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Jane Austen's Heroines—and Some Others

I began this essay last Saturday, when, as it happened, all day the Family Channel showed several famous Disney cartoons, about a group of fictional characters now commonly known as the Disney princesses—the little mermaid, the sleeping beauty, Cinderella, Pocahontas, etc. A very appropriate time, for my essay is about them—or rather, about how some heroines of famous fairy tales, are, in a sense, transformed into heroines of Jane Austen's novels.

In the last thirty years or so there have been many writers who have written novels based on famous fairy tales. But, more recently, the trend has changed. Writers are still adapting fairy tales, but nowadays they often, so to speak, turn the source on its head. One such novel is Maguire's *Wicked*, later adapted into a musical, in which Baum's wicked witch of the west is, in fact, not wicked at all. The trend in recent cartoons and movies has been exactly the same—e.g., *Maleficent*.

There is one movie, an adaptation of a famous musical by Steven Sondheim, which I should particularly mention as pertinent to my theme. I am speaking of *Into the Woods*, which opened in theaters last December. It is a dramatization of several well known fairy tales, including the stories of Cinderella and Rapunzel. The first act closely follows the plots of original tales, even down to small details, and its last words, sung by all the characters, are the familiar “happy ever after,” but the second act brings a drastic change. In it we see what happens *after* the supposed happy ending, and the fairy tale heroes and heroines turn out to be fallible, disillusioned, and ordinary. At the end of the first act Cinderella and Rapunzel marry their respective princes, but in the second act each prince gets bored with married life and finds another love interest, Cinderella (like the real life Princess Diana) realizes that life in the palace is not for her, and Rapunzel turns into a neurotic, hysterical woman who cannot settle down and (again, like Princess Diana) perishes in a senseless accident. (Rapunzel's fate is not shown in the movie, only in the stage musical.)

In other words, *Into the Woods* takes up several fairy tales, but gives them something that fairy tales never have: the dimension of realism. Characters of fairy tales often behave in what is, by normal standards, an illogical or incomprehensible manner. For example, if Cinderella falls in love with the prince, why does she three times run away at the stroke of midnight, instead of staying and explaining who she is? And if the prince is in love with Cinderella, why doesn't he take steps, at least after the second night, to prevent her from escaping? Such questions, of course, are not meant to be asked in fairy tales: they follow their own logic. But *Into the Woods* does ask those questions, and gives reasonable answers. Cinderella runs away because, as she puts it, “wanting a ball is not wanting a prince.” And the prince, after she runs away the second time, does take measures to stop her the third time: he has the steps smeared with pitch, which causes the crucial loss of her slipper.

Unlike *Into the Woods*, Jane Austen's novels are not rooted in fairy tales. And yet, as I read them, I am

reminded of certain typical fairy tale motifs in their plots, and most of her heroines are, in some ways, reminiscent of several famous heroines of fairy tales. The only Austen's novel in which I do not see this pattern is *Sense and Sensibility*. As you know, it is a novel about two very different sisters. I am aware that other readers might disagree with me. There are fairy tales that have two sisters for heroines; I might also mention Disney's extremely successful cartoon *Frozen*. Nonetheless, in this paper I will talk about the other five novels.

Of all fairy tales, "Cinderella" has a plot which has been imitated most by writers of romance. Every year thousands of cheap romances are published whose plots follow this pattern: the heroine is a poor, but beautiful and worthy young girl, who, after various tribulations, marries, if not exactly a prince, at least a handsome and wealthy man. The girl almost always has a rival, a vain and spiteful girl, over whom she triumphs in the end. It is easy to see why this plot would be so popular. For one, every poor, hard-working girl yearning to find love and a measure of comfort can easily identify with Cinderella; she could hardly identify with Rapunzel, Snow White, or Sleeping Beauty. Moreover, "Cinderella" is a fairy tale, but in it the fantastic element is reduced to the minimum. It is a story not of a romantic princess in an enchanted castle, but of an ordinary girl who is neglected and victimized by her family. Finally her luck turns: she gets a ball gown and a carriage from her fairy godmother and goes to a ball, where everybody is impressed by her beauty, and where she meets a man whom she will later marry. Now eliminate the fairy godmother and put in her place some human benefactor, and you get a perfectly realistic story, which could happen anywhere. In fact, several adaptations have done just that. For example, the movie *Ever After* is a straightforward retelling of the story, but in this case Cinderella is a 16th century French girl called Danielle, and she gets her ball gown from Leonardo da Vinci, who has just come to France at the invitation of the French king—which, by the way, is a historic event.

Since each of Austen's six novels ends with the heroine's marriage, it is not surprising that no fewer than four of them use the Cinderella theme, though in the fourth and last instance, it is subordinate to the main theme. *Northanger Abbey*, her first novel, uses it in the simplest and most straightforward way. Catherine, a pretty, innocent young girl, makes a journey to Bath with a couple of family friends. There she happily goes to a ball, where she meets a charming young man—not a prince, but socially above her; they dance and romance follows.

I must emphasize here that there is an important similarity between the plot of "Cinderella," and the plots of several Austen's novels. In "Cinderella," everything hinges on the ball to which the heroine is invited. Similarly, balls are events of supreme importance in Austen's world. In all her novels except *Persuasion*, there are balls which the heroines attend, and often they are instrumental for the plots. That is by no means unrealistic. In the Regency period, balls were social occasions of great importance, and no doubt many young women met their future husbands there. But notice that, of all Austen's heroines, Catherine is the only one who, like Cinderella, meets her mate when they dance at a formal ball. True, they do not fall in love on

the spot, but they are attracted to each other, and, as they continue seeing each other, the attraction grows. There is nothing so simple in the other two “Cinderella novels” of Austen, *Pride and Prejudice* and *Mansfield Park*. These novels are far more complex than *Northanger Abbey*, and the hero and heroine, although we see them dancing together, do not come to an understanding so easily.

Of all Austen's novels, *Pride and Prejudice* is by far the most popular, not because it is the best, but because it has such an impressive heroine. Elizabeth is a powerful character—so powerful that, in comparison to her, Catherine seems almost insignificant. For all that, Elizabeth is a Cinderella figure no less than Catherine is, for she is a poor middle class girl who gets a husband of high social status. In fact, she is the only one of all seven heroines who marries not only a man of good family, but an extremely wealthy man. However, Elizabeth is such a powerful figure because she is not only Cinderella, but also anti-Cinderella, just as the aristocratic and handsome Darcy is Prince Charming, and also the opposite of Prince Charming, for he is a proud and reserved man entirely devoid of charm. Elizabeth and Darcy meet at a ball, as Cinderella and Prince Charming should, but what happens at that famous encounter? This Prince Charming coolly refuses to dance with Cinderella, finding her only “tolerably handsome,” and in her turn Cinderella heartily dislikes Prince Charming. True, Darcy falls in love with her, and they dance together at a later ball, but that does not change her feelings. When Darcy proposes to her, Elizabeth coldly refuses. In the end, of course, her feelings change and they are reconciled, but the point is that Elizabeth is not the usual sweet and humble heroine found in so many fairy tales, and, for that matter, in many popular novels written by women authors before and after Austen. Austen is not a “feminist” writer, but in Elizabeth she has created a girl that is in some ways akin to Cinderella, but in others akin to emancipated women of a later age. I will add that in *Pride and Prejudice* there is also the odious Miss Bingley, a superb “wicked stepsister” figure, whose downfall we enjoy, and the delightfully overbearing “wicked stepmother,” Lady Catherine, who ferociously tries to bully Elizabeth into giving up Darcy, for she wants him to marry her own daughter.

Fanny, the heroine of *Mansfield Park*, is in no sense an emancipated young woman. On the contrary, she is, like Cinderella, and unlike Elizabeth, a sweet and humble girl who is neglected and exploited by her relatives. Without even trying, she wins the love of Henry Crawford, an irresistible Prince Charming to all young ladies who meet him. They do not get acquainted at a ball; still, later, when her uncle gives a ball that constitutes Fanny's formal entrance into society, she first dances with Henry, as Cinderella should—actually, she, the lowliest of the seven heroines, is the only one who gets the ultimate triumph of opening the ball with her distinguished suitor. Moreover, Fanny has two wicked stepsisters in Maria and Julia, her selfish cousins, who yearn after Henry Crawford, and the wicked stepmother in her aunt, the witch-like Mrs. Norris, one of the most hateful characters of fiction, who cruelly persecutes her for years on end. So all characters necessary for the story of Cinderella are provided, including the fairy godmother, that is, Fanny's cousin Edmund, who unobtrusively takes care of Fanny's needs. But *Mansfield Park* has a peculiar twist on the story of Cinderella. Henry Crawford proposes not to Maria or Julia, the “wicked stepsisters,” but to the penniless Fanny. This is, of course, the expected triumph of Cinderella. But this Cinderella refuses Prince

Charming in shocked revulsion, for she is the only person who realizes his incurable narcissism. Besides, Fanny wants Edmund, once her mentor and protector, and now the man she loves. Unfortunately, Edmund wants Henry's sister, a formidable “wicked stepsister” figure, for she has beauty, charm, and quick wit, but she is morally flawed. At the end, Fanny triumphs over her as well, but her victory is not easy.

Emma Woodhouse, the heroine of the fifth and greatest of all Austen's novels, indeed one of the greatest of all novels in any language, is no Cinderella. She is a beautiful, self-assured, rich girl of good family who is the mistress of her father's house and queen of her social circle. For all that, Emma is very like Rapunzel, for she is just as much prisoner in Hartfield, her father's estate, as Rapunzel is prisoner in the witch's tower. All other heroines, even the timid Fanny, go on various journeys in their respective novels; Emma is the only one who never leaves home. And the reason for her “imprisonment” is the same as the reason for Rapunzel's imprisonment: both are helpless before their parents' demands. Rapunzel is locked up in a tower without doors by her foster mother, the witch, who presumably wants to share her daughter with nobody. Emma is not literally locked up, but so long as her adoring but possessive father lives, she has no thoughts of going away, not even when the man she loves proposes to her. And yet, just as Elizabeth is both Cinderella and anti-Cinderella, so Emma is both Rapunzel and anti-Rapunzel. Rapunzel is passive to the point of mindlessness. Even when she falls in love with the prince, she does nothing to escape, and, when she is finally reunited with him, it happens by chance. Now Emma is anything but passive; on the contrary, she is a young woman of remarkable vitality, intelligence, and strength of character, who is almost too high-spirited for her own good. And when she finds her man, she puts up a fight to be united with him, in spite of her father's resistance.

However, *Emma* is a very complex novel, and its heroine is not only Rapunzel, but also a would-be fairy godmother and even a wicked stepsister. When Emma meets Harriet Smith, a pretty, naïve girl of unknown parentage, she immediately decides to become fairy godmother to Harriet's Cinderella and chooses Prince Charming on the spot. Of course, it does not work. Prince Charming turns out to be a worthless fortune hunter, and Harriet is poor material for Cinderella. Even worse is Emma's behavior to Jane Fairfax. Jane, unlike Harriet, is a genuine Cinderella figure—a beautiful, intelligent, but impoverished girl, who, at a social gathering, meets a handsome young man far above her in society's view, and they fall in love. Emma quite unintentionally becomes her “wicked stepsister,” for she first imagines that she is in love with that young man, and later outrageously flirts with him, causing Jane deep suffering. Moreover, this unfortunate Cinderella has not a fairy godmother, but a horrible perversion of one—the vulgar narcissist Mrs. Elton, who ostentatiously takes Jane under her wing, that is, she patronizes and bullies her.

Anne Elliot, the heroine of *Persuasion*, is neither Cinderella nor Rapunzel. She is Snow White. There are no fairy tale motifs in the story of Anne Elliot, no magic mirror, no dwarves, no poisoned apple, no glass coffin. Even so, there are curious similarities to the story of Snow White. The misfortunes of Snow White start when the queen her mother dies and her father remarries. Of all Austen's heroines, Anne is the only one who has a

truly exceptional mother, beautiful, wise, and loving. When Anne loses her mother at the age of fourteen, everything changes for the worse. True, her father (who, incidentally, is just as obsessed with his looks as Snow White's wicked stepmother) does not remarry, but he and her sisters either ignore her or exploit her. The only person who loves her is Lady Russell, her godmother. Yet, ironically, Lady Russell acts not like the fairy godmother, but like the witch stepmother, for she ruins Anne's happiness by persuading her to reject Frederick Wentworth. From then on Anne is as unhappy, unloved, and helpless in her father's house as Snow White in her father's palace. However, just as Snow White at long last finds refuge with the sympathetic dwarves, so Anne, once her father is forced to let his estate, finds refuge with people who like and respect her, first with her brother-in-law's family, and then briefly with the sailors that she meets in Lyme Regis. All those simple, unsophisticated people are of lower rank than the elegant but cold-hearted Elliots, just as the earthy dwarves are strange company for Princess Snow White. But in both cases refuge is temporary. The dwarves love Snow White, but they cannot protect her for long. Her stepmother causes her to sink into the sleep of death, which would have lasted forever, if the prince had not happened to see her lying in the glass coffin, and, impressed by her beauty, taken her with him, bringing her back to life. Likewise, the only person who can permanently release Anne from the dreary monotony of her life is Frederick Wentworth. When he meets Anne again, eight years after they parted, it is only by accident; but little by little he realizes that he has never stopped loving her, and in his eyes she regains her former youthful beauty. And, of course, his proposal gives Anne a new life after eight years of dull misery.

Let me conclude. I have spoken about how *Into the Woods* brings a dimension of realism into well-known fairy tales. Its message is clear. As the characters themselves state in the second act, there is no such thing as "they lived happily ever after" for any one of us. Time and again we'll decide to go into the mysterious woods, which in the musical symbolize the world, to look for something or else. If we are lucky, we might find it, but our happiness will at best be precarious, at the mercy of time and chance.

Jane Austen's novels are not adaptations of fairy tales; they are completely realistic. Its heroines are ordinary middle class English girls of the early 19th century. They go on journeys, but there is nothing mysterious or symbolic about the places they visit, even when they are fictitious. Yet Austen's message is closer to the message of fairy tales than the message of *Into the Woods*, for, despite her unbending realism, she does believe in "happily ever after." Austen is no sentimentalist, but she is confident that, with wisdom and some luck, true happiness can be achieved. The last words of *Emma*, her greatest novel, are "the perfect happiness of the union," referring to the marriage of her heroine to the man who will not disappoint her expectations. All her heroines achieve that sort of happiness, even if it evaded Austen herself. No doubt this cautious optimism is one of the many reasons why Austen's novels are so popular.