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“She was no taller than your thumb. So she was called Thumbelina”: Gender, Disability, and Visual Forms in Hans Christian Andersen’s “Thumbelina” (1835)

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Cover Page Footnote

The research presented in this article represents a much developed and expanded version of a paper given at a conference entitled “Disability at the Intersection of History, Culture, Religion, Gender, and Health”, which was hosted by Marquette University (Wisconsin, USA) and took place on 3-4 March 2022.



“SHE WAS NO TALLER THAN YOUR THUMB. SO SHE WAS CALLED THUMBELINA”: GENDER, DISABILITY, AND VISUAL FORMS IN HANS CHRISTIAN ANDERSEN’S “THUMBELINA” (1835)

HANNAH HELM¹

Abstract

This article explores representations of femininity and disability in Hans Christian Andersen’s fairy tale “Thumbelina” (1835) and select examples of his paper art. In this article, I argue that, on one level, the fairy tale and Andersen’s own paper cuttings uphold feminine and ableist norms. However, on another level, these literary and visual forms simultaneously work to destabilize social prejudices and challenge bodily normativity. I explore how characters and themes associated with the fairy tale and paper art can be (re)read in strength-based ways. In the story, Thumbelina experiences the world through her smallness, and key themes including accessibility, physical ability, social stigma, and the environment overlap with disability concerns. However, through “Thumbelina,” Andersen also presents glimpses of female empowerment and a positive sense of disabled community, thereby challenging—but not always offering a solution to—damaging nineteenth-century gendered and bodily norms. Existing scholars have investigated disability and gender in other popular fairy tales such as “The Little Mermaid” (1837) and “The Ugly Duckling” (1843) (Yenika-Agbaw, 2011; Barounis, 2016; Yamato, 2017). However, work that combines critical analysis of Andersen’s fairy tales with visual forms is yet to be undertaken. In particular, I argue that interdisciplinary approaches account more fully for the artistic, gendered, literary, political, and social contexts associated with disability. By offering one of the first explorations into literary representations of disability, gender, and visual forms together, this paper bridges gaps in Children’s Literature and Literary Disability Studies and points to future directions in both fields, suggesting that a combined analysis of the textual and visual may inform and develop future research into representations of gender and disability in fairy-tale forms.

Keywords: Hans Christian Andersen, “Thumbelina,” disability, gender, fairy tale, visual forms, paper art

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This article argues that Hans Christian Andersen represents issues relating to femininity and disability in his fairy tale “Thumbelina” (1835) and paper art in ways that simultaneously uphold nineteenth-century feminine and bodily norms and reveal implicit glimpses into possibilities for female emancipation, rebellion, and creativity.² In investigating Andersen’s engagement with these issues through his depiction of female and male characters in “Thumbelina” and select examples of his paper art, the article does not solely conform to Clare Barker and Stuart Murray’s view that disability in literature “arouses notions of ‘deviance,’” or that its representation “shocks, creates fear, or invites pity,” but rather positions Andersen’s fairy tale and paper art as potential wellsprings for tracing subliminal and partially obscured themes of female empowerment and disability in contradistinction to many harmful representations found in nineteenth-century children’s literature.³ Andersen’s characterization of Thumbelina is autonomous and independent despite the obstacles and pressures she faces from other characters in the story, where she navigates a natural environment from which she is excluded both physically and socially. While Andersen, in part, reinforces normative structures about femininity and the female body through Thumbelina’s experiences, he brings these same structures into question to query dominant cultural ideas relating to nineteenth-century gender roles, physical ability, and social acceptance.

Andersen presents a female character who is physically beautiful, but her smallness (which is encoded as an impairment) means that she also negotiates many issues with which people with disabilities might identify, such as an inaccessible environment, mobility concerns, and social prejudices. For example, Thumbelina “is so small and light that [the environment is] just like an island to her,” whilst later on she struggles to navigate a world that is “so enormous compared to her own inch of height”: “every time a snowflake struck her it was as if she had been hit by a whole

² In this article, I differentiate between the key terms of “impairment” and “disability.” I argue that “impairment” is understood as an individual’s bodily condition, whilst “disability” refers to the stigma and exclusion that result from impairment in the social environment. These definitions are linked to the medical and social models in Disability Studies. The medical model places the onus of disability on the individual and focuses on “curing” or “overcoming” impairment. In comparison, the social model locates disability in society and argues that systemic barriers are the root of disability, and I contend that Andersen negotiates with key disability concepts such as access, physical ability, and social exclusion in his creation of the character of Thumbelina.

³ Clare Barker and Stuart Murray, “Introduction: On Reading Disability in Literature,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Literature and Disability*, eds. Clare Barker and Stuart Murray (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017), 6. Problematic disability tropes can be seen in many other near-contemporaneous examples of children’s literature, such as disability-as-punishment in Jacob and Wilhelm Grimms’ fairy tale “Cinderella” (1812), where the stepsisters are blinded as punishment for their jealousy; disability-as-cure in Sarah Chauncey Woolsey’s *What Katy Did* (1872), where Katy learns to walk again as a result of her good-natured disposition; and disability-as-villainy in a much later example—J. M. Barrie’s *Peter and Wendy* (1911)—where Captain Hook is signified both in terms of his impairment and his evil.

shovelful, for we are quite tall while she measured only an inch.”⁴ Thumbelina’s physical smallness means that she must navigate an inhospitable physical environment that accommodates only particular types of bodies, a claim evidenced by Michalina Grzelka’s argument that “‘Thumbelina’ is a good example of how hostile an inaccessible environment can be to people with disabilities.”⁵ In this article, my main aims for analyzing Andersen’s representation of femininity and disability in the fairy tale and paper art are three-fold: First, I examine how the maybug characters in the story are used to call attention to Thumbelina’s gendered and bodily constraints. Second, I explore how Andersen creates images of women in his paper art that, like Thumbelina, struggle against confining gender roles and unequal power dynamics, thus showing how concepts of female struggle and liberation are connected through parallels within his fairy tale and paper art. Third, I posit that the character of the swallow is allegorically representative of the concept of prosthesis and is used to emancipate Thumbelina from her inhospitable physical environment—and unite her with a character who shares her physical difference—by the end of the tale.

I adopt a feminist disability studies theoretical framework in this article to enable my interrogation of nineteenth-century, Western European representations of femininity and disability. This subfield of disability studies draws on feminist theory to “offer profound insights, methods, and perspectives that would deepen disability studies” and interrogate gendered concepts such as caregiving responsibilities, physical appearance and beauty standards, and the female body in line with disability issues.⁶ Throughout history the relationship between women and disability has been classified in largely negative terms because, from an intersectional perspective, each identity position stems from a place of oppression and disempowerment. This viewpoint goes back at least as far as the views of the ancient Greek philosopher Aristotle, who described woman as “a mutilated male” in comparison to men, thereby problematically suggesting that womanhood is inferior and, within itself, a form of impairment.⁷ The links between women and disability, particularly in terms of oppression and disempowerment, have since been taken up by leading disability scholar Rosemarie Garland-Thomson. Garland-Thomson inaugurated the field of feminist disability studies, and she asserts that “women with disabilities, even more intensely than women in general, have been cast in the collective cultural imagination as inferior, lacking, excessive, incapable, unfit,

⁴ Hans Christian Andersen, “Thumbelina,” in *Hans Christian Andersen’s Complete Fairy Tales*, trans. Jean Hersholt (San Diego: Printers Row, 2014), 19, 21, 22.

⁵ Michalina Grzelka, “Representation of Disability in Fairy Tales from the Perspective of the Social Model of Disability,” *International Journal of Pedagogy, Innovation, and New Technologies* 6, no. 1 (2019): 111.

⁶ Rosemarie Garland-Thomson, “Integrating Disability, Transforming Feminist Theory,” *NWSA Journal* 14, no. 3 (2002): 2.

⁷ Quoted in Robert Mayhew, *The Female in Aristotle’s Biology: Reason or Rationalization* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2004), 56.

and useless.”⁸ In her review of the field, Garland-Thomson outlines several key goals of feminist disability studies, namely that it “understands disability as a system of exclusions that stigmatizes human differences . . . it uncovers communities and identities that the bodies we consider disabled have produced . . . it reveals discriminatory attitudes and practices directed at those bodies . . . and it frames disability as an effect of power relations.”⁹ As I will argue throughout this article, all of these concepts are negotiated within the fairy tale and Andersen’s paper art. By attending to surface-level themes of disempowerment and marginalization in these different cultural forms, it then becomes possible to understand how Andersen similarly “explor[es] conceptual and lived connections between gender and disability” through “Thumbelina.”¹⁰

Scholars working within feminist disability studies have explored how the intersections between women and disability have traditionally been associated with disempowerment. As Susan Lonsdale suggests, “For women, the status of ‘disabled’ compounds their status as of being ‘female’ to create a unique type of oppression.”¹¹ However, I explore how Andersen’s tale and paper art have the potential to offer a creative platform in which the perceived parallel “inferiorities” of gender and disability work together toward liberation rather than oppression. In this way, the dialogue between gender and disability is interpreted, within the context of fairy-tale narratives, as productively ambivalent: whilst Andersen does make visible feminine and ableist norms, he also uses “Thumbelina” and his paper art in part to resist them.

This article is thus informed by feminist and anti-ableist frameworks that are newly used to analyze representations of gender and disability in “Thumbelina” and Andersen’s paper art. Scholars working on Andersen’s fairy tales or adaptations inspired by his works, such as Vivian Yenika-Agbaw, Cynthia Barounis, Lori Yamato, Jennifer Hammond Sebring, and Pauline Greenhill, have critiqued representations of gender and disability in popular tales such as “The Little Mermaid” (1837) and “The Ugly Duckling” (1843); yet, “Thumbelina” has received comparatively little attention.¹² Whilst other recent scholars have investigated themes of gender in the tale, work

⁸ Rosemarie Garland-Thomson, “Feminist Disability Studies: A Review Essay,” *Signs* 30, no. 2 (2005): 1567.

⁹ Garland-Thomson, “Feminist Disability Studies: A Review Essay,” 1557.

¹⁰ Kim Hall, *Feminist Disability Studies* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2011), 4.

¹¹ Susan Lonsdale, *Women and Disability: Experience of Physical Disability* (Basingstoke, Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan, 1990), 2.

¹² See Vivian Yenika-Agbaw, “Reading Disability in Children’s Literature: Hans Christian Andersen’s Tales,” *Journal of Literary and Cultural Disability Studies* 5, no. 1 (2011): 91–107; Cynthia Barounis, “Special Affects: Mermaids, Prosthetics, and the Disabling of Feminine Futurity,” *Women’s Studies Quarterly* 44, no. 1 (2016): 188–204; Lori Yamato, “Surgical Humanization in H. C. Andersen’s ‘The Little Mermaid,’” *Marvels & Tales* 31, no. 2 (2017): 295–312; and Jennifer Hammond Sebring and Pauline Greenhill, “The Body Binary: Compulsory Able-Bodiedness and Desirably Disabled Futures in Disney’s *The Little Mermaid* and *The Little Mermaid II: Return to the Sea*,” *Marvels & Tales* 34, no. 2 (2020): 256–275.

that specifically combines literary analysis with visual forms has not been undertaken.¹³ Moving beyond existing critical approaches and enquiries into Andersen's tales, this article pushes beyond well-established areas of discussion to reveal new insights into the relationship between gender, disability, and paper art in "Thumbelina." By offering one of the first explorations into literary representations of disability, gender, and visual forms together, I contend that interdisciplinary approaches account more fully for the artistic, gendered, literary, political, and social contexts associated with disability.

Andersen's paper art has also gone largely unacknowledged by scholars working within fairy-tale studies. Whilst producing, sharing, and delivering his fairy tales in oral form, Andersen created many paper cuttings, and nearly four hundred survive today. In the only comprehensive study on the subject, Beth Wagner Brust claims that Andersen's "paper cuttings enchanted everyone who saw them" because he "usually made his cuttings while people watched, often while he was telling a fairy tale aloud."¹⁴ Andersen's ability to deliver his tales in oral form, while simultaneously producing intricate paper cuttings, creates an important link between the literary and the visual that enables different artistic forms to be placed in dialogue to attend to broader themes of gender and disability. Wagner Brust's study provides a useful examination of Andersen's paper art; however, the scope of her research is also limited because she does not consider the "Thumbelina" a fairy tale at all. Addressing this underdeveloped area of study, I show how Andersen's paper cuttings do not exist in isolation but rather have the potential to either reflect or subvert literary representations of gender and disability in "Thumbelina." As Wagner Brust further states: "Most of what is known about the cuttings comes from [. . .] what can be learned by looking at the paper cuttings themselves."¹⁵ Considering Andersen's paper art within a wider context of fairy tales, gender, and disability enables exploration of Andersen's paper cuttings as creative responses to, and extensions of, key themes of gender and disability traced within "Thumbelina."

I argue that intersecting patterns found within both the "Thumbelina" fairy tale and paper art enabled Andersen to navigate different contemporary issues such as the role of women, class, and power dynamics within society. This adds new meaning to one claim made in his autobiography, where Andersen stated in 1847 that "I put on paper the story of my life."¹⁶ This

¹³ For a recent discussion of gender in Hans Christian Andersen's tales, see Maria Holmgren Troy, "Imagining Gender in Nineteenth-Century Fairy Tales by Hans Christian Andersen and Richard Henry Stoddard," *Nordic Journal of English Studies* 19, no. 4 (2020): 61–84.

¹⁴ Beth Wagner Brust, *The Amazing Paper Cuttings of Hans Christian Andersen* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1994), 11, 12.

¹⁵ Brust, *The Amazing Paper Cuttings of Hans Christian Andersen*, 12.

¹⁶ Hans Christian Andersen, *The True Story of My Life*, trans. Mary Howitt (Boston: James Munroe, 1847), 279.

suggests that Andersen explored social experiences and nineteenth-century cultural norms through the process of writing his fairy tales down *on* paper, whilst also using paper *as* the material in which he was able to craft tangible representations of related thoughts and emotions in creative and abstract ways. Both the “Thumbelina” fairy tale and Andersen’s paper cuttings speak more broadly to themes of entrapment, oppression, and hostility that still resonate and link back to a gendered or disability reading. As Wagner Brust outlines: “Andersen dared to be different—with words and with scissors—and, as a result, created works of art that can be enjoyed as much today as they were more than one hundred years ago.”¹⁷ In addition, characters within “Thumbelina” and Andersen’s own paper art are inspired by animals and nature. These include a variety of creatures and plants, such as toads, moles, and flowers, which are anthropomorphized and given human-like qualities to query ideas about human agency and free will.

In the tale, Thumbelina first undergoes experiences of powerlessness because her physical smallness and feminine beauty initially compound her subordination in the text. Garland-Thomson highlights the link between female bodies and disabled bodies:

Both the female and the disabled body are cast as deviant and inferior; both are excluded from full participation in public as well as economic life; both are defined in opposition to a norm that is assumed to possess natural physical superiority.¹⁸

At the beginning of the story, Thumbelina is described as “a good and pretty girl” who is subject to the affections of male creatures including a toad, a maybug, and a mole.¹⁹ Nevertheless, the character is treated as “inferior” because she is physically controlled as a result of both her feminine attributes and her smallness: “she was the loveliest little girl you can imagine” and “a tiny little child,” yet Thumbelina faces cultural and patriarchal pressures in the form of male characters who repeatedly attempt to force her into marriage.²⁰ In particular, Thumbelina’s floral characterization heightens her femininity.²¹ For example, Beverley Seaton pinpoints the links between flowers and nineteenth-century femininity, claiming that “flowers were seen as the most suitable aspect of nature to represent women” through “certain stereotypical qualities of the female being: smallness of stature, fragility of mind and body, and impermanence of beauty.”²² This idea is seen in

¹⁷ Brust, *The Amazing Paper Cuttings of Hans Christian Andersen*, 70.

¹⁸ Rosemarie Garland-Thomson, *Extraordinary Bodies: Figuring Physical Disability in American Culture and Literature* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1997), 19.

¹⁹ Andersen, “Thumbelina,” 23.

²⁰ Andersen, “Thumbelina,” 19, 21.

²¹ The flower motif is used widely across Andersen’s fairy tale *oeuvre*, with other stories, such as “Little Ida’s Flowers” (1835), “The Little Mermaid” (1837), and “The Daisy” (1838), revolving around this motif. This pattern is also seen in later tales including “The Marsh King’s Daughter” (1858), where Andersen continues to present his female characters in floral terms.

²² Beverley Seaton, *The Language of Flowers: A History* (Charlottesville: The University Press of Virginia, 1995), 17.

Thumbelina's physical description since she literally develops from, and is born out of, a flower. The underdeveloped flower mirrors Thumbelina's small height, as Andersen writes: "It quickly grew into a fine large flower [. . .] but the petals were folded tight, as though it were still a bud," and he uses a simile to explain that she is "as frail and fine as the petal of a rose."²³

At first, Thumbelina is free to exercise her own interests and desires. She "played on a table" with games and flowers and uses petals "as a boat [. . .] she could row clear across the plate," but this changes when she is instructed to marry a toad: "He is to be your husband."²⁴ Despite the mother toad's view that, because of her smallness, Thumbelina "can't run away from [her son]" since "there was no way at all for her to reach the shore," Thumbelina does eventually escape the arranged marriage.²⁵ Andersen at first demonstrates how Thumbelina resists gender norms because she rejects the toad and his proposal of marriage: "she didn't want to have the toad's horrible son for her husband."²⁶ With the help of the fish, Thumbelina is able to escape down the stream, "far away where the toad could not catch her."²⁷ As such, Thumbelina is liberated from the toad and the patriarchal threat of marriage that he is used to uphold: "she was a happy little girl again, now that the toad could not catch her" and entrap her as his wife.²⁸

In the following scene, however, Thumbelina encounters a maybug in her travels through the natural world, and this character is used once again threaten Thumbelina's agency. The maybug "fastened his claws around her slender waist and flew up with her into a tree," and he "sat her down on the largest green leaf of the tree, fed her honey from the flowers, and told her how pretty she was."²⁹ In contrast to her experience with the toad, the character of the maybug forces Thumbelina back into a subordinate position because he commandeers her small body and removes her mobility, and in doing so he also reinforces feminine traits of passivity and aesthetic value. The term "aesthetic value" is gendered because it is associated with physical beauty and appearance, but the term also has a critical utility within disability studies. As Michael Davidson argues, aesthetic value is "the source of ableism as ideology of bodily normalcy" within society, and this idea maps onto Thumbelina's interaction with the maybug.³⁰ In this moment, Thumbelina is subject to ableist norms

²³ Andersen, "Thumbelina," 19.

²⁴ Andersen, "Thumbelina," 19, 20.

²⁵ Andersen, "Thumbelina," 19.

²⁶ Andersen, "Thumbelina," 20.

²⁷ Andersen, "Thumbelina," 20.

²⁸ Andersen, "Thumbelina," 20.

²⁹ Andersen, "Thumbelina," 20.

³⁰ Michael Davidson, "Aesthetics," in *Keywords for Disability Studies*, eds. Benjamin Reiss, David Serlin, and Rachel Adams (New York: New York University Press, 2015): 26.

and becomes a decorative object rather than an empowered or independent character because the maybug is used to curtail female agency and reinscribe the gendered beauty ideal.

Thumbelina's smallness enables the maybug to manipulate and physically control her body, and as disability scholar Nick Watson argues, "the common feature of a disabled identity is not the *nature* or *extent* of the impairment, but the political experience of oppression" that results from it.³¹ According to Watson, individuals who experience disability "undergo a wide range of experiences as the direct result of their impairment, and some identity-forming experiences may be better described as exclusion, rejection or isolation."³² The idea that social experiences construct disability is important for interpreting Thumbelina since her "small and light" stature and "tiny" features are not necessarily framed as impairments within themselves.³³ Rather, Thumbelina's interactions with other characters are disabling because she experiences "exclusion" and "rejection" as a result of not "look[ing] the least like" other characters in the story due to her smallness.³⁴ As Rachel Adams suggests, "Disability itself always begins and ends with the subjective impressions of the individual who experiences the world through her body," and while Thumbelina conforms to normative standards of appearance and able-bodiedness, she is also deemed non-normative in the social world presented by the tale.³⁵

The male maybug calls attention to themes of accessibility, immobility, and idealized femininity, whilst the female maybugs communicate social stigma and hostility. These ideas can also be understood in line with disability concerns. As Garland-Thomson explains: "the female body and the disabled body converge in their appropriation as cultural displays of aberrance—freaks, if you will—often shaped or framed to produce cultural otherness."³⁶ Garland-Thomson's argument resonates with this example of the text because Thumbelina's physical difference and non-normative body alienate her from the other creatures and consequently create a sense of otherness and social exclusion. This is exemplified in the following passage:

"Why, she has only two legs—what a miserable sight!"

"She hasn't any feelers," one cried.

³¹ Nick Watson and Simo Vehmas, *Routledge Handbook of Disability Studies*, 2nd ed. (Oxford: Routledge, 2020), 146 (emphasis in original).

³² Watson and Vehmas, *Routledge Handbook of Disability Studies*, 146.

³³ Andersen, "Thumbelina," 19, 24.

³⁴ Andersen, "Thumbelina," 20.

³⁵ Rachel Adams, "Disability," in *Keywords for Disability Studies*, eds. Benjamin Reiss, David Serlin, and Rachel Adams (New York: New York University Press, 2015), 9.

³⁶ Rosemarie Garland-Thomson, "Redrawing the Boundaries of Feminist Disability Studies," *Feminist Studies* 20, no. 3 (1994): 593.

[. . .]

“She looks like a human being—how ugly she is!” said all of the female Maybugs.

Yet Thumbelina was as pretty as ever. Even the Maybug who had flown away with her knew that, but as every last one of them kept calling her ugly, he at length came to agree with them and would have nothing to do with her.³⁷

In this example, Thumbelina’s appearance is admired by the male maybug but criticized by female characters. Thumbelina is rejected as a result of her physical difference, which is made visible in a social context here. Discussing the concept of the aesthetic, Davidson further asserts that “aesthetic judgments implicate disability insofar as they presume a normative standard of perception and an ideal of bodily perception.”³⁸ In addition, Tobin Siebers claims that “all bodies are not created equal when it comes to aesthetic response. Taste and disgust are volatile reactions that reveal the ease or disease with which one body might incorporate another.”³⁹ From these perspectives, the maybugs in the story are used as vehicles to express similar emotions and reactions and, in becoming antithetical to the female maybugs’ normative bodily standards, Thumbelina is socially excluded and perceived as non-normative. Indeed, Thumbelina “only has two legs” and “looks like a human being,” which reinforces Garland-Thomson’s claim that the link between women and disability is made visible through “a system of exclusions that stigmatizes human difference” and “reveals discriminatory attitudes and practices directed at those bodies.”⁴⁰ Therefore, Thumbelina’s perceived otherness occurs on the basis of her physical appearance rather than any discernible impairment, but her social exclusion emphasizes her marginalization. The male maybug values Thumbelina’s beauty whilst the female maybugs are more critical about her physical difference from them, ostracizing and positioning her as the “other.” This ultimately demonstrates how—in line with the social model—disability is inherently a social and political issue.

³⁷ Andersen, “Thumbelina,” 20–21.

³⁸ Davidson, “Aesthetics,” 26.

³⁹ Tobin Siebers, *Disability Aesthetics* (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan, 2010), 1.

⁴⁰ Garland-Thomson, “Feminist Disability Studies,” 1557.



Fig. 1: Hans Christian Andersen, “The Botanist” [Reprinted by permission from Odense City Museums.]

It is productive to examine Andersen’s paper art here to further explore the intersections between Thumbelina’s physical difference and the hostility of the natural world. After she was shunned in the previous example, the maybugs “flew down out of the tree with her and left her on a daisy, where she sat and cried because she was so ugly.”⁴¹ Following this, “poor Thumbelina lived all alone in the woods.”⁴² Once again, she struggles to navigate a harsh natural environment: “The trees and the flowers withered. The big burdock leaf under which she had lived shriveled up until nothing was left of it but a dry, yellow stalk.”⁴³ The verbs “withered” and “shriveled” support a view of the natural world as undesirable and weakening, rather than generative and encouraging, for Thumbelina. Further, prior to marrying the mole towards the end of the tale, Thumbelina’s smallness and the oppressive natural environment are used to mirror Thumbelina’s powerlessness in this moment: “the grain that was sown in the field above the field mouse’s house grew so tall that, to a poor little girl who was only an inch high, it was like a dense forest.”⁴⁴ All of these aspects of the fairy tale resonate with the paper cutting in Figure 1, which is entitled “The Botanist” and is described by art historian Detlef Klein as “a living flower that has feelings.”⁴⁵ This description can be interpreted through Thumbelina herself: she is an autonomous floral-like figure born out of “a flower pot” at the start of the tale, and her own “feelings” and emotions are made clear throughout when she contends with the social pressures and stigmas voiced by other characters such as the maybugs.⁴⁶ In one 1867 letter, Andersen also states that “paper cutting is the prelude to writing,”

⁴¹ Andersen, “Thumbelina,” 21.

⁴² Andersen, “Thumbelina,” 21.

⁴³ Andersen, “Thumbelina,” 21.

⁴⁴ Andersen, “Thumbelina,” 23.

⁴⁵ Petra Lambeck, “Hans Christian Andersen’s Lesser-Known Talent: Paper Cuttings,” Deutsche Well (website). October 19, 2018. <https://www.dw.com/en/hans-christian-andersens-lesser-known-talent-paper-cuttings/a-45924839>.

⁴⁶ Andersen, “Thumbelina,” 19.

and according to Klein these cuttings were “made with a great deal of purpose.”⁴⁷ Figure 1 is not directly based on or related to Andersen’s fairy tales, but it is still possible to interpret the image in this way to tease out fruitful parallels between Andersen’s paper and overlapping themes of gendered disempowerment and hostility in “Thumbelina.”

Through this paper cutting, Andersen also anthropomorphizes the plant in human-like form, and Moy McCrory suggests that “Andersen’s possible life was cut and re-cut [. . .] a dream turned into a paper cut out, a series of figures through which he allowed light to shine, projecting the possibility and the possible life.”⁴⁸ Here, McCrory’s argument reflects the uncanniness of this image, and the idea that Andersen’s paper art epitomizes “the possibility and the possible life” communicates a sense of optimism that is undercut by Thumbelina’s isolation and hopelessness as a result of her interaction with the maybugs. Whilst on the one hand Figure 1 might conceivably be read through Andersen’s description of Thumbelina’s characterization, it also offers a different (and rather contrasting) meaning: unlike Thumbelina, this flower figure in Figure 1 is depicted as bold and threatening rather than passive and delicate. This underscores the traditional correlation between femininity and flowers in the nineteenth century that I discussed previously. Returning to Seaton, she posits that “nineteenth-century society viewed women in certain ways. The ideal woman is one who is close to nature, practicing her role in life by working with her flowers” because, in the period, flowers were seen “as equivalents of happiness, joy, and femininity.”⁴⁹ In contrast, the fact that the flower cutout in Figure 1 is portrayed in an intimidating way (with its arched eyebrows, menacing smile, and thorny features) works allegorically to represent the hostility of the natural world and its creatures in “Thumbelina.” Further, McCrory’s assertion that Andersen “made things fit into his world, rather than his being made to fit inside the conventions of his time” encapsulates how Andersen moves away from the nineteenth-century feminine ideal here: he creates a paper cutting that embodies the hostility, rather than the passivity, of the natural world.⁵⁰

⁴⁷ Lambeck, “Hans Christian Andersen’s Lesser-Known Talent.”

⁴⁸ Moy McCrory, “Andersen’s Scissors: Cutting His Own Shape,” *Writing in Practice* 5 (2019): para. 84.

⁴⁹ Seaton, *The Language of Flowers*, 19, 152.

⁵⁰ McCrory, “Andersen’s Scissors,” para. 4.



Fig. 2: Hans Christian Andersen, “Hands from Above” [Reprinted by permission from Odense City Museums]

An additional example of Andersen’s paper art is examined here to further support how Thumbelina’s interaction with the maybugs is encoded with both gender and disability concerns. In this example of the tale, Thumbelina’s femininity and smallness (her impairment) intersect together to constitute her powerlessness. Similarly, Figure 2, which is entitled “Hands from Above,” depicts a powerless feminine figure. This figure, like Thumbelina, is comparatively small and seized by a larger creature. When considering the broader links between themes of femininity and disability in the tale, this paper cutting adds new meaning to Garland-Thomson’s argument that disability, for women, is framed “as an effect of power relations.”⁵¹ Thumbelina—like the paper ballerina—is physically controlled as a result of her smallness and beauty when she meets the maybug, who “fastened his claws around her slender waist and flew with her up into a tree.”⁵² The red background of the cutting also has connotations of danger, and Michel Pastoureau explains that “red warns, prescribes, prohibits, condemns, and punishes” because the color “is always connected to the idea of something dangerous.”⁵³ These same themes are communicated in the following line by Andersen in the tale: “My goodness! How frightened little Thumbelina was when the Maybug carried her up in the tree.”⁵⁴ Interpreting the “Hands from Above” paper cutting from this perspective further emphasizes the unequal power dynamics between identity groups—male and female characters, able-bodied and disabled characters—that are negotiated in both the fairy tale and Andersen’s paper art.

⁵¹ Garland-Thomson, “Feminist Disability Studies,” 1557.

⁵² Andersen, “Thumbelina,” 20.

⁵³ Michel Pastoureau, *Red: The History of a Color*, trans. Jody Gladding (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2017), 181, 178.

⁵⁴ Andersen, “Thumbelina,” 20.

Andersen's paper cuttings thus exemplify how different strands of gender, disability, and the visual intersect together to uncover more subversive meanings. As noted in the sleeve notes to the collection of Andersen's paper cuttings at Odense City Museums, often "there was a hidden meaning in the paper cuttings—in the same way, as we know it from the fairy tales: on the surface it could amuse, in the depth it would amaze."⁵⁵ McCrory states the following in her article on the subject:

In his paper cut outs [Andersen] worked with something tangible, an external reality which reflected his own imagination and a possible place of belonging, which he might bring into being for a brief flare of life. At these times, he was able to hold in his hands a potential of what could exist and imagine being in a less defined world.⁵⁶

McCrory's claim that Andersen's paper cuttings reflect "a possible place of belonging" links back to Thumbelina and her social exclusion within an inhospitable environment. McCrory also highlights how art—as well as literature—can be used to mobilize and explore more creative possibilities as a way of imagining a better future and "a less defined world." Indeed, the fact that Andersen was able to "hold in his hands" dainty paper cuttings, such as Figure 2, offers an additional perspective on Thumbelina's own smallness. Thumbelina, in a veiled parallel to the feminine figure in "Hands from Above," is manipulated by Andersen as author and creator on a macro level, as well as male characters on a micro level in terms of plot. The materiality of Andersen's paper cuttings merits close attention here; as physically delicate artifacts, the paper cuttings function as a suitable metaphor for the character of Thumbelina herself, who is repeatedly described as "dainty" and is "so slender and frail."⁵⁷ Just as Thumbelina's body is easily controlled by other characters in the story, Andersen's paper cuttings are so fragile that "you could often bend the figures a little, blow at them and then move them across the tabletop."⁵⁸ Further, Wagner Brust states that, "considering how fragile the cutouts are," it is surprising that "so many still exist" since children and adults alike played with them.⁵⁹ This offers another parallel to Thumbelina and the ballerina in Figure 2: each are handled physically by male characters in the story and Andersen himself. These interpretations support links between Andersen's visual art and his creation of "Thumbelina," whilst also reinforcing the ways in which Thumbelina is at first controlled and mistreated in the story as a result of her physical difference.

⁵⁵ McCrory, "Andersen's Scissors," para. 67.

⁵⁶ McCrory, "Andersen's Scissors," para. 84.

⁵⁷ Andersen, "Thumbelina," 19, 21.

⁵⁸ Ayun Halliday, "The Exquisite, Ephemeral Paper Cuttings of Hans Christian Andersen," *Open Culture* (March 1, 2021), <https://www.openculture.com/2021/03/the-exquisite-ephemeral-paper-cuttings-of-hans-christian-andersen.html>, para. 1.

⁵⁹ Brust, *The Amazing Paper Cuttings of Hans Christian Andersen*, 14.

After she is rejected by the maybugs, Thumbelina is rescued by a mouse; yet, despite the mouse's "kind-hearted" disposition, the character's position in the text further imposes social norms of femininity on Thumbelina. The mouse, like the mother toad earlier on, instructs Thumbelina to marry her neighbor the mole, who is described as a "sensible man" that will make "a superb husband" for her.⁶⁰ When Thumbelina refuses and "declare[s] that she would not have the tedious mole for a husband," the mouse threatens her with violence: "Don't you be obstinate, or I'll bite you with my white teeth. [. . .] You ought to thank goodness that you are getting him."⁶¹ Maria Holmgren Troy, who recently examined the "Thumbelina" tale, states that "older female characters actively work to uphold social norms and patriarchy by finding and grooming a beautiful and submissive wife."⁶² In the tale, the mouse sustains and promotes patriarchal values that subordinate women through marriage and, in juxtaposing the mouse's views with Thumbelina's feminist defiance, Andersen anticipates the cultural conflict in Europe between the Angel in the House and the New Woman figures that would unfold as the nineteenth century progressed.

As cultural constructs relating to normative and non-normative gender norms in the mid-to-late nineteenth century, the Angel in the House and the New Woman originated from Britain. However, Rachel Fuchs and Victoria Thompson explain that these constructs were influential throughout Europe during the Victorian period. Writing about the former, Fuchs and Thompson state that "although most closely associated with England, the concept of 'angel in the house' pervaded much of Western Europe writing; it helped the middle classes define family values."⁶³ Fuchs and Thompson further claim that the figure of the Angel in the House, who was linked to and relevant for the white, middle-class, European woman, was "subordinate to her husband and devoted to him and her children."⁶⁴ By comparison, the New Woman referred to "women who postponed or rejected marriage" in order to exercise independence and play a more active role in a traditionally male-dominated society, which is something that Andersen explores through the character of Thumbelina.⁶⁵ Fearing her fate as the mole's wife, "where she would have to live underground and never go out in the warm sunshine again," Thumbelina instead craves agency and "dream[s] about how bright and fair it was out of doors," living in freedom far away from the mouse and mole.⁶⁶ In contrast to the Angel in the House, then, the New Woman was a progressive, educated

⁶⁰ Andersen, "Thumbelina," 21, 22.

⁶¹ Andersen, "Thumbelina," 23, 24.

⁶² Troy, "Imagining Gender in Nineteenth-Century Fairy Tales," 68.

⁶³ Rachel Fuchs and Victoria Thompson, *Women in Nineteenth-Century Europe* (Basingstoke, Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004), 35.

⁶⁴ Fuchs and Thompson, *Women in Nineteenth-Century Europe*, 35.

⁶⁵ Fuchs and Thompson, *Women in Nineteenth-Century Europe*, 40.

⁶⁶ Andersen, "Thumbelina," 24, 23.

woman who pushed back against societal constraints such as marriage and motherhood as the expected routes towards financial security and happiness. Andersen was writing many of his fairy tales several years before these constructs emerged, but he shows an early articulation of this gender construct by placing Thumbelina and the mouse in conflict to demonstrate contrasting gendered positions that would eventually emerge and gain traction in the following decades. Andersen also anticipates law reforms relating to the rights of women in Denmark that were introduced just over twenty years later, such as laws that enabled unmarried women to emancipate themselves from male family members in 1857.⁶⁷



Fig. 3: Hans Christian Andersen, “Ballerinas in a Corked Bottle” [Reprinted by permission from Odense City Museums]

A final paper cutting by Andersen is considered here to support a view of nineteenth-century feminine norms and roles, such as marriage, as confining trajectories for many middle-class European women. This parallels an idea negotiated in the tale through Thumbelina’s arranged marriages, with the toad and later the mole, as vehicles. Figure 3 similarly conveys two feminine figures that are entrapped or without agency in a corked glass bottle. This sense of enclosure and the inability to escape reinforces themes explored in “Thumbelina” and, more specifically, the links between gender, disability, and entrapment in relation to Thumbelina’s smallness and arranged marriage(s): Thumbelina “hated to marry the mole and live deep underground where the sun never shone.”⁶⁸ This viewpoint becomes complicated since the two women in Figure 3 are joined together in an act of unity. This unity may metaphorically signify the liberating ways in which gender and disability can intersect together towards liberation rather than oppression, as within the tale Thumbelina overcomes her own obstacles by the end and fosters relationships with other characters

⁶⁷ Fuchs and Thompson, *Women in Nineteenth-Century Europe*, 165.

⁶⁸ Andersen, “Thumbelina,” 24.

who possess non-normative bodies. Reading the tale and paper art in this way also makes visible Andersen's own sympathies and solidarity with female struggles given his own status as a social outcast. As J. N. Frandsen suggests, Andersen "takes a position on societal values and he always sides with the weak and fragile, the children, the outcast, and the strange and odd characters," while Wagner Brust further states that "in his cuttings [Andersen] reveals both the fantastic world of his imagination and glimpses of his life."⁶⁹

In the tale, Thumbelina is temporarily trapped by the mouse and mole, seemingly unable to escape her predicament. Eventually, however, she is saved by a more amicable creature—a swallow—who facilitates her escape from an inhospitable world: "tie yourself on with your sash, and away we'll fly, far from the ugly mole and his dark hole—far, far away."⁷⁰ The character of the swallow works to remove Thumbelina from the mouse and mole's oppression, the social stigma and hostility she faces from the maybugs, and the inaccessible barriers of the natural world. The mole's "dark hole," for example, metaphorically represents the hopelessness and pessimism associated with both an inhospitable natural world and Thumbelina's prospective marriage. Moreover, the swallow's ability to aid Thumbelina functions allegorically as a type of prosthesis because he uses his own mobility to enable her escape: "she sat on his back, put her feet on his outstretched wings, and fastened her sash to one of his strongest feathers."⁷¹ According to Katherine Ott, prosthesis refers to "assistive devices that people use to support what they want to do," and Watson interprets prosthesis as "a dialectical method of self-engagement, and ultimately a way to reorganize the self-world relationship."⁷² These arguments lend themselves to this reading of the tale because the swallow helps Thumbelina to overcome her plight. Indeed, the swallow uses his own ability to fly to "assist" Thumbelina's escape from a loveless marriage and a hostile natural world. In functioning allegorically as a kind of prosthetic device, then, the swallow plays an integral narrative role, enabling Thumbelina to negotiate with or "reorganize" the "self-world relationship" and unequal power dynamics that exist between herself and antagonistic characters such as the mouse, the mole, and the maybugs. Thumbelina's escape from this environment and its creatures enables this example of the text to be read in a generative way since the swallow helps her to challenge social obstacles. The fact that Thumbelina—despite her objectification and powerlessness at the beginning of the tale—is able to escape oppression at the end contrasts with Figure 3, where the two ballerinas are

⁶⁹ J. N. Frandsen, "Hans Christian Andersen: Human Values and Ethical Literature: An Introduction," *Forum for World Literature Studies* 11, no. 2 (2019): 1; Brust, *The Amazing Paper Cuttings of Hans Christian Andersen*, 14.

⁷⁰ Andersen, "Thumbelina," 24.

⁷¹ Andersen, "Thumbelina," 24.

⁷² Katherine Ott, "Prosthetics," in *Keywords for Disability Studies*, eds. Benjamin Reiss, David Serlin, and Rachel Adams (New York: New York University Press, 2015), 140; Julia Watson, "Visual Diary as Prosthetic Practice," *Biography: An Interdisciplinary Quarterly* 35, no. 1 (2012): 23.

trapped rather than liberated. This suggests that juxtaposing representations of women in the fairy tale and paper art reveal how Andersen was attuned to feminized forms of struggle in the nineteenth century, but he was not always able to challenge them.

Following her escape from the mouse and mole, Thumbelina's physical difference is finally accepted when she meets characters of her own kind at the end of the story, adding new meaning to Garland-Thomson's assertion that feminist disability studies "uncovers communities and identities that the bodies we consider disabled have produced."⁷³ Andersen's presentation of the flower prince and his kingdom is complex and offers a nuanced representation of disability. The flower prince's position in the text does promote equitable relationships between characters with the same physical difference by celebrating a sense of shared disability within the flower community—the flower prince "was not a bit bigger than Thumbelina."⁷⁴ However, Thumbelina's arrival in the flower kingdom also undermines her identity in order to reinscribe a normative sense of able-bodiedness. Like Thumbelina, the flower prince develops out of a flower: "In every flower there lived a small man or woman just like him."⁷⁵ Andersen's portrayal of this moment is complex. The flower prince polices the flower community, as "he was the king over all of them," and the tale's marriage denouement undermines female agency.⁷⁶ For example, the flower prince "asked her to be his wife, which would make her queen of all the flowers."⁷⁷ In this moment, the flower prince reconciles and situates Thumbelina with ideal feminine traits of fragility and beauty. This allows the story to come full circle and mirrors the initial framing of the tale, where Thumbelina first emerged from "a fine large flower" and could now—as the flower prince's wife—"flit from flower to flower" within his community.⁷⁸

By the end of the tale, Thumbelina ultimately submits to a male character in contrast to her previous rejection of the toad and mole. Her smallness is "cured" through marriage because the flower prince gifts Thumbelina wings in order to overcome mobility issues presented by her small height, and he changes her name because her existing one is "ugly," declaring, "you shall no longer be called Thumbelina [. . .] We shall call you Maia."⁷⁹ Thumbelina's name, a name that first encapsulated her smallness ("she was no taller than your thumb. So she was called Thumbelina"), suggests that her impairment must also be "cured" in line with the medical model of disability.⁸⁰ In an alternative thread, Andersen does work to restore social order by uniting Thumbelina with a

⁷³ Garland-Thomson, "Feminist Disability Studies," 1557.

⁷⁴ Andersen, "Thumbelina," 25.

⁷⁵ Andersen, "Thumbelina," 25.

⁷⁶ Andersen, "Thumbelina," 25.

⁷⁷ Andersen, "Thumbelina," 25.

⁷⁸ Andersen, "Thumbelina," 19, 25.

⁷⁹ Andersen, "Thumbelina," 25.

⁸⁰ Andersen, "Thumbelina," 19.

character of her own kind, thereby presenting a more positive view of a disabled community in contrast to the stigma, ableism, and alienation that she previously experienced. Therefore, although Andersen does not work to explicitly resolve gendered and ableist norms, he does portray more equitable relationships between characters who are otherwise excluded through their physical difference. This ultimately creates, in Williamson's words, "a more inclusive society with greater opportunities for social and political participation" within the fairy tale and relationships between characters with non-normative bodies.⁸¹

This article has offered some exploratory insights into Andersen's nuanced representation of issues relating to nineteenth-century concepts of femininity and disability in his fairy tale "Thumbelina" and selected examples of his paper art. Though Andersen was evidently influenced by nineteenth-century feminine and bodily norms that were steeped in ideals of beauty, subservience, and the normative body, glimpses of emancipatory expressions of resilience, rebellion, and community in the fairy tale and paper art simultaneously enable him to express alternatives to the nondisabled 'Angel in the House' ideal. Through my own analysis, I have engaged with representations of femininity and disability in the fairy tale itself whilst also drawing on Andersen's paper art to extend the critical utility of these interpretations. I have demonstrated how the "Thumbelina" tale and associated visual forms reveal complex, nuanced attitudes towards femininity and disability because, on one level, Andersen does uphold feminine and ableist norms. However, on another level, he reveals a degree of sympathy and presents a female character who overcomes an inhospitable, inaccessible physical environment in order to foster more equitable relationships with other characters who share her physical difference. Fairy tale scholar Jan Ziolkowski ultimately suggests that "it seems fruitless to press these stories for one overarching meaning or seek any one interpretation."⁸² It is this complexity and ambiguity that enables Andersen's work—and the visual forms that are directly or indirectly influenced by his writing—to be read in a multitude of different ways, which in turn may inform and develop future research into literary and artistic representations of gender and disability in fairy-tale forms.

⁸¹ Bess Williamson, "Access," in *Keywords for Disability Studies*, eds. Benjamin Reiss, David Serlin, and Rachel Adams (New York: New York University Press, 2015), 14.

⁸² Jan Ziolkowski, *Fairy Tales from Before Fairy Tales* (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan, 2009), 105.

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