Gold Slippers and Cyborg Feet: Comparing Adopted Bodies in the Grimms’ “Cinderella” and Marissa Meyer’s *Cinder*

*Cinder* is the first book of Marissa Meyer’s *The Lunar Chronicles*, a series of futuristic science-fiction retellings of classic fairytales. Although Cinder, the titular character, plays a major role throughout Meyer’s series, I’ll be focusing on the first novel for the purposes of this panel. In this retelling of the Cinderella fairytale, Meyer dramatically alters Cinderella’s birth origins: rather than a stepchild, Cinder is an adoptee. To complicate Cinder’s sense of belonging further, she was made into a cyborg as a young child due to traumatic injuries. She also discovers that she is Lunar, a race of people living on the moon who have evolved into something not quite human and who are on the verge of war with the Earthen Alliance where Cinder has grown up.

To summarize *Cinder* very briefly, when one of Cinder’s stepsisters contracts Letumosis, the deadly plague that has been killing Earthen’s for over a decade, Cinder’s adopted mother Adri (a stand-in for the prototypical evil stepmother) volunteers the sixteen-year-old Cinder for antidote testing, where she will be injected with the plague and a potential vaccine, a procedure that had always resulted in the test subject’s death. As a sixteen-year-old cyborg and Adri’s ward, Cinder has no rights over her body or her life, so she is unable to refuse the procedure. However, instead of dying after being injected with Letumosis, Cinder’s body fights off the infection. The scientist in charge of the testing, Dr. Erland, reveals to her that she is Lunar and so, immune to the disease. Cinder also becomes aware of the full extent of her cybernetic hardware as a full image of her body—blue as if a blueprint—reveals internal cybernetic
structures she had not been aware of, including a chip in her back that had restrained her Lunar ability: an ability that allows Lunars to control the thoughts and actions of others.

Meanwhile, after his father dies of the plague, Prince Kai becomes emperor of the Eastern Commonwealth (essentially, our modern-day China), and plans on marrying the evil Lunar queen, Levana, in order to get an antidote for the plague and to stop her from waging war on an already weakened Earth. However, Cinder discovers that after being crowned empress, Levana plans on murdering Kai and waging a war against Earth anyways. Cinder attends Kai’s coronation ball to warn him, but Levana sees her and publically reveals that Cinder is Lunar (a race hated by Earthens because of the power they possess and the threat they pose). Attempting to flee the ball, Cinder trips down the stairs and her too-small cyborg foot falls off, exposing the cyborg identity she had attempted to hide due to widespread prejudices against cyborgs. Imprisoned after this scene, Cinder receives a new cybernetic arm and leg from Dr. Erland that help her break out of prison, but before he does this, he reveals that her genetic testing confirmed that she is the missing Princess Selene, the rightful heir to the Lunar throne.

Cinder loosing her foot obviously invokes the iconic scene of Cinderella losing a shoe as she runs from the ball to meet her midnight curfew. However, while Cinderella’s shoe leaves the prince wondering about Cinderella’s identity through the absence of a physical body, the cyborg foot reveals Cinder’s. After Cinder loses her foot, she lies “sprawled on her side . . . blood stain[ing] the beautiful cream colored silk” of her gloves. In the Grimms’ “Cinderella,” a text that I find particularly useful as a comparison to Cinder because of the violence done to bodies throughout, the stepsisters both cut off part of their feet in an attempt to fit Cinderella’s slipper. The blood, trickling from the slipper and staining their stockings, exposes their lies. Just as blood exposes the hidden wounds of Cinderella’s stepsisters, the cyborg body Cinder has attempted to
hide is finally exposed: Cinder’s inner body—her blood, her wiring—literally spills out on the floor for the world to see.

Meyer obviously took many liberties with her reinterpretation of “Cinderella,” but as Victoria Flanagan notes, by delaying Cinder and Kai’s eventual wedding until later in the series, Meyer allows for the possibility to engage with larger social issues (61). These issues often engage with social binaries such as child and adult, especially in terms of legally constructed forms of intimacy like adoption (61). In “A Cyborg Manifesto,” Donna Haraway’s groundbreaking work on cyborg studies, she imagines cyborgs as a means of blurring binaries (152). When Cinder sees scans of her body, she finds out that she is 36.28% not human (Cinder 82). A man scanned before her was only 6.4% cyborg (69). At what point does a human being become not human? When technology becomes a part of our lives and our bodies, the archaic binaries between human and machine dissolve.

Marriane Novy sees adoptees as similarly challenging and upsetting boundaries, writing that by “living in border-crossing positions, adoptees have a better chance to get beyond our society’s dichotomies” (27). So while in the first and, to my knowledge, only published scholarly work on Cinder, Victoria Flanagan engages in a discussion of Cinder as a cyborg, she leaves out a discussion of Cinder as an adoptee, an essential part of understanding Cinder’s character and one of the more meaningful changes Meyer made to the Cinderella storyline. Set in a society with an emperor, consanguinity is key to the concept of family: heirs are assumed to carry royal blood. Lunar similarly functions under a monarchy. However, adoption challenges any assumptions about “blood,” kinship, and relationality.

As an alien cyborg adoptee, Cinder further troubles traditional concepts of the family. These difficulties arise because of Cinder’s physical traits—her cyborg parts and alien genes—
but until Cinder understands her biology she is unable to question and evaluate her familial relationships. Through intimacy with her own physical body, Cinder begins to understand the liminality of her position and so question the very idea of family and its role in identity-formation. With the new information she gains through the medical scans and Dr. Erland’s genetic testing, Cinder realizes: “a week ago, I knew exactly who I was, what I was, and maybe that was a worthless cyborg, but at least I knew that. And now . . . now I’m Lunar” (239). More than that, “she was almost a month younger than she’d always believed. It was a small fact, an insignificant fact, and yet for a moment she had the distinct impression that she had no idea who she was anymore. No clue who she was supposed to be” (385).

Not only does this crisis of identity bring up questions about the authenticity of “self,” it also relates to the ethics behind contemporary closed adoption practices, which often involve tampering with official, legal documents, such as birth certificates and family histories. As Cynthia Callahan brings up, this causes some interesting problems: “Traditional stranger adoptions, in which birth certificates and adoption decrees are sealed to prevent parties to the adoption from knowing one another’s identities, belie the fundamental role of blood kinship by demanding the irreversible dissolution of the blood tie between birth parents and child and the creation of a new relationship modeled as if it were blood” (17-18). However, already in a boundary position as an adoptee and a cyborg, Cinder’s body further complicates her relationships because she is an intergalactic adoptee. Gaining knowledge of this allows Cinder to question her identity as Cinder Linh, the ward of Adri Linh. Instead, as she realizes by the end of the novel, “She could be anyone. Become anyone” (387), a realization that is difficult under current closed adoption practices that enforce a new, but singular identity through the denial of access to birth origins.
Because of this new awareness of her biological body, Cinder’s relationship with her adopted mother shifts despite Adri having no knowledge of Cinder’s medical discoveries. Although Cinder calls Adri her stepmother at the beginning of the novel, she shifts to “guardian” or “legal guardian” after Adri volunteers her for the antidote experiment. Of course, part of this has to do with not being able to forgive Adri for sending her to her death, but by consciously shifting her terminology, Cinder actively distances Adri from the role of mother, instead marking her in purely legal terms. And yet, in Cinder’s world, adoptive parents maintain their power even when they fail to fulfill their expected roles. Cinder reflects on this: “The woman was supposed to be the one to protect her, to help her. If Adri and Pearl were her only family left, she would be better off alone” (131). And yet, when Adri fails to protect Cinder, Cinder has no recourse: “Legally, Cinder belonged to Adri as much as the household android and so too did her money, her few possessions, even the new foot she’d just attached.” (Cinder 24). In fact, Adri enacts her legal power by taking Cinder’s foot when she discovers Cinder has secretly saved up the money to replace the “too-small” limb she’d had since age eleven (3).

However, problematic adult-child power relations go beyond Adri. For instance, when Cinder describes the surgeries that left her 36.28% not human—surgeries she cannot remember but imagines over and over—she consistently describes these scenes as akin to rape. At the medical lab where she discovers her biological origins, she thinks to herself:

Someone had been there before—in her head. A fact never forgotten, always ignored. Some surgeon, some stranger, opening her skull and inserting their made-up system of wires and conductors while she had lain helpless beneath them. Someone had altered her brain. Someone had altered her. . . . It was painless. Painless. But someone was inside her head. Inside her. An invasion. A violation. (80-81)

It’s interesting then that Cinder repeatedly brings up adoption when she bemoans her cyborg body. At one point she tells Adri, “I didn’t ask to be made like this” (65), referring to being
cyborg. She immediately follows this with the statement “I didn’t ask for you or anybody to adopt me” (18), associating her adoption with another involuntary action in which adults assume control over the child body, deciding not only immediate medical decisions, but also what can and cannot be told to children about their own bodies and their own pasts. Like many adoptees, Cinder grows up with a false birth story. With a new awareness about her genetic makeup Cinder realizes, “If Dr. Erland were right, then everything she knew about herself, her childhood, her parents, was wrong. A made-up history. A made-up girl” (179). Closed adoptions heavily feature adult-mediated legal documents that alter and limit access to information about a child adoptee’s body—and even an adoptee’s access to this information as an adult.

As we’ve seen in many contemporary Young Adult dystopian series, teenagers and children often save the world after being victims of a corrupt or broken society run by ineffective or ill-intentioned adults. Cinder and the rest of the Lunar Chronicles follow this model. Although I’m largely ignoring the later novels in this series for the purpose of this discussion, it’s important to recognize that throughout the Lunar Chronicles (and the fairytales these novels are based on) nearly all of the main characters are young and estranged from their biological parents. Aside from Cinder, we see familial adoptions, orphans, wards of the state, and stepchildren with no living biological parent. Significantly, these characters are often mutilated, experimented on, or tortured to some extent as a very young child. The child body becomes a site of adult demonstrations of power.

Although Cinder’s cybernetic parts were, for the most part, implemented to save her life after her aunt—the Lunar Queen Levana—tried to kill her at the age of three in a nursery fire, Cinder sees these surgeries very differently. Even if the reader sympathizes with the desire to save a child’s life, especially one with the potential to throw a corrupt leader from the throne,
Meyer complicates the narrative by explaining that Cinder is kept alive for eight years as doctors perform surgery after surgery. Kept in a continual coma, Cinder has no memories when she awakens at age eleven and is transported to a new family, where she assumes the falsified identity they have given her. Cinder’s medical procedures and adoption blur the line between protecting a child and harming her, or between doing what is best for the child and serving a more selfish political goal.

We can see a problematic adult-child power relationship in the Grimms’ “Cinderella” as well: the unnamed stepsisters cut off parts of their feet in an attempt to fit the shoe only at their mother’s command. In fact, she hands them the knife, explaining to both: “When you are queen you will no longer have to go on foot.” And yet, notably, the sisters are punished, not the mother. Labeled “the two false sisters,” the Grimms’ story explains that the birds peck out the girls’ eyeballs as punishment “for their wickedness and falsehoods.” Meyer’s decision to have Cinder be the one with a mutilated foot and the metaphorically pecked out eyeballs (her eyes are cybernetic implants), shifts the focus away from the sibling rivalry Bruno Bettelheim sees as the focus of traditional Cinderella stories towards the adult-child relationship—a legal relationship in which the adults’ decisions, rather than the child’s, are physically manifested in violence done to the child’s body.

The only way in which Cinder is able to escape her legal guardian is through an awareness of her body. The body (and the violence done to it) functions as a source of identification in both Cinder and the Grimms’ “Cinderella,” but in much different ways. In the Grimms’ version, the prince is able to identify Cinderella by the shape and size of her foot. In Cinder, after her true identity has been revealed to her, the medical scans taken of Cinder’s body become a text through which she can begin to understand her own biology and background. In
striking contrast to Grimms’ “Cinderella,” Cinder participates in the reading of her body; while Cinderella’s point of view is silenced, Cinder becomes empowered through self-knowledge, both in regards to her physical body and her true birth origins. By reading Cinder alongside the Grimms’ “Cinderella,” Cinder can help us examine closed adoptions in terms of inordinate adult-child power relations that work to silence and minimize the corporeal identities of adoptees.
Works Cited


