

2012

Unbreakable Glass Slippers: Hegemony in Ella Enchanted

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Recommended Citation

Mirsadjadi, Tori Shereen, "Unbreakable Glass Slippers: Hegemony in Ella Enchanted" (2012). *Scripps Senior Theses*. Paper 40.
http://scholarship.claremont.edu/scripps_theses/40

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UNBREAKABLE GLASS SLIPPERS: HEGEMONY IN *ELLA ENCHANTED*

by

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**SUBMITTED TO SCRIPPS COLLEGE IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT
OF THE DEGREE OF BACHELOR OF ARTS**

**PROFESSOR WERNIMONT
PROFESSOR LIU**

April 20, 2012

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Acknowledgements

To Professor Jacqueline Wernimont and Professor Warren Liu, who so graciously guided me through every indecisive, rambling step on my journey toward getting this thesis written: I am forever thankful to have benefited from corresponding with, talking to, and thinking in the presence of two such amazing professors.

I cannot thank my readers enough for letting me distract them from their newborn babies.

A Self-Conscious Reflection on the Fairy Tale Thesis Contained in These Pages

“Fairy tales contain us like a picture or poem, and reflect back to us in language, image and trope.”
--Kate Bernheimer¹

Gail Carson Levine’s first published work, *Ella Enchanted*², rebels against its own fairy tale form in surprising ways. Certainly, the rebellion of the titular protagonist seems obvious—Ella exclaims that “nothing should be dictated” to a prince and fantasizes about wreaking havoc in a finishing school (Levine 154, 73). But these sorts of absurd outbursts and fantasies, the stuff of a playful piece of children’s literature, are easy to dismiss as superficial appeals to an individualistic American audience rather than thoughtfully engrossing challenges to readers mired in hegemony. We might presume that Levine makes Ella spunky so that the fairy tale heroine conforms to a modern standard of femininity and reifies a contemporary American power structure, not as part of some anarchistic attempt to undermine the way individuals’ imaginations subconsciously submit to a power structure. Levine reflects the container for our imagination that our structured society already creates.

But such reflection is not straightforward. Mirrors reverse the images they reflect, and fairy tale literature similarly presents readers with an uncanny reminder of their structures of thought and of their social and psychological drives. (I use the word “uncanny” intentionally—fairy tales are nigh inseparable from the notion of the uncanny,

¹ Bernheimer, Kate. *Fairy Tales Reimagined: Essays on New Retellings*. Ed. Susan Redington Bobby. Jefferson: McFarland & Company, 2009. 2.

² For those who have not read *Ella Enchanted* carefully—or at all—it is a Cinderella story, set in the fairy tale realm of Kyrria. The protagonist and narrator of the story is the young Eleanor of Frell (Ella), who has a magical “gift” of obedience placed on her by the fairy Lucinda. Ella falls in love with Prince Charmont (Char), breaking the curse by refusing orders to marry and force him to share the burden of her curse. Ella also has a fairy godmother named Mandy. The book was published in 1997 and made into a 2004 movie of the same name.

and the psychological resonance of this term relates to the way that the fairy tale has become a psychoanalytical tool and cultural marker.) The abundance of psychologically-engaged, socially-structuring, potentially-subversive valences of modern fairy tale retellings can be overwhelming. Fairy tales have saturated contemporary culture. Television shows like *Once Upon a Time* and *Grimm* strategically warp fairy tales from the popular imagination; mainstream television has brought the dark and subversive aspect³ of fairy tales from the page to the screen. Television now gives us a commercially-sterilized version of the often-violently imaginative challenges to fairy tales written by Angela Carter in the 1970s. Luckily for us (as the ones about to embark on a thesis exploring the nuances of a subversive fairy tale for children), Levine wrote a playful book for children rather than a didactic feminist tome. The fact that Levine's story is playful, I argue, helps it engage with readers' imaginations and suggest counter-hegemonic understandings of their world. Levine's subversive messages may be extracted, dissected out of a close reading of her text, but they do not distract or burden readers with protracted challenges to the reading experience as is the tendency with more experimental, postmodern, or otherwise ostentatiously complex pieces marketed for adults.

In introducing his book's critical analysis on Victorians, fairy tales and femininity, U.C. Knoepfmacher draws attention to the way that serious treatment of children's literature robs the tales of their wonder; he notes that, in the words of William Wordsworth, "we murder to dissect" (qtd. in Knoepfmacher xvi). In William Thelin and Wendy Carse's pedagogical analysis of a class in which Carse attempted to get students

³ Jack Zipes points out that earlier versions of fairy tales contained realistic representations of society, with an emphatic lack of love, reconciliation, or tenderness in the often-violent creations of French women in their fairy tales, a dark origin which will be addressed later in my introduction (Zipes "Rise").

to analyze the ideological, gender-role-reinforcing acculturation of American values through fairy tales, students' resistance to an assignment to analyze the Cinderella story⁴ was repeatedly framed in terms of this distaste for ruining a children's story. So is there a solution to the serious handling of playful texts, which preserves the texts' serious and playful functions. Can we vivisect?

While fans of children's literature and of fairy tales may object to the analysis I'm undertaking for the sake of preserving that which makes such imaginative literature wonderful, there remains a contingent of literary elitists who, conversely, presume that such playful scholarship gives undue consideration to a realm of literature which barely merits consideration as "literature" at all. The scope of an English major, and the general requirements for studying literature, include room for such studies only as electives or as obscure options within other requirements. There is no "Children's Literature" survey to accompany the British and American Literature surveys required of my Bachelor of Arts in English at Scripps College. The academic world may *accept* such studies, but it does not *expect* them. One of the most-cited fairy tale scholars, the prolific Jack Zipes, bemoans the fact that "...it is commonly known, despite substantial achievements in the field, that children's literature is given short shrift at the university, as 'kiddie lit,' and it is hardly ever included in popular studies or cultural studies programs" (Zipes *Happily* 8). The literature we read as children creates a foundation for our development of critical reading skills, and fosters the love of reading which inspires us to pursue studies in

⁴ You may notice that I am refraining from italicizing "Cinderella" and citing an author. This is because the Cinderella story does not represent a single text. The Aarne-Thompson classification index, which is presumed to be valid in virtually all scholarly discussions of fairy tales, defines the Cinderella tale-type as 510A (Ashliman 107-109).

literature as undergraduates. Fairy tales like *Ella Enchanted*⁵ frequently make up our initial exposures to fantastic literary realms. But, as Zipes points out, this literature gets a “short shrift” in academic contexts.

The marginalization of children’s literature pervades the way we consider the texts so thoroughly that even the authors of such texts might shy away from considering their own books complexly. Emblematic of authors’ reluctance to acknowledge the intertextual and metatextual complexity of their own published work, Levine has dismissed the resonance of the Cinderella story by calling it an “embellishment” to what she wrote as straightforward stories. Addressing young readers’ interpretation of her second book, *Dave at Night*, as another Cinderella story, Levine said: “Although both Dave and Ella are Cinderella stories, Cinderella isn’t the plot of either one. The plot of both books is a quest. In Ella, the quest is a way to end the curse. [...] The Cinderella elements are embellishments, add-ons” (qtd. in Edinger 30). Such dismissal of “Cinderella elements” as “embellishments” is an overemphasis when it comes to *Ella Enchanted*, a story that so clearly and intentionally takes a modern understanding of the Cinderella tale as its basis. The dismissal reflects Levine’s desire to use the Cinderella form to create an imaginative world for her story that defies alignment with the fairy tale inheritance and its constraining associations with an outdated and oppressive type of femininity. Levine may not want to draw attention to *Ella Enchanted*’s fairy tale frame in favor of focusing on Ella’s quest for self-sufficiency, but this fairy tale inheritance carries substantial weight in a consideration of *Ella Enchanted* as subverting thought patterns that conform to hegemonic expectations. My analysis will reveal the way Levine’s text

⁵ “like *Ella Enchanted*” implying the fact that the story engages with responding to a previous history of more conventional fairy tales (to be discussed later), as well as implying the fact that playful, seemingly innocuous stories generally make up the field of children’s literature.

makes hegemony visible where the stereotypical fairy tale form—for which Perrault will serve as an emblem—cloaked and thereby reinforced hegemony.

Since I've now used the term a few times, I ought to offer something of an explanation of hegemony. Antonio Gramsci coined the term for a concept of “social power or domination” in the early 1900s, having faced imprisonment by Fascists (Rivkin and Ryan 673). Gramsci discussed a hierarchically-organized “complex of superstructures” that functions throughout society, mediated by dominant social groups as well as by the governing body's official arm of power (Gramsci 673). Such superstructure functions without requiring the consent of those it controls, and is pervasive (Gramsci 673). Hegemony is a structure of oppression that encompasses the actual structures of power as well as the internalized acceptance of such oppression. My understanding of *Ella Enchanted* emphasizes the way that Levine simultaneously reinforces and draws attention to a contemporary superstructure that dictates how its constituents ought to be. Levine draws attention to the inescapable hegemonic force through the way that Ella's curse enmeshes her in grappling with issues of power. Ella rejects a certain type of power such that readers may understand a certain type of superstructure to be dangerously oppressive. Levine also struggles with her own story's perpetuation of hegemonic standards through how Ella as a character represents a certain contemporary ideal.

Before We Get Too Far: Some Problems with “Children's Literature”

The distinction between tales for adults and for children did not exist when fairy tales were emerging in the popular imagination. Indeed, the category of “children” was not created until after fairy tales had already become popular. James Kincaid, fellow

Victorian scholar and friend of Knoepfmacher, takes a provocative stance on childhood and its connection to femininity. In a 2011 talk at Pitzer College, Kincaid called the child a “category created but not occupied” and drew a parallel between the treatment of the category of children and the category of women and of minorities as a type of “other.” The infantilized sexuality of women connects childhood innocence and female virginity such that society values maintaining both women and children with their “waist, hips, feet, and minds small” (Kincaid *Erotic Innocence* 17). This created category of an “other” to oppress young women recurs in Cinderella tales. Perrault’s 17th-century tale presented the Cinderella character as a submissive object, and the Grimms’ 19th-century adaptation shows a shift which reflects a contemporaneous understanding of a “young woman’s productive role [as] that of a wife and mother” (Platt 46). Both of these early literary versions evidenced society’s need to define the role of women while simultaneously speaking to the emerging and related category of the child. The relationship between the feminine and the childish has been conflated in the imagination beyond the sexual parallel Kincaid pointed out; women have long been associated with children in literature, and the two identities—which overlap in Levine’s *Ella*—have thus been implicated in related issues of power. Knoepfmacher recognizes that “constructions of the feminine greatly vary,” and that such variances which may be found “even within any single text,” may be attributed to 19th-century separation of child and adult audiences which have created fractures in the way we imagine such characterizations (425). Thus, the tensions and struggles inherent in my analysis of *Ella Enchanted* as a feminist fairy tale for children have been inherited from a history of confusion surrounding the oppressive way we label femininity and childhood.

Children's literature has been a didactic tool for hegemony. Particularly the literature written for, by, about—or for, by, *and* about—women. But, since the late 19th century, children's literature has shifted such that it need not be seen as purely instructional and didactic; it can engage readers in dialogical confrontation of issues that concern them. Power-confronting issues, even; issues with growing up which draw on a created notion of childhood to imagine the struggles of leaving that idyllic category behind. The 1865 publication of *Alice in Wonderland* “completed the erosion of a didactic and empirical tradition of children's literature that had been dominated by female authors for over a century” (Knoepflmacher xi). Moving away from didacticism, Victorian texts for children prominently featured an inventive “dialogic interplay” which has been preserved in later books written for children, but not acknowledged by critics who presume that only literature written for adults—like the densely allusive *Ulysses*—might thusly engage with readers (Knoepflmacher 345). Fairy tales and children's literature face a similar detriment to their study in ignorance of their dialogic potential to simultaneously amuse and provoke thought in readers.

The problem of critical minimization of fairy tales is connected to the conflation of the “fairy tale” and “children's literature” categories. In her introduction to an Oxford compilation of modern fairy tales, compiler and editor Alison Lurie draws attention to this problematic conflation. She expresses a frustration shared by many who wish to look seriously at fairy tales, that “[t]oday the fairy tale is often dismissed as old fashioned, sentimental, and silly; a minor form of literature, appropriate only for children. To people who have been recently over-exposed to the bowdlerized and prettified cartoon versions of the classic stories, this view may seem justified” (Lurie xviii). Lurie identifies the

problem of the ghettoization of fairy tales. But in doing so, Lurie implicitly reifies the dismissive attitude toward children's literature that Knoepfelmacher has attempted to counteract. Lurie frames the common dismissal of fairy tale literature in terms of its being "appropriate *only* for children" (emphasis added). I realize Lurie's focus is on what is "often" thought rather than the reality she argues as existing in contrast to this misapprehension, but the offhand dismissal of "bowdlerized and prettified cartoon versions" concluding this sentence implies an acceptance of the marginalized status of children's literature. Presuming that certain literature will only be enjoyed by children ought not mean that such literature is minor; children are capable of complex interpretation, and ought not be dismissed as developing subhuman "others" who turn a body of literature into a "minor" consideration if they are its only audience. I remain aligned with Lurie in terms of the defense of fairy tale literature as a complex realm worthy of serious consideration. I would add, however, that it is just this "bowdlerized and prettified" trend, and the reaction to it, which is worth considering in looking at our understanding of fairy tales. These versions have contributed to the cultural saturation in which a sense that fairy tale stories are "old fashioned, sentimental, and silly" has become useful in subversive retellings. Books like *Ella Enchanted*, which respond to this dismissively imagined stereotype of a fairy tale, are possible only in response to this "over-expos[ure]."

A Brief Explanation of Some Salient "Cinderella Elements"

As a reimagining of the Cinderella story, *Ella Enchanted* necessarily engages its readers in a history of challenging and defining women's roles. Though she dismissed the "Cinderella elements" of her stories, Levine has discussed the way that *Ella Enchanted*

grew from an impulse to make sense of the Cinderella tale. Inspired by *Beauty*, a late-1970s book by Robin McKinley that reimagined the Beauty and the Beast fairy tale, Levine “decided to do a story based on Cinderella” (Lara). Levine has said she didn't like that Cinderella was “so disgustingly sweet” in the mainstream imagination (qtd. in Lara). Levine imagined a Cinderella character cursed with obedience so that the modern reader could understand this “disgustingly sweet” heroine sympathetically: “She didn’t have to be so sweet after that and I understood why she did what she was told” (qtd. in Baker). Levine cannot extract herself or her story from the feminist issues of the Cinderella story, and hence my analysis of *Ella Enchanted* must establish Cinderella’s enmeshment.

The version of the Cinderella tale Disney has preserved in our American imaginations is (more or less) the version written down by Charles Perrault. Perrault’s version has so pervaded the culture that it stands out as the clearest reference point for Levine’s Cinderella “embellishments” of glass slippers, domestic servitude, and a fairy godmother. (Or, as Justin Platt sums up the Cinderella story in orienting his historically-grounded discussion of *Ella Enchanted*, “the story of Cinderella, a giant pumpkin, glass slippers, and a happy ending” (32).) According to Zipes, preexisting popular and female-created oral folk tales were not “deemed worthy” of being written down and distributed as literature in France until the 1690s (Zipes “Rise” 1). I quote this two-word phrase from Zipes because it is essential to my hegemony-focused analysis. The fairy tales that were ultimately written down and preserved as literature were, by virtue of their being “deemed worthy” of this written record, the conservative sorts of stories which served the ends of social control. Zipes cites the French origins of the literary fairy tale in “the conversation and games developed by highly educated aristocratic women in the salons

that they formed in the 1630s in Paris and that continued to be popular up through the beginning of the eighteenth century;” women turned to these salons to gain more independence, to be treated more seriously as intellectuals, and to distinguish themselves from the less-educated lower class (Zipes “Rise” 2). The juxtaposition of women’s “games” and the effort to be taken seriously as intellectuals is no coincidence. To play an aristocratic game is to prove one’s superior cleverness in conformity to the rules of that game. As Knoepfelmacher’s *Ventures into Childland* points out in respect to Victorian-era female authors of fairy tales, oppressed women have historically reinforced hegemony, clinging to their modest status within that structure of power by reproducing it in their writing. Women were fundamental in creating and distributing fairy tale stories, their oral fairy tale games bridging of the gap from folk to elite audiences.

The Cinderella tale has been preserved in the popular imagination through its literary form—specifically, the English translation⁶ of Charles Perrault’s 17th-Century-French *Cendrillon*—such that the fairy tale’s folk origins have been obscured. But part of what makes modern fairy tales appealing is a sense that the tales derive from humble folk stories, a quaint legacy evoking a bygone era of princesses and heroes. The term “fairy tale” and the term “folk tale” overlap and blur, and the history of fairy tales tends to conflate the terms such that the origins of fairy tales are understood as oral folk tales. Ruth B. Bottigheimer, author of *Fairy Tales: A New History*, attempts to disentangle the fairy tale from the folk. She disagrees with the nostalgic conception of a non-literate peasant origin for the tales, writing that the “folk invention and transmission of fairy tales has no basis in verifiable fact” (Bottigheimer 1). Other scholars have also ceded this point

⁶ Its translation is particularly important, as my emphasis on the origin of the “glass slippers” will make clear.

when it comes to discussing fairy tales as folk tales. D.L. Ashliman, whose compilation of folk tale types uses as its foundation the widely-accepted Aarne-Thompson classification system, takes a perspective implicitly critical of the type of understanding of folk tales which proliferates. Ashliman warns that it is common to overstate “simple folk origins” of folktales (xiv). False though a general nostalgia for fairy tales as oral folk stories may be, the oral and folk histories of the fairy tale have at least some credibility in the history of the Cinderella tale specifically, as the French salon context of the Cinderella story proves.

According to an understanding of an oral folk history for fairy tales, the Cinderella story was created by those who lacked the powerful social positions which would allow them to properly preserve their tales in writing. Hence, the non-European folk forbearers of the Cinderella story merit consideration in preparing to look at *Ella Enchanted* as an inheritor of this subversive legacy. Even the European-focused Platt, establishing his understanding of how the Cinderella story “reflects a society’s changing interpretations of how a girl should behave,” recognizes that “it is impossible to reduce her [e.g. Cinderella’s] story to a single original version that encompasses all aspects and European [sic] representations of her characterization” (Platt 33). *Cinderella: A Casebook* provides myriad analytical perspectives on the Cinderella story, compiled by Alan Dundes, “one of the foremost scholars of folklore in America” (Zipes *Breaking* 180). In Dundes’s casebook, Photeine Bourboulis posits that the shoe-test in Cinderella indicates the tale’s origins in a society in which “women’s small feet were held in great estimation” (103). Her focus draws attention to the complexity of historical fact behind the European folktale we know as “Cinderella,” by emphasizing the Cinderella tale’s

Chinese or Indo-Asian folk origins. Jane Yolen's contribution to Dundes's casebook emphasizes the European and Oriental forebears of Cinderella as self-sufficient characters who tricked their stepsisters with double-talk (296). Not only is the Cinderella character not necessarily from a European legacy, her early manifestations across cultures reveal her to have been anything but the demurely conservative version preserved in the popular imagination through the English translation of Perrault's 17th-century text. Neil Philip, editor and compiler of a compilation of Cinderella tales published through Penguin, defines the "Cinderella cycle" as a Eur-Asian oral tale in his compilation's introduction, and points out that the tale, while not necessarily European, is "not native to Africa, Australia or the Americas" (7). Obscure as these emphases may seem to modern readers whose imaginations have frozen Cinderella into an elite European past, the non-European origins make clear that the Cinderella tale has never been so constrained as the popular imagination of the tale would have it understood.

The Inherited Constraint of the Shoe

In looking at ways that three written forms of the Cinderella tale have served acculturating ends across the centuries, Platt points out that Perrault's prince in *Cendrillion* is in love with the person who had worn the slipper rather than Cinderella herself; Cinderella is objectified, forced into constraints represented by the slipper (45). Though Levine's adaptation of the Cinderella story shifts the prince's love onto the person rather than the objectified heroine, Platt is over-eager in seeing Levine's version as having moved far beyond this notion of the protagonist fitting into the constraints represented by the legacy of her glass slipper. Far from breaking the glass slipper, Levine presents it as unbreakable:

I only reached for one [glass slipper], and the other fell. In the moment before the crash, I mourned the loss of such a beautiful thing.

But there was no crash. The slipper didn't break. I picked it up and tapped on it. The sound was of a fingernail on glass.

'Try them on.'

They fit exactly. I held my feet out for Char to see.

'Stand up.'

'They'll crack for certain if I do.' I could barely stay seated because of the command.

'Perhaps not.'

I stood. I took a step. The slippers bent with me. I turned to Char in wonder. (Levine 152)

My thesis frames much of its analysis around issues inherent to this interaction: Ella's willing obedience to her prince, the way Ella fits into a certain mold, Ella's propensity for violent imagery (the violent imagery of a slipper's "crash" is a bit of a stretch, but I'll prove Ella's violence in my third chapter), and the way that Ella shares readers' wonder over just how much those beautiful, seemingly-fragile constraints can be dropped and worn by Ella without breaking.

In looking at the symbolically resonant glass slipper, we must remind ourselves of the origins of this iconic glass slipper. A fundamental emergent detail in historically shifting permutations of the Cinderella story, the glass slipper purportedly arose from the act of translating Perrault's story. The first English translation of Perrault's *Cendrillon* was Robert Samber's 1729 version in the Opies' *Classic Fairy Tales* (Philip 10). Paul Delarue's contribution to Dundes's casebook emphasizes how a misunderstanding of the French word for "fur," translated in English to "glass," created an appropriately symbolic slipper for the Cinderella tale, the glass's fragility and ease of being broken making it "a standard symbol of virginity" (Delarue 111). The slipper's symbolism, beyond this virginal connotation, also implies the rigid constraints in embodying a perfect decorative female. *Ella Enchanted* changes what the perfect female might be, but it maintains a

representation of the Cinderella figure embodying some form of perfection. Levine lets the slippers bend for Ella, but she does not let them break.

Playing with Rebellion

Social criticism often requires a cloak of humor in which to veil its subversive message. Satire has been conflated with humor because its presentation of the way the world ought to be is most effective when it disarms audiences with humorous mockery. Fairy tales, as women's parlor games, embodied this revolutionary function. A crisis in the standard of living occurred in France in the late seventeenth century, drawing its citizens to vent their criticism and express hope through a better world; the conversational games in which they'd honed their ideas on mores, taste, etiquette, and love therefore became an outlet for women to express revolutionary sentiments (Zipes "Rise" 6). Early fairy tales were a form of entertainment that became popular through this power-flouting French history. Early written tales from these salon origins "displayed a certain resistance toward male rational precepts and patriarchal realms" (Zipes "Rise" 4). This resistance was fundamentally tied to the female engagement with the aspect of play, a lightheartedness that, I argue, makes simultaneous heavy criticism possible. This simultaneity of conventional standards of cultural elitism alongside revolutionary sentiments, which has been a part of the literary fairy tale as far back as can be traced, similarly manifests itself in *Ella Enchanted*. Fairy tales' playful oral origins with female storytellers has continued in the tales' later female authorship and re-appropriations, including reimagined fairy tales by Gail Carson Levine, Robin McKinley, and Angela Carter. Readers unfamiliar with the French fairy tale origins might incorrectly presume that conventionality coexists with rebellion only in a modern retelling, rather than having

been an aspect of the Cinderella tale from its literary genesis. But the playful tales have always been subversive.

Not only are subversive texts frequently playful, playfulness makes subversion possible. From a psychological perspective, pleasure reading “offers rewards that are powerful enough both to sustain reading for long periods and to support a large publishing industry” (Nell 6). This imaginative engagement with material read for pleasure has been termed ludic reading, from the Latin for “I play,” “*ludo*” (Nell 7). The term was adopted from Stephenson’s 1967 publication on “the play theory of mass communication;” psychologist Victor Nell co-opted the “ludic” as “a useful descriptor of pleasure reading, reminding one that it is at root a play activity, and usually [...] pursued for its own sake” (Nell 7). The “play” inherent in the term *ludic reading* suggests the importance of disarming the reader with playfulness in order to effectively enter her imagination. Indeed, ludic reading “is an important goal of reading instruction” (Nell 6). Having established the enjoyable trancelike state of reading for pleasure, psychologist Victor Nell also discusses the way that a “Protestant ethic” influences readers to “perceive literary merit to be inversely related to reading pleasure” (6). I see this masochistic perception of literary merit as incorrect. Literary merit, in terms of how thoroughly readers may engage in theoretical and externally-relevant consideration of a piece of literature, is directly related to the pleasure of that reading experience. Playful texts linger in the minds of readers, their readability making them easy to visit and re-visit, and to think about those texts from new perspectives upon each re-reading. In an essay on McKinley’s “playful reawakening of *The Sleeping Beauty*,” Marie C. Bouchet applies Larry McCaffery’s understanding of how playfulness can be a strategy “to

provoke readers to critically examine all cultural codes and established patterns of thought” (qtd. in Bouchet 98: 14). Bouchet’s analysis of fantasy fiction for young women makes clear that enjoyable, playful literature can engage meaningfully with complex and culturally subversive approaches of thought. That a subversive message can transcend its context, and its interpretation depend on the reader, is “one of the great achievements of the fairy tale” (Lurie xi). *Ella Enchanted* confronts hegemony not in spite of its shallow playfulness, but because of this playful engagement with the status quo under which it operates. Because the text allows readers’ imaginations to play in it, *Ella Enchanted* enters through the imagination and lingers in the mind as fodder for deep intellectual considerations.

My analysis engages with the ludic on two levels. Ella exists in a playful text, and any analysis of her world therefore must orient itself around an understanding of how that seemingly-frivolous context of play engages with readers. An emergent level of my ludic interpretation involves how this engagement occurs. The text simultaneously reproduces and rejects hegemony, forcing an analysis to play with creative reconciliations of how Levine means for Ella to be understood and how her text seems to represent the character. Hence, my thesis itself plays with confrontational readings and re-readings of Levine’s text.

Finally: A Bit of Feminist Fairy Tale Context to Orient Things

I’ve already alluded to McKinley’s significance to Levine as an exemplary fairy-tale-re-imaginer, but radical feminist Angela Carter also bears mention in defending Levine’s text for its application of the fairy tale structure without necessarily conforming to its conservative ideology, with reference to reader response theory that has been

applied to Carter's feminist responses to fairy tales. Levine's book exists in a literary world in which a feminist niche, and surrounding criticism, already exists. Critics have argued that Carter's work cannot escape the conservative sexism of the fairy tale form she frequently employed, but feminist scholar Merja Makinen thinks that such "reactionary" forms can in fact be re-written, and makes an argument for "a feminist strategy of writing and also of reading" which aims to "throw some light on Carter's potential audiences" (4). Carter's work demonstrates the way that feminist interpretations of fairy tale stories are possible in spite of those stories emerging in the ostensibly confining structure of the fairy tale. Levine's *Ella Enchanted* can therefore benefit from a similar approach.

In looking at historical permutations and re-interpretations of the Cinderella tale, Platt argues that Ella represents a character who transforms "the subservient and neglected cinder girl into a woman whose abundant agency and self-confidence propel her into a life where happily ever after can exist for both parties [in a marriage] without the sublimation of her character" (48). He concludes his analysis of the cultural norms discernable in historical iterations of the Cinderella story by writing that he hopes "the glass slipper will break, giving each new generation of readers the hope with which Ella ends her story" (Platt 48). As much as I might want to agree with Platt's optimistic understanding of Ella as a character whose happy ending breaks free of cultural constraints, I do not. Ella's "abundant agency and self-confidence" cannot be recognized without qualification. A close look at the way power manifests itself in Levine's story—particularly in conjunction with establishing patriarchy in comparison to the Perrault version, a version which Platt recognizes as reflecting contemporary ideals and

reinforcing an oppressive power structure—presents obstacles to seeing Ella as a progressive agent of her own destiny. My at times ungenerous interpretation of *Ella Enchanted* draws on the aggressive and confrontational stance taken by Carter. I bring to Levine’s text some of the feminist discourse on which Carter’s fairy tale re-imaginings depend. “*Bloody Chamber* draws on a feminist discourse—or at least an awareness that feminism is challenging sexist constructions [and the deconstructive irony central to its argumentative stance therefore does not get ‘activated’ if readers are uninformed by feminism]” (Makinen 6). Applying Makinen’s perspective on how to properly understand Carter’s work as successfully overcoming issues inherent in a patriarchy-confirming fairy tale legacy, it is helpful rather than problematic to my analysis that Levine writes playfully and for children rather than aggressively and for an elite audience of feminist intellectuals. Which is not to say that Carter’s work is not or cannot be popular among non-feminist-scholars. Rather, Levine’s work communicates an empowered female playfully and to a broad audience. She challenges sexist constructions, but she also—and most obviously—entertains. A dialogical feminist perspective on *Ella Enchanted* augments rather than “activates” such feminist understanding. Platt’s article on changing cultural norms and the Cinderella story looks at Perrault’s *Cendrillion*, the Grimms’ *Aschenputtel*, and Levine’s *Ella Enchanted* with emphasis on parent-child relationships, gender roles, and ideas of love and marriage as part of “the acculturation and civilizing process of young girls” (Platt 33). Diverging somewhat from Platt’s stance, but using much of his perspective as a basis, my thesis will unpack Levine’s engagement with hegemony. I will show how reader response theory can be applied to *Ella Enchanted* such that the playfulness of children’s literature facilitates rather than undermines the

serious work of subverting structures of power by drawing readers' attention to the inescapability of hegemony. Levine preserves the glass slipper, but she emphasizes the object as a surprisingly-sturdy relic. And *Ella Enchanted* polishes that relic to make it clear rather than transparent.

Chapter 1: Ella Grapples with Patriarchy

“There was once a man who took for his second wife the most haughty, stuck-up woman you ever saw.”
--opening sentence of “Cinderella,” by Charles Perrault⁷

“Father was away on a trading expedition as usual, but our cook, Mandy, was there.”
--opening sentence to third paragraph of *Ella Enchanted*,
by Gail Carson Levine⁸

The Cinderella story relies on the perspective of a patriarchal world. Perrault’s version of the Cinderella tale⁹ commences by framing the story in terms of its male perspective. Perrault’s Cinderella story begins by introducing “a man who took for his second wife the most haughty, stuck-up woman you ever saw” (“Cinderella” 60). Perrault requires readers to imagine his Cinderella in terms of the male authority whose marriage introduces the story. Levine’s Cinderella story begins with an insult directed at a foolish woman as well, but orients that insult differently: “That fool of a fairy Lucinda did not intend to lay a curse on me” (3). The first character mentioned is the one responsible for the hardships the titular protagonist will endure: Perrault’s clueless father character, and, in Levine’s version of the tale, the clueless fairy Lucinda. Levine’s version of the Cinderella story emphasizes female authority. The quote I lifted for this chapter’s second epigraph makes clear—since Ella’s father’s absence creates the “usual” state of the household—that Ella’s world does not depend on an icon of patriarchy to validate its actions. Opening her version of the Cinderella tale with not just a female narrator, but

⁷ “Cinderella.” *The Complete Fairy Tales of Charles Perrault: Eleven classic stories including Little Red Riding Hood, Cinderella, and The Sleeping Beauty*. trans. Neil Philip and Nicoletta Simborowski. New York: Clarion Books, 1993. 60.

⁸ Levine, Gail Carson. *Ella Enchanted*. New York: Scholastic, 1997. 3.

⁹ Subsequent chapters will not focus so much on the source text by Perrault, but this framing of Levine’s text as responding to Perrault’s establishes a critical dialogue, in spite of the limitations in looking at a translation.

with a problem that arises in the complete absence of a father figure, Levine creates a narrative structure that moves away from the male perspective.

Moves away, but does not escape. As Platt points out: “Writers are not immune to social expectations generated by changing cultural norms, and seek to produce works whose values remain identifiable and relevant to their audiences” (48). Levine, like Perrault, and like the myriad others who have re-imagined Cinderella before and after *Ella Enchanted*, has created a story whose popularity depends on remaining “identifiable and relevant,” and hence conforms to the expectations of her audience. Inherent in this conformity to social expectations, a patriarchal social structure exists in Levine’s imagined world. But, as my introductory chapter established, such fairy tale reflection of reality tends to play with that which it reflects. Though Perrault’s Cinderella story seems to undermine its initial male-centered perspective by making the father effectively disappear in the text, I see this dismissal as actually reinforcing a patriarchal mindset by presuming male authority to be above discussion. The way that Ella’s father is “away on a trading expedition as usual” creates a more provocative absent presence in Levine’s text, drawing attention to the patriarchy Perrault implicitly accepted.

This contrast between Perrault’s version and Levine’s version of the Cinderella tale draws attention to the way that *Ella Enchanted* tackles male dominance. Perrault’s version of the Cinderella tale focuses exclusively on its heroine, whose female virtue gets thrown into relief by the stepmother and stepsisters. Though men virtually disappear in this focus, the male-dominated world remains. The masculine lens, established through Cinderella’s father at the beginning of the story, subsumes Cinderella’s female world of charm and fashion. Perrault’s male characters seem to pop up as accessories: the men

transfigured from rodents and lizards, servilely accompanying Cinderella on her carriage ride to the ball; the king admiring Cinderella, with the son courting her; and the palace guards and gentlemen witnessing Cinderella losing her slipper and later putting the slipper back on and subsequently ascending to her rightful place¹⁰ as their queen. Female success in Perrault's Cinderella story is aided by and measured through possession of men. The men are not accessories, though; those men have already been established as the ones in power. Any seeming objectification of men in Perrault's Cinderella story actually contains Cinderella's own subjugation. Cinderella's father only seems to disappear in Perrault's version; this very disappearance implies an acceptance of the male dominance under which Cinderella operates.

The Curse: Internalized Submission Made Visible

The submission Perrault accepts without comment in his Cinderella story becomes the central conflict of Levine's story. Ella's curse of obedience represents a compulsion to be a docile and submissive female. Cinderella cannot but be contained by the male-dominated society in which she struggles to accumulate male approval. Similarly, Ella cannot but be contained by her magically-dictated obedience. But Ella's relationship with structures of power comes from an unwillingly-obedient perspective which makes that obedience visible as a curse.

The compulsion to be a docile and submissive female has been addressed for audiences much older and much less playful than Levine's child readers. *The Cinderella*

¹⁰ The Cinderella character never really occupies the low-class category. In her contribution to Dundes's casebook, Jane Yolen emphasizes that Cinderella is a riches-to-rags-to-riches story rather than the rags-to-riches story Americans tend to think of it as (Yolen 296). The way Levine's Cinderella story is not actually rags-to-riches but actually riches-to-rags-to-the-riches-she'd-always-been-best-suited-to will be addressed more in my second chapter, in terms of Ella proving herself worthy of marriage to a prince through her lack of desire to be a princess.

Complex, by Colette Dowling, gives a psychological, self-help perspective on female struggles for self-sufficiency. This early-1980s publication draws on a perhaps-outdated notion of feminist empowerment, but usefully defines female docility as an internalized mindset. Resisting this mindset of docility, this compulsion to allow men to be the providers in relationships that Dowling sees as fundamental to the titular “Cinderella complex,” provokes symptoms eerily similar to those Levine attributes to Ella when she resists her curse. Dowling writes that symptoms of female anxiety over the prospect of being self-sufficient include hyperventilation, dizziness, and heart palpitations (75). When Ella resists obedience, she experiences a “desperate struggle” in which each passing moment causes “breathlessness, nausea, dizziness, and other complaints” (Levine 7). Recognizing this psychological resonance—a resonance that Levine didn’t even realize she was creating as she wrote it—Deirdre Baker’s 2004¹¹ article, “The challenge of saying ‘No,’” praises Levine’s popular book because “she’s able to bring to kids’ attention something important—how hard it can be to say ‘no,’ especially for women.” Levine portrays the complex psychological ambivalence underlying this distaste for compliance, which coexists with an awareness that submission could be easier, in the form of Ella thinking about her complete obedience when ordered to be happy about it:

I knew I was happy only because I’d been ordered to be, but the happiness was absolute. I still understood why I had always hated Lucinda’s gift. But I was glad nonetheless. I imagined future commands, awful ones, ones that would kill me, and I glowed at the idea of obeying them.

For the first time since Mother had died, I was free of fear. (Levine 128)

¹¹ An article written in response to the release of the movie adaptation of the book. Baker points out that the psychological resonance of Levine’s book gets elided in the 2004 film version.

Though still aware of the danger inherent in her obedience, Ella enjoys surrendering to an existence in which she can no longer worry about that danger. As Dowling points out, women have long been acculturated to have a sense of security in being taken care of, to the extent of being afraid of the prospect of controlling their own fates (31). “Free of fear” because she can no longer make herself unhappy with worry over imagined commands, Ella has become passive in her obedience. Since Ella has been commanded into a completely passive position, the appeal of not resisting becomes evident to Levine’s readers. The comfort of Ella’s surrender parallels maternal comfort, in how Ella’s freedom from fear in her doubly-cursed state exists “[f]or the first time since Mother had died.” Ella’s fearless obedience means a complete lack of control over her own fate and a relinquishing of even the imaginative control implicit in the ability to worry over that fate. The previously-resisted obedience becomes passive, and Ella temporarily relinquishes control so that Levine’s story may demonstrate the righteousness of the difficult struggle against obedience.

Ella’s passive satisfaction from relinquishing her internal rebellion against obedience becomes most obvious when Mandy frees Ella’s emotions from that happy obedience: “I began to sob from relief mixed with sadness. I had been a begging puppy and a delighted slave, yet I hadn’t felt cursed since I met Lucinda. Now I did again” (Levine 140). Happiness with obedience frees Ella of fear, and losing that passive happiness makes her sob in recognition of the struggle that has returned. Fundamentally a way of feeling, obedience’s “curse” depends on the obedient person’s ability to recognize that such submission depends on relinquishing internal agency and becoming emotionally passive about her fate. Ella’s narration when commanded to be happy with her obedience

calls it a “gift,” whereas her narration upon returning to her emotionally-independent state reverts to recognizing the obedience as a curse. The cost of feeling submission as a “gift” is dehumanization—the “begging puppy” and “delighted slave” references Ella makes remind readers that by submitting to her curse Ella had occupied shameful categories; not only does Ella define herself as a nonhuman “begging puppy,” but she also recognizes that she has occupied the offensive myth¹² of the “delighted slave.” Levine has Ella notice how resignation to the oppression represented by her curse feels freeing. Her narrative acknowledgment of why Ella sobs emphasizes the emotional attachment that the oppressed might have to their passive roles. Levine thereby continues the feminist argument made by Dowling, that females need to empower themselves on a personal level and overcome a psychological oppression. But the fact that this recognition comes in the middle of Ella’s narrative reminds readers that the strong protagonist for whom they feel empathy is the fearful and cursed Ella rather than the “delighted slave.”

Ella’s curse contributes to the enjoyable playfulness of her narrative. In addition to demonstrating the real-world psychological resonance of female obedience, Ella’s curse also contributes to aligning the protagonist with Levine as a female who wields the magic of language. Ella must focus on the way others can and do use words to control her as a form of self-preservation. Readers, letting their imaginations play in the world created by Levine’s linguistic magic, may notice how Ella appropriates this authorial capacity of words to control. Ella empowers herself against the literal magic of her curse with a subversive linguistic magic; Ella’s words are greater even than Lucinda’s magic. Not only does Ella’s narration contain her story and explain experiences the fairy tale

¹² I am alluding specifically to the Sambo myth, which a 1973 *Times Literary Supplement* defined as a “stereotype of the loyal, lazy, affectionate and child-like slave” (OED).

from the protagonist's perspective, but Ella's greatest triumphs—first over ogres and ultimately over her own obedience—come from this facility with language. The explicitly magical association Levine makes with the power of words becomes most evident when Ella coaxes the ogres into falling asleep¹³ and, having realized that she has appropriated the ogres' magically-convincing manner of speech, “almost laughed and broke the spell” (Levine 102). Words have the power to control in Levine's world, and even the obedient Ella can appropriate that power to fight her subservience to others' words. The magic of Ella's words is a skill—a self-professed “knack for languages” (Levine 64)—honed through diligent practice (Levine 101). This studied and purposeful application of words is, in Levine's world, more powerful than the superficial shortcut represented by magic.

Levine rejects externally-imposed and imagination-inhibiting control of thoughts and actions by her characters' rejections of “big magic.” The unwittingly-curse-laying fairy Lucinda ultimately sees the error of her reckless spell-casting attempts to impose perfection and renounces “big magic” (Levine 195). This renouncement of “big magic” precludes even the possibility of Lucinda undoing the curse of obedience, and forces Ella to rely on herself rather than on a magical external solution to the problem of her obedience. Ella is not allowed to escape her obedience by appealing to the force which created that obedience. Levine presents the imposition of a magical demand that the world conform to one's whims—“big magic”—as dangerous in a way that “small magic that can't hurt anybody” is not (Levine 28). Mandy's understanding of big versus small magic effectively speaks to the issue of hegemonic constraint in the real world; in terms of the imagined world Levine creates, the message against attempting to control others gets reduced to the following lesson: big magic is bad. Levine's judgment against the

¹³ I will discuss this linguistic seduction in my third chapter.

dangers of big magic initially comes in terms of Mandy encouraging Ella to “use your imagination” about the ramifications of the seemingly-miraculous ability to make the universe conform to one’s wishes (Levine 26). Big magic hence represents a superstructure of power, capable of controlling and affecting everything imaginable. Though big magic is all-encompassing, imagination allows individuals to escape the acceptance of and dependence on this force which constrains with its all-encompassing influence. When considered for all its sweeping ramifications on the way people think and function, this “big magic” force, Mandy guides Ella—and by extension, the reader—to conclude, is dangerous. Big magic threatens because it represents an inability to imagine consequences complexly, and a misunderstanding of how to solve problems by imposing the whim of a single wielder of power on society at large. Levine effectively passes judgment against hegemonically-constrained thought and emotion, in favor of an imaginative and nuanced approach to the social world.

The Threat of Ella’s Father

Ella’s curse represents a visible and acknowledged marker of the internalized oppression that is implicit and accepted in Perrault’s version of the Cinderella story. Ella’s father represents the way that such oppression might exist on a personal level outside of the individual, on the level of the family. After the initial—and essential—framing of his Cinderella story through the father’s marriage, Perrault makes only one more mention of Cinderella’s father. This second mention comes early in the story, in establishing Cinderella’s submission to the demands of her evil stepmother. Perrault’s Cinderella “didn’t dare complain to her father, who would have scolded her, because he was completely under the woman’s sway” (“Cinderella” 61). This acknowledgment of a

male authority figure resembles the commencement of the tale in the reference to a male foundation for the action of the story. But, just as the first mention moves quickly from the man to his “second wife,” this second and final evocation of male authority in Perrault’s story mentions that male authority only to dismiss him. Perrault acknowledges the obvious possibility of appealing to male authority for salvation from a domineering female and dismisses it as irrelevant such that the female’s domineering presence eclipses male dominance. The reference to Cinderella’s father establishes that the female realm of social agency exists under an understanding of male authority. The “woman’s sway” which prevents Cinderella from appealing to her father establishes a female realm of social agency. This feminine charm¹⁴ works only by co-opting a male authority’s power over the family. Rather than choosing a course of action to take, a woman must exercise her “sway” on the man who dictates the action of the entire family. Having his good sense as the male head of household usurped by the stepmother, Cinderella’s father cannot take charge and counteract the abuse of his daughter. He cannot even see the abuse; a woman’s dominion blinds the man to his duty as protector. Male power quickly becomes a non-issue in Perrault’s version of the Cinderella story, as Cinderella’s father gets removed from the action of the story as irrelevant.

In his interpretation of this same section of Perrault’s Cinderella, Platt quotes a Zipes translation of Perrault: “the poor girl endured everything with patience and did not dare to complain to her father, who would have only scolded her since he was totally

¹⁴ Though the stepmother’s feminine charm negatively influences Cinderella, Cinderella herself uses a positive version of that charm to win the Prince and establish higher social positions for herself and her stepsisters. These female charms, exercised for good or for ill, must appeal to the male wielders of power; female power can only be obtained through deference to a male, specifically through marriage. My third chapter will expand on the problematic perpetuation of this male-deferent female charm in terms of Ella’s characterization, with specific reference to Ella’s seductive use of words.

under the control of his wife” (qtd. in Platt 36: 450). Platt interprets this reference to the “poor” Cinderella character as meaning that Cinderella’s father “has become a distant part of her development and can no longer provide emotional support for her” and thereby becomes “as guilty in her mistreatment as the stepmother” (36). Whereas Platt sees Perrault’s version as indicative of the father figure’s culpability for Cinderella’s abuse, I maintain that this second and final reference to the father speaks more to Perrault’s perpetuation of an acceptance of patriarchy. Perrault dismisses the possibility of addressing a family-level manifestation of patriarchy in a way that presumes such patriarchy ought to exist, granting men control even as it shifts to a female-focused story. In Perrault’s female-focused story, the stepmother’s abuse of power must be addressed and repaired before the proper appeal to power—namely, the father—can even become possible. “Female-focused” might make Perrault sound like he’s promoting a healthy appreciation of women and the domestic realm in which they were understood to exist in his time. Focus does not, however, imply respect. If the “male gaze” oft-cited in feminist literature has taught us anything, it is that male focus on females can be extremely demeaning. Perrault separates the male and female realms, turning the female realm into an object of focus from a male perspective. Because Levine does not thusly separate the male and female realms, and engages Ella in confrontations with her father’s abuse of his powerful position in relation to women, Levine gives a perspective which refuses to submit to the structure of power it represents. The container of patriarchy exists, but Levine’s self-conscious recognition of its confining influence makes it visible. A glass slipper made clear but not transparent.

Levine's representation of the absent figure of Ella's father makes it possible for readers of *Ella Enchanted* to engage more with the issue of male power than the power-affirming foundational version by Perrault. Though also in a male-dominated world, Levine's protagonist fears and rebels against the de facto dominance that her father represents on the level of Ella's family. Sir Peter orders Ella to do things without knowledge that the curse will make Ella comply, but he forces compliance without magic such that his paternal influence exists as an external force of dominance separate from the internal struggle of Ella's curse. Forcing Ella to go to finishing school, the angry Sir Peter represents a frightening enforcer of male dominance:

Angry, Father reminded me of a carnival toy, a leather fist attached to a coiled spring used in puppet shows. When the spring was released, the fist shot out at a hapless puppet. With Father, it wasn't the fist that frightened me; it was the spring, because the spring determined the force of the blow. The anger in his eyes was so tightly coiled that I didn't know what would happen if his spring were tripped. (Levine 35-36)

Since he does not know about Ella's magical obedience, Sir Peter's thoughtless wielding of power speaks to the way which the entitled male might make commands with the expectation that they be obeyed, with no thought to what disobedience might cost those in subservient positions. The specific metaphor of the carnival toy makes Sir Peter's means of enforcing his will explicitly violent. His anger over the prospect of disobedience gives the family patriarch's whims the force of violence. He need not command Ella, even, because he draws on Ella's fear of his anger to bend her to his indomitable will. Ella calls her compliance with his demand that she go to finishing school "a taste of obedience without an order, and I didn't like it any better than the Lucinda-induced kind" (Levine 36). Sir Peter's power extends beyond the curse of obedience, but that curse compounds the way Ella understands the threat. Mandy warns

Ella not to let Sir Peter learn that Lucinda has cast a spell on Ella to make her obedient because she recognizes the compounded danger of an already-powerful man gaining absolute certainty of Ella's compliance: "He likes to have his way too much. He'd use you" (Levine 37). The threat of Sir Peter as a spring-loaded fist resonantly dramatizes a wary perspective toward a father's violent potential to enforce his will. By making this metaphor, Ella makes the reader consider the dominance imposed on Ella as violence, and makes the prospect of submission to abstract dominance an issue of existing under a constant threat. Threatening, ever-present violence thusly aligned with a family patriarch makes for a text in which the frightening inescapability of hegemony has concrete representation.

Another way that Levine makes Sir Peter's complicity in oppressing Ella visible comes in the specific contrast with how Ella appeals to her father where Perrault's Cinderella character could not. Levine does not preclude the possibility of appealing to the father: "Father. I hated to ask him for anything, but he was the only one who could help. I would write to him" (Levine 171). Ella's reluctance to admit her father's dominance and ability to control the family makes her reluctant to write to him. She "hate[s] to ask him for anything" because she resents being reminded of the obedience her father can exhort even without magic. Proud of whatever self-sufficiency she might be able to eke out of her cursed life, the obedient Ella would rather not ask for "anything" from the frightening wielder of non-magical power unless he is "the only one who could help." Perrault's Cinderella faces the opposite challenge to writing to her father, in the awareness that the family patriarch's rightful dominance had been co-opted by a domineering wife, rather than Ella's awareness that the patriarch's dominance might

serve her ends but require her to acknowledge that dominance in a painful reminder of his power as patriarch. Levine's father figure, made aware of the situation, abandons his daughter to servitude: "My servitude pained him, but not enough to return him to the arms of his odious, though beloved, wife. He wrote, 'When I find a husband for you who is rich enough to satisfy me, you will be released from my Olga. Until then, I urge you to be, as always, my stalwart daughter'" (Levine 189-190). Unlike the father "under the woman's sway" of Perrault's version, Levine's Sir Peter is aware of the "odious" nature of the woman he has married. Ella, unlike Perrault's Cinderella, does "dare" to complain to her father, but is greeted with worse than the hypothetical scoldings feared by Perrault's Cinderella; Ella faces a greedy and domineering man whose awareness of the situation only exacerbates the evils Ella must face. Sir Peter's absence mocks his "stalwart daughter" by reminding her that he could save her from servitude, but does not care enough about his daughter to become a positive presence in her life. Instead, he provides distant threats which mock Ella with a reminder of how debased she has become that even the "only one who could help" defers releasing Ella from servitude because he would rather not "return [...] to the arms of his odious, though beloved, wife."

Sir Peter's letter reminds readers of the inescapable reality not only of Ella's servitude but of the frightening possibility of being forced to marry for money, an odious act¹⁵ which Sir Peter has committed twice and which so imminently looms over Ella. Ella appropriates that possibility as a means to deter her true love, Char, but Sir Peter proves

¹⁵ Levine herself might be accused of a similar superficial monetary interest given the fact that she sold the rights for Disney to make a movie out of *Ella Enchanted*. In exchange for Disney's money, Levine allowed the screenwriters to erase the aspect of internal struggle from the magical curse and instead turn *Ella Enchanted* into a story which ironically elides all of the imaginative resonance my thesis discusses. Which is why I generally ignore the movie, except where movie critics like James Poniewozik offer salient points to my discussion of Ella. Also, Levine has defended herself on this note by comparing the adaptation of her book to the *Clueless* adaptation of Jane Austen's *Emma* (Nguyen).

the plausibility of Ella's made-up scenario in his letter and thereby provokes a literal collapse for the distraught character: "I fell back on the bed, laughing wildly. Father would make my letter to Char come true. He would marry me off to an ancient man who would soon die and leave me enormously wealthy. The irony! I couldn't catch my breath. Tears ran down my face, and I didn't know whether I was laughing or crying" (Levine 190). The avaricious strategy Sir Peter employs, of seeking out marriages to compensate for an impoverished state he has brought upon himself, gets demonstrated as such in his courtship of Dame Olga. Ella bears witness to this second courtship and marriage, and Levine thereby allows readers to share the witnessing of Sir Peter's strategic manipulation of a wealthy woman. In addition to the extended narrative demonstration of Sir Peter's manipulation of Dame Olga, Ella also learns, from Mandy, that Sir Peter had similarly manipulated Ella's mother: "Until she was his wife, Sir Peter was very sweet to Lady. I didn't trust him, but she wouldn't listen to me. Her family didn't approve because he was poor, which made Lady want him even more, she was just that kind-hearted" (Levine 37). Sir Peter uses women. The very possibility of his marrying wealthy women to attain respectable social status suggests that women might possess higher status than men. Perrault's version did not acknowledge this possibility. Though women allow for him to preserve his wealth and status, the fact that Sir Peter so adeptly manipulates women makes him a reminder of the cunning way that a man might coerce a woman to do what he wants—whether through paternal violence or through romantic manipulation.

By emphasizing Ella's father as a domineering family patriarch, Levine makes it impossible for readers to ignore the fact that the story's protagonist suffers under an oppressive patriarchy. Sir Peter controls and constrains Ella in a frightening and

frustrating reminder of Ella's involuntary submission. By extension, Levine allows readers to understand that men in dominant roles might oppress women from a similarly disengaged, absent presumption that he can "have his way" (to quote Mandy).

Oppression need not be active, Sir Peter's largely-absent character yet immediately-threatening characterization reminds readers. Ever-absent, ever-greedy, ever-capable of manipulating Ella's mother figures, Sir Peter's static character represents an inescapable hegemonic presence. Ella ultimately frees herself of the curse and finds a happiness in which her father's absence no longer threatens her through her necessary obedience to it, though Sir Peter still exists and still possesses his characteristics as an embodiment of avaricious human capacity to manipulate others. Ella's freedom from the familiar threat of her father represents Levine's message that manifestations of an oppressive structure might be escaped on an individual level, even if the controlling body—represented by Ella's father—must itself remain. *Ella Enchanted* communicates that an oppressive and frightening enforcer of power will always exist and can, at certain points, be genuinely inescapable, but that ultimately this oppressive force can be dealt with, set aside and controlled. *Ella Enchanted* therefore allows readers to understand how to subvert the ever-present structure of power that Sir Peter represents by becoming an independent heroine like Ella. However, the means of this independence—Ella's marriage to Char—enmeshes Levine's text in yet another higher level of patriarchy.

The Hope of Ella's Prince Char

Though Levine avoids making Prince Char an appealing love interest for his royal status alone, she still defines her characters as deferent to the patriarchal world he embodies. The benevolent royalty in *Ella Enchanted* represents an acceptable

superstructure of power, a superstructure Ella chooses to preserve in the climactic, curse-breaking moment when she rejects Char's marriage proposal in order to save him from sharing her curse. Levine represents Kyrria as more worth saving than either Ella as an individual or the personal happiness that might come from marrying Char. Just because the notion of deference arises in relation to Levine's royalty, does not mean that Levine promotes unthinking or blind deference. Rather, the reminders of an inherited royalty in *Ella Enchanted* carry associated reminders of the necessity that such wielders of power prove their worthiness of this inherited responsibility. Levine's Kyrria represents a benevolently-led society, and hence merits preservation for the way it serves the individual. In Levine's version of the Cinderella story, acceptance of a pre-existing, male-headed governing structure comes only after journey from awed deference to questioning insubordination and finally to self-sacrificing love has been outlined in the reader's imagined experience through Ella.

Levine has Ella confront Char's initially-intimidating royal title such that questioning its entitlement becomes possible. She quickly moves from calling him "Prince Charmont" to accepting his friendly identity as Char. Translations of Perrault's text, on the other hand, refer to Cinderella's love interest¹⁶ as the "king's son" ("Cinderella" 61). Presuming that this translation's wording preserves the intention of the original French, the phrase "king's son" implies not only the definitional importance of a royal title but also the way that inheritance of power functions in a royal patriarchy. The king's son is an abstracted figure, given a title and a relationship rather than the actual name Levine gives her Prince Charmont. Formally, the prince allows for approbation and elevation of the proper feminine represented by Cinderella. As with the father figure,

¹⁶ The element of romance in this story is virtually absent, so perhaps "love interest" is an overstatement.

Perrault's cursory acknowledgment of the royal figurehead implies acceptance of the governing patriarchy.¹⁷

Levine's Prince Char may be a more round and amiable individual in comparison to his counterpart in Perrault's Cinderella story, but Char's characterization nonetheless relies heavily on references to his father¹⁸. Recurring comparisons between Char and his father, even when the father is absent, bring the notion of deference to a male figurehead into the text even as traditional conceptions of royalty are being questioned. The monetary unit within Kyrria, KJs, bear mention for the way Levine effectively monetizes the notion of power. When Olive takes Ella's money, Ella narrates that her stepsister has taken the "power that even a few coins bestow" (Levine 169). KJs, monetary units presumably an initialism of King Jerrold, represent an absent presence of the king. Their first mention (Levine 19) does not make the connection explicit. There is hence an element of Perrault-like acceptance of patriarchy in Levine's imagined world. But this absent presence, of the governing patriarchy, represents the more influential, more powerful, and more positive counterpoint to the oppressive powers Ella faces on a personal level, through her curse and her father. An exploration of the way Levine defines Char—and his parents, and the overall goodness of Kyrria as a kingdom worth saving—will make this optimistic understanding of Levine's royalty more clear.

When "Prince Charmont" first appears in her story, Ella provides the following description of him:

¹⁷ This understanding of Perrault as implicitly approving of royalty largely ignores the context of revolutionary ideas in France at the time, and the similarly rebellious feminine influence of the salon-based origins of the Cinderella story. This footnote only slightly remedies the oversimplification I have done in my evocation of French history.

¹⁸ Similarly, Ella is constantly compared to her mother. A couple enmeshed in their fairy tale inheritance...

Although the prince was only two years older than I, he was much taller, and he stood just like his father, feet apart, hands behind his back, as though the whole country were passing by on review. He looked like his father, too, although the sharp angles of King Jerrold's face were softened in his son. They each had tawny curls and swarthy skin. I had never been near enough to the king to know whether he also had a sprinkling of freckles across his nose, surprising on such a dark face. (Levine 12)

As with Perrault's implicit emphasis on inherited royal status by referring to his prince as the "king's son," Levine emphasizes the prince's royalty through his father. A notion of inheritance (as my introductory discussion of fairy tale origins established) is important to my analysis. Characters' literal inheritance represents the oppressive, power-reinforcing structure of the Cinderella tale *Ella Enchanted* itself inherits. Though the first comparison Ella makes in her description of Char involves herself—her age and height in respect to the prince—every sentence in this paragraph includes some form of comparison between the prince and his father the king. This first sentence orients Ella as younger and smaller than the noble figure of the prince, a representation of herself as comparatively lesser and uncertain of how to respond to royalty that continues throughout their first interaction. This first representation of Char reflects Ella's intimidation by her proximity to a royal person, an intimidation inexorably tied to a sense of the prince's inherited position of power. Ella's description of Char's posture expands on "like his father" to describe the powerful stance of a man who looks "as though the whole country were passing by on review." Char resembles his father in bearing as well as in physical likeness, and this inherited aura of nobility overwhelms Ella's initial description. Even in mourning, the prince exudes authority and confidence that Levine allows Ella to interpret (correctly) as connected to the way that a prince might have the power to "review" the fairy tale country and effect institutional change. Ella's recognition of this authoritative

bearing in Char recurs throughout *Ella Enchanted*, and suggests that Levine believes there to be some validity to the idea of royalty being an inherited, noble, characteristic. But Ella also questions the notion of inherently-superior royalty such that Char as a royal figure must prove himself worthy of this inheritance.

Levine guides readers toward an understanding of royal power in which that which initially intimidates gets questioned and chosen in an empowering climax. Ella's preoccupation with seeing Char in terms of his father in this initial presentation of Char's character reflects Ella's mindset at this early point in the novel, in which she has yet to grow confident enough with herself to question Char's princely identity. But Ella's empowerment rests on *choosing* the royalty after she has come to love (and understand) its prince. A journey toward questioning the structure of power represented by a royal identity can be seen in the way that Ella's relationship with Char develop. In commencing their epistolary romance, Ella confronts the initially-intimidating powerful title Char holds:

I have many questions, most of them impertinent. When you were a boy, did you study with other children, or did you have tutors all to yourself? I suppose you were wonderful at all your subjects—but were you? Who took care of you when you were small? When did you discover you were a prince and would someday be king? What did the knowledge mean to you?
(Levine 162)

Ella's questions draw attention to the fact that social hierarchy merits interrogation; even if those in power relate to their subjects thoughtfully and benevolently—as with the royalty in *Ella Enchanted*—the very fact that people can control one another (as Ella's curse makes her painfully aware) means that there is always a danger of becoming compliant to a freedom-restricting system. By having Ella ask Char about his status as future king, Levine reminds readers that such elevated status ought not be accepted

without thought. Ella literally interrogates the prince in her letter so that readers engrossed in her words might similarly question the people who wield power in their lives. Ella's initial deference for authority fades as she becomes familiar with Char and allows herself to question presumptions about aloof and perfect royalty, but her confidence in their relationship never fully erases her initial awed deference toward the prince and her implicit understanding as the noble character as inherently superior. Ella prefaces her questions with the recognition that they are "impertinent," and the letter itself gets represented within Ella's self-conscious narration in which she worries about how to address the letter without seeming "childish" to the prince (Levine 162). The prince may deserve to be interrogated about his inherited eminence, but he still merits respect as a fellow individual and a fellow adult.

When Ella draws attention to the fact that hierarchy might be questioned, she also draws attention to the correct wielding of power Char represents. The "softened" angles of the king's features Ella notices on first seeing Char represent a softened and more personable sort of authority, more a servant of the people than an inaccessible icon of power that the eponymous money of King Jerrold's Kyrria implies the king to be. Char's soft personality gets demonstrated in a couple of instances of the prince literally lowering himself to the same level as common laborers:

'When the seller began screeching that everyone would trample his precious tomatoes and melons and lettuces, Char had us right the cart; then he spent the better part of an hour on his hands and knees, rescuing vegetables' (Levine 114, Sir Stephan talking to Ella)

Mother, Father, I, Ollo, Uflimu, Isti, and even Ettime went down on our knees, picking up shards so the prince wouldn't step on something sharp. It was so crowded on the floor, I bumped into someone's shoulder. When I turned to apologize, I was face-to-face with the prince, who was crawling about with the rest of us!

He insisted on paying for the vase. He said it never would have happened if not for him. Then he apologized for knocking into me! (Levine 199, Ella reading Areida's journal)

Power may be inherited and its structuring influence on society perpetuated, but Char's softened and amiable presence suggests that such a structure can be considered optimistically, as benevolent and progressing away from the sharp dictates of a negative connotation of power¹⁹. Written interactions, like the excerpt from Areida's journal that Ella reads, bear noting because of the extra emphasis placed on Ella's magic book (which I will discuss more in my third chapter). Ella and Char's epistolary romance provides the most insight into Char's character. Not only does Ella write Char interrogating him about his inherited royal status, she also uses his handwriting to infer the merit of his character. Upon receiving Char's first letter, Ella notes that "Char's hand was large and round, the letters evenly spaced, each fully formed—completely unlike my crabbed, spiky writing. His showed a balanced, honest nature, while Areida used to say mine proved me imaginative, impulsive, and always in a hurry" (Levine 173). Ella explicitly defines the written word as an essential way of attaining insight into a person's character. Ella's connection between the way she perceives Char and the written representation of him increases a reader's ability to identify with the protagonist as a fellow reader. It also defines Char as balanced and honest, an ideal counterpart to Ella and a careful and moral person who might make for a paragon of a leader for his ability to be "balanced" in his decision-making.

¹⁹ I'm trying not to burden my readers too much, so I've removed my discussion of the progressive connotations of Char's "dark face" as it relates to Levine's imagined ideal authority figure. For those interested in reading about 1997 re-imaginings of the Cinderella story and the way such re-imaginings put forward an ideal American version of a de-racialized future, I refer you to Marlene S. Barr's "Biology Is Not Destiny; Biology Is Fantasy: *Cinderella*, or to Dream Disney's 'Impossible'/Possible Race Relations Dream."

Char's Perfect Royal Inheritance

The textual progression—from defining royalty in terms of its overwhelming inherited status and toward vindicating that eminent status through the contemporary challenge to the validity of that power which Ella's impertinence represents—becomes most evident when Ella meets Char's parents. The way that Levine handles this introduction between paramour and parents subverts notions of royalty as necessarily elite and aloof for their ability to control society. To establish Char's introduction of "Lela" to his parents as something other than the prince flouting his royal status by confronting her with the reigning monarchs, Levine establishes Char's introduction as defensible as a gallant exchange of respect. As the final ball commences, Ella emphasizes Char's "gallantry" as a gentleman who bows to a lady he considers disfigured (Levine 215). As Levine has previously established with the way Char's character does not see himself as above his people and literally lowers himself to their level, Ella sees Char as "gallant" in terms of his respect for those who might be considered of lower status. Definitions of the word "gallantry" may evoke showiness and fashion, but the more salient definition of the term for the genuine and non-superficial ideal Levine emphasizes might be found in the definition of "courtliness or devotion to the female sex, polite or courteous bearing or attention to ladies" (OED). The prince treats Ella courteously, and hence shows respect toward her as a lady. The connotations of "gallantry" referring to interactions between the sexes reinforces the way that Char and Ella's relationship, even in the short and misleading interactions Ella creates to see him at the balls where she disguises herself as "Lela" by leaving on her mask and adopting a different voice, represents a heterosexual courtship. Part of this courtship is the standard exchange of

introductions with the parents. Before proposing that she meet his parents, Char asks to visit “Lela”²⁰ in Bast (Levine 215). He requests permission to visit and get to know “Lela” and her family, showing that he does not presume that as a prince he is above making such polite requests.

Char’s deference to “Lela” is essential to the subsequent demonstration of Char’s royal status. He offers to introduce “Lela” to his mother and father only after he has first expressed interest in meeting the innkeeper family Ella has made up for “Lela” (Levine 215). This ordering of events therefore establishes Char’s interest in introducing a lower-class girl to royal parents minimizes the implications of flaunting his powerful position by displaying his royal parents to “Lela.” When Ella is taken aback by his offer to meet Char’s parents (“Now? King Jerrold?”), Char’s response further de-emphasizes the fact of his royal status: “He chuckled. ‘That’s who my father is.’ ‘But...’ ‘He’s kind to everyone except ogres. You needn’t worry’” (Levine 215). Char’s cavalier glossing-over of his royal status presents his father as unintimidating. The fact that King Jerrold is “kind to everyone except ogres” suggests the fairy tale ruler’s benevolence, serving and protecting his people and therefore deserving of any deference that his elevated position might accord. Char’s chuckling dismissal of “King Jerrold” as merely the identity of his father also emphasizes the importance of interpersonal relationships and personality traits rather than titles in establishing a person’s character.

Levine’s representation of the interaction between Ella and the king and queen (as with Ella’s initial intimidation in the presence of Char) emphasizes the way that Ella feels in the presence of royalty: “I curtsied, blushing for my rudeness in wearing a mask before

²⁰ An identity which Char accepts as an innkeeper’s daughter. This contrasts with Cinderella in Perrault’s version in which the Prince presumes Cinderella to be a great, mysterious princess.

him [i.e., the king]" (Levine 215). As with her first time seeing Char in person, however, Ella quickly goes from being overwhelmed by the idea of the powerful figure to observing the way that that powerful figure manifests ideal notions of a benevolent ruler. "The queen had a wide face, perfect for broad smiles. An honest face. Char resembled his father, but softened a bit. The king's face was severe in repose, although merry now" (Levine 216). The narration emphasizes the queen and king as happy, friendly people; Char's chuckling dismissal of the prospect of being intimidated by meeting a king therefore gets demonstrated to have been well-founded by Ella's experience in actually meeting the queen and king. In having the description of the queen before that of the king, Levine continues her book's reader-appealing focus on a female and a young person. The "honest" face of the queen and the king's face which tends to be "in repose" both suggest rulers who might make fair and thoughtful decisions in governing their country. As with her first interaction with the prince, Ella once again compares Char and his father. But Ella now sees the father in terms of the son—repeating the "softened" comparison made when she first met Char, as well as calling King Jerrold's voice "the roundest, deepest voice I'd ever heard" (Levine 216). This phrasing echoes the way Ella identifies Char's handwriting in the application of the word "round" (Levine 173). Levine hence emphasizes the familiar and comforting aspects of royal people rather than their intimidating positions of power. In so doing, Levine orients power itself as something possible to separate from individuals, reflecting a modern notion of who wields power and why.

The fairy tale story cannot avoid representing a prince, a king and a queen—but *Ella Enchanted* makes these representations engage with these royal figures such that

these royal positions appeal to American readers' sympathies. The royal identities themselves receive less focus than the way that an individual might respond to and relate to the experience of interacting with the people who humanize the abstract concept of governmental power and thereby make it positive, something other than an oppressive and inescapable hegemonic force like the curse of obedience.

Overcoming The Curse for Kyrria

Ella's climactic moment of growth occurs in a way that presents a problem to interpreting the text in which such a climax occurs as resistant to the patriarchal world in Ella finds the strength to overcome this curse. Ella manages to empower herself while placing a kingdom above her personal happiness, ostensibly reifying a notion of the abstract patriarchy as superior to the embodied individual. Levine has Ella overcome her curse through internal strength: "For a moment I rested inside myself, safe, secure, certain, gaining strength. In that moment I found a power beyond any I'd had before, a will and a determination I would never have needed if not for Lucinda, a fortitude I hadn't been able to find for a lesser cause. And I found my voice (Levine 226)" Ella's internal focus allows her to find her voice; the phrasing of how she overcomes her curse orients Ella as self-empowering, throwing off the compulsion to be submissive through a power that rests inside the individual. But the greatest possible cause, in Levine's world, is the preservation of an ideal imagined kingdom rather than the happiness of the individual. The greatest "cause" that Levine can imagine for her protagonist is preserving that protagonist's kingdom. Even in presenting Ella's individual empowerment, Ella's narration recognizes an external force greater than the individual who has just become empowered:

I had been able to break the curse myself. I'd had to have reason enough, love enough to do it, to find the will and the strength. My safety from the ogres hadn't been enough; zhulph's rescue hadn't been enough, especially not with guards about; my slavery to Mum Olga hadn't been enough. Kyrria was enough. Char was enough. (Levine 228)

Ella places her kingdom and her prince above her personal safety and happiness. Levine's reasoning, narrated through Ella, is that the greatest cause for empowerment is love of a man and his kingdom. With the kingdom—the abstract superstructure—coming first in Ella's narration. Because Ella's strength to throw off her curse comes from a need to preserve the power structure (i.e., Prince Char), it might seem as if Levine rejects one form of constraining femininity (the obedience-cursed form) only to embrace another (the passive wife). Levine's text challenges not patriarchy per se, but rather the unquestioning acceptance of external control over an individual that might confine and control thought. The Ella who breaks free of cursed dominance to choose to perpetuate a royal patriarchy is not constrained, because she has the ability to choose. Also, the patriarchy Ella chooses has been interrogated and demonstrated to be worthy of preservation.

Levine may be seen to resolve the tension between Ella's self-sacrificing love and the way that such love implies her submission to patriarchy by having Char, the human embodiment of her world's patriarchal governance, deny the submissive stance that Ella takes in her proposal. Having refused Char's order to marry him and broken the curse, Ella proposes to Char. His response reinforces an ostensibly equal relationship: "He didn't let me kneel before him. He pulled me up and kissed me again. I took that to signify his consent" (Levine 229). The notion of male control existing in a relationship gets appropriated by Levine in Ella's narrative joke that Char "didn't let me kneel before him." Char inhibits Ella's behavior—not allowing her to kneel—insofar as he inhibits her

performance²¹ of subservience. Furthermore, Ella's proposal is framed in terms of the running joke in Char and Ella's epistolary correspondence, about whether she is old enough to marry: "When you asked for my hand a few minutes ago, I was still too young to marry.' I looked up at him and saw a smile start. 'I'm older now, so much older that not only can I marry, but I can beg you to marry me.' I knelt and took his hand" (Levine 228-229). In their proposal, Ella and Char enact the "laughter and love" which ultimately make for their happily-ever-after in the epilogue. I will discuss my problems with the "laughter and love" which qualifies their happily ever after in my third chapter, but for now I will let the matter rest with this defense of how Ella demonstrates Levine's approval of a certain manifestation of patriarchy as enabling individual empowerment.

As with Levine's representation of Sir Peter as a patriarch, royalty in *Ella Enchanted* gets made visible as potentially oppressive by the way that Ella confronts its presumptive eminence from her cursed perspective. Unlike the more personal levels of oppression, however, the overarching and official structure of power that royalty represents receives Levine's approbation. Levine does not attempt the impossible task of rejecting all structures of power, but rather creates an imaginary world in which improperly-wielded power is emphasized as such and escaped (i.e., big magic and Sir Peter) with deference to an ideal royalty which serves its people rather than oppresses them. Levine's conception of what might constitute ideal governance exists in terms that U.S. audiences might easily relate to, as individualistic members of a republic.

²¹ Judith Butler has applied the notion of performativity to gender in a way tangentially relevant to my thesis. Butler points out: "Feminist theory has sought to understand the way in which systemic or pervasive political and cultural structures are enacted and reproduced through individual acts and practices, and how the analysis of ostensibly personal situations is clarified through situating the issues in a broader and shared cultural context (Butler 903). My thesis seeks to understand how Levine's text performs a conformity to contemporary standards of femininity, but how such a performance, as such, implies the possibility of "being constituted differently" (Butler 901).

Chapter 2: Ella's Socially Positive Characterization

“...it is helpful to know the proper way to behave, so one can decide whether or not to be proper.”

-Ella, to Char²²

In my first chapter, I demonstrated how Ella's magically-induced obedience may be interpreted as Levine's judgment against a constraining society. I have yet to discuss the problems with the manner in which Levine characterizes Ella as a heroine grappling with magically-induced obedience. Levine imagined Ella as cursed with obedience so that the character would conform more to Levine's personal ideal of a worthwhile heroine. Levine has said that she “didn't understand why [Cinderella] was so obedient” and that she “didn't like her because she was so sweet” (qtd. in Baker). In rejecting a certain “sweet” form of femininity, Levine creates a version of femininity which still conforms to contemporary standards. In criticizing the movie version of *Ella Enchanted*, James Poniewozik lays out the following criteria for an early-21st-century fairy tale heroine: “She should be pretty, but in a class-president way, not a head-cheerleader way. She should be able to stand up for herself [...]. She must be socially conscious [...]. And she should above all not want to be a princess—at least until she changes her mind.” Though not necessarily constraining in the same terms as pre-American Cinderella versions, Levine's characterization of Ella nonetheless makes the protagonist of *Ella Enchanted* an icon of a 1997 form of ideal femininity which inherits notions of prettiness and selflessness from its Cinderella legacy even as it attempts to supplant those ideals with feisty and self-righteous alternatives. Just as Levine presents Ella as enmeshed in an inherited patriarchy, she also presents Ella as inescapably inheriting feminine traits valued by that patriarchy. Ella's conformity to ostensibly conservative notions of

²² Levine, Gail Carson. *Ella Enchanted*. New York: Scholastic, 1997. 107-108.

femininity defines her through the way Levine attempts to flout it as much as how the new ideals of fairy tale heroine define Ella. Ella's discomfort with her inherited Cinderella legacy of perfect, social-approved femininity represents Levine's means of addressing her own discomfort with the legacy of the Cinderella story. Even seemingly-constraining characterization of Ella makes productive conversations about a young woman's constraint possible.

Pretty Little Ella In Her Pretty Little Shoes

Ella is pretty and has small feet, but she responds defensively to these superficial traits such that Levine's characterization of an ideal femininity relies on this thoughtful objection to objectification more than the fact of its inherent containing of the heroine in a fairy tale trope of perfection. Levine dismissed the fairy tale structure of *Ella Enchanted* as an "embellishment" (Edinger 30). An icon of that constraining fairy tale structure, the glass slipper itself becomes superficial and irrelevant to Levine's characters except as an indication of fey inheritance. But, just as the Cinderella legacy cannot be dismissed as irrelevant to *Ella Enchanted*, superficial physical traits cannot be considered irrelevant to Ella's character. Ella's small feet remain Cinderella-like emblems of an ideal interiority, though Ella conforms to contemporary standards of humble beauty and fierce wit rather than stunning beauty and docile obedience. The shoe-test remains because the structure of the story cannot be escaped any more than the structure of society can be escaped. (That is, it can be escaped somewhat, and imaginatively—according to Makinen's understanding of how fairy tales' "reactionary" form can be re-written.) Ella is still a pretty Cinderella heroine, and Ella still has Cinderella's small fairy-tale feet. However, Levine surrounds the moments of recognition of Ella's inherited small feet and

of the glass slipper as a signifier detached from its metonymic bearing on the Cinderella character. The symbolic constraint of the slipper hence gets defused somewhat, because the story rejects the shoe's superficial implications. Though the shoe-test remains as the climactic scene in Levine's Cinderella story, what's tested is Ella's interior strength and ability to resist what society tells the young woman she should find appealing rather than her exterior conformity to standards of beauty.

Levine evidences discomfort with female beauty standards throughout *Ella Enchanted*. The way Levine skirts around the issue of Ella's beauty implies that fairy tale perpetuation of the value of standards of female beauty is a necessary evil. Initially somewhat plain, Ella becomes increasingly physically attractive as she matures. Levine has Ella first describe herself as a "skinny, spiky grasshopper with a human head and straight hair" (Levine 17). The potentially attractive element of skinniness gets undercut by the comparison to an insect and to the mundane modifier attached to Ella's hair. Though Ella initially possesses the potential to conform to restrictive notions of an ideal feminine figure as a skinny one, Levine refuses to allow Ella to acknowledge this skinniness as part of an ideal womanly figure. For Levine, the preadolescent body of Ella is so alien from an attractive female body as to resemble a "grasshopper," an insect rather than a human. Though such early descriptions from Ella do not admit her beauty, Ella later falls under numerous other characters' gazes such that Levine acknowledges her protagonist to be pretty in the eyes of others: Ella resembles her mother, who was beautiful (Levine 15); Hattie jealously calls Ella pretty (Levine 76); Sir Peter calls Ella "pretty enough" (Levine 128). In his letter confessing his love, Char concludes by imagining "what a beautiful bride" Ella will be (Levine 181). Descriptions of Ella seldom

occur outside of those provided by other characters, and virtually every reference other characters make to Ella's appearance garners a negative reaction. Levine's resistance to presenting Ella's appearance extends beyond an authorial tool to make the first-person narrator dissolve so the protagonist may be imaginatively occupied by the reader who substitutes herself for Ella's "I." Ella's characteristic resistance to being objectified defines her more than the beauty that allows for this objectification. Ella resents being considered by her father as if she were "a portrait instead of a maiden" (Levine 31). Imagining a memory of being dressed up as a small child, Ella objectifies herself in a description of her appearance as like a "china doll" (Levine 4). Ella imagines her younger self such that the constraints of sophisticated, fashionable clothing make her into an object. But the later narration as Ella's father considers how her face "belongs" to him proves that Ella resents being seen as an object by others. Levine's heroine wants to be seen as the complex human individual of "a maiden" rather than the prettified representation of what an artist might want to emphasize as beautiful in "a portrait." She recognizes that she might seem like an object, but Ella does not enjoy being the object of others' gazes. The fact that Ella avoids explicitly recognizing her beauty, getting bothered by others' references to her appearance²³ allows readers to understand that a superficially-judgmental world ought not to rest easily, even with those for whom the emphasis on beauty serves them well. Ella cannot escape the fact that her beauty defines her, nor that such beauty privileges her in a world in which beautiful women are valued more than ugly ones. But Levine has the reader, through Ella, confront the way that reduction of a person to her physical presence is misguided.

²³ For the most part—Ella makes no comment on Char's reference to her as a "beautiful bride" in his letter confessing to his love for her (Levine 181).

In Levine's retelling of Cinderella, the protagonist's small feet, an indication of fashionable beauty, no longer represent something the protagonist might enjoy possessing. Ella's small feet shift from the Cinderella emblem of demure feminine beauty and the identifying factor through which a woman might win a prince to a superficial embodiment of fairy inheritance. When Mandy introduces Ella—and Levine, through Mandy, introduces readers—to the notion that Ella's small feet represent an inherited and magical legacy, the mundane nature of this revelation reminds readers that this magical inheritance is not the straightforward blessing that might be imagined:

'All the Eleanor line are Friends of the Fairies. You have fairy blood in you.'
Fairy blood! 'Can I do magic? Shall I live forever? Would Mother have if she hadn't gotten sick? Are there many Friends of the Fairies?'
'Very few. You're the only one left in Kyrria. And no, love, you can't do magic of live forever. It's just a drop of fairy blood. But there's one way it has already started to show. Your feet haven't grown for a few years, I'll warrant.' (Levine 25)

Ella's initial delight over having fairy blood reflects readers' initial reaction to the notion of a fairy tale. Ella's over-eager understanding of the fairy tale magic erasing her problems, and of readers' beliefs that fairy tales are synonymous with simplistic happy fantasies, gets disabused by Mandy. Levine's fairy godmother reminds Ella that, though special for her maternally-derived magical legacy, Ella's small feet only mark her as special inasmuch as she has the privilege of drawing on "Friends of the Fairies" status. Ella's small feet, inherited from her Cinderella origins, become a superficial inherited trait with no positive bearing on Ella's character. The fact that the fairy blood is "just a drop" and does not endow Ella with magical abilities or longevity speaks to the way that Levine hopes to minimize the association of her story with the Cinderella tale's legacy of

constraining femininity by forcing its protagonists into the passive conformity represented by fitting into the glass slipper.

This superficial embodiment troubles Ella just as the fact of her existence in an inherited form of the fairy tale might trouble readers. The small feet represent a potentially-crippling, potentially-impossible-to-grow-beyond aspect of the fairy tale, a mode of communication that reifies notions of what its audience values at the potential expense of becoming clumsy and falling back into conservative tropes (e.g., of beauty as a virtue). Ella's narration emphasizes the absurdity of small feet being fashionable in terms of foot size implying anything other than the mundane fact of the surface on which people walk. Having been told that her feet will stop growing, a young Ella thinks: "Tiny feet were fashionable, but would they make me even clumsier as I grew taller? Would I be able to keep my balance?" (Levine 26). In Ella's initial worry about small feet exacerbating clumsiness, Levine turns the fact that small feet might be fashionable into a secondary consideration to the worry about the practicality of this fashion. Ella focuses on grappling with how to function in a world where that which society values (not just the curse of obedience, but the fashionably small feet as well) might be more curse than gift. Ella's narration recognizes that conforming to fashionable ideals of one's society facilitates easier functioning in her patriarchal world. Her worry over being "even clumsier implies an understanding of the delicate behavior fashionable society expects of her. Smaller feet may be attractive, but clumsiness is not. Ella's worry focuses not just on the superficial acceptability of her small-footed appearance, but also on the practical implications of what that might accompany and undercut the "fashionable" (e.g., clumsiness). Levine has Ella narrate thoughts that emphasize the absurdity of the fashion

of small feet because Ella represents Levine's vision of a modern female ideal whose thoughtful and imaginative interiority is more important than the (also-positive) fact of her fashionable appearance.

Ella's meeting with Char's parents dramatizes the way that Levine's text shifts away from a perpetuation of ideal women as objects of beauty and toward a newer standard of the ideal woman as intelligent and engaged with her world. This ideal gets pointed out in Ella by Queen Daria such that it receives particular emphasis in its simultaneous manifestation in the two female characters involved in the interaction. Queen Daria says Ella reminds her of a lady the queen admired, with "the most playful spirit I ever knew," and that if Ella is like this lady, "then Char has chosen well" (Levine 216). Levine has another woman express her approval directly to Ella. The queen's approval represents official social sanction, coming as it does from a governing power. Moreover, though the queen notices Ella's beauty, Queen Daria's approval avoids superficial validation of a woman based on the fact of her beauty. Because Ella has kept her mask on, Queen Daria cannot tell whether Ella resembles her mother as a pretty young woman; the queen can, however, detect and express an awareness of maternal similarity. The "playful spirit" Ella inherits makes her an ideal protagonist and narrator for readers who enjoy her story, but it also makes her an ideal character to the contemporary ideal of proper eminence which the ostensibly propriety-ignoring queen who makes this observation in front of her son represents. That this "playful spirit" cannot be verified through a mask implies a pragmatic recognition of the fact that physical appearance has bearing on how people are perceived. An inescapable fact of existence, like hegemony, Ella's inherited beauty cannot be dismissed as irrelevant.

In Levine's characterization, Ella's "playful spirit" of witty responses to a stifling world is more important than her beauty. Ella is pretty, but Ella's character is so diametrically opposed to the idolatry of vapid femininity that the vacant "simpleton" functions as a disguise for her. When Char seeks her out after the ball, Ella hides behind a manservant and, sucking on her fist, "stare[s] about vacantly, straining for a new disguise of servant and simpleton" (Levine 222). Ella's small feet, and related conformity to female beauty standards, remain essential to Levine's Cinderella story even in this moment where Ella's character emphasizes her intelligence as an identifying factor more essential than her (also acknowledged) physicality.

Though Levine's characters perform²⁴ a dismissal of the superficial unimportance of Ella's looks and the related fact of her small feet, they cannot escape the fact that Ella's small feet represent her inherited fairy tale privilege. Char frames his identification of Ella in the performance of fitting her foot into the slipper. "As soon as we touched, I knew he recognized me. He brought my slipper out from his cloak. 'It belonged to Ella, and will fit her alone, whether she is a scullery maid or a duchess'" (Levine 223). Levine's characters perform a dismissal of structures of power in Char's acceptance of Ella "whether she is a scullery maid or a duchess," but this acceptance occurs on the condition of Char's already having recognized Ella. The shoes will fit Ella no matter what social position she pretends to occupy, because she truly occupies a privileged position for her internal virtue. As Jane Yolen has pointed out in discussing America's Cinderella, the Cinderella character never really occupies the low-class category (296). Even in its earlier iterations, Cinderella is a riches-to-rags-to-yet-more-riches story rather than the rags-to-riches story Americans tend to think of it as, because the noble

²⁴ See my footnote in the first chapter for a reminder of the feminist resonance of performativity.

Cinderella character gets forced into a position of servitude before ascending to a yet-higher position of nobility (Yolen 296). By saying that the slipper “will fit [Ella] alone,” Char ignores the fact that he and Ella discovered the slippers—they were, like the story in which Ella and he exist, originally of an older time and therefore inherent the connotative resonances of the previous occupants. Neither the slippers nor the fairy tale frame truly “belong” to Ella—she exists within a Cinderella story, and her slippers similarly exist as tools wielded by Levine—the so-called Cinderella “embellishments” Levine has referred to—to tell the story of Ella. Granted, that Cinderella story has been coerced to suit modern conventions, but the inherited and preexisting frame of the fairy tale story nevertheless exists and manifests itself most obviously in the emblematic glass shoe. Ella must still fit into the slipper, albeit one which Levine—through Char—re-appropriates to make it “Ella’s.”

Levine’s re-appropriation of the iconic glass slippers is—like those slippers—transparent and surprisingly accommodating. Ella’s struggle against hegemony comes to the forefront in the climactic shoe-fitting scene, when Ella’s inherited Cinderella legacy of small-footedness as well as “sweet” submissiveness coalesce and get dealt with in terms of Levine’s ideal protagonist’s relationship with power. Ella fits into the shoe, but focuses more on the struggle to say no and on the ramifications of fitting into the shoe than on the superficial fact of that perfect fit. In saying no, Ella actually allows for the possibility of saying yes without danger. She embodies an ideal of small-footed femininity, but more importantly she shows that she can be allowed to embody this old-fashioned feminine legacy because she has struggled against it to embody a new feminine ideal. Rather than breaking the slipper that displays this small foot, Levine makes the fact

that Ella fits into the shoe an embellishment to Ella's hard-won freedom, and makes her proudly fit into an unbreakable slipper that she can call her own.

A Problematic Parity of Interiority and Exteriority: A Deeper Understanding of Beautiful Pottery

The way Ella appreciates beautiful material objects—such as the candle-holder her father shows her and the pottery the elves show her in the forest—is easy to interpret as vapidly. Ella's focus on exterior beauty extends beyond the superficial, however, and encompasses the way that Ella's character leads readers toward understanding Levine's ideal female as appreciating interior value. Ella's appreciation of beautiful objects (and the handsome prince Char) coincides with an appreciation of their similarly-perfect interiority. The fact that these levels of perfection tend to coincide—as with the fact of Ella's inherited small-footed beauty—might be problematic, but Levine makes efforts to demonstrate to readers that such parity of interiority and exteriority only exists as a useful fairy tale simplification.

Guiding the reader toward an understanding of exterior appearance existing without necessary connection to interiority, Levine demonstrates how Ella gets disabused of a presumed conflation of beauty with magical goodness. Ella initially doubts that Mandy is a fairy in terms of superficial preconceptions about the glamor of magic: “She couldn't be a fairy. Fairies were thin and young and beautiful. Mandy was as tall as a fairy was supposed to be, but who ever heard of a fairy with frizzy gray hair and two chins?” (Levine 24). Ella's prejudice about fairies—and readers' associated prejudices about superficial appearance along the lines of fairy tale ideals—gets disabused through Mandy. Nevertheless, Levine continues to portray Ella as beautiful and the evil

stepsisters as fat and disgusting in a way that seems to reinforce notions of superficial appearance indicating something deeper. Levine makes this devaluing of ugly and fat women more acceptable to modern readers by presenting the fat stepfamily as disgusting, fat because their appetites are an extension of their avaricious natures.

Levine indicates Ella's worthiness of a high social position in how Ella does not desire such affluence. Whereas Hattie admits she wishes to be queen (Levine 76), Ella never expresses a desire to be a princess and indeed rejects the title of "princess" when she finally does marry Prince Char (Levine 231). Levine hence uses Ella's rebellion to indicate a worthiness of a certain sort of elevated power, co-opting rebellion as a type of conformity to American individualist character. Not only does Ella reject titles in an indication of her worthiness of them, Ella similarly rejects beautiful objects in an indication of her worthiness of possessing them. When admiring elves' pottery, Ella's disinterestedness in possessing the valuable pieces represents a genuine display of appreciation which allows her to possess some of her favorite piece:

Slannen began to wrap the pieces up again. I hated to let them go.
'Wrap this one last, please.' I touched the wolf's nose.
When he finished, Slannen handed the package with the wolf to me. 'It's for you.'
Father had made clear that an Agulen was worth a great deal. 'I can't accept such a valuable gift,' I said in my best Manners Mistress manner. But my hands closed around it.
'You have,' Slannen said, smiling. 'We like to give our best pieces away sometimes, when we find people who love them.' (Levine 94)

After Slannen offers Ella the Agulen piece, Levine has Ella immediately narrate thoughts of propriety. Ella evidences a notion of the family-level patriarchal influence by commencing her acknowledgement of proper behavior with her father. Ella's specific father-figure brings an element of the monetization of power into Levine's text, since his

profession as a merchant has so consumed his identity for Ella that the lesson she takes from her father is “that an Agulen was worth a great deal.” Ella’s father has not only taught her a pragmatic understanding of money, but he has forced her to attend finishing school as well, an extension of his powerful influence. Ella has also internalized this female-enforced aspect of patriarchal influence. The way that Ella performs an initial rejection of the elves’ gift draws on the lessons of proper behavior for young women which the female instructors have imparted on the young pupils in finishing school. Though Ella performs propriety, Levine draws attention to this propriety as a performance rather than a genuine submission to polite society with how Ella narrates this performed rejection. She uses her “best Manners Mistress manner” to say no. The repetitive, alliterative wording of this phrasing emphasizes the word “manner.” In this emphasis through repetition, Levine communicates the notion of manners as a form of senseless repetition. Such manners, imparted by fellow women but undertaken under the enforcement of the family-level patriarch of Sir Peter, might be understood in Knoepflmacher’s terms of females oppressing one another to secure what status they can.

Though Ella’s narration demonstrates a thought process in which she acknowledges the patriarchal influences working on her, Ella’s actions do not conform to the propriety she espouses. In spite of recognizing that the gift is valuable and she ought to reject it out of politeness, Ella’s “hands closed around it.” Such passive wording emphasizes a disjoint between Ella’s thoughts and her actions. Compelled to conform superficially to the standards ingrained in her through her upbringing in a patriarchy, Ella nevertheless evidences an innate rebellion against those social constraints in how her body reacts with respect to her love for the pottery pieces and wish to not “let [the art]

go.” Rather than a vapid impulse to possess a pretty thing, Ella’s desire to have the pottery represents an intelligence-evidencing character trait. Ella knows how to behave properly, but part of what makes her a modern heroine is the fact that she finds these socially-ingrained rules of propriety less fulfilling than the behavior which Levine’s imagined world values more—namely, playful spirit. Ella has inherited an ideal interiority. Part of this ideal interiority is the ability to recognize how and when beautiful exteriors evidence beautiful interiors, and when such exteriors are misleading performances. Society has tried to separate Ella from her embodied, inherited perfection, but she proves her virtue by letting that genuine impulse happen.

Though exterior beauty matches interior value in the pottery, the exterior performance of rejecting a gift represents a fancy performance of proper behavior that Ella’s acceptance of that gift dismisses as an unnecessary embellishment. Ella expresses a notion of a shifting understanding of propriety, and the way that society’s standards ought to be understood and responded to critically: “[...] it *is* helpful to know the proper way to behave, so one can decide whether or not to be proper.” (Levine 107-108).

Levine has Ella recognize that conforming to society’s standards for her can be useful, as well as that mastering domestic skills produces a gratifying sense of accomplishment. Because she thusly demonstrates appreciation of her finishing school skills after having accepted the piece of pottery, Ella does not just reject the social structure in which she exists. She instead interacts with the standards to which she is held in a way that draws attention to the ambivalent frustration and accomplishment in possessing skills that an oppressively structured society values, and which can allow for advancement within that society. The ambivalence, somewhat apparent in Ella’s hands

closing around the pottery in a disconnect from her thoughts of propriety, gets emphasized later when Ella mockingly displays her finished skills to Char. Ella alarms Char when she tells him that finishing school, though “wearisome,” has left her with “many accomplishments” (Levine 106). Representing her conformity to a sort of femininity not held as ideal by the positive icon of power, Ella’s ability to perform propriety alarms Char and makes Ella behave uncharacteristically for a moment. Responding to Char’s alarmed questioning of whether she’s proud of her finishing school talents, Ella recognizes that proper behavior does not serve her in a beneficial interaction with the prince: “I nodded solemnly. I wanted to make him laugh again” (Levine 106). Ella initially refers to finishing school talents as “paltry tricks” (Levine 84, 85). Distancing herself from seeing her superficial talents as truly valuable, Ella evidences alarm with the subconscious recognition that such skills might actually be considered valuable. This alarm makes Ella resort to her contemporary female virtue of the queen-approved “playful spirit.” Ella reflects a contemporary society’s understanding of femininity in which “paltry tricks” of manners matter less than genuine and playful spirit. Rather than a rejection of female standards of behavior, *Ella Enchanted* represents a shift of what those standards are. Recognition of conventionally feminine “accomplishments” alarms Ella because she exists as a facet of Levine’s imagination in which rejection of those forms of femininity is being framed as the actual evidence of female accomplishment. Levine has Ella draw readers’ attention to the notion that the “paltry tricks” of behavior which society deems valuable should only be considered useful to the individual if she understands that she might use those “tricks” strategically. Propriety

ought to be performed, but only by those with enough depth to recognize such propriety as superficial.

Ella's admiration of the Agulen pottery represents a humble appreciation of inward value (similarly present in Ella's valuing the prince as a friend) that proves her depth. Levine represents the external and socially-determined value of objects (and people) as less important than the (also impressive) interiority which Ella's narration foregrounds. Ella appreciates the pottery for its evidence of the potter's artistry. Levine proves Ella worthy of the elite position whose title Ella disdains with emphasis on this innate and genuine respect for art. Art, a root in "artifice" and connected to the art that authors themselves perform in creating an imaginative world for readers, is essential to understand as a living creation. After narrating her appreciation for the pottery, Ella tells Slannen, "They don't look as though someone made them. They look born" (Levine 94). Levine demonstrates Ella's sincere appreciation of the craftsmanship and beauty of the pieces characterizes Ella as worthy of possessing them. Ella recognizes not just external beauty, but the way that this external beauty represents an inner talent. Levine gives the reader evidence of this talent through Ella's descriptions imagining each piece of pottery as living creations (Levine 93-94). The fact that Ella accepts "such a valuable gift" in spite of her superficial performance of a polite denial of the gift suggests that Ella's ability to appreciate and love art carries social value great enough to stand in for high monetary value. Ella imagines the art as living creations before expressing her understanding of them as having been "born" so that Levine might emphasize that Ella's words make external her internal thoughts, rather than being an insincere performance of the personality Levine values in her heroine.

A Sweet Storybook Ending

Another part of Ella evidencing her worthiness of her eminent status comes in how she takes care of others. The mothering instinct manifests itself as a conserved female virtue in *Ella Enchanted*. Ella's magical, fairy-made book simultaneously represents Ella's privileged fairy tale inheritance and the way that such an inherited identity preserves an ideal of maternal caretaking. Ella's magic book is a particularly salient emblem for readers, one that helps us identify with Ella by positioning a book as the protagonist's primary comfort. Levine highlights the alignment of Ella with the reader in the fact that Ella's book re-tells the fairy tale of the Shoemaker and the Elves:

In this version, though, each elf had a personality, and I came to know them better than the shoemaker. And I finally understood why the elves disappeared after the shoemaker made clothes for them. They went away to help a giant rid herself of a swarm of mosquitoes, too small for her to see. Although the elves left a thank-you note for the shoemaker, he put his coffee cup down on it, and it stuck to the cup's damp bottom. The story made sense now. (Levine 56-57)

The fairy tale book within Levine's fairy tale book vindicates the elves to Ella in a manner similar to how *Ella Enchanted* itself was Levine's way of vindicating the passive Cinderella to modern readers with an obedient heroine who resents that obedience as a curse. The self-reflexive nature of the fairy tale story Ella reads gets emphasized when Ella later shares her book with an elf in her world: "Slannen opened it. 'The Shoemaker and the Elves' returned as the first story. He roared with laughter. 'We're so tiny in here! The elves can fit inside a shoe!'" (Levine 92). Ella's elves, rather than being tiny human-helpers, are "the same height as humans," green people who trade with humans (Slannen is chief trader) on equal terms rather than providing secret and unacknowledged help (Levine 91). By contrasting the reality of the elves in Ella's world with the fairy tale

version of the elves also within Ella's world, Levine draws attention to the way that fairy tale retellings might approach the truth by explaining troubling details of servility and submissiveness, but reminds readers that these stories are entertaining escapes from reality rather than reproductions of it. Levine effectively cautions us against taking her story too seriously. I don't think Levine need have worried.

The way characters respond to Ella's book seems to indicate Levine is encouraging her readers to consider Ella's story as such, and to appreciate its explanation of the Cinderella character's submissiveness without extrapolating too far in connecting the Ella character to reality. But Ella's book also draws attention to the way that Levine's story might be problematic in the way it addresses Ella's submissiveness. Ella's magic book provides Ella with a means for monitoring on her loved ones such that her reading experience makes her a passive observer and a selfless caretaker in her world. Such an identity undermines the non-passive, vindicated Cinderella heroine Levine meant to create in Ella. Preceding Ella's first exposure to her book's version of "The Shoemaker and the Elves," the magic book shows Ella several illustrations of her loved ones. An illustration of Mandy, tearfully missing Ella, comes first (Levine 55). Next, an illustration of Char, responsibly exercising his authority by talking to the zoo's ogre-guards about the threat of ogres' ability to control people²⁵ (Levine 56). The final illustrations Ella sees are of her home—the manor of Frell, in a map—and her father (Levine 56). By seeking comfort in her magic book, Ella returns to a conventionally passive characterization, dependent on others' lives to give hers joy and value. Engrossed in her magic book, Ella enjoys watching the lives not just of those she cares about—Mandy and Char—but also

²⁵ A threat which his recent witnessing of Ella's obedience to an ogre has made him mistakenly believe applies to the general populace rather than just Ella.

her cruel and greedy father. She focuses outwardly on the book of fairy tales and true representations of her loved ones rather than inwardly on her own cursed life.

Ella's caretaking instinct, and her humble setting aside of her own desires to serve others, further manifests itself in concern for Char when he gets rope burn rescuing her from ogres. "I wanted to examine the burn more closely, but I continued [in providing Char with a jesting instruction on manners]" (Levine 107). In this instance, refraining from fussing over Char's burn demonstrates awareness of the type of attention he prefers; amusing him rather than nursing him actually appeals to Char's needs and wants more effectively, and represents how Ella is an ideal female partner for him. Ella does not indulge her personal impulse to display concern, but rather does what she knows will be appreciated. Levine characterizes Ella as an ideal female partner with an innate and sacrificial concern for others as sincere as her related recognition of interior value.

Passive femininity thusly seems to creep into Ella's characterization. But the broader characterization of Ella in which such a passive role might be *chosen* emphasizes the fact that Levine's text advocates for a female's right to behave as she chooses, whether that behavior conforms to typical femininity or not. Ella's choice to enjoy reading in her magic book and taking care of her loved ones ought not be seen as oppressive just because these choices conform to stereotypical female roles as a passive caretaker. Ella proves herself the thoughtful sort of rebel who chooses to be proper only when it suits her. Part of a modern conception of an empowered young woman is that she have the freedom to choose to be romantic and feminine. "Among an earlier generation of women, the wish was to be able to do everything men could. For the modern Cinderellas' audience, which takes that freedom as a given, the wish is to also be able—

unashamedly—to fall in love and go to the ball” (Poniewozik). Poniewozik’s perspective allows for defense of the happily-ever-after conclusion of *Ella Enchanted*, in which she marries Char to become a “Court Linguist and Cook’s Helper” and enjoy entertaining Char while keeping track of their children (Levine 231). Ella’s choice to marry Char and become a “Court Linguist and Cook’s Helper” reflects Levine’s decision to empower Ella with “the power to say yes *or* no” (Levine 232, emphasis added). Modern fairy tales allow female desire to express itself “unashamedly” in stereotypically feminine manners, and hence Ella must be allowed the same pleasure she provides her readers—to lose herself in a book.

In Levine’s book, however, the conclusion of Ella’s fairy tale story conforms to a characterization of Ella as a passive caretaker in a way that might bother the serious reader. My previous chapter discussed the issue of Levine’s fairy tale conclusion presenting Ella the individual as deferent to Kyrria the kingdom, but another problem exists in the fact of how Ella’s wedded happiness makes for her ultimate “happily ever after.” The problem lies not in that Ella chooses to pursue wedded happiness with a nuclear family. Rather, the issue is how Levine has Ella understand that wedded happiness. Levine has Ella provide an epilogue in which she defines the “happily ever after” of Prince Char and Court Linguist and Cook’s Helper Ella (Levine 231). Ella writes that “My contrariness kept Char laughing, and his goodness kept me in love” (Levine 232). Char’s happiness in the marriage comes in terms of being amused by Ella, whereas Ella frames her own happiness around a romantic notion of Char’s “goodness.” Such a framing of the wedded happiness of Char and Ella makes Ella minimize her own importance in respect to her husband.

Levine may not have intended to emphasize a gendered binary in which the female provides trivial amusement whereas the male provides a deep emotional connection. But the way that the parallel structure of Ella's contrariness keeping Char laughing and Char's goodness keeping her in love creates an unavoidable comparison between contrariness and goodness, and between the effects of laughing and being in love. Readers cannot but notice the discrepancy between what the partners get out of this marriage, particularly as this sentence comes in Ella's voice, the voice which has ostensibly rejected elite labels and a conformity to social dictates. The epilogue also emphasizes that Ella "refused to become a princess" (Levine 231). Right before the sentence about Char's goodness and Ella's contrariness, Ella orients that contrariness with the claim that she "loved having the power to say yes or no, and refusing anything was a special pleasure" (Levine 232). But the final sentence still concludes with the fairy-tale "happily ever after" (Levine 232). The qualified nature of this conclusion, oriented as it is in Ella's contrariness, undercuts the conformity of the tale to the standard fairy tale form: "And so, with laughter and love, we lived happily ever after" (Levine 232). But the preceding emphasis on how Ella seems to understand that laughter and love in gendered terms reveals that readers might not be satisfied with this seemingly-progressive fairy tale conclusion. Such dissatisfaction might be assuaged with reference to how Levine creates an ideal femininity which is outwardly-focused and generous while simultaneously contrary. The book's conclusion contains these fundamental aspects of Ella's character, so it becomes possible to defend Ella's conformity to a modern ideal.

Because Levine characterizes Ella such that the Cinderella figure's previously positive feminine traits (i.e. the obedience, the small feet, and the associated beauty) do

not rest easily with the protagonist or with the reader, Ella's perfect femininity becomes productive rather than merely constraining. Ella's ostensibly constraining virtue of obedience and inherited fairy tale legacy coalesce to reflect on the inescapability of that constraint rather than merely reproducing it. As my introductory chapter pointed out, the fairy tale retelling is the warped sort of mirror that reflects in an uncanny way.

Chapter 3: Bitchy Ella

“If she took this from me too, I’d kill her.”

--Ella²⁶

Part of the way that Levine characterizes 1997’s ideal woman, through a “playful spirit” and a pretty, depth-appreciating, socially conscious individuality, has just been discussed. But Levine also describes Ella in ways that might be interpreted as stereotypically negative femininity. Ella seems bitchy. To be bitchy is to be “malicious, catty” as well as implicitly sensuous (OED). “Bitchy” is also a common epithet directed at strong women. Hence, this word is the most useful, succinct way of referring to the types of negative stereotypes of femininity this chapter will discuss in relation to Ella. Responding to the frustration of her oppressed status, Ella frequently resorts to violence. This violence may be physical—punching the friend who takes advantage of Ella’s curse (Levine 7)—or it may be structural—stealing bossy Hattie’s wig (Levine 87)—or it may even be imagined—fantasizing about wreaking havoc at finishing school (Levine 73). True, Ella’s response to Hattie asking to see the fairy tale book Mandy gave her is humorously hyperbolic. I took it out of context for an epigraph because such isolation highlights the humor. But the genuine violence underlying Ella’s imagined threat to kill Hattie fits with a characterization of Ella in which violent and possessive impulses recur, and in which Ella conforms to a negative characterization of a female which might be seen as wily. Ella’s ostensibly negative behavior may be explained in terms of Levine characterizing Ella through a struggle to cope with being trapped in an oppressed position in the structure of power. Along with an apparently thoughtless acceptance of certain positive valences of her fairy tale heroine inheritance, Levine’s characterization of Ella as a complexly reactionary figure depends on a similar perpetuation of negative valences of

²⁶ Levine, Gail Carson. *Ella Enchanted*. New York: Scholastic, 1997. 57.

this same inheritance. Ella's conformity to feminine jealousy and meanness perpetuates rather than undermines the oppression her fellow female characters face. In Levine's characterization of Ella, her reproduction of negative tropes of femininity (i.e., bitchiness) does not condemn femininity so much as dramatize a young woman's struggle against structures of power.

Ella's Acts of Violence

Ella's violent acts hurt fellow female characters. Whether intending to hurt or passively allowing harm to come to others, such female violence imbues Levine's protagonist a "malicious, catty" tendency which can only be defended with reference to how the women Ella hurts might deserve such pain. Seeing Ella's violence as justified nevertheless draws attention to the way that such justification lets readers notice different valences of oppression affecting different female characters.

Hattie, for instance, is physically disadvantaged and does not inherit the same conformity to society's standards that Ella does. Ella's acceptance of what her society deems fashionable reveals manifests itself in an unkind, violent conformity. Hattie herself acknowledges the unacceptability of being an overweight female when she asks Ella to tighten her corset to a point that makes it difficult for Hattie to breathe. Preparing for the first night of the ball, Hattie commands Ella to "pull harder" on her corset laces (Levine 200). By recognizing that female thinness is attractive, Hattie implicitly recognizes her failure to adhere to society's standards. Hattie declares herself "perfect" only after hours of primping (Levine 201). Platt sees Ella's tightening of Hattie's corset as a "passive-aggressive attempt to hurt Hattie by drawing her corset too tight" (Platt 40). I commend this recognition of the more vindictive elements of Ella's personality, but this

interpretation of the event focuses on the relationships within Ella's family in what I saw as a trend in Platt's analysis which obfuscates the less comforting valence of an analysis of *Ella Enchanted*, a valence in which Ella as a character functions as someone whose constraint reveals the inescapability of hegemony. In tightening Hattie's corset, Ella becomes the force to help Hattie try to fit into unachievable beauty standards. Though it may coexist with a desire to hurt Hattie, Ella's over-compliance with the command represents not a passive-aggressive desire to hurt her stepsister, but rather an absent-minded complicity in a female-objectifying society's demands that women be thin to be attractive. Ironically, such absent-minded complicity is the real-world counterpart to Ella's curse of obedience: a manifestation of unthinking female submission to a society that demands women to fit into absurd constraints. Just as Ella inherits her small feet, she inherits Levine's understanding of female beauty standards and the way that such superficial marks do hold actual cultural value. Ella internalizes standards of beauty, and judges her fellow female characters for their conformity or divergence from these standards. Internalization of female beauty standards manifests itself in Ella's vindictiveness and jealousy.

Ella may—rightfully—want to hurt Hattie by tightening Hattie's corset, but this does not mean that Ella's violence is passive aggressive. Ella's violent urges need not be extrapolated from passive acts of aggression—she is actively, aggressively violent. The restriction against Ella telling anyone about her curse exists only because Ella punched her bossy young friend Pamela (Levine 7)²⁷. And, in addition to tightening her stepsister's corset, Ella grinds dust into the command-abusing Hattie's face when Hattie

²⁷ Pamela's differently-disadvantaged existence will be addressed in my next section, where I delve into the physical punishment Pamela faces where Ella faces the magic of a spell and an absent father.

first begins to oppress Ella (Levine 53), purposefully stabs Hattie with a pin while helping her stepsister prepare for the ball (Levine 193). In resisting replicating a “sweet” passive femininity, Levine repeatedly characterizes Ella as responding to her docility in violent, aggressive agency. That these vicious instances of agency occur as violence toward other women demonstrates the problem of women keeping one another oppressed by taking out their frustration with society’s constraints on them on one another. This practice of the oppressed perpetuating means of oppression was pointed out by Knoepfmacher in relation to Victorian-era female authors.

Though Levine presents female-based oppression of fellow females, she does not suggest that its manifestation in her book’s heroine is productive. In the dust-grinding scenario just mentioned, Ella’s narration reminds readers that aggressive engagement with an oppressor does not liberate. After Hattie orders Ella to pick up a ball of dust in the coach on the way to finishing school, Ella has the following reaction: “An order I liked. I grabbed the dust and ground it into her face. ‘It becomes you,’ I said. But the satisfaction was fleeting” (Levine 53). Levine having Ella recognize this moment as a short-lived triumph is a key point of Ella’s rebellion always facing punishment (at least before she ascends to a position of the empowered wife of the prince). The Ella that exists for most of *Ella Enchanted* cannot act on her aggressive impulses to rebel without being further reminded of her powerlessness. Attempting to retaliate against Hattie only provokes retaliation on Hattie’s part, and reminds both women of how rigidly their positions of relative disempowerment have been defined. Ella narrates, “After I rubbed dust in her face, all she did was smile. The smile meant that dust weighted little in the balance of her power” (Levine 54). Acts of aggression against the oppressor do not affect

“the balance of...power.” Levine hence establishes the futility of rebellion in the all-encompassing position of inescapable deference Ella occupies, a position that reflects the similarly helpless position of those disempowered in a hegemonic world.

Ella, Understanding and Perpetuating Structural Violence

I’ve already discussed Ella’s thoughtfulness in terms of selflessness as a female virtue, but here I will flip that understanding to play with the notion of the thoughtfulness of Ella as a consequence of the cursed Ella’s aggressive self-preservation. My previous chapter showed that Ella recognizes that proper behavior might be useful as a tool of strategic essentialism, but here I will extend the way that Ella’s characterization allows readers to understand notions of power and rebellion in a less optimistic way. The way that Ella’s curse makes her sensitive to how she is oppressed also enables her to jealously punish fellow women who might also be seen as oppressed by the structure of a patriarchy.

Ella’s aggressively observant nature, when not applied to her “playful spirit” to amuse others, gets applied to an obstinacy which frustrates even those Ella recognizes as benevolent in their requests for her compliance, not guilty of attempting to oppress her. When Mandy gives the young Ella commands, the curse-resenting Ella “[follows the instructions] exactly, while still managing to frustrate her true wishes” (Levine 6). Ella pays close attention to how Mandy’s commands are worded and finds ways to obey the words of the command without actually doing what Mandy commands. Ella resents the fact that she must comply, regardless of the harmlessness of the compliance. Because she must comply, every command reminds Ella of her powerlessness. She complies more readily when Mandy changes her order to a request (Levine 6). Ella’s exchange with

Pamela reminds readers of the metaphorical violence of the oppressive patriarchal expectations of female docility represented by Ella's curse. Ella's revelation of her curse to Pamela juxtaposes Ella's obedience due to her curse with Pamela's obedience based due to fear of physical punishment:

Later, when Pamela and I retreated to the garden to devour the candy, she asked why I hadn't done what Mandy wanted straight off.
'I hate when she's bossy,' I answered.
Pamela said smugly, 'I always obey my elders.'
'That's because you don't have to.'
'I do have to, or Father will slap me.'
'It's not the same as for me. I'm under a spell.'²⁸ (Levine 6)

This excerpt allows the young Ella to explain why she hates her curse by explaining it in terms of the fact that she resents being forced to behave a certain way. Ella's response to Pamela, that Pamela obeys "*because* you don't have to" (emphasis added), implies that the freedom to obey or not obey makes obedience less of an issue. Constrained by a worldview in which she has been robbed of the possibility of disobedience, Ella understands that obedience itself is not the issue, but rather the inescapability of that obedience. Similarly, hegemony irks not because it represents a structure of power, but rather because no alternative to obedience exists in such a structure. Ella's jealous acknowledgment of why her friend does not feel compelled to rebel draws readers' attention to the fact that Levine uses Ella's obedience to demonstrate how and why

²⁸ The interaction continues with the following recognition of the fairy-tale world: "I enjoyed the importance of the words. Spells were rare. Lucinda was the only fairy rash enough to cast them on people. 'Like Sleeping Beauty?' 'Except I won't have to sleep for a hundred years.' 'What's your spell?' I told her." (Levine 6). Levine invokes the fairy tale legacy represented by Sleeping Beauty to present the reader with an uncanny recognition of the fairy tale world in which Ella exists alongside a reminder of reality. The simultaneous reminders of reality (through parents slapping their children as discipline, and of children thinking in terms of fairy tales like *Sleeping Beauty*) and of fantasy (through the magical world in which Sleeping Beauty might be real, and Ella must obey orders because of her curse). On a related note, Ella's resentment of fetching for Mandy emphasizes her fairy tale world's shift of valuing independence over submission, particularly obvious when compared with Perrault's Cinderella who proves herself good and worthy of going to the ball by fetching things for her godmother to transform into objects for the ball.

people with different valences of oppression might resent one another for the valences in which the also-oppressed individual is less oppressed.

I've used the word "jealousy" in several forms throughout this thesis. This is in part because of Sheldon Cashdan's influence on my analysis. Cashdan's psychological perspective in interpreting the Cinderella tale defines the story as fundamentally dealing with jealousy among the female characters. Cashdan refers to what is widely accepted to be the earliest written version of Cinderella, Basile's 1634 "Cat Cinderella," for the express purpose of pointing out Basile's commencing statement that "envy is ever a sea of malignancy" (Cashdan 87). According to Cashdan, the popular Perrault version of the Cinderella tale perverts "the story's original intent" by erasing Cinderella's sense of bitter jealousy—an emotional aspect present in the Grimms' portrayal of the character as well as in Basile's—in favor of a bland obedience (Cashdan 95). Levine shares his recognition of the Cinderella character's fundamentally disconcerting obedience. Ella is "cursed" with obedience in Levine's attempt to create a version of Cinderella whose passivity, no longer a chosen docility but rather a magically-imposed obedience, might present less of a problem in relating to the protagonist. Contributing also to this characterization of a protagonist as relatable because she is less-than-sweet, Ella's jealous treatment of her fellow female characters represents a negative character trait which serves Levine's purposes in a productive modern Cinderella story.

When she runs away from finishing school, Ella steals Hattie's wig in a calculated effort to punish Hattie by exposing the physical manifestation of Hattie's moral inferiority. By recognizing that stealing this wig will punish Hattie, Ella acknowledges the superficial standards to which women are held. She implicitly recognizes that Hattie

has reason to be jealous of the prettier, smarter, hair-possessing Ella, and hence allows readers to understand both Hattie and Ella as disadvantaged in a demanding patriarchy.

Ugly and fat women are petty and bad (though not flat characters) in Levine’s Cinderella story in a way that perpetuates the validity of judging females²⁹ based on superficial merits. Simone de Beauvoir provided insight into this by discussing ugliness as “an inescapable disgrace” for women (Kawan 35). The fact that Levine represents this “inescapable disgrace” of female appearance need not imply that Levine hopes to perpetuate it. Rather, by drawing attention to the fact of the way that female appearance is so important, Levine creates a sense that this importance is misplaced. My discussion of Ella’s beauty, and the way she resents even positive emphasis placed on her appearance, supports this interpretation. But the way that Ella perpetuates this conflation of outward appearance with inner virtue can be seen in the way Ella uses Hattie’s wig to wrest control from her. Taking the wig off of her sleeping stepsister, Ella contemplates burning the wig or displaying it in a public location, only to dismiss these as insufficient punishment: “the smell [of burning hair] might wake someone” and “if Hattie woke early, she could rescue it before anyone saw” (Levine 87). Hattie may be vain for caring about her hair, but Ella knows that society will mock and punish Hattie if this façade of attractive hair is removed. Indeed, Ella later re-uses this threat as her only form of leverage to keep Hattie away from her: “‘If you speak to me at all today, Hattie,’ I hissed, ‘I’ll snatch off your wig and pass it around to the guests’” (Levine 146). This

²⁹ And males. Cashdan cautions against overextending “misogynistic streak in fairy tales” when looking at negative female figures (Cashdan 18). He instead urges readers to consider negative female figures as a means for children to deal with reconciling “good” and “bad” conceptions of the mother figure by splitting the maternal caretaker—and ultimately the self—into distinct “good” and “bad” versions (Cashdan 22). I’m not completely adopting his psychological perspective, but it is worth noting that my discussion of “bitchiness” need not confine itself to “bitchy” females.

acknowledgment of how society punishes those who do not conform to proper standards of beauty bows to the social conventions of representing vindictive and shallow femininity. It also seems to not just reify standards of beauty, but the unfair association of those standards being met naturally and without prosthetic aid.

Eventually, though, Ella's wig-stealing assertion of her power becomes obvious as the power play it is. Ultimately, Ella takes the wig with her, calling it "a trophy" (Levine 87). Calling the wig a trophy emphasizes the fact that Ella has asserted her dominance over Hattie. Hattie had attempted to wield power by demanding that the otherwise-empowered³⁰ Ella suffer through her curse without a friend. Hattie issues her command that Ella end her friendship with Areida to reassert authority over the happily thriving Ella. Having just shared her grief over losing her mother with Areida and been comforted, the following exchange happens between Hattie and Ella:

'Having a nice time?'
'We were,' I answered.
'I won't keep you then, but tomorrow, Ella, you must spend some time in the garden with me.'

'You shouldn't associate with the lower orders, like that wench from Ayortha,' she said the next evening.
'Areida is a higher order than you are, and I choose my own friends.'
'My dear, my dear. I hate to cause you grief, but you must end your friendship with her.' (Levine 80)

In this excerpt, Ella's unkind response to whether she's having a nice time—implying that Hattie has ruined the friends' mood—provokes Hattie's subsequent attempt to remove that exclusionary friendship from existence. Ella's willful attempts to assert her own agency, by implying that Hattie is excluded from an ability to have a good time with a friend, was provoked by Hattie's also-snarky rhetorical question. Upon explicitly

³⁰ In her intelligence and beauty—Hattie explicitly expresses jealousy of both these traits (Levine 76)—though not in being cursed.

saying that Hattie is inferior, Ella faces Hattie's jealous quashing of that friendship which has served as the basis for Ella's solace that has allowed her to take refuge from her oppressed status and find a way to mock Hattie with snarky words. The power struggle inherent in this interaction, though it rests on Hattie's unkindness, escalates because of the way Ella responds to that unkindness by asserting her meager leverage as a girl who can make friends³¹.

Ella wins her power struggle with Hattie by running away and taking Hattie's wig as a trophy. This triumph allows Ella to simultaneously assert her superior cleverness—escaping Hattie's command to cease being friends with Areida by running away—and her more acceptable physical appearance—reminding Hattie that Ella possesses hair while Hattie wears a wig. Hattie explicitly expresses jealousy of Ella's intelligence and beauty (Levine 76). Ella takes advantage of this knowledge to punish Hattie for attempting to control her. The wig as a trophy emphasizes that Ella wins³² in her social interaction with Hattie, not just by escaping the domineering and power-hungry Hattie but also in exposing Hattie as an ugly character. Such a triumph, like the short-lived one of grinding dust into Hattie's face, reminds readers of the self-perpetuating hopelessness of such structural violence exercised by disempowered individuals on one another in ways that reifies the oppressive standards against which they should be fighting instead of one another.

³¹ Hattie also makes friends at finishing school, but Ella describes that group of friends in a way that dismisses the value of that friendship: "They were an odious group, Hattie and the two she called her special friends, Blossom and Delicia" (Levine 74). Not only does Ella pass judgment on the group of friends as "odious," she also implies that the friendship they purport to have is disingenuous, by saying that Hattie "called [the two girls] her special friends" and thereby drawing attention to the phrase Hattie uses for her friends rather than admitting that the girls are friends.

³² Ella also wins by marrying happily, getting the prince who Hattie imagines as a piece of property and a means to possessing power and money (Levine 160). I have already discussed the problems I see in Ella getting married and ostensibly flouting the power structure by refusing to be called a princess.

Like Ella's jealous relationship with the differently-disempowered Hattie, Ella's jealous relationship with a similarly-empowered blonde character reveals how Levine's fairy tale world does not escape the real-world problems of women oppressing one another. In this instance, rather than struggling to remind the less-ideally-embodied Hattie that for all her ability to control the actions of Ella she is still an inferior female, Ella must recognize a threat to her ideal femininity. At the ball, Ella is jealous of the blonde who makes Char laugh. "Making him laugh had been my domain. The damsel who caused the laughter was of middle height, slender, with blond, wavy hair cascading to her waist. She had removed her mask, but her back was turned, so I couldn't see her face" (Levine 207). The blonde's power over Char, stated initially in terms of an emotional connection, is promptly followed by a physical description. Her female dominance that subscribes to Levine's 1997 standard of valuable female trait of a "playful spirit" that coincides with an attractive appearance. Ella's jealousy gets framed around the inseparable traits of female beauty and female virtue: the funny, pretty woman exists as a foil for the mean, ugly Hattie who also engaged Ella in a jealous escalation of competitive emphasis on the ways two females might be differently empowered in contrast to one another. "I scrutinized Char's dancing partners, although I knew I had no right to resent a rival. He danced three times with the yellow-haired wench who'd made him laugh the night before. She wore no mask and was lovely. I couldn't leave him to her" (Levine 211). Ella refers to her rival as a "wench," and overcompensates against the original acknowledgment of the classically beautiful "blond, wavy hair cascading to her waist" by calling the hair "yellow."

The initial bitter wording of “wench” bears note in the context of Levine’s female characters using that term to disparage one another. Lucinda uses the word “wench” when she catches Ella staring at her (Levine 125). Such uses of the word “wench” by other female characters makes the word, as an epithet used to disparage fellow women, seem like Levine’s fairy-tale version of “bitch.” Both monosyllabic words end in a crunchy “-ch” sound. And “wench,” like “bitch,” carries connotations of shame as a “wonton woman” and a “girl of the rustic or working class” (OED). The word “wench” derives from a Middle English word for a person of the working class. The word implies low class. Ella’s use of the word “wench” helps defend the way I see Ella’s jealousy as beyond a normal, gender-transcending reaction given the context of a preexisting love, since the term derisively defines a fellow women in a gendered, debasing term. Ella’s bitter language precedes a competitive scenario, in which Ella knowingly enters a social interaction which might endanger the man she loves should he discover her—namely, engaging with Char as a dance partner. Ella feels compelled to engage in this scenario because she cannot stand the thought of a rival woman, and recognizes the threat of the blond beauty. This blonde beauty embodies previous imaginings of Cinderella; she is a bright yet flat character, antithetical to Ella yet still recognizable as a threat as one who could easily occupy Ella’s rightful place with the prince. The blonde also exists in diametric opposition to Ella, who possesses dark, straight hair and whose position as narrator has defined her with internality and depth denied to the blonde competitor she observes.

Ella’s competitive jealousy toward Char need not be considered as an exclusively feminine problem of a desire to possess other human beings, but jealousy’s association

with the female as a negative trait has precedence in *Ella Enchanted*. Female competitiveness had previously manifested in terms of physical beauty and vindictiveness when Ella stole Hattie's wig, but here the "trophy" is more clearly a man's affection, a direct competition for male approval rather than the abstract social approbation for conformity to beauty standards that the wig represents.

Ella's Imagined Aggression

A curse which robs Ella of power over her own actions becomes that character's most important trait as a narrator of those actions. Levine aligns Ella with herself as a female who uses language to accomplish what she wants. But the power of Ella's narration paradoxically comes from the fact that she has been disempowered, through her curse, rather than empowered as the author of her own story. As demonstrated in the example of Ella revealing her curse to Pamela (and then punching Pamela for taking advantage of her obedience), Ella's frustration with and awareness of her powerlessness feeds Ella's aggression. Beyond her physical aggression, Ella's powerlessness also provokes an aggressive exercise of observational skills which, as I've mentioned in previous chapters, makes Ella an ideal protagonist-cum-narrator.

Ella's aggressive imagination might be seen in the following excerpt, in which an increasingly-accomplished Ella imagines rebelling against finishing school:

At dinner I'd paint lines of gravy on my face and hurl meat pasties at Manners Mistress. I'd pile Headmistress's best china on my head and walk with a wobble and a swagger till every piece was smashed. Then I'd collect the smashed pottery and the smashed meat pasties and grind them into all my perfect stitchery. (Levine 72-73)

Ella's imagined rebellion is savagely worded: she plans to "hurl" pasties and "grind" smashed china into her stitchery. The "lines of gravy" evoke war paint, and the

imagination of a masculine identity is bolstered by the subsequent reference to a swagger. One definition of “swagger” as an intransitive verb is “To behave with an air of superiority, in a blustering, insolent, or defiant manner; now esp. to walk or carry oneself as if among inferiors, with an obtrusively superior or insolent air” (OED). Another is to “sway, lurch” (OED). In the phrase “a wobble and a swagger,” the word functions as a noun more aligned with the second definition, but the connotation of the first cannot be unintentional as merely the second meaning would make the word “swagger” redundant following “wobble.” Hence, the word “swagger” implies an intentional performance of one who wields power in the context of a patriarchal type of hierarchy.

Though Ella hates her obedience and imagines a rebellion against it, she demonstrates the inescapability of hegemony in the fact that she still operates within the confines of her obedience. Ella’s magically-imposed of obedience prevents her from acting on the rebellious fantasy, just as hegemony is inescapable power structure prevents all suppressed individuals from truly realizing a means of escape. Ella’s aggressive and confrontational fantasy precludes, in its absurdity, the conceivability of Ella ever acting out the fantasy, under any conditions. Which, as my previous examples demonstrated, is not to say that the reader does not get to experience Ella actually acting out such an aggressive fantasy of violent retaliation against those who issue commands. Ella responds violently to her oppression.

Lying Like a Woman

I’ve discussed different forms of Ella’s aggression as evidence of a negative sort of femininity, but Levine also perpetuates a more passive sort of oppressive feminine stereotype, in the form of Ella’s curse-induced mystique. As a direct result of Ella’s

socially unacceptable physical violence, Ella must protect herself from confrontation by becoming secretive: “After punishing me for using my fist, Mother issued one of her infrequent commands: never to tell anyone about my curse” (Levine 7). Because Ella’s mother forbids her from telling anyone that Lucinda has magically made her obedient, Ella must distract and lie when confronted about her obedience. Her creative lies, coupled with her finely honed observational skills, coalesce with Ella’s wit to make her an excellent storyteller in her own world. (A fact I’ve discussed in reference to how Ella’s facility with language ultimately crowns her with her “Cook’s Helper and Court Linguist” title upon marrying Char.) But before Ella can ascend to her rightful place in her fairy tale hierarchy, she must exercise her facility with language in a passive, seductive, and dishonest manner that might trouble readers who recognize another sort of “sweet” characterization creeping into Levine’s docility-bucking Ella. Ella’s feminine wiles are central to her character. They emerge as part of a fairy tale inheritance insofar as they may be understood in part as necessary consequences to responding to the curse of obedience (i.e., because Ella’s mother has commanded Ella to protect herself from abuse and the retaliatory violence it provokes). The positive valence of how these wiles make Ella a good storyteller and an interesting heroine make this wily feminine character all the more troubling as a piece of conformity to a negative stereotype of femininity.

I’ve addressed the fact that Char falls in love with Ella in an epistolary romance, and that such a written exchange provides readers with a means of understanding the characters as revealing their true selves through their letters. But the Ella of these letters is in large part a persona, a feminine mystique that frustrates and allures but does not truly represent her life. Ella’s letters are dishonest, while Char’s letters are genuine. Char

writes that Ella's letters "torment" him (Levine 181). The evasiveness of Ella's letters, more than being negative for this torment, however, pique Char's interest through that torment. Char does not know that Ella's curse makes her evasive. In his ignorance, the prince presumes that the mysteries of Ella's life are opportunities for him to imagine her in a way that suits his ardor. He reads the gaps in his knowledge about Ella's life in a way that unknowingly takes advantage of Ella's curse by using the gaps in his knowledge of her that the curse has creative to fill in an appealing mystique. Char writes that he loves Ella for her writing, which is "playful, interesting, thoughtful, and (occasionally) serious. I'm overjoyed to receive them, yet they bring misery. You say little of your daily life; I have no idea how you occupy yourself. I don't mind; I enjoy guessing at the mystery. But what I really long to know you do not tell either: what you feel, although I've given you hints by the score of my regard" (Levine 181). As his mother does when he later introduces her to "Lela" at the ball, Char emphasizes Ella as "playful" in appreciating her. Char also writes that his parents would "be yours [Ella's] completely. As I am" (Levine 181). Powerful figures in Levine's fairy tale world get seduced and possessed by Ella, because Ella conforms to a certain playful persona which they do not realize exists under a protective mask of self-preservation.

Ella takes advantage of the evasiveness originally established as a protective manner, appropriating it with her playful spirit that she might empower herself with how it imbues her with an appealing mystery. The running joke of whether or not Ella is old enough to marry becomes a playful means for Ella to maintain a feminine mystique about herself: "If I said I was old enough to marry and his question had only been the continuation of a good joke, he would be horribly embarrassed and our easy friendship

would be ruined. He might stop writing, which I couldn't endure" (Levine 177). Ella consciously uses her sense of humor to seduce Char. She chooses to be dishonest because she knows that such dishonesty keeps Char interested, "guessing at the mystery" of Ella's life. The seductive power of Ella's words empowers her, but it also defines her as a wily sort of woman.

The way Ella uses her words to seduce gets demonstrated in graphic metaphor when she's lost in the woods³³. Having run away from finishing school, Ella further empowers herself when she uses her words as magic. Captured by ogres who take advantage of Ella's obedience to prevent her from escaping, Ella appropriates their manner of magically-convincing speech (which works even on those who are not cursed with obedience like Ella) to cast a "spell" over the ogres. "At the risk of being eaten alive, Ella resorts to her skills of language to sweet talk her way out of danger, and she ends up subduing the ogres until Prince Charmont and his contingent of knights arrive to haul them off to jail" (Platt 43). Platt's analysis implicitly recognizes the sexually-loaded nature of the situation by using the term "sweet talk" to refer to the way that Ella uses her words to subdue the ogres. Being eaten alive, as numerous fairy tale analysts have

³³ I apologize for this long footnote. Footnotes are appropriate for such a foot-focused fairy tale, right? Feel free to ignore it as an embellishment. I just couldn't not quote George McDonald's "The Light Princess" somewhere in my thesis. In the context of introducing his story's prince, George McDonald writes that "forests are very useful in delivering princes from their courtiers like a sieve that keeps back the bran. Then the princes get away to follow their fortunes. In this way they have the advantage of the princesses, who are forced to marry before they have had a bit of fun. I wish our princesses got lost in a forest sometimes" (McDonald 77). McDonald's wish for an assertive princess gets fulfilled in Levine's characterization of her protagonist. Ella not only gets lost in the woods—and nearly devoured by ogres...both before she actually achieves princess status, even—but also receives "the advantage" typically allowed of princes" to "have...a bit of fun" before she marries. Her playful text defines Ella. Ella's quest for self-sufficiency, the struggle to break the curse of obedience, gets dramatized while lost in the woods. Ella represents a modern ideal of a princess who has gone on a hero-like quest for self-sufficiency and who, in this journey, gets happily divested of the trappings of polite and structure society which McDonald's courtiers represent and which Levine's finishing school represents in its enforcement of strict notions of propriety. In the woods, Ella learns to apply her finishing school skills toward more useful ends and gets closer to realizing that the way to break her curse is through mature, selfless support of the ideal structure of power represented by Prince Char.

demonstrated in their analyses of numerous iterations of the Red Riding Hood tale, is a highly sexualized risk. Ella's agency in saving herself relies on the feminine wiles of her words, Platt's phrase "sweet talk" suggesting a seductive sort of interaction. Levine's own introduction to the ogres' magically-convincing speech, however, makes this sexually-charged risk even more apparent:

Ogres weren't dangerous only because of their size and their cruelty. They knew your secrets just by looking at you, and they used their knowledge. When they wanted to be, they were irresistibly persuasive. By the end of an ogre's first sentence in Kyrrian, you forgot his pointy teeth, the dried blood under his fingernails, and the coarse black hair that grew on his face in clumps. He became handsome in your eyes, and you thought him your best friend. By the end of the second sentence, you were so won over that he could do whatever he wanted with you, drop you in a pot to cook, or, if he was in a hurry, eat you raw. (Levine 43-44)

Though ogres are a magical race which includes males and females, Ella's narration introduces the threat of their "irresistibly persuasive" speech in terms of a masculine ogre. The ogre "bec[omes] handsome" and takes advantage of manipulating an individual's secrets to "do whatever he want[s] to you." Not only does Levine have Ella phrase the threat of ogres in terms of a disgusting, powerful male figure taking advantage of a position of powerful and knowledge-based manipulation, but that threat uses the second person "you" to extend that threat beyond Ella and her fairy tale world and to the reader in her³⁴ real world in which disgusting and manipulative men might similarly seem handsome and friendly while actually feeding their unwholesome appetites.

The ogres' magical application of language has real-world resonance, and hence so does Ella's conquering of this linguistic magic. Ella's appropriation of the linguistic tricks of the ogres delights and surprises her as evidence of her own creative potential. Ella refers to the power she wields over the ogres as a "spell" to emphasize the fact that

³⁴ Or his.

she has appropriated a sort of magic and used it against the forces which have previously oppressed her: “I almost laughed and broke the spell. Who was giving orders now?” (Levine 102). Ella appropriates the ogres’ power by copying their persuasive speaking techniques, and applies the precise modulation of her voice she’d learned in finishing school to less ornamental ends. Ella’s near-laughter at the way that she has reversed power dynamic connects the notion of the power of language to Ella’s sense of humor. From her position of powerlessness, Ella appreciates her ironic and temporary triumph.

Ella’s linguistic skill not only appropriates the oppression Ella has faced in finishing school and at the hands of the ogres, it also receives approbation from the novel’s representative of the positive potential of power properly wielded. Char says that Ella’s words “tame” the monsters (Levine 111). Speaking on behalf of a benevolent hierarchy, Char points out that Ella has reduced the threat of the ogres. The magical embodiments of the malevolent, demanding antithesis to Char’s powerful position similarly succumb to Ella’s linguistic wiles. Char and his knights bind and gag the eight ogres, and subsequently marvel at the relative ease with which the ogres have been captured: “He [i.e., Char’s father, the king]’ll be interested to learn that humans can use their magic against them,” Char said. “At least Ella can” (Levine 109). Both of these references to Ella using her words as magic come in the form of Char’s praise. Ella possesses the magic of using her words, and Char possesses the authority to name this magic and express approval of it. Ella begins the process toward empowering herself without Char’s aid, but just as she cannot actually escape from the ogres until she receives a new command to counteract their command that she not run away, Ella cannot completely recognize her magical facility with words until an outside authority names

that magic and expresses approval of it as valuable to the king. In an attempt to be more gracious to feminist interpretations of this text, I acknowledge that this salvation from the ogres could represent a parity of genders, an effort to portray men and women working together so that they may both have an easier time confronting the dangerous (sexual) threats to their lives. Char helps complete the business Ella's words had begun.

Ella's feminine wiles are yet another manifestation of the strategic essentialism of her socially-positive traits, insofar as she also uses her language to wrest control from those who would oppress her. And ultimately, this wiliness gets approval from Levine's ideal monarch. Ella may be a bitchy character, but such behavior gets justified by Levine as provoked, self-preserving, and generally acknowledged for its vice. Not only do Ella's ostensibly "bitchy" faults help entertain and make her relatable, when considered for their connection to her curse and her disempowered status, these traits speak complexly to the reasons for continued oppression and the problematic ways it might make a disempowered individual relate negatively to her fellow individuals.

A Concluding Reflection

“The slipper bent with me.”
--Ella³⁵

My introduction alluded to the conflated otherness of “child and female identities.” If the notion of the child as “other” has been subordinated in my analysis, it has been an unfortunate consequence of my reluctance to speak reductively toward a category I no longer (ostensibly) occupy. The defensive stance my introduction itself takes toward an analysis of children’s literature, as well as the reader-response focus I’ve had, in which all this complex treatment of hegemony may be understood and grappled with by readers who—like the character of Ella—are under the age of sixteen³⁶ when they first experience this story, might make up for this seemingly sparse mention of childhood in my discussion of the way Levine confronts hegemony in *Ella Enchanted*. I have also cited several instances of Ella’s narration where Levine has the protagonist self-consciously reflect on her own age (e.g., the running joke with Char about whether she’s old enough to marry, the initial concern about seeming “childish” in commencing the epistolary correspondence with the prince). Ella’s oppressed character experiences conflated valences of oppression as a young woman, and her journey toward self-sufficient maturity culminates in her claiming to be “old enough” to propose marriage to Char in a framing of age in which Ella defines her age for herself such that Ella’s youth and femininity get empowered simultaneously in *Ella Enchanted*’s climactic final scene.

Whereas Platt’s essay on *Ella Enchanted* implies that Levine’s readers might be prepared to break out of Ella’s fairy tale legacy, I see Ella as inescapably contained in the

³⁵ Levine, Gail Carson. *Ella Enchanted*. New York: Scholastic, 1997. 152.

³⁶ Extrapolating from the age Ella gives on page 139 and the passage of time made explicit on page 173, Levine’s Ella is 16 (at the very oldest) by the conclusion of *Ella Enchanted*.

Cinderella legacy such that she lets readers recognize a way to make peace with that container. Levine did not erase the Cinderella tale's "sweet" docile protagonist, but rather explained it in contemporarily-sympathetic terms, through a curse of obedience.

Similarly, Levine does not erase the inherited constraint of the slipper or of the notion of an ideal femininity, but rather allows readers to understand these constraints as frustratingly inescapable. Far from "breaking the glass slipper," Levine's story demonstrates how the glass slipper is unbreakable. Literally—"The slipper didn't break" (Levine 152)—but also figuratively. We might play with the Cinderella tale and imagine a world in which the slipper and its associated superficiality is irrelevant, but we cannot imagine a fairy tale world as such without some form of conventionality.

Platt glosses over the fundamental conflict of ostensibly-progressive contemporary fairy tales in lauding *Ella Enchanted* for its progressive positioning as a text which reflects contemporary ideals. He recognizes that fairy tales are "complex symbolic acts intended to reflect on mores, norms, and habits organized for the purpose of reinforcing a hierarchically arranged civilizing process in a particular society" (Platt 48). This acknowledgment of a "civilizing process" aligns Platt with Zipes and Zipes's idea of a "culture industry" in which fairy tales function (*Zipes Happily*). The alignment continues when Platt goes on to say that *Ella Enchanted* therefore represents the social hierarchy of the society in which it was produced—as it must, to be identifiable and relevant to its readers (Platt 48). But Platt confronts neither the way that this reflection conserves a confining structure of power nor the nuances in a feminist interpretation that may arise by examining the way that power structures are similarly reinforced in the Perrault-derived source text of *Ella Enchanted* and the re-imagined fairy tale of *Ella*

Enchanted itself. Looking at Levine’s text in the context of a fairy tale legacy allowed for an analysis of the book in terms which give due consideration to the complexity of the theoretical possibilities underlying engagement with the text.

Westland points out a “new wave of feminist fairy-tales” proliferating children’s books in the 1980s, which allowed for “feminist ideas of the 1970s” to enter British society (Westland Background). Levine’s work may be seen as part of the American manifestation of this new wave. *Ella Enchanted* engages readers in a dialogue around feminist ideas around fairy tales, and Westland’s study demonstrates that the fact that these readers are children should be no obstacle to interpreting the work as critically engaging with issues of gender and power. Westland demonstrated that children can and do respond critically to the constraining social roles represented in fairy tales. Citing the title of Fetterley’s 1978 book on emergent reader-response theory, Westland borrows feminist literary criticism’s term “resisting readers” to describe the Cornish girls from whom Westland got the data for her study (Westland Background). She points out that, with the emergence of reader-response literary criticism and similarly focused theoretical developments in fields of culture and education, the 1980s saw a shift in the way that feminists understood female readers as capable of active and critical response to literature (Westland Feminist Reflections). Her sociological perspective vindicates my application of a critically-engaged reader response approach to the fairy tale story of *Ella Enchanted*. Westland identifies a social presumption that fairy tales damage young girls, and locates a reaction to that presumption.

Ella Enchanted reinforces an American structure of power, but the fact that a subversive feminist analysis is possible at all marks *Ella Enchanted* as more than a

pandering commercial attempt. As Bottigheimer points out, “Fairy tales’ marketability is a key element in their history” (107). A marketable example of “ludic” reading material, a formative text for young feminists (which, for all its potential reinforcement of stereotypes and conventions, allows for engagement in a dialogue in which the struggle against hegemonic constraint may be considered complexly), *Ella Enchanted* proves that playing in a book can be worthwhile. Ultimately, distinctions between child and adult, like distinctions between male and female and between elite and folk, are false and inhibiting constructions; a postmodernist understanding of a world in which the distinctions of high and low have vanished should also disintegrate age and gender categories along with the stigmas associated with the artificial categories of kiddie lit and chick lit. As I hope I have demonstrated, a playful dialogue with the text is all the more thought-provoking for its playful whimsies. Even superficially feminist ludic reading material represents a positive bastion for burgeoning feminists, a formative text which might change in relation to how its readers respond to it. *Ella Enchanted* allows young readers to engage in a salient dialogue around issues of power and gender. The way that the text entertains and speaks to young readers facilitates an early exposure to issues of conformity and rebellion. Such early exposure to a perspective that balks at submission makes subsequent dialogues about hegemony and how to subvert dominance easier.

Perhaps, taking a more optimistic stance on fairy tale scholarship than Knoepflmacher’s idea that we destroy the sense of wonder with our analysis, we can align ourselves with the perspective that fairy tales become vibrant in fairy tale scholarship’s attempts to identify and comprehend them (Bernheimer 4). Early in his fairy tale handbook, Ashliman establishes that fairy tales may function in cathartic and

wish-fulfilling ways, but ultimately must *entertain*. Fairy tale analysis, like metafiction, “playfully, though nonetheless seriously, celebrates the reality of the illusion, the very art of representing entire worlds” (Gibson 86). This vibrant, playful yet serious celebration is precisely what I hope to have done in my analysis of *Ella Enchanted*. Certainly, Levine’s text will continue to create a dialogue between its world and ours, yielding new interpretations to for young and playful readers who encounter it for the first time. And for those of us who are no longer encountering the text for the first time, we can still go back to play in those delightfully bendy glass slippers Levine has made for us, with the guarantee that they will never break no matter how much we abuse them.

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