

Cinderella: the real story

“Cinderella” is more than a bedtime story or Disney movie. Her story is a fictionalized tale of life in the Middle Ages that was used to entertain as well as educate. It describes the plight of women, the laws of inheritance, and the harsh realities of life in the Middle Ages.

The first known version of “Cinderella” dates back to the first century BC. In the Greco-Egyptian version, Rhodopis, a Greek slave working in her Egyptian master’s household is mistreated and oppressed.

In a story plot similar to the 1810 Grimm brothers’ version of “Cinderella,” the beautiful and talented Rhodopis is prevented from attending the Pharaoh’s ball. While doing wash at the shore, one of her slippers is stolen by a falcon and delivered to the Pharaoh.

Seeing it as a sign from God, the Pharaoh searches his kingdom to find the owner of the shoe. The Pharaoh ultimately finds Rhodopis, and in story book fashion, they marry and live happily ever after.

The modern version of Cinderella” is attributed to the German-born Grimm brothers, who in the early 1800s began to transcribe centuries-old folktales that had been orally passed from generation to generation. Although “Cinderella” has many adaptations, the basic story is symbolic of life in the Middle Ages.

Cinderella, who lives with her stepmother and two stepsisters (her mother and father have passed away), is treated quite shabbily. Aptly, she derives her name from spent fireplace cinders; today’s equivalent of a throwaway child. Her condition is desperate with no apparent salvation.

But, alas, a fairy godmother appears and turns a pumpkin into a coach and her tattered clothing into a fabulous gown replete with glass slippers. With her fairy godmother’s help, Cinderella is able to attend the ball where she meets a prince, whom, after some drama, she later marries.

Life expectancy in the Middle Ages was extremely short. If you were

lucky enough to reach the age of twenty, you could expect to live to be fifty-one. However, if you factor in death from violent causes, life expectancy for a twenty year old was only forty-two. These figures are



Forced to clean her stepmother’s cottage, Cinderella derives her name from spent fireplace cinders.

even more dire than they may first appear; they are based on a survey of well-nourished English nobility and do not account for infant and childhood mortality.

Parents rarely lived to see all of their children reach adulthood. The severity of the living conditions of this period also mandated that a surviving spouse

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remarry as soon as possible after the death of their spouse.

As with “Cinderella,” the result was blended families with stepchil-

dren fighting for recognition and survival. We tend to think of stepchildren as the product of divorce, but the harsh realities of the Middle Ages made second marriages and stepchildren as common as today.

The stakes were high for children, especially daughters and younger sons, since land was the principle form of wealth, and primogeniture was the principle method of inheritance. Under primogeniture, the eldest son inherited upon his father’s death to the exclusion of the decedent’s surviving spouse and other children. And it didn’t matter that the eldest son was a minor; nearly half of the sons in Medieval times inherited from their fathers while minors. Richard II (age ten), Henry VI (age nine months) and Edward V (age twelve) all became Kings of England while minors.

The characters of “Cinderella” bear a striking resemblance to their real life medieval counterparts.

As was typical of the time, Cinderella’s mother and father failed to see her through to adulthood. Her stepmother—with little prospect of finding a husband (widowers remarried twice as frequently as widows during this period)—treated her cruelly. Her priority was to find landed husbands for her daughters in order to ensure their future well being as well as her own. With few eldest sons to go around, the young and pretty Cinderella was a threat to her family’s future security.

Cinderella, being both a stepchild and female, did not have good prospects. Without the expectancy of an inheritance, girls looked to marriage as the sole determiner of their future. A young girl’s dream of a good life rested almost entirely on whom she married.

The prince, who was most likely an eldest child, inherited both his prop-



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erty and standing in the community from his parents. Land was the principle source of wealth, and virtually the only way to obtain it was through inheritance. Any younger brother would be forced to join the military, the priesthood, or become a traveler looking for opportunity wherever it may have appeared.

The similarity of the words fair and fairy is no coincidence. Cinderella’s fairy godmother dispensed fairness. By the magic wave of her wand, she made a cruel and hopeless situation right and fair.

Stripped of their happy ending, medieval fairy tales are stories of evil and cruelty. Burnt witches, abandoned children, and murderous stepmothers do not make good bedtime stories. The presence of a fairy godmother allowed parents to educate their children on the practical laws of survival while offering hope for a happy ending. Such tales allowed a largely illiterate population to pass on the important lessons of the day.

Fairy tales like “Cinderella” survive as entertaining fantasies—my personal favorite is the 1960 Jerry Lewis version, Cinderella. Lying just under Cinderella’s surface is an equally entertaining story of the history, law, and life.

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