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While generally praising Walt Disney’s technical contributions to animated film, critics have been troubled by the studio’s treatment of classic children’s literature and fairy tales. In a famous attack over 25 years ago, Sayers blasted Disney for showing “scant respect for the integrity of the original creations of authors” and treating folk texts “without regard for [their] anthropological, spiritual, or psychological truths. Every story is sacrificed to the ‘gimmick’ [of animation]” (602). Her complaint specifically addressed a tendency to “dummy down” source material by eliminating psychological conflict: “Disney falsifies life by pretending that everything is so sweet, so saccharine, so without any conflict except the obvious conflict of violence” (609).

More recently, this pattern, which Schickel calls “Disneyfication” (225), has been criticized on ideological grounds for reinforcing and/or contributing to dominant patriarchal and capitalist systems. For instance, Stone charges that Disney’s adaptations of *Snow White* and other “classic” fairy tales “amplify . . . the stereotype of good versus bad women” already present in the source material, offering heroines who “seem barely alive” and villains who are invariably female (44). Dorfman observes a neocolonial plundering of folklore and children’s literature in the service of Disney’s “average North American image” (24). So pervasive is Disneyfication that, as Zipes has noted, the Disney method has become the prototype for most film adaptations of fairy tales (and one might extend this to children’s literature in general) made by other studios, all mass-mediated vehicles which co-opt fairy tales’ subversive potential and convert it to the service of corporate capitalism (113–14).

Much Disneyfication, at least in the era of Walt himself, was evidently conscious; the filmmaker admitted that he sought out simple stories and simplified them further to create “nice” children’s films. In *Pinocchio*, for instance, Disney intentionally narrowed the story to create a more cohesive plot and altered Pinocchio’s character from that of a delinquent to “a well-meaning boy who was consistently led astray by conniving characters” (Thomas 26); this sanitized hero was judged more acceptable
for children. Disney himself acknowledged his preference for the morally simple over the complex:

I look for a story with heart. . . . It should be a simple story with characters the audience can really care about. They've got to have a rooting interest.

That was the trouble with Alice. There we had a classic we couldn't tamper with; I resolved never to do another one. The picture was filled with weird characters you couldn't get with. (Thomas 22)

The conscious effort to produce children's movies with no alarming moral ambiguities contributed to such well-known Disney signatures as the ubiquitous cute animals, either as adjuncts to the film's main characters (Snow White, Cinderella) or as anthropomorphized protagonists (Robin Hood, Oliver!). Less noted signature traits of Disneyfication include the use of dogs and cats as moral compasses and the imposition of generational conflict, absent from the original, which is always satisfactorily resolved, restoring family order (Sleeping Beauty).

Walt Disney is dead but his successors have followed and magnified the pattern he created for animated film. All of the characteristics described above are present in the studio's adaptation of The Little Mermaid; as one film critic noted, "we have seen before . . . funny animal friends, a handsome prince, a grotesque villainess and her less funny animal friends" (Lloyd). Peter Schneider, Disney animation chief during the production of The Little Mermaid, says that "people have been trying to figure out what Walt would have done and to hold on to his tradition" (Solomon 273), and in Mermaid, as successful a commercial product as any of Disney's early triumphs, the studio appears to have identified "what Walt would have done." Schneider attempts to argue that Disney tradition was to innovate constantly; in effect, he denies any sameness to Disney products under Walt. But a Disney studio style for animated features was noted as early as Dumbo in 1941 (McReynolds 788) and Disney animator Ron Clements, who originated the Little Mermaid project in 1985, acknowledged that he tried to make the melancholy original more upbeat (Flower 177), just as Disney himself had done.

Disney's Little Mermaid thus appears to be a classic example of the corporate appropriation of an originally creative work of art. According to Zipes, the culture industry transforms works of imagination into "commodities within a capitalist social-economic system . . . [so that] cultural objects appear to possess a life of their own beyond the control of the actual creators" (96–97). This co-opting of image and narrative is not value-neutral, but encodes ideological messages that may create a false
picture of reality (Zipes 102). It is thus advisable to consider the ideological basis and effect of alterations made between Andersen’s tale and the Disney film.

In the Disney adaptation, the elements of the fairy tale remain recognizable, but superimposed are typical elements of Disneyfication and a happy ending that contravenes the moral intention of the original tale. McReynolds, faulting Disney for playing a Pollyanna-ish “glad game,” has argued that the typical ending of a Disney film denies evil’s reality: all wicked characters are banished, leaving a world “in which kindness and sympathy always prevail” (787–88). However, Disney’s animated films do not so much deny the reality of evil as present a Manichean world of moral absolutes in eternal warfare, from which—in the Disney version—good always emerges triumphant. This is especially true of The Little Mermaid.

Andersen’s mermaid is driven to the surface world by two complementary but separable impulses: a romantic/erotic desire for the handsome prince whom she rescues from drowning in a shipwreck and a moral desire, privileged in Andersen’s telling, to attain a soul with the promise of an afterlife. Romantic desire is frustrated when the prince marries a human whom he wrongly believes to have been his savior, but the mermaid has a chance to resume her original form if she will abandon both erotic and moral quests and slay the prince. She rejects this opportunity, however, throwing the knife with which she was to stab the prince into the sea as the sun, which will bring her death, rises. Rather than dying, the little mermaid miraculously becomes an ethereal spirit and is told by fellow spirits:

“If for three hundred years we earnestly try to do what is good, we obtain an immortal soul and can take part in the eternal happiness of man. You, little mermaid, have tried with all your heart to do the same. You have suffered and borne your suffering bravely; and that is why you are now among us, the spirits of the air.” (76)

Her willingness to sacrifice the happiness she has pursued through excruciating pain and very real dangers provides a second chance at immortality. Even though the romantic/erotic narrative is frustrated, the “higher” narrative of moral progress remains a possibility—is, in fact, enhanced by the mermaid’s refusal to destroy another life.

Andersen, too, has been accused of saccharine sentimentality, as this synopsis of the fairy tale’s Christian moral may suggest. But the Disney version accentuates the most sentimental and romantic aspects of the story at the expense of its moral and psychological complexity. Like previous
Disney adaptations, *The Little Mermaid* provides wish fulfillment without true sacrifice and neatly encapsulates all “bad” desires within a figure of female evil.4

The Manichean world view requires an active principle—in the original heresy, Satan—who is responsible for all evil effects. In Disney’s film, this principle is embodied in the sea witch Ursula, a repulsive half-woman/half-octopus who parodies the adult sexuality denied to Ariel herself. Ursula’s character allows a streamlining of plot and characterization such as commonly occurs when texts are converted into film, defensible on the basis of generic convention. This defense, however, ignores the manner in which the character absolves Ariel of all responsibility for her own actions, simplifying the psychological and moral problem of desire and reconfirming the pattern of female stereotyping that Stone observed in early Disney products.

Ursula’s ancestor, the sea hag, appears only once in Andersen’s fairy tale; while she is undeniably evil, she acts only upon direct petition. His mermaid, having conceived her dual desires for human form, seeks transformation on her own volition; the sea hag grants it “for it will bring . . . misery” but warns her that it will involve great pain:

“Your tail will divide and shrink, until it becomes what human beings call ‘pretty legs.’ It will hurt; it will feel as if a sword were going through your body. . . . [E]very time your foot touches the ground it will feel as though you were walking on knives so sharp that your blood must flow. If you are willing to suffer all this, then I can help you.” (68)

The other conditions of transformation also involve suffering. In becoming human, Andersen’s little mermaid takes an irrevocable step; whatever the outcome of her romantic quest, she cannot return to the sea and her family. If she fails to win the prince’s love, she will die, thereby failing also to gain a human soul, which can only be received through that love. Her death will then be permanent. Finally, she must give up her voice to the sea hag by having her tongue cut out.

The Disney version purges these elements of pain. There is no physical pain associated with Ariel’s transformation, as there is in Andersen; she experiences momentary hesitation at leaving her father and sisters, but separation anxiety is quickly overcome when Ursula conjures the image of handsome Prince Erik. While the price of transformation remains the loss of her voice, Ariel does not suffer physical mutilation; the voice is transferred to a shell from which it can later be released and returned to its rightful owner.

The most marked change, however, comes through a reversal of the
active center of the mermaid’s relationship to the sea hag. Andersen’s mermaid conceives of the transformation herself and must pass through deadly obstacles to reach the sea hag; the hag tells her of all the drawbacks to the scheme, then—at the mermaid’s insistence—gives her a potion to be taken only when safely on land. The dangers and pain are all generated by the mermaid’s own desire; the sea hag assists, but does not actively plan for evil to befall the mermaid.

Ariel’s desire in the Disney film is more innocent, in itself carrying little risk. Ursula’s plotting brings on everything. The sea witch is introduced as she observes Ariel watching the human world and plots how to use the mermaid’s fascination with humans to revenge herself on Triton. Ariel only comes to Ursula at the instigation of the witch’s servants, the moray eels Flotsam and Jetsam, and it is Ursula who proposes that she win her prince by becoming human. Ariel lives in a fantasy land that ignores the incompatibility between species; not until the sea witch plants the idea in her head does she imagine a literalization of her girlish infatuation. Ariel, not the witch, brings up the separation from family that will accompany the transformation, and Ursula’s temptation is needed to overcome her hesitation. They sign a contract that is clearly reminiscent of a pact with the devil, a comparison driven home by Ursula’s display of her collection of damned souls, each one shrunken into misery after failing to fulfill his or her bargain with her.

If Andersen’s sea hag is evil, she also sticks by a bargain. She leaves it to the mermaid to win her prince or to fail in the attempt. While Andersen’s mermaid undergoes transformation when she has safely reached shore, Disney’s Ursula effects Ariel’s transformation while the mermaid is still at the bottom of the sea, putting her at risk of a drowning that would quickly negate the deal—immediate evidence that the sea witch has been bargaining in bad faith. A quick end to the mermaid’s quest is only prevented when Ariel’s sidekicks Flounder and Sebastian rush her to the surface.

Andersen’s prince never imagines that he has been rescued by the mysterious, mute girl who appears soon after he escapes the shipwreck. In the film, Erik immediately suspects Ariel’s identity and is thrown off track only by her inability to speak, which means she cannot be the one who sang so beautifully after pulling him from the sea. Nevertheless, Erik seems about to fall for Ariel and is prevented from bestowing the magic kiss only by Ursula’s eels, who overturn the boat in which the prince and the mermaid are sitting. When Erik is about to abandon his imaginary savior for life with Ariel, the sea witch again intervenes, disguising herself as a beautiful woman and using Ariel’s stolen voice
to convince the prince that she is his destined lover. Despite her evident beauty and the conclusive evidence of the voice, Ursula must hypnotize Erik to keep him from Ariel, so strong is the former mermaid’s attraction.

Contrast this to Andersen’s tale, in which the mermaid’s erotic prospects never have a chance of fulfillment and the prince weds a mortal woman. The romantic failure of Andersen’s mermaid may be seen as the inevitable heartache of human love, a heartache Andersen knew firsthand: she is destined not simply to be rejected, but to be ignored by the object of her desire. In Andersen’s tale, there is no external agent to blame; the mermaid seems, before her final transfiguration, to be the tragic victim only of her own desires.

Ariel never has to face the consequences of her choices. As in Disney’s *Sleeping Beauty*, even the conflict between parent and child proves illusory; order is restored through the discovery that parent’s and child’s wishes are the same. Triton himself makes Ariel human so that she may marry Erik, who has destroyed the sea witch, the source of her real troubles. The marriage takes place aboard a ship, an intermediate locale that negotiates between the land world of humans and the undersea world of the merfolk; father and daughter are not really separated, as the newly-weds sail off under Triton’s rainbow, escorted by merfolk. The evil principle has been purged through the joint courage of human and merfolk.

One might ask, “What is wrong with Disney’s transformation?” It could be argued that Andersen’s subtle moral tale is too complex to be grasped by most children, that children in fact need the reassurance of the conventional happy ending that Disney imposes. Niels and Faith Ingwersen have argued that the film’s focus on the conflict between good and evil, while sacrificing the transcendent theme of the original, is “nevertheless truer to the folktale struggle between good and evil than Andersen’s tale is” (415). They do, however, find the introduction of a strongly evil female power “troubling” and note a shift from a predominantly matriarchal world in Andersen’s tale to a strong patriarchy in the film. Cravens, whose difficulties with the Disney film in some ways parallel mine, describes how she was “troubled” by aspects of the original tale when she first encountered it at age four or five. But this was counteracted by a sense of connection:

> even though her trials seemed intolerable, I felt as though the deepest part of my nature were being addressed by a sincere friend, and I was satisfied and uplifted by the ending without understanding the reason. (638)

This dimly understood sense of connection, I submit, is what the Disneyfied story, with its insistence on a “happily ever after” marriage plot, inevitably sacrifices.
Disney's conclusion certainly offers a more conventional happy ending than Andersen's original, reflecting a narrative and psychological urge to create apparent harmony that Bausinger has named "Märchendenken" or "fairy-tale thinking" (17). As an individual tendency of mind, Märchendenken has certain risks, but it also serves the useful psychological purpose of instilling hope. When embodied in the mass-mediated Disney form, however, the Märchendenken of The Little Mermaid poses social hazards.

Disney's manipulation of original material is a matter of special concern because of the studio's marketing machine, which enables Disney product to command consumer attention through interlocking movie, TV, book, record, and toy products. Thus Disney versions of "standard" fairy tales tend to usurp the originals. The version of Cinderella most familiar to adults of my generation is Disney's adaptation of Perrault; the image of Snow White is likely to be Disney's cartoon heroine. As "classic" texts are Disneyfied, more of children's literary legacy becomes endangered.

In popular consciousness, Alice in Wonderland is a Disney creation, though Disney himself thought the film a creative failure. In toy stores today, you can find many teddy bears that look like Disney's Winnie-the-Pooh but will search fruitlessly for one resembling the original Shepard illustrations for Milne's books.

The merchandisers' work on The Little Mermaid should be self-evident to anyone who has visited a toy store recently. The film itself grossed $76 million in its initial release, at the time establishing a record for an animated film (Flower 229). In an unprecedented move for Disney, The Little Mermaid was released on videotape within a year of its theatrical release, as the company's increasingly savvy marketing people responded to comments of those leaving the theater after seeing the film (Flowers 292). Even after the releases of Beauty and the Beast and Aladdin, which promise to eclipse the earlier film in profits and spin-offs, shelves remain filled with Little Mermaid dolls, clothing, books, tapes, records, bath toys, etc. Product spin-offs continue to be introduced to an as-yet-un-saturated market.

The ideological content of children's films, like that of children's literature in general, should have a particular interest for us because it both reflects the pervasive world view of its producers and contributes to the formation of its viewers' own world view more strongly than does adult literature, thus influencing the ideology of the next generation. It is the perception of this ideologic influence that accounts for so much of didacticism that pervades children's literature.

Faced with the near-certainty that the Disney derivative will replace
the Andersen tale in popular consciousness, then, it is important to understand the moral ideology that shapes the film. The elimination of moral complexities reflects both Walt Disney's original moral vision, formed in the Depression and World War II and continued today by successors who imbibed "the Disney version" in their own childhood, and the conservative American ideology of the 1980s, when The Little Mermaid was developed and released. The film encourages a pervasive world view that sees malignant evil, not human fallibility, as the chief source of conflict; a similar world view can be seen in former President Reagan's characterization of the (pre-glasnost) Soviet Union as the "Evil Empire" or President Bush's more recent transformation of the Gulf War from a geopolitical conflict into a crusade against the person of Saddam Hussein.

In a Manichean world, one party to any conflict must always be "bad," the other "good"; insofar as we are conditioned to see ourselves as good, this perspective encourages conflict, since we can always justify our own actions, however terrible they may seem when deprived of the moral conviction that ends justify means. Those who oppose us become figures of evil, each "another Hitler," rather than normal human beings who, like us, pursue national or personal self-interests. In this Disneyfied world, there is no reason for diplomacy; the proper way to deal with an Ursula is to destroy her, not to negotiate.

As my brief discussion of The Little Mermaid should indicate, Disneyfication not only homogenizes individual creations into a simplistic narrative sameness, but eliminates the moral complexities of the original text. The child who reads Andersen's fairy tale has experienced a world in which desires have consequences that may be painful, where wanting something badly enough to suffer for it need not make it happen; the child who views the Disney film experiences a world in which bad things only happen because of bad people, where desire is always fulfilled. Such moral simplification increases the likelihood that these children will become adults who find the causes of their unhappiness in personalized, "evil" antagonists—a sure formula for continued conflict.

Notes

1 However, Schickel warns of "the folly of overinterpreting essentially innocent popular culture material in the light of any ideology—political, psychological, religious, or even literary" (166). Such criticism will rebound on the critic and leave the popular culture unaffected. Forewarned of my folly, I will yet proceed.
I am not aware that this aspect has been observed before, but almost inevitably, “good” characters in Disney cartoons are either dogs or dog-lovers. Cats, on the other hand, tend to be vicious, and cat-lovers are evil or morally obtuse, like the aunt in *Lady and the Tramp* who locks Lady outside and fails to recognize when Tramp saves the baby. There are some exceptions to this latter characteristic (*The Aristocrats*, the eponymous hero of *Oliver!*), but none that I can think of for the positive moral value of dogs. Ursula’s villainy in *The Little Mermaid* includes kicking Prince Erik’s loyal dog, and Erik’s goodness is shown when he risks his life to rescue the dog.

In my analysis of *The Little Mermaid*, I am probably guilty of what Rollin calls “the classic elitist position: a distrust of anything mass marketed for children and a confidence that one’s educated personal judgment can decide what is best for others” (91). But she acknowledges that much of the Left’s critique of Disney is on target, calling Disney’s fairy tales “opiates . . . that tell us just what we want to hear”; the elitism lies in deciding this is wrong, she says (91).

“It’s a film about sacrifice in which nobody has to sacrifice anything they weren’t all ready to. All misfortune finally accrues to the villainess. . . . Ariel herself remains absolutely static except for having changed her place of residence. She leaves the film the same wacky, willful kid as when she entered. Nobody learns a thing” (Lloyd).

Note that while the resolution of Andersen’s tale requires that the Little Mermaid refrain from the taking of life, Disney’s version can only reach closure through the violent deaths of Ursula and her henchmen, the eels. In Andersen’s story, the sea hag disappears from the tale after her transformative function has been accomplished.

“As capitalism, it is a work of genius; as culture, it is mostly a horror” (Schickel 18).

An illustration: I recently used Anne Sexton’s “Cinderella,” which is based on the Grimms’ version of the story, in my introduction to literature class and asked students to identify changes the poet had made in the fairy tale. All of the students pointed to details like the stepsisters’ cutting off parts of their feet and the birds’ pecking the stepsisters’ eyes out as authorial inventions, even though these details appear in Grimm. Their conception of the true Cinderella corresponded exactly to the Disney version.

Works Cited


