A Little Princess as a Colonial Adaptation of “Cinderella”

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I. Introduction

“I am living in a fairy story,” thus Sara exclaims when she finds out that her room has been transformed into “a beautiful little room full of all sorts of odd and luxurious things” (Burnett 157). This particular line of Sara exemplifies the way in which A Little Princess adopts certain motifs from fairy tale as a genre. More specifically, many critics have suggested that the novel is undoubtedly inspired by “Cinderella,” which was quite popular in Victorian England. For example, Elizabeth Gruner notes that “Sara Crewe of A Little Princess most obviously resembles Cinderella in her class fall and in the hardships inflicted on her by a cruel ‘stepmother’, the schoolteacher Miss Minchin” (167).

“Cinderella” in this context of course refers to Charles Perrault’s version (and “Cinderella” in this essay refers to this version unless indicated otherwise), since it came to dominate over others in England by the nineteenth century, including the Countess d’Aulnoy’s adaptation which had been the most popular one when “literary Cinderellas began to appear in English” in the previous century (Cullen 60). The basic plot of “Cinderella” is found in A Little Princess as well: sudden misfortune, the death of one or both parents that befalls to the heroine; an ordeal bestowed upon her by
her evil stepmother and sisters; the magical aid of a fairy godmother; a ball where the heroine meets the prince and enters him: “recognition through a token” (qtd in Gruner 166), most famously the shoe trial; and finally the reward of becoming the wife of the prince. These motifs appear in A Little Princess with some modifications, which I will discuss later in detail. At this point, it would be sufficient to raise the question of what historical context lies at the heart of such differences.

Not only A Little Princess, but also the children’s literature of the Victorian era in general has been regarded by many critics as inseparable from the British imperialism at the time. M. Daphne Kutzer points out that “[t]he vast majority of literary references to empire refer to [...] Britain’s imperial outposts: India and Africa,” which “often functioned as fantasy lands and magical kingdoms in children’s fiction” (1). Also, commenting specifically on A Little Princess, she argues that “the imperial content of the novel [...] provides the reader not only with Sara as a late-nineteenth-century Cinderella, but also with a fairy tale for Britain about the role of India in its empire” (49). However, similar to most Victorian novels dealing with the empire at home, the empire is at once omnipresent and absent in A Little Princess because the true nature of the colonial relationship between Britain and India is never overtly acknowledged in the novel. Accordingly, the narrative structure of A Little Princess consists of two layers. On the manifest level, the readers merely get to see the commodified, domesticated, and thus sanitized forms of colonial wealth. Yet, on the latent level, displaced or overwritten by the manifest one, there is the real of the empire, the world outside the peaceful domestic empire. The latter level is latent in a similar fashion with the “latent dream thought” in Freud’s interpretation of dream: what is repressed is repressed