

“The Princess on the Pea” in North American Popular Culture

By Sara Bruun Jørgensen, University of Southern Denmark

Edited for publication by Torsten Bøgh Thomsen, University of Southern Denmark

Hans Christian Andersen’s fairy tale “The Princess on the Pea” has enjoyed an enduring afterlife in global literary and cultural history. Though deceptively brief – only a couple of pages in its original publication in *Eventyr, fortalte for Børn. Første Hæfte* (Fairy Tales, Told for Children. First Booklet) from 1835 – the tale has been translated and adapted across numerous languages, formats, and platforms. In North America, adaptations since the mid-twentieth century have not merely retold Andersen’s story; they have transformed it in ways that reflect the cultural values, aesthetic preferences, and narrative conventions of their time and place.

This essay examines how “The Princess on the Pea” has been reimagined in North American popular culture, with particular attention to the emergence of a distinct set of local conventions surrounding the figure of the princess. In these adaptations, the princess is consistently portrayed as a strong-willed, campy, red-haired young woman, a characterization far removed from Andersen’s enigmatic and minimally described original character. The central argument of this essay is that these recurring features constitute a locally situated cultural mythology – one that has been established, circulated, and reinforced through adaptation across theatre, film, television, and children’s literature.

Focusing primarily on the influential 1959 Broadway musical *Once Upon a Mattress*, this study traces how Andersen’s fairy tale has been appropriated and extended within a North American context. Drawing on theoretical perspectives from Critical Heritage Studies (Harrison, 2013; Smith, 2006), Memory Studies (Kukkonen, 2008), and Cultural Studies (Hall, 1981), and Roland Barthes’s concept of myth (1972), the essay situates these adaptations as expressions of popular cultural memory and mythmaking. It argues that the adaptation process operates as a negotiation between the inherited literary past and the cultural needs of the present.

From Translation to Adaptation: The Transatlantic Circulation of a Fairy Tale

The international dissemination of “The Princess on the Pea” in English began in the late 1840s, both in England and North America. During Andersen’s lifetime, American publishers – often through pirated editions – followed the lead of British translators in making his tales available to a transatlantic audience. As Andersen scholar Erik Dal notes, “All the early American printings were probably taken over from Great Britain” (1968, p. 3), suggesting that the first American receptions of “The Princess on the Pea” were mediated through British literary filters.

However, a decisive moment in Andersen’s North American dissemination came with the publication of *The Complete Andersen* (1942–1949), a six-volume collection of 160 fairy tales translated by Danish-American actor, director, and philanthropist Jean Hersholt. Hersholt’s translations were the first widely accessible and affordable American editions of Andersen’s tales, and they played a crucial role in shaping the reception and reinterpretation of the stories across various media platforms (Topsøe-Jensen, 1948).

Hersholt’s version of “The Princess on the Pea” laid the groundwork for subsequent adaptations in theatre, film, and children’s literature. Among these, the 1959 musical *Once Upon a Mattress* stands out as a formative and transformative reinterpretation. While Andersen’s fairy tale consists of a few hundred words and offers minimal character description, *Once Upon a Mattress* expands the narrative into a two-and-a-half-hour performance featuring new characters, elaborate scenes, and a radically reimagined princess. This adaptation does not simply retell Andersen’s story; it recontextualizes it, introducing conventions and tropes that would become defining for the princess figure in later North American adaptations.

The transformation is signaled from the very beginning of the musical. While a minstrel introduces the tale in a manner reminiscent of Andersen’s original narrator, he immediately undermines its authority by asserting: “There are many versions of this story; I sing them all. This is the prettiest, but it’s not quite accurate. I happen to know the true story of ‘The Princess and the Pea’ for the very good reason that I was there.” (Rodgers et al., 1959). With this statement, the adaptation announces its departure from literary fidelity and positions itself instead as a reinvention – one grounded not in textual authenticity, but in performative revision.

This gesture towards multiplicity and subjectivity sets the tone for the cultural mythology and mythic reimagining of the princess in North American popular culture. No longer a passive, silent figure whose royal status is verified through physical sensitivity, the princess in *Once Upon a Mattress* is outspoken, comedic, and energetically nonconformist. Her characterization, most notably her red hair and defiant disposition, would become recurring visual and narrative features in later adaptations. As such, *Once Upon a Mattress* marks a pivotal moment in the tale's cultural reorientation, establishing the visual and behavioral template for what would later develop into a distinctly North American version of Andersen's princess.

***Once Upon a Mattress* and the Emergence of Local Conventions**

Once Upon a Mattress premiered at the Phoenix Theatre in 1959 and was soon transferred to Broadway due to popular demand, where it ran for more than 400 performances. Loosely based on Andersen's "The Princess on the Pea," the musical marked a radical departure from the original tale. While Andersen's narrative is sparse, relying on brevity and suggestion, *Once Upon a Mattress* reimagines the story as a campy and exuberant comedy populated by a cast of new characters and expanded into a full-length musical production.

At the center of this adaptation is the figure of Princess Winnifred, played in the original production by comedienne Carol Burnett. Winnifred is loud, physical, and gleefully unconventional. She arrives at the castle drenched and disheveled, having swum the moat rather than waited for the drawbridge to be lowered – an action that encapsulates her independence and disregard for courtly decorum. As she exclaims upon entering: "What a nuthouse!" (Rodgers et al., 1959). The musical emphasizes the princess's refusal to behave in accordance with traditional feminine expectations. While Queen Aggravain repeatedly criticizes her "willfulness," Prince Dauntless is captivated by her spirited nature. In this dynamic, the adaptation recasts the narrative as a struggle over norms and legitimacy, not just in terms of royal status, but in terms of gender, propriety, and social roles.

Crucially, Carol Burnett's portrayal of Winnifred established a new visual iconography for the princess figure. Burnett had natural red hair, which would come to function as a recurring motif in subsequent adaptations. Though Andersen's original tale confines itself to describing the princess's soaked clothes, shoes, and hair, Burnett's performance effectively inaugurated a tradition: the red-haired, unruly princess as a recognizable type in North American popular culture.

These local conventions are more than theatrical quirks; they operate as cultural codes that signify a broader reinterpretation of the fairy tale genre. By positioning the princess as a figure of irreverent energy and embodied difference, the adaptation redefines the concept of “real” royalty, no longer grounded in pedigree or physical sensitivity, but in authenticity, agency, and charisma.

As such, *Once Upon a Mattress* can be understood as a pivotal moment in the fairy tale’s cultural migration: it does not simply adapt Andersen’s tale but refashions it into a durable mythological structure within its own historical and cultural context. Within this process, the princess figure takes on the qualities of what Roland Barthes would later describe as *myth*: a signifying form that naturalizes cultural values and makes them appear self-evident. In the following decades, similar figures of red-haired, strong-willed princesses would recur across North American media, attesting to the cultural resonance of this mythic template. It is within this mythic framework that the concepts of popular cultural memory and signifying convention become analytically indispensable.

Popular Cultural Memory and Mythmaking

To understand how “The Princess on the Pea” has come to function as a recurring cultural type in North American media, it is necessary to move beyond the individual adaptation and consider the broader frameworks of memory and myth through which such patterns emerge and stabilize. Two theoretical lenses are particularly useful in this regard: popular cultural memory, as articulated by Karin Kukkonen, and myth, as theorized by Roland Barthes (1972).

Popular cultural memory refers to the way in which certain characters, narratives, and images are stored, recalled, and reassembled across media and over time. As Kukkonen argues, this process entails “a repository of conventions and imagery that are continually reconstructed in contemporary popular culture.” (2008, p. 261). These reconstructions are not arbitrary; they are shaped by audience expectations, intertextual familiarity, and culturally sedimented codes of meaning. In this framework, adaptation is not simply the transfer of a story from one medium to another, but a dynamic process of negotiation between inherited forms and present cultural needs.

Adaptations, according to Kukkonen, are always read in relation to existing texts, genres, and character types. The meanings that arise from these readings depend on the audience’s *context knowledge*, or their accumulated experiences with similar texts and familiar

narrative forms (2008, pp. 270–271). In the case of “The Princess on the Pea,” this means that viewers or readers of a new adaptation bring with them not just knowledge of Andersen’s original tale, but also memories of earlier versions – especially those that have achieved iconic status, such as *Once Upon a Mattress*.

Barthes’s notion of myth adds another layer to this analysis. In *Mythologies*, Barthes describes myth not as a static narrative but as a form of signification, “a system of communication [...] a type of speech” that functions to naturalize cultural meanings (1972, p. 107). The myth, he argues, emerges through a multimodal process in which language, images, and symbols are stripped of their historical specificity and reassembled into a new, apparently self-evident meaning. In this sense, the princess in *Once Upon a Mattress* is not merely a character in a musical; she becomes a mythic figure – a sum of signs that signifies spirited authenticity, irreverent femininity, and comic disobedience.

This mythic transformation is particularly visible in the way that specific traits such as red hair or willfulness become *signifying elements* that are repeatedly emphasized across versions. These elements operate independently of Andersen’s text and are no longer anchored in any singular origin. As Barthes suggests, myth works by forgetting the context and complexity of its source material; what remains is a simplified emblem, a culturally legible figure that can be mobilized in new settings.

In the case of “The Princess on the Pea,” the red-haired, strong-willed princess circulates as both a product and a producer of cultural memory. She is not simply inherited from Andersen; she is constructed through a process of objectivation and reconstruction, or what Kukkonen identifies as *imprecise intertextuality* (2008, p. 262). In this process, adaptations no longer refer to a specific text or author but to a broader genre, discourse, or media tradition. The princess becomes recognizable not because of fidelity to Andersen, but because of her resemblance to other media princesses shaped by the same conventions.

This analytical lens makes it possible to grasp how a fairy tale of minimal detail can give rise to a persistent and visually codified cultural figure. What was once a literary sketch of royalty tested by discomfort has become, through popular cultural memory and mythmaking, an icon of defiant individuality.

Familiarity, Objectivization, and the Red-Haired Princess

One of the most enduring signifiers to emerge from North American adaptations of “The Princess on the Pea” is the image of the red-haired princess. This visual trait has become

central to the character's recognizability across media platforms, from Broadway stages to children's picture books. Its persistence illustrates how popular cultural memory operates through what Kukkonen describes as processes of familiarity and objectivization (2008, pp. 266, 270).

Familiarity, in Kukkonen's framework, refers to the way adaptations create resonance by drawing on previously known characters, narrative forms, or images. Rather than restoring a historical or literary original, adaptations offer audiences something that *feels* familiar – often not through accuracy, but through repetition and affective recognition. In *Once Upon a Mattress*, Carol Burnett's Princess Winnifred does not conform to traditional royal femininity; she is brash, physical, irreverent – and red-haired. While this visual detail may have begun as a coincidental feature of Burnett's casting, it soon became a reproducible element in the emerging myth.

Subsequent adaptations retained or emphasized this trait. The 1964 black-and-white television film and its 1972 color remake both cast Burnett again, visually reinforcing the association between the character and her red hair. Later versions continued the pattern: Sarah Jessica Parker's portrayal in the 1996 Broadway revival featured similar visual cues, as did Tracey Ullman's performance in the 2005 Disney television adaptation. Over time, red hair became less a biographical feature of individual actresses and more an objectivized visual code – part of the princess's fixed cultural identity.

Objectivization, according to Kukkonen, is the process by which cultural memory preserves media elements not as detailed, contextualized references, but as abstracted *codes*: standardized, repeatable, and mobile across platforms (2008, p. 262). In this sense, red hair functions much like a costume or iconographic shorthand, signaling to the audience that this is *the* princess regardless of setting or storyline. This codification of visual traits, however, is not ideologically neutral. As Roland Barthes argues, myth always reflects the values of the context that produces it. In the case of *Once Upon a Mattress*, the unruly red-haired princess embodies a distinctly North American ideal of authenticity and comic self-determination, qualities that would soon find new expressions across popular culture.

The red-haired, unruly princess of North American media culture thus participates in a broader, transmedial discourse about femininity, autonomy, and affective legibility. The qualities first personified by Winnifred – her irreverence, humor, and physical vitality – reappear in later cultural icons who combine similar visual markers with performative non-compliance. One obvious descendant is Ariel in Disney's *The Little Mermaid* (1989), whose

bright red hair and defiant curiosity redefine Andersen's voiceless mermaid as an outspoken, independent heroine. Ariel's physical transformation and pursuit of self-expression mirror Winnifred's refusal to submit to decorum, transforming red hair from a casual feature into a semiotic shorthand for unruly will and modern female agency.

A comparable dynamic is at play in Pippi Longstocking, whose unruly braids and comic eccentricity have long signified resistance to adult authority. Like Winnifred, Pippi turns physical exuberance into moral legitimacy: she is "real" not because of lineage or refinement, but because of strength, humor, and sincerity. The kinship between these figures becomes even more pronounced with Merida from Pixar's *Brave* (2012), another red-haired princess who resists social constraints and parental control. Merida's wild curls and willful independence evoke both Winnifred's comedic energy and Pippi's anarchic freedom, reactivating the same constellation of red hair, authenticity, and defiance that *Once Upon a Mattress* helped to codify half a century earlier.

These intertextual affinities do not imply direct adaptation or influence; rather, they testify to the circulation of a recognizable visual and affective code across cultural and media boundaries. Through the mechanics of familiarity and objectivization, the red-haired heroine becomes a mythic type – an emblem of spirited individuality continually rewritten to fit new contexts.

The evolution of this visual marker also illustrates the myth's adaptability. In the 2005 Disney adaptation, a notable shift occurs: Carol Burnett reappears, now in the role of Queen Aggravain, whose hair is even more vividly red than that of Princess Winnifred. This visual reallocation of the color red from the princess to the queen complicates the established convention and initiates what might be called a site of struggle, to borrow from Cultural Studies terminology. By 2015, in a new youth edition of *Once Upon a Mattress*, the red hair seems to recede, no longer a consistent feature of the princess, suggesting that the myth is not fixed but subject to renegotiation in response to shifting cultural contexts.

In short, the red hair operates as both an entry point into a shared popular cultural memory and a marker of its internal tensions. Its presence, reproduction, and eventual modification reveal the mechanics by which adaptation stabilizes and destabilizes character identity. Through familiarity and objectivization, the red-haired princess becomes both symbol and signal – her myth constructed not only through narrative, but through image, iteration, and performance.

Willfulness and Disobedience as Cultural Signifiers

Alongside the visual marker of red hair, another signifying element has proven central to the mythologized figure of the princess in North American adaptations of “The Princess on the Pea”: her pronounced willfulness. While Andersen’s original tale portrays the princess as largely passive – her sensitivity to the pea functioning as the sole indication of her royal legitimacy – the adaptations beginning with *Once Upon a Mattress* invert this logic. In these versions, it is not fragility or refinement that marks her as “real,” but rather a refusal to conform to expectation.

Princess Winnifred’s first entrance in *Once Upon a Mattress* is emblematic of this reconfiguration. She arrives soaked from head to toe, having swum the moat to reach the castle more quickly. “I heard there was a vacancy” (Rodgers et al., 1959), she announces, disregarding court protocol entirely. Her physicality and urgency immediately set her apart from the other candidates, who are filtered out by Queen Aggravain’s arbitrary tests. This theatrical moment establishes her willfulness not only as a personality trait, but as a performative disruption of royal norms.

Throughout the musical, this willfulness is continually invoked as a source of tension. The Queen repeatedly frames the princess’s behavior as improper and unfit for royalty. Yet it is precisely this disobedience that captures Prince Dauntless’s attention. Their dynamic dramatizes a central tension in gender politics: who defines legitimacy, and by what standards? The princess’s defiance of expectations becomes the very basis of her desirability, a reframing that aligns closely with feminist re-readings of classic fairy tales.

Sara Ahmed’s theorization of “willfulness” is particularly useful here. In *Willful Subjects* (2014), Ahmed describes willfulness as a label applied to those who deviate from what is socially expected, turning acts of resistance or disobedience into something perceived as excessive, problematic, or pathologic. The willful subject becomes a problem precisely because they act on their own terms rather than conforming to collective norms. Within this framework, Winnifred’s unruly exuberance – like Pippi’s mischief or Ariel’s yearning – marks the persistence of willfulness as both an accusation and a badge of individuality. What is condemned as obstinacy becomes a sign of vitality. In *Once Upon a Mattress*, Winnifred is repeatedly accused of being too loud, too forward, too improper – yet these same qualities propel her toward narrative centrality and romantic fulfillment.

The comic excess that surrounds her behavior transforms transgression into charm; it recasts resistance as energy, converting willfulness into a culturally legible form of joy. Like

the red hair, it recurs across adaptations in slightly varied forms. The line between comedy and critique is often blurred: Winnifred is humorous, but her humor masks a deeper interrogation of the rules that govern femininity and legitimacy in both the fairy tale genre and the broader media ecology.

Notably, while the visual convention of red hair begins to fade in later adaptations, the motif of willfulness remains. This persistence suggests that willfulness may, in fact, be the more foundational element in the construction of the princess myth. Whereas hair color is contingent and subject to reallocation (as in the 2005 Disney version where the queen inherits the fiery red), willfulness endures as a structural narrative device. It is this trait that binds the various versions of the princess together and ensures her continued recognizability across shifting media forms.

Moreover, willfulness connects the princess to a broader network of red-haired female characters in popular culture who similarly defy norms. Red hair and rebelliousness are intertwined, forming a semiotic cluster that signals individuality, courage, and comic irreverence: the hair may change, but the impulse to resist domestication remains a powerful through-line.

In short, willfulness in “The Princess on the Pea” adaptations is not merely a character trait but rather a cultural signifier – one that indexes broader struggles over gender, power, and belonging. As with the red hair, it has become a constitutive part of the myth in circulation, a marker through which audiences recognize and respond to the princess across time, format, and platform.

Conclusion: The Local Myth of the Princess

Over the past 70 years, “The Princess on the Pea” has undergone a remarkable cultural transformation in North America. What began as a brief and enigmatic fairy tale by Hans Christian Andersen has evolved into a durable and widely recognizable myth, defined less by its literary origins than by its iterative reinvention across popular media. Central to this transformation has been the 1959 musical *Once Upon a Mattress*, which did not merely adapt Andersen’s tale, but reauthored it according to the comedic, musical, and cultural idioms of its time.

This essay has traced how that adaptation established a set of local conventions that define the princess figure in North American contexts: she is red-haired, strong-willed, irreverent, and performatively disruptive. Through processes of popular cultural memory

(Kukkonen, 2008), these traits have become signifying elements within a shared repertoire of imagery and affect. Once objectivized, they serve as shorthand for identity and recognition, often independent of Andersen's original. The visual and behavioral codes first introduced in Burnett's portrayal, especially the interplay between comic excess and willful independence, proved flexible enough to survive shifts in medium and moment. Whether emphasized through appearance or attitude, the princess's irreverent energy remains the touchstone of the type.

Following Barthes's analysis of myth as a form of signification, it becomes clear that "The Princess on the Pea" no longer refers solely to Andersen's text. Rather, it signifies a cultural archetype produced and reproduced through performance, image, and audience recognition. The North American princess thus emerges as a localized myth, shaped by the interplay of memory, genre, and ideology. As adaptations continue to evolve – whether in musical revivals, illustrated children's books, or digital reinterpretations – the princess remains a site of negotiation. Her figure is both stabilizing and unstable: familiar enough to be recognized, yet pliable enough to reflect changing values around gender, agency, and identity. The persistence of her myth attests to Andersen's continuing cultural mobility: the tale endures not through fidelity to its source, but through reinvention.

This essay was written as part of the research project Hans Christian Andersen as World Literature (2022–2026), supported by the Independent Research Fund Denmark and the Carlsberg Foundation.

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