

Cinderella and Society: The Use of Jokes in Children's Culture

Jacqueline Curran

Writer's comment: I've had Jay Mechling in many classes because I enjoy his teaching style and I am also interested primarily in children's folklore. While I enjoy his classes, knowing him creates a bit of performance pressure with each assignment. I'm not just a face in the crowd; Professor Mechling knows it's me. Because of this, I always want to write a paper that stands out. Sometimes, this desire leads me to take risks that make for pretty lousy papers. But every once in a while, it helps me write something of which I am proud. I think this piece is one that I could not have written without a teacher that I respect as much as Jay Mechling.

—*Jacqueline Curran*

Instructor's comment: Folklore students need to learn how to recognize folklore in the flow of their everyday, taken-for-granted lives, and that's not easy. Jackie's essay shows what happens when the folklorist observes a seemingly trivial event and asks how the person performing the traditional lore uses the performance to help her manage some psychological or social tension. The simple humor in the Cinderella riddle joke text relies on the double meaning of "ball," but Jackie shows us the much richer meanings of the joke in performance, meanings made clear once we understand Julianna, her developing sense of herself, the very particular dynamics of her family, and the special setting for the family's vacation. Jackie shows us a world of larger gender issues condensed in that particular telling of the joke, and she also manages to include in this short essay an important point about children's uses of popular culture in their folklore.

—*Jay Mechling, American Studies*

I DO NOT HEAR JOKES VERY OFTEN in the course of my day. Maybe I look like someone who would be easily offended by a joke, maybe I don't tell enough jokes to start a joke cycle, or maybe I don't have very many anxieties; I'm not sure. It may be because I spend so much time with very young children, who have yet to master the art of joking. The one joke that seems to stick out in my mind was told to me by a younger child.

Three years ago, a family I have baby-sat for since the oldest child, Julianna, was six months old, asked me to accompany them on their vacation to Arizona for San Francisco Giants Spring Training to help with the children. At the time Julianna was five years old and her younger sister, Kaelynn, was three. While we were watching the Giants play the Angels, Julianna asked her dad if one of the players with longer hair was a girl. Her dad replied that girls don't play baseball. Some time passed and when her parents got up to get food, she told me this joke.

"Why wasn't Cinderella any good at baseball?" Julianna asked me.

I had actually already heard this joke, but I played along. "I don't know; why?"

"Because she ran away from the ball!" Julianna laughed as if it was the funniest thing anyone had ever heard and for days later she and Kaelynn would repeat it to themselves over and over.

The obvious part that is funny, although apparently more so if you are five than nineteen, is the incongruent meanings of ball. In one sense the ball is a baseball, something that you can't run away from and be successful at the sport. The other meaning of ball is a fancy party, such as the one that Cinderella had to leave at midnight in her famous fairy tale before her magical spell showed her to be a simple cinder girl.

The reason that particular joke occurred to Julianna at that time is what is more interesting. Julianna had just started kindergarten that September and was constantly being told that if she worked hard enough she could be anything she wanted to be. She also knew that being a baseball player was fun and that a lot of people like watching the Giants, even to the point where it was her family's yearly vacation. However, as her dad told her, women can't play baseball. This created for her a conflict. There was an underlying anxiety about the hypocrisy of U.S. society. What if baseball wasn't the only thing that Julianna wouldn't be allowed to do? The joke presented a sort of explanation to her for why baseball was an exception, allowing her to still believe she could do what she wanted.

For Julianna as a child in today's world, where Disney is so prevalent, Cinderella is an early heroine. Most fairy tale princesses are like Cinderella; passive and good, they are rewarded in the end, usually by marriage. These values are not necessarily the same values that are desired in young women of today. These values are taught of children though, and then are attempted to be untaught at school age. Despite the attempts of school as a socialization tool to empower young women, traditional views of women's roles are still very much in line with some parts of the United States' patriarchal society, such as professional baseball. While women's leagues have sprouted for basketball and Olympic teams in women's soccer and ice hockey have garnered a lot of media coverage, baseball is still considered men's territory. Softball is the alternative for women.

Now, while I sincerely doubt that all of this was going on consciously in Julianna's mind in the space between the conversation with her dad and telling me the joke, folklore is a culture's way of affirming its beliefs and values and it helps socialize children. The fact that this particular joke came out at this particular time is indicative of the way that children learn to use folklore to deal with their own fears about the future. It also shows that children learn and adopt the messages that folklore sends, both the overt messages and the ones that are implied by events.