

Enchanting Readers with Revisionist Fairy Tales: Pairing *Ella Enchanted* and Espinosa's *The Courageous Princess* Discussion Questions for Small Group or Paideia Seminar

The following questions may act as a guide for how teachers might explore these two texts with their students. The italicized text that follows after certain bullets does not represent a correct answer to the question but additional information and points of references from which teachers may want to examine the works.

- Both Ella and Helen have something special about them that sets them apart from being not only normal girls, but normal princesses. What are these traits, and how do they affect each girl?

A "fairy bestows on the infant Ella the 'gift' of obedience. This gift quickly becomes a curse, as no matter how silly or hurtful the command might be, Ella must carry it out. If she tries to resist, she becomes physically ill" (Cox). Students may find it harder to recognize the subtle clues that Mabelrose is "the one from the South" who will save the kingdom of Leptia. Also, a quick mind will note that Ella is not royalty from the get-go, but leads the life of a well-to-do merchant's daughter. Later, however, she does become a princess.

- Both Ella and Mabelrose get chances to go to elegant parties and balls. How does Mabelrose's experience at the ball compare with Ella's first few trips? How are the two girls treated by other young women at the parties?

The ball scene is a comedic spectacle in The Courageous Princess and can be compared to any number of hilarious scenes in the Levine text. What is apparent in both works is that neither princess is the most beautiful nor socially accepted at their respective parties. This might lead into a discussion of the "class" differences apparent in Ella's and Mabelrose's families. Again, Ella's father is a merchant. Though she does not begin the story as a princess, she is relatively well-off. Fortunes change quickly for her, however, and economics actually drive the story forward. Mabelrose is from a poor kingdom with few resources compared to other princesses.

- Can Ella also be described as courageous, as Espinosa describes Mabelrose? What evidence is there that both girls are courageous?
- Describe the differences in Ella's relationship with her parents and Mabelrose's relationship with hers. What are the most striking similarities and differences? How do you think their relationships helped influence their respective stories?

Ella has a complex relationship with her father whom she both admires and despises. Her mother is dead but remains an exemplar of beauty and grace to the clumsy and awkward Ella. Queen Helena and King Jeryk get

less character development than do Ella's parents, but once their daughter is kidnapped by the evil dragon Shalathrumnostrum, Jeryk leaves to find her and save her from whatever obstacles are there, just as he saved his wife from an evil wizard. This subplot gets little attention but does give male readers a figure to relate to. In terms of revisionist traits, it should be noted that in this volume, Jeryk never reaches Mabelrose, who becomes a savior in her own right and proves time and again that she is capable of saving herself.

- Both protagonists must be very resourceful. List examples of how the two girls make the most of what they have at their disposal.

Ella's resistance to her curse has made her clever and quick-witted. She often finds ways of manipulating the curse to her benefit and seems to be afraid of nothing, perhaps because she is accustomed to trouble. Mabelrose too is ingenious in the face of adversity but often looks to material resources rather than inner strengths, though her reliance on faith and goodness of heart might also be considered inner reserves.

- Mabelrose and Ellen both have thoughts about princes. Ella has a relationship of mutual respect and admiration with young Prince Char, and Mabelrose, once captured, prays that a prince will rescue her someday. But, even once Ella marries Char and becomes royalty, she doesn't do so like other fairy tale princesses. How do the interactions with princes and the resolutions thereof differ in these two stories from those in other fairy tales you've read, seen, or heard about? Do you prefer these two stories' way of dealing with the "prince issue," or the other fairy tales? Explain your answer.

Here again the revisionist elements are intriguing. Ella does, after all, fall for the prince and live "happily ever after" (232). Does this fact subvert all the other elements in the story where Ella is a strong, willful young woman? Likewise, does Mabelrose, who ends her story a savior but still pines for her family, really break the mold of stereotypical fairy tale princess?

- Both Ella and Mabelrose find that they can control seemingly fierce beasts. Do you remember how? What about how the girls deal with these powers? If you could choose one of the two, which power would you want and why? What would you do with your powers, and would you be more like Ella or Mabelrose in the end?

Ella is an expert linguist and learns that she can sweet-talk man-eating ogres once she is captured and saved for a late dinner. She uses her power to escape and to help Char and his knights defeat and capture the ogres. The reader is left with the impression that this is a little gift that Ella will continue to use as it comes in handy. This apparent choice on her part demonstrates a wonderfully wicked aspect of Ella's mischievous personality, but it is perhaps not the most moral decision to make.

Compare Ella's decision to that of Mabelrose, who, once she learns the power of the magic flute she uses to rally a kingdom to liberation, decides "It can do much good/But it can also be put to evil use./I can't leave it to anyone else..../It must never again fall into the wrong hands" and then breaks it over her knee (234).

- How do you think Ella would use Mabelrose's magic flute?
- Both Ella and Mabelrose encounter all sorts of magical creatures that either aid them or want to harm them. Do you prefer one novel's cast of supporting characters over the other? Consider the drawings in *The Courageous Princess*, and try to draw what you think one of the creatures from *Ella Enchanted* might look like.

This can lend itself to further discussion of fairy tales as revision, if a teacher is so inclined. The creatures in Espinosa's work follow the traditional model of "talking animals" that often act as protectors or tormentors of fairy tale characters. Does Espinosa turn this convention on its head in any way, perhaps by making breaking down the category into "talking animals" like Spikey and the more anthropomorphic anifolks?

For teachers who might want to incorporate some traditional fairy tales into this pairing or make these texts part of a larger unit:

- *Ella Enchanted* is clearly a revision of *Cinderella*. Now that we know that, let's make a list of the different ways Ella's adventures revise or retell in a different way the version of the Cinderella story we read/saw.
- Now let us consider *The Courageous Princess*. The back cover of the book says it is set in a "familiar fairy tale world." But what fairy tale world is it, or is it any one particular fairy tale? Which fairy tale(s) is this story most like? Does it revise certain fairy tale ideas just like *Ella Enchanted* does?
- Often main figures in fairy tales and epics have to go on journeys to grow as characters. How do Ella and Mabelrose grow on their various journeys?
- Which story, in your opinion, is the better fairy tale, based on what we've learned are elements of the fairy tale? Which story, in your opinion, is the better revisionist fairy tale, based on what we've learned are elements of fairy tales and how authors sometimes like to twist them?
- As well, teachers who might want to try this pairing with more advanced students or with students who express great interest may want to turn to the literature of Joseph Campbell or Jack Zipes (*Don't Bet on the Prince*, for instance) for more thorough analysis of fairy tale trends, themes, and tropes.

Additional Resources

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