Aschenputtel. The punishment is executed by the helping agents - the birds, as they peck out the sisters' eyes and consequently sentence them to a lifelong blindness in addition to becoming severely mutilated for not being able to see or walk normally again. In the Perrault's version the helping agent is represented by the Fairy Godmother who, similarly to the Grimm brothers' birds, provides Cinderella with both material and mental support. Cendrillon, derogated by being unable to visit the ball, is soothed by the Fairy Godmother who may be recognized as a substitution for her biological mother. An example of their mother-daughter relationship is noticeable at the moment when Cendrillon returns home from the ball and eagerly reports her dancing experience to her Fairy Godmother. However, in this part of the story, the magical helper is only in a position of a passive listener. The Fairy Godmother therefore provides Cendrillon with both mental and physical support as she listens to her and uses her magical powers to help poor Cendrillon as she turns a pumpkin, mice, rats and six lizards into a noble coach with horses and a coachman, along with the footmen and finally she turns Cendrillon's nasty rags into "a cloth of gold and silver, all beset with jewels" (Perrault 2), accompanied by a pair of glass slippers, "the prettiest in the world" (2).

While for the Grimm brothers' Aschenputtel the fine dress is enough, the French Cendrillon needs much more than just a dress which indicates the circumstances and a brief background of the time, the fairy tale had been written in. All of these aids are given to Cendrillon under the condition of "being a good girl" (Perrault 2) and leaving the ball before the stroke of midnight. What remains unclear is the reason why the Fairy Godmother as a powerful magical character does not intervene to help Cendrillon much earlier as she must have been aware of the young girl's unkind situation. The Fairy Godmother in Perrault's fairy tale remains portrayed only as a passive listener and an instrument to provide Cendrillon with all the magnificent upper-class support.

In comparison with the classical version of the fairy tale, neither the Egyptian, nor the Chinese interpretation include such helping agents as the birds or the Fairy Godmother. On the contrary, the main female protagonists from both the non-European tales are portrayed as strongly self-sufficient and self-reliable. Focusing on the elements that might substitute the main protagonist's biological mother's love within the two latter stories, one can liken such attributes to Rhodopis's garden overlooking the River Nile where she seeks sanctuary and surrounds herself with her animal friends, similar to Aschenputtel and her birds. Also, the garden is a source of envy to the other slave girls for it is there that Rhodopis's graceful dancing enticed her master to buy her the pretty sandals which eventually led to her marrying the King. If compared with the remaining three Cinderella-characters though, she does not seem as unhappy for she is fortunate to have a loving father figure in her life which is missing from the other versions. In her peaceful life she does not need any prince who is supposed to rescue her from some kind of misery. From all the four protagonists, the Egyptian Rhodopis is portrayed as the toughest, the most self-reliant and bravest Cinderella-character. She does not dispose of any friends or companions, and she suffers from great humiliation and severe pain, yet she is still strong enough not to give up and carry on with her courageous decision and determination which consequently brings her the happiness she desired.

## **Conclusion**

Fairy tales, much like all expressions of human creativity, undoubtedly merit careful consideration. Among them, Cinderella stands out as particularly charming and timeless. No other story is as cherished in the Western world, and it is likely that its unique significance in the hearts and minds of both women and men will persist for many generations. This article challenged the widely accepted lineage of the Cinderella story "Basile–Perrault–the Brothers Grimm–Disney," suggesting that the notion of Cinderella as "the people's princess" is more complex than previously thought and gave evidence of the origin of this fairytale in Ancient Egyptian folktales, namely the story of Rhodopis as the early version of Cinderella. The study also explored the changing representation of Cinderella across various cultures, and examined differences in story types, the protagonists' family backgrounds, social standings, and personalities to demonstrate the evolution of Cinderella's image over time.

The unique interface central to fairy tales—representing both individual and local identities alongside a collective narrative heritage—has long made them an exceptional medium for exploring and contemplating the significance of belonging to a larger community. Today, in an era of cultural homogenization fostered by our late industrial and globalized society, the

urgency to recover the narrative remnants of local heritages has become even more pronounced. This is not driven by a mere nostalgia for preserving the past, but rather by the hope that the cultures that birthed these traditions can reclaim their unique vitality and continue sharing their life-affirming stories. These tales can provide insights on the types of behaviors that may lead to a happy ending, both for individuals and for the broader community. They also invite reflection on whether a "happily ever after" is truly attainable in the end.

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