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Amanda K. Allen

No matter how your heart is grieving,
if you keep on believing,
the dream that you wish will come true. (David et al.)

The 1950 release of Disney's *Cinderella* liltily informed girls across the United States and Canada that their dreams would come true—if they kept on believing. The release of the film echoed a Cinderella zeitgeist already prevalent within the booming American postwar economy. What it also echoed, however, was a newly developing fairy tale novel—relatively forgotten today—that was produced and distributed by a powerful female network, and aimed specifically at the newly-minted postwar/Cold War teenage girl consumer. I call these novels “commodity tales.”

This article is an attempt to articulate the parameters of these postwar/Cold War commodity tales. My argument falls into three parts. The first culls from the sociohistorical work of two folk and fairy tale scholars, Jack Zipes and Elizabeth Wanning Harries, in an attempt to situate commodity tales as late capitalist tales within the fairy-tale genre. The second part of this article focuses on two representative commodity tales, *Going on Sixteen* (1946) by Betty Cavanna, and *Rosemary* (1955) by Mary Stolz, and examines them as Cinderella case studies. *Going on Sixteen* focuses on one year in the life of Julie Ferguson, a farm girl with a passion for art and dogs who feels alienated from her high school society. *Rosemary* revolves around high school graduate Rosemary Reed's attempts to assimilate into the college society from which she has been continually excluded. I couple these Cinderella case studies with Pierre Bourdieu's theories of taste and distinction to reveal the magical power embedded in the commodity tale protagonists' purchase of and belief in the “Right

Dress.” The third part of the article turns to Luce Irigaray’s theory of women as commodities to demonstrate that the inclusion of the “Right Dress” within these commodity tales fosters both a female rivalry and a paradoxical alternative to patriarchy.

“*Breaking the Spell*”: *Zipes and Harries*

In numerous studies, Jack Zipes proposes that the method for grasping the meaning of folk and fairy tales is to break the “magic spell of commodity production” (20), and to scrutinize tales in relation to the myriad sociohistorical forces that generate them. While the folk tale may feign timelessness, Zipes proposes that it is an aspect of a “pre-capitalist people’s oral tradition” (27) and, as such, depicts the struggles and contradictions of feudal society. The fairy tale, conversely, conveys a transition from feudalism to early capitalism by applying folk tale characteristics to new tales, thereby reflecting the customs, ethics, and civilizing needs of a rising bourgeois class. By appropriating elements of the folk tale, the fairy tale becomes a wholly new genre that expresses the struggles and ideology of early capitalism.

This movement from folk to fairy tales is by no means as simple as my brief summary of Zipes’s argument suggests, nor does it operate in one direction only. Still, the myth of timelessness that surrounds folk tales continues to affect our reading of fairy tales today. In *Twice Upon a Time: Women Writers and the History of the Fairy Tale*, Elizabeth Wanning Harries argues that there are two types of fairy tales: “compact tales,” the well-known, canonical forms based on the writings of Perrault and the Brothers Grimm; and “complex tales,” the noncanonical, forgotten tales that were written by seventeenth-century society women—the *conteuses*—and which have existed as long as the canonical tales. Intriguingly, Harries’ explanation for the exclusion of complex tales from the fairy tale canon stems from both the gender of the writers and the orality of folk tales. She refuses the convention, forwarded by the Brothers Grimm in particular, that fairy tales are written records of the folk tales of a preliterate tradition, and instead argues that the supposed orality of compact tales is an invented simulation. Thus, unlike their famous male counterparts, the *conteuses* who first popularized the complex tales refused the nostalgia inherent in transcribing a mythical folk tale tradition. Instead, they created their own tales, focusing on their present historical moment, and including subplots and frame narratives. As a result, “the style, length, and timeliness of their narratives do not fit the ideology of the fairy tale as it has been constructed in the last three centuries” (Harries 24). Harries thus cracks open the folk

and fairy tale canon to allow for versions that have been forgotten or excluded. This opening, coupled with Zipes's emphasis of the temporal nature of the folk and fairy tale continuum, allows for the exploration of a twentieth-century fairy tale: the "commodity tale."

American Commodity Tales: 1940s–1960s

Commodity tales—the American fairy tales of the late capitalist period—are a subgenre established in the young adult literature of the postwar/Cold War era that appropriates earlier folk and fairy tale elements to advance a formula of consumerism. Commodity tales were novels aimed specifically at white, American, teenage girl readers during the 1940s to late 1960s. The most representative of these texts include novels by Maureen Daly (*Seventeenth Summer*, in particular, may be cited as the wellspring for this genre), Rosamund Du Jardin, Anne Emery, and Amelia Walden. While contemporary book reviews and journal articles esteemed texts written by Mary Stolz as the critics' preferences, library surveys focusing on a teenaged girl readership suggest that novels by Betty Cavanna were the readers' favorites.¹

Like much young adult fiction intended for females, commodity tales function to teach girls how to become women. Many of the novels possess similar characteristics, most notably an attractive female teenage protagonist, loving but lenient parents, a complexly hierarchical high school social sphere, and a "first love" encounter with implied future marriage. Unlike their series novel contemporaries (Nancy Drew, Donna Parker, etc.) commodity tales do not adhere to a strictly predetermined framework of characters and plots. Moreover, while many of the series novels were produced through a male-run, Henry Ford-style production line, the community that produced the commodity tales was almost completely female-run.

As a twentieth-century variation of Harries' *conteuses*, the commodity tale community was a now mostly-forgotten network of professional women, embodying what Betsy Hearne calls a "matriarchal enclave within a patriarchal system" (773). This female network was composed of authors, editors, illustrators, literary agents, librarians, booksellers, and critics, all of whom worked together to produce and distribute their commodity tales. Their power was paradoxical: they had little to no control over the supposed female "suitability" to service occupations or to work with children, yet those very elements enabled them to attain their positions. The devaluation of children's literature and its accompanying services, coupled with the gender of its practitioners, allowed these women to retain a power contrary

to their subservient status. What allowed them to create the commodity tales was the structure of their professional community: it was not linear, it was not a movement from author to editor to librarian to teenager. It was, instead, a network of interaction, in which each movement made by a member (whether she was an editor, an author, or a librarian), created a reverberation perceived by other members of the community.

That the network was comprised almost exclusively of women does not necessarily mean that it was feminist. Its heyday occurred in the lull between first- and second-wave feminism, during that postwar time in which women were reminded of their “duty” to return to their homes. Still, the network may be considered as generally pro-women, employing and mentoring an essentially female publishing sphere and distributing dozens of books aimed specifically at teenage girls. For the purposes of this paper, I will focus specifically on two representative texts from the many commodity tales created and distributed by this network: Betty Cavanna’s *Going on Sixteen* (1946) and Mary Stolz’s *Rosemary* (1955).

Cinderella: A Commodity Tale Case Study

To demonstrate the dominant tropes of the commodity tale genre, I will examine *Going on Sixteen* and *Rosemary* through a case study of the Cinderella tale. Iona and Peter Opie claim that Cinderella is “the best-known fairy-story in the world” (117), possessing at least seven hundred variants (121). Dominant tropes inevitably emerge from these many versions to form a Cinderella “essence.” Jane Yolen summarizes these dominant Cinderella motifs as “an ill-treated though rich and worthy heroine in Cinders-disguise; the aid of a magical gift or advice by a beast/bird/mother substitute; the dance/festival/church scene where the heroine comes in radiant display; [and] recognition through a token” (298). Disney’s 1950 film, *Cinderella*, likely the most influential twentieth-century version of the tale, certainly includes each of these tropes: a Cinderella as a servant girl, saintly in her friendships with birds and mice; a magical “biddi bobbidi boo”-ing fairy godmother; a royal ball; and a tiny glass slipper. But how do the film’s contemporaries, the commodity tales, use these tropes?

To clarify my argument, it is necessary to first present a brief summary of each commodity tale. The main plot of Betty Cavanna’s novel is relatively simple. *Going on Sixteen* focuses on the high school career of Julie Ferguson, a motherless girl who lives with her father on the family farm, Deepdale. The beginning of the novel focuses on Julie’s first dance, the Freshman Frolic. The dance becomes a social disaster for Julie, forcing her to recognize her inexplicable fall down the high school social hierarchy,

and leaving her lonely and insecure. She withdraws from that society and spends most of her time sketching the collie pups who board at her farm. In an effort to purchase her favorite dog, Sonny, Julie secretly attempts to sell her drawings to a Philadelphia publishing house. She is rejected, but her future as an artist is established. Sonny is sold, and Julie learns to showcase her new artistic talents at school. Eventually Julie and Sonny are reunited, and Julie learns the lesson of self-acceptance.

Mary Stolz's *Rosemary* is a slightly more complex narrative. Pretty but poor Rosemary Reed lives with her working-class father and sister in a college town. Unable to afford college, she is embittered by the town-and-gown distinction that seems constantly present in her life. An invitation to the college dance provides Rosemary with the hope that she and her sister, Lenore, may finally be accepted by the college crowd. When the dance ends disastrously, Rosemary is slowly forced to admit her class position.² *Rosemary* also includes subplots surrounding Helena Williams, Rosemary's high school rival who now attends the college, and Sam Lyons, a college student who boards with the Reeds while surreptitiously writing a thesis about their social position.

Depending on which folk or fairy tale version one chooses, Cinderella aspects are easily observable in both *Going on Sixteen* and *Rosemary*. These include the dead mother, the somewhat absent father, and the hope implicit in the dance/festival/church scene. Metafictional references to the fairy tale are also provided in both texts. In *Going on Sixteen*, Mr. Lonsdale sees Julie wearing a gown that once belonged to her mother, and hails her with "hello, Cinderella" (Cavanna 11), to which she retorts, "the shoe didn't fit . . . I wear size six and a half" (11). While waiting for her date in *Rosemary*, the protagonist observes that "the whole thing feels sort of like Cinderella, doesn't it?" (Stolz 9). Her sister, Lenore, replies: "Well, darling, you're a step up on Cinderella as far as I'm concerned. You did it all yourself. No assistance from fairy godmothers" (9–10).

Lenore's comment is telling: where these commodity tales differ from many fairy tales is in the nature of the magical help and tokens of recognition needed to gain access to the higher class. There are no magical fairy godmothers to help Julie and Rosemary, nor are the protagonists given gifts by beasts or birds or dead-mothers-present-in-trees. The magical force, however, remains present in the form of money, because money can be used to purchase the magical token of recognition: the Right Dress. In each of these commodity tales, it is the purchase of the dress, and the protagonists' hope placed in that dress, that parallels the glass slipper (or gold ring, or whatever acts as the token) through which recognition and eventual acceptance by the dominant society is granted.

Here Pierre Bourdieu's theories of taste and lifestyle in *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste* are particularly helpful in understanding the magical role that the dress plays in these commodity tales. Bourdieu attempts to demonstrate that power relations within society often operate through processes other than repression. Wealth, as the basis of power, can be cloaked through conversions of capital, and can therefore exert its power lastingly through the guise of symbolic capital. Where this disguised power affects the protagonists of the commodity tales is in regard to aesthetics. The relations of symbolic power place different aesthetic temperaments into a hierarchy, so that supposed inequalities such as talent or taste are legitimized as "natural," thereby consecrating social difference. Yet this conversion of economic capital into symbolic capital, and the consequent naturalization of aesthetic temperament, requires the complicity of all agents. This complicity is partly based on the habitus—the residue of an agent's inherited class past that functions below the level of consciousness, and which shapes all perception in the present—and its impact on the drive to acquire symbolic capital. The symbolic capital itself, however, possesses only an arbitrary value, yet that very arbitrariness is "misrecognized" because of the habitus' shaping of perception. Thus class differences are legitimized under the guise of individual taste or ability, and cultural consumption serves to defend and entrench social difference.

In Bourdieu's terminology, the Right Dress could be renamed the Legitimate Dress. It is the token of recognition that advocates form over function, which is legitimated by the dominant class and which, as a result, can never be held by the protagonists. Once the Right Dress is achieved by the dominated, it will no longer be the Right Dress. Still, the protagonists, as members of the dominated class, can never recognize their inherent inability to achieve the dress. Rosemary regards her dress as the gateway to the college society from which she has been continually denied:

She saw herself floating—flying—over a dance floor in her flame-colored dress among the college people. They would whisper and say, "Who is she? Who is that lovely girl, and where has she been till now?" Now everything began. She and Lenore would get to know people at the college. Girls—it was possible—would stop by of an evening for a Coke and gossip. And boys—well, Jay was enough. (Stolz 8)

In Julie's imagination, similarly, the Right Dress allows her access to the popular crowd:

She could see herself at the party, vivacious in the plaid dress, popular. Not only Dick, but lots of the other boys wanted to dance with her. She was able to think of the cleverest things to say! She was the Julie Ferguson she *felt*, not the one she seemed to other people. It was very gratifying to be a success. (Cavanna 29)

The Right Dress is no guarantee of social success, but its existence suggests hope. The dress is “seeming” instead of “being,” a social bluff designed to allow the wearer to trick her way into the dominant society. Bourdieu notes that “since the surest sign of legitimacy is self-assurance, bluff—if it succeeds . . . is one of the few ways of escaping the limits of social condition” (253). Thus the magical power of the Right Dress is to escape from domination; to *appear* as a dress that would be worn by a member of the dominant class, thereby winning the recognition of that class and legitimizing both itself and its owner.

Furthermore, that magical power is something that can be felt, viscerally, by the protagonists. In her article, “Commodity Fetishism and Commodity Enchantment,” Jane Bennett studies the ways in which customers experience a feeling of power from the purchase of commercial items. She notes the “sense of vitality, the charged-up feeling, that is often generated in human bodies by the presence or promise of commodity consumption.” In the commodity tales, this “charged-up feeling” acts as consumer enchantment. It provides the magical excitement of finding the Right Dress and the related triumph of performing the bluff.

In this “seeming” as “being” bluff, the very fabric of the Right Dress becomes of utmost importance: it provides entry into the dominant society for the protagonists, but inevitably reveals that bluff to members of the dominant society. Technically, the fabric of Julie’s dress—cotton—is acceptable, but the print separates her from the popular crowd. While Julie’s friend Anne, a popular girl, wears an all-white dress, Julie’s dress is “a plaid gingham . . . there was a deep blue in it, and a rust red, and a lot of tan and white.” Julie admits that “gingham was something she had worn half her life” and describes the tan as the same color “as the sable in Scarlet’s coat” (Cavanna 27).³ Both the gingham print and the colors within it represent Julie’s farm life, and separate it from the cosmopolitan monochromatic colors of the town girls’ dresses.

The bluff of Rosemary’s dress, on the other hand, is demonstrated by its fabric: “‘Nylon acetate,’ the saleswoman explained, taking a size twelve from the rack. ‘Looks just like a slubbed silk, doesn’t it?’” (Stolz 7). Nylon was a relatively new fiber⁴ during the postwar period. Its original classification as “artificial silk,” coupled with its greater availability and cheaper price, meant that it could never attain the prestige accorded to silk. Thus although Rosemary’s dress may *appear* like silk, the fact that it is made from nylon acetate automatically defines it as a bluff. It cannot be accepted by the dominant society, and neither can she by wearing it. In fact, one can argue that the Right Dress is what I term a *double bluff*: an attempt by each girl to trick her way into the dominant society, and a

simultaneous self-bluff of hope, a self-deception that swindles the protagonists into believing in the bluff's power.

Although both Julie and Rosemary place great faith in their dresses, Bourdieu is clear that their bluffs must inevitably fail. By aiming too high, by "exhibiting the external signs of a wealth associated with a condition higher than their own" (252), the girls battle against innumerable social agreements that are "designed to regulate the relations between being and seeming" (252). And, indeed, each dress fails its wearer. Julie is not a brilliant social success, but rather a shy girl pasting a smile on her face. Rosemary is snubbed by the college girls and briefly assaulted by her date. The enchantment fails; neither dress fulfills its role as magical token of recognition. Poignantly, neither girl is able to understand *why* the dress must fail. Moreover, as members of the dominated class, that particular knowledge must always be withheld from them.

The Right Dress must inevitably fail as a token of recognition for two reasons. First, both protagonists lack intimate knowledge of the social codes that define taste. As a form of cultural capital, taste is used as currency to exhibit or attain higher rank in the social hierarchy. In its simplest form, it is the acquired ability to differentiate. Since its acquisition is based on the habitus, however, Rosemary and Julie, as members of the dominated class, can never possess the taste of the dominant class. Thus when Rosemary arrives at the dance and compares her dress with those of the others girls'—"it really was pretty, just as pretty as any, and nicer than some" (Stolz 19)—she cannot know that no matter how attractive her dress may seem, it will not work her hoped-for magic.

The second reason for the failure of the Right Dress lies in its role as the token of recognition. As such a token, it is paralleled with the glass slipper or golden ring of the Cinderella folk and fairy tales. The difference, however, is that while Julie and Rosemary are both members of the dominated class, most folk and fairy tale Cinderellas belong to the dominant class. As Jane Yolen states:

"Cinderella" is *not* a story of rags to riches, but rather riches recovered; *not* poor girl into princess but rather rich girl (or princess) rescued from improper or wicked enslavement; *not* suffering Griselda enduring but shrewd and practical girl persevering and winning a share of the power. (296)

The crucial meaning of the token of recognition, then, is that it only recognizes members of the class *for which it was produced*. Cinderella is a member of the dominant class; thus, the glass slipper is used to identify her status as such. Rosemary and Julie, conversely, are members of the dominated class. They may try to gain entry to a higher class through their uses of the double bluff, but ultimately both of their dresses—as

self-purchased tokens of recognition—must identify them as citizens of the dominated class, and therefore exclude them.

The Double Bluff and Female Consumer Agency

Despite its failure, however, the double bluff remains an essential component within these texts, acting as the commodity tale version of magical elements found within folk and fairy tales. Jack Zipes examines such magic: “The miraculous talents—the magic—are symbolic of the real hidden qualities which [the protagonist] himself possesses, or they might represent the collective energies of small people, the power they actually possess” (31). The miraculous talents that Julie and Rosemary seemingly possess are the forces of late capitalism: the power to purchase the Right Dress. Yet such power is problematic in *Going on Sixteen* and *Rosemary*. The concept of a bluff suggests both intent and subsequent ability to act. The expression of such agency through consumption is subtly undermined, however, during the shopping task. Although each girl acts in her own self-interest in purchasing her dress, both Cavanna and Stolz seem to suggest that such acts demonstrate a hubris for which the protagonists must be punished.

Rosemary’s dress costs thirty dollars, well over the price she can afford. Her desire for it is so strong, however, that she impulsively spends the money, disregarding her family’s needs. Rosemary guiltily confesses her extravagance to her sister, Lenore, then induces Lenore’s help to convince their father that the dress is “shopworn enough” to cost only ten dollars. Rosemary’s consequent failure at the dance and eventual submission to her class status underscore her hubris in purchasing the dress, and, by the end of the novel, seemingly punish her for it.

Cavanna’s treatment of supposed female hubris is slightly more forgiving than Stolz’s. Unlike Rosemary, Julie is given both permission and money to purchase her new dress. Her response, however, is that of fear: she is apprehensive about the money and intimidated by the salesclerk, who “was so smartly gowned that she frightened Julie” (Cavanna 26). Julie’s inability to control her situation is highlighted by the continual interference of Mrs. Sawyer, the affluent mother of Julie’s popular friend, Anne:

For her own part, [Julie] had thought some of the dresses the sales girl had brought out were beautiful—especially a pale-pink organdy with roses on the skirt.

On the way to the Corner Shop she murmured, timidly, “That pink organdy. . .”

But Mrs. Sawyer would have none of it. “Sleazy material,” she pronounced. “And far too old for a high-school freshman.” (26)

Julie eventually buys her dress, but it is Mrs. Sawyer, again, who reminds Julie that her dress is incomplete without new shoes to match. Julie's hopeful assumption that she possesses the power to purchase the Right Dress is therefore undermined by the removal of her control—that is, by eliminating her ability to choose the object of her purchase, and by instilling a fear of the shopping task.

In these novels, the undermining of agency appears to be directly related to gender. It suggests that the over-reaching of female characters cannot be allowed; that although they may attempt to act in their own self-interests, their gender precludes class mobility. Amy Billone's article, "The Boy Who Lived: From Carroll's Alice and Barrie's Peter Pan to Rowling's Harry Potter," may be helpful in understanding such gendering. Billone makes a compelling case that within children's literature "girls still cannot confidently make the voyage to dreamland and back again; this power seems to be the privilege of male characters alone" (191). She acknowledges that Wonderland is completely driven by women's fury, and that the anger embedded in Alice's gender means that she cannot survive there. Eventually Alice's "own anger, which corresponds to her physical growth, explodes the entire dreamworld" (184). Similarly, while the male children in *Peter Pan* are able to forget reality and live comfortably in Neverland, it is Wendy who acts as the disturbing element and who provides the ultimate reason for the Lost Boys' return home to reality. In Billone's final case, the Harry Potter books (up to the fifth book), the females are consistently divided into two categories: those who exist in the real world of logic and do not dream (Hermione Granger, Minerva McGonagall, and Dolores Umbridge); and those who exist in a "loony" dreamland (Luna Lovegood, Sibyll Trelawney). The point here is that while the main male characters can easily navigate between reality and dreamworlds, comfortable in both, the female characters remain fixed in one or the other.

Although there is no direct relationship between female characters navigating between dreamworlds and reality in children's fantasy literature and Julie and Rosemary's attempts at the double bluff within the commodity tales, Billone's examination is nonetheless useful if one imagines the dominant society within the commodity tales to be something of a dreamworld for the protagonists, while their dominated society remains entrenched in reality. The gendering of class mobility becomes readily apparent in this comparison. Whereas attempts by Julie and Rosemary to purchase the Right Dress and to infiltrate the dominant class must necessarily fail, the male characters in each novel are easily able to navigate between the two types of class.

In *Going on Sixteen*, Julie's farming neighbor and childhood friend, Dick Webster, feels comfortable both working as a farmhand for Julie's father and going to parties and dances with the popular high school crowd in town. Although Rosemary feels embarrassed by Reg's low-class status throughout most of *Rosemary*, by the conclusion of the novel the blue-collared Reg is well-accepted and even respected by the members of the college fraternities. Sam Lyons, similarly, may hail from a moneyed fraternity house, but boards at the Reeds' house and is accepted by Rosemary's family and friends. Stolz emphasizes his ability to be accepted in contrast to Rosemary:

He held himself in that self-assured, relaxed manner that only those born to self-assurance could communicate. . . . it made him at home anywhere. And it made Rosemary, who felt so terribly excluded and constrained in unfamiliar atmospheres, nervous and hostile before he'd so much as rung the bell. (Stolz 80)

Helena Williams, Rosemary's female foil, also fails to travel between the classes. While Rosemary attempts to gain access to the dominant class, Helena—who went to high school with Rosemary, but who is wealthy and attends the college—recalls a failed attempt to extend a high school friendship into her current life. Furthermore, she blames this failed friendship solely on the distinction between the classes: the town versus gown division prevalent around her. Unlike the male characters, then, the female characters of the commodity tales follow the children's fantasy literature pattern perceived by Billone: their gender prevents them from traversing classes. Any agency that Julie and Rosemary demonstrate through their belief in and purchase of the Right Dress is therefore revealed to be impossible: as females, they will never be allowed the class mobility granted to their male counterparts.

Girls on the Market

Despite this gendered division of agency, however, these commodity tales accomplish a surprising twist to traditionally perceived postwar gender roles. What appears to be a lack of female agency may, instead, mask a version of a semi-autonomous female society that lies within patriarchy while remaining somewhat separate from it. Luce Irigaray's theory of women as commodities helps us to better understand this alternative society created by the female characters of *Going on Sixteen* and *Rosemary*. In "Women on the Market," Irigaray suggests that the use, consumption, and circulation of women constitute the basis of a purportedly heterosexual society. Women provide the unknown "infrastructure" of this society: their otherness

smooths relations between men and stimulates exchanges of other forms of “wealth.” While women function exclusively as “products” and are thus prevented from participating in their exchanges, men provide the “work force,” exempting themselves from such transactions. A woman’s value is therefore determined entirely by her status as a product of man’s “labor,” and such value can only be perceived during the operation of exchange. Her body is split into two types: the natural body and the socially-valued exchangeable body. The exchange value is added to the natural body, subordinating the natural as a nonvalue. The exchange value itself is not the property of a woman, but is rather a representation of the desires of at least two (male) exchangers. A woman’s “development” ultimately exists in the passage from natural value to social value.

Although Irigaray does not directly refer to a particular stage in her description of female development, I would speculate that she is gesturing toward adolescence. The implications of such a gesture are troubling, since a girl’s physical maturation would therefore coincide with the devaluation of her natural body and the elevation of her exchange value. If one of the purposes of the commodity tales is to teach girls how to become women, then Irigaray’s theories suggest that these novels teach both the devaluation of a girl’s natural body and an accompanying celebration of the male recognition of her body as a desirable object. In these books, to achieve womanhood is to perceive the body only in terms of its use to men; that is, as a socially-valued exchangeable object.

Regarding the relations between women, Irigaray states: “Uprooted from their ‘nature,’ [women] can no longer relate to each other except in terms of what they represent in men’s desire, and according to the ‘forms’ that this imposes upon them” (188). *The Right Dress* constitutes the physical manifestation of female attractiveness—of the “form” that has been imposed on Julie and Rosemary by their patriarchal society. It places all significance on the visual, stressing the shape of their bodies over other perceivable elements. As self-imposed packaging, the *Right Dress* is an advertisement that is purposely developed and promoted, but whose reason for existence must remain unknown and unquestioned. This packaging becomes, moreover, an attempt to encourage competition between female characters, for, as Irigaray states, “the interests of businessmen require that commodities relate to each other as rivals” (196). The narrative framework of *Rosemary* reflects this rivalry in that the foundation of the secondary plot is the competition between Rosemary and her foil, Helena Williams, for first Jay Etting, then Sam Lyons, and, in Helena’s recollection, for a boy they knew in high school.

For Julie, this rivalry is the source of loneliness and alienation from the other girls at school, girls with whom she used to be good friends:

For some reason Sidney and Anne and some of the other girls seemed to be growing away from Julie. Even when she tried, it was hard for her to put her finger on how this was being done. There were just a lot of little things—a difference in the way the girls walked, a new shrillness to their voices when any of the boys happened within earshot. (Cavanna 22)

The girls' obvious preoccupation with boys foregrounds their movement from natural bodies to socially-valued (by men) bodies. In this early section of the novel, Julie attempts to join them in this transition, to become part of the group by ameliorating her physical appearance for men, and by purchasing a dress intended to enhance that facade. It is unsurprising that Julie chooses fabrics that Mrs. Sawyer denounces as "sleazy," and "too old for a freshman" (26), since Julie is hoping that her dress will invest her with the visual sensuousness of a body she thinks is desirable to men. In terms of color, Julie gravitates toward white, the color associated with her friend Anne. It is a desire she recognizes as dangerous within the context of their ever-present—albeit unacknowledged—female rivalry.⁵ Regardless of their competition, however, Julie longs for the white dress not merely for its aesthetic value, but because it is *Anne's* color.

Julie's longing is a start toward fulfilling Irigaray's vision of a society in which women are not the exchangeable commodities in relations between men. Regarding such a society, Irigaray questions: "*But what if these 'commodities' refused to go to 'market'?* What if they maintained 'another' kind of commerce, among themselves?" (196). The female societies in both *Going on Sixteen* and *Rosemary* provide an imperfect solution to these questions. The girls remain the products of men's transactions, but they also initiate their own society—the female dominant class. Such a class is both subordinate to and reliant on the male dominant class, but its power is the result of female *desire*.⁶ Julie desires Anne's dress color because Julie wants to be part of the female dominant class. The fundamental objective underlying the Right Dress and its place within the double bluff is not the aspiration to gain entry into the male dominant society, but to become an associate of the *female* dominant class. The girls are used as commodities, exchanged between their fathers and lovers (there's a reason that neither protagonist possesses a mother in these novels), but implicit within those transactions is a paradoxical cry to share a female society. Thus Julie desperately wants her Right Dress, on her body, to attract boys like Dick, but that attraction is simply her tool for accessing the female dominant class ruled by Anne and the other popular girls. Rosemary, similarly, perceives the physical attraction Jay Etting demonstrates toward her body as her entry

into the female dominant class in which girls from the college “would stop by of an evening for a Coke and gossip” (Stolz 8). Rosemary’s dream of belonging is almost entirely female-oriented:

She wanted to sit, on a winter’s night, as girls must be doing this moment, pajamaed ridiculously like the girls in ads, crowded into one lovely bedroom, eating things out of bakery boxes and drinking coffee and talking, talking. . . . *Rosemary, want some more cake? Rosemary, could I borrow your yellow jacket? Rosemary . . . Rosemary . . . Rosemary. . . .* (122)

Of course, this female dominant class can never exist in isolation. Its hierarchy remains dependent on the symbolic capital controlled by the male dominant society. In this sense, Rosemary’s double bluff does not completely fail. Her Right Dress does enhance her physical attractiveness to Jay Etting, which should theoretically allow her access to the male dominant society, and through it, into the female dominant society. However, her failure stems from her refusal to fulfill her role as a commodity and to provide her body to Jay Etting, satisfying his suggestion that she had been “practically begging for it all evening” (26). The result of her decision is that she is barred from entering the female dominant society, and the remainder of the novel describes her attempts to accept her dominated status.

The residual plot that follows Julie’s failure is somewhat more positive. Like Rosemary, Julie wants to be part of the female dominant class, and attempts to use the double bluff to achieve this desire. Her double bluff fails, but Julie triumphs by the novel’s conclusion. The difference between the two protagonists lies in their symbolic capital: Stolz keeps Rosemary trapped within Irigaray’s cycle of commodity exchange, denying her the ability to possess or access any kind of capital; Cavanna, conversely, endows Julie with artistic talent, accompanying symbolic capital, and the freedom to use that capital to remove herself slightly from her role as a commodity. It is not a full removal; Julie is still exchanged between her father and Dick Webster, but her artistic capital wins her a poster competition (and an accompanying five dollars), leads her to become chairman of the school poster committee, art editor of the school newspaper, and, ultimately, a member of the dominant female class. Her achievement is symbolized in the final pages of the novel by her inability to fit into her original Right Dress:

It was the same dress—the plaid gingham—the only long dress Julie had. It was going on two years old now—and Julie was going on sixteen. She had to draw in her breath when she fastened it under her left arm. (219)

Neither the female dominant society in *Going on Sixteen* nor its counterpart in *Rosemary* lies far enough outside the influence of the male dominant

societies to fulfill Irigaray's utopian vision, but both provide a starting point, a hint, a suggestion of an alternative.

Remaining Questions

This article has attempted to articulate the parameters of postwar/Cold War commodity tales. These late capitalist, young adult novels relate to folk and fairy tales in their focus on social interaction and class struggles (coupled with utopian dreams), but their magical force is provided solely by money. Applying Pierre Bourdieu's theory of distinction reveals the magical power embedded in the (purchased) token of recognition, the Right Dress, and demonstrates that its enchantment is the result of a double bluff to gain dominance: a bluff over both the dominant and the dominated. The double bluff's inevitable failure raises questions of agency, and suggests that female class mobility is both impossible and punished if attempted. Adding Luce Irigaray's theory of women as commodities exposes the double bluff as a form of packaging that encourages rivalry between female characters. Paradoxically, it also suggests an imperfect alternative to patriarchy, in which a subordinate—yet still semi-autonomous—female dominant class, based entirely on female desire, coexists in relation to the ruling male dominant class.

One question that remains, of course, is whether or not the girl readers of the 1940s and 1950s perceived the double bluff or the struggles between male and female societies within the commodity tales. That they recognized the symbolism of the Right Dress seems likely, particularly considering the proliferation of contemporary films—including Disney's *Cinderella* and numerous Billy Wilder flicks (*Sabrina* being the best example)—celebrating the Cinderella effect. Dina M. Smith even suggests that American postwar foreign policy was a reflection of this same effect, wherein “Paris as Cinderella desired a commodity make-over (a new gown and glass slippers). She eagerly awaited her wedding to the prince, American capitalism” (27–28). It seems that the American postwar/Cold War period was dominated by the Cinderella story. Yet did those girl readers perceive the full extent of the class and gender struggles underlying the magical dances and dresses described in these novels? Did they question what was so ardently presented to them? It seems impossible to tell. Looking back from the twenty-first century, the girl readers of that period remain inevitably “other,” inaccessible both by their adolescence and their time. Even attempting to create a theory of the “girl reader” is unavoidably fraught. Still, the often doubled nature of commodity tale sales through both house hardcovers and simultaneous mass-market paperbacks⁷ suggests that girls were reading these books. Faded signatures

on the borrowing cards of discarded library copies further imply that girls like “Jean M.” and “Nancy P.” continually read and reread their favorite commodity tales. In reflecting on the postwar/Cold War period, it seems that we can identify what girls were reading, but we cannot know what they were thinking.

A second question might be to what extent the authors believed in the class and gender struggles as they presented them or, of equal importance, whether or not they *perceived* their inclusion within these novels. Both Mary Stolz and Betty Cavanna were members of the commodity tale network, that community of female authors, editors, illustrators, literary agents, librarians, booksellers, and critics who worked together within the larger patriarchal publishing world to produce and distribute these novels to teenage girls. In their roles as professionals, these women lived as examples of a female society that was both subordinate to and reliant on the larger male-dominated publishing world, but which, through its web-like structure, retained its own paradoxical autonomy. Did Stolz and Cavanna recognize their network and its value? Did their editors? Did the critics who praised the books, or the librarians who promoted them to their girl readers? Sadly, Mary Stolz died in 2006, and Betty Cavanna in 2001. Almost sixty years has elapsed since the publishing heyday of these novels, and the network of women who created and distributed the commodity tales seems as inaccessible as the girls who read them. What remains, however, are the novels themselves, and the shadowy history of the professional women who created and distributed them—a female dominant society who may or may not have revealed themselves in these novels, but whose network and its creations, the commodity tales, certainly deserve further exploration.

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Notes

¹For an analysis of girls' female junior novel reading preferences, see Cynthia Frease's 1961 dissertation regarding Mary Stolz's female junior novels.

²In a not-so-subtle allusion at the end of the novel, Stolz includes three paragraphs in which one of the characters summarizes the plot of *Jude the Obscure*. See *Rosemary* (195–97).

³Scarlet is a champion show dog that is boarded at Julie's farm.

⁴Nylon's origins lay in the search for filament material for the humble lightbulb. This material eventually became nylon, the first truly synthetic fiber. During the Second World War, it was used for parachute fabrics, cords, and as a replacement for silk in women's stockings. For a detailed description of the evolution of synthetic fibers, see volume two of David Jenkins' *The Cambridge History of Western Textiles*.

⁵Although Cavanna's inclusion of the unacknowledged rivalry between Anne and Julie is short, she seems to emphasize Julie's knowledge of it:

Miss Moore shook out a white piqué. "Now that's nice," Mrs. Sawyer said. "You might try that on!"

"But my dress is white," Anne objected.

"That wouldn't matter," said Mrs. Sawyer. But Julie knew it would. (27)

Later, while her own dress is being wrapped, Julie "looked toward the white piqué with a certain amount of longing" (28).

⁶This desire is not necessarily sexual. It can be read as a female version of Eve Sedgwick's theory of male homosociality, in which women mediate men's desire for each other.

⁷Many of the larger publishing houses at this time (including Stolz's publisher, Harper & Brothers, and Cavanna's publishers, the Westminster Press and William Morrow) had contracts with reprint, paperback publishers such as Grosset & Dunlap and Scholastic, so that the books gained exposure in multiple markets.

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