Table of Contents

Acknowledgements .............................................................. vii

Introduction ........................................................................... xi
    Miriam Forman-Brunell and Rebecca Hains

Part I: Princess Cultures and Children’s Cultures

Chapter One: The Princess and the Teen Witch: Fantasies of the Essential Self ........................ 3
    Ilana Nash

Chapter Two: Applying for the Position of Princess: Race, Labor, and the Privileging of Whiteness in
    the Disney Princess Line .............................................. 25
    Megan Condis

Chapter Three: Ghetto Princes, Pretty Boys, and Handsome Slackers:
    Masculinity, Race and the Disney Princes ........................ 45
    Guillermo Avila-Saavedra

Chapter Four: Rescue the Princess: The Videogame Princess as
    Prize, Parody, and Protagonist ...................................... 65
    Sara M. Grimes
Chapter Five: Playing to Belong: Princesses and Peer Cultures in Preschool  . . . 89  
Karen Wohlwend

Part II: Princess Cultures Beyond Western Cultures

Chapter Six: Mono- or Multi-Culturalism: Girls around the World  
Interpret Non-Western Disney Princesses ........................................ 115  
Diana Natasia and Charu Uppal

Chapter Seven: Princess Culture in Qatar: Exploring Princess Media Narratives in the Lives of Arab Female Youth .................................. 139  
Kirsten Pike

Part III: Princess and Performance Cultures

Chapter Eight: Blue Bloods, Movie Queens, and Jane Does:  
Or How Princess Culture, American Film, and Girl Fandom Came Together in the 1910s ......................................................... 163  
Diana Anselmo-Sequeira

Chapter Nine: JAPpy: Portraits of Canadian Girls Mediating the Jewish American Princess and Identity ............................................. 191  
Rebecca Starkman

Chapter Ten: If I Were a Belle: Performers’ Negotiations of Feminism, Gender, and Race in Princess Culture ........................................ 209  
Rebecca C. Hains

Part IV: The Royal Cultures and Imagined Princess Cultures

Chapter Eleven: Princess Sissi of Austria: Image, Reality, and Transformation ............................................................... 235  
Phyllis S. Zrzavy and Helfried C. Zrzavy

Chapter Twelve: Dedicated to Princesses: The Marriage Market and the Royal Revelations of Ancien Régime Fairy Tales ..................................... 255  
Rebecca-Anne C. Do Rozario

Contributors ............................................................................. 275

Index ...................................................................................... xxx
In the early 1910s, as the American film industry moved away from trick shorts and one-reelers, movie fan magazines began presenting adolescent actresses as real-life embodiments of fairy tale princesses. For instance, in September 1918, leading fan publication *Photoplay Magazine* introduced Paramount’s youngest star, fourteen-year-old Lila Lee, not only as a magically precocious talent, but moreover as an everyday personification of the Cinderella myth.

If you had grown up to be a great big girl of fifteen or sixteen, and had seen a lot of moving pictures, and thought they were wonderful, and you could do it too—if [a] man came along and said, “I wanna make you a star”—just like that—would you believe your good fairy was on the job again? [... After all] many a Cinderella has found her way to fame and fortune thus unexpectedly in the world of make-believe.¹

Titled “Do You Believe in Fairies?” Joseph Shorey’s article epitomizes the typical write-up released by the fan press in the mid-1910s, a decade when girl actors in their teens and early twenties emerged as the clear preference of American movie audiences. In fact, by 1915 teenage players such as Mary Pickford, Vio-la Dana, and Mary Miles Minter—curly-haired, rosy-cheeked, and famous for impersonating fairy princesses and “the doll baby character of the heroine”² on screen—often placed first in nationwide popularity contests published by film fan magazines. Simultaneously, the trade press appointed them as the most well-paid
players in the motion picture business. In 1916, the *New York Dramatic Mirror*
even remarked that “from the first day, the dramatic level of picture acting has
hovered around a *pair of cupid lips.*”

Shorey’s reading of Lila’s professional success as a rags-to-riches Cinderella-
la story actually undergirded many early actresses’ publicized biographies. From
emotive Mae Marsh to comedic Mabel Normand, and from teenage Mary Miles
Minter to childlike Mary Pickford, most Thumbelina-sized female players were
imagined as “Cinderella […] girls who […] became famous overnight when their
good fairies led them into the magic light of the Kliegs.” A trade reviewer later re-
inforced this romanticized view of female stardom when he mused that box-office
successes often hinged on a girl star’s alchemistic ability to, “with her presence,
[…] transform a strip of celluloid into a fairytale ribbon of spun gold.”

Forging a strong homology between fairy tale princesses and adolescent film
actresses, while concurrently inviting female movie fans to identify with such
fabricated “fairy” biographies, articles such as “Do You Believe in Fairies?” re-
veal how popular culture made sense of young femininity during a transitional
decade. In fact, the years between 1910 and 1920 marked a time when narrative
film, celebrity movie culture, and, more important, the new life-stage of adoles-
cence first took root in popular culture. By 1910, pioneering American psychol-
ogist G. Stanley Hall had defined girlhood as a liminal phase between childhood
and womanhood, deeply rooted in the make-believe world of nursery rhymes
and in the romantic expectations of a fairy tale happy ending. “Just blossoming
into beauty, enjoying for the first time that most exhilarating experience of being
taken for a young lady,” the adolescent girl, Stanley Hall noted, tended to revert
to images of fairy tale royalty, fantasizing that “perhaps she is really destined to
become a superior being, queening it through the world,” or maybe one of the
mystical “priestesses, pythonesses, [and] maenads” that populated her delirious
subjectivity.

At the same time that Stanley Hall defined female adolescents as excessive-
ly romantic, gullible, and imaginative, successful narrative films—such as *The
Good Little Devil* (1914), *Cinderella* (1914), *The Fairy and the Waif* (1915), *Lady
Little Eileen* (1916), *Snow White* (1916), and *The Princess of the Dark* (1917)—
visualized adolescent heroines’ interaction with fairies. In fact, eighteen-year-old
Fay Herron—the sightless “Princess of the Dark”—and blind teen Juliet from
*The Good Little Devil* both embodied Stanley Hall’s typical delusional girl. Both
fictional maidens imagined themselves as a monarch of fairy realms, “holding
her lonely court, day by day” in an empty mountain grove, while “through her
busy brain there passed a procession of princes and princesses, come to pay her
homage.”
Many scholars have contributed enormously to our understanding of “women’s” lives and cultures in the early 1900s. Film historians Miriam Hansen and Shelley Stamp first suggested that the 1910s fostered the emergence of a visible female spectatorship. Cultural theorists Nan Enstad and Kathy Peiss importantly documented working girls’ increased identification and consumption of narrative cinema at the dawn of the twentieth century. However, none of these landmark studies considered silent movie stars and their audiences within the context of female adolescence. How did the creation of such an interim life-stage influence the emergence of a first generation of movie stars that were no longer children, and yet not quite women? Did this biological in-betweenness affect the presentation of young actresses as fairy tale royalty? How did adolescent female fans respond to the film industry’s presentation of young movie actresses as everyday Cinderellas?

This chapter seeks to reexamine narrative film from the 1910s through the lens of fairy tale imagery and miraculous class ascendance, tropes that constructed female identity at a time the institutionalization of mass-marketed cinema coincided with psychology’s seminal formulation of adolescence. I argue that contemporary understandings of the mythic fairy tale princess—invariably adolescent, beautiful, and transformative—originates from this particular historical confluence. During such a formative time, popular culture began filtering girls’ identities—both as movie lovers and screen laborers—through well-established tropes of female adolescence, tropes rooted in Old World fairy tales of rags-to-riches transformation. In this chapter, I set out to explore how and why the liminal figure of the adolescent girl became a privileged site for negotiating American anxieties regarding social mobility, national identity, shifting gender roles, and industrial disenchantment, cultural issues greatly amplified by the outbreak of World War I.


As many contemporary art historians and media theorists have remarked, the turn of the twentieth century witnessed the birth of a highly industrialized visual culture. Mass-marketed illustrations, photo-postcards, color lithographs, and fashion plates all adorned theater playbills, movie ephemera, women’s magazines, and children’s books, thus signaling Western culture’s burgeoning romance with reproducible technologies. In Great Britain and the United States, cheap mechanical modes of visual reproduction fostered a particular desire to render visible the fantastic creatures that inhabited the ethereal realm of childhood fairy tales,
nursery rhymes, and Old World folktales. However, the most popular representations of such fantastic creatures often took the shape of diminutive, nubile fairies and transformative, young princesses—such as Cinderella, Snow White, and Donkeyskin—anachronistically covered in animal pelts, rags, and wild flowers. In their awkward cross between childish innocence and womanly sensuality, these figurations functioned as romanticized embodiments of the ambiguous psychophysiological transformations underpinning female adolescence. Simultaneously, their ubiquitous presence in early-twentieth-century visual culture articulated a cultural understanding of girlhood reflective of that seminally proposed by Stanley Hall: as a mysterious developmental phase defined by elusive, shape-shifting, liminal pliability, and uncanny “becomings.”

In addition, the germ of a fledgling “princess culture” emerged at the same time that a multimediated film industry began marketing individual players as deified “picture personalities.” Both these occurrences became linked by a popular desire to make visible the newly defined figure of the adolescent girl through already established, and thus legible, paradigms of femininity. Therefore, to understand why at the time of its inception the American star system promoted young film actresses as royalty—as fairy princesses on the screen, and as “movie princesses” in everyday life—one has to trace early-twentieth-century audiences’ widespread fascination with the princess figure, a figure that pervaded mass-marketed illustrations, stage plays, and actual newspaper reports throughout the 1910s.

There is significant evidence attesting to British and American culture’s tendency to render adolescent girlhood identifiable through the well-known figures of youthful fairies and fairy tale princesses. Notorious illustrators from both countries, including Arthur Rackham, Cicely M. Barker, Jessie Willcox Smith, and Elizabeth Shippen Green, spearheaded such mass-marketed “fairyland fever.” Throughout his long career, Rackham gave life to some of the most revered fairy princesses—from Undine (1909) to Catskin (1918), Cinderella (1919), and Sleeping Beauty (1920)—as well as to some of the most enchanted magical realms: from Alice’s Wonderland (1907) to Peter Pan’s Neverland (1906) and Titania’s Fairyland (1908). In 1918, English artist Cicely M. Barker produced a popular postcard series depicting elves and fairies, the seed to her masterpiece Flower Fairies of the Spring (1923) and Flower Fairies of the Summer (1925). These colorfully illustrated books portrayed barefooted fairy-girls clad in petals, small elfin ears, and butterfly wings that rendered them incongruently humanoid. Such lovely crossings between human girlhood and animalistic flora visually represented what Hall influentially classified as “the budding girl’s […] real nature […]: wild, with a charming, gamey flavor.” By 1920, two pubescent English girls, Elsie Wright and Frances Griffiths, captured the imagination of British and American audiences
by taking photographs of themselves posing with alleged real-life fairies in the Cottingley woods. Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, the respected British author, wrote a corroborating eulogy to the girls’ photographs, further reasserting prevalent cultural associations between young femininity, magical thinking, and fairylands.

Dialoguing with these main themes founded by the golden age of British illustration, notable American artists Jessie Willcox Smith and Elizabeth Shippen Green drew dreamy images of bourgeois girls, fairy tale heroines, and regal maidens wrapped in diaphanous gowns. They placed them in sunny seascapes, secret woods, groomed gardens, and well-to-do domestic scenarios, daydreaming, doll-playing, or being courted by princely men who emerged in scenarios of invariable royal opulence and atemporal magic.

The popular desire to visualize young femininity through the figures of fairy girls and fictional princesses further emerged hand-in-hand with a revived interest in the foundational fairy tales of the Brothers Grimm, Hans Christian Andersen, and Charles Perrault. These European compilations greatly influenced two coming-of-age novels that importantly impacted the American imagination: J. M. Barrie’s *Peter Pan; or, The Boy Who Wouldn’t Grow Up*, first published as a play in 1904 and then as a novel in 1911; and L. Frank Baum’s *Oz* series, whose first volume, *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz*, came out in 1900, followed by thirteen other novels, the last one released posthumously in 1920. While Barrie’s narrative centered on a prepubescent boy’s refusal to mature and a girl’s (Wendy) decision to embrace adulthood, the figure of the capricious fairy Tinkerbell was the one aptly embodying the emotional turmoil experienced by a teenage girl conflicted by the first pangs of sexual desire. Similarly, Baum’s delirious world of Oz offers many possible readings of Dorothy’s abandonment of girlhood and incipient trespassing over the threshold of adolescence. Such confusing developmental twilight is personified by several fantastic characters she encounters throughout her self-discovering journey into Oz’s dystopian fairyland. These include two opposite figures of female power: Glinda, the Good Witch of the South, and the nameless Wicked Witch of the West, two magical figures who read in tandem present Dorothy with antithetical visions of womanhood.

Following in the footsteps of their predecessor, Lewis Carroll’s *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland* (1865), both Barrie’s and Baum’s novels quickly became best-sellers in America, propelling an avalanche of similarly fairy-themed, coming-of-age works: Harley Granville-Barker and Laurence Housman’s *Prunella; or, Love in a Dutch Garden* (1906); Grace Miller White’s *Tess of the Storm Country* (1909); Austin Strong’s best-selling Broadway version of Rosemonde Gérard and Maurice Rostand’s stage play *A Good Little Devil* (1912); Owen Davis’s *The Wishing Ring: An Idyll of Old England* (1914); Georgette Leblanc’s novelization of Maurice
Maeterlinck’s haunting fairy play *The Blue Bird* (1914); Betty T. Fitzgerald’s “Little Lady Eileen” (1916); and Lanier Bartlett’s “Princess of the Dark” (1917), to name only a few. Tellingly, most of these texts focused on young girls’ sexual awakening and its negotiation via direct (or imaginary) contact with fairies and other supernatural entities. The sheer volume of plays and novels featuring young princesses, rags-to-riches maidens, and girlish fairies evinces a pervasive, cultural preponderance to visualize girlhood via fairy tale tropes.

In America, such visual fascination with fairy girlhood found its most active and lasting shape on the theatrical stage. In March 1913, the weekly periodical *New York Dramatic Mirror* ran an article titled “Have You a Little Fairy in Your Play?” which, playing upon the then-popular commercial slogan “Have you a little of fairy in your home?” confirmed the ubiquity of the “whimsical fairy play” on American stages. The definition of “fairy play” as employed by journalist Fred J. Smith reveals how popular American culture came to understand the concept during the 1910s. Rather than as a strict genre, as later proposed by mid-twentieth-century literary luminaries Northrop Frye and Tzvetan Todorov, the fairy play served as a label that described narratives in which fantastic motifs—namely, fairy intervention, magical turns of fate, contact with ghostly entities, talking animals, and feudalistic class asymmetries—framed a young girl’s passage from adolescent daughterhood to wifely womanhood. As a case in point, many of the acclaimed “fairy plays” taking over Broadway in the 1910s—*A Good Little Devil*, *Poor Little Rich Girl*, *A Kiss for Cinderella*, *Alice in Wonderland*, and *Snow White*—focused on adolescent heroines’ confrontation with the adult world by way of wondrous events. For example, in *A Good Little Devil*, lovelorn Juliet’s friendship with fairies allows the girl to magically regain her sight and reunite with her childhood sweetheart; in *Snow White*, the budding princess’s exile from her father’s home, and magical resuscitation from slumberous death via a suitor’s kiss, signified the girl’s transformation from childlike daughter to sexually mature bride.

American audiences’ fascination with fairy tale princesses quickly stretched from Broadway to Main Street. By 1916, local newspapers frequently reported on amateur productions of “fairy plays.” Invariably, they emphasized the play’s reliance on a strong female character and a young female player. In December 1916, the *New York Times* commented that a pubescent New York socialite, “Miss Tanis Guinness,” turned her mother’s Christmas party into a big success by playing “the title role” of Snow White. By 1917, the *San Francisco Chronicle* commended the city’s Girls’ High School for its “scoring success” performing a revised version of the Grimms’ “Snow White.”

The widespread cultural consumption of fairy tale narratives permeating local theatrical productions and large-scale stage shows participated in a specific spec-
tatorial desire for escapism into an ahistorical time of myth and magic, inured to the ravages of urbanization, industrialization, and World War I. In 1915, a *Motion Picture Magazine* reader, Mary Carolyn Davis, submitted a poem ascribing to “dreamy” “Filmland” the “gift of forgetfulness”: “Forgetfulness of our own cares and grief / From hard reality an hour’s relief— / This is the gift that Filmland tenders free / To tired life-travelers—you and me.” The year before a *New York Dramatic Mirror* journalist had identified fairy films—“with [their] golden key of imagination,” uplifting whimsicality, and old-fashion values of “courtliness and kindness”—as educational tools against an otherwise overly industrialized and alienated society. The reporter guaranteed that by “instilling poetry and beauty in the minds of children and driving hardness and hatred from the hearts of older players,” fairy plays taught large audiences to “realize and fight modern evils.”

By 1916, the film-fan magazine *Motion Picture Classic* introduced a new kind of female star, “the ‘homey’ girl,” as the vessel through which such restorative effect reached movie audiences. The affective power of this female type originated from an “essentially feminine and adorable” old-fashionedness that harked back to the fairy tale imagery of Cinderella slippers and thumb-size fairies; with the “homey girl,” the journalist guaranteed, “came memories of maids whose tiny feet have long since traveled their last, flower-strewn path.”

Ironically, this intense search for mass-marketed renditions of fairy girls, fantasy princesses, and romanticized Old World royalty occurred as centuries-old empires came crashing down. At their height of popularity during the war years, the machinations of European royal families—especially young, unmarried princesses—were splashed across the pages of popular periodicals for American audiences to devour. *The Day Book*, Chicago’s daily, often presented European princesses’ matchmaking dramas as war-riddled dilemmas. One sensationalistic article, “Pretty Princess Must Give Up Love to Bring Royal House Together,” speculated that the teenage Princess Victoria Louise of Germany, known as “The Little Princess” and “the best catch of Europe,” had to sacrifice “her heart [...] as a bridge over a chasm between hostile royal houses.” Years later, the same magazine positioned twenty-year-old Princess Margaret of Denmark’s potential wedding to the Prince of Wales as a consequence of Europe’s “war-torn” scarcity, which “left [her] the only girl eligible to become the fiancée of the heir to the British throne.” The headline “No ‘War-Brides’ in Royal Family, No Husbands for Royal Ladies” melodramatically addressed the dearth of suitable partners for young princesses, since “with all the eligible princes fighting on land or sea, it would be useless to arrange a marriage feast at which Death might preside.” The article included two photos of Princess Maud of Fife and Princess Mary of Britain, the two well-coiffed faces framing the drawing of a cupid crying over his broken bow.
Safely positioned as distant spectators of a war-torn Europe, in short, American audiences ambivalently reveled in European monarchies’ domestic dramas, while still revering princesses and queens as compelling, superior beings, magnified by their ancestral sophistication and mythologized social status.

The publicized discourse on European princessdom also centered on issues of beauty. In 1912, the *Salt Lake Tribune* steadily reported on the serial love affairs of Prince Adalbert and Count Fugger of Germany. However, all these features focused not on the Don Juan duo, but on the physical gifts of the many princesses they deceived. Throughout the war years, both *The Sun* and *The Day Book* similarly released images of the prettiest European princesses, as well as “the newest photographs of Europe’s most beautiful royal family,” a title conquered by Romania because of the reputed facial perfection of Queen Marie and her two eldest daughters. Large photos of the three showed the queen in regal profile, while the two teenage girls appeared fresh-faced, well coiffed, and tastefully bejeweled.

Three years later, the *New York Tribune* gushed over the Rumanian princesses in a lavish, multi-photo article. This piece addressed the Parisian opening of a “fairy play” authored by the Queen herself, minutely describing the three princesses’ luxurious attires and well-bred poise. The piece dubbed the blue bloods’ “beauty an asset” that—similar to the rhetoric used to promote fairy tale princesses—allegedly functioned as a civilizing instrument. Presented as “an extraordinarily beautiful woman,” the Queen was said to “take extreme care of her appearance […] because she feels that in this way she best helps represent her people before the civilized world.”

Although impossible to determine the veracity of readers’ letters, those published in newspapers and movie fan magazines of the late 1910s suggest that, reflective of their cultural milieu, female audiences negotiated their identities through imaginary royal figures. In 1917, a Chicago moviegoer sent a query to *Photoplay* under the name “Princess Zim-Zam.” In 1916, Lauren S. Hamilton, a *Motion Picture Magazine* reader, submitted a poem in which she imagined herself “a Moving Picture queen.” In April 1917, a girl signed her letter “The Lonely Princess” and sent it to “The Cousins’ Letters,” a popular section of the *Washington Post* aimed at school-age youth.

In fact, throughout the 1910s “The Cousins’ Letters” invited young readers to write autobiographical letters and submit drawings in exchange for prizes. Most participants had to choose an alias by which they wanted to be known to “Dear Aunt Anna,” the ringleader of the club. By 1917, at the apex of nationwide interest in fairy tale princesses, girls writing to “The Cousins’ Letters” vied for the right to be known as “Snow White.” In April, Margaret Kelley wrote asking whether the “Dear Aunt” “had room for one more cousin? […] If you will accept me, I will
choose Snow White for my pen name.’” The Aunt declined her request, claiming, “We already have a Snow White.” In fact, in January of that year the “original” Snow White had emerged after a long hiatus. She wrote apologetically, wondering whether “you have forgotten that you ever had a ‘Snow White’ in your club. But you had one and here she is […] and don’t think for a minute that I have forgotten you or ‘our page.’” The girl further confessed that her prolonged silence resulted from her growth into adolescence: “I joined when I was in fourth grade [but] I am now in high school.” However “grown up,” the Eastern High School girl still identified her adolescent self with that of the fairy princess: She signed her letter “Snow White” in capital letters, and kept her given name, “E. Mogenweck,” abridged, minimized, and bracketed under her fairy persona. Thus, the fairy tale heroine’s adolescent transformations from teen rags to womanly riches, or from princess-child to married queen, not only undergirded the successful stagings of many fairy plays, but moreover functioned as an identity lens through which everyday girls negotiated their own teenage growth.

In conclusion, American audiences’ particular fascination with European, unmarried princesses focused on the girls’ unparalleled physical beauty, expensive fashions, and exciting romantic engagements. However, these reports constantly bypassed princesses’ relevance as political subjects, i.e., as potential heiresses to a country’s throne. In fact, in the popular press, real-life princesses appeared as romanticized embodiments of antiquated mores and social etiquettes, and as legible effigies of enviable female refinement, established social ascendancy, and desired class status. In other words, unmarried princesses’ cultural capital remained mainly superficial and ornamental. With this in mind, it can be suggested that during the 1910s, American popular culture positioned real-life princesses as servicing very much the same cultural functions as that of their fairy tale counterparts: (1) They reasserted deep-seated associations between girlhood, fantasy, frivolity, and mandatory romantic completion; (2) they stimulated female audiences’ class fantasies of rags-to-riches transformation and absorbing self-identification with out-of-reach, imaginary identities; and (3) they exemplified ladylike and material opulence, while simultaneously promoting a conservatively disempowered image of femininity defined by fleeting youth and beauty, whose intrinsic value resided in premarital virginity.

It is curious that at the same time American audiences idolized European blue bloods, the 1910s witnessed an increased dissipation of the boundaries between actual princessdom and stage performance. In 1912, The Day Book reported on an inverted rags-to-riches story: Princess Ibrahim Hassan of Egypt—originally Ola Humphrys from Oakland, California—decided to trade “palaces for footlights.” After pronouncing “Oriental men’s […] age-old treatment of women […] intolerable,” the young California actress decided to leave her royal husband,
and return to her home-country and theatrical trade.\textsuperscript{34} Two years later, a similar princess-to-performer transformation made international news: The “nation-wide hunt for the Princess Metchersky of Russia,” a girl “scarcely out of her teens,” culminated when the princess was found “dancing on the sea shore of Nice, France.” Reportedly, the girl “known as the ‘dancing princess’” had escaped her home country “to satisfy a whim” of becoming a stage performer.\textsuperscript{35}

Last, the article on the “fairy play” penned by the Queen of Rumania importantly articulated an elision of boundaries that in the mid-1910s became fundamental for the successful promotion of early movie actresses. The play visualized an imaginary princess who wandered through a fantastic land of mermaids and fairies in search of the magical “lily of life.”\textsuperscript{36} By describing the make-believe “princess” featured in Queen Marie’s “fairy play” as the creation of an actual ex-princess, and moreover by casting such fantastic figuration as an accurate personification of the queen’s autobiographical experiences of postwar bereavement, the \textit{New York Tribune} collapsed the lines separating performed fantasy from lived identity, and imaginary fairy tale princessdom from actual real-life royalty. Such crucial erasure underpinned early-twentieth-century fascination with fairies, (living and fictional) princesses, and screen stars, figures presented in an increasingly multimediated film culture as larger-than-life personalities, self-made gods that belonged to a magnificent oligarchy positioned above anonymous mortals. In common, fairies, princesses, and female film stars shared their mythic narratives of origin; their uncanny status as flesh-and-blood wonders; and last, their feminine youth and compelling girlish beauty.

\textbf{“The Slipper Fits—You Are Cinderella, My Princess”:}\textsuperscript{37} \textit{Movie Princesses, Fairy Films, and the Rags-to-Riches Ethos of Early Female Stardom}

After the “fairyland fever had [held] the theatre within its grasp” for years,\textsuperscript{38} contagion ensued, spreading to the silver screen. Stage adaptations of famous fairy plays created such large box-office revenues that film producers decided to bring fairyland to the movies. During the 1910s, substantial evolution in trick cinematography, editing technology, narrative storytelling, and reel length allowed movies to create complex visual spectacles that only a decade before had eluded the grasp of pioneer filmmakers Thomas Edison, Edwin S. Porter, and Georges Méliès. Thus, not only the fantastic transformations undergone by Cinderella (rags-to-riches), Snow White (teen corpse to queenly bride), and Alice (fairy-small to gargantuan giant to child-size again) could now be visualized in all their magical splendor but, moreover, these heroines’ narratives of adolescent growth could now be fully articulated in multi-reel films.
We clearly see this shift from optical spectacle into subjective storytelling in the first narrative adaptation of Cinderella. Slotted to premier on Christmas week, Famous Players’ 1914 Cinderella was marketed as a child-friendly fantasy for the whole family, whose cutting-edge cinematography would bring to life the popular fairy tale of rags-to-riches girlhood. Cinderella also functioned as a vehicle for rising star Mary Pickford. At this time, Pickford had already built a reputation playing ingénues at Biograph; however, only in 1913 did she cease starring in shorts and graduate to feature-length productions. Sorely disappointed with her first feature-length effort—a film adaptation of her latest stage success, the fairy play A Good Little Devil—Pickford wanted to prove her acting skills. As a result, she portrayed Cinderella not as Perrault’s flattened archetype, but as an everyday adolescent girl from the Progressive Era. Pickford humanized the imaginary figure with her trademark warmth and childlike mischief, characteristics clearly displayed in the scenes where a raggedy Cinderella interacts with her evil stepfamily.

Foremost, this five-reeler revealed an awareness of audiences’ growing dissatisfaction with an overuse of gimmicky trick cinematography. For the sake of optical wonder, previous versions of Cinderella—such as Méliès’s 1899 protean rendition—had reduced the tale of female transformation to its magical components, consequently evacuating the female protagonist of any psychological depth.
In James Kirkwood’s five-reeler, however, trick cinematography made visible the adolescent girl’s inner world: Split-screens show Cinderella wistfully remembering an earlier encounter with the Prince (Pickford’s real-life husband, Owen Moore), while double-exposures visualize her horrible nightmare, conjured in the afterglow of the forbidden ball.⁴⁰

Although the movie helped to cement Pickford’s girlish stardom, in fact by 1914 Cinderella was already the most popular princess in American narrative cinema. Between 1910 and 1920, the number of known Cinderella renditions reached almost three dozens. A list of titles produced by top-tier companies—Edison, Vitagraph, Selig, Thanhouser, Famous Players, Universal, and Fox—including *A Modern Cinderella* (1910), *Cinderella* (1911), *Lord Browning and Cinderella* (1912), *Cinderella’s Slippers* (1913), *An Awkward Cinderella*, (1914), *Cinderella* (1914), *The Vanishing Cinderella* (1915), *Kentucky Cinderella* (1917), *A Studio Cinderella* (1917), *The Princess of Patches* (1917), *A Modern Cinderella* (1917), *A Kitchen Cinderella* (1920), and *Cinderella’s Twin* (1920). Not all of these films followed Perrault’s fairy tale, instead using the legible trope of Cinderella as a way to encapsulate a girl’s rags-to-riches story. However, a majority of such Cinderella-ish plots did function as vehicles for young actresses who, at that early point in their film careers, still vied for recognition and stardom. Marie Prevost, Ruth Clifford, June Caprice, Florence LaBadie, and Dorothy Davenport were some of the silent-screen girls who played Cinderella before rising to worldwide fame as Hollywood’s leading ladies.

Silent cinema frequently adapted two other young female characters credited to the Grimm Brothers’ and Perrault’s fairy anthologies: Little Red Riding Hood and Snow White. The 1911 versions of *Little Red Riding Hood* included James Kirkwood’s facetious adaptation starring a pre-stardom, nineteen-year-old Mary Pickford, and an Essanay short with twelve-year-old Eva Prout. By 1913, Selig released a two-reel fantasy starring child actress Baby Lillian Wade in *When Lillian Was Little Red Riding Hood*. At least two more adaptations appeared in 1917 and 1918, both sporting all-children casts.

In 1914, Thanhouser filmed *The Legend of Snow White*, America’s first known narrative rendition of Snow White. The now-lost movie starred one of the notorious Thanhouser Twins, fourteen-year-old Marion Fairbanks, as the title “Fairy Child.” Snow White’s film adaptations appeared two more times in 1916: a less-known, extravagant seven-reel production made by Ohio’s Regent Photo Play Company and released by the Educational Films Corporation of America, which starred “about 200 well-known Cleveland children,”⁴¹ and an immensely successful Christmas release in which beloved film star Marguerite Clark “dusted off the darling little costumes she wore in [Winthrop Ames’s
applauded stage] play and donned them again for the Famous Players version of the story.”

A last adaptation from 1917, an obscure three-reeler produced by Rex/Universal, remained lost until a Dutch copy recently resurfaced at the UCLA Film and Television Archive. This film is particularly unusual in its visualization of female adolescent growth. It begins by employing an anonymous child actress who plays the scenes of domestic bliss predating the turning point at which Snow White’s budding beauty threatens the evil stepmother’s vanity. As the princess enters puberty, her stepmother engages a henchman to kill her, thus hindering the girl’s unavoidable transformation into superior womanhood. Once a childish Snow White is cast into the woods, finds refuge in the Seven Dwarfs’ abode, and engages in new mature roles of housekeeper and motherly caregiver, the actress changes. Now Elsie Albert—a player who built her movie career impersonating fairy tale princesses—emerges as the adolescent Snow White. Under the “grown-up” guise of the shapely actress, the princess metamorphoses into a full-fledged object of desire, concurrently spurring her evil stepmother’s murderous jealousy and arousing the wandering Prince’s marital lust.

In sum, if the transformative figure of the fairy tale princess once governed the American stage, by the late 1910s it ruled the American screen. There are two main reasons fairy tales about female metamorphosis embodied by adolescent princesses came to be favored by early film producers. First, as film scholar Tom Gunning has influentially argued, early film audiences enjoyed being astonished by mechanical wonder. As film technology matured, so did the complexity of visual tricks displayed on screen. Reviews of Famous Players’ Cinderella (1914) and Snow White (1916) invariably focused on the perfected quality of believable trick cinematography. Motion Picture News emphasized Cinderella’s “transformation of the pumpkin, rats and mice into the coach, and attendants [as] prettily effected,” praising “the photography” for being “beautiful in all scenes, with some excellent light effects be[ing] obtained.” When advertising his Snow White, director J. Sea-ley Dawley similarly argued that,

Of course there had to be a good deal of trick work in the telling of the tale because of the magic and witchcraft […] but Broening did something in one scene which I do not believe any other photographer has accomplished. That was the crowning of Miss Clark at the end of the picture while she was surrounded by the whole throne room full of people. It is the first time, so far as I know, that this double exposure trick has been employed with a whole stage full of people.

In its glowing review, Motography concurred with the director’s claims of groundbreaking cinematography, stating that “in developing advance advertising on
‘Snow White,’ the exhibitor can hardly over-emphasize the exquisiteness of its staging, and the exceptional way in which trick photography was made to subserve the desired results.” Inherently magical and transformative, fairy tales held ideal components to test the advancements of film technology.

By 1917, blood-soaked reports on massive European casualties and distress over America’s entrance in World War I had also altered the national mood. The eyes of American audiences—from “kiddies” to adults, and from non–English speaking immigrants to literate individuals—turned to fairy tales, not necessarily seeking the recreational astonishment of the early 1900s, but actively procuring respite rooted in the “clean” nostalgia of childhood tales. Reviewing *Snow White* in January of that same year, the Chicago Daily Tribune guaranteed that “the only difference between […] the self-same fairy story you hung over and devoured in your childhood […] and the picture is that […] the latter brings fairyland to your vision. *With your own world tired eyes* you gaze rapturously over the vistas of the impossible.” As the decade came to an end, girlish “Cinderella and her magic slipper” also became heralded in popular press as the embodiment of childish wonder, “a story that clings to us, bathed in the romance of our youth […] even if] as we move along the years our faith in them tends to dim.”

Young female stars personified such restorative “vistas of the impossible” and such unretrievable “romance of youth” through their screen impersonations of dispossessed orphans and fairy princesses who, faced with adversities, still managed to magically develop into perfectly hopeful, beloved, and kind-hearted queens. Case in point, when in the early 1920s a reporter commented on the rerelease of Mary Pickford’s 1914 hit *Tess of the Storm Country*, he claimed that “if [Pickford] ever fails to touch us, we are going to feel that something vital—the slumbering embers of youthful illusions and dreams—had died within us. And we shall know that all that is lost.”

Further, as noted by Smith in his 1913 article, the majority of Broadway “fairy plays” producing handsome profits already starred youthful players who have […] been trained in motion pictures. Mary Pickford, of *A Good Little Devil*, was one of the greatest favorites of all photoplay actresses and her playing in Biograph film plays is known everywhere; Viola Dana, of *A Poor Little Rich Girl* and known in pictures as Viola Flugrath, played child parts delightfully in Edison pictures. Gladys Hulette, whose Beth in *Little Women* was so appealing, was graduated from films. […] Finally] this season’s *Snow White* […] was vivified by Marguerite Clark’s admirable and artistically delightful playing.

Seeking to secure similarly generous box-office revenues, film producers often engaged the same female stars who had shined in theatrical fairy plays, asking them to replicate on screen the fairy roles that glorified them on the legitimate stage. In
1914 alone, Mary Pickford appeared in film adaptations of *A Good Little Devil* and *Cinderella*. Two years later, Pickford’s direct contender for the title of “America’s Sweetheart,” diminutive Marguerite Clark, conquered picture audiences with her screen performances of *Prunella* and *Snow White*, roles that had catapulted Clark to stage stardom in 1913 and 1915, respectively. In fact, throughout the 1910s, the tiny actress would relive dozens of transformative fairy tale heroines: from destitute princess raised by gypsies in *The Goose Girl* (1915) to Pierrot’s brokenhearted bride in *Prunella* (1918); from feral daughter of the woods turned society lady in *Wildflower* (1914) to fairy-loving Irish lass in *Little Lady Eileen* (1916).

Established leading girls Viola Dana and Gladys Hulette, as well as rising stars Mary Miles Minter and Lila Lee, also performed their biological adolescence through screen representations of fairy girls and transformable princesses. Eighteen-year-old Dana starred as the fairy queen in *The Blind Fiddler* (1915), and as a scullery maid turned belle of the ball in *Cinderella’s Twin* (1920). At thirteen, Hulette played the pliable heroine in Edwin S. Porter’s *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland* (1910), and a fairy princess who precociously smokes and flirts with an older gentleman in Vitagraph’s one-reeler *The Princess Nicotine; or, The Smoke Fairy* (1909). Similarly, in her screen debut *The Fairy and the Waif* (1915), fourteen-year-old Minter appeared as a girl who converses with fairies; fourteen-year-old Lila Lee’s first role was that of “a poor little girl who rigs up a ‘boat’ in her tenement back-yard, and [...] sends her imagination roving over the seven seas.”

A year after playing the lead in this “mild little fantasy” appropriately titled *The Cruise of the Make-Believe* (1918), Lila impersonated another dreamful little heroine, Mary Lennox, in the first film adaptation of Frances Hodgson Burnett’s 1911 children’s classic *The Secret Garden*.

So often American cinema cast the first generation of young female stars in the roles of fairy girls and rags-to-riches princesses that their imaginary screen personas quickly became melded with their perceived lived identities. As noted by film scholar Richard deCordova, throughout the 1910s the star system promoted complete homogeneity between a player’s screen characters and off-screen identity. To achieve such fabricated illusion of consistency, the star system re-packaged their most girlish stars as real-life princesses, everyday Cinderellas, or ugly-ducklings-turned-ruling-swans when placed under the all-powerful tutelage of the motion picture kingdom. As early as 1913, the *Washington Times* promoted “charming Mary Pickford” as a magical performer who possesses “a budding girlish figure,” and, at the same time, “although she is almost twenty, still believes in fairies, and especially the good fairy who has presided over her destiny since the time she made her first appearance in the ‘movies.’” Six years later, Mary Pickford’s star text had evolved from Cinderella-ish fairy-believer into blue-blooded
royalty: In 1919, the actress confessed to The Tattler “how tickled she has been at the reports that she is the daughter of a duchess.”

A year before, touting the “astound-new” debut of their first “made-for-order” star Lila Lee, Paramount press agents built up the hype surrounding the unseen prodigy’s first production by releasing a manufactured account of “the young girl’s extraordinary [...] and] exotic antecedents”:

No living woman has emerged from such strange circumstances of life and [royal] parentage. Her father, a follower of Rasputin and an adherent of the old Russian regime, was sent by the Czar into exile. Her mother, a princess who was also a revolutionist, died a heroine of the Battalion of Death on the Western front. The child herself was captured and taken to Germany, and after appalling adventures escaped to Sweden and made her way to America a stowaway.

Although it was clearly fictional (in fact, Lila was a New Jersey girl, born Augusta Appel to a middle-class German American family), Photoplay guaranteed that this account was “truthful publicity,” further quipping that “what a sad, dull pass the movies are coming to when managers and press-agents spring on a new star on nothing but the truth.” At the same time Lila emerged as a Russian princess turned American “movie queen,” Photoplay presented Mae Marsh’s linear trajectory from child movie fan to adolescent film star as an actual embodiment of fairy tale transformation: “Without going further into the details of the early ambitions of this Ugly Duckling, this Cinderella, let us pause to observe the essential truth of the fairy stories as here exemplified. Just as the Ugly Duckling became a wonderful Swan, just as Cinderella alone could wear the Golden Slippers, so Mary is not Mae Marsh.”

The rags-to-riches Cinderella figure appears as much on the screen as it does in connection with early young actresses’ narratives of “discovery” and stardom. Recurrently, film critics described barely-of-age stars, such as “Mae Marsh, Mabel Normand, Norma Talmadge, Mary Pickford,” as part of a growing group of inexperienced “Cinderellas [who] found [their] way to fame and fortune thus unexpectedly in the world of make-believe: girls who were never, or hardly ever, heard of became famous overnight when their good fairies led them into the magic light of the Kliegs.” By 1916, fourteen-year-old Mary Miles Minter was being heralded as “The Fairy of Filmdom,” her fabricated biography promoted by the fan press as an actual fairy tale of magical metamorphosis: “No story ever written by Grimm, the necromancer of the nineteenth century, or related by the doomed Scheherazade,” mused Motion Picture Magazine, “could contain more of the elements of romance than the real story of the little fourteen-year-old Southern girl
now playing in the movies [...] and drawing a salary more than that of a United States senator.”

The idea that everyday, untried girls became movie stars because of a male producer’s transformative action participated in the rags-to-riches myth of female stardom created by the star system in the mid-1910s. Mary Pickford’s “good fairy of male persuasion [was] David Belasco [who] happened to hear of her [...] and transplanted her to Broadway where she became a star overnight.” Similarly, Lila Lee metamorphosed from street urchin to Paramount’s youngest star owing to the intervention of “her good fairies:” stage producer Gus Edwards and film producer Jesse L. Lasky. Such manufactured texts of female “discovery” further underscored the biographies of many of D. W. Griffith’s young leading ladies, including Bessie Love, Mae Marsh, and Miriam Cooper. Press agents assigned them fairy tale narratives by alleging that the three teenagers had been transformed from untrained extra girls into Griffith’s screen muses overnight. According to Photoplay, all Bessie Love had to do to be “discovered” was timidly rap at Griffith’s office door: “Griffith looked up and saw the girl’s face framed in the door way, [...] and two minutes later Bessie Love was on the Fine Arts payroll. She was a star almost from the start.”

In conjunction with their fictional inexperience, Pickford (who had actually been on stage since childhood), Marsh, and Talmadge also became known as fatherless waifs, the breadwinners of broken families often composed of a managerial materfamilias and another sister who was also an actress. In turn-of-the-century theatrical lore it was said that “it makes no difference who your mother is, but your father must be a glamorous and romantic figure—if you have a father. If you cannot invent a fascinating devil of a sire, kill him in your infancy—and kill him with dramatic suddenness.” The lack of a supportive father figure reinforced the image of feminine fragility and emotional vulnerability that many girl stars embodied onscreen; it also made them more readily pliable to a director’s demands.

The romanticization of young actresses’ fatherlessness also aligned their star texts with two of the most famous fairy tale heroines of the 1910s: Cinderella and Snow White, two fatherless adolescent girls turned ruling queens. However, it must be noted that not only press agents but also the actresses themselves magnified the absence of father figures in their publicized biographies. For example, underprivileged actress Jeanne Eagels openly admitted that, by eighteen, she had transformed her father “from a failure, a poor, meek ambitious” Midwestern
carpenter, into “a gay and reckless, ne’er do well artist from Spain” that resembled actor Antonio Moreno. Stories of Mae Marsh’s early loss of two father figures—first her biological father in a train accident, and then her stepfather in San Francisco’s 1906 earthquake—seemed to have been disseminated by Marsh herself in an attempt to romanticize her screen persona, as well as to mitigate her father’s chronic alcoholism. The same can be said of the Talmadge sisters’ sentimental reworking of their father’s early abandonment.

Clearly, these manufactured biographies aimed to mythologize female stardom. Relentlessly, they introduced young actresses as real-life personifications of well-known and well-beloved fictional figures: the blue-blooded princess demoted to a lower station—“a stowaway”—as a child, only to be restored to rightful queenliness in her adolescent years; the plain little Duckling transformed into a “wonderful Swan” as childhood wore off; and the talented, but dispossessed Cinderella, swept away from poverty and insecurity by a larger-than-life, magical happenstance. Ripening into adolescence under the “the magic light of the Kliegs,” in short, allowed ragged Cinderellas like Lee to return to their original riches; spurred “Ugly Ducklings” like Marsh to metamorphose into beautiful creatures; and offered Little Orphan Annies, such as Eagels and Talmadge, the opportunity to live a life of luxury and love their humble origins otherwise denied them. After all, like the life of fictional Cinderella, the careers of these young actresses also underwent a vital transformation from anonymous menial workers to affluent belles of the ball at the cusp of adulthood. Mass-marketed as figures of magical transformation, girl stars thus led a fairylike life of romance and adventure in the wonderful land of make-believe that was early Hollywood. The only difference between both narratives, however, is that in fabricated star texts film producers and directors acted as a girl’s fairy godfather, while the institutionalized film industry stood as the magical power enabling the actresses’ life-altering, rags-to-riches metamorphoses.

In sum, young actresses’ star texts functioned as stories of multifarious transformation: of class ascendance paralleling a girl’s biological evolution from childish larva to ladylike butterfly; and of adolescence marking the threshold to an enchanted life of economical affluence, physical perfection, and romantic completion as embodied by the real-life European princesses then gracing the stories in America’s popular newspapers. In fact, the press drew that parallel often. Articles in fan and trade magazines recurrently referred to young female stars as “princesses” and “queens,” and equated their mass popularity, lavish lifestyle, coiffed beauty, and professional status with that of blue-blooded royalty. In 1914, The Day Book claimed that the Thanhouser studio “created the Princess films especially for Miss [Muriel] Ostriche,” a fifteen-year-old actress “whose girlish beauty and peculiar talents inspired the title of Princess.” The following year, Motion Picture
*Magazine* announced that Billie Burke’s “highest salary ever paid to a Motion Picture artist” made her equitable to a veritable “queen.”[^69] Two years later, the same magazine introduced twenty-something Beverly Bayne as “Princess Beverly of Metro.”[^70] In 1916, *Picture Progress* crowned the most well-paid actress in motion pictures, Mary Pickford, as “the little blonde-haired Princess of Photoplays,”[^71] while in 1918, *Motion Picture Magazine* praised Norma Talmadge for achieving “phenomenal success with her own company” and described “the dainty and wise little woman” as a “peerless queen.”[^72]

Although America lacked monarchic bloodlines or princely fountainheads, the plethora of articles published in the popular press proves that American audiences followed with fascination the activities of European royals. The edification of a film industry built on an aloof pantheon of stars fostered a unique opportunity to manufacture a mythology of superior creatures supposedly chosen not by lineage but by innate talent. This pervasive mythologizing of film actors as professional deities—exclusive laborers organized in aristocratic hierarchies—participated in a larger cultural shift toward what historian Warren Susman diagnosed as the early-twentieth-century “cult of personality.”[^73] Endowed with regal characteristics—such as good looks, determination, and charisma—but also equipped with edifying biographies of economical struggle, class metamorphoses, and world conquest, film personalities, by the mid-1910s, had their manufactured texts serve as testimonies to an individual’s superhuman abilities. These texts also served as collective lessons to the transformative power of perseverance and ambition, characteristics that always undergirded the protean narrative of a self-reliant and self-made young civilization such as America.

Furthermore, American cinema’s eager absorption of aristocratic titles and hierarchies, as well as the highly publicized myth of the rags-to-riches screen queen, participated in a cultural moment that historians Nan Enstad and Kathy Peiss have noted spoke to the growing influx of young girls joining the urban workforce. As a result of increased paid labor, a higher number of underage females now enjoyed economical independence and personal leisure time without being prematurely impaired by the constraints of wifehood, housekeeping, and maternity. This change in female lifestyle significantly altered movie-going constituency. Film scholars Miriam Hansen and Shelley Stamp have influentially remarked that, by the mid-1910s, women and teenage girls emerged as important movie patrons, visible to film producers and exhibitors who increasingly attempted to lure working females’ patronage with beauty competitions, discounted admission prices, star-endorsed cosmetics, and glossy giveaways. By the late 1910s, Goldwyn Productions’ ads addressed working girls directly, promising them escapist respite “whenever you are tired of yourself and your work-a-day life—when you wish to be
whisked away to other worlds—go to a Goldwyn picture. Gone are your troubles. You are the heroine—you can lead a thousand lives. [...] Tonight the daughter of an earl—tomorrow you marry a cowboy.” Dreamful, romantic, remarkably eager and able to escape into make-believe “worlds,” Goldwyn’s imagined target-consumer shared uncanny resemblances with G. Stanley Hall’s teenage girl.

Films starring mythologized young actresses in roles that broached female transformation and romantic awakening (such as Cinderella, “the daughter of an earl,” or the bride of “a cowboy”) thus directly spoke to a female demographic originating from diverse backgrounds. This complex female audience included middle-class schoolgirls—whose dreams of stardom reflected a personal desire for peer admiration, social recognition, and self-beautification—as well as Goldwyn’s targeted wage-earning girl who, “tired of [her] work-a-day life,” sat in the theater dreaming of film stardom as the ultimate panacea to all her day-to-day economical struggles and unfulfilled romantic fantasies.

The trade and popular presses often captured the subtle nuances differentiating these two groups of girls’ affective investment in movie fandom. We find valuable insight into working girls’ dreams of film glory in a nationwide competition. From October 1915 until December 1916, one of the leading film fan magazines, Photoplay, and the recently developed “photoplay maker” World Film Corporation decided to capitalize on female adolescents’ longing for stardom by organizing the “Beauty and Brains’ Contest.” This nationwide competition promised to send “half a score of American Girls to become moving picture stars.” All the female readers had to do was mail “a profile picture and a full face study,” as well as a “letter of not more than 150 words stating: ‘Why I would like to be a photoplay actress.’” Although open to girls of all professional and personal backgrounds, I suggest that the “Beauty and Brains’ Contest” tapped into dreams of social ascendance and economical improvement intrinsically linked with the rise of a class of working girls.

Published monthly starting in December 1915, the 150-word autobiographical narratives submitted by the participants suggest that fan girls rooted their aspirations for stardom in a quest for more lucrative employment and rewarding class status: “One girl wrote that she is training to become a nurse ‘but if successful in this contest it will be ‘Goodnight Nurse.’ […] One girl who has been ‘everything […] from typist to drawing room dilettante; from kitchen to office and store; from underling to boss, […] now wants to be a camera queen.”

In addition, the competition addressed fan girls’ main fear about stardom: that the lack of stage experience would minimize their chances of succeeding in the motion picture business. In December, an ad compared the hopeful movie-struck fans to “unskilled young women leaping into stellar roles [such as …] Mae Marsh,
Anita Stewart, Mabel Normand, [...] and many other film stars” also in their teens when they gained film fame. A July editorial introduced the eleven winners as “daughters of destiny [...] forecast[ing] the new type of player: the native player, the player whose first and only study is the shadow stage, and who brings to it no prejudices of the theatre.” By presenting these examples of inexperienced girls’ rise to stardom, Photoplay invited female contestants to identify with such manufactured narratives of rags-to-riches transformation underpinning most actresses’ circulated texts. In fact, such comparative rhetoric implicitly promised that by simply entering the contest, any anonymous fan girl regardless of her class standing could suddenly become “a notable actress of extraordinary individuality and powers.”

Although eligible to girls of all walks of life, this promotion of instantaneous female stardom spoke most directly to working girls. In fact, the magazine maintained that, similar to many of their fans, stars like Normand or Marsh had once struggled in menial jobs but thanks to being “discovered,” “today are enjoying fame and fortune in the profession.” In other words, most of rags-to-riches star texts suggested that, through overnight film stardom, working girls could instantly shed their wage-earning struggles and enter a luxurious lifestyle marked by aggrandized self-worth, personal comfort, and magnified social respect.

Nonetheless, cinema’s fantasy of transformative self-betterment equally resonated with middle-class girls. In an attempt to classify the effects of movie watching in younger audiences, in the late 1920s university sociologist Herbert Blumer conducted a survey of almost two thousand high school and college-level students across the country. This ambitious research, supported by the Payne Fund and commissioned by the Motion Picture Research Council, resulted in a book titled Movies and Conduct (1933). Within its pages we find a repository of girls’ first-person accounts describing their adolescent engagement with motion pictures. These testimonies are accompanied by the interviewee’s age, ethnicity, and educational standing. Positioned as confessional reminiscences, the autobiographical reports shed some light on how middle-class American schoolgirls, unencumbered by working pressures, internalized the myth of female stardom. Consistently, the girls regarded the late 1910s/early 1920s as the formative time in their lives when movies impacted them the most. A majority of girls confessed to having been drawn to young actresses, and that such admiration often took the form of imitation. A “white, high-school senior,” admitted that after each movie, I think there is a great tendency to try to act like the girl you have just seen. Clara Bow has been my ideal girl, and I have tried to imitate some of her mannerisms. The way she wears her hair, [...] how she rolls her eyes, [...] and all her little actions. I have learnt from the movies how to be a flirt, and I have found out that at parties and elsewhere the coquette is the one who enjoys herself the most.
In the same vein, a “Female, 17, white, high-school junior” linked her imitative fan behavior to the “girls in the movies.” The high-schooler confessed that she only copied the female stars because they “were always beautiful and lady-like and so I tried to be too.” A twenty-year-old “college sophomore” concurred, claiming that “one learns from the movies something in the best ways of portraying one’s charms,” the reason she constantly mimicked actresses’ “graceful” posture and “good appearance.”

Curiously, by the late 1920s schoolgirls still elected the girlish Pickford of 1910s fairy tales as their favorite star and role model. A “Female, 19, Jewish, white, college sophomore” spoke of watching The Poor Little Rich Girl (1918) “three times, and as a result let my hair grow and put it up in rags every night […] and became an ardent Mary Pickford fan.”

Another nineteen-year-old Jewish girl explained that she had learned “the difference clothes may make in appearance” by seeing Mary Pickford in Daddy Long-Legs (1919) “parade for five scenes, bare-legged, in dark brown cast-offs, pig-tailed, and freckle-faced.”

Finally, a “Female, 20, white, college sophomore” selected fairy tales starring Pickford and Clark as her preferred genre, remarking that after seeing “‘Pollyanna,’ ‘Mrs Wiggs of the Cabbage Patch,’ and others [I] acted just as they [the film heroines] had done. I wanted mom to cut my hair and curl it as Pollyanna’s was. I even wanted to be struck by an automobile so that I could enjoy the experiences of being a heroine like Pollyanna.”

In short, grounding their imitative relation with girlish actresses in a desire for social refinement, self-betterment, and public recognition, on the one hand Blumer’s schoolgirls articulated a productive rapport with female stars that prioritized amusement, peer accolades, personal grooming, and an enhanced taste level. Working girls’ testimonies, on the other hand, tended to equate movie stardom with professional advancement and economical improvement.

Regardless of fan girls’ different backgrounds, however, in the end discourses on female stardom tapped into the ubiquitous American dream of miraculous metamorphosis that had for so long underscored the country’s national identity as an inclusive safe haven, the mythical land of opportunities where hard-working migrants and free-thinking immigrants strove to become their most optimal selves. Similarly, the message channeled through many of the young actresses’ star texts suggested that any girl—regardless of her class, experience, or personal background—could be magically made anew, ultimately transformed into someone better: from Jane Doe into “Miss Movie,” the queen of filmmdom heights. Not coincidentally, female stars—like real-life princesses turned queens—usually shed their birth name once they reached celebrity status. In such a manner Gladys Smith became the “Princess
of Photoplays,” Mary Pickford; Juliet Shelby, “the fairy of filmdom,” Mary Miles Minter; and little Augusta Appel, the Cinderella-ish Lila Lee.

Conclusions

The emergence of a movie star system focused on the promotion of deified “picture personalities” coincided with a renewed interest in mythologized female figures, either fictional fairies or real-life princesses. Such intersection allowed an inchoate “princess culture” to transcend the localized constraints of the page and the stage, taking over America’s collective imagination via mass-marketed cinema. As a reflex of such widespread cultural proclivity, a burgeoning film industry produced girl stars—young-looking, curly-haired, and sweet-mannered performers—whose fabricated biographies repeated legible narratives of rags-to-riches transformation that mirrored the tales of popular fairy tale heroines. As a way to reinforce a homogeneous cohesion between a player’s lived identity and her body of work, these girl stars only played virginal heroines on the cusp of adulthood who either underwent magical metamorphoses or miraculously improved in social standing, often through matrimonial completion or a third party’s fantastic intervention.

Further, these altered biographies and screen characterizations targeted a specific female demographic, imagined by press agents and magazine writers, as young, dreamful, and at times also wage earning. Although it is easy to suppose that mass-produced representations of girls as star-struck fans and fairy tale stars created an understanding of girlhood as derivative and superficial, girls’ responses to the star system’s fabricated discourse on female stardom suggest otherwise. By utilizing the new film fan magazines as a public venue where they explored their intimate dreams of class ascension and self-betterment; by deriving pleasure from usurping the fairy tale identities portrayed on stage and on screen; by re- appropriating actresses’ movie characters as productive role models; and finally, by participating in the drafting of their own star texts, fan girls and girl stars were far from passive instruments of a new film culture. Their agency at times may have been obscured by the saccharine connotations associated with the figures of diminutive fairies and dispossessed princesses, as well as with the economical goals of a male-dominated movie industry. However, girls’ agency—in the shape of female fans’ assiduous patronage and passionate self-identification, and of female stars’ professional acumen and film labor—helped to enable that collapse between audiences’ fascination with adolescent girlhood, fairy princesses, and the emergence of an institutionalized motion picture world, markers that so crucially influenced American culture in the 1910s.
Endnotes

12. Stanley Hall seminally described “the budding girl” as “no longer a little girl, but by no means yet a young woman, nor is she a cross between or a mixture of the two, but a something quite unique and apart.” “The Budding Girl,” 1.
Meaningfully, all these texts would be turned into motion pictures throughout the 1910s.


Cinderella. Exhibitor’s Herald (1914).


Interestingly, in 1916, fan magazine Picture Progress noted that by playing Cinderella’s inner life so effectively, “Mary Pickford has perhaps proved a different theory about dreaming than usual, for it is her acting of dreams and not the dreaming that has made many things come true […] (including the biggest salary ever paid to a girl).” Picture Progress. 1916. (August): 72.
In fact, Elsie Albert co-wrote, co–directed, and played more fairy princess roles in her short film career (1910–1917) than many popular young actresses. From 1913 to 1914 alone, she starred in *The Sleeping Beauty*, *Beauty in the Beast*, *Golden Locks and The Three Bears*, as well as *For The Heart of a Princess, Such a Princess*, and *The Love of Princess Yolande*, all fairy tale shorts produced by Rex/Universal and directed by her husband, Harry C. Matthews.


Tinee, Mae. 1917. “Please Come with Us to Fairyland!” *Chicago Daily Tribune* (January 9): 14, italics mine.


“Tess of the Storm Country.” Audrey Chamberlin Scrapbook Collection. Margaret Herrick Library, Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences, Los Angeles.


Legend has it that Clark’s film performance would also become the blueprint for Walt Disney’s famous animated princess depicted in *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* (1937). For more information on Clark’s Snow White and Disney’s movie, see: Kaufman, J. B. 2012. The Fairest One of All: The Making of Walt Disney’s Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs. San Francisco: Walt Disney Family Foundation Press.


For more information on the manufactured elision between players’ everyday and screen persona, see: deCordova, Richard. 1990. Picture Personalities.


Ibid.


Shorey. 1918. “Do You Believe In Fairies?,” 47.


This is true of all three girls. Pickford had a younger sister, Lottie, as well as a brother, Jack, who achieved limited success on the screen; Marsh supposedly was introduced to Griffith through her older sister, “Love” Marsh; and Talmadge’s younger sister, Constance, also became a well-known actress in the late 1910s/mid-1920s.
67. Doherty *The Rain Girl*, 86.
73. According to Susman, the twentieth-century concept of “personality” came to substitute that of nineteenth-century “character” as the leading distinguishing feature in the social arena. Susman has suggested that, while “character” intrinsically depended on personal sacrifice and accomplishment, “personality” stemmed from the quick growth of a superficial media culture. Simply put, if “character [was] either good or bad; personality [was only] famous or infamous.” Susman, Warren. 2003. *Culture as History: The Transformations of American Society in the Twentieth Century*. Washington, DC: Smithsonian Books: 277.
75. As Enstad has noted, “The movie-struck fantasy was a dream of lavish recognition [… that] imaginatively combined women’s workplace struggles with […] fantasies of romance, adventure, and sudden changes in fortune that characterized working ladyhood.” *Ladies of Labor*, 183–184.
78. Ibid. 46.
81. Ibid. 55.
83. Ibid. 80.
84. Ibid. 45.
85. Ibid. 33.
86. Ibid. 76.
87. Ibid. 60.