

## **HELP! I'M A FEMINIST BUT MY DAUGHTER IS A "PRINCESS FANATIC"! DISNEY'S TRANSFORMATION OF TWENTY-FIRST-CENTURY GIRLS<sup>1</sup>**

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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.

Ironically, the Princess phenomenon started with a Disney ice show which Disney Consumer Products president Andy Mooney attended in 2000 and there witnessed, as he says, "thousands of young girls dressed in costumes, Mulan and Snow White. It was like a rock concert for little princesses" (qtd. in Wloszczyna 2003)). He was inspired to combine the "Princess" heroines together into one brand, a "pretty controversial" move, he says, given how these princesses had only ever existed "in their own mythological worlds. [...] But young girls and mothers voted with their dollars. They believed in the unifying attributes of the Disney princesses" (qtd. in Wloszczyna 2003). Geared towards little girls, three to five, this line has created a financial explosion. Between 2002 and 2005 the Princess brand grew a whopping 300% (*Business Wire*), and has now overtaken both Disney's Winnie-the-Pooh and Mickey Mouse himself as their most popular brand (Arkoff 2009). Since its inception, Disney Princess merchandise has garnered \$3.4 billion in profits (Arkoff 2009). Today it is the largest "global girls franchise" (*Business Wire*) with markets in ninety countries (Arkoff 2009), including Russia, China, and India (Millard 2006). Three of the ten top-selling videos around the world are Princess films (*Beauty and the Beast*, *Aladdin*, and *Pocahontas*; Artz 2004, 117); five of the top six Disney videos ever released have been Princess films (Arkoff 2009).<sup>2</sup> *Raves* entertainment editor for *Sweet Sixteen* magazine, Vicki Arkoff, "Moms embrace it because, in a time when little girls are maturing at a much faster pace, Disney Princess lets little girls remain children for a little longer time. Disney aims to empower girls with the wholesome stories about virtues of integrity, honor, discovery, friendship, and love" (2009).

Scholarly opinion, on the other hand, has been more wary of the intense consumerism and social implications of Disney tales. The original "princess" tales (*Snow White*, *Cinderella*, and *Sleeping Beauty*) have especially come under intense scrutiny. From Frances Clarke Sayers in 1965, Kay Stone in 1975, Jill May in 1981, to Jack Zipes in 1995, all have regretted Disney's distortions of folk literature.<sup>3</sup> As Jack Zipes has said, "There is something sad in the manner in which Disney 'violated' the literary genre of the fairy tale and packaged his versions in his name through the merchandising of books, toys, clothing, and records" (1995, 40). Kay Stone, in her classic "Things Walt Disney Never Told Us," further pointed out the feminist implications: "The only tests of most [Disney] heroines require nothing beyond what they are born with: a beautiful face, tiny feet, or a pleasing temperament. [...] [Yet] to judge from the 186 heroines found in five major Angle-American folktale collections, oral narrators do not confine themselves to passive princesses" (1975, 45).

I will divide my own examination into three sections, examining first the "Princess" movies under Walt Disney's own direction (*Snow White*, *Cinderella*, *Sleeping Beauty*); the second "golden age" of Disney in the 1990s under Eisner and "Team Disney" which began with *The Little Mermaid* (1989) (I will not include *Aladdin* in this discussion since it is mainly Aladdin's story, not Jasmine's); and then the phase we are experiencing right now in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, when Disney is regurgitating its "masterpieces" through products and re-releases, while apparently also trying to inaugurate another decade of Princess films with *The Princess and the Frog* (2009) and *Tangled* (anticipated late 2010). Within each era, I will analyze 1) the narratives, 2) the images, and 3) the songs that indoctrinate and influence successive generations. I do believe, along with many scholars, that Disney's attempts in the 1990s to become more politically correct were fairly successful and can become a positive model for our young girls. The other eras, the 1930s through 50s, due to patriarchal bias, and now our own, due to crass consumerism, have been less golden.

### **"Someday My Prince Will Come": Princesses of the 'Walt Era'**

Perhaps Disney's princess theme seems so engrained within the imagination and corporation of Disney because its first full-length feature *was* a princess film: *Snow White* (1937). Marie Claire Simonelli feels that "Disney breathed new life into a genre that had long been forgotten" with his films *Snow White* and *Cinderella* (1999, 69). From *Snow White*, to *Cinderella*, to *Sleeping Beauty*, early "Princesses" were undeniably sweet, patient, and obedient girls whose only emotions ranged from extreme happiness to utter dejection.<sup>4</sup> It is likely due to these fairly dull heroines that the narratives containing them so quickly move to other characters and stories: it is indeed a breath of fresh air when the dwarves and talking mice arrive on the scene. Artz even argues that *Sleeping Beauty* failed at the box office because it was the only Disney film "without an animal sidekick" (2004, 121). The plots involving the heroines are simplistic and standard fairy-tale narrative, with heroines portrayed as "helpless, passive victims who need protection" (Henke, Umble, and Smith 1996, 234); they receive this protection from princes, fairies,



*Figure 1. Annetta as Belle, age three.  
Photograph by Alisa Clapp-Itnyre.*

even male mice. As M. Thomas Inge sums up, “[Snow White] accurately reflected the general public attitude toward the place of women in society [of the 1930s] and continued a long tradition in Western culture of portraying women as passive vessels of innocence and virtue, although [he adds] Disney’s Snow White shows a good deal more spunk than most fairy tale princesses” (2004, 141).<sup>5</sup>

In terms of image, early Princesses were, obviously, stereotypically slender, beautiful, and elegant, modeled after current stars and icons of the time. Snow White “was envisioned as a ‘Janet Gaynor’ type” (Inge 141); “Under the peasant costume,” writes Rebecca Anne C. DoRozario, “Snow White is a 1920s/30s starlet with a flapper’s haircut, rosebud mouth, and high-pitched warble” (2004, 38), yet drawn to be about fourteen. Cinderella may look older, but, like Snow White, even

she looks amazingly elegant even under the most impoverished of circumstances.<sup>6</sup> Finally there is Sleeping Beauty who, as DoRozario points out, is “a prototype Baby Boomer,” walking about barefoot, crushed when she misses her date with a boy. Like her Barbie doll image, which came out in 1959, too, she represents “the idealized American teen” of the 1960s (2004, 38). These are the images still being pushed and packaged as seen on the re-released VHS and DVD covers.

My special interest is in the songs that accompany these films, which carry ideological meaning more strongly than any dialogue because viewers still sing the songs well after they have stopped watching the films. Who does not know the song “Someday My Prince will Come” with or without watching *Snow White*, after all? My four-year-old daughter did and pointed out an error in one of scholarly articles I was reading to her which erroneously credited Sleeping Beauty with the song! Little girls are bombarded with “happily-ever-messages” even from the first moments of *Snow White*, which, in fact, opens with six songs in just the first thirty minutes. As Simonelli writes, “songs carried the central themes of the stories, conveyed the personality of the characters who sang them, and finally helped unify the whole works through musical themes” (1999, 65). The words exude romantic ideals now parodied and problematic by today’s standards: “Someday my prince will come ... And away to his castle we’ll go. To be happy forever, I know ... And the birds will sing and wedding bells will ring. Someday when dreams come true.” As journalist Jami Bernard described in 1993, at the film’s re-release, the song is “eminently hummable, ennobling the virtues of passivity and pre-



*Figure 2. Annetta as Snow White, age three, at a Disney ice show with “princess” friends: Andrea Pegg, Madelyn Brunton, and Natalie Pegg. Photograph by Alisa Clapp-Itnyre.*

determined happy endings. [...] That song sets up little girls for a lifetime of feverish romantic expectations that don’t easily mix with the jungle out there that is the modern dating scene” (qtd. in Inge 2004, 141). These songs suggest more potent influence on little girls since it is their tunes and words which little girls remember long after viewing the film itself.

*Cinderella* is especially known for its songs and had Academy Award nominations for Best Musical Score and Best Song (Bibbidi-Bobbidy-Boo; O’Brien 168).<sup>7</sup> “A Dream is a Wish Your Heart Makes” could be a complex statement about abject poverty and how to face it: “In dreams you will lose your heartaches. Whatever you wish for, you keep. Have faith in your dreams and someday, your rainbow will come smiling through. No matter how your heart is grieving, If you keep on believing The dream that you wish will come true.” *Cinderella* uses aesthetics to escape the reality of her life though, like Snow White, *Cinderella* lacks any motivation to change her and

others’ poor circumstances: note that the only time she shows any kind of anger is in this song—to the clock for waking her up: “O that clock! Killjoy! I hear you! Come on, get up, you say. Time to start another day. Even he orders me around. Well, there’s one thing: they can’t stop me from dreaming.” It is interesting that this appears to be the only time *Cinderella* gets angry, yet she reverts to dreaming as escape. The male-identified clock further is significant; *Cinderella* is living under patriarchal rule. As Naomi Wood writes, “*Cinderella*’s challenge over the course of the movie is to hold on to her dreams ... [but she learns that] all wishes have to be earned by obedience to the dream-fulfilling authorities who reward good behavior and innocent faith. [...] Her acceptance and promotion of patriarchal values [...] provide the justification for the fulfillment of her dream” (1996, 37-8). Her relationship with the Prince is given very little film space, limited to just the Doris-Day-like ballad “So this is Love,” a duet in which, significantly, the Prince only echoes *Cinderella* throughout. This, and a similar love duet from *Sleeping Beauty* based on the Tchaikovsky ballet score (“I know you! I walked with you once upon a dream”) are significant not only in that men share the songs with the women (a trend dropped in 1990s films) but also in reinforcing the concept of “dreaming,” taking young women’s minds away from realistic problems and relationships, and letting “fate” work its magic.

### **"I Want So Much More Than They've Got Planned": Princesses by 'Team Disney'**

After Walt Disney's death in 1966, the Walt Disney Company, led by family members who often lacked business savvy, began to flounder (O'Brien 1996, 168). Churning out simplistic, "cutesy" films like *The Fox and the Hound* (1981), Disney began to lose money and viewers. By 1984, Disney stockholders brought in new leaders from other studios, with Michael Eisner from Paramount as chairman of the board (O'Brien 1996, 169). Termed "Team Disney," this committee led by Eisner, determined to return to Disney's very successful fairy-tale adaptations of earlier years.<sup>8</sup> A number of recent critics are willing to praise "Team Disney's" attempts to rectify gender and cultural biases of past films: "[L]ater films shift from simple stories of passive, young virgins in conflict with evil, mature women to more complex narratives about rebellion, exploration, and danger" according to Henke, Umble, and Smith (1996, 234). Two sociological studies of Disney films (Hoerrner; Towbin et al.) both find that, though not completely free of gender stereotyping, recent films show stronger women "with problem-solving abilities and actions on a more equal footing with their male peers" (Hoerrner 1996, 225).

Not that *The Little Mermaid* (1989) was any immediate break-through; Regina Bendix, in "Seashell Bra and Happy End," argues that "*The Little Mermaid* follows the same formula Disney created with his *Snow White* adaptation" (1993, 289). Admittedly, Ariel is now spunky and feisty but channels this towards obtaining a man, at great cost: as Henke, Umble, and Smith write, "Little wonder [...] that alarms sound for feminists concerned with the psychological development of girls and women's sense of self when Ariel literally sacrifices her voice" (1996, 237). Disney makes this condition more sexist than in Anderson; note Ursula's quips such as "It's she who holds her tongue who gets a man." Leading a barrage of critics,<sup>9</sup> Roberta Trites, in her 1991 article, concluded, "The movie depicts women as either self-effacing or evil, incapable of creating their own responsible power without either depending on men or stealing power from them. Thus, Disney's interpretation of Anderson's story perpetuates sexist values by teaching those values to a new generation" (152).

Some critics found "Team Disney's" next production, *Beauty and the Beast* (1991), to be "the same old story, a romance plot that robs female characters of self-determination and individuality," to quote June Cummins (1995, 22). Others, myself included, found that the film really did break new ground in greatly submerging the fairy-tale-romance ending almost to an afterthought. Additionally, the agency accorded to Belle is ground-breaking: she "exercises more power on her own behalf than previous Disney heroines" (Henke, Umble, and Smith 1996, 238) and claims literally twice as much screen time as any other character in the film (Thomas in Henke, Umble and Smith 1996, 238). Belle resists societal pressures by engaging in reading, dreaming beyond "provincial" norms, rejecting the town suitor, and even defying the Beast himself. As Henke, Umble, and Smith explain, "No victim, Belle sets the terms for the bargains she makes. In this sense, she exercises more power on her own behalf than previous Disney heroines. [...] She preserves her own options [...] [And] by freeing her father from the Beast's

prison, becoming a prisoner herself, and saving the Beast from the wolves, [s]he holds *their* futures in her hands” (1996, 239). In stark contrast to those lightly-glossed-over relationships of the early Princess films, “It offers to viewers a model for intimacy which presumes that both partners must seek wholeness of Self before either can find wholeness in relationship,” according to Susan Z. Swan (350), with Belle choosing a man “who wants the same things [books and intellect], [thus] symbolically [...] marrying an aspect of herself” (Ross 2004, 63).

I am pleased to say that my daughter Annetta’s first Princess favorites were, in fact, Belle and Pocahontas. Acknowledging that there has been a large outcry



*Figure 3. Annetta as Pocahontas, age two, trick-or-treating on Halloween. Photograph by Alisa Clapp-Itnyre.*

especially from Native Americans and cultural critics against *Pocahontas* (1995),<sup>10</sup> from a strictly feminist perspective, I still do appreciate “Team Disney” portraying a minority heroine who shows even greater personal risk in “saving her man” than even Ariel or Belle and who, in other ways, goes against the grain. Forget that we know from the historical record that Pocahontas in fact married someone else and migrated to England, or that race relations could not be mitigated by simply one strong person. It is enough, I think, that the last image we see on the screen is of a courageous woman standing alone without a husband but with a mighty purpose to undertake. As Henke, Umble, and Smith write, “Our reading of Pocahontas implies that she is clearly the most elaborate and complex character in this group of heroines. [...] [She is] an adventurous female who [...] chooses a destiny other than that of heterosexual romantic fulfillment” (1996, 240-1).

“Team Disney”’s last “princess” movie, *Mulan* (1998), is possibly their

best. Again I admit that cultural critics have much maligned the film in its huge deviations from traditional renderings of the Mulan legend, using clichéd images of the East, and using “streetwise black lingo” through the character of Eddy Murphy’s Mushu character (Ma 2003, 151).<sup>11</sup> Nevertheless, there are important strides here in showing a strong, independent, brave woman whose story, for the most part, does not even rely on a romance plot but is one about martial bravery and quick-thinking as Mulan concocts strategies for defeating the Huns and rescuing the Emperor. In the first instance, she cleverly aims her gun not at one soldier but at a snow-covered to create an avalanche that subdues the entire Hun

army. She then creates a plan to save the Emperor when the Huns kidnap him and, knowing her resourcefulness by now, the men immediately follow *her*.

Many of the strides made in narrative strategy are backed by more politically acceptable physical images. Belle and Mulan, for instance, reveal fewer curves, and flaunt "untidy" hair which shows rebellion of society's codes of neat femininity. In fact, Mulan is androgynous for most of the movie. Of course, the same could not be said for Ariel and Pocahontas. Ariel is barely clothed with small shells to cover her breasts while Pocahontas is leggy with hardly any waist, an off-the-shoulder look to show off her voluptuous breasts. DoRozario refers to their athleticism, "enact[ing] a shift from the 'princesses' of ballet to the 'heroes' of sport" (2004, 47) and describes them as moving with "the grace of sportswomen. Ariel performs underwater feats and rescues Eric from drowning in a storm. [...] Pocahontas dives off waterfalls, sings a solo while shooting the rapids and duets while running cross-country" (46-7). However, as Bean notes, they are "male-defined fantasies of female biological perfection. Drawn according to the same impossible dimensions as the Barbie doll — or any number of surgically altered Hollywood actresses — Disney's heroines all feature tiny waists, large breasts, curvy hips, and sensuous hair" (2003, 55). Queries Jacquelyn Kilpatrick, "Would [Pocahontas], like Barbie, fall over if really given those dimensions?" The simple image of her body threatens to undermine any powerful feminist or ecological message she might promote, Kilpatrick writing, "She does sing to John about living naturally in tune with the Earth [...] but does she have to do it in an off-the-shoulder miniskirt?" (1995, 36-7)

But the 1990s Disney films would still probably have failed had they not been enhanced by incredibly promoted soundtracks. *The Little Mermaid* won an Oscar for "Under the Sea"<sup>12</sup> while Celine Dion and Peabo Bryson's pop version of "Tale as Old as Time" blared over all radio stations in 1991-2. The "Princess" songs from these films now appear in various sing-along and princess collection CD's, dispersing their ideologies to more and more generations of kids. I find "Kiss the Girl" masking some dangerous sentiments ("You know she wants it") with our increased attention to date rape in recent decades. But many of the others, including Ariel's song, "Part of Your World," Belle's Song, Pocahontas' "Just Around the River Bend," and "Mulan's "Reflection," are all about a young woman's sense of confinement under patriarchal laws; to quote Ariel, "Bright young women, sick of swimmin', ready to stand." Most speak about defying society and choosing their own course of action, as Belle sings: "I want adventure in the great, wide somewhere, I want it more than I can say ... I want so much more than they've got planned." "Mulan's "Reflection," though least known, probably best sums up this powerful trend in revealing women's anger and rebellion in a patriarchal society:

Now I see, that if I were truly to be myself, I would break my family's heart.

... Somehow I cannot hide, Who I am, though I've tried.  
When will my reflection show who I am inside?

If there is a problem in these songs, it is the self-deprecating way that each woman begins her song, Ariel asking “Maybe there is something wrong with me,” for example. Pocahontas, in “Colors of the Wind” is made to blindly state, “You think I’m an ignorant savage, And you’ve been so many place, I guess it must be so” while even Mulan begins her reflection by admitting, “Look at me, I will never pass for a perfect bride or a perfect daughter.” Too, as I have just delineated, most of the songs’ feminist stances run counter to the ultimate romance plots; despite defying society’s marriage expectations, all women end up married or sought after by the end.<sup>13</sup> I would argue that, taken independent of their opening recitatives and especially the ultimate outcomes in the films, though, these songs, sung on their own, are fairly liberating “hymns to her.”

**“Look at This Stuff, Isn’t It Neat?”  
21st Century Manifestations of the  
Disney Princesses**

I end, then, with contemporary manifestations of the Disney Princesses. Indeed, the re-releases and sequels of these now classic films keep their images alive on the screen for each new generation. The Disney Company tries to redeem the historical record by having Pocahontas marry John Rolfe in England in *Pocahontas II: Journey to a New World* (1998); Ariel, ironically, succumbs to overly-protective motherhood herself in *Little Mermaid II: Return to the Sea* (2000) while we learn of her own mother’s tragic adventure in *The Little Mermaid: Ariel’s Beginning* (2008); and Mulan and her romantic interest Li Shang, in un-Asian fashion, try to prevent three arranged marriages in *Mulan II* (2004).

In the midst of my revision of this article, Disney unveiled their first Princess movie in eighteen years, *The Princess and the Frog* (December 2009). Clearly, Disney was attempting to address earlier “sins:” Tiana is the first African-American princess and her dream is to own her own restaurant, not find a “prince;” in fact, her rich, white friend, Lotty, whose only aspiration is to find a prince becomes easy fodder in the “evil plot.” In the end, it is Tiana who gets the prince, and her dream becomes his, so she achieves that twentieth-first-century, feminist goal of having a man and a successful career, too. But Tiana’s desire to own her own restaurant is, in large part, an extension of her dead *father’s* dream, and much of the movie serves to point out her almost foolish one-tracked obsession with it,



*Figure 4. Annetta as Mulan, age six, and cousin Becca as Ariel, age five. Photograph by Alisa Clapp-Itnyre.*

to the exclusion of “finding love.” Further, Disney playfully inverts the princess-and-the-frog motif so that both Tiana and Prince Naveen spend most of their on-screen time as amphibians; this thus limits the amount of time Disney can devote to exploring human gender roles. Its release has not, ultimately, seemed to have made a huge impact. It made only \$263 million worldwide at the box-office and \$67 million on DVD sales (by comparison, the next big children’s film, *Toy Story 3* [June 2010] grossed \$984 million world-wide; the-numbers.com). Though nominated for Best Animated Feature Film of 2010 at the Academy Awards, it lost to Pixar’s *Up*; ticket sales, too, confirmed popular preference for *Up* (#4 in ticket sales for 2009) than *Princess and the Frog* (which was 38<sup>th</sup>). Even Disney seems to have pulled back in promoting the film: their official *Princess Magazine* highlighted Tiana in their October 2009 magazine in anticipation of the film, but subsequent issues have simply shown her as part of the princess line-up at the back, with no feature stories. Internet articles and blogs show viewers divided on Disney’s achievement, commending Tiana’s minority status while complaining that she follows the stereotype of a poor black in the segregated South, that she marries a “whiter” Prince, and that the use of voodoo is overwhelming and frightening. Maybe their next Princess movie, *Tangled*, set to be released in November 2010, with a feisty — albeit still blonde and sexy — Rapunzel, will bring back a flamboyant 1990s heroine.

It may be no surprise, then, that Disney has continued to promote their other Princesses. For our twenty-first century computer-savvy little girls, Disney has its own Princess website at <http://disney.go.com/princess> where “happily ever after happens every day.” Ironically, much of the website is devoted to more consumerism: purchasing Princess products and videos, viewing Disney theme parks, etc. When girls are asked to participate, it is to paint, hear a story, decorate a room, or to help a Princess dress. Girls love this: the Princesses call the girls their “friends,” play their favorite songs in the background, and “you get to pick out their clothes and they’re all so pretty,” my eight-year-old tells me. Yet I respond that it is too bad she wasn’t asked to greet the guests, help rule the kingdom, or do other more meaningful work! As Meghan Sweeney recently pointed out, the covert messages are still conservative: Princesses look coy, are overly appreciative and sweet, while the little girls’ own agency — simply dressing and decorating — is severely limited.<sup>14</sup>

Book publishers are also eager to share the Princess market. Random House uses Princesses in their Step Into Reading series. Redan Publishing, using Disney artwork by permission, publishes a *Disney Princess Magazine* targeting girls 3-8 years old with crafts and stories. A plethora of Golden and other such books repeat the film’s versions of these fairy tales. Scholastic Books publishes a line of books through their Princess Book Club: The Disney Princess Collection. These books are aesthetically weak, using Disney Princesses to tote pedantic stories about being brave, paying attention, taking turns, and telling the truth. What is potentially useful about the books is that they enlarge the meaning of “princess” beyond those who are royal or rich, and clearly define it as a character trait — something any brave or clever girl could emulate — by giving a problem and then asking, “What would a princess do?” The books further disavow the princesses’

royal and/or romantic status by setting books before they have married their prince, or quickly dismissing their princely-husband. In the first instance, we often find Cinderella back dealing with problems with her stepsisters and see Mulan back as a man among the troops. In the second instance, Princess Snow White will leave her prince to visit the dwarves, and when her prince is off visiting another kingdom, Princess Cinderella cavorts around the castle with the mice, often dressed very much like the servant Cinderella. In several Pocahontas books, Pocahontas actually plays with Capt. Radcliffe’s dog Percy, reminding readers that the context is post-Smith but not once mentioning him while Pocahontas carries on her daily routine with fellow villagers. This is fascinating to me because it suggests that, despite the “hype” over the Princess status — as romantic and royal — it is much more interesting to tell stories of their lives as single, poor women. It is not a bad reminder to make to girls.

And girls everywhere need to be reminded of this to offset the bombardment of images on everything from cereal boxes to pajamas. Combining the princesses erases any individuality among them: Belle is simply not Snow White if you have seen the movies. The most common combination of Princesses is the Caucasian Cinderella, Belle, and Sleeping Beauty, as we see on towels, clothes, and many other products. Pocahontas, Mulan, even Tiana are still shown much less often, defeating the cultural strides the films had made. Too, the Princesses are now usually shown in very regal and sexual ways, again disappointing given the statements of the actual movies: the book-worm Belle now has a cleavage, the modest Aurora looks alluring, and Jasmine often seems to be starting a strip-tease.<sup>15</sup>

All of these points are manifested visibly at Walt Disney World itself where my daughter (in 2008, age six) and her four-year-old cousin stood in half-hour lines to be photographed with the *royal* Belle, Aurora, and Cinderella in the Magic Kingdom. Mulan, on the other hand, was showcased only briefly, and without wait, at the China exhibit in EPCOT — as if she were an exotic cultural icon like the Great Wall. Pocahontas is easy to miss in Animal Kingdom, appearing in her own small nature show completely dwarfed by the Lion King show next door ... and was never available to be photographed with little girls. Both facts suggest Pocahontas as an “animal-other”, housed far from humans, used only to teach ecology lessons.<sup>16</sup>

And what songs are ringing in little girls’ ears these days? When not singing along to soundtracks and sing-along CDs — which encourage rote memory of potentially problematic lyrics just discussed — little girls may be singing adulterated versions of classic and folk songs; my daughter owns a Princess Fairy Tale Song book in which Irving Berlin’s classic “In my Easter Bonnet” is now perverted to “Smile and show your dimples”! When Disney tries to be original, with their much heralded 2004 release of a newly written song, the “princess anthem,” ‘If You Can Dream,’ on Walt Disney Record’s *The Ultimate Song Collection*, performed by many of the original soloists of Princess films (Judy Kuhn, Jodi Benson, Paige O’Hara, and Lea Salonga, etc.), a ridiculous hodge-podge of clichés from all the princess songs are put together into unrealistic, romantic sentiments:

There is a world where hope and dreams can last for all time  
 A wondrous place to go you'll know it when your heart finds ...  
 Hearing our song as old as rhyme, Hold my hand, we're gonna' fly  
 What a magic ride, and just a kiss away ...

*[Refrain]*

If you can dream, the wish we're making on a star is coming true  
 The colors of the wind will lead my heart right back to you  
 'Cause if you can dream, reflections in a diamond sky come shinin' on  
 through  
 Romance will always be so new and love will save the day.

I am especially disturbed to see the "colors of the wind" phrase torn from its environmental theme and appropriated into the romantic message. If this is as good as Disney can now do, I am turning off my CD player.

### **Conclusion**

And so we come to some conclusions as I ponder the eminent fate of my eight-year-old daughter, now in her sixth year of "Princess fan-dom." Bendix reminds us that "How children ultimately process their encounters with [Disney] [...] remains a largely unexplored domain. [...] It remains to be hoped that children around the world will be resilient enough to challenge the commodified fantasies that are coming their way" (1993, 290). Hastings warns that "Such moral simplification [of good/bad people; of all desires fulfilled] increases the likelihood that these children will become adults who find the causes of their own unhappiness in personalized, 'evil' antagonists — a sure formula for continued conflict" (1993, 90). Yet O'Brien points out that children usually use the characters, not the plots, in their play so rebellious girls from the 1990s films still offer positive role models (1996, 178). In 2004, Alexander M. Bruce conducted a study of second- and third-graders about the Disney princesses, concluding that "the girls did tend toward one general reaction: they want the life of the princess — just not necessarily the prince himself" (2005-2006, 7).<sup>17</sup> Though reassured that girls may be shaking off some of Disney's romantic notions and are becoming more independent (paralleled, in fact, by the phenomenon found in Scholastic's book-series where the men actually disappear), I note the troubling extension of this: that to be a princess yet means "to have all the beautiful possessions they could hope for" with great significance placed on physical beauty (Bruce 2005-2006, 15). In my limited experience, I do find that Annetta has always been more fascinated by the characters themselves, not the storylines or romantic endings. She and her friends love waltzing into a room in full princess regalia or stealing around the backyard as Pocahontas and friends, creating their own stories. We talk about the physical beauty, tiny waists, jewelry, and moments of complete acquiescence not being necessary or even appropriate to being a "princess." Indeed, Mia Adessa Towbin and others suggest using the films as a "springboard for family discussion. If parents watch the movies with their children and ask questions before, during,

and after, parents can begin to increase their children's media literacy" of how to read films (2003, 40).

I cannot ignore the look of rapture whenever my daughter dons her Sleeping Beauty dress or meets Ariel at Walt Disney World. So I am going to continue to let Annetta enjoy her Princess dolls and dresses, but I am also going to be a continual presence in the reading, listening, and viewing of anything "Princess." To enjoy, with an analytical eye; to share, while developing a critical world view: these can be the feminist attitudes I can pass on to my exuberant "Princess fanatic."

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### NOTES

1. This study originated as a conference paper given at the Annual Children's Literature Association Conference, Manhattan Beach, California, 10 June 2006.

2. I am using internet articles and EBSCOhost database news-articles: Vicki Arkoff, "How Disney Princess Works," *HowStuffWorks*. 2006-9. HowStuffWorks, Inc. May 31, 2009. <entertainment.howstuffworks.com>; Rosie Millard, "In five years, Disney Princess has bloomed into a hugely successful multinational brand," in *New Statesman* (January 9, 2006); "Disney Princess proves she's still the fairest of the land," "Business Wire" (New York, June 21, 2005); and Susan Wloszczyzna, "Disney princesses wear merchandising crown," in *USA Today* (Sept. 17, 2003). See also Lee Artz, "The Righteousness of Self-Centered Royals: The World According to Disney Animation." *Critical Arts: A Journal of South-North Cultural and Media Studies*. 18. 1 (2004): 116-46.

3. Frances Clarke Sayers accused Disney of "sweeten[ing] a folk tale ... [which] destroys the proportion and purpose of the story, the conflict and its resolution" (118). Jill May has regretted that "One of Disney's greatest achievements in the realm of film was to replace the reader's desire to pursue a book's theme through the viewing pleasure of light-hearted American entertainment" (464).

4. Their sweetness is amplified by consistently including older women — not their mothers — who are the antagonists of the films, from Snow White's Evil Stepmother, to Lady Trumain, to Millicent, those "femme fatales" ably discussed in Henke, Umble, and Smith; Bell; and DoRozario. The princess's "weaknesses are contrasted with the awesome and awful power of the evil women with whom they struggle" (Hemke, Umble, and Smith 234).

5. See both of their articles for close analyses of what Disney changed from the original Grimm version.

6. Naomi Wood suggests the voyeurism of Cinderella, as when the Duke looks at her through his monocle which "serves to focus on and frame Cinderella, particularly her legs and feet, and places us as the audience in the same appreciative position" (32).

7. With *Cinderella*, Walt Disney used every star and advertising gimmick to sell the movie through its songs, with well-known singers such as Dinah Shore and Bing Crosby signed on to sing promotional versions of "Bibbidi-Bobbidi-Boo" on radio and recordings (O'Brien 166).

8. Noting the lack of fathers in these earlier films now often corrected in this new films, DoRozario writes that "Team Disney's re-affirmation of a closer bond suggests the company's own paternal attachment to the more challenging daughters of the late twentieth-century and early twenty-first, to whom Walt Disney himself is little more than a black and white photograph of a rather old-fashioned looking man" (36).

9. See Bendix; Hastings; O'Brien; Henke, Umble, and Smith; Finkelstein in Ayres; and Ross.

10. See Edgerton; Kilpatrick; Kiyomi; and Perekh.

11. It is regrettable that Team Disney felt so unsure of their story that they had to add the sassy dragon voiced by Eddy Murphy whose jokes are not only culturally inappropriate but bordering on the disrespectful at times. Too, its ending, Mulan returning to her home with a suitor soon following, is a bit disappointing.

12. Lyricist Howard Ashman, co-author of *The Little Shop of Horrors*, and composer Alan Menken came together to write the songs for *The Little Mermaid*; Eisner credits Ashman as being "the most important creative decision we made on" the film (qtd. in DoRozario 48).

13. It is significant that Ashman and Menken wrote the songs to *The Little Mermaid* before the animation was started (Sells 183), because there is a sharp disconnect between the liberating lyrics here and the ultimate conclusion of her tale: as Ross puts it, "Yes, she gets her legs, she makes her stand, she marches — but only down the aisle, to marry some guy named Eric" (60).

14. Meghan Sweeney, "We Have an Opening for a Princess: Disney Princess Culture on the Web," 37<sup>th</sup> Annual International Conference of the Children's Literature Association, Eastern Michigan University, 11 June 2010.

15. See Bean for a discussion about the erotic portrayal of these princesses in the films and elsewhere.

16. Kenneth B. Kidd problematizes the Animal Kingdom in other ways in "Disney of Orlando's Animal Kingdom."

17. Bruce and his students asked useful, probing questions of their elementary students, such as "Do you think Cinderella was right to act as she did?" and "How do Belle (*Beauty and the Beast*) and Mulan differ from Aurora (*Sleeping Beauty*) and Snow White?" See Alexander M. Bruce, "Princesses without a Prince: A Consideration of Girls' Reactions to Disney's 'Princess' Movies" in *Children's Folklore Review*, 28 (2005-6): 7-21.

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