

Gender Roles and the Princess in American Literature and Society

The Disney characters that proliferate American culture encapsulate the traditional princess character in illustrated children's books published in the United States. Sleeping Beauty, Cinderella, and Snow White were, and in many cases still are, the popular princesses that sell. However, their influence has not remained unchallenged. Starting in the 1980's, picture books such as *Princess Smartypants*, *Cinder Edna*, and *The Paper Bag Princess*, began to include princesses who defied traditional gender roles. Yet, much like the readers who buy these stories, these princesses never completely transcend the traditional plot and personality of a princess. Through plot structure and development that is intended to challenge cultural norms, the characters unavoidably reinforce some aspects of traditional gender roles. Due to a variety of factors such as beauty, assertiveness, modesty, desire for marriage, and reliance on magic to solve problems, these stories present a range of characters with reversed gender characteristics. Thus, while these books are important because they serve as a cultural counter-weight to

traditional princess tales, they are also a part of a general system that maintains gender roles because even when they challenge their traditional roles, they are unable to fully transcend the restrictions of their gender.

Children's books are an important aspect of American culture because they reflect the changing values within American society. The books parents buy their children, and the messages that they send, impact the way children accept or reject particular ideologies. In picture books, the characters "embody societal values and provide a means to observe shifts in such values... [They] are a major means by which children assimilate to culture."¹ Thus, books are a way in which culture is reflected. This is not to say that they always embrace dominant culture. However, these stories are important because they are both a reflection of cultural change and a means by which change is created.

Since books like *Princess Smartypants* and *Cinder Edna* are reactions to traditional fairy tales, they are in some ways defined by their ability to reverse the archetype. An example of the tra-

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Figure 1. Cinderella, as illustrated by Kevin O'Malley in Ellen Jackson's 1994 illustrated children's book, Cinder Edna. Her distant gaze and immersion beneath the blankets, indicate her passive nature. She appears sullen, yet unable to assert change upon her situation without the help of others. This is an example of the princess prototype.

ditional form and character in a princess story is Cinderella. Although this tale is not unfamiliar, the moral behind the story is a reflection of an outdated notion of gender roles because it enforces passivity. For example, Cinderella patiently waits for the harassment of her mother and stepsisters to end. She is submissive, complying with their demands. Only magic is able to get her to act differently. Although she does finally speak up and demand to have the slipper tried on her foot, the prince has to come to her first. Finally, she is rescued from being her family's maid and lives "happily ever after"

only because the prince saves her. The values that these stories seek to impart on young girls, such as the importance of beauty, passivity, and submission support what is known as the feminine beauty ideal. This ideal is characterized by "the socially constructed notion that physical attractiveness is one of women's most important assets, and something all women should strive to achieve and maintain."² The princess is saved because of her beauty, despite, or perhaps even partially due to, her passivity.

The traditional princess, however, is not always reflective of the ideas girls

have. This is manifested in the girls in Ella Westland's 1993 study, which demonstrates the love/hate relationship that exists between children and fairy tale princesses. In her study, she asked both boys and girls to draw their "favourite character from Snow White, Sleeping Beauty, or Cinderella."³ Surprisingly, although many girls — *had indulged in painting princesses, the girls were almost unanimous in denying that they would want to be princesses themselves....What came across strongly in many of the girls' comments was the desire for independence. No-one was prepared to admit that the 'best thing' about being a princess was having a prince to protect you.... The children saw princesses and princes as representing more extreme versions of the gender models they experienced themselves: princesses had the most negative associations of girlhood...*⁴

The reactions of these 9-11 year olds demonstrate that while many girls enjoy fairy tales, they are also able to realize the implication of the gender roles within the stories. Though the children in this study were older than the target age group for most picture books, their reactions demonstrate the impact that fairy tales have on their notions of gender. Their dislike for the princesses specifically because they are not independent characters demonstrates that children are ready for princesses that break the gender ideal. This might represent a new trend, because just as these books are relatively recent in challenging gender roles, girls have not always been exposed to these ideas.

The first American author to directly challenge the archetypal princess and sell millions of books was Robert Munsch, who reversed the roles of the prince and princess in *The Paper Bag Princess*. According to Munsch, the inspiration for the story was a comment from his wife, who worked at the same daycare as him, and said, "How come you always have the prince save

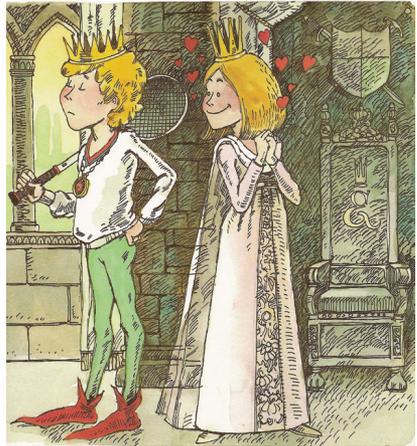


Figure 2: Elizabeth as depicted by Michael Martchenko in *The Paper Bag Princess*. She is originally shown as a traditional princess who loves and adores her prince. As the picture illustrates, with her dress, crown, and love-struck hearts, she is originally identified as a typical princess in the illustrations and text.

the princess? Why can't the princess save the prince?"⁵ This basic inquiry became the basis for a story that encourages young readers to ask the same question.

Munsch starts by introducing the main character, writing, "Elizabeth was a beautiful princess. She lived in castle and had expensive princess clothes. She was going to marry a prince named Ronald."⁶ In these three sentences, Munsch establishes information that indicates the traditional princess pattern. She is praised as beautiful, rich, and she desires to marry. Like Cinderella or Sleeping Beauty, at first Elizabeth seems to fit the traditional princess mold. This sets the reader up to believe that he/she will be hearing a more traditional story.

However, when the dragon burns down her castle and carries away her prince, she switches places with the traditional prince and becomes the hero. It becomes her job to rescue Ronald, and he, like the traditional

princess, must be saved. This reversal is the basic plot structure that allows the reversal to occur. Elizabeth's role as "the prince" is not, as it might seem, absolute. For example, her first problem is that her clothing has been burnt by the dragon's fiery breath. Her modesty, typically seen as a feminine virtue, requires that she find clothing instead of pursuing the dragon naked. Elizabeth "look[s] everywhere for something to wear, but the only thing she could find that was not burnt was a paper bag. So she put[s] on the paper bag and follow[s] the dragon."⁷ In this scene, Elizabeth rejects her gender role by wearing a paper bag instead of a fancy frilly dress, but is unable to fully reverse her place because she cannot wear nothing at all. The paper bag, which now serves as a marker of her reversal and acceptance of her presupposed role, will follow her throughout the book and creates the paradox upon which the title of the book *The Paper Bag Princess* is based.

Elizabeth then traces the dragon to his cave to find Prince Ronald. Although this task is described as "easy,"⁸ Elizabeth's intelligence is later proven by the clever way in which she lulls the dragon to sleep. She tricks him by appealing to his ego and asking him questions like, "Is it true...that you can burn up ten forests with your fiery breath?"⁹ and instructing him to repeat actions, like burning forests, over and over until he wears himself out. Here Elizabeth again acts contrary to her presupposed role. She uses intelligence and perseverance, two characteristics of a traditional prince, to beat the dragon. However, this scene can also be seen as an example of Elizabeth using her feminine charms to flatter the dragon. Therefore, in outsmarting the dragon her role in the story is reversed, however in a way it still conforms to the traditional cultural norms.

After the dragon falls asleep, Elizabeth is able to save Prince Ron-

ald. At this point in a traditional princess story, they would have kissed and married "happily ever after." However, Elizabeth's transgression of her role as the princess is evident to Prince Ronald. It is so apparent, in fact, that he proceeds to scold her for not behaving and appearing as a princess should. In his directions for her to "come back" later when she is ready to act like a real princess, he implies that he is not as upset about Elizabeth transgressing her gender role and saving him as he is about her not looking beautiful while she does it. His views represent the stereotypes of a typical prince, and he insinuates, correctly so, that the archetypal princess is, above all else, valued for her beauty. Elizabeth directly counters him with a strong argument that reflects her character. She says to him, "your clothes are really pretty and your hair is very neat. You look like a real prince, but you are a bum."¹⁰ In her address to Prince Ronald, Elizabeth asserts her authority, which reverses not only her role in the story, but the ending of a traditional fairy tale too.

In critiquing the work of authors like Munsch, Deborah Thacker notes that these stories are often not as thought provoking or complex as they could be. She says,

*In most cases, these texts merely switch roles around but retain the stereotyped features of male and female characterization, so that strength, activity, and triumph are still opposed to passivity, beauty, and gentleness. In this way books that attempt to act as a corrective only impose another way of thinking and reading conventionally, rather than challenging readers with a new way of approaching gender or inviting them to question the imposition of socially constructed modes of behavior.*¹¹

In relation to the plotline, this critique seems to fit. Elizabeth is the triumphant savior and Prince Ronald becomes the beautiful yet passive victim. However when this analysis is applied to the way in which the charac-

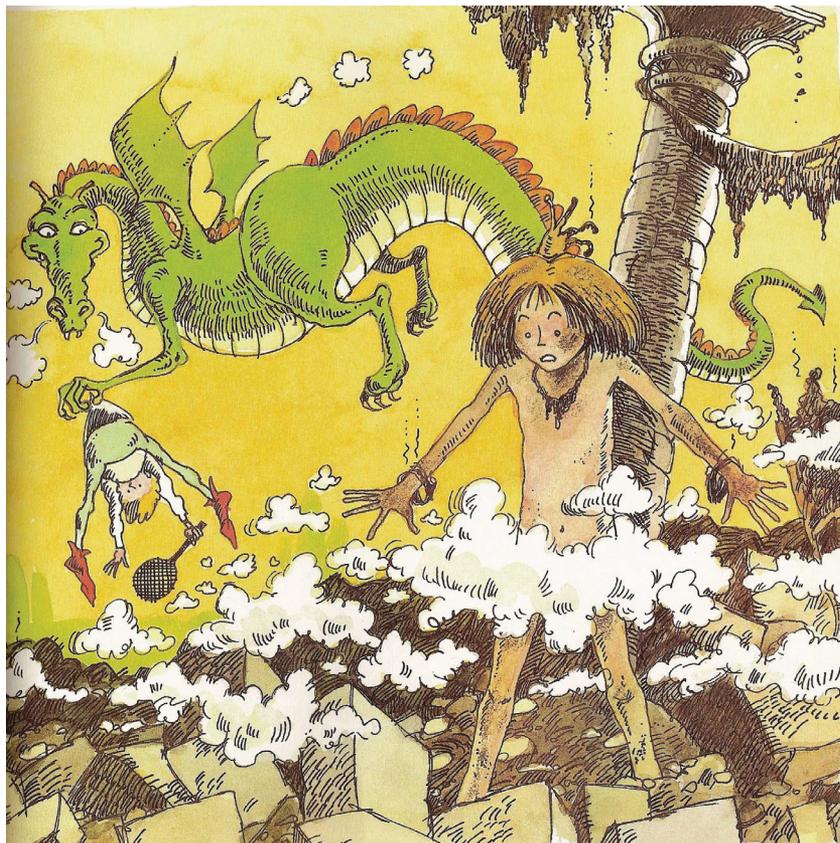


Figure 3: Elizabeth as depicted by Michael Martchenko in *The Paper Bag Princess*. She is shocked, yet unlike the typical Cinderella she decides to fight for the prince she desires. However, first she needs to put on her paper bag, because she is unable to fully transcend social precedent and save him unclothed.

ters operate it fails to correctly explain their complex behavior. For example, Elizabeth is assertive when she knocks on the dragon's door until he finally hears her speak, but she also tricks the dragon with flattery, which is a meeker approach to dragon slaying than the typical sword. Furthermore, even prince Ronald, whose masculinity is reduced because he is called "pretty,"¹² demonstrates assertiveness when he commands Elizabeth to "come back."¹³ Thus, while the plot of *The Paper Bag Princess* does preserve passive and ac-

tive roles that are hegemonic, the dialogue demonstrates that the characters are much more complex than their reductive roles might otherwise indicate. One explanation for this phenomenon is that the author kept the basic gender roles intact but reversed them in order to create a comic effect. By preserving the basic premise of a traditional fairy tale, Munsch creates a story that is familiar enough to challenge young readers without alienating them.

One of the first books with a similar princess to follow *The Paper Bag*



Figure 4. *Princess Smartypants*, as illustrated by Babette Cole in her 1997 children's book. In the picture she is unkempt and in a dirty room, which conveys the image of her as atypical for either a prince or a princess.

Princess successfully in publication was Babette Cole's *Princess Smartypants*. Unlike, Munsch, however, Cole did not write a story that reversed the gender role so obviously within the story. Whereas *The Paper Bag Princess* is easily identified as a reversal story, because it reverses the characters' places within a traditional plot, *Princess Smartypants* is different because the princess is initially identified as atypical for either role. This does not mean, however, that her reversed role is less apparent. For example, the first line of the story identifies clearly that she is not going to act like a princess because she does "not want to get married."¹⁴ Thus, in this way, Cole's approach to the nontraditional princess is much more straightforward than Munsch's, who initially depicts Eliza-

beth as an average princess before he breaks the traditional conventions.

Cole does not dismiss the conventions entirely. On the second page she describes *Princess Smartypants* and applies the marks of the traditional princess to her. She is "very pretty and rich, all the princes wanted her to be their Mrs."¹⁵ These descriptions are in contrast with the first statement in the book, because the description of her beauty and wealth align her with the traditional princess. In contrast to Thacker's criticism, which argues that these stories problematically maintain "the stereotyped features of male and female characterization,"¹⁶ Cole starts the story by creating the framework for *Princess Smartypants* to be both beautiful and triumphant. Furthermore, as the title *Princess Smartypants* im-

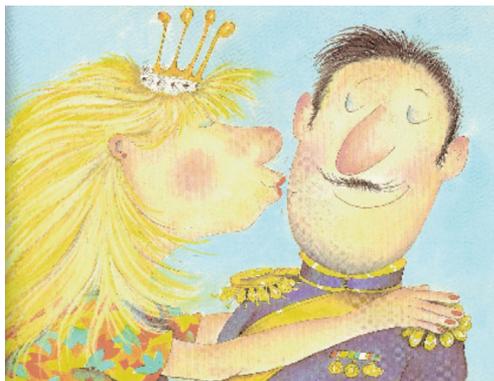


Figure 5. *Princess Smartypants* kissing the prince, as illustrated by Babette Cole in her 1997 illustrated children's book *Princess Smartypants*. Although the princess is depicted as a tomboy wearing overalls earlier in the book, when it comes time for her to kiss the prince she becomes more feminine. By depicting her as a typical princess, Cole is setting the viewer up to believe that the kiss will end in her marrying the prince.

plies, she is also allowed to reverse the mindset of the traditional princess by being strong-willed. Thus, from the beginning, Cole creates characters that are complex mixtures of the polarizing sets of gender characteristics usually seen in princess tales. In this sense, although her characters challenge the dominant culture, they also at times reinforce it.

Princess Smartypants fulfills her name when she cleverly outwits the usual authorities within a princess book: her parents and her suitors. She does this by creating challenges that the prince must complete before they can enter into a marriage that she clearly dislikes but that her parents insist on having. While some of these tasks, like rescuing her from a tower made of glass, have roots in traditional tales, others, like riding a motobike and roller-disco, are challenges that are unique to *Princess Smartypants*.¹⁷ In these ways her character becomes increasingly complex. Although she still relies upon the traditional idea that whoever completes the tasks can marry her, she is unique because she creates the obstacles herself instead of having them imposed on her. Likewise, the princes who are vying for her attention have originality because they are not trying to save *Princess Smart-*

ypants from any evil, rather they are submitting to the conditions she created in an attempt to win her heart. In these ways, the book is structured so that the plot is reminiscent of, but not entirely conformant to, the traditional plot of a princess tale.

In accordance with a typical plot, a prince eventually appears who is able to complete the seemingly impossible tasks. Then, like a traditional princess, *Princess Smartypants* kisses him,¹⁸ an act that normally would lead to a marriage and a happily ever after ending. The expectation that she marry the prince is nevertheless rejected because her "magic kiss"¹⁹ turns him into a toad and he leaves. This break with the conventions is key because it explains that *Princess Smartypants* is not only more clever than the prince but also is independent. Furthermore, her happy ending demonstrates that despite the expectations of the people surrounding her, even a beautiful, rich princess does not need to marry to be happy. However, her reliance on magic to escape marriage, despite her determination and wit, is a regression in behavior reminiscent of a traditional princess. Again, the structure of the story indicates that even a strong princess cannot reverse all the conditions that culture places upon her.

Although Princess Elizabeth and *Princess Smartypants* did not marry their princes, some authors have allowed their princesses to embrace the traditional role and marry. One such author is Ellen Jackson whose Cinderella spoof, *Cinder Edna* follows two neighbor girls who face similar problems. Whereas the other books did not directly mention the princess model that their heroines opposed, her book directly addresses the problems with the traditional princess by comparing her to a more modern princess. The plot, which tracks the lives of Cinderella and Cinder Edna, has the two princesses progress through the same challenges at the same time.²⁰ In this parallel, Cinderella represents the traditional princess in the conventional role, and Cinder Edna is presented as a new, reversed alternative that is Cinderella's complete opposite.

Unlike the characters in *The Paper Bag Princess* and *Princess Smartypants*, Cinder Edna is not immediately defined by the characteristics that typically mark a princess, like beauty and wealth, although her counterpart Cinderella is. While Cinderella is "quite beautiful"²¹ and behaves passively, sitting "among the cinders to keep warm, thinking about her troubles,"²² Cinder Edna is defined and depicted as a completely different type of girl. Cinder Edna is described as "strong and spunky"²³ and the narrator admits that Cinder Edna, unlike Cinderella, "wasn't much to look at."²⁴ Thus, from the beginning, the namesake of the story, Cinder Edna, is a foil to Cinderella, and is unlike her in every way. The structure of this story, which posits the two characters as opposites, one thriving on the princess tradition and one rejecting it, offers to show by example that a princess need not be passive or pretty to achieve a happy ending.

One key difference between the characteristics embodied by Cinder Edna is initiative. Unlike Cinderella,

who relies on the customary fairy godmother to fix all of her problems for her, Cinder Edna, "[does]n't believe in fairy godmothers."²⁵ Instead, she relies on the money she has saved by working after her chores are done to buy her own dress and take a bus to the ball.²⁶ In a reversal of the archetypal plot, she decides to take control of her own fate. However, like Princess Elizabeth and *Princess Smartypants*, she is not a complete reversal of a typical princess. She is still marked as feminine because she is depicted wearing a dress at the ball and is asked by the prince, instead of asking him herself, to dance. In these ways, even though she is set up to be Cinderella's opposite, Cinder Edna does not fully transgress her cultural role.

Another way in which the plot of *Cinder Edna* reinforces cultural hegemony is in her marriage at the end of the story. Even though she is happy to marry, because Cinder Edna uses marriage as a way to escape her "wicked stepmother and stepsisters,"²⁷ it reinforces the old message that marriage is the only way a princess can escape a bad situation. This is problematic because even for Cinder Edna, who is hard working, strong, and witty, marriage is the only solution to escaping her oppressive family. Why is it that she cannot first conquer them and then marry? One possible reason is the structure of the story. Since Cinder Edna's situation needs to parallel that of Cinderella throughout the story for the gimmick of the spoof to be complete, a break in the plot would challenge the story's form. Thus, although Cinder Edna's character and personality seem to completely reject the archetype of the princess, the way she escapes her stepmother and stepsisters reinforces the notion that a princess is saved only through her marriage to a prince.

The reversal structure within these stories is one way in which the dominant idea of the princess is challenged.

As they demonstrate, even books with a structure designed to oppose a hegemonic norm can at times reinforce the very positions they intend to challenge. Like humans, the princesses in these stories they can neither completely escape, nor completely reverse, the culture that surrounds them and

the expectations placed upon them. It is this realistic quality that makes characters, like *Cinder Edna* or *Princess Smartypants* rich and relatable figures. By conveying a message, and working within the dominant discourse, these princesses are able to challenge the stereotypical princess.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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