

**Telling the Humble Truth**  
**The Subversion of Female Rivalry in A Feminist Rewriting of *Cinderella***

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## Abstract

There is a long history of feminist authors rewriting stories. The goals of these rewritings can vary, but they are often concerned with bringing the female perspective into focus where it has been left out. *All The Ever Afters* by Danielle Teller (2018) is one such rewriting; it tells the story of *Cinderella* from her stepmother's perspective; what she calls the "humble truth" (Teller 2018, 2). In her rewriting, Teller subverts the rivalry narrative present in older versions of the fairy tale. Both the version of *Cinderella* by the brothers Grimm and the one by Charles Perrault depict the stepmother as an evil, jealous, proud villain without motivations beyond her jealousy of Cinderella, and Cinderella's stepsisters as mean, self-obsessed creatures that do everything in their power to torment their stepsister. In *All The Ever Afters*, however, these characters are provided with humanity and motivations, and their relationship towards the Cinderella character is made more complex. Instead of giving the stepfamily all the power, the Cinderella character is the one with the higher status, which allows her agency. Whereas the fairy tales clearly draw a line between the good and the evil characters, *All The Ever Afters* blurs this line by showing the differences in personality between the characters without condemning one and praising the other. The first-person narrative perspective of the stepmother allows the reader to see her as a human being, and understand her actions. Through the changes Teller made from the fairy tales, the rivalry between Cinderella and her stepfamily is subverted; showing that while there are difficulties for a stepmother and her stepdaughter to have a good relationship, they can still love and support each other. By subverting the rivalry, this story does what Adrienne Rich (1972) states rewritings should do: challenge the power of traditional narratives, in this case about relationships between women.

## Introduction

Throughout literature, it has often been the case that two women appearing in the same novel are positioned as rivals. In her essay on women and literature, *A Room of One's Own*, Virginia Woolf (1929) attributes this to the fact that most literature until the twentieth century had been written by men. Therefore, women in these stories were only seen in their relationship to men, which made relationships between women in literature too simple. Often, the only two available qualifications for these women were “heavenly goodness and hellish depravity,” based on whether a male character was currently enchanted or disenchanted with them (Woolf [1929] 2014, 60). Many stories, therefore, juxtapose these two types of women; it happens in Shakespeare’s *King Lear*, in *Jane Eyre* by Charlotte Brontë, in films like *Mean Girls* (2004), and in fairy tales such as *Snow White*, *Frau Holle*, and *Cinderella*.

Stories like these have been scrutinised by feminist authors, and sometimes even rewritten. Some, such as *Jane Eyre*, were written from the perspective of the ‘other woman’, as in *Wide Sargasso Sea* by Jean Rhys. Others, for example *King Lear*, were rewritten to explore motivations of the women previously branded as evil – *A Thousand Acres* by Jane Smiley exemplifies this. The novel *All The Ever Afters (ATEA)*, by Danielle Teller, tells Cinderella’s story from the stepmother’s perspective. *Cinderella* is likely one of the most well-known stories in existence, occurring in many different versions all around the world. Its rivalry between lovely, sweet Cinderella and her proud and mean stepmother has negatively influenced the perception of stepmothers in real life (Williams 2010, 255). Teller’s novel attempts to depict Cinderella’s stepmother not only as a *stepmother*, but also as a mother to her own children, who is trying her best to stay afloat in a world where women have little power and options. In doing this, *All The Ever Afters* has changed the depiction of the rivalry from how it was presented in earlier versions of the story, such as those written by the brothers Grimm and Charles Perrault.

The changes made in *ATEA* can tell us what has changed in our own culture in the perception of rivalry from the times of Perrault and Grimm, since fairy tales have a history of reflecting the ideals of the time in which they are written (Allen 2009, 283). Amanda Allen, in her discussion of post-war rewritings of Cinderella, suggests that these rewritings in the form of novels reflect changed perceptions as well. By looking at a recent rewriting of the story, this thesis will therefore show how rivalry between women is perceived in contemporary Western society. Stories do not just reflect the culture they are written in, they also affect their readers' ideas of what that culture is like (Delany 1983, 2). When people read stories in which there is a constant rivalry between women, they may internalise this. Anthony et al. (2016) did a qualitative research on the reasons for female rivalry in college-age women, and they found that the driving force behind female rivalry appears to be the goal of achieving idealized femininity. This idealized femininity is constructed by comparisons to other women and representations of women, and results in a competition between women, affecting women's sense of identity and self-esteem (Anthony et al. 2016, 321). It is therefore relevant to see whether and how contemporary feminist rewritings handle the female rivalry present in *Cinderella*, and how this reflects today's ideas about interpersonal relationships between women. Since *ATEA* is a feminist rewriting – complicating the relationships between the women, and written from the perspective of the stepmother, which will be further discussed in the theoretical framework – it is interesting to see what has been done with the rivalry between Ella, the Cinderella character, and her stepmother Agnes, as well as between Ella and her stepsisters.

The main question this thesis will therefore seek to answer is: how does *All The Ever Afters* by Danielle Teller subvert the rivalry between Cinderella and her stepfamily, compared to how the rivalry appeared in the versions of Cinderella by Charles Perrault and the Grimm brothers? In order to answer this question, three subquestions have been formulated:

1. How does *ATEA*'s shifting of the power dynamics between the Cinderella character and her stepfamily change the rivalry from the fairy tales?
2. How does the changed perspective of *ATEA* influence the depiction of female rivalry compared to its depiction in the fairy tales?
3. How does the blurring of the fairy tales' line between good and evil affect the relationship between the characters at the end of *ATEA*?

In order to answer these questions, I will carry out a close reading analysis of several episodes in *ATEA* and, through a comparative analysis with the Grimm and Perrault stories, show what was changed and how this affects the portrayal of the rivalry in *ATEA*. Using previously written analyses of other feminist rewritings, I will show in my theoretical framework what I mean with the concept of feminist rewriting, and what kinds of elements a feminist author can change to make her rewriting a specifically feminist work. I will also go into female rivalry, both in literature and in how representations of this cultural narrative in literature affect women's perceptions of themselves and other women in relation to one another. Following a discussion on these topics, the first chapter will discuss the change in the power dynamic, the second the perspective changes, and the third the blurring of the line between good and evil. This thesis will conclude by answering the research question, and discussing options for further research on this topic.

## Theoretical Framework

### *Feminist Rewriting*

My research question contains the concept of feminist rewriting, so a brief outline of what that concept denotes is necessary. The concept of feminist rewriting will, in this thesis, be used as the telling of a story that was already in existence, in this case *Cinderella*, specifically with the intent to provide a different reading of the story with a focus on the female characters. Even though authors use various words to denote this concept – revision, retelling – this thesis will use ‘rewriting’, because this word highlights the written nature of my sources. Feminist essayist and poet Adrienne Rich (1972) wrote about the re-vision of texts that it is used to challenge the power of traditions over the narratives about women (19). These traditions do not just exist in a literary vacuum, they affect real world ideas about women. The traditions that Rich finds are those in which the woman is the muse, the one who is written about, but hardly ever the writer. The problem with these narratives about women is that they were often written by men (Woolf [1929] 2014, 60). As Woolf argues that the fact that women in literature are shown only in relation to men causes their relationships with women to be too simple, feminist works of literature can give relationships between women more complexity. Feminist rewritings, then, can make relationships that were already known through the ‘original’ story more realistic. While women in works by men were often either fully good or fully evil (Woolf, 60), feminist rewritings of these texts can find a more realistic middle ground, not just in their characterisation of women, but also in their portrayal of relationships between women. Joanna Russ wrote that, because women in literature exist only in relation to men, they do not really exist, but they are manifestations of what men want, hate, or fear (Russ 1972, 3, qtd in Aguiar 2001, 4). This has led to women being depicted as fighting each other for a man’s attention, whether it be romantic or otherwise. Feminist rewritings focus on writing realistic women whose attention is not solely focused on men.

*ATEA* is concerned not just with the relationship between the stepfamily and Ella as a relationship between women, but also with the specific relationship of a woman with her stepdaughter. In *Cinderella*, the opposite relationship of girl with her stepmother is put in the centre, giving the stepmother a bad name in cultural narratives. The fact that *ATEA* gives the stepmother character a voice of her own and tells the story from her perspective makes it a relevant and interesting text for analysis.

Susan Ayres (2001) discusses a feminist rewriting of *King Lear*, called *A Thousand Acres* by Jane Smiley, told from the perspective of the Goneril character. Ayres argues that the story is a feminist rewriting because it gives the silenced female perspective a voice (133). Sarah Appleton Aguiar (2001) also expressed this idea in her book on the ‘bitch’ character in literature, stating that rewritings attempt to give voiceless characters a voice and agency, and make female characters more complex (81). This complexity extends to the villains as well; in rewritings from the perspective of the bitch character, motivations for her behaviour are provided, and in that way her humanity is shown (82). Furthermore, Aguiar adds that the aim of an oppositional revision is that “it becomes ‘a narrative rather than *the* narrative’ [...] removing the absolutist authority from the original” (81). This can be seen in the many rewritings of the story of *Cinderella* as well. In Galia Ofek’s (2012) analysis of late nineteenth-century rewritings of *Cinderella*, she shows that feminist rewritings of *Cinderella* challenge the sisterly antagonism in favour of sisterhood; instead of the *Cinderella* character trampling down her sisters, they bond together (30). These rewritings show a different end to the story, and provide a message of sisterhood.

As narratologist Jie Wu points out about Angela Carter’s rewriting of *Little Red Riding Hood*, a feminist rewriting may intend to disrupt the binary distinction between good women and bad women that fairy tales often make. Christy Williams, who has written extensively on fairy tales and their adaptations, finds another type of change in Robert



Coover's feminist rewriting of fairy tales called *Stepmother*; Coover develops Stepmother – the protagonist of the story – as a realistic character, rather than just changing her into a good, virtuous person. Character changes in feminist rewritings may therefore be the result of a more humanised, morally grey character.

Since *ATEA* is written from the perspective of the stepmother and seeks to show the motivations for her actions, making her a complex character instead of a flat villain, the novel can be seen as a feminist rewriting. The fact that the ending of the story does not show one female character trampling down the others for her own benefit lines up with Ofek's idea of a feminist rewriting of *Cinderella*. *ATEA* provides the silenced stepmother with a voice and the authority over her own narrative by telling the story explicitly from a first-person perspective.

### *Female Rivalry*

The term female rivalry will be used in this thesis to denote more than just a one-time conflict between women. Sociologists Amanda Anthony, Sarah Okorie and Lauren Norman (2016) defined it as “the ongoing comparisons and competition in the process of trying to achieve feminine ideals” (318), since rivalry between girls or women is caused by their wish to achieve an idealized version of femininity. The clearest markers for idealized femininity that Anthony et al. found was appearance, which was related to being a successful consumer and attracting a good partner (318). The rivalry between women is born because they perceive a competition about who can be the best. Sianne Ngai (2006) also explores competitiveness in her text about female rivalry in literature “Competitiveness: From *Sula* to *Tyra*”, in which she argues that competitiveness between women is unfeminist (112), since it makes solidarity between women difficult, even when they have the same goals.

In Perrault's version of *Cinderella*, the rivalry between the stepmother and Cinderella is caused by the fact that Cinderella is “of unparalleled goodness and sweetness of temper”

which made the stepsisters appear “the more odious”. The stepmother is afraid that Cinderella’s presence will reduce the appeal of her daughters, causing rivalry. The way in which this and other rivalries that become apparent in the fairy tale are rewritten in *ATEA* shows how relationships between women are viewed at present and how the narrative about women as rivals is changing. Changing the competitiveness between Ella and her stepfamily makes the text a specifically feminist rewriting as well, since it allows the women to pursue their shared goals instead of driving them apart.

Since *ATEA* was written from the perspective of Cinderella’s stepmother, it changes the story and challenges the authority of the older versions. Generally, feminist rewritings take one of two paths with regard to rivalry: they reframe the story in such a way that the rivalry disappears (Ofek), or they keep the rivalry in the story but balance it out by showing the perspective of the “rival” (Ayres, Aguiar). Since feminist rewritings attempt to remove the absolutist authority from the original story by telling the story in a different way, this last strategy may be used to critique the patriarchal systems that the rivalry is rooted in or caused by, such as heterosexual romances.

## Methodology

### *Materials*

The primary texts that will be used are *ATEA* and the two most well-known *Cinderella* versions by Charles Perrault and the brothers Grimm. I have chosen to discuss *ATEA* because it is a recent rewriting of the story, and therefore reflects current ideas about female rivalry, and because of the way it depicts the stepmother.

I find it relevant to not just look at Perrault's text, which is arguably the most influential, since it is also the basis of the 1950 Disney film about Cinderella, but also at the story by the brothers Grimm. There are a few differences between the texts, for example in the behaviour of the stepsisters towards the end. In Grimm's version, they slice off their heel and toe in order to fit into the slipper, which Perrault does not include. This episode, and other episodes from Grimm's story, are referred to in *ATEA*, which makes it interesting to compare the novel to this version as well as that of Perrault. While Perrault forgives the stepsisters, Grimm brutally punishes them. In my analysis, both Grimm and Perrault will be considered early influential versions, and they will not be compared to one another, only to *ATEA*.

Since the original stories were written in languages I am not sufficiently acquainted with, French (Perrault) and German (Grimm) respectively, this thesis will use translations in English for the analysis. Various translations exist, and choosing one eventually had to depend on the contents of the story and the time of the translation. One translation of Grimm's version completely eliminated the final paragraph in which the sisters are punished. Since this is a well-known and – for my analysis – relevant part of the story, I decided to use Margaret Hunt's version, translated in 1884, within thirty years after the seventh edition of Grimm's fairy tales. Since Andrew Lang's version of Perrault's tale was also one of the earliest translations (1889), it would likely contain few errors in translation of the moral and cultural context of the story. It is possible that using another translation of the story might

have yielded slightly different results in analysis. However, the general way that the story has portrayed relationships between women will likely have largely remained the same in any translation. A note on citation: while Margaret Hunt's text containing the Grimm's version of *Cinderella* has page numbers, Andrew Lang's version of Perrault does not. Quotes from this version will therefore be cited only as "(Perrault)", to make clear which version they are from.

### *Analysis*

In order to see the effect of changes that *ATEA* has made, it will be compared to the early stories. During a close reading analysis, attention will be paid to the phrasing around the stepfamily's behaviour to see how their behaviour may be interpreted. Harvard's College Writing Center's page on close reading includes three steps: annotating the text, looking for patterns, repetitions, contradictions and similarities, and asking questions about these patterns (Kain 1998). The researcher is advised to move between these questions, the data gathered through annotation, and the source text. The process of close reading is therefore not a straightforward one. In my close reading, the overarching question that I will ask is how the rivalry is represented. This can be through themes, focalisation, and the development of characters and the rivalry throughout the novel. Themes are abstract ideas which result from the way that the subject of the novel is treated, and they can say something about the message of the novel (Baldick, "theme"). Focalisation is the kind of perspective from which the story is witnessed (Baldick, "focalisation"). In the case of first-person narration, as in *ATEA*, the focaliser and the narrator are the same person. This may cause the narration to be unreliable, due to goals or biases of the speaker (Baldick, "point of view"). However, while both of the fairy tales have omniscient narrators, this does not mean that they do not have a bias.

As this thesis will compare the fairy tales to *ATEA*, it will be a comparative analysis. Comparative analysis is based on explaining the differences and similarities between two or

more cases, according to Christopher Pickvance (2001, 11). Harvard's online writing center page on comparative analyses requires a frame of reference and a ground for comparison. A frame of reference is the element that the comparison is made about; the part that is different between the cases. Having a frame of reference allows for an angle into the material, a way of looking at it. In this thesis, the cases will be discussed based on the way they represent the relationship between the Cinderella character and her stepfamily. The cases that I will compare are all based on the same general story, but Perrault and Grimm tell it in a different time period, with different goals, and from a different perspective than *ATEA*. Looking at *ATEA*, a recent feminist rewriting of the earlier versions, can therefore show how the perception of rivalry between women has changed.

Changes between the earlier versions and *ATEA* will be analysed to see how they have affected the representation and the nature of the rivalry between Ella and her stepfamily. Since *ATEA* is a full-length novel instead of a short fairy tale, it contains more plot and characters. The effects of new (elements of) rivalries on the message of the novel will be considered. I will be looking at the full stories, though the comparative analysis of *ATEA* and the *Cinderella* stories will focus on the part of the story that occurs in all versions, from the moment that the stepmother comes into Cinderella's life up until Cinderella's marriage to the prince.

This analysis will show what changes have been made and how these changes affect the rivalry narrative which *Cinderella* has been telling for a long time. These changes, made in a modern feminist rewriting of the story, can reflect changes in the cultural narrative about relationships between women.

## Chapter One: A Shift in Power

In the rivalry as portrayed in the fairy tales by both Perrault and Grimm the stepfamily has all the power. Cinderella is “forced” to pick her food out of the ashes (Grimm, 124) and does not dare complain to her father, “for his wife governed him entirely” (Perrault). In *ATEA*, Ella is a highborn lady while Agnes starts out as a servant. This chapter will investigate how the change in their power dynamic also changes the rivalry between Ella and her stepfamily. First, the novel will be briefly summarised, after which the changed power dynamics will be analysed. Though the story is interspersed with fragments of Agnes’ life at the palace, the following is a chronological summary of the action.

*ATEA* starts much earlier than the *Cinderella* tales, namely with Agnes’ own mother dying. Agnes then goes to work at Avicford manor because her family cannot afford to feed her. She works in the laundry, which is hard work. One day a messenger from Ellis Abbey, which controls Avicford manor, comes to get a girl from the manor to work at the Abbey. Agnes goes with the messenger, whose name is Fernan, and starts working for the mother of Abbess Elfilda. Fernan slowly courts her, and they begin to have a sexual relationship, which results in Agnes getting pregnant and sent away from the Abbey. She and Fernan go to the village Old Hilgate, where Agnes begins an alehouse and has two daughters, Charlotte and Matilda. When Fernan dies, the alehouse is taken from Agnes, who is subsequently sent back to Avicford manor as a lady’s maid, leaving her daughters to study at the Abbey. Agnes becomes nurse maid to Ella, the newborn daughter at the manor, and goddaughter of Abbess Elfilda. Agnes marries Ella’s father Emont after Ella’s mother dies, causing the angry Abbess to send her daughters away from the Abbey. Shortly after Emont, too, dies, a ball is held. Ella charms Prince Henry so much that he wishes to marry her. Ella takes her stepfamily with her to the court so that they have a place to live, but the court is full of gossip about them and the

way they – supposedly – treated Ella. In the end, Ella provides the three of them with a secluded place at the Abbey, where Ella and her children often visit.

As apparent from the fact that Abbess Elfilda, one of the most powerful women in the novel's world, is Ella's godmother, and she is highborn, Ella has much more power than Cinderella, which changes the nature of the conflicts in the story from outright rivalry to familial conflicts. Unlike in the fairy tales, her father Emont also consistently takes Ella's side when she has a disagreement with Agnes. In the fairy tales, the stepsisters were more powerful and not necessarily ugly, while Cinderella was powerless and beautiful. This meant that, if they were able to make Cinderella less beautiful, take away her grace by giving her wooden shoes and taking away her dresses, the stepsisters had a chance of coming out on top, having the best feminine qualities. However, Ella is powerful and beautiful, while Charlotte and Matilda are neither. This is exemplified in the novel during the preparations for the ball. "Lady Rohesia's maid dressed Ella's hair [...] the effect was breathtaking. Poor Charlotte and Matilda had only Gisla and my uncouth chambermaid to help with their hair" (Teller 2018, 336-7). Ella's high status contributes to her ability to showcase her feminine qualities – she has a lady's maid to do her hair, which makes her look even more beautiful. Meanwhile, her stepsisters' lower status only makes their lack of feminine qualities more apparent. They cannot change their situation by degrading Ella, so they do not. The outright comparisons that take place in the novel acknowledge this fact, "Even if Charlotte and Matilda had been true beauties [...] they would have faded like ghosts next to Ella" (337). Instead of actual rivalry, the way Anthony et al. defined it, what happens between Ella and her stepfamily is more a series of conflicts than an ongoing competition. The conflicts that are still in the novel, then, are not based on Charlotte and Matilda trying to be more ideal women than Ella; some stem from Ella's difficulty in accepting the entry of Agnes and her daughters into her life, others from conflicts in their personalities.

These personality conflicts are caused by the fact that Agnes and her daughters think that Ella is spoiled and weak. During dinner, for example, Agnes is clearly irritated by what she perceives as Ella's spoiled nature when she does not want to work or eat her food, which Charlotte and Matilda do. When asked by Emont why she wants Ella to work, Agnes does not reply, but the reader sees into her thoughts, "*Because misfortune does not wait idly by until we are prepared for it*" (Teller 2018, 296, italics in original). While the stepfamily in Perrault and Grimm wants to tear Cinderella down, Agnes' motivation stems from her own experiences as a woman, and from a wish that Ella may have a good life, even if she encounters bad luck. This passage provides Agnes with much more humanity than the fairy tales' stepmother and makes the reader understand her behaviour – one of the goals of a feminist rewriting according to Aguiar. The story does not justify Agnes' actions as such, but it depicts the conflict between Agnes and Ella as a type of conflict that stepmothers and stepdaughters have.

Many of the conflicts between Agnes and Ella are rooted in the nature of their relationship as stepmother and stepdaughter. Ella feels threatened by her stepfamily intruding in her domain. Though Ella is not the only woman in the manor, after her mother's death she is the only high-born lady, and the only female member of her close family. When she gets a new mother-figure, she has trouble accepting it, and "[clings] to her father even more than usual" (Teller 2018, 279), which shows that she fears that her family will be changed again. When Agnes and later her daughters enter her family, gaining in status dramatically, Ella's response is one of blame, saying: "You want to lock me away up there" (325), and "Why do I have to sleep in the attic? This is *my* room! *They* should sleep in the attic!" (300-1, emphasis original). Comparing her stepfamily to "cuckoo birds" (325), Ella sees them as rivals for her home and her father's affections. Ella's unease with Agnes and her daughters is not connected to



comparisons about feminine ideals, however, but an arguably understandable response from a young girl dealing with the feeling of her mother being replaced.

Even though the conflicts between Ella and Agnes, Charlotte, and Matilda have a fundamentally different cause from those between Cinderella and her stepfamily, the element of beauty as part of the rivalry is retained, though it is valued differently. Cinderella is described throughout both fairy tales as “handsome”, “charming” (Perrault), and “beautiful” (Perrault; Grimm 127). Ella, too, is consistently described as very beautiful throughout the novel, while Charlotte and Matilda, her stepsisters, are not. Since Fernan was dark-skinned, Charlotte is too, and this is not seen as attractive in the society in the novel. Matilda is lighter skinned, but she had a bad case of the pox as a young child and her face is “ruined” (Teller 2018, 294) so that people are scared of her when they meet her. However, beauty in *ATEA* is not merely a feminine ideal, not just a value in and of itself; it is also needed for a stable future. The importance of marriage as a way of attaining financial security is a theme throughout the novel. When Agnes marries Emont – thereby securing her status and likely financial security for the rest of her life – she inadvertently endangers her daughters’ security when Abbess Elfilda sends them away from convent school. She worries about their futures: “Had Charlotte and Matilda remained at the abbey, they might have become nuns, but that door had been slammed shut by Mother Elfilda. The only alternative was marriage [...] Without pedigree or beauty, I did not know what would become of them” (294). When the positions of Agnes and her daughters at court become tenuous because of the gossip, the only way out that they can think of at first is that one of them will have to marry, though none of them are particularly marriageable, due to Agnes’ age and her daughters’ looks (365). Ella’s beauty, on the other hand, is what eventually makes the prince fall in love with her. The rivalry around beauty is not based on beauty as a virtue, but on beauty as a means to an end.

The changed power dynamic, in which Ella is the social and financial superior to her stepfamily, makes sure that she is not abused the way Cinderella is. Instead of focusing the story on a rivalry based on feminine ideals like beauty, *ATEA* pays much attention to the relationship between Ella and Agnes as that between a woman and her stepdaughter. At the same time, Agnes' worries about all her daughters' futures play a large role in the novel, since Agnes has experienced first-hand how difficult it can be for a woman without a husband to carve out a place for herself. These looks into the various relationships between the female characters in the novel do what Woolf saw lacking in literature; they complicate the relationships between women, by not making these relationships about men. Marriage in this novel is not about the relationship a woman has with a man, it is seen as one of the only viable ways to attain financial security for a woman. Charlotte and Matilda's ugliness stands in the way of this. By changing the power dynamic of the rivalry, *ATEA* is able to focus on the reasons for a difficult and complex relationship between the three-dimensional characters of the novel, instead of merely relegating them to the realm of evil. This nuance in the relationship between the characters is strengthened by the fact that the perspective of the story is that of Agnes, the mother, who is trying to give her daughters – including Ella – a good life. The perspective in the fairy tales is very much skewed against the stepmother, and puts her firmly in the 'villain' category. As *ATEA* refuses to do so, the way that the conflicts are described also subverts the depiction of the rivalry. In the next chapter, the switch in narrative perspective will be discussed in order to see how it affects the portrayal of the rivalry.

## Chapter Two: A Matter of Perspective

In the previous chapter, the nature of the rivalry between Ella and her stepfamily was shown to have changed. This is not only because of changes in the power dynamic, but also has to do with the changed perspective; the story is told by Agnes, Ella's stepmother. Agnes is an unreliable narrator because she has a stake in telling the story. She states that her purpose is not "to write the princess's history, but [her] own, the only tale [she has] the authority to tell" (Teller 2018, 4). Though she claims not to "have any desire to diminish the adulation for the princess" (4), the fact that she emphasises that "Compelling fiction often obscures the humble truth" (2), shows that her goal is also to set the record straight; to remove the authority of the well-known story and challenge its power over her reputation. This chapter will show how the change of the perspective influences the way that the rivalry between Agnes and her stepdaughter is portrayed. This will be done by comparing the episode from the fairy tales in which the stepfamily makes Cinderella into their servant to the comparable episodes from *ATEA*. This episode is interesting to discuss, especially when looking at the perspective change, because it is the direct result of the rivalry between Cinderella and her stepfamily. While the episode in the fairy tales illustrates the wickedness of the stepfamily, the perspective change in *ATEA* complicates this. First, the Perrault and Grimm versions of this episode will be discussed, after which episodes from *ATEA* will be analysed and compared with them.

When the stepmother enters the household in the fairy tales, she immediately begins tormenting her stepdaughter. She and her daughters "took her pretty clothes away from her, [and] put an old grey bedgown on her" (Grimm 1884, 124). The stepmother "employed her in the meanest work of the house" (Perrault 1697), clearly favouring her own children over Cinderella, who "slept in a sorry garret, on a wretched straw bed, while her sisters slept in fine rooms". Grimm even states that "she had no bed to go to" (124). Both tales makes sure to

show the reader exactly how sad the situation is, using phrases like “meanest work”, “sorry garret”, and “wretched straw bed” (Perrault), and “hard work” and “old grey bedgown” (Grimm 124). Grimm’s version also emphasizes Cinderella’s lack of agency, saying that “she was forced to” pick her food out of the ashes and “had to sleep by the fireside” (124).

Three parts of the abuse in the fairy tales that can be discerned are that she wears rags for clothes, that her bedroom is taken away from her, and that she is forced to do housework. These three parts also occur in *ATEA*, though they are described in more detail and in three distinct episodes. The first to occur is the episode in which Ella is sent to sleep in the attic instead of in her own room. Charlotte and Matilda have slept with her in her room from the day they arrived, until they have a fight which results in Agnes sending her to sleep in the attic. When Ella protests that it is not fair because it is her room, Agnes tells her that “there are two of them and only one of you” (Teller 2018, 301). Ella does not have to sleep on a wretched straw bed, though, Agnes makes sure to “move up the feather bed” (301). The second part of the abuse in the fairy tales – and arguably the worst – is the “hard” (Grimm 124), “mean” (Perrault) housework that Cinderella is set to do. In *ATEA*, Ella is made to work in the laundry for one day after she has made a very fancy dress dirty although Agnes had told her not to wear it. However, this is not what causes the punishment; Agnes becomes angry because of Ella’s reaction to being scolded for creating more work for Beatrice, the laundry girl. Since Agnes used to be a laundry girl and knows how hard the work is, Ella’s response of yawning and shrugging enrages her, and she sends the girl to work in the laundry for the whole day. The third part concerns Ella’s clothes. After her father’s death, Ella has to dress for mourning. She does not like wearing black clothes and calls them “rags” (Teller 2018, 330). This is not a situation inflicted on her by Agnes, though Agnes enforces it for propriety’s sake.

The narration skews the sympathy towards Agnes and her daughters by portraying Ella as a weak, spoiled child who “stamped her little foot” and yells in a “shrill voice” when being sent to sleep in the attic (Teller 2018, 300-1). She “shrug[s] and yawn[s]” (313) when Agnes berates her on making Beatrice do more work, and though “she looked no less lovely in black than in any other color [...] she complained bitterly about her wardrobe” (327). When Ella accuses her of injustice, Agnes admits her bias in her narration, saying that she “battled my own sense of injustice every day [...] having to compare my daughters to the kingdom’s most beautiful girl. Even if it couldn’t help Charlotte or Matilda one whit, it may be that I wanted to see Ella’s radiance just the tiniest bit dimmed” (328). This sentiment is similar to the motivation in the fairy tales. Agnes expression of this motivation shows the difficulty she has being a stepmother. She is not just comparing her daughters to the kingdom’s most beautiful girl, but that girl is someone she has to take care of and love and support, even though it is so easy for Agnes and her daughters to dislike her. Though the girls are still compared, there is no real sense of competition as in the fairy tales. This allows the girls to come together instead of driving them apart (Ngai 2006, 112). The line also shows that Agnes does not consider Ella her own daughter, which changes later in the story. When she finds out Ella is pregnant, she exclaims “I am to be a grandmother! I suppose that I should say ‘step-grandmother’” (Teller 2018, 57), viewing Ella more as a daughter of her own than before.

The perspective change disrupts the binary distinction between good and evil, which Wu also saw in Carter’s rewriting of *Little Red Riding Hood*, by showing that *ATEA*’s Ella is at least partly responsible for the events, while the emphasis on Cinderella’s lack of agency makes her the victim of an evil stepfamily in the fairy tales. The perspective change does not completely clear up Agnes’ name, nor does it drag Ella’s reputation through the mud. Rather, it provides nuance and more well-rounded characters. By lessening the abuse, *ATEA* also creates the possibility for a positive relationship between Ella and her stepfamily. This will be

discussed in the next chapter, in order to see how the relationship between Cinderella and her stepfamily at the end of the story has been changed from rivalry to sisterhood.

### Chapter Three: Gracefulness and Wickedness are No Friends

In the previous chapters, the disruption of the binary distinction between good and evil has been shown to influence the relationship between *ATEA*'s characters. The question this chapter seeks to answer is how blurring the dichotomy between good and evil from the fairy tales changes the relationship between the characters under scrutiny at the end of the story. The relationship between Cinderella and her stepfamily in the fairy tales will be discussed first, paying attention to the development of the rivalry throughout the story. This same development will be traced through *ATEA*, and the differences between the three stories will be discussed.

The two fairy tales differ in the development of the rivalry. Perrault's depiction of the stepfamily starts negative and ends slightly more positive. They are introduced as proud and haughty (Perrault), and spoiled (Grimm, 125), while Cinderella is good and sweet. Towards the end of the story, the two stepsisters are greatly astonished, and "threw themselves at her feet to beg pardon for all the ill-treatment they had made her undergo" (Perrault). This description of them shows that they are willing to grovel, and not so proud and haughty as described in the beginning. Grimm's depiction of the stepsisters, Cinderella's primary torturers, remains negative throughout. They are "vile and black of heart" (124) when they first enter, they are "proud" (127), and they become "pale with rage" after Cinderella is revealed (131). In the last line of the story, they are punished for their "wickedness and falsehood" (Grimm, 131). These descriptions are in line with the morals of the stories; whereas Perrault shows the importance of mercy and forgiveness, even to those who have treated you badly, Grimm's emphasis is on punishment for wicked behaviour.

Throughout *ATEA*, the narrator – Agnes – changes her views on Ella, just as Perrault changes his depiction of the stepsisters. As a baby, Agnes calls Ella "difficult" (Teller 2018, 205), "a mere wisp by comparison" to her own "big and sturdy" daughters (204). At three,

“her voice pierced like a dagger” (240) when she shrieks. At eight, Agnes calls her “trying at times” (270), “quick to tears”, and “fussy”, though she considers her “a good girl”, “beautiful”, and “clever” (271) as well. A turning point arrives when Agnes becomes her stepmother; “the betrothal changed [their] relationship” (279). From this moment on, Agnes appears to get closer to understanding Ella, seeing that she is not just weak or spoiled, the way Agnes and her daughters used to perceive her, but she was just different, she “had a deformed wing, which she hid by never trying to fly” (315). After Ella agrees to marry the prince, she is concerned about what will happen to her stepfamily, which makes Agnes genuinely feel like her mother: “It was the happiest miracle of my life to hold Ella for no other reason than because I craved her nearness. [...] She was my daughter, but that was the first time I allowed myself to be her mother” (355). When Agnes’ position at court is threatened, Ella sends them to live in Rose House, near the Abbey, saying “We have had our differences, but I never doubted your love” (369). Agnes is not so sure about the truth of this statement: “My soul shrank within me as I remembered shameful lapses in my love for Ella [...] I made excuses, telling myself that Ella was strange [...] That Charlotte and Matilda were more inherently amiable. That I was not Ella’s real mother” (370). Though Agnes learns to love Ella, and Ella her, the relationship is more complex than only hate or love. The story ends with Ella and her stepfamily in a good relationship, in which they support each other.

The rivalry in Grimm continues until the end. The sisters are blinded by the pigeons who helped Cinderella earlier in the story. The eyes with which the sisters looked down on Cinderella throughout the story are pecked out. Grimm’s reason for this punishment is “their wickedness and falsehood” (131). The wickedness refers to their abuse of Cinderella, and the falsehood to the fact that they mutilated their own feet to fit into the shoe; when the prince discovers their lie he “took the false bride home” (Grimm, 130). In *ATEA*, they are not punished, but instead helped by Ella. Apart from the fact that they are not wicked and false, a



punishment for them would conform to, what Ofek (2012) calls “Cinderella’s privileging of personal promotion at the expense of other sisters” (30), which she shows in other feminist rewriting to have been replaced with solidarity. The stepsisters in *ATEA* are not punished because they have not been as mean to Ella as Cinderella’s stepsisters were. They have been unkind occasionally, but not in such a way that it would ruin their relationship, for the three of them could also be “the picture of sisterly love” (Teller 2018, 321). This difference from the fairy tales is only possible because the good-evil binary has been disrupted, since a fully evil person would not be able to love a fully good person.

That is also the reason that Ella cannot just forgive them as in Perrault; if they had treated her badly in her eyes, forgiving them anyway would make her too much of a purely good character. Instead, *ATEA* shows a gracious, kind Ella, whom Agnes knows she should have treated differently, seeing that her stepfamily did not mistreat her, though she may have experienced it as such while growing up. Removing the stark contrast between the characters allows for understanding and support between them. Ironically, the fact that none of the characters in *ATEA* are as saintly and good as Cinderella in the fairy tales, makes it possible for the relationship between the characters to be equal and supportive.

## Conclusion

The shift in power difference subverts the rivalry by complicating the relationship between the characters. Whereas Perrault and Grimm positioned a good Cinderella against an evil stepfamily, *ATEA* shows the difficulty for Agnes in being a stepmother and a mother at the same time. Without justifying all her actions, the novel makes the motivations that were behind them clearer, providing the ‘evil stepmother’ character with humanity. This is reinforced by the changed perspective. Whereas the fairy tale narrators clearly paid the most attention to the perspective of Cinderella, emphasizing her lack of agency, Agnes’s own perspective shows how the relationship between her family and her stepdaughter was difficult, but not as black-and-white as it is often portrayed to be. The nuance that *ATEA* provides to the fairy tales’ division of the characters allows for them to come together at the end of the story in a way that neither Perrault nor Grimm does; they are aware of their flaws and shortcomings, and able to accept this in each other. *ATEA* subverts the rivalry between Cinderella and her stepfamily by providing her characters with complexity and humanity through changes in the power difference and the narrative perspective. These changes cause the good versus evil binary from the fairy tales to be blurred, allowing for the characters to understand and support each other.

Rich (1972) wrote that the rewriting of texts is “used to not pass on a tradition but instead challenge its power over the narratives about women” (19). *ATEA* exemplifies this by taking the cultural narrative of rivalry between women that has occurred in many popular versions of the *Cinderella* tale and showing that, in a more realistic setting, with more complex characters, the stepfamily does not have to be mean to the girl. They can bond together, regardless of their differences in personality.

Due to the scope of the thesis, not all facets of the novel have been discussed. For example, *ATEA* contains interesting relationships between other female characters as well, for

example the bad one between Agnes and her boss in the laundry, the relatively bad one between Agnes and Abbess Elfilida, and the good one between Agnes and Abbess Elfilida's mother. Since all these characters have, at one point at least, power over Agnes, it would be interesting to see what *ATEA* does with these relationships. I would also have liked to be able to discuss the Disney versions of the fairy tale, since they are – at least in Western culture – the most well-known and influential versions. Perhaps if this novel is analysed again, these issues can be discussed as well.

A close reading and comparative analysis between a novel that was only ever written as a novel in English, and two stories that were not only written in French and German respectively, but that were also part of a narrative tradition in which the stories were changed, can never have the final word on the interpretation. However, since most of the rivalry elements in these stories have been transferred in similar ways throughout the ages and between languages, the analysis in this thesis is definitely able to contribute to the discussion on female rivalry in feminist rewritings.

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