Help! I’m a Feminist But My Daughter is a “Princess Fanatic”! Disney's Transformation of Twenty-First-Century Girls

Abstract

As I began this paper, my then four-year-old daughter, Annetta, sat singing “Part of Your World” from Disney’s Little Mermaid, playing with her Pocahontas Barbie doll, wearing her Cinderella dress, and planning to watch Disney’s Snow White for the umpteenth time that night... and I wondered where I had gone wrong. From dolls to lamps, bikes and bathing suits, underpants and toothpaste, the “Princess theme” is everywhere. Disney is cleverly pulling together all its heroines from earlier film classics — Snow White, Cinderella, and Sleeping Beauty — and adding the latest versions—Belle, Jasmine, Ariel, now even Tiana—to create a whole world populated by women whose only desire is to marry a prince. Kids now attend “princess” ice shows in costume and throw “princess” birthday parties — while parents (like me) pay for all the souvenirs and party supplies. Is there anything that goes beyond consumerism and sexist fairy tales in the Disney formula? I am not the only scholar-parent asking this question and, drawing upon the published record as well as my own very “intimate” knowledge of Disney’s Princesses, I will consider in this paper the transformation of girls today into “sleeping beauties,” “material girls,” and potentially even “radical feminists” after having been “touched” by the Disney spell.
Disney changed the original to make Mulan more feminist and empowered. When I first saw the movie as a child, I couldn’t wrap my mind around how a woman who quit the most important position in her life had a movie based on her. They put her up on a pedestal for having a vagina? I don’t think that it should be considered “progressive” at all. A traditional Disney princess lies within every girl’s psyche. The Princess is Pure, young and beautiful. The Antagonist is Old, time ravaged witch. We rank 8 of our favourite Disney films in order of how feminist they really are, from Aladdin to Frozen.

The Female Lead: Fiery and outspoken, princess Jasmine is a sassy feminist fighting her way through ‘a man’s world’ in Arabia. And while that can be disheartening, Jasmine really is a shining beacon when she tells the patriarchy “How dare you — all of you! Standing around deciding my future...I am not a prize to be won!”

The Male Lead: At their first scene, Jasmine tells Aladdin about how her father is forcing her to get married and describes how she’s feeling trapped. He’s genuinely alarmed by this concept before he’s interrupted by pet monkey Abu. She has help from Maui but when he gets scared she goes on alone without him proving this woman does not need a man. Engagement with Disney Princess culture can make preschoolers more susceptible to potentially damaging and limiting stereotypes, says an expert. My five-year-old daughter has a Disney princess mirror. Inevitably, it is pink and plastic and emblazoned with a Disney crown. It is an interactive toy and, provided I keep changing the batteries, it coos to her about what a beautiful princess she is and how nice she looks. While I loathe the princess mirror, my daughter loves it. It is her most treasured possession – she even sleeps with it under her pillow. The researchers also noted that for both boys and girls, more interactions with the princesses led to more female gender-stereotypical behaviour a year later. Is this a problem? Coyne thinks so.