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Emma Carbone
Pace University

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Emma Carbone
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Ella Enchanted: Reclaiming Fairy Tales/Perpetuating Hollywood Standards

Feminists often denounce traditional fairy tales because they perpetuate the ideals of a patriarchal society by encouraging girls to behave like proper princesses and wait for charming princes to take charge and save the day. In response to these traditional fairy tales, many authors have tried to reclaim the realm of fairy tales for girls. These retellings feature active protagonists who are not scared of taking charge and do not need princes to save them. One example of this new fairy tale genre is the 1998 children's novel Ella Enchanted by Gail Carson Levine, which takes an untraditional approach to retelling the story of Cinderella. The novel addresses several specific feminist issues, specifically negotiating and fighting the burden of obedience, the importance of female friendships and, of course, learning to save yourself. This popular novel was adapted into a "ramshackle mess" of a film in 2004 that is, shockingly, no longer an effective feminist text (Barsanti).

In both incarnations, Ella's story attempts to turn the tenets of conventional (patriarchal) fairy tales upside down. Indeed, the film was marketed towards young, teenage girls and hailed by many critics as "a charming dose of girl power" (Swarzbaum par. 1). Nonetheless, Levine's original novel remains the more effective feminist text. In adapting Ella Enchanted to the screen—making it more cinematic and marketable to a teen audience—much of the story's complexity and gravity were lost. Even more problematic is the fact that the story's feminist underpinnings were largely abandoned in the process of adaptation as not only the plot but also characters were changed to be more effective on the big screen. Some of the oddest changes include the elimination of extraneous (female) characters, the addition of male characters who

had only minor roles in the novel, the beautification/glamorization of certain characters as well as the introduction of a convoluted side plot, presumably meant to give the film more action.

Ella Enchanted's shift from feminist text to girl power film is reminiscent of the dichotomy between third wave feminism and the girl power/popular feminism movement. Third wave feminism is generally seen as the next step forward from the second wave feminism of the 1970s (the first wave came much earlier during the fight for suffrage). The third wave hopes to use second wave feminism as groundwork for a more encompassing movement that can take into account more varied agendas for women everywhere (Heywood 3). Furthermore, the third wave takes "cultural production and sexual politics as key sites of struggle" by discussing the implications of the media on feminism as well as integrating notions of femininity within the movement (Heywood 4). Girl power (also often referred to as popular feminism) pays lip service to the ideals of third wave feminism without addressing the political content behind the ideals (Bellafante 57). The simplification of ideologies found in the girl power movement clearly bears a striking resemblance to the adaptation process that Ella Enchanted underwent as it moved from a serious narrative to a campy film.

Despite the numerous changes, the plot remains the same on a basic level in both the novel and the film. The story is set in an imaginary, medieval-esque kingdom called Frell (though in the movie Frell becomes a city in a larger kingdom to accommodate more complicated side plots). A roaming fairy named Lucinda gives Ella the gift/curse of obedience at Ella's birth. As a result, Ella has to do everything she is told, no matter what harm it might cause to herself or others. As the plot moves forward Ella is compelled to leave home to try and find Lucinda and ask her to lift the curse. Along the way she also falls in love with Prince Char. For varying reasons, depending on the version, Lucinda refuses to lift the curse. Further difficulties

arise for Ella before she finally breaks the curse. The plot described here is the body of the novel. Levine spends the entire book with Ella as she works to break the curse. In the film, Ella's curse and, bizarrely, her quest to break the curse become a backdrop to Ella's romance with Char and their efforts to save the kingdom from Char's evil uncle, Edgar.

The film does try to maintain the original condition of the curse—that Ella must do anything she is told—albeit on a very basic level. Symbolically, Ella thereby loses her voice, a fact that is addressed by the “reviving Ophelia” discourse originated by Mary Pipher. As Marina Gonick explains in her comparative essay on the discourses of “girl power” and “reviving Ophelia,” “the crux of Pipher’s argument is that due to pressure from U.S. culture, adolescent girls are coerced into putting aside their ‘authentic selves’” (Gonick 12). With so much pressure to be someone they are not, Pipher argues, girls often become disoriented or depressed (Gonick 12). The similarities between Pipher’s argument and Ella’s curse are apparent, particularly since Ella is ordered throughout both film and novel to behave according to the whims of other characters. It is, therefore, possible to suggest that Ella is the embodiment of the “unwitting victim” that Pipher writes about saving.

Except, of course, for the fact that Ella actively works to save herself. Thus, while Ella’s curse harkens back to “reviving Ophelia,” her actions as a character seem more relevant to the early girl power movement, before the Spice Girls helped to render the movement as innocuous as their popular songs (Labi 60). Until then, the original girl power movement—headed by a group known as the Riot Grrrls—was a reaction to the male dominated local punk scenes. This form of girl power urged young women to see themselves as “producers and creators of knowledge, and as verbal and expressive dissenters” (Gonick 7). The notion of dissent is especially visible in Ella’s defiance of her father’s wishes in the novel and her crusade for Elf

rights in the film. After the movement's early years, however, girl power was adopted by the Spice Girls, becoming a "marketable concept that has been exploited for its commercial potential" much in the same way Ella Enchanted was gutted and largely rewritten to become a bland teen movie (Gonick 11).

To be fair, it is unlikely that any film adaptation could faithfully recreate this novel. Largely told through Ella's narration, the story did have to be changed to work as visual entertainment. As is often the case, the adaptation process for Ella Enchanted consequently became problematic. Choices had to be made to present information effectively in the film and to maintain viewers' attention. Unfortunately, in the process the minds behind this film also seemed to choose to depoliticize most of Ella's story. Particularly problematic are the film's setting, its treatment of characters (both male and female) and the poetic license that was taken with key points of the plot.

The film takes the already straightforward plot of Ella Enchanted and waters it down even further. It boils down Ella's internal struggle against the curse and Levine's commentary on fighting cultural norms like obedience into a campy, clichéd romantic comedy marketed toward teens. The writers choose to incorporate jokes common to the Shrek films—playing with the mores of well-known fairy tales in a contemporary setting—and various other modern elements rather than remaining faithful to Levine's original work. As a result, the adaptation transforms into a quasi-high school version of the novel. Other "high-school-ized" films include Clueless and Ten Things I Hate About You. The argument for this simplification and recasting of film adaptations is that "young people pay to see their current conditions celebrated and exaggerated on the screen" (Shary qtd. in Davis 57) While this approach is effective in the adaptation of more canonical texts such as Shakespeare or Austen, there is no reason to simplify the story in Ella

Enchanted since viewers can easily follow the simple, contemporary style of storytelling (Davis 54). Nonetheless, the film chose to “contemporize aspects of the story and language, with references to medieval teen mags and fan clubs, a shopping mall replete with hand-cranked escalators” in addition to two musical numbers and other inane atrocities that cause the plot to veer dangerously toward the absurd and ridiculous (Rooney par. 5). This insistence to simplify and modernize the plot illustrates a “tunnel vision” often found in “movies aimed at a teen audience, as filmmakers have been wary of too academic a product” (Davis 56). It is subsequently clear that the film does not take itself seriously, thereby rendering the feminist elements of the original story ineffective.

Despite being targeted at an older audience (teen rather than child), the movie is much lighter than the novel thanks to its simplification and inappropriate modernization. Everything is campy and fun. Even Ella’s curse becomes less cruel in the film. In the novel, the severity of Ella’s curse is constantly underscored with passages explaining how little control Ella has over her own life: “If someone told me to hop on one foot for a day and a half, I’d have to do it. And hopping on one foot wasn’t the worst order I could be given. If you commanded me to cut off my own head, I’d have to do it” (Levine 5). The movie chooses to ignore the more severe commands, focusing instead on silly orders like telling Ella to freeze mid-jump creating a tableau akin to the fight scenes in the Matrix films. Furthermore, while in the film Ella is compelled to complete her orders with a twinkling sound and a bodily jolt, the Ella of the novel has the choice to delay in following orders. The film’s representation of Ella’s obedience disregards the physical difficulties Ella faces because of each delay: “Each moment cost me dear—in breathlessness, nausea, dizziness and other complaints. I could never hold out for long. Even a few minutes were a desperate struggle” (Levine 5). This darker side to Ella’s curse is ignored in

favor of cinematic effects and comedic opportunities, as when Ella is ordered to sing at a Giant's wedding and bursts into one of the film's notorious musical numbers.

Finally, in dealing with the menacing nature of Ella's "gift," the film fails to include some of the most jarring examples of the curse's dangers. These dangers are particularly obvious at the Giant's wedding in the novel where, instead of being ordered to sing, Ella is ordered to be grateful for her gift by Lucinda herself. Ella explains the effects of this order, saying, "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" (Levine 128). In this way, some of the most visceral and evocative events of the story are never addressed. While the novel truly paints Ella's gift as a curse the movie merely makes it seem an inconvenient nuisance.

In addition to inadequately showing Ella's gift as a curse, the film also becomes excessively preoccupied with appearances as almost all of the female characters are somehow glamorized for the film. Ella's stepsisters go from short, fat and balding horrors to rather dim, mildly cute, annoying pests. The changes made to Ella's fairy godmother, Mandy, are even more problematic. Claudia Puig, in her review of the film, writes "the novel's fairy godmother, with frizzy gray hair and a couple of chins, has been transformed by Hollywood into a much younger, more glamorous and decidedly duller Minnie Driver" (Puig par. 3). It is particularly disturbing that in addition to gaining eternal youth in the film Mandy loses most of her magical aptitude—accidentally changing her boyfriend into a book that accompanies Ella on her journey.

Lucinda's transformation is similarly upsetting. A well-meaning albeit misguided fairy who eventually sees the error of her ways in the novel turns into a "loose-canon fairy godmother" in knee-high boots and an ill-fitting outfit that shows off her midriff in the film

version (Scwarzbaum par. 2). Instead of being well meaning and misguided, Lucinda is intentionally reckless throughout the film. At times she even seems cruel, refusing to revoke Ella's curse because of a "no return" policy. Lucinda never shows the repentance or regret that redeemed her in the novel. Consequently, Lucinda never renounces "big magic" in the film (the reason she cannot revoke the curse in the novel)—a decision that led her to also give up her magically maintained beauty toward the end of the novel where she appears as a stooped, old woman (Levine 193). The one peripheral character immune to this treatment is Ella's dear friend Areida. But this is likely because the character that occupied at least a third of the novel and played a major role in furthering the plot is relegated to ten minutes of screen time in the movie. In other words, the one character that wasn't glamorized and simplified for the film version simply doesn't appear in most of the movie.

That is not to say that the other female characters fair better than Areida in the film. All of them—Mandy, Lucinda, and even the evil step-sisters—become less central to the plot as the focus shifts from Ella's quest to break her curse to Ella's romance with Prince Charmont. In a film that critics uniformly called a tale of empowerment for girls everywhere, few of the important peripheral characters are female (Scwarzbaum). While other contemporary films with girl protagonists are "exploring the empowerment of female youth through same-sex relationships" and friendships, this film systematically marginalizes all of its peripheral female characters (Kearney 132). Instead of including empowering female relationships, Ella Enchanted paradoxically uses an approach found in traditional patriarchal fairy tales where girls are told that they must "relinquish ties to other women so that all their energies can be harnessed in preparation" for finding their own princes (Fisher 129). This conditioning, which is generally

irritating to contemporary feminists, is shocking in a film whose roots lie in a feminist retelling of the Cinderella story.

Of course, given the absence of significant female characters, the film is awash in male characters: “in ‘Wizard of Oz’ fashion, the film makes transient characters from the book into tag-alongs during Ella’s trek through the kingdom” (Rooney 2). Slannen the elf, for example, changes from a mild-mannered tradesman who gives Ella directions into a wise-cracking elf who wants to petition the king for the chance to go to law school. This fact becomes relevant to the film’s silly side plot with Prince Char’s uncle Edgar mandating that Elves must sing and dance as part of his evil plan to take over the kingdom.

Then there is the matter of Mandy’s gift to Ella: The Book. In the novel the book is an inanimate gift from Mandy to Ella upon her departure for finishing school. It shows Ella useful letters and illustrations of people she cares about. Basically, the book is Ella’s lifeline. In the movie, the book is Mandy’s boyfriend who is sent to accompany Ella as she sets out to break the curse. He also becomes Ella’s advisor, offering advice as Ella continues her journey and actually helping to rescue her at one point in the film. It is fascinating that the movie felt compelled not only to create this source of male advice in the film but also to make him Mandy’s boyfriend. Certainly the book is more effective on camera as a speaking character, but why not a female book? It is also strange that the film decided that one of the story’s most independent female characters, Mandy, needed a man. The implication of Ella needing this male advice on her journey is mind-blowing in a movie that proclaims itself as a girl power fairy tale. In the novel Ella is saved thanks to *her* intellect. In the film, Ella’s merry band of men always steps in to save her when it becomes apparent that Ella cannot save herself, despite her protestations to the

contrary—a recurring joke in the film. This fact, and its constancy throughout the film, works to undermine all of Ella’s hard-won agency as a feminist heroine in the novel.

Strangely, the filmmakers chose to abandon the one enlightened male that was in the original story. Prince Char—who in the book had clever comments such as asking why Ella needed to go to finishing school when she was already perfectly fine—has become unrecognizable. In the process of adaptation, Char became a caricature of himself, “the playful and intelligent Prince Charmont has morphed on screen into an empty-headed teen idol” (Puig par. 4). In addition, the prince loses all interest in politics during his translation from novel to screen. He even has a fan club, a group of psychotic girls he continuously runs away from during the movie.

As if these changes are not enough, the film even alters the ending of the story. The only focus of Levine’s novel was “Ella’s empowering quest to lift the obedience curse while the overly processed script here embellishes her personal journey with numerous diversions and a political agenda” (Rooney 2). In the film version Edgar, Char’s uncle, orders Ella to kill Prince Charmont when he asks her to marry him. This all conveniently takes place in a room with mirrored walls so that Ella is able to look at her reflection and issue her last order, to no longer be obedient. Char, airhead idol that he is in the film, does not understand what Ella is doing holding a knife to his back and she is arrested. While Ella languishes in jail, her friend Slannen gathers a misfit cavalry to launch a rescue, Ella then “stops Edgar murdering Char with a poisoned crown. Edgar reveals his plan to kill Char and admits he killed Char’s father. He dons the poisoned crown” and dies (Smith par. 2). Ella and Char then make up, get married, and start singing “Don’t Go Breaking My Heart” as the credits roll. This ending creates a variety of problems when trying to read the film as a feminist text. The most detestable is that Ella has to

order herself to stop being obedient. Instead of overcoming the curse, she finds a loophole. In this way, Ella's triumph—the point at which the novel ends, is rendered so anti-climactic that an entire assassination plot had to be added to create a more satisfying sense of closure. Then—just to make sure viewers never forget that Ella Enchanted is a silly, fun, romantic movie—all of the characters start dancing and break into song.

As several critics note, the novel is not bogged down in such complicated subplots and flashy tricks. Instead, Ella willingly renounces Char when he professes his love because she knows that she poses too much of a danger to Char, and by extension to the kingdom, with her curse. The story's relation to Cinderella becomes more evident here as Ella attends three royal masquerade balls to see Char one last time before completely renouncing him. At the last ball Ella is unmasked and forced to admit that she does love Char. Realizing the value of a royal stepdaughter, Ella's stepmother orders Ella to accept Char's proposal. And here is the real difference between the film and the novel. Ella does not look in a mirror and say the curse is broken. Instead she fights it through sheer force of will:

My thought burrowed within, concentrated in a point deep in my chest, where there was room for only one truth; I must save Char. 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)

In this ending, Ella obliterates any similarities to Pipher's Ophelia as she defines herself and takes a stand to break the curse. Like second-wave feminists at consciousness raisings, Ella finally has the words she needs to express her own feelings and desires. She has the strength to

refuse to marry Char until she is ready, thereby breaking the curse and saving not only herself but also the prince.

Ella Enchanted is a campier, simpler version of a complex novel. In trying to modernize the story and make it more effective as a film, the movie actually turned to traditional gender roles—creating men to guide Ella and situations from which other men could rescue her. Like a good, traditional princess, this Ella renounces the women in her life to prepare to find a proper husband. But she does all of this while protesting for Ogre rights, singing lovely songs and wielding swords beside her prince, so that a compliant audience might overlook the less-than-feminist ideas. Because of this “dumbing down” of the story, the film becomes a work in popular feminism. As a result, Ella Enchanted suffers a similar process in translation from print to screen that the girl power movement suffered after the Spice Girls embraced it. Rather than effectively addressing any of the concrete, feminist, issues brought up in the original novel, Ella Enchanted merely creates a ridiculous setting, does a song and dance, and tells a few stale jokes while it pretends that a girl saying she can save herself is the same as actually doing so.

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