

What is Wickedness?: An Analysis of the Wicked Stepmother in Literary and Film

Adaptations of the Cinderella Story

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## **Fairytales and Stepmothers**

Fairy tales as a genre are difficult to study for several reasons. The biggest one is perhaps that there is no tale that has only one iteration. As Maria Tatar observes, “for nearly every tale, there are at least a dozen versions, in some cases hundreds of extant variants” (Tatar). It is impossible to analyze a single version of a story without taking into account the previous versions and the context within which it has evolved into its current iteration. The tale of Cinderella, for example, has hundreds of versions that fit into the faux medieval setting in which it first appeared. In recent times, too, many rags-to-riches love stories (or even some not love stories) are known as Cinderella stories. The Cinderella terminology is especially humorous when it is applied to the barest bones of the original story: consider when an underdog sports team achieves great success unexpectedly, and it is labeled a Cinderella story by newscasters and sports commentators. With such a far reaching classification, how is it possible to narrow the field? For the purposes of this thesis, I will be excluding versions that do not take place in the pseudo-medieval world that is synonymous with fairy tales, and given that this paper aims to examine the stepmother character specifically, I will also be excluding any versions that do not have a developed step mother character. This paper is a comparative study of the stepmother character from literary and film adaptations of Cinderella, with a particular focus on what she does to deserve the title of “wicked stepmother.”

The trope of the wicked stepmother is deeply entrenched in the world of fairy tales. She appears in countless stories as the primary antagonist to our beloved fairy tale heroes. As Tatar explains in her history of the character, the stepmother archetype

evolved from a combination of a few different villain tropes, and has become a staple of its own. The earlier fairytales, rather than making use of a wicked stepmother, often had a wicked mother-in-law or a wicked biological mother. These female characters often developed a craving for human flesh, and this usually led to them attempting to eat their own children or grandchildren. As the fairy tale genre evolved, the early cannibal tendencies of “non-witch” female villains intermixed with the cannibalistic tendencies of true witch characters, such as the witch in “Hansel and Gretel” (who in some versions of the story are sent in the woods by their stepmother with the hopes that they will not return). Several stories that now feature a wicked stepmother originally had the hero’s biological mother carrying out the atrocities. Tatar credits the Grimm brothers specifically with shifting the blame to other female characters, such as stepmothers, in order to protect the wholesome image of motherhood. One example of this is the story of “Snow White.” In the first edition of the Grimm brothers book, Snow White’s biological mother is driven mad by vanity and orders her daughter to be murdered so that she may eat her. The second edition has Snow White’s biological mother dying and a stepmother taking her place as the vain and vengeful villain. This idea that the Grimm tales focus on stepmothers to protect the sanctity of motherhood is reinforced in the case of nineteenth-century German writer and folklorist Ludwig Bechstein, who intentionally excluded the wicked stepmother archetype from his 1856 fairy tale book in order to be more relatable to the numerous children who have step parents and read fairy tales. He claims that the archetype has the potential to cause tension between children and their step parents, even if there are no physical or emotional issues in the reality of their relationship (Tatar).

Cinderella's stepmother may not have the cannibalistic tendencies of some other villainous fairy tale women, but she is indisputably wicked. The one common thread throughout different versions of the story is that Cinderella is, at the very least, relegated to the position of servant in her own home. Otherwise, different versions contain various degrees of the abuse and violence that Cinderella experiences, and different versions present the stepmother along a spectrum of wickedness. The Disney versions, for example, present the stepmother as a demanding and certainly cruel woman, but they limit her cruelty to verbal insults and psychological trauma. The Grimm brothers' version of the story, by contrast, presents the stepmother in a very different light by showing her willingly mutilating her biological children in order to gain social mobility and status. Clearly, Cinderella's wicked stepmother is not simply a stock character: she is depicted in a variety of different ways, and with different motivations.

The stepmother's motivations, I argue, are inextricable from the social and cultural context of the story's fictional world. Fairy tales as we know them today mostly take place in an fantastical, pseudo-medieval society: there are kings and queens and knights and lords and peasants and witches and all manner of beasts and beings. The world of fairytales is so firmly set in the Western mind that it is what most people think of when they hear the word medieval, although the true medieval world in which the stories were originally written is very different. Putting aside their ahistorical depictions of the period, the medieval world as represented in fairy tales is one in which women have very little power. The world of the fairy tale is ruled by men, both in the public and private spheres, meaning that women often have to rely on a man, be it husband or father, in order to maintain their standard of living. Viewing Cinderella's stepmother

within this context adds a layer of moral complexity to her character. She is a woman who has been twice widowed (in the more well known versions) and is responsible for the upbringing of three young girls (in most versions). It is her duty to ensure the girls have a stable position in life for when she is no longer there to take care of them, and, naturally, she is primarily interested in her biological daughters' successes rather than her stepdaughter's. The difference between how the stepmother treats her biological daughters and how she treats Cinderella is another common feature of her characterization. The more graphic depictions of the story include the stepmother cutting off her daughters toes and heel, respectively; this is obviously troubling, yet she does so with the intention of giving them the opportunity to marry a prince. Other versions of the story show the stepmother maneuvering her daughters into socially advantageous positions through less gruesome ways, but again with the primary intention of making their lives better. Although the stepmother actively stands in Cinderella's way to happiness and intentionally hurts her chances of social mobility, the duality of her actions towards her daughters and stepdaughter demonstrate her moral ambiguity. In what follows, I will consider how, in various versions, the stepmother is simultaneously taking the position of motherly affection towards her own daughters and the position of the stereotypically "bad mother" towards Cinderella.

### **Perrault's version**

Charles Perrault's version of Cinderella, which was published in 1697 in a collection of stories under the title "Cinderella, or The Little Slipper Made of Glass," is known for adding the details of the pumpkin coach, the fairy godmother, and the glass

slippers. The story begins with a widowed gentleman getting remarried to the “proudest and haughtiest woman who had ever been seen,” and who had two daughters who “resembled her in everything.” The widowed man also has a young daughter who is described as “amazingly sweet-natured and kind,” these qualities being inherited from her mother who was “the most charming person” imaginable. After the wedding, the stepmother lets her bad temper take over. She especially does not like her husband’s daughter because she is so good, which makes her own daughters’ bad qualities seem even worse by comparison. As a result, the stepmother forces the girl to do all the hardest household chores and makes her sleep in the attic on a dirty mattress. She lives in rags and squalor and has to take care of her sister’s lavish rooms and clothes, yet she never complains to her father because she knows that he would berate her, as “he was completely under the thumb of his wife.” During her free time, when she is not doing her chores, the girl sits near the fireplace in the ashes and thus earns the nickname “Cinderbum”; the younger stepsister, who is described as less rude, gives her the name “Cinderella” instead (Perrault pointedly reminds us that, even in her rags, Cinderella is a hundred times more beautiful than her stepsisters despite their finery).

Interestingly, this opening is the only specific mention of the stepmother in the entire Perrault version of the story. As the tale proceeds and the stepsisters continue to treat her worse and worse, the line that her daughters resemble the stepmother in every way demonstrates her potential for wickedness. This version is also mildly critical of the father because he allows his daughter to be mistreated in his house, although the story implies that he is not entirely aware of the situation: Cinderella does not tell him what is happening because she believes he will not support her, but since it is never explicitly

stated that he knows what is happening, there is no way to know for sure whether he would have stood up for her. Whether or not the father truly understands the circumstances of his household, his possible ignorance displays a clear picture of a troubled family dynamic.

Many of the subsequent events of the plot, although familiar today, were Perrault's invention. One day, the prince throws a ball and invites everyone from a "good family" to attend, and this includes Cinderella's stepsisters. They are very pleased with themselves for getting an invitation, and they enlist Cinderella to help them choose their outfits and hairstyles because she has excellent taste. They mockingly ask if Cinderella wants to go to the ball, but she replies that she doesn't think it sounds like something she would enjoy. They are pleased with her answer and proceed to tell her that it is a good thing she does not want to go, because she would inevitably get laughed at if she attended. They leave for the ball and Cinderella breaks down crying. Her fairy godmother, intuiting what is bothering her, asks Cinderella if she wants to go to the ball and if she will be a good girl if she agrees to help her, to which Cinderella says yes. She is told to retrieve a pumpkin, which the fairy godmother turns into a golden coach; she also transforms six mice into horses, a rat into a coachman, and six lizards into footmen. Finally, the fairy godmother creates a gorgeous dress and sends Cinderella off with the warning that she must be home by midnight because everything will revert back to what it was before. When Cinderella arrives at the ball, whispers start immediately about a mystery princess. The prince comes to personally escort her from her carriage into the ball, the king compliments her, and everyone stares because she is so beautiful.

Intriguingly for her relationship with her family, Cinderella finds her stepsisters at the ball and pays them special attention, but they do not recognize her. At a quarter til midnight, in accordance with her godmother's directions, Cinderella goes home and talks to her stepsisters, who tell Cinderella all about the mystery princess and how she was so nice to them. Cinderella says she would love to see the princess at the next night's ball, and asks the older and meaner sister, Javotte (who is the only named character in the story), if she can borrow her plain day dress to attend the ball the next night, but she very rudely declines. The next day, the sisters leave for the ball and the fairy godmother gives Cinderella an even more beautiful dress, this time with the famed glass slippers. The events of this second ball unfold as one might expect: Cinderella loses track of time and does not leave until the clock strikes midnight. As she is running away, she loses her shoe on the steps, and when she arrives home, everything has gone back to the way it was, and all she has is a single glass slipper. A little later, when the stepsisters arrive home, they tell Cinderella that the prince must be in love, because after the princess left he spent the entire rest of the night looking at the glass slipper. The classic ball experience remains the same throughout various versions of the fairytale. One particularly intriguing detail about the Perrault version is that neither the father nor stepmother appear to be in attendance at the ball. Cinderella pays special attention to only her stepsisters, not her father or stepmother and only the sisters are seen returning from the ball and telling Cinderella about it.

After the ball, the prince announces that he will marry the person whose foot fits the glass slipper. The search begins with princesses and duchesses and courtly women, before the slipper is finally taken to Cinderella's house for the stepsisters to try.



Neither are able to make the shoe fit and Cinderella asks if she could try it on. The sisters laugh, but the prince's man agrees to let her try. To the sisters' amazement, the shoe fits perfectly, and Cinderella then reveals that she has the other glass slipper. The fairy godmother arrives and transforms her rags into the most beautiful gown, and the sisters finally recognize her as the mystery princess from the ball. Unlike later versions, Perrault's version ends with a reconciliation of sorts: the stepsisters throw themselves on the ground and beg for forgiveness for all the terrible things they have done to her, after which Cinderella tells them to get off the floor, embraces them, assures them of her forgiveness, and asks them to always love her. Cinderella is then taken away to reunite with the prince, and when they get married she arranges for her stepsisters to live in the palace and marry lords.

The story ends with Perrault sharing two general morals, in verse, about how kindness and a good heart are more important than outer beauty. The first is:

Though beauty's a treasure that women desire.  
For everyone's fond of a pretty young face,  
Cinderella had gifts with a value much high,  
As she showed in behaving with charm and with grace.

Some say, when they're asked what this story might mean,  
That these were the gifts that her godmother gave;  
Cinderella had learned from her how to behave  
With such grace and such charm that is made her a queen.

Young ladies in quest of a prince, you'll discover  
That in winning and keeping the heart of a lover  
These gifts from the fairies are always the best,  
And count for much more than the way you are dress;  
For with them you will get what you're after with ease,  
But without them whatever you do will displease."

The second moral is:

You have a great advantage, I admit,  
If you receive from Heaven at your birth  
Good breeding, courage, sense, a ready wit,  
And other things of comparable worth;  
But that is not enough, unless you know  
How best to use such precious gifts: you need  
A godfather or godmother to show  
What you must do in order to succeed.

These two morals place Cinderella's character, as well as the importance of the godmother figure, at the forefront of the story. They could perhaps help explain why the stepmother's role in this version is so minimal. The stepmother has no direct influence on Cinderella's positive attributes, and even the stepsisters play a greater role by being the antithesis of Cinderella's character. The repeated insistence on the importance of

the godmother figure in a child's life, Cinderella's in this case, also negates the purpose of the stepmother serving as a female role model. This is the most well known version of the Cinderella story and it is the version that most later versions are based on. It is interesting that this early version, which is so well known, makes so few mentions of the iconic wicked stepmother. This character is such a crucial part of popular conceptions of the fairytale, and yet she is only mentioned one time in the most famous variant of the story.

### **Grimm's version**

Jacob and Wilhelm Grimm's version of Cinderella, published in 1812, is both more detailed and more violent than Perrault's version. The story opens with the wife of a rich man getting sick and leaving her only daughter behind with instructions to be good and a reminder that God will take care of her. She says that she will look down on her from Heaven and will always be near. The child visits her mother's grave every day and follows her mother's instructions. Soon the father remarries a woman with two daughters, who are described as "beautiful and fair of face, but vile and black of heart." As in Perrault's version, the stepsisters treat the girl poorly and force her to wear dirty clothes and do all the housework. They use several cruel nicknames, but eventually they start calling her Cinderella. Unlike the Perrault version, however, the father in the Grimm version actively allows all of the mistreatment to occur, and even calls her Cinderella himself. By contrast, there is no indication in the text of the story that the stepsisters are being encouraged to act this way by their mother, and in this situation it does not seem that she can be truly classified as wicked. She is certainly no saint,

seeing as she is allowing her husband and children to treat another person so horribly, but at this point in the story she is not participating in the abuse herself.

The next crucial part of the Grimm fairy tale is the father's departure on a long journey. He asks all three girls what they would like him to bring back for them; the two stepsisters ask for luxury goods such as fancy dresses and jewelry, while the virtuous Cinderella asks only for the first branch that knocks against his hat during his journey home. He gives all three girls what they asked for, and Cinderella takes the branch and plants it at her mother's grave. She visits the grave three times a day, and her tears water the branch until it grows into a large tree. A small white bird lives in the tree and is able to throw down anything that Cinderella wishes for. This is the first juncture in the Brothers Grimm version where the father character seems to have several conflicting feelings towards his daughter. He clearly cares enough to offer to bring her something back from his travels, yet he does not protect her from the name calling and even participates in it. This is also the part of the story where Cinderella's devotion to her parents is solidified. Despite the way that her father treats her, she loves him enough to place value on a tree branch that touches him, so much so that she asks him to bring it back for her. The detail that she visits her mother's grave three times a day is also very telling: Cinderella seemingly has nothing to live for except the promise that she made to her mother to be good, so she obeys that promise as literally as she can by directing her goodness and piety to her mother's grave.

As in the Perrault tale, the plot of the Brothers Grimm version centers around a ball—in this case, the king announces a three-day festival to find the prince a bride and invites all the beautiful local girls. Cinderella graciously helps her stepsisters prepare

despite their constant belittling and teasing that she cannot join them. At this point, the stepmother makes her first substantive contribution to the story line. Cinderella asks the stepmother if she can attend the festival with the family, and the stepmother agrees, but only on the condition that Cinderella finishes the task of picking lentils out of a pile of ashes. Of course, the task is meant to be impossible to complete in the given time, yet Cinderella calls upon the birds to help her and she is able to do it. When Cinderella presents her success to her stepmother, the stepmother says she cannot attend because she does not have clothes and cannot dance. She then assigns her the task again, with twice the amount of lentils, again on the assumption that the task will be impossible. Cinderella calls upon the birds again and is able to pick out all the lentils. The stepmother repeats that Cinderella cannot attend the festival, because she would embarrass the family. I would argue that this section of the story presents the stepmother in an intriguingly ambiguous light. While she is certainly unwilling to allow Cinderella to attend the festival, we can interpret her trick with the lentils in two ways: on the one hand, she is cruelly giving Cinderella false hope, but on the other hand, she is also trying to create a legitimate reason for why Cinderella cannot attend the festival without directly telling her that she is unwanted. Depending on how we read the situation, this either establishes her as the story's villain or demonstrates her unexpected concern for Cinderella's feelings.

In any case, once the family leaves for the festival, Cinderella goes to her mother's grave, and the bird in the tree performs the usual fairy godmother role by giving her a beautiful dress and shoes. She attends the first night of the festival and dances the entire night with the prince; as in the Perrault version, her family does not

recognize her. When she is ready to leave, the prince follows her in order to see who she is. Cinderella escapes by hiding in the pigeon house, leaving the prince to wait outside until her father shows up. The prince tells her father that he followed a woman home and saw her hide in the pigeon house. The father momentarily believes it could be Cinderella and chops down the pigeon house, but Cinderella has already gone out the back, returned her clothes to the tree, and gone to sleep in the ashes. The family sees her and thinks that she couldn't possibly be the maiden from the festival. The second night of the festival happens the same as the first, except this time Cinderella climbs up a pear tree to get away from the prince. The prince meets the father again and they cut down the pear tree, yet once again Cinderella has gotten away, returned her clothes to the tree over her mother's grave, and gone to sleep in the ashes as usual. On the third night of the festival, the bird throws down an even more beautiful dress than the first two, along with a pair of golden slippers. Cinderella dances all night with the prince once more, but when she goes to leave she gets stuck on the stairs: the prince, as it turns out, had prepared for her fleeing by spreading pitch on the steps. Her left shoe thus gets stuck and she leaves it behind as she is running away. The storyline of the prince chasing down Cinderella when she clearly doesn't want to be followed is consistent throughout several variations of the story, but his persistence and Cinderella's desperation to the point of locking herself in sheds and climbing trees creates an uneasy dynamic. The father's willingness to destroy his property is also an intriguing detail. Rather than enlightening the character of the stepmother directly, the additional information on Cinderella's father makes the Grimm version stand out among fairy tales. It is common for a fairytale hero or heroine to have one saintly or revered

parental figure (Cinderella's dead mother in this case) and one cruel parental figure, yet the Grimm tale grants Cinderella two negatively characterized parental figures.

Similarly to the Perrault tale, the prince of the Grimm tale uses the slipper to discover the maiden's identity, declaring that he will marry whichever woman fits it. The older sister tries it on first in the privacy of her room, and when it does not fit, her mother gives her a knife and instructs her to cut off her toe. She does so, and the prince—convinced by her ability to fit the shoe—takes her away to be his bride. But as they are passing the tree at Cinderella's mother's grave, the birds call out to the prince and tell him about the blood in the shoe, at which point he discovers her deception. He returns the first sister, and the second sister tries on the shoe. Like the other sister, her foot is too big, and she is instructed by her mother to cut off her heel to make it fit. Again, the prince rides off with the sister and is again warned by the birds. When he returns, he asks if there are any other maidens in the house, and Cinderella's father admits that there is one more maiden—a “stunted little kitchen-wench” left behind by his late wife. When the prince asks to see her, the stepmother says she is too dirty to be seen by the prince, and both Cinderella's father and stepmother insist that there is no way that Cinderella could be the maiden that the prince is looking for, despite the father's suspicions from earlier. At the prince's insistence, Cinderella comes upstairs and successfully tries on the shoe; the prince suddenly recognizes her as the maiden he had danced with. As the prince leads Cinderella past her mother's grave, the same birds that had warned him about the false brides congratulate him for finding the true bride. When Cinderella and the prince get married, the stepsisters come to try to mend their relationship with her, but their eyes are pecked out by birds. Curiously, the last line

of the fairy tale ends with their fate: “And thus, for their wickedness and falsehood, they were punished with blindness as long as they lived.”

The Grimm version of the story introduces several important changes to the fairy tale, most of which serve to implicate the stepsisters as the primary villains. For example, this is the first time that the stepsisters mutilate their feet in order to fit the slipper, and it is the key feature that separates this version from other versions of the Cinderella story. The scenario is also very interesting for what it suggests about the figure of the stepmother. Though she does not inflict harm on her daughters directly, the mutilation is her idea; she encourages her daughters to inflict immense pain and permanent damage on themselves in order for them to have a chance at being royalty. While some might dismiss this act as outright, cartoonish evil, I would argue that the stepmother’s actions here make some sense in the patriarchal context of the story. This is another moment where a case can be made for two contradictory readings: the stepmother is a terrible parent in that she is willing to cause injury to her children, but she is also a good parent for trying to better her children’s positions in the world, albeit in a horrifying way. This is especially the case because, as women, her daughters (and stepdaughter) can only attain security through an advantageous marriage. Since Cinderella is competition in the marriage market, the stepmother also has a vested interest in keeping Cinderella away. In other words, her intentions are understandable, even if her methods are not. I would also point out that, as a villain, the stepmother pales in comparison to both Cinderella’s stepsisters and her own biological father. The stepsisters are the ones who instigate her torment, come up with the nasty nicknames, mock her for not being able to attend the festival, and directly threaten her future



happiness (though they don't realize it at the time) by pretending to be the prince's beloved. As such, they are the only ones who are punished at the end of the story. I would argue that her father, too, is an unacknowledged villain. The fact that her father describes her in such terrible terms demonstrates how truly awful of a parent he is, though that was already apparent by his allowing her abuse to go on for so long and participating in it himself. The stepmother is not great, but her reasoning that Cinderella is simply not fit to meet the prince due to her state of cleanliness is much milder than the father's comments. She is understandably more concerned with her biological children; by that same token, it is despicable that Cinderella's father is not looking out for her interests, being that she is his only biological child.

### **Cinderella (1950)**

Elements of both the Perrault and Brothers Grimm versions are reflected in the 1950 Disney animated classic *Cinderella*, which is the version of the story that has the strongest hold over the popular consciousness. When people think of Cinderella as a character, it is the blonde princess in the classic blue dress that Disney created. The title page of the film states that the story is adapted "from the original classic by Charles Perrault," and indeed it includes all of the unique details that Perrault had added to the story. The film, however, fleshes out Cinderella's backstory, opening with a widowed gentleman and his young daughter Cinderella. He is described as an excellent father in his own right, but he believes that his daughter needs a mother figure in her life. He remarries a woman named Lady Tremaine, who is "of good family" (this specific phrase is also used in Perrault's version) and has two daughters the same age as Cinderella,

named Anastasia and Drizella (like Perrault, Disney gives the stepsisters names, though these specific names are original to the film version). When Cinderella's father dies, the stepmother's true nature is revealed: she is "cold, cruel, and bitterly jealous of Cinderella's charm and beauty," in part because her own daughters are so "awkward." The film also confirms that her motivation is to make her children's lives better at Cinderella's expense. She allows the chateau to fall into disrepair and squanders the family fortune on spoiling her daughters; meanwhile, Cinderella is "abused, humiliated, and forced to become a servant in her own house," though she remains kindhearted and hopeful that one day her dreams of happiness will come true. This opening of the Disney movie sets up the story in a new way by explicitly killing Cinderella's father and stating outright that the stepmother is cruel and abusive. Unlike the early written versions of the tale, there is no doubt that the stepmother is the driving force behind all of Cinderella's hardships. This is also the first version of the story that gives the protagonist the name Cinderella, rather than it being just a mean nickname from her family due to her tendency to sleep near the fireplace. I would argue that the fact that she has a name at all, even if it is the same as the mean nickname from previous versions of the tale, gives the character more power both in her own story and in the world at large. Its usage in the film creates a new connotation for the name: now, Cinderella is a reasonable name in and of itself, and what was once an insult becomes synonymous with an icon for little girls

Famously, Disney's Cinderella sleeps in the barren attic and takes care of the local birds and mice, who help take care of her in return. She is the first person awake every day and serves her stepfamily breakfast in bed before they assign her chores for

the day. Besides being industrious, she is also consistently pleasant and polite despite her stepsisters' rude demands, though she is noticeably meek when faced with the cruelty of her stepmother, who assigns her redundant chores as punishment. As in earlier versions, the plot moves forward when the king, desperate for his son to get married, plans a ball and sends out urgent invitations. Cinderella accepts the message and interrupts the stepsisters' music lesson to give it to her stepmother. She is berated for interrupting, but it is quickly forgotten when they realize the message is an invitation to the ball. Cinderella makes the case that she should be allowed to attend as well because she is a part of the family, and the message specifies that "by royal command every eligible maiden is to attend." The stepsisters mock her and mime her dancing with her broom before pleading with their mother to bar Cinderella from going; unexpectedly, Lady Tremaine says that if she can get all of her chores finished and find something to wear, she will be allowed to go. When she leaves the room, the sisters instantly ask their mother what she is doing and she says that of course she knows what she's doing: she said "if" Cinderella can get everything done. Even in the first twenty minutes of the film, the characters of the stepmother and stepsisters are clearly defined and very intentionally made to be evil. Cinderella's continued goodness in the face of their cruelty just makes their wickedness even more striking. There are smaller moments that highlight the differences as well. One in particular shows the stepsisters singing poorly in their music lesson and Cinderella murmuring the song while cleaning and sounding angelic. They are consistently shown as antithetical characters with every detail. Even their clothing highlights their differences as the stepsisters dress in clashing, unflattering colors and even in her rags Cinderella appears put together. By

reminding her stepmother and stepsisters that she is still a part of the family even though they treat her as a servant, Cinderella also stands up for herself. In this sense, Disney's Cinderella is more assertive than her counterparts from earlier versions.

This Cinderella also takes initiative by working to update one of her mother's old dresses to wear to the ball. Unfortunately, she is unable to work on it because her family keeps her busy with even more chores; instead, the mice finish the dress for her, using materials that the stepsisters have thrown away. After the mice surprise her with the dress, Cinderella goes downstairs to join Anastasia and Drizilla. Lady Tremaine states that she "never [goes] back on [her] word" and makes a contemptuous comment about the beads Cinderella is wearing. The stepsisters, realizing that the dress is made up of things they threw out, call Cinderella a thief while ripping the dress to shreds. In perhaps the most heart wrenching scene of the film, Lady Tremaine stops them so they can make it to the ball on time and tells Cinderella "goodnight" as she closes the door and leaves her in the foyer in her ruined dress. Early in the film's opening sequence, the narrator says the stepmother is determined to further the interests of her daughters, and in this moment Cinderella is a direct threat to their success at the ball. To be fair, she probably knows they will be unsuccessful at the ball regardless of whether Cinderella is there or not (they are "awkward" and ugly, after all), but she is certainly not going to make things more difficult for them by bringing their prettier sister along. However, the way that she goes about it seems intended to make Cinderella's disappointment as painful as possible. The final "goodnight" and cruel smile before the door closes is an exceedingly wicked final acknowledgement of Lady Tremaine's success.

Like the Perrault version, the Disney *Cinderella* features a fairy godmother who appears while Cinderella is crying in the garden, bemoaning the fact that she has nothing left to believe in. The fairy godmother quickly readies Cinderella for the ball by turning a pumpkin into a carriage, the mice into horses, the horse into a coachman, the dog into a footman, and Cinderella's ruined dress into a beautiful ball gown with glass slippers. At the ball itself, the stepsisters make a bad first impression in front of the prince, who is having a terrible time until he sees Cinderella across the room. Cinderella and the prince spend the entire night together, but in accordance with her fairy godmother's instructions, she flees when the clock strikes midnight. The prince asks where she is going, and she says that she hasn't met the prince yet, revealing that she does not know that he is the prince. He runs after her as she flees, but is stopped by a group of fawning women. The Grand Duke is able to follow her and picks up her slipper when she loses it on the steps. Having been earlier told by the king not to let anything go wrong between the prince and the unknown woman, the Grand Duke sends guards after her carriage, but it turns back into a pumpkin and she is able to get away. Back at the palace, the prince swears he will only marry the girl who fits the slipper, and the king orders the Grand Duke to try it on the foot of every maiden in the kingdom. All in all, the ball occurs just the same as every other version, except for the detail that Cinderella is unaware the man she has spent the evening with is the prince. One other minor change is that the stepmother experiences a sense of familiarity when she sees Cinderella at the ball, which makes her suspicious enough to try to find out more.

As in earlier versions of the fairy tale, the slipper performs a crucial role in settling the matter of Cinderella's identity and resolving the plot. The morning after the ball,

Lady Tremaine frantically wakes up her daughters to tell them that the Grand Duke is about to arrive to have them try on the glass slipper and possibly win the heart of the prince. Cinderella overhears and finally realizes that she had been with the prince at the ball. The stepmother, in an epiphany of her own, realizes that Cinderella is the girl from the ball and locks her in the attic so that she will not be able to try on the glass slipper. When the Grand Duke arrives, neither sister is able to fit the glass slipper (unsurprisingly, this version opts not to include the mutilation that is such a prominent feature of the Grimm brothers' retelling). As the Grand Duke is getting ready to leave, he asks if there are any other people in the house; Cinderella runs down the stairs, having been freed by her animal friends, and asks to try on the slipper. The family protests, but the Grand Duke repeats his orders to try the shoe on "every maiden" and beckons the footman to bring the slipper. Lady Tremaine intentionally trips him and the slipper breaks. The Grand Duke is distraught and Cinderella consoles him by presenting the other slipper, which fits, much to her stepmother's horror. The film ends with the standard happily-ever-after: a wedding between Cinderella and the prince.

In this version, I would argue that the ending reinforces Lady Tremaine's villainy by emphasizing that her overriding motivation is to hurt Cinderella at all costs. For example, Lady Tremaine knows that Cinderella is the maiden from the ball, and she could have taken advantage of having a family member being the woman the prince is in love with, but instead she ruins any chance she or her daughters could have to benefit from Cinderella's position. She would rather lose her chance at having a connection to royalty than see Cinderella happy. The character of the stepmother is fully defined in every way in this film. She is given a name, a stated motivation, and

several moments where her cruelty is on full display. In contrast to her more ambiguous counterparts in other versions, she fully earns the wicked title in this film.

This clearly villainous variation of the stepmother character also appears in two animated sequels. The first, *Cinderella II: Dreams Come True* (2002), follows the story of Cinderella settling into life at the palace. There is a side story in the film that gives Anastasia, one of Cinderella's stepsisters, a romance with the local baker. Her mother disapproves, believing him to be beneath her. The second sequel, *Cinderella III: A Twist in Time*, shows an even greater depth of the character's wickedness. In this film, which begins a year into Cinderella's marriage to the prince, the stepmother gets a hold of the fairy godmother's magic wand and wreaks havoc in the original film's timeline. She uses the wand to turn back time to the morning after the ball and makes the glass slipper fit Anastasia, before Cinderella can escape the attic; she then destroys the other glass slipper and uses magic to make the prince forget who Cinderella is. When Cinderella briefly gets the wand back, she is captured and Lady Tremaine has her exiled. Eventually, the mice convince the prince to save Cinderella and explain the situation to the king, who orders the Tremaines—including Cinderella's stepsisters—arrested. They escape, however, and on the day that Cinderella and the prince are supposed to get married, Lady Tremaine uses magic to disguise Anastasia as Cinderella. Ultimately, after more near misses and magical mischief, Cinderella wins the day, Lady Tremaine and Drizella are turned into toads, and Cinderella and the prince are once again happily married. In both sequel films, the stepmother serves as the recurring villain. These films are not based on the traditional fairytale, but rather on

the characters that Disney created for their animated adaptation. As such, they furthered the character's development into the wicked woman of popular imagination.

### **Cinderella (2015)**

In 2015, Disney released a live-action adaptation of Cinderella that was heavily based on the 1950 film, with noticeably more direct references to Perrault's original text as well as details from the Grimm retelling. The film begins with a girl called Ella who lives in a picturesque country home with what the narrator describes as the "most happy of families." As in the Brothers Grimm tale, Ella's mother falls sick and, just before she dies, makes Ella promise to "have courage and be kind," because kindness has the power to change the world. After Ella's mother dies, her father remarries Lady Tremaine and she and her two daughters move into Ella's home, which they regard with disdain. In another echo of the Grimm version, Ella's father leaves for a merchant trip with promises to bring back the stepsisters lace and a parasol and Ella the first branch that brushes his shoulder on his journey. As soon as Ella's father leaves, the stepmother tells Ella to start calling her "madame" and orders her to move into the attic and take all of her mother's belongings with her. Ella looks on the bright side as best as she can; all her life, she has helped the staff with household chores, and she doesn't stop when the Tremaines move in. One thing that does change though is that the stepmother purposefully causes extra work for Ella.

Not long after her father leaves, Ella is visited by one of her neighbors who tells her that her father fell ill on the road and died. He delivers the branch that Ella had asked for and tells her that her father spoke of Ella and her mother until he died. Ella is



heartbroken, the stepsisters do not seem to care, and Lady Tremaine is worried about their livelihood. There are several significant changes between the 1950 film and the 2015 film in just the beginning of the stories. The 2015 version pulls from the Grimm version by including a scene in which Cinderella makes a promise to her dying mother; though they are not the exact same message, her mother's instruction to "have courage and be kind" sets the tone for the entire film. The film also adds more characterization to the stepmother. While it is obvious that Lady Tremaine is a widow, due to the fact that she is raising two daughters, the opening of the 2015 film specifically mentions that she is a woman who "had known grief" and "wore it remarkably well." These are small comments, but they add a compelling psychological depth to the stepmother figure; she is a woman who has been forged by her suffering, and it is an integral part of her personality. This film also more strongly highlights the practical consequences of Ella's father's death. Though the prologue of the animated film specifically says the house falls into disrepair, the live-action remake shows it happening. There are also scenes where the stepmother talks about financial struggles and fires the staff (which is why Ella has to do all the household chores), further emphasizing the precariousness of her situation as a widow twice over.

After her father's death, Ella is treated worse and worse by her family. One particularly horrid morning, her family does not allow her to eat breakfast with them and instead tells her to eat alone in the kitchen. This is also the morning that one of her sisters notices a mark on her face and gives her the nickname of "Cinderella." Lady Tremaine applauds her daughters for their cleverness, and this is the first time that Ella breaks under their torment. She cries in the kitchen and then flees into the woods; all

the while, the narrator talks about the power of names and that, in this moment, Ella has been transformed into “merely a creature of ash and toil,” even in her own eyes. In the woods, however, she meets the prince, Kit, and has instant chemistry with him. Like in the 1950 Disney version, Ella and the prince are uncertain as to each other’s identities: Kit leads her to believe that he is an apprentice who works in the palace, and she refuses to give her name (“Miss, what do they call you?” he asks, and she replies, “Nevermind what they call me,” reinforcing the narrator’s commentary on the power of names). In another echo of the animated film, the king is eager for his son to marry, though he is also being pressured by the Grand Duke for a political marriage. Kit is able to convince his father to hold a ball for the entire kingdom in the hopes that he will see Ella again.

As in previous versions of the story (but deviating from the animated film), Ella is directly responsible for helping her sisters prepare for the ball; she does their hair, helps with their clothes, and listens as they voice their excitement. After helping her sisters get ready, Ella puts on a dress belonging to her mother and attempts to join her family so that she might see her friend Kit, whom she still believes to be an apprentice. Lady Tremaine tells her that she cannot go because it would be an insult to the king to appear at the palace in her “old rags.” When Ella defends her dress, her stepmother proceeds to tell her that her mother had questionable taste and deliberately rips the sleeve of her dress. There are a few more exchanged comments about how embarrassing Ella would be to the family before Lady Tremaine ends the conversation by stating that Ella is a servant girl and always will be. Interestingly, this is the only time in any of the Cinderella adaptations discussed in this paper that the stepmother speaks negatively about

Cinderella's saintly mother. For this reason, this depiction of Cinderella's stepmother, especially in this scene, is one of the harshest depictions of her. It shows off her cruelty in new ways and would seem to make her irredeemable.

Soon after the family leaves, Ella's fairy godmother shows up and performs the classic transformations introduced by Perrault's version, with the inclusion of a spell to make sure that her family will not recognize her. She has a wonderful time at the ball and realizes, to her great surprise, that Kit is the prince. But before she can tell him her name, the clock strikes midnight and she flees, losing her shoe along the way; Kit attempts to follow her, but he is stopped by the Grand Duke who is still pressuring him to enter an arranged marriage with the princess of a neighboring country. In a plot complication unique to the live-action film, the king dies shortly thereafter and, on his deathbed, gives Kit permission to marry the mysterious girl from the ball. Kit, in his first act as king, issues a proclamation asking her to come forward. When Cinderella returns home to retrieve the glass slipper as proof, she finds her stepmother holding the slipper: Lady Tremaine has figured out that Ella was the girl from the ball and asks her to tell the story behind it. When she is too stunned to speak, the stepmother tells her a story instead. It soon becomes clear that Lady Tremaine's story is her own: she talks about a girl who married for love and had two wonderful daughters, and how her husband, "the light of her life," died. She says that when she married again it was for the sake of her daughters, but he also died, dooming his widow to look at his daughter every day. Lady Tremaine further explains how she hoped one of her daughters might marry the prince, but a girl with a glass slipper ruined that for her. She again asks for the story of why Ella has the glass slipper and accuses her of stealing it. When Ella replies that it was given

to her, Lady Tremaine scoffs about how nothing is ever given and everything comes with a price. At this point in the film, then, we see how the stepmother is not cruel for its own sake; rather, her life's disappointments have made her cynical and desperate. This reading is reinforced by Lady Tremaine's subsequent actions, which address a major plot hole from the animated version. Rather than simply ruin Ella's happiness out of spite, Lady Tremaine attempts to use the situation to her advantage. She offers to support Ella in presenting herself to the king in exchange for making her head of the royal household and marrying off Anastasia and Drizella to wealthy lords. She tells Ella in no uncertain terms that she will be running the kingdom instead of Ella and the king. Ella refuses and declares that she will protect Kit and the kingdom from her stepmother even if it means her chance at happiness is gone. Lady Tremaine shatters the glass slipper and locks Ella in the attic. When she is questioned about her cruelty towards Ella, she simply says that Ella is innocent and good and she is unable to admit out loud that she is the opposite. Lady Tremaine takes the broken piece of the glass slipper to the Grand Duke and tells him the truth. He agrees to secure marriages for her daughters if she will keep Ella out of the picture until he can get the prince married to the foreign princess.

While Lady Tremaine and the Grand Duke plan their schemes, Kit orders the Grand Duke and his closest friend, the captain of the guard, to try the slipper on every maiden in the kingdom until they find his "mystery princess." They arrive at Ella's home and her sisters try on the slipper to no avail. The Grand Duke attempts to leave, but the captain of the guard accuses Lady Tremaine of lying because Ella can clearly be heard singing from the attic. The Grand Duke brushes off his concerns, fully aware that the

“mystery princess” is locked in the attic of the house, until Kit reveals himself hiding in disguise as a guard. He has the captain investigate and Lady Tremaine takes him up to Ella in the attic. When he asks her to come downstairs, Lady Tremaine forbids Ella from following him. When he asks who she is to ignore a command from the king, she says that she is Ella’s mother. In this moment Ella stands up for herself and says that Lady Tremaine never has been and never will be her mother. Against her stepmother’s wishes, Ella goes downstairs, tries on the glass slipper, and, as in previous versions, reunites with the prince to live happily ever after.

Somewhat like the Perrault version, the 2015 film does try to stage a kind of reconciliation between Cinderella and her stepfamily. Once they see her wearing the glass slipper, Ella’s stepsisters immediately apologize for all they have done to torment her and address her as their sister. She smiles at them, and as she is leaving the house she makes a point to tell Lady Tremaine, who is sitting on the staircase seemingly coming to terms that her plans failed and her life will never be the same, that she forgives her. But Lady Tremaine’s claims to being Ella’s mother ring false, as they contradict her behavior throughout the rest of the film. If she were saying the words in any other context it could be a potentially redeeming moment, but instead it is damning. At this point, it is certain that Ella will get her happy ending, and so Lady Tremaine is simply trying for one last act of cruelty before Ella can escape her. This makes the film’s depiction of the stepmother ultimately ambivalent: while the film gives Lady Tremaine a sympathetic backstory and motivations, her final scene depicts her as embittered and unnecessarily mean.

## Conclusion

The wicked stepmother has become an integral part of the Cinderella tale. She exists in every variation of the story, albeit in different forms. The early literary depictions treat her more as a background character, existing only to explain the appearance of the stepsisters, who are the true villains. They are the ones who are openly cruel to Cinderella and threaten her happiness. The character of the stepmother is only solidified as the villain in the 1950 animated Disney film. The sisters are certainly present and unpleasant, but it is the stepmother who instigates all of Cinderella's torture, often for no other reason than that she dislikes her. This is also the first time that the stepmother is given a name, a detail that has shaped her character into what it is known to be today. The animated sequels and the live action adaptation further solidify Lady Tremaine as the true villain of the Cinderella story and cement the wicked stepmother archetype into the tale.

Other adaptations and variations of the Cinderella fairy tale not discussed in this paper broaden the stepmother's character further, although she is still typically the villain. In the films *Ever After* (1998) and *Ella Enchanted* (2004), whose stories deviate quite a lot from the traditional tale, the family dynamic of a girl with a stepmother and two stepsisters who treat her poorly is the key detail connecting them to the Cinderella story. The 1997 *Rodgers & Hammerstein's Cinderella* adds another layer to the relationship between Cinderella and her stepmother. In the film, comprised of a racially and culturally diverse cast, Cinderella is played by young black actress Brandy, while the stepmother is played by white actress Bernadette Peters. The racial conflict

between the characters actually caused some casting issues for the film: several white actresses turned down the role of the stepmother because they were uncomfortable being cruel to a young black woman. These three examples lean more heavily on the stepmother being cruel for the sake of being cruel. Some other adaptations are the “Cinderella story” movies, piloted by Hillary Duff’s 2004 *A Cinderella Story*, which transplants the tale into a modern setting. In these films, the stepmother character is often portrayed as a caricature of the archetype and actually serves as some comedy relief; these women are so pathetic that you almost feel sorry for them, thus negating some of the wickedness. Of the several performed versions, Andrew Lloyd Webber’s *Cinderella* musical is perhaps the most forgiving depiction of the stepmother. There is one scene in particular in which the stepmother actually plays a motherly role to Cinderella and gives her advice similar to the advice that she gives her own daughters earlier in the show. While even the four variants of Cinderella’s stepmother discussed in this paper portray variations in the character, an expanded version of this project would engage with these diverse stage and film versions.

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