

# When Princesses Become Dragons

## *Using Critical Literacy to Confront Rape Culture in English Classrooms*

Shelby Boehm, Kathleen Colantonio-Yurko,  
Kathleen Olmstead, and Henry “Cody” Miller



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**Abstract:** In this article we offer curricular suggestions for teaching Elana K. Arnold’s young adult title *Damsel*, a subverted fairytale rewrite, using a critical literacy framework. In doing so, we outline how English curriculum has often upheld oppressive systems that harm women, and how our teaching can challenge such systems. We situate this work through the retelling of a fairytale trope given the ubiquity of such stories in secondary students’ lives. Our writings have teaching implications for both secondary English language arts classrooms and higher education fields such as English, folklore, mythology, and gender studies. We end by noting the limitations of such teaching.

**Keywords:** critical education, English teaching, fairytales, secondary teaching, sexual violence, young adult literature

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## Introduction

Fairytales do not always have a happily-ever-after ending. Princess narratives, where the helpless damsel in distress needs to be saved by the valiant prince, are often influenced by oppressive systems of sexual violence, male dominance, and power. These oppressive systems work as a constellation to construct and uphold rape culture. Pairing Elana K. Arnold’s (2018) young adult novel *Damsel* with a critical literacy framework, in this article we illustrate how English teachers can use young adult (YA) literature to support adolescent students in understanding sexual assault and challenging the cultural and political environments that produce sexual assault.

Many girls and young women are enculturated into a rape culture in which sexual violence is normalized, minimized, or even completely dismissed. The commonality of sexual assault and rape is a disturbing injustice documented by many organizations, scholars, and journalists who have



noted overwhelming statistics regarding sexual violence against women and girls (Bureau of Justice 2018; Orenstein 2017; Rape, Abuse & Incest National Network (RAINN) 2020). The ideologies of sexual assault are often taught, implicitly and explicitly, through children's stories, fairytales, pop culture, and school curricula (Anderson 2010; Coste 2020; Manne 2017; Phillips 2016). Middle and high school English classrooms often act as a meeting point for the panoply of texts that create logical justifications for sexual assault. Many middle and high school students have been raised with their childhoods punctuated by fairytales (often Disneyized) and children's stories; they are active consumers of popular culture, and they are engaging in secondary school curriculum daily. Thus, middle and high school English classrooms can serve as generative spaces in which to teach and challenge the logics of sexual assault that underpin rape culture.

We situate Elana K. Arnold's (2018) *Damsel*, a subverted fairytale in the form of a (YA) novel, as a central text in supporting the development of students' critical capacities and textual analysis in high school English language arts (ELA) classrooms. In their origins, fairytales were often gruesome with sexual violence being a common occurrence. However, decades of sanitization have warped fairytales from their genesis. We use fairytales to mean the Disneyfication of the original stories (Zipes 1999). As Jack Zipes (1988) notes, fairytales are more akin to a cultural institution than a genre. Our students are familiar with the institution through Disneyfication, as are we, which is why we situate fairytales as such in this article.

### ***Damsel*, a Subverted Fairytale**

*Damsel* by Elana K. Arnold (2018) begins much like other classic fairy tales read to children at bedtime. The story begins in the kingdom of Harding. There is a dragon to be slain, a damsel to be saved, and a brave prince who must complete these tasks in order to become king. For generations, the male hero, often a prince, has always followed this journey. The novel begins when Ama, the protagonist, wakes up in the arms of Prince Emory with no recollection of her past and is, instead, told that she has been rescued. And so, like any hero in any fairytale, the handsome Prince Emory rescues the fair maiden from a violent and gruesome dragon. He takes the young woman he rescues as *his*. He feeds her, clothes her, and brings her home to his mother to prepare for the marriage celebrations. He even takes the liberty of naming Ama, as she herself does not recall her name, her past,

nor her identity—leading the reader to question Ama’s safety and the events which have transpired.

Throughout the text, the reader begins to see Ama’s resolve. The damsel does not know herself to be helpless, but she is constantly reminded, through the actions of other characters, that she is powerless in the kingdom. Because Ama has no memory of her previous existence, the life before her life with Prince Emory, she is not quite sure of how to handle her new life in the castle. Ama knows to question these new expectations and by doing so, encourages the reader to do the same. At first, Ama does as she is told, and Arnold provides the reader with brief windows into Ama’s psyche. However, the reader, along with Ama, soon learns that this fairytale is riddled with violence that other characters in the text seemingly accept and even perpetuate. Ama is assaulted through digital penetration by the would-be prince charming of the narrative. The prince routinely kisses Ama and forcibly touches her body. Ama is repeatedly told by other female characters that the prince has the power and that Ama should submit to his physical abuse.

*Damsel* is an unsettling story that positions the reader as both the consumer of this twisted fairytale and the constant witness to Ama’s many violations. Whenever she advocates for herself, she is always told that she should accept her fate. *Damsel* can provide teachers and students with the opportunity to examine the role of sexual violence, power, and male dominance as a pervasive, oppressive system through literature. Like Amber Simmons’s (2012) work reading *The Hunger Games* alongside critical socio-political issues, in this article we conjoin analysis of “social injustices in our world” (24) with a novel, providing English teachers with suggested activities for meaningful discussion, research, and social action.

## **The Princess Enculturation and Disney Tropes**

*Damsel* (2018) calls us to question the construction of the notions of princess and the ways in which this concept permeates our culture and upholds male dominance as ideal. Girlhood, in popular culture and children’s narratives, is often synonymous with princess stories that implicitly teach little girls to imagine a pink, glittery life in a pretend kingdom. In her work considering the narratives of girlhood, Peggy Orenstein (2018) finds that Disney’s Princess line is the “fastest-growing brand the company has ever created” and is quickly “becoming the largest girls’ franchise on the planet” (321). While princess stories are not always inherently problematic, these

stories do often sustain ideas of male dominance and perpetuate notions that princess characters are celebrated for their beauty above all else. In this sense, many literary princesses imitate the real-life sexist treatment of female bodies, where “the standards of female beauty are so punishing that even should a girl miraculously fit them, she may still believe she falls short” (Orenstein 2011: 134). These beauty standards work to position girls as objects to be consumed by male characters in the narrative, thus representing a site ripe for interrogation.

There is a wellspring of scholarship calling for the reimagining or rewriting of fairy tales to unearth the oppressive ideologies that guide them and to confront this problematic nature of many traditionally taught fairy tales, including in schooling spaces. Feminist scholars have long called for fairytales to be the subject of scholarship and teaching (Bacchilega 2010; Haase 2004; Joosen 2011; Rowe 1979; Westland 1993). The novel *Damsel* (2018) makes princess Ama’s story ideal for complex classroom-based discussions about male dominance. While Ama’s narrative seems to follow the Disney princess trope (Zipes 1999), it is the violent sexual assaults and the subverted ending of the tale that brings to light cycles of female oppression in Ama’s mythical world.

Princes typically slay a dragon, rescue the princess, and then establish or reclaim a kingdom in the Disneyfication of fairytales. Arnold twists that narrative feature by positioning Ama as the dragon that must be slain. That is, damsels (in this case, Ama) must be raped by the prince in order to establish his kingdom. The prince’s sexual violation of Ama’s bodily autonomy is substituted for the scene in which the prince emerges victorious from killing a mythical beast. Ama’s forced marriage represents the moment the prince can ascend to king and the princess can take her subservient role as queen. Thus, *Damsel* draws on Disney princess tropes (Zipes 1999) in order to later unearth the underpinning ideologies of sexual violence. The book reproduces harmful constructions of princesses in order to later challenge such notions. It is this aspect of the YA book that we believe gives the novel potential for interrogation in secondary English classrooms.

## **English Curriculum and the Ideologies of Sexual Violence**

Scholars have begun to examine how the cultural values and ideologies embedded in the canon normalize sexual violence against women. Canonical texts continue to make up the bulk of secondary high school curricula,

thus potentially abetting the proliferation of dangerous patriarchal ideology. Erin Spampinato (2018b) makes the relationship between canonical texts frequently taught in high school and the normalized logic of sexual violence explicit: “The literature we choose to teach our children evidences how untroubled we are by this disturbing cliché” (para. 7). These values and this normalization can be perpetuated in schools when those who make decisions about novel selections in classrooms do so without making a conscious effort to examine whose stories are told and how. Writing about the involuntary celibate (incel) movement, Spampinato sees canonical texts as its literary roots (2018b) and cultural reinforcement (2018a) for a movement that glorifies sexual violence against women. Secondary ELA curricula can reinforce ideologies that normalize and justify sexual violence against women. How then can we reimagine secondary English curriculum and teaching to counter these ideologies and logics?

YA literature, when paired with intentional pedagogy can offer an answer. E. Sybil Durand (2019) sees this as a “key resource for youth to participate in current national discourse” (89) on a host of issues including sexism and violence against women. Many widely taught YA novels address sexual violence and sexual assault (Cleveland and Durand 2014; Colantonio-Yurko et al. 2018). Drawing on Amber Moore’s (2018) notion of the “sub-genre of sexual assault narratives” (145), we suggest that sexual assault literature as a sub-genre may incite similar discomfort for some teachers. While many scholars have suggested that it is imperative that sexual violence be addressed through literature in schools (Cleveland and Durand 2014; Colantonio-Yurko et al. 2018), some teachers may be hesitant to do so. Many teachers may be uncomfortable discussing topics they consider “controversial” (Darvin 2011: 287)—yet we emphasize the powerful experiences for readers in interacting with such texts.

Such powerful interactions could combat the rape myths that underpin rape culture. A study by Victor Malo-Juvera (2014) notes that Laurie Halse Andersen’s novel *Speak* (1999) proved effective in counteracting dangerous ideologies around rape, such as victim-blaming. Teachers can use YA literature to discuss rape culture and rape myths by examining what is happening within the narrative of the text and dissecting these events with students (Colantonio-Yurko et al. 2018). It is important for students to develop an understanding of rape myths and rape culture to avoid the perpetuation of sexual violence (Alsup 2003; Malo-Juvera 2014; Park 2012). For instance, in working with book club groups composed of adolescent girls, Jie Y. Park (2012) taught and reflected on *Speak*. Park concluded that the students

“encountered different ways of looking at themselves and others” (191) and were able to engage in rich dialogue to examine these differences, thus enabling some students to challenge commonplace myths and ideas about rape. All these scholars highlight the importance of intentional pedagogy paired with YA novels that feature sexual assault.

## **Teaching with Trauma in Mind**

While we believe dissecting novels that address sexual assault is essential to disrupt rape culture, we know that this dialogue may be distressing or triggering for individuals who have themselves experienced sexual violence, and teachers should plan accordingly (Colantonio-Yurko et al. 2018). Importantly, Debra Jackson (2016) advocates the need for those traumatized by sexual assault to tell and retell their stories, and interact with an “empathetic other, a witness to the trauma” (211) as part of the process of recovering their subjectivity. Therefore, part of the teacher’s classroom plan might include partnering with a school counselor or crisis center worker during these important classroom discussions to ensure that those triggered will be handled with extra care by someone experienced in trauma support. In addition to supporting the students who may be triggered, Jackson reports the toll on those witnessing (those listening to) others’ trauma:

the witness enters a world full of fear, shame and guilt, hearing what it is like to have one’s bodily integrity violated, to be treated with disrespect and disdain, and to be reduced by another to the status of nonperson. (224)

In discussing testimony and critical witnessing in relation to difficult stories, Elizabeth Duto (2011) notes that “we must both connect deeply to students’ experiences and be highly cognizant of the differing consequences they bear” (208). Partnerships with experienced trauma counselors can support both students and faculty in processing trauma that may surface when they are engaging in readings about sexual assault.

## **Teaching Critical Literacy to Challenge the Ideologies of Sexual Violence**

As Allan Luke (2004) proposes, literacy instruction is not neutral and involves the “selection and framing of values, ideologies, and contending versions of the truth” (4). Likewise, Jerome Harste and Vivian Vasquez

(2017) believe that curriculum is a space for embedding aspirational societal change. We view texts in K–12 spaces as opportunities to unmask and discuss broader socio-political issues alongside students. Examining texts through a critical literacy lens allows students and teachers to consider and reflect on ways that we can both “problematise” (Janks 2014: 145) situations and the ways we could have or should have acted. Yet, reading about issues is not enough to enact critical literacy pedagogy. Recognition of oppressive systems is a crucial initial step, but as researchers and teacher educators we hope to place emphasis on what happens after reading—the moments when action is taken.

Angela Hubler (2017) criticizes the commonly taught novel *Speak* (Anderson 1999) for being a narrative that positions discussions of rape as an “individual project” and equates speaking with social change. Critical literacy can facilitate the transition between speech and social change. We argue that teaching *Damsel* through a critical literacy framework can map some of the “structural conditions that underlie rape” (135). Engaging students in texts that disrupt and interrogate the complexity of sexual assault enables them to develop a critical consciousness and work toward interrupting social inequities (Sharma and Christ 2017). *Damsel* helps readers to confront and counter what it means to be a princess, what it means to have power, and what it means to be heard.

Simmons (2012) notes that fantasy literature and film lend themselves to discussions of critical topics in adolescent classrooms and that these texts, “reinforce the critical themes in the traditional adolescent texts that they are already being taught” (25). She encourages teachers to use fantasy texts such as film and YA literature to address power issues including those related to gender. For example, fantasy texts provide students with the opportunity to interrogate the ways in which gender and sexuality are “perceived” and “cultivated by society” (29). Texts like *Damsel*, then, offer teachers and students a multitude of avenues in which to examine fairytales through critical literacy practices.

Critical analyses of books like *Damsel* allows students to challenge the text, examine the author’s presumed intentions, investigate different perspectives, and determine what actions they might take to disrupt rape culture where sexual violence is normalized. To do so, teachers can consider the following steps for “critical literacy in practice” as described by Hilary Janks (2014: 350): finding and naming the issue, linking the issue to learners’ lives, accessing relevant information by critically examining text and textual design, examining social effects of the issue, imagining possibilities

for making a difference. Consider the following example of “critical literacy in practice” using Arnold’s (2018) *Damsel*.

Table 1: Critical Literacy in Practice with *Damsel*

Five Steps from Janks (2014)	Sample Prompts to Promote Critical Conversations
1. Finding and naming the issue/s	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● How does <i>Damsel</i> compare to other fairy tales you’ve read?</li> <li>● How do you feel women are portrayed in other fairy tales you’ve encountered? Why?</li> <li>● What do you notice about the way Arnold presents Ama at the beginning of the text? Middle? End?</li> <li>● Whose voice is represented in <i>Damsel</i>? Whose voice/s is/are missing?</li> </ul>
2. Linking the issue to learners’ lives	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● How are women represented in the fairy tales you’ve been exposed to (either stories you’ve read or fairy tales that you’ve experienced through the media or pop culture like Disney)?</li> <li>● Consider providing snippets of original fairy tales to deconstruct (e.g. The Little Mermaid’s tongue is cut out in order to have a man love her, Sleeping Beauty is unconscious and raped by the king, Cinderella’s stepsister cuts off her own toes to fit her foot into the glass slipper in hopes of winning the prince’s love, etc.)</li> <li>● What are your experiences growing up with gendered expectations? What are some gendered expectations you experience today: at school? At home? In the media or pop culture?</li> </ul>
3. Accessing relevant info, textual design	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Analyze the text. What quotes stand out for you? Why?</li> <li>● How does the author use dialogue to present the issues to the reader? What are some examples?</li> <li>● What do you notice about Ama and the Prince through their dialogue? Why do you think the author represented each character in such a way?</li> </ul>
4. Social effects of the issue	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● What is the impact of male dominance? Sexual assault?</li> <li>● How might we interrupt these injustices?</li> </ul>
5. Imagining possibilities for making a difference	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● How might our actions matter?</li> <li>● What projects might we engage in to make a difference in our classroom, school, community, etc.?</li> <li>● Have students explore social issues in the news and online like #MeToo, the RAINN website, and advocacy like <a href="http://takebackthenight.org">takebackthenight.org</a></li> <li>● Share how others’ actions have made a difference.</li> <li>● Have students plan their own advocacy projects based on issues raised in their analysis of <i>Damsel</i>.</li> <li>● Implement advocacy projects and invite the community to participate when possible.</li> </ul>

In this table, we provide readers with information and suggestions for how to approach the five steps presented by Janks (2014). As former teachers, we want to spend time discussing the complex task of naming the issue and connecting these issues to social action.

## **Naming the Issues**

In this section, we examine two of the major issues embedded in *Damsel*. Teachers might review these central topics as examples of starting points for critical conversations in their own classrooms that lead to text-based social action projects. Before students can take informed action, they must first understand the issue at hand. We offer our own analysis of *Damsel* as well as some suggestions for teachers to consider when they are using the book in their own classrooms.

### ***Cycles of Male Dominance***

From the beginning of *Damsel*, Ama is told she is safe because a man rescued her. Ama does not remember her name, previous life experiences, or why she needed rescuing, and consequently is dehumanized through a cycle of male dominance that enforces female subordination. These moments of male dominance range from covert to explicit throughout the novel, occurring frequently as Ama attempts to question patriarchal norms and expectations to the surprise of the inhabitants of the kingdom of Harding.

Prince Emory's domination over Ama and the kingdom is evident in his sense of entitlement which is highlighted throughout his verbal commands and physical positioning. For example, Prince Emory requires polite, ladylike greetings from servants and Ama, with the latter also required to be beautiful and well-behaved. One evening, he enters Ama's bedroom unwarranted and tells her to "Call off [her] guard" (106) and then proceeds to sexually assault her. Physicality often contributes to female subordination in the novel since Ama is told that her role is to be "a vessel" (264) for a future king. Understanding the various tools the prince uses to control Ama and maintain the gendered hierarchy is one area of analysis for students to consider when reading the book.

The role of other female characters in maintaining the cycles of male dominance is another analytical consideration. For instance, the Queen, Prince Emory's mother, tells Ama, "It is a king's world in which we find ourselves" (176). Female characters consistently reify subordination through

cycles of male dominance that refuse to question the male-dominated kingdom of Harding. These instances open up conversations about the ways in which women can internalize oppressive hierarchies through social interactions and then reproduce these forms of harm. Students should understand that upholding the violent cycles of male dominance is not merely a priority of male characters. The adjacency to power of some female characters, such as the Queen, requires the perpetuation of male dominance.

### ***The Logic of Sexual Assault***

The prevalence of sexual assault is underpinned by a logic that refuses to see assault as the horror it is. This common occurrence presents an avenue for students to analyze the ways in which Prince Emory uses a form of logic connected to male dominance to maintain control over Ama. Early in the novel, Emory thinks of the time that he “relieved” (33) another female character of her virginity. The reader sees him touch, fondle, and penetrate Ama many times without consent, each time telling her that she should be grateful to him. Students should pay attention to the language the Prince uses when violating Ama since he often does not see his actions as immoral.

Part of Prince Emory’s logic rests on the belief that Ama herself is to blame for his transgressions. When Emory first assaults Ama he proclaims, “But who could blame me, when a beauty such as yourself is under my roof” (125). The Prince repeatedly refers to Ama’s beauty as something that causes her to be irresistible, as though she brings the attacks on herself because of how she looks. This type of mentality is not relegated to the pages of fiction. It is a form of victim-blaming that upholds rape culture.

This victim-blaming logic pulses through the language characters use in discussing Ama. The notion of Ama as an object or thing to be consumed or that she is a prize echoes throughout the text. Initially, she is compared to livestock, and later when she is readying herself to dine with the King, Ama is regarded as “a well prepared meal or finely arranged bunch of flowers” (94). Ama endures Emory’s kissing her, pulling her dress up, fondling her, and grinding against her repeatedly throughout the novel. And yet, Emory notes that his actions are restrained, with more violent sexual attacks to come once they are wed. He says, “The time will come soon enough that such restraint shall not be required of me” (126). Students should be asked to examine the language the perpetrator of sexual violence uses to describe his victim. Then, they could consider how that language reflects the logics of sexual assault for both the character and the setting of Harding Kingdom.

## **Taking Action**

We see examples of male dominance and the logics of sexual assault in action all around us today—whether in sexual assault trials or within the political landscape. In discussing her work with student activism, Durand (2019) notes that such activism rested on a foundation of first discussing literature with students. We position *Damsel* as a text that can transform discussions into actions. As Simmons (2012) emphasizes, students can channel their “passion, skills and knowledge as well as the resources of the classroom” (28) to enact change. We envision taking action broadly to include leading classroom discussions to naming issues within their school at large. The suggestions below provide ideas for taking action based on critical conversations alongside *Damsel*. Such projects and activities enable student empowerment and encourage disruption of the issues named above.

### ***Rewriting and Subverting Texts***

Students can view and reconsider well-known texts, films, or television shows that contain male dominance. Just as Ama’s story in *Damsel* (2018) has a subverted ending, the act of revisioning through rewriting allows students to construct disruptive narratives of sexual violence, power, and male dominance. This type of rewriting of the ending is a form of fanfiction, which is seen as a valuable tool in teaching literature and texts more broadly (Beach et al. 2016). For example, students can discuss how *Damsel* compares in relation to their familiarity with fairytales. Students can make a list of how Arnold subverts the Disneyfication (Zipes 1999) genre. Using the list, students can select their favorite texts that subvert male dominance or the logics of sexual assault. Students may rewrite narratives in which princesses reject their passivity placement in the narrative, for instance.

### ***Multigenre Project***

The creation of multigenre projects around themes discussed in *Damsel* allows students to examine ideas through various modes, thus increasing the chances for ideas about gender rights to manifest through various interpretations. Although many approaches to multigenre projects exist, we suggest using genres that allow for finished student products to be widely shared, such as zines, podcasts, or video essays. Potential authentic audiences motivate students to think deeply about how to frame their understanding of *Damsel* for new viewers.

### ***Critical School Community Audit***

After reading *Damsel*, students may wish to turn to their own schooling experiences to make sense of new ideas about sexual violence, power, and male dominance. A good place to start this reflection is a critical examination of their own school curriculum, policies, and culture. Teachers can prompt students to observe their school curriculum, policies, and surroundings while considering the following questions.

- How is gender and sexuality controlled by school policy? What are the implications of these policies?
- In what ways does our school environment promote male dominance?
- How does the larger community do so?
- How does your school or community react and respond to stories of sexual violence?
- In what ways are students heard or not in your community when it comes to issues of sexual violence?
- Why might that be?
- How are relationships presented in stories you read in school? What aspects of those stories are discussed? Who determines how they are discussed and why?
- Whose stories are included and excluded in those discussions?
- How is sexual violence acknowledged or not in your courses?

After reviewing and discussing their findings, students can document their analysis in letters to administrators or through social media campaigns. Writing letters and advocating on social media could be avenues through which to prompt changes in school, including policy and cultural shifts. This type of activity represents how students can translate learning from a YA novel into action in their immediate social contexts.

### ***Other Considerations***

While this work has traction for important discussions in high school English classrooms, we also believe that *Damsel* (2018) would provide opportunities for purposeful conversations in other disciplines, such as courses in gender and women's studies departments, the field of literature, and humanities. The practices we outlined in this section can be amended to fit the context of humanities courses at undergraduate and graduate levels. The Critical School Community Audit would be a powerful tool for college students to use to consider the dimensions of rape culture on their campuses while the Rewriting and Subverting Texts activity would reach a wide audi-

ence of students in general education courses such as freshman composition or in an introduction to literature course.

### ***Limitations, Centering, and Representation***

The classroom practices we suggest throughout this article can offer an answer to the question of rethinking the English curriculum. Considering sexual violence, Kimberlé Crenshaw (1991) posits that women of color experience violence through “intersecting patterns of racism and sexism” (1243). These intersections of oppression are often not considered when generalized implications are drawn about sexual assault experiences. Worse still, when racism and sexism are not examined alongside experiences of sexual assault, “the power relations that each attempts to challenge are strengthened” (1282). The analysis we provide throughout this article considers the ways in which oppression shapes the experience of a white woman without interrogation into intersecting forms of oppression.

Similarly, the statistics in the opening section represent cisgender women and not transgender women. It is important to note that transgender women also face sexual violence but because of transphobia, their stories are not often believed. According to the 2015 US Transgender Survey (James et al. 2016), nearly half of all participants reported being sexually assaulted. Queer and trans voices and experiences must be included in the national discussion of sexual assault. As K.C. Clements (2018) argues, “[R]ape culture is not simply a problem of cisgender heterosexuality, but a product of toxic masculinity that has wide-ranging effects on people of many genders” (para. 14). It is imperative that teachers include trans and queer people in their discussions of sexual violence when they are talking with students.

A limitation of this article is that Arnold’s (2018) *Damsel* and thus our pedagogical suggestions forefront stories of sexual violence that center white, cisgender women. In writing about YA rape novels, Hubler (2017) argues that “narrators who are Black, poor, gay, or intellectually disabled articulate the experiences and insights of disadvantaged social groups” that shed light on the “ways in which gender interacts with other social institutions to structure violence” (115). This type of analysis is absent from *Damsel*. In addition to her white, cisgender, and able-bodied privilege, Ama is also a princess. The limitations of *Damsel* speak to the larger limitations in recent fairytale pop culture trends.

Cinematic and book adaptations of fairy tales remain Eurocentric, thus replicating the whiteness of the literary canon. Vivian Yenika-Agbaw et al. (2013) argue that fairy tales centering Black characters can provide counter-

narratives that affirm the humanity of African diaspora communities. Similarly, Jemimah Young et al. (2018) call for Black girls to construct “counter fairy tales” (103) to resist the violent whiteness of secondary English curricula, including fairy tales. The recently published YA title, *Cinderella is Dead* (2020) by Kalynn Bayron, imagines the titular fairy tale from the perspective of Sophia, a young queer Black girl, as she navigates and challenges systems of oppression. The studying and teaching of *Cinderella is Dead* is needed to continue naming and fighting harmful ideologies in English curricula. Since there are calls to rethink fairy tales that challenge Eurocentrism, we hope there are also calls for fairytales that include women of color and other gender identities to challenge narratives of male dominance. Such stories, we believe, could add to the curricular power of challenging the many facets of rape culture in secondary English classrooms.

## Conclusion

Durand (2019), in theorizing the aims of teaching literature to adolescents in our contemporary times, muses that the purpose is to “take steps toward resolving the issues raised in literature” (90). Witnessing the last few years of social and political upheaval from the election of Donald Trump to the #MeToo movement started by Tarana Burke (2018); from the confirmation hearings of Supreme Court Justice Brett Kavanaugh<sup>1</sup> to the Brock Turner<sup>2</sup> case has only strengthened the resolve of our commitment to critical literacy in our classrooms. Arnold’s (2018) *Damsel* is a catalyst promoting analysis of and response to societal injustices like male dominance and sexual assault. Through critical readings, thoughtful conversations, and social action projects, students can be empowered to have an impact on their world. Just as Ama’s fury at her reality fuels her to rewrite her own so-called fairytale story-ending in *Damsel*, so could our students use their outrage at injustices to rewrite their futures in a world in which they, too, can challenge a common refrain in Arnold’s novel: the way things have always been.



**Shelby Boehm** (ORCID: 0000-0002-6671-6197) is a doctoral student at the University of Florida where she studies English education and literacy. Prior to doctoral studies, she taught high school English in Florida. Email: sboehm@ufl.edu

**Kathleen Colantonio-Yurko** (ORCID: 0000-0002-3205-2871) is an assistant professor of literacy education at SUNY Brockport. Before becoming a teacher educator, she taught high school English in Florida. Email: [kyurko@brockport.edu](mailto:kyurko@brockport.edu)

**Kathleen Olmstead** (ORCID: 0000-0002-0559-9003) is an assistant professor of literacy education at SUNY Brockport. Before becoming a teacher educator, she was an elementary school teacher/literacy specialist in New York. Email: [kolmstea@brockport.edu](mailto:kolmstea@brockport.edu)

**Henry “Cody” Miller** (ORCID: 0000-0003-1172-3733) is an assistant professor of English education at SUNY Brockport. He taught high school English in Florida before transitioning into higher education. Email: [hmillier@brockport.edu](mailto:hmillier@brockport.edu)

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## Notes

1. During his Senate confirmation hearing, Supreme Court nominee Brett Kavanaugh was accused of sexual assault by Christine Blasey Ford, thus adding to the growing number of allegations against powerful men, including Donald Trump, the president who appointed Kavanaugh. see <https://www.vox.com/identities/2018/10/9/17933746/me-too-movement-metoo-brett-kavanaugh-weinstein>
2. Brock Turner, a swimmer at Stanford University, was accused of sexual assault by Chanel Miller. Gaining national attention in the US, the media portrayal of Turner and the lenient guilty sentencing were widely criticized as representative of the issues facing survivors of sexual assault. see <https://www.vox.com/2016/6/7/11866390/brock-turner-stanford-sexual-assault-explained>

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