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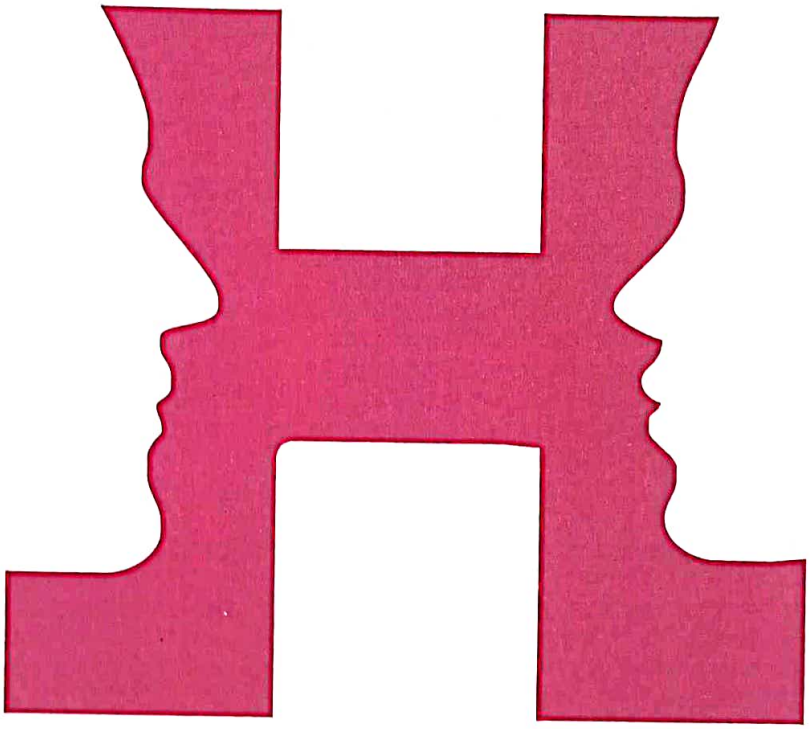

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CONTENTS

23

Folk Literature: Versions of Cinderella

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Cinderella or **"The Little Glass Slipper"** is a folk tale with thousands of variants throughout the world. The protagonist is a young woman living in forsaken circumstances that are suddenly changed to remarkable fortune, with her ascension to the throne via marriage. The story of Rhodopis, recounted by the Greek geographer Strabo sometime between around 7 BC and AD 23, about a Greek slave girl who marries the king of Egypt, is usually considered to be the earliest known variant of the Cinderella story.

The first literary European version of the story was published in Italy by Giambattista Basile in 1634; the version that is now most widely known in the English-speaking world was published in French by Charles Perrault in Histoires ou contes other version was later published by the Brothers Grimm in their folk tale collection Grimms'Fairy Tales in 1812.

Although the story's title and main character's name change in different languages, in English-language folklore Cinderella is an archetypal name. The word Cinderella has, by analogy, come to mean one whose attributes were unrecognized: one who unexpectedly achieves recognition or success after a period of obscurity and neglect. The still-popular story of Cinderella continues to influence popular culture internationally, lending plot elements, allusions, and tropes to a wide variety of media.

The oldest known oral version of the Cinderella story is the ancient Greek story of Rhodopis, a Greek courtesan living in the colony of Naucratis in Egypt, whose name means "Rosy-Cheeks". The story is first recorded by the Greek geographer Strabo in his Geographica (book 17, 33): "When she was bathing, an eagle snatched one of her sandals from her maid and carried it to Memphis; and while the king was administering justice in the open air, the eagle, when it arrived above his head, flung the sandal into his lap; and the king, stirred both by the beautiful shape of the sandal and by the strangeness of the occurrence, sent men in all directions into the country in quest of the woman who wore the sandal; and when she was found in the city of Naucratis, she was brought up to Memphis, and became the wife of the king."

The same story is also later reported by theRoman orator Aelian (c. 175–c. 235) in his *Miscellaneous History*, which was written entirely in Greek. Aelian's story closely resembles the story told by Strabo, but adds that the name of the pharaoh in question was Psammetichus. Aelian's account indicates that the story of Rhodopis remained popular throughout antiquity.

Herodotus, some five centuries before Strabo, records a popular legend about a possibly related courtesan named Rhodopis in his Histories, claiming that she came from Thrace, was the slave of Iadmon of Samos and a fellow-slave of the story-teller Aesop, was taken to Egypt in the time of Pharaoh Amasis, and freed there for a large sum by Charaxus of Mytilene, brother of Sappho the lyric poet.

The resemblance of the shoe-testing of Rhodopis with Cinderella's slipper has already been noted in the 19th century, by Edgar Taylor and Reverend Sabine Baring-Gould.

Aspasia of Phocae - A second predecessor for the Cinderella character, hailing from late Antiquity, may be Aspasia of Phocaea. Her story is told in Aelian's Varia Storia orphaned in early childhood and raised by her father, Aspasia, despite living in poverty, has dreamt of meeting a noble man. As she dozes off, the girl has a vision of a dove transforming into a woman, who instructs her on how to remove a physical imperfection and restore her own beauty. In another episode, she and other courtesans are made to attend a feast hosted by Persian regent Cyrus the Younger. During the banquet, the Persian King sets his sights on Aspasia herself and ignores the other women.

Le Fresne - *Illustration of Marie de France, the author of* Le Fresne, *from a medieval illuminated manuscript*

The twelfth-century ADLai of Le Fresne ("The Ash-Tree Girl"), retold by Marie de France, is a variant of the "Cinderella" story in which a wealthy noblewoman abandons her infant daughter at the base of an ash tree outside a nunnery with a ring and brocade as tokens of her identity because she is one of twin sisters the mother fears that she will be accused of infidelity (according to popular belief, twins were evidence of two different fathers). The infant is discovered by the porter, who names her *Fresne*, meaning "Ash Tree", and she is raised by the nuns. After she has attained maturity, a young nobleman sees her and becomes her lover. The nobleman, however, is forced to marry a woman of noble birth Fresne accepts that she will never marry her beloved but waits in the wedding chamber as a handmaiden. She covers the bed with her own brocade but, unbeknownst to her, her beloved's bride is actually her twin sister, and her mother recognizes the brocade as the same one she had given to the daughter she had abandoned so many years before. Fresne's true parentage is revealed and, as a result of her noble birth, she is allowed to marry her beloved, while her twin sister is married to a different nobleman.

Non-European versions -

One Thousand and One Nights -

Several different variants of the story appear in the medieval One Thousand & One Night, also known as the *Arabian Nights*, including "The Second Shaykh's Story", "The Eldest Lady's Tale" and "Abdallah ibn Fadil and His Brothers", all dealing with the theme of a younger sibling harassed by two jealous elders. In some of these, the

siblings are female, while in others, they are male. One of the tales, "Judar and His Brethren", departs from the happy endings of previous variants and reworks the plot to give it a tragic ending instead, with the younger brother being poisoned by his elder brothers.

International Versions - *Tam and Cam*

The story of Tam and Cam, from Vietnam, is similar to the Chinese version. The heroine Tấm also had a fish that was killed by the stepmother and the half-sister, and its bones also give her clothes. Later after marrying the king, Tấm was killed by her stepmother and sister, and reincarnated several times in form of a bird, a loom and a "gold apple". She finally reunited with the king and lived happily ever after.

Other Asian versions - *There exists a Cambodian version (called "Khmer" by the collectors) with the name Néang Kantoc. Its collectors compared it to the Vietnamese story of* Tam and Cam

Another version was collected from the Cham people of Southeast Asia, with the name *La Sandale d'Or* ("The Golden Sandal") or *Conte de demoiselles Hulek et Kjong* ("The tale of the ladies Hulek and Kjong").

20th century folktale collector Kenichi Mizusawa published an analysis of Japanese variants of Cinderella, separating them into two types: "Nukabuku, Komebuku" (about rival step-sisters) and "Ubagawa" (about the heroine's disguise).

Italian author Giambattista Basile wrote the first literary version of the story.

The first European version written in prose was published in Naples, Italy, by Giambattista Basile, in his Pentamerone (1634). The story itself was set in the Kingdom of Naples, at that time the most important political and cultural center of Southern Italy and among the most influential capitals in Europe, and written in the Neapolitan dialect. It was later retold, along with other Basile tales, by Charles Perrault in Histories ou contes du temps (1697), and by the Brothers Grimm in their folk tale collection Grimmsfairy Tales (1812).

The name "Cenerentola" comes from the Italian word "cenere" (ash, cinder). It has to do with the fact that servants and scullions were usually soiled with ash at that time, because of their cleaning work and also because they had to live in cold basements so they usually tried to get warm by sitting close to the fireplace.

Cenerentola, by Basile - Giambattista Basile, an Italian soldier and government official, assembled a set of oral folk tales into a written collection titled *Lo cunto de li cunti* (The Story of Stories), or Pentamerone. It included the tale of Cenerentola, which features a wicked stepmother and evil stepsisters, magical transformations, a missing slipper, and a hunt by a monarch for the owner of the slipper. It was published posthumously in 1634.

Cendrillon ou la petite pantoufle de verre, by Perrault - One of the most popular versions of Cinderella was written in French by Charles Perrault in 1697, under the name *Cendrillon ou la petite pantoufle de verre.* The popularity of his tale was due to his additions to the story, including the pumpkin, the fairy-godmother and the introduction of "glass" slippers.

In many particulars of form and substance there will be found great variations in the ways folk literature is manifested. The interests of people in one culture may differ profoundly from those of people in another. One group may enjoy singing folk songs, another listening to romantic folktales, and a neighbouring group may even be concerned only with legends and traditions. This difference is often geographic, so that the student of folk literature in the Pacific Islands who may later investigate a Central African tribe will find a completely different emphasis in the two areas. These differences may well depend upon the varieties of religious concepts held by the group or its natural environment, whether islands or jungle or cultivated farm lands, or its stability or mobility. These characteristics are likely to become especially deep-seated in groups that have been settled in one place over a long period of history. Frequently they may correspond to national frontiers, but more often they are aspects of the general culture of an area and may well be quite independent of political or linguistic boundaries.

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