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Putting the Punk in a Steampunk Cinderella:  
Marissa Meyer’s “Lunar Chronicles”

Abstract: Focusing on the first novel, Cinder, in Marissa Meyer’s ‘Lunar Chronicles’ series, this paper examines her blending of fairy-tale and steampunk motifs in order to rewrite the meme of “Cinderella”, identified not only as a narrative of family dysfunction and child abuse, but also as a narrative of feminine passivity and wish fulfilment. After identifying the key motifs from “Cinderella” present in the novel, the abusive stepfamily, the seemingly abject heroine, the prince, the pumpkin transportation, and the ball, the discussion progresses to address two powerful steampunk motifs associated with the Cinderella character, Cinder: the maker, or mechanic, and the cyborg. As a maker, Cinder is empowered by her knowledge of technology and ability to tinker with it, for she is able to use her skills to resist those who would abuse her, and as she is a cyborg, she also has control over her own body. Her cybernetics also empower Cinder, allowing her to resist both mental and physical attacks. Comparing Meyer’s use of steampunk motif to popular applications of steampunk to “Cinderella,” such as Rod Espinosa’s “Steampunk Cinderella”, which focus on aesthetics over politics, illustrates the degree to which her depiction of Cinder is connected to one of the punk aspect of steampunk, the rebellion against social injustice. Meyer does not rewrite the meme of abuse in “Cinderella,” but in her revision of the story, she demonstrates how a girl might resist being defined by her abuse, and she rewrites the meme of female passivity as Cinder works through a process of identity formation. Compared to the novel’s female characters that use traditional markers of femininity to disguise their manipulations and cruelties, the cyborg mechanic Cinder emerges as a positive role model for girls.

Key Words: Fairy Tale, Steampunk, Meme, Cinderella, Gender, Young Adult

Marissa Meyer’s “Lunar Chronicles” comprises four volumes: Cinder (2012; based on “Cinderella”), Scarlet (2013; based on “Little Red Riding Hood”), Cress (2014; based on “Rapunzel”), and Winter (2015; based on “Snow White”). The series is a generic hybrid, a mash-up of science fiction, fantasy, and fairy tale, with elements of steampunk. The fairy tale motifs are strongly evident in the books, while the steampunk elements are less overt but nonetheless play a key role in Meyer’s revisioning of the dominant memes of the innocent persecuted heroine tales she rewrites. This paper focuses mostly on the charac-
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...ter of Cinder, the central character of the first volume, whose story is woven throughout the series, to explore the ways in which Meyer uses steampunk motifs to rewrite the meme of “Cinderella,” a message about feminine passivity and wish fulfilment. Cinder is obviously based on Cinderella, but instead of a girl banished to the ashes on the hearth, she is a mechanic, in steampunk terms a maker, with a basement storage room workshop. Although much Young Adult steampunk has focused dominantly on the genre’s aesthetics, steampunk as a social movement also has an agenda to change radically our relationship to technology, one of the “punk” elements of steampunk. Makers are valorized for reclaiming human ownership of technology, in opposition to average consumers who use new technologies but cannot make or fix them. Steampunk also, as Jenny Sundén notes, “mak[es] explicit . . . an intimate relationship between femininity, embodiment and technology” (Sundén 2015: 381). As a maker, Cinder has greater agency than Cinderella. She is also a cyborg, a hybrid being that is essentially human but with body parts replaced or modified by technology. In steampunk literature, the cyborg is a figure that challenges our understanding of what is human, and in this case of what it means to be female. Meyer’s use of steampunk motifs establishes Cinder as a strong revision of the “Cinderella” meme that speaks directly to current adolescent anxieties about femininity, agency, and identity.

Meyer indicates in an interview at the back of the Square Fish paperback edition that she was inspired by the Chinese variant of “Cinderella,” “Yeh Shen”, because of her fascination with Asian culture (Meyer 2012: n.p.). This allows her to play with the association between Cinderella’s famous slipper and constrictions of the female body. Tyler Scott Smith points out that although Yeh Shen does not bind her feet according to southern Chinese custom, the story still celebrates the smallness of Yeh Shen’s foot: the King falls in love not with Yeh Shen, but with the tiny shoe she has left behind (Smith 2013: 6). Instead of fetishizing the tiny shoe, and by implication the tiny foot that fits it, Meyer focuses on the pain and constriction caused by her heroine’s unnaturally small foot. Linh Cinder lives in New Beijing, part of the Eastern Commonwealth, in the second century of the Third Era, after World War IV; in this alternate reality, the moon was colonized in the 1970s, and Lunars are viewed with suspicion by those on earth. Cinder, eventually revealed to be a Lunar, is a cyborg because it was the only way for her to survive horrific injuries in an accident from her early childhood, when she was escaping the assassins who killed her birth parents. Among her cybernetic implants is an artificial foot, and her wicked adoptive mother controls Cinder in part by forcing her to continue to wear the foot that was designed for her child’s body, despite her having long outgrown it. Before we first encounter Cinder suffering with her too-small cybernetic foot, we see the connection between Meyer’s novel and the fairy tale made overt with the epigraph to Book One of Cinder: “While her sisters were given beautiful dresses and fine slippers, Cinderella had only a filthy smock..."
and wooden shoes” (Meyer 2012: 1). The novel is divided into four books, each with an epigraph from the fairy tale, the remaining three as follows: “There was no bed for her, and at night when she had worked herself weary, she had to sleep by the fire in the ashes” (Meyer 2012: 84); (in the voice of one of the stepsisters) “You want to go to the festival, all covered in dust and dirt? But we would only be ashamed of you!” (Meyer 2012: 187); and “The prince had the stairway smeared with pitch, and when Cinderella tried to run away, her left slipper got stuck” (Meyer 2012: 283). These epigraphs highlight Cinderella’s abjection and status as an object, whether of her adoptive family’s disgust or the prince’s desire. The novel is also littered with allusions to the fairy tale: Cinder’s too-small mechanical foot (instead of a dainty slipper), Adri the abusive adoptive mother (instead of the wicked stepmother), a salvaged pumpkin-coloured, ancient car (instead of a coach), and Cinder being forced to pick up and sort tools before the ball (instead of picking lentils out of the ashes on the hearth), for instance. All of these motifs encourage us to read the novel as a Cinderella story.

But what exactly is a Cinderella story, and how do we read it? Each of the tales that Meyer revises in the series falls into the innocent persecuted heroine category, noted for an “emotional emphasis on intra-family relationships that are important to the heroine,” particularly regarding the heroine’s experience of and response to abuse from close family members (Jones 1993: 21). “Cinderella” is the most widespread and popular of these stories: there are hundreds of variants from around the world, not to mention numerous retellings in picturebooks, short stories, and novels. Fairy tale scholar Jack Zipes suggests that certain tales like “Cinderella” thrive in this way because they are carriers of cultural values that remain relevant; he applies to fairy tales the evolutionary biologist Richard Dawkins’s theory of the meme as a unit of cultural transmission. He describes the fairy tale-as-meme as one “that has been canonized in the Western world and become so memorable that it appears to be transmitted naturally by our minds to communicate information that alerts us to pay attention to a specific given situation on which our lives may depend” (Zipes 2006: 14). According to Zipes, the meme of “Cinderella” addresses “issues of child abandonment, family legacy, sibling rivalry, and parental love” (Zipes 2006: 115). Certainly these topics are at the core of all versions of the tale. I would suggest, however, that in Western culture the most popular meme associated with “Cinderella” is the rags-to-riches story. Jane Yolen identifies the American Cinderella as “a spun-sugar caricature of her hardier European and Oriental forebears”, and the mass-market American version as “a tale of wishes-come-true-regardless”, a fantasy of wish-fulfillment (Yolen 1977: 21, 27). Similarly, in their investigation of three contemporary rewrites of “Cinderella,” Karlyn Crowley and John Pennington point out that the story “seems in need of gender refashioning” (Crowley and Pennington 2010: 298), after working their way through a
lengthy description of pop-culture depictions of sweet girls who are found by their princes. The dominant meme of “Cinderella” in Western culture seems to be that good things happen to nice, deserving girls.

Applications of memetics are somewhat controversial. As Gregory Shapiro notes, “[m]emes are not material things, and yet they are defined through robust biological analogy and materialist mechanics” (Shapiro 2009: 96). There appears to be a tension between the implied determinism of the meme and human free will when considering narrative memes. Here the analogy with evolution is helpful: not only is the meme not static (Zipes 2012: 20), but any narrative meme transformation, or mutation, to continue the biological analogy, occurs through human interaction with and response to iterations of the tale (Silva 2012: 49). Therefore, not only does the meme analogy effectively represent why certain fairy tales are replicated more than others, but it also offers the possibility of narrative evolution. According to Zipes,

The choices that we make when we seek to transform the world are intertwined with ethics, aesthetics, and politics. As we continue to form and reform fairy tales in the twenty-first century, there is still a glimmer of utopian hope that a better past lies ahead, but more practically, a fairy tale like “Cinderella” replicated as meme reveals to us what we have not been able to resolve and how much more we need to know about the world and ourselves. (Zipes 2006: 127)

This latter is the work I see Meyer performing with her character Cinder, not so much resolving all issues in the “Cinderella” meme, but rather showing us new ways to think about how we might address them, in terms that are relevant to contemporary culture. The length of the series allows Meyer to explore in greater depth the element central to “Cinderella” stories: the intra-family conflict that the heroine must somehow negotiate and transcend. Indeed, intra-family conflict is more complicated here than in most “Cinderella” stories, for not only does Cinder have her adoptive mother and guardian, Adri, along with two adoptive sisters, like the stepfamily so familiar from the fairy tale, but she also has a birth family: the evil Lunar Queen Levana is her aunt, and Winter, the Snow White figure mentioned only in passing in Cinder as the stepdaughter forced to self-mutilate by Levana, is her step-cousin. It is these latter relationships that become more important to Cinder as she moves beyond Adri’s sphere in her quest to defeat Levana. Yet family is not the single factor in Cinder’s identity formation. More than the unwanted and unloved child, she is doubly alien as a cyborg and a Lunar. This combination of factors might make her the most abject of Cinderellas, but Meyer revises what Jane Yolen calls the American “Cinderella” story of female patient suffering and goodness rewarded by redefining female worth as rooted in female agency and emphasizing her heroine’s superior humanity when compared to that of many of the unmodified human characters.
Cristina Bacchilega, writing on postmodern transformations of the fairy tale, has noted that “they are doubling and double: both affirmative and questioning” (Bacchilega 1997: 22). This is so of *Cinder*, which on the one hand replicates the Cinderella meme, both in the motif of the child abused by family and in the motif of the girl who is ultimately recognized and valued. On the other hand, *Cinder* does challenge aspects of the Cinderella meme: Cinder resists being defined by her family, and she learns to both value herself and expect to be valued in her difference from societal norms. Meyer achieves this in part by blending generic elements, combining in Cinder two key figures from steampunk fiction: the maker and the cyborg.

Although Meyer makes use of these two steampunk motifs, *Cinder* does not fit the classic definition of steampunk literature as defined in a special issue of *Neo-Victorian Studies*:

[Steampunk] can mean a narrative set in Victorian London; one set in a futuristic world that retains or reverts to the aesthetic hallmarks of the Victorian period; a piece of speculative historical fiction that deploys Victorian subjects; or a text that incorporates anachronistic versions of nineteenth-century technologies. (Bowser, Croxall 2010: 1)

The novel has nothing to do with Victorian London, Victorian aesthetics, or anachronistic nineteenth-century technologies. Indeed, it is set far in the future, and the only anachronistic technology, really, is Cinder’s old combustion engine car. This does not mean, however, that *Cinder* cannot be seen as using steampunk elements. The definition of steampunk is the subject of much critical debate; it is fraught because there are three distinct aspects of steampunk. There is a steampunk literary tradition reaching back to the 1970s, but steampunk has also become associated with an aesthetic movement focused on costume, decorative arts, and role-playing, as well as a political movement that rejects contemporary consumerism and human subordination to technology. The steampunk aesthetic is in danger of becoming a formulaic cliché that seems to celebrate an imperialistic culture. This leads the critic and editor of major steampunk anthologies Ann VanderMeer to argue in the introduction to *Steampunk III: Steampunk Revolution* for a definition of steampunk as an attitude, claiming that the “punk” aspect of steampunk demands that it become “something other than its origins indicate,” that it push generic boundaries (VanderMeer 2012: 11). Meyer does just this by incorporating the steampunk tropes of the maker and cyborg with her fairy tale motifs and science fiction.

Most pop-culture applications of steampunk to “Cinderella” focus squarely on aesthetics. An online search for “steampunk Cinderella” turns up varied sites, all focused on giving Cinderella, character and story, a steampunk “look”: instructions for costume make-up for Hallowe’en, a dance recital, a steampunk version of Jules Massenet’s opera *Cendrillon*, to name a few. A good example of this aesthetic approach to steampunk applied to “Cin-
"Cinderella" is Rod Espinosa’s *Steampunk Cinderella*, a comic book published a year after *Cinder* and collected in the trade edition of his *Steampunk Fables*. Here, Cinderella is a comical figure, scurrying between various steampunk contraptions, most malfunctioning, designed to help her with her domestic chores. As Rebecca Onion points out, “misinterpretation of an aesthetic movement as simple aesthetics leaves the deeper relation between human and object unexamined” (Onion 2008: 156). Setting Meyer’s depiction of Cinder against pop culture uses of steampunk as a matter of “simple aesthetics” highlights the political implications of Cinder-as-maker. The *Steampunk Bible* classifies steampunk makers as those who “typically restore obsolete devices and modify modern technology” (VanderMeer, Chambers 2011: 96). Cinder not only has her workshop in the storage space below her family’s apartment, but she has a stall at the weekly market, where people in her community hire her to make repairs and modifications to various technological items. She is known as “the best mechanic in New Beijing”, with many of her customers initially shocked to discover she is a teenage girl (Meyer 2012: 10). The steampunk maker, or mechanic, is a powerful figure in much steampunk literature. Whereas those who use technology without understanding how it works are ultimately helpless to control it, the maker exercises control over technology; this ability to tinker with technology is seen as the most “punk”, or rebellious, aspect of steampunk in terms of the implied critique of our relationship with technology (Bowser, Croxall 2010: 22).

Cinder’s skills as a mechanic empower her in a number of ways and are essential to her self-assertion and development of agency. It may seem they are only another aspect of her servitude to her adoptive mother, as she supports her family with them and is forced by her status as a cyborg to remain under Adri’s guardianship. However, she applies her maker skills in a plan to free herself from her situation: with the help of the automaton Iko, she takes an old, combustion-engine car from a junkyard to her workshop, where she can tinker with it and turn it into a vehicle for escape. Later, as her adventures continue in *Scarlet*, she uses her tinkering skills to put Iko’s personality chip, all that’s left of her after Adri destroys the android and sells most of her parts, into a spaceship’s auto-control system, “rescuing at least one person who matter[s] to her” (Meyer 2013: 154). Most important, as a mechanic, Cinder has the capacity to repair herself. She has a synthetic hand and foot, a control panel in the back of her head, control wires along her spine, some metal vertebrae, four metal ribs, synthetic tissue protecting her heart, and metal splints supporting the bones of one leg; she is “36.28 % not human” (Meyer 2012: 82). In much steampunk literature, the automaton or the cyborg, often female, is at the mercy of the male maker. I’m thinking here of Ekaterina Sedia’s Mattie in *The Alchemy of Stone*, who cannot gain control of the key that keeps her alive and whose maker punishes her by taking her eyes, or the steam dancer, from the short story of the same title by Caitlin R. Kiernan, who is at the mercy of the man who saved
her and made her first a cyborg and then his wife; he teases that he will make a window into her head so she cannot keep any secrets from him. Unlike these female figures, Cinder is able to change her own parts and does not need any male mechanic to adapt and control her body. When we first encounter her, she is removing her “too-small” foot and enjoying the resultant sense of freedom as she waits for a replacement foot to be delivered (3). Cinder’s rejection of the part and its attendant limitations suggests that she will rebel against the traditional role of Cinderella, just as she becomes a rebel in her continued resistance to Levana, stating at the end of Cress that she is “going to start a revolution” (Meyer 2014: 550).

Certainly Cinder as mechanic and cyborg is represented as the opposite of the traditional fairy-tale princess-in-waiting. As a mechanic, she is usually dirty, covered with oil and grease. She is also described as lacking in standard feminine attractiveness: “If Cinder’s body had ever been predisposed to femininity, it had been ruined by whatever the surgeons had done to her, leaving her with a stick-straight figure. Too angular. Too boyish. Too awkward with her heavy artificial leg” (34). Tellingly, however, culturally defined female beauty is brought into question with Levana, whose beauty is a facade, a glamour that hides not only a cold, vicious heart, but also a physically unattractive face. When he first sees her in person, Kai notes that her beauty is “unnatural” (Meyer 2012: 184). Likewise, Cinder notes that Adri, “with her face shimmering with too much power and her lips painted horrifically bright . . . almost look[s] like a reproduction” (Meyer 2012: 21). Levana, Adri, and Pearl, one of Cinder’s adoptive sisters, work hard to project socially acceptable feminine personas, yet none is a particularly attractive human being. In contrast, Cinder, when she finally arrives at the ball, which she has decided to attend only to warn Prince Kai of Levana’s plot to marry then kill him, presents herself in a rumpled ball gown that belonged to her deceased younger sister, wearing a too-small foot because Adri has confiscated her proper foot, and covered in stains from her pumpkin car/coach. Cinder is well aware that she does not belong at the ball, but her concern for those she cares about outweighs any anxieties about propriety or her less than fairy-tale-princess appearance.

Citing Donna Haraway’s “Cyborg Manifesto”, Bowser and Croxall note that the cyborg in steampunk, blurring boundaries between hierarchical distinctions such as human versus machine, offers “radical feminist possibilities” (Bowser, Croxall 2010: 27). While it might be a stretch to imagine Cinder as a feminist manifesto, certainly the novel complicates the human-machine binary, and since this process is centred on the female cyborg Cinder, there is also an exploration of gender and power. Cinder is seen by many as not-human; when she escapes from prison in Scarlet, a crowd viewing the news footage agrees with the statement by one viewer that he would “put a bullet right through her head. And good riddance” (Meyer 2013: 12). In the Eastern Com-
monwealth, cyborgs are expendable: there is a draft that forces them to serve as guinea pigs in the search for a plague cure. They are “hated and despised by every culture in the galaxy” (Meyer 2012: 292). When Cinder’s much loved younger adoptive sister Peony falls ill of the plague, Adri attacks her: “‘Do your kind even know what love is? Can you feel anything at all, or is it just . . . programmed?’” (Meyer 2012: 63; italics mine). Similarly, Levana responds to an android’s expression of sympathy that “[t]he idea that a pile of metal could experience emotion is insulting” (Meyer 2012: 213). Interestingly, early on, when Cinder first sees Prince Kai’s android, Nainsi, she notes that it is an older model because of its “mock-feminine shape” (Meyer 2012: 8). People do not want their androids to look like humans. What seems to be most disturbing about cyborgs is that they are human and not-human at the same time, blurring the binary distinction.

To some extent Cinder internalizes the societal prejudice against cyborgs. When she is first told of her true identity as the Lunar Princess Selene, she cries, “No. I can’t. I can’t be a queen or a princess or—I’m nobody. I’m a cyborg!” (384). Until she is publicly outed at the ball, Cinder tries as much as possible to pass as being fully human. She also has absorbed the earth bias against Lunars. When first presented with the possibility that she might be Lunar, she is horrified:

To be cyborg and Lunar. One was enough to make her a mutant, an outcast, but to be both?... Lunars were a cruel, savage people. They murdered their shell children. They lied and scammed and brainwashed each other because they could. They didn’t care who they hurt, so long as it benefitted themselves. She was not one of them. (Meyer 2012: 178)

Cinder struggles with the double identity of cyborg and alien. Writing of steampunk romance, Julie Anne Taddeo comments that “the heroine’s own struggle to refashion her identity takes center stage” (Taddeo 2013: 50). This is particularly so for Cinder. Adopted, she is constantly made aware by Adri that she is unwelcome and not part of the Linh family, despite Garan having given her his surname. She is also aware that as a cyborg she is an object of disgust for many humans. When she has to accept her Lunar heritage, she thinks that “she had no idea who she was anymore. No clue who she was supposed to be” (Meyer 2012: 385). This is a significant difference from most “Cinderella” stories. Generally, Cinderella knows who she is: she had a mother, and she has a father, however absent or incompetent he may be. It is only the temporary hostility of her stepmother that forces her to disguise her identity. A key feature of most “Cinderella” stories is the recognition by others (particularly the prince) of the heroine’s true worth; there is no process of identity formation for the heroine. In Cinder’s case, however, she must negotiate the different factors of her heritage, societal expectations, and her own desires to shape an identity. A key element in her sense of self is her pride in her maker abilities, but she must
integrate her cyborg and Lunar components to, as Dr. Erland puts it, “accept who [she] truly is” (Meyer 2012: 384).

Cinder begins to come to terms with her cyborg self when it saves her from Levana. It is unusual for a Lunar to be a cyborg because Lunars, who have the ability to manipulate bioelectrical energy, are opposed to cybernetics, and perhaps for good reason. Cinder’s cybernetic implants allow her to see through Levana’s glamour and recognise her lies. At the crisis moment, when she faces down Queen Levana, as Cinder resists the queen’s compulsion to kill herself, she “call[s] forth every nanobyte of strength she possess[es]” and attempts to kill the queen instead. In between pointing the gun at her own head and then pointing it at Levana, she notices that she feels “different. Strong. Powerful” (Meyer 2012: 364). In Scarlet, we see her making good use of the enhanced cybernetic hand Dr. Erland gives her at the end of Cinder, using its various tools to break out of jail and jumpstart a spaceship. When she encounters another prisoner, Carson Thorne (think of the prince from “Rapunzel”), she matter-of-factly borrows a vid-cable from his portscreen and opens her skull panel in front of him to replace her own defective cable. When he shows revulsion in observing she has a portscreen in her head, her reaction is utterly nonchalant: “Something like that” (Meyer, 2013: 34). As a maker, she is perhaps more prepared to accept the benefits of her cybernetics than she might otherwise be if she had no understanding of how they work or ability to repair them.

It is more difficult for her to accept her Lunar identity. Human fear of Lunars is highlighted by Kai’s acknowledgement after Cinder’s escape in Scarlet that it is Cinder’s Lunar abilities to manipulate rather than her cybernetics that disgust and frighten him. He wonders “how many times she’d tricked him” (Meyer 2013: 66). Whereas Cinder the cyborg is attacked as being unable to have or display human feelings, Cinder the Lunar is assumed to be inhumanly duplicitous and malevolent. Since most of the novel is focalized through Cinder, we see that she most certainly does have human feelings. For instance, when she realizes that the cyborg draft has been a ruse to locate her, she feels ill at the thought of those killed in the process. It is simply the visual markers of her feelings that she cannot display, as she has no tear ducts to weep and her sensors prevent her from blushing. Both weeping and blushing are particularly associated with feminine sensibility, yet in the novel, the woman who works hardest to present a conventionally feminine image, Adri, views a feminine appearance, similar to Lunar glamour, as a tool to manipulate men; as she says to the dressmaker, she “expect[s] results” from the dresses being made for her daughters (Meyer 2012: 23). Levana uses her glamour to project the image of a warm and nurturing queen to disguise her ruthless ambition and cruelty. In contrast, Cinder is very reluctant to use her Lunar abilities to manipulate others. She reflects that “[s]he could make people see things that weren’t there. Feel things they shouldn’t feel. Do things they didn’t mean to do. She could be
anyone. Become anyone” (Meyer 2012: 387). Being Lunar seems to offer her a world of possible identities, which is both “sicken[ing] and frighten[ing]” to her. It is harder for Cinder to counter the accusation that she is a monstrous Lunar because she fears herself; whereas she knows she is capable of human emotion despite her cybernetics, she does not know if she can be Lunar and still be humane.

This is another key way in which Cinder picks apart the Cinderella meme, not only in Zipes’s formulation of a tale that addresses family dysfunction and child abuse but in the Western popular narrative of wish fulfillment. Cinder must come to terms with how to define family and her place within one. She is well aware of her adoptive family’s dysfunctionality and has enough self-worth to recognize that Adri is not behaving as a mother should: “[t]he woman was supposed to be the one to protect her, to help her” (Meyer 2012: 131). At this point, having escaped the betrayal of Adri selling her to be a test subject, Cinder recognizes that she might as well have no family as have Adri and Pearl. Her Lunar family also puts the “dys” in dysfunction, as her aunt has murdered her mother, tried to murder her, and forced her beautiful stepdaughter to mutilate herself. Cinder’s birth mother was not a loving or lovable woman either. She was promiscuous, so no one can clearly identify Cinder’s father, and she was responsible for the law requiring Lunar families to destroy those children who are born without the ability to manipulate bioelectrics. Many “Cinderella” stories feature the heroine striving to please her abusive family and, more often than not, passively waiting for them to accept her. There are, of course, the variants such as the Grimms’s “Cinderella” [“Aschenputtel”], in which the stepsisters are punished by having their eyes pecked out by doves, but the birds are representatives of the heroine’s birthmother; she herself initiates no aggression. More common in Western popular iterations of the story, based on the Disney version, itself based on Charles Perrault’s “Cinderella, or The Little Glass Slipper” [“Cendrillon, ou la petite pantoufle de verre”] is a young woman who is sweet, meek, and incapable of anger. In contrast, Cinder feels hatred for Adri and fights back when the androids arrive to take her away to the labs for plague research, knocking out one with the timing belt from her outmoded car. Likewise, after Adri takes Cinder’s new foot, forcing her back into the too-small foot from her childhood, Cinder “want[s] to rampage through the house, destroying everything” (Meyer 2012: 281). Cinder does not accept her family’s abuse. Caught between an adoptive family she rejects and a birth family she rightfully fears, Cinder instead creates a family of the heart for herself in her adoptive sister Peony and her android companion Iko. Even after they are taken from her, when she decides to escape from jail at the end of Cinder, she takes with her Peony’s identity chip and Iko’s personality chip. In later volumes in the series, Cinder will create a community for herself that comprises humans, an android/space ship, a genetically created wolf soldier, and a Lunar shell. Rather than finding ways to accommodate dysfunction and putting up
with abuse, Cinder creates an alternative way of living in companionship, love, and respect with others.

This is not simply the wish fulfilment of which Jane Yolen speaks when criticising the Western Cinderella, for Cinder has to work on her own behalf. Dr. Erland is a possible fairy godfather when he gifts Cinder with new cybernetics to assist her jail break, but the choices, effort, and risks are hers. In embracing all facets of her self, including the technology that is a part of her, she finds the strength to rebel against the fate that is being forced upon her. This first volume in the series ends with Cinder rejecting passivity. She thinks “[i]t would be so simple to let it happen. So simple not to fight back” (Meyer 2012: 386). Nonetheless, she realizes that “she ha[s] to try” and cuts out her ID chip preparatory to breaking out of jail. Having removed the item that society used to identify her, Cinder is now free to form her own identity. The book’s final lines present some of her options:

A deformed cyborg with a missing foot.
A Lunar with a stolen identity.
A mechanic with no one to run to, nowhere to go.
. . . a ghost. (Meyer 2012: 387)

In the subsequent volumes in the series, as Meyer weaves in additional fairy tale narratives, variations on the innocent persecuted heroine story that continue the subversion of the meme of the passive female victim, Cinder will work to integrate her different selves and shape an independent identity that is determined by neither social norms of femininity nor by physical limitations of humanity. As a cyborg mechanic, Cinder embodies rebellious power, rejecting her family’s and her society’s judgment of her and using her skills to take control of her own life. She challenges our notion of what it means to be female and human.

I am not suggesting here that steampunk motifs are the only way to cause a needed memetic mutation to “Cinderella”. However, I think Meyer’s use of them is an effective strategy, particularly for the current cultural moment. Despite decades of feminist critique, the meme of the sweet girl rewarded for her beauty and goodness continues to thrive. Indeed, Disney’s 2015 live-action remake of its iconic Cinderella, directed by Kenneth Branagh and starring Lily James, does not significantly rewrite the meme presented by the 1950 animated version; the movie’s website describes Cinderella’s goal as trying to “have courage and be kind.” In other words, she still must suffer the trials of her step-family with patience and niceness as she waits for her opportunity to dazzle the prince. The film has also generated much criticism for its seeming fetishization of the tiny, perfect female body (VanderWerff 2015; Robinson 2015). As well as the pervasiveness of the Cinderella meme, another strong element that affects adolescent girls today in Western society is the human relationship with technology. On the one hand there is anxiety about girls being left behind boys in
the development and use of technology; on the other hand, we worry that girls 
are obsessed with the more superficial applications of technology available on 
their smart phones, that as they become increasingly connected digitally they 
become less capable of making meaningful human connections face-to-face, 
and that they are victims rather than users of technology as social media be-
comes a tool for shaming girls for various transgressions against societal femi-
nine norms of appearance or behaviour. In contrast, by employing the 'punk' 
element of steampunk, Meyer provides assurance that technology can em-
power girls. Her steampunk Cinderella, maker and cyborg, demonstrates in-
stead that a girl's value lies not within her appearance or adherence to societal 
norms, but rather within her strength of character, her agency, and her capac-
ity for rebelliousness against injustice.

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