

2

THE CINDERELLA STORY IN ANTIQUITY

Cinderella can fairly be claimed as the best known of fairytales in modern times, as well as the first tale to be subjected to attempts at the 'exhaustive' collecting of its variants. It was long assumed that the story, or rather group of stories, did not date much further back than the early seventeenth century, when a recognisable form of it appeared as Basile's *La Gatta Cenerentola*.¹ But from time to time throughout this century discoveries have been made to show that the tale must be much older, and few who have seriously examined the evidence would be tempted to measure the tale as a whole by the yardstick of its most famous example, the version published by Charles Perrault in 1697.² It can now be seen that a number of the Perrault features such as glass slipper, pumpkin coach, clock striking midnight, and others, are not essential, or even necessarily characteristic, of the orally transmitted story. Taken as a whole, the hundreds of versions known present the heroine under a variety of names: Cinderella, Ashiepatle and Popelutschka are the most obvious European variations; sometimes she has sisters (often less beautiful, rather than ugly), sometimes not; sometimes she has a fairy godmother helper, sometimes a helpful animal or plant, sometimes even a fairy godfather, or some combination of such forces. The basic framework for the story printed by Aarne-Thompson can be slightly abridged as follows:³

I The persecuted heroine

1. The heroine is abused by her stepmother and stepsisters; she stays on the hearth and ashes; and
2. is dressed in rough clothing—cap of rushes, wooden cloak, etc.
3. She flees in disguise from her father who wants to marry her; or
4. is to be killed by a servant.

II Magic help

While she is acting as servant (at home or among strangers) she is advised, provided for, and fed

1. by her dead mother; or
2. by a tree on the mother's grave; or
3. by a supernatural being, or
4. by birds; or
5. by a goat, a sheep, or a cow.
6. When the goat (or other helpful animal) is killed, there springs up from her remains a magic tree.

III Meeting the prince

1. She dances in beautiful clothing several times with a prince who seeks in vain to keep her, or she is seen by him in church;
2. she gives hints of the abuse she has endured as a servant girl; or
3. she is seen in beautiful clothing in her room or in the church.

IV Proof of identity

1. She is discovered through the slipper test; or
2. through a ring which she throws into the prince's drink or bakes in his bread.
3. She alone is able to pluck the apple desired by the prince.

V Marriage with the prince

All readers will recognise that this framework will describe a recognisable Cinderella—or rather a large number of combinations of Cinderella variants. In fact, the possibilities should be extended quite

considerably; the scheme does not take into account variants where the prince never sees the heroine at all before the token test, but only receives a recognition token. This will tend to happen in social situations where strict segregation between the sexes is practised, and so can be expected as a matter of course in some oriental variants. Nor does the scheme recognise situations where the heroine is seen naked rather than clothed, a mainly southern and eastern trait for obvious reasons—it is only likely where naked bathing outdoors is easily feasible. Nor does it take account of such obvious corollaries as the possible punishment of the rival sisters at or after the marriage of Cinderella. But on the whole the headings present a reasonable test of what will constitute a version of the tale.

There are a number of easily distinguishable sub-types of the overall outline. The two latest of the three major analysts, Rooth⁴ and Aarne-Thompson, distinguish no fewer than five major varieties in the transmission of the story. There is what we usually see as the most ‘proper’ version, Cinderella itself, characterised by the motifs of hearth cat, father’s mission, treasure tree, shoe test (Basile, Grimm). This requires rival sisters and the inevitable cinders, and entails a preliminary motif (*not* in Perrault) of the father bringing presents to the girls and so establishing their contrasting attitudes of goodness and greed. A considerably more grotesque variant is offered by the Grimms’ ‘One-eye, two-eyes, three-eyes’: here the characteristic motif is that the sisters spy on the heroine and helpful animal; it usually entails the motifs of a tree, often raised from the bones of the helpful animal, and a fruit-picking test (AT Type 511).⁵ Both these variants can be combined to form a third, often including an underground test by a supernatural agent (this merges into Aarne-Thompson Type 480, *The Kind and Unkind Girls*).

Two rather different forms are set clearly apart from the standard Cinderella complex: in the *Cap-O’-Rushes* sub-type we expect an incest motif, with the incestuous father required to provide his daughter with some sort of sun, moon and star dress or dresses, and some sort of demeaning camouflage for the heroine to hide the dresses, performing a similar function to the more familiar ashes. Dresses of animal pelts, wood or even lice are found. There are regularly no sisters, and a lovesick prince with the token placed in his food by the heroine employed as a kitchen maid (AT Type 510B)⁶. And finally, in a male Cinderella type, ‘The Little Ox’, the hero is saved by a self-sacrificing ox or bull and fed by an ‘ear cornucopia’ or similar device, often with the secondary motif of a journey through woods of gold, silver and jewels, before the ‘normal’ events of recognition and marriage take place (AT Type 511A). It is an easy matter to go through the summaries of Marian Cox of over 300 versions assigning each one at least approximately to one of these types;⁷ though not unexpectedly in a sample of this size, a number of versions, especially literary ones, seem to defy easy or absolute classification.

Nor, it must be stressed, is the evidence static. As new examples are identified, type indexing requires more or less continual expansion and modification, and it is useful to suggest some brief criteria. We should be prepared to admit material as belonging to the cycle if it is closely related to examples in the collections of Rooth or Cox, or if it contains one or more names related to Aschenputtel, Cinderella, Maria Wood, or the like. Where major deviations occur, a tale is not necessarily excluded, but we do have to attempt to explain the oddity; often it may simply be the result of conflation or confusion, but just as readily it may be the result of different social or literary convention, or a different view of family relationships. It would not be particularly disqualifying if a Muslim version of Cinderella were to entail the prince’s marriage to a second wife, for example. It is also possible to accept new Cinderellas if they appear to contain a compelling juxtaposition of elements whose conjunction is not otherwise associated in standard folktale repertoire: if a tale were to contain a pumpkin coach and a glass slipper, neither of which is obligatory or even characteristic of the mainstream of Cinderellas but which are not associated with such tales as Rumpelstiltskin, Snow White, or the Assman—or indeed any other tale generally known except Cinderella—then it is once more wise to look carefully to see if the tales containing them belong to one of the basic patterns for the story after all.

Earlier versions

Relatively recently two versions have been identified which place the origins of the tale well outside the boundaries of Renaissance Europe: these are a Chinese version from the ninth century AD,⁸ and a much less well-publicised Sanskrit version underlying Kalidasa’s drama *Sakuntala*, of the fifth century AD,⁹ and also known as early as an allusion in the *Mahabharata* of some two centuries earlier. The known age of the tale,

then, has been advancing steadily to late antiquity, though not in Europe. It is time to look at classical versions in their own right.

A classical Cinderella I: Rhodopis

Attempts to place any version of the tale in Classical Antiquity have been limited, incidental and neither widespread nor complete. Anna Rooth made a fugitive suggestion of an element of the tale in the *Argonautica* legend and the story of Io,¹⁰ but otherwise the only contender has been a reference in the Greek geographer Strabo (first century BC/AD) to a tale about a girl called Rhodopis:

They tell the fabulous story (mytheuosi) that while she was bathing, an eagle seized one of her shoes from her maid and brought it to Memphis, and while the king was dispensing justice in the open air, the eagle arrived over his head and threw the shoe into his lap. The king was aroused by the rythmos of the sandal and the strangeness of the event, and sent all around the country in search of the woman who wore it. When she was found in Naucratis she was brought up country to Memphis and became the king's wife.¹¹

This example has no problem in supplying three of the five essential steps as it stands: Rhodopis has the help of an animal, which might also be classed as 'supernatural intervention'; the operation of the slipper test motif could not be clearer, nor could 'marriage to the prince'. On the other hand, there are no rivals and no actual sight of the bride before the slipper test, neither omission unexampled within the modern tale tradition, but there seems to have been no attempt to look at any further details that might be available on Rhodopis herself. These can be found in a long notice on the very same girl in Herodotus (2.134f.) some five centuries before Strabo:

(Rhodopis) came from Thrace, and she was a slave of Iadmon son of Hephaestopolis, a man from Samos; she was a fellow slave of Aesop the writer of fable... (she) arrived in Egypt, brought by Xantheus of Samos, and when she got there she was freed for a large sum by Charaxus of Mytilene, son of Scamandronymus, brother of Sappho the lyric poet. Having obtained her freedom, she actually stayed in Egypt and became so popular with lovers that she obtained a huge fortune for a person in her profession... she wanted to leave a memorial of herself in Greece by doing something that no one else should have thought of and putting it in a temple, and laying it up at Delphi as her memorial. So having made a great many iron roasting-spits for oxen for a tenth part of her wealth, she sent them to Delphi.

This Rhodopis is clearly the same one as was in due course to be mentioned by Strabo. The latter noted that Charaxus was in love with her, and both writers comment on the fact that she is claimed to have built one of the pyramids, a claim Herodotus emphatically rejects and Strabo accepts without discussion. Indeed, that is the only reason why either writer sees fit to mention her at all. Herodotus provides all the essential information except for the marriage to the Pharaoh and the identification by means of the slipper.

Several details in Herodotus' account point to a legendary quality. It is not a matter of historical confidence that she was a slave in the same household as Aesop, a figure whose own existence is either legendary or would claim legendary elements. Moreover Sappho writes of a girl called Doricha, not Rhodopis, and other writers disagree as to whether the two were one and the same character. Sayce long ago noted that 'Hephaestopolis' ('Firegodville') is an odd name for the *father* of her owner—a place name rather than a personal name. What has not been done is to see what the story looks like once Herodotus' and Strabo's testimonia are put together as information available about one and the same Rhodopis by Strabo's time:

A girl called Rhodopis was a slave in the household of Iadmon son of Hephaestopolis ('Firegodville') in Samos. She was taken to Egypt by Xantheus ('Goldman') where she was given her freedom by Charaxus ('Seabream'/'Vinepole') of Mytilene. There she worked as a courtesan and while she was bathing in Naucratis an eagle carried her shoe to the Pharaoh; after finding it was hers by testing it on all the women in the country, he married her. As a thank-offering she gifted a collection of iron ox-roasting spits to Delphi.

We have already noted the Cinderella element in Strabo. Do Herodotus' details amplify this aspect of the

story? They tell us that she was a slave, and concurrently and/or subsequently a courtesan. This indicates a 'persecuted heroine' — a slave status and a despised profession. But the names add something as well. Cinderellas in the Balkans often have the heroine allege on her three encounters with the prince that she comes from places connected with the hearth ('Tongstown', 'Ashborough', 'Scuttleforth', or the like). Here we have a connection with 'firegodville', a place name with similar associations.¹²

Still more cogently, the offerings at Delphi are of a kind one makes when able to give up a trade or profession: gladiators dedicate their swords, sailors their oars, and so on. Someone who dedicates ox spits would reasonably be implying service in the hearth as a kitchen maid. The name Charaxus is significant for a Cinderella tale: it is the name for a fish, the sea-bream, and for a vine pole (we are also told by Strabo that he was a wine-importer). This gives her some more helpers: we have noted that trees and fish, separately or in combination, help Cinderella, or that she may be expected to deal with a killed ox. All these elements are hinted at here. The story may have the 'feel' of historical anecdote, but the characters have names reminiscent of the talking trees and animals that routinely advance the fairytale heroine's career. Moreover, the offering, attributed with perhaps selfish motives by Herodotus, might be seen as an act of piety: the great Egyptian queen as she now is thanks the Greek god and shows herself not unmindful of her rags-to-riches past. The implication of combining the testimonies of Herodotus and Strabo on the same heroine is that at least by the latter's time of writing in the first century BC/AD the wherewithal for a 'full' Cinderella based on a quasi-historical Rhodopis was clearly available. It might of course have been available long before: Herodotus might have rejected information about the slipper test and the eagle as fanciful, if indeed he knew it; he certainly has an extensive repertoire of folktales told almost incidentally for their own sake.¹³

Here, then, we have a recognisable overlap of stories concerning the same girl, both of which are consistent with a basic pattern of Cinderella. We should perhaps be asking ourselves already why it is that the Strabo version is so much more readily recognisable than that of Herodotus. Whatever our answer, Rhodopis is our most readily identifiable classical Cinderella.

Aspasia of Phocaea: an early literary Cinderella in Aelian

Rhodopis is not by any means the only ancient candidate for the fairytale princess in the Graeco-Roman world. The name of the heroine is no more standardised in antiquity than in the modern tale. Aelian's story from the second/third century AD about Aspasia of Phocaea presents an important missing link between fairytale and Romance. It is told as an extended moral exemplum in the *Varia Historia* (12.1), a miscellany of curious facts, diverting anecdotes, and the like: in the handling of individual details the author could scarcely make it clearer that this is a story of virtue and modesty rewarded. But some almost incidental characteristics point towards a classification of the story as a Cinderella. A summary will best bring out the Cinderella characteristics:

Aspasia of Phocaea loses her mother at birth and her father brings her up in poverty. She dreams however that she will be with a noble man. But she is disfigured by a growth on her face. In a dream a dove appears and changes into a woman; Aspasia is instructed to treat the growth with Aphrodite's roses; her beauty returns. She is now compelled to attend at a banquet of Cyrus the Younger with three other girls. The others are dressed and behave as courtesans; Aspasia modestly repels the prince's advances and so attracts him all the more; he rejects the others and forms an exclusive and two-sided relationship with her. She rewards Aphrodite with a golden statue and a jewelled dove, and looks after her father; when Cyrus the Younger offers her a precious necklace fit for a queen, she proves her nobility by offering it to his mother instead. In a short sequel she is taken over by Artaxerxes after Cyrus' own death; she gratifies him by wearing the eunuch Timagenes' clothes over her own black mourning garb.

The relationships and dynamics of this story bring it close to Cinderella tradition even when details and outcomes are opposite. The Aphrodite figure and the dove discharge the function of fairy godmother and helpful animal respectively. The heroine's disfigurement is not due to poverty or to malice from sisters, but it is solved by a supernatural helper and her own obedience to instructions. This time, in contrast to the case of Rhodopis, we do actually have something resembling a ball, insofar as the girl is presented at what is clearly designed as a formal (and competitive) social occasion at court. She does not receive clothes or jewellery

directly from the fairy godmother, but the animal helper-cum-fairy godmother—Aphrodite herself, it appears—is still responsible for the restoration of her superlative natural beauty; she would presumably not have been chosen to appear before Cyrus with her clear disfigurement. What is particularly characteristic of the tale-type is the mixture of beautiful attire and reticence: normally Cinderella goes out of her way to be seen as little as possible in her magically acquired finery, and continually tries to revert to her original humble state, testing the resolve of her suitor and requiring to be loved for herself rather than her finery. In this version, this reticence is carried so far that at the point where we expect the token test, the heroine actually refuses to put on the precious necklace that serves the function of a token. This is a stage further, in effect, than the instances where she hides from the test of her own accord as opposed to being hidden by her rivals. Aspasia secures the proof of her beautiful nature and her eligibility for royal favour by *not* wearing the token. In other words, the token test is adapted to a court etiquette where a powerful mother-in-law figure has to be won over. The motif of refusing a token is on occasions found in ‘normal’ Cinderellas: sometimes in cases where Cinderella has been insulted by the prince on some previous occasion, she refuses to accept the slipper—or accept it back (though she usually relents in the end). It should be noted, however, that a number of Cinderellas lack the test altogether: the prince may simply be able to prevent the girl from leaving the ball and able to marry her straight away.

The unusual feature here is that ball and bride tests are in effect conflated. Some Cinderellas have the prince’s overtures rebuffed (running away from the ball is itself often able to be read as such an act); it is unusual, if not unique, to have the sensuous detail provided here of the King fondling the heroine’s breast. A very few examples have the hiding of the prince’s gift instead of a token test. I have found only one other where the competitors are three and not one or two,¹⁴ and it is unusual to have them as simply rivals and not specifically sibling rivals.

The name of the heroine raises a problem: in Greek it means ‘welcomed’, from *aspazein*, but it is close enough to the sequence of names for the modern heroine Aschenputtel, Ashiepatle, and suchlike, normally connected with ashes (and sometimes obscenely so). It may be that an original of the latter in some non-Greek language has been Hellenised into the nearest Greek name available, but further evidence is needed before any conclusion can be drawn.

Once more it is significant to see a complete Cinderella so early, though both the Rhodopis texts and one of the Asenath ones discussed below are actually earlier still. What is more striking is the feel of a developed psychological romance and rags-to-riches fairytale side by side in a story with a specific historical setting. Here is a Cinderella, or a very near approach to one, placed in a specific historical setting and treated as the heroine of a romantic novella. It ought to give the lie to B.E.Perry’s dogmatic assertion that novella could not develop into romance:¹⁵ it would be easy enough to multiply every page by ten by *ecphrasis* and other kinds of expansion.

The relationship between historiography and folktale is also raised: Plutarch clearly regarded the *chreia* at Cyrus’ banquet as having actually taken place, and can pause in more than one strictly historical context to remark on it.¹⁶ But history and folklore are clearly convergent in a ‘bride-show’ tale, and, irrespective of its Aarne-Thompson tale-type, Aelian’s presentation could be argued to have the flavour of fairytale in its own right, and fairytale with seventeenth- to nineteenth-century human values at that. This is a tender and well-told ‘art tale’ of a kind that the lady storytellers of a French court, such as Madame D’Aulnoy or Madame LePrince de Beaumont, would readily have expanded. Here then are the essential ‘movements’ of Aelian’s Aspasia:

Aspasia the daughter of Hermotimus came from Phocaea and was brought up as an orphan; her mother had died in childbirth. Afterwards Aspasia was brought up in poverty, but she was taught modesty and self-control. She had a recurrent dream which offered her the prophecy of good fortune and gave a hint of good luck in the future—that she would live with a fine and noble partner. While she was still a child, she had a growth below her face, just underneath her chin. It was unsightly to look at and distressed father and daughter alike. So her father showed her to a doctor, who undertook to cure her for a fee of three staters. Her father said he did not have the money, and the doctor said that he for his part did not have enough of the medicine. Aspasia naturally was distressed at this and went out to cry. As she put a mirror on her lap and saw herself in it she was very upset. She took nothing to eat

in her misery, but at just the right moment she fell asleep, and as she slept she dreamt that a dove arrived, turned into a woman, and said: 'Never fear, and have done with doctors and drugs alike. But take all Aphrodite's withered garlands of roses, grind them up and put the powder on the growth.' When she heard this the girl did as she was told and the growth disappeared. And once more Aspasia was the most beautiful girl of her time, and had regained her beauty from the most beautiful goddess.

Once Aspasia visited Cyrus son of Darius and Parysatis, the brother of Artaxerxes. She had been reluctant to go and her father had been reluctant to send her, but she went of necessity, as often happens when cities are taken or tyrants or satraps have their way. At any rate it was one of Cyrus' satraps who had brought her to him together with other girls... When she first came to Cyrus, he just happened to have come from dinner, and was on the point of having drinks according to Persian custom—for the Persians, after filling themselves with food, spend a long time in their cups and toasts; they prepare for drinking as [Greeks] do for a wrestling bout. While they were in the midst of the drinking, then, four young Greek girls were brought to Cyrus, including Aspasia, the girl from Phocaea. They were most beautifully turned out. The other three had been groomed by their serving women, who had come with them. Their hair had been done and their faces were made up with face powders and cosmetics. And they had been schooled in how to win Cyrus' attention, and how to flatter him and not turn away if he approached them, and not to be annoyed if he touched them, and to let themselves be kissed—in fact the skills of courtesans and the techniques of women who traffic in their beauty. So each vied with the others to outdo the rest in beauty. But Aspasia did not want to put on an expensive dress, nor did she like the idea of an embroidered wrap; she could not even bring herself to take a bath... But she was beaten into submission, and obeyed her instruction, although it caused her distress to be forced to act the part of a courtesan rather than a modest girl. Now the others arrived and looked directly at Cyrus and smiled and put on a facade of pleasantness. But Aspasia looked down; her face was covered in fiery blushes, her eyes were filled with tears, and she was obviously embarrassed at the whole performance. And when he told the girls to sit beside him, they complied in a docile manner, but she took no account of the order until the satrap took hold of her and forced her to. And when Cyrus touched them and looked over their eyes and cheeks and fingers, the rest allowed him, but she would not; when he so much as touched her with the tip of his finger she gave a yell and told him that if he did so he would be sorry. Cyrus was delighted at this. And when she got up and tried to run off because he had touched her breasts, the son of Darius, contrary to Persian custom, was greatly impressed by her noble behaviour, and said to the trafficker, 'This is the only girl you have brought who is free and unspoilt. The others behave like courtesans, in their looks and even more in their manner'. From this moment Cyrus loved her more than any woman he ever had to do with. And later his love for her deepened, and she loved him in turn; the pair fell so much in love that they were close to equals and did not fall short of a Greek marriage in their harmony and unselfish devotion...

Once a necklace was brought to Cyrus from Thessaly, sent by Scopas the younger; he had obtained the gift from Sicily. The necklace seemed to have been worked with amazing skill and ornament. So everyone Cyrus showed it to was amazed, and delighted beyond measure with his treasure; he at once went to Aspasia in the middle of the day. He took the necklace out of its box and showed it to her, making the remark that this necklace was worthy of a king's mother or daughter. She agreed and he said: 'So I am giving it to you as a present; put it on just as you are and show me how it looks on your neck.' She was not overwhelmed by the gift but gave him a clever and civilised reply: 'And how can I presume to put on a gift worthy of your own mother: rather send this to her, Cyrus; I will show you the beauty of my neck even without it.'

Many moralising asides in the quoted portion, and others outside it, suggest the personality of Aelian himself, both sentimental and Hellenising. The story obviously appealed to him, as he confines most of his

anecdotes in the *Varia Historia* to the scale of a paragraph: this is clearly a ‘luxury version’ on which the author has expended a certain amount of relatively discreet rhetorical presentation. However, there is no doubt that he has not only transmitted the essential details of the story, but the basic moral assumptions as well: modesty, virtue, and simple piety are to be rewarded; forwardness and self-seeking will get a girl nowhere. This is as socially conformist a Cinderella as we are likely to find. It is worth remarking that Aelian also relates an only slightly different version of Strabo’s Cinderella story in the next book of the *Varia Historia* (13.33); he is the only ancient author we know to have included two Cinderella candidates in a single work.

Two Jewish Cinderellas: the tale of Asenath

A number of further Cinderellas can be noted where the materials configure clearly enough to one Cinderella or another. Most important, to my mind, in the Graeco-Roman area are two complementary Cinderellas which emerge around the character of the biblical Asenath, wife of Joseph. One of these is Hellenistic and has been recognised for nearly three decades as related to the ancient novel;¹⁷ the other has had a more fugitive existence, considerably later, in medieval rabbinical commentary.¹⁸ The earlier has the ashes, the sighting of the bride at a home/church, the supernatural helper, and the marriage (but, again, a rather unusual variant of the bride test, without an actual slipper); the other has decidedly more persecution and death threat, an animal helper similar to that in Strabo’s example, and a ring form of the token test. The two have different strategies for explaining how the Hebrew Joseph can marry the Egyptian Asenath: in the first, she has to convert to Judaism; in the second, she is shown to have been Joseph’s niece and so a Hebrew all along. The token test, as rarely, is to establish parentage and marital eligibility rather than identity. The two versions can be conveniently placed in synopsis:

[See Table](#)

The importance of these two largely complementary versions of the story of the same girl is this: either can be recognised as a Cinderella-type narrative as it stands. The girl on the left sees and is seen by Joseph from afar; he is now classed as Egyptian royalty, and so plays the role of ‘the prince’; after the sighting she casts off her finery and rolls in the cinders; an angel acts the role of supernatural helper/fairy godmother; she is given a change of name, an important secondary characteristic in the folktale versions, but the token test is replaced by a different act concerning the foot. We should be prepared to ask why so characteristic a motif should be different. The reason is perhaps not far to seek. The Cinderella story has been cast here as a Jewish religious tale with Asenath required to renounce idolatry and become a Jew. This motif provides the tension of separation between the couple (apart from the fact also that they have not been close enough together for the normal conditions of communicating a token to be met), and contemporary Jewish practice would have expected the wife to wash the husband’s feet, not the husband the wife’s.

The second ‘composite’ version draws on a much fuller range of traditions about Asenath: as merely the foster child of Pentephres/Potiphar she is given a connection already with the family of Joseph (as daughter of his sister Dinah she is in fact his niece); this means that Joseph can thus be made once more not to marry a non-Jew by another route. Here we have the persecuted heroine and one of the two standard tokens, a ring which is among the *gnorismata* (recognition tokens) given to the unborn child when her mother was driven into the desert. But we also see a use of the unusual motif used in Strabo’s version of the Rhodopis story. Not just the sandal is transported to the Pharaoh by an eagle, the baby and her token are transported to Egypt en bloc by this same bird.¹⁹ When the two traditions are conflated, the Asenath-Cinderella complex looks like this:

Asenath is exposed with her mother Dinah in the desert after the latter was raped. She was carried by an eagle to the altar of the priest of On. She grows up as a beautiful girl, outshining her seven handmaidens. Her stepmother falls in love with Joseph and so acts as a rival. She sees Joseph from her room, which is also a shrine, and is herself seen in beautiful clothes, but having previously rejected him she covers her face with cinders and lies in ashes for seven days. However, a man from heaven persuades her to dress in bridal garments. She throws her ring with Hebrew characters inscribed on it to Joseph; she is his long-lost niece

and can marry him, which she does; she also undertakes to wash his feet, as his future bride.
20

Here, then, we have a girl who acquires distinctive characteristics of Cinderella, complete with real cinders, not just the implied ones in the tale of Rhodopis. We also have another detail. In the popular version Joseph acquires a talisman which at one moment assumes the form of a golden branch.²¹ This is often a part of *male* Cinderella stories, where the hero sometimes travels through a wood with trees of bronze, silver and gold, off all of which he takes a twig.²² We also have Joseph, traditionally a persecuted hero in his own right, here at one point despised as simply the son of a shepherd and, of course, initially a slave of Pharaoh. In the popular version he has *gnorismata* of his own. Although the emphasis is always on Asenath, we have at least the hint of a 'double' Cinderella, where the male is himself a 'Cinderello' figure.

It is time, then, to look at the key portion of the first complete Cinderella text to have survived antiquity:

(Joseph and Asenath 10.2) And Asenath was left alone with her handmaids; she was in a listless state and wept till sunset. She neither ate bread nor drank water, and she alone stayed awake when everyone else was asleep. And she opened the door, and went down to the gate and found the doorkeeper asleep with her children. And Asenath quickly took the leather curtain down from the door and filled it with ashes. She brought it back up to her room and put it on the floor. And she closed the door firmly and put the iron latch across, and she wept and wailed aloud... (10.9) And Asenath got up and quietly opened the door and went into her second room, where she had the chests with her clothes, and opened her chest and brought out a black and mournful tunic (this was the one she wore when her firstborn brother died). And Asenath took off her royal attire and put on the black tunic and undid the gold girdle and tied a rope round her waist and put off the headdress and diadem from her head and took the bracelets from her hands... (10.16) And she took sackcloth and put it round her waist and took the ribbon from her hair and sprinkled it with ashes... (10.18) And when she got up early in the morning she was amazed to see that her tears had turned the ashes underneath her to mud. And Asenath fell once more on her face on the ashes till sunset. And she did this for seven days without food or drink. (11–13: In her anguish she prays to God.)

(14) And when Asenath had finished her confession to God she was excited to see the morning star rise from the Eastern sky and when she saw it she rejoiced and said: 'The Lord God has heard my prayer, for this star is the herald and messenger of the great day'. And amazingly the heavens were rent near the morning star and an indescribable light appeared. And Asenath fell on her face on the ashes and a man came out of heaven towards her. And he stood over her head and called her: 'Asenath'. And she said: 'Who is calling me, since my chamber door is shut and the tower is high; and how has he come into my chamber?' And the man called her a second time: 'Asenath, Asenath.' And she said, here I am, sir, tell me who you are. And the man said: I am the commander of the Lord's House and the commander-in-chief of the whole host of the Most High. Stand up and I will talk to you.' And she raised her eyes and looked and there was a man who looked just like Joseph in his dress, his crown and royal sceptre, but his face was like lightning, and his eyes were like the light of the sun, and the hair of his head was like flames of fire and his hands and feet were like molten iron. And Asenath saw him and fell on her face at his feet in great fear and trembling. And the man said to her: 'Take courage, Asenath, and do not be afraid, but stand up and I will speak to you.' And Asenath stood and the man said to her: 'Take off the tunic you have put on, the black one, and the sackcloth from your waist, and shake the cinders from your hair and wash your face with living water. And put on a brand new robe and shining girdle, the double girdle of a virgin. And come again to me and I will tell you the words sent to you.' And Asenath went into her chamber where the chests of clothing were and opened the chest and took off her black robe and took a new resplendent dress and put it on... (15) And she went to the man and when he saw her he said, 'Take the veil from your head, for today you are a holy virgin and your head is like that of a young man.' And she took it from her head, and the man said to her: 'Take courage, Asenath: look, the Lord has given you Joseph for a

husband and you will be his bride. And you will not be called Asenath but City of Refuge'...(15.9) 'And look: I am going to Joseph and I will talk to him about you, and he will come to you tomorrow and will see you and be delighted with you and will be your husband. And listen to me, Asenath, and put on your bridal dress, the ancient robe, the first robe stored in your chamber, and put on all your favourite jewellery, and adorn yourself as a bride and get ready to meet him. For he will come to you tomorrow and see you and be delighted with you.' And when the man had finished speaking to Asenath, she was full of joy and fell at his feet...(19) And a little slave came and said to Asenath: 'Joseph is at the gate of our house.' And Asenath came down with her seven handmaidens to meet him. When he saw her Joseph said to her: 'Come to me, holy virgin, because I have received a message from heaven telling me all about you.' And Joseph stretched out his hands and they had a long embrace, and were revived by each other's breath. (20) And she said to him, 'Come into my house', and she took his right hand and brought him into the house. And Joseph sat down on her father Pentephres' seat, and she brought water to wash his feet, and he said to her: 'Let one of your maidens come and wash my feet.' And Asenath said to him: 'No, sir, for my hands are your hands, and my feet are your feet, and no one else but me shall wash your feet.' And she insisted on washing his feet, and Joseph took her by the right hand and kissed her, and Asenath kissed Joseph's head. (They marry the next day.)

Here we have the necessary sequence of familiar motifs—ashes and general wallowing; a fairy godperson so officious that the cinder-girl has no need to turn up at any ball; and an unusual interpretation of the 'slipper test' situation. The central focus is exactly right: the need for supernatural intervention before the extreme and self-abasing modesty of the girl will cause her to dress in the resplendent attire of the bride, who somehow proves herself to the prospective husband in the face of any opposition. There is just the faintest hint of 'sibling rivals' about the handmaidens: our cinder-girl is not taking any chances with them, and we have already been told that they are seven maids born on the same day as Asenath, and sharing her own private rooms: they are her servants, not her sisters. Overall the piety and simplicity of the narrative is very clearly brought out in the extract (even after Asenath's prayer of confession has been cut). The writer relies heavily on a naive paratactic style, a standard symptom of 'popular' narrative. Taking both these aspects together we might almost describe our text as a 'Sunday School Cinderella' which would not have looked out of place in a Victorian milieu. But a Cinderella it is, and Asenath herself continued to be a Cinderella in its medieval successor.

Some mythological treatments: Pherecydes and the Io myth

Cinderella need not be confined to historical anecdote, novella or romance. We seem to have hints of versions of the fairytale in the received body of Greek myth as well. The first Greek prose writer, Pherecydes of Syrus (sixth century BC), yields fragments of a cosmological narrative about a wedding of Zas (Zeus). We are told that on the third day of this wedding Zas gives his bride Chthonie (underground-girl) a great and beautiful robe, and on it are embroidered earth and ocean and the dwellings of ocean. In relation to the same event we have further reference to 'the winged oak and the embroidered robe on it'. And as the result of the wedding gift of Earth Chthonie now becomes Ge (Earth).²³ M.L. West suspected a close connection between the tree and the recipient of the robe, Chthonie/Ge.²⁴

Some of the most persistent among Cinderella variants will explain much about this tantalising complex of fragments. Many of these heroines spend a prolonged period incarcerated underground; many ask for a clothing of sun, moon and stars, or for some variant combination, including some kind of sea-robe; the request for such attire is usually either answered by a tree, or allied to a request for a tree-robe, which is itself mobile or even winged (normally to effect a flight from a threat of incest). A frequent concomitant of all this is a change of name: a nickname like Aschenputtel or Cinderella will be replaced by a 'true' name—Maria or the like. And the usual end is of course marriage to a prince. It seems to me that the Pherecydes fragments are intelligible within the parameters of Cinderella stories; I know of no other narrative framework (as opposed to cosmological cliché) within which they make sense. We might not have been surprised to find Ge as the

daughter of Zas and flying from him in the winged tree. But this latter object seems at all events to be the 'trousseau-tree' feature that somehow brings about the royal marriage. The description of the robe ties the myth firmly to the Cinderella legend, as does the change of name.

In Pherecydes' narrative, folktale and cosmic allegory seem to converge: we might 'read' it as implying that Earth is no more than underworld till it receives its coating of green earth, sea and sky, justifying its change of name. One notes the significance of change of name in Cinderella: in Basile's seventeenth-century version the Cinderella heroine 'Jujube girl' (Zezolla) can only revert to this her true name Zezolla once she has put on the jewels and clothes supplied by the date tree, when she can discard her mere nickname *Gatta Cenerentola* ('Cat Cinderella'). A combination of several characteristic elements of the cycle seems to have existed, then, in the very first known prose text in Greek.²⁵

Conclusion

The overall consequences of these links are very considerable. They show us that there were versions of Cinderella worked as fairytale and as romance, and perhaps even as myth as well, and that the tale seems well established in fairytale and romance before the end of antiquity, and in myth perhaps a good deal earlier. We shall examine two much larger-scale romantic versions in due course.²⁶ The fact that a Cinderella pattern underlies versions of Rhodopis, Aspasia and Asenath gives the tale as such a strong foundation across a range of genres and cultural contexts at an early stage. Here is a tale whose transmissibility and adaptability are already well attested. But we are not entitled to conclude that these classical versions represent more than a part of the early history of the tale. They can hardly be claimed as its origins. I conclude this initial chapter with two appendixes: a brief pointer to a still earlier mythological setting of the story in our very earliest Near Eastern literature, that of the Mesopotamian civilisation of Sumer. The Sumerian version comes close to the earliest modern European version, that of Basile, in the distinctive detail of the trousseau tree. No such link has to my knowledge been previously noted. Nor, it should immediately be added, can Basile's version be the first post-classical European Cinderella in any case. The second appendix draws attention to a medieval verse version in Marie de France's *lai* of *Le Fresne*. Both these cases should serve as a reminder that the history of this resilient tale is still far from complete.

A Sumerian Cinderella: aspects of the Inanna cycle

We have already seen that there is a good case for arguing that the earliest Greek prose text contained a mythological handling of a Cinderella variant. We should now be prepared to push back the history of the tale still further, to the earliest extant literature of any kind. We have a small but increasing stock of mythological texts from the Mesopotamian civilisation of Sumer. The Sumerians themselves were subsumed into the Babylonian empire, and the Sumerian language itself ceased to be used for copying texts as early as around 1700 BC; the surviving texts stretch backwards through over two millennia.²⁷ The texts that concern us deal with the fortunes of the love-and-sex goddess Inanna and her relationship with her future consort, the shepherd-king Dumuzi.²⁸ The story has not been found so far in any single continuous text, but can be pieced together from a number of separate texts concerning the goddess's prospective marriage. Inanna's Cinderella credentials can be set out most conveniently as follows:

She complains to her father Enki that she is expected to look after the spinning of flax and the management of sheep, while her sisters enjoy more elegant and prestigious occupations.²⁹

But her brother Utu, the sun, undertakes the management of the flax, with a view to helping her marriage.³⁰ She has planted a tree, after her father's ship has been caught in a storm.

She nurtures it carefully, and its trunk provides her marriage bed and domestic objects.³¹

She also receives presents of jewels and clothes from the keeper of a date tree, to provide her wedding trousseau.³²

She meets her shepherd-prince Dumuzi by moonlight and dances with him, but still returns home safely afterwards to her parental home.³³

She is able to celebrate her marriage to him.

Her attributes also include the element of clothing of heaven and earth, comparable to the characteristic sun, moon and star dress usually associated with AT Type 510B.³⁴

The following synopsis shows a sequence of separate but overlapping Inanna texts side by side with Basile's celebrated Neapolitan literary version and a nineteenth century oral version from Palermo:

[See Table](#)

Basile's Cinderella has the distinctive feature that a girl receives jewels from a date tree, a tradition replicated in modern Italian oral tradition (as in Grattula-Baedatula, 'fair date'). This feature has a bearing on the very early history of the tale as it corresponds to a distinctive feature in the Sumerian material—the motif that Inanna seems to be getting jewels from a date-gatherer or from the tree itself. The differences are minimal: our Inanna texts do not cover the whole tale (slipper or ring test is missing, as it is in Grattula-Baedatula). Inanna looks after a huluppu-tree to provide a different set of marriage objects, and the jewelproviding date tree is presented from a fragment of a different text. But in terms of narrative function the two trees are obvious variants on the 'trousseau tree': both provide for Inanna's marriage, at least one of the two as a result of her own efforts. The relationships are close enough to enable us to clarify an obscurity in the Sumerian text by reference to the complete folktale in Basile: Kramer had been unable to construe any context for the apparently jewel-bearing tree on its own.³⁵ Other Sumerian texts clarify the picture still further. One includes Inanna complaining that tasks are necessary before her marriage; her brother Utu completes them for her. This gives us the 'supernatural helper' motif so characteristic of those who help Cinderella herself. A tailpiece to a creation text that is really about Inanna's father Enki provides the first evidence that Inanna has rival sisters with much more privileged occupations—although they are not much in evidence in the classical texts we have noted, the 'ugly sisters' have been there since as near the beginning as we can go.

An unnoticed Old French Cinderella: Le Fresne (Ash-tree girl)

The *lai* entitled *Le Fresne* in Marie de France (twelfth/thirteenth century AD) purports to be a Breton tale and represents an important signpost in the European history of Cinderella. The girl is exposed in infancy by a mother of twins to avoid the accusation of illegitimacy. She has a brocade and a ring as tokens, and is left in an ash tree beside a nunnery, to be discovered by the porter and suckled by his widowed nursing daughter. She lives at the nunnery till a distinguished nobleman sees her when she is grown to womanhood and becomes her lover. Forced in due course to marry, he has to put away his mistress and wed a well-born lady. Fresne accepts this and is in the chamber at the wedding night as a handmaid. She uses her own brocade to cover the bed; the mother recognises it, and she herself can now marry the nobleman. The sister is married to a rich man. We can set out the Cinderella features of the story as follows:

- I Persecuted heroine: she is threatened with death and in humble circumstances.
- II Supernatural help: the ash-tree itself acts as shelter; the abbess allows her to be brought up as her own niece.
- III The hero sees her 'at a church' (no repeated pattern of balls, but the lord gives endowments to the abbey as a pretext for his visits).
- IV Ring and brocade as token; competition with sibling rival (hazel/ash); cruel mother does not want the hero to marry his mistress.
- V Token recognition and marriage to hero.

The significance of this version is not just that it is the earliest West European example to survive in the vernacular, but it also shows adjustments to the world of romance rather than folktale. It also has a good many affinities with both *Sakuntala* and *Daphnis and Chloe*:³⁶ the form of token test is not to find the heroine's identity, but to determine that her parentage is 'correct' for marriage; and the trappings of courtly medieval society are as distinctive as the seventeenth-century trappings of Perrault. We should note the connection with ash; this is not the ash of the fireplace, but the ash *tree*; the two are, however, liable to

confusion throughout Germanically-related languages and in that context a confusion may have arisen. We should note that one genealogy of the Greek Io gives her an ancestor Melie ('Ash Tree'); this should serve to strengthen her own Cinderella credentials in turn.

We have seen, then, that the Cinderella story existed in a more or less recognisable form in antiquity, and so at least one fairytale has survived almost unnoticed. In several cases we have had to join different versions or facets of the story, both in combining Strabo and Herodotus on Rhodopis, the Sumerian texts on Inanna, and the medieval tradition of *Joseph and Asenath*, but in the Hellenistic version of *Joseph and Asenath* and Aelian's story of Aspasia we have complete texts. Neither, as it happens, uses the slipper test so clear in Strabo, but both have substitutes which fulfil the criteria for a different kind of 'bride show'. Fairy godpersons vary through the texts from Aphrodite herself in Aelian to an angel in *Joseph and Asenath*, or a divine brother, the son-god Utu, in a Sumerian text. The close association with trees is present as early as the trousseau date tree or Io's ancestor Melie.³⁷ The connection with hearth or ashes occurs in *Joseph and Asenath* and more obliquely in Herodotus, through the roasting spit and the name Hephaestopolis. From having half a Cinderella sporadically acknowledged in Strabo, we have been able to point to two complete classical Cinderellas, two newly recognised medieval versions, and substantial suspicion of analogues in three classical myths, not to mention the Sumerian fragments.

Even if we had only this one story, we have a strong confirmation, as we had long ago in the first Chinese Cinderella Yeh-Hsien, that fairytales seem at least capable of surviving—for the most part doubtless submerged in oral tradition—over very long periods. But we must now ask: if Cinderella could have survived in this way, what of Snow White and the rest?

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