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

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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.

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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. I adore the Disney princesses precisely because they remind girls that no matter what their circumstances (whether you’re trapped in a cottage, in a tower, or underwater, in a provincial village or by the confines of royal duty), it’s okay to want something more, to know that you are worthy of something more, and rather than downgrade your dreams to fit your reality, you must upgrade your convictions to match your destiny. My daughter is what many politely term a 'strong-willed' child. (In the words of William Shakespeare, “She is but little, but she is fierce.”) Cinderella’s transformation was not just from rags to riches; but when she stopped viewing herself as a lowly ash girl and saw the princess she always had been.